



before
we *fall*

RILZY ADAMS

BEFORE WE FALL

UNEXPECTED LOVERS: BOOK 2

RILZY ADAMS

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Edited by A.K Edits (@adotkredits)

*To everyone who has been wounded through misplaced love. I
hope you find your soft place to land.*

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CONTENT WARNINGS

It is important to be aware that this book contains themes of domestic violence, child abuse, sexual assault, physical assault, attempted murder, stalking, cheating and parental death. Please take special care if such themes might be difficult or triggering for you.

BEFORE YOU DIVE IN

This was hard to write. In fact, there were many times I wanted to give up. I am happy I did not. Although Tasha's and Cole's journey to love was not as linear or carefree as Navaya's and Xander's, I believe their story is a powerful one.

Please note that this is a slow burn romance which also contains explicit language and vivid descriptions of sex.

Tasha Dixon-Turner breathed deeply through her mouth and exhaled slowly through her nose, keeping track of the length of her breaths by tapping her high-heeled shoes against the pavement. Nobody on the planet pushed her buttons like Jeremy did. Anger sloshed like corrosive acid in her stomach, threatening to release the rage Tasha tried her best to hold back. It wouldn't do anyone good if she lost her temper. It wouldn't do *her* any good if she lost her temper.

“Aye. You listening to me?”

Her husband's angry voice jerked her from thinking about all the things she wished she'd said when he asked her to go out that night. She should have feigned a headache, upset stomach...*anything* to convince him they didn't need a last-minute date night at a popular D.C. restaurant. She agreed to it because she didn't want to deal with his temper. *That same temper* was at the forefront of her mind as she tried to select an outfit. She'd been careful to make sure the outfit she picked was just sexy enough for him to approve but not so sexy that other men leered at her. It didn't work. It never did. Tasha didn't know why she even tried. Jeremy's jealousy was like a tsunami — forceful, all-encompassing, and usually hitting without much warning, sweeping her away in his rage.

Tasha pushed the apology hovering on the tip of her tongue away. She was sick and tired of apologizing for things that weren't even her fault. She didn't ask the tall, stocky man standing at the side of the bar with a glass of brown liquor in his hand to make suggestive comments to her. Her stomach

roiled in disgust. Jeremy was the fucking worst. He *should've* felt protective of her. Some lecher throwing unwanted attention her way *should've* bothered him. That was how a man who truly cared about his woman would feel. Jeremy didn't even feel the need to tell the man to knock off his disgusting commentary about what the sight of Tasha in her dress did to his body. Her husband lost his entire shit...*at her*. Loud as hell, too.

Tasha continued taking deep breaths as he launched into another tirade about her not listening to him while he was ranting before.

I can't stand your disrespect.

Who do you think you are?

Coming out here dressed like a fucking slut.

Clothes I paid for.

Why do I even put up with you?

Tasha dragged her bottom lip between her teeth and tried to ward off the increasing irritation she felt. A few people started casting looks in their direction, and Tasha wanted to snap at Jeremy. She wanted those people to know she wasn't a pushover. But experience had taught Tasha better than that. It might feel good to curse him out now, but it wouldn't feel good later when he didn't have the eyes of strangers to regulate his behavior.

Jeremy grabbed her arm and yanked her toward him. Tasha barely suppressed a wince as she finally brought her eyes to him. His smooth brown face was contorted with ugly anger, and his eyes flashed with the promise of danger. Tasha's heart slammed against her chest.

"You're the most important person in my life. I don't care what any other man thinks he sees when he looks at me. I dressed up to impress *you*. I wanted you to be proud of the woman on your arm," she spluttered, hating herself a little bit more as the words she knew would pacify him spilled from her mouth.

He swallowed hard but slowly released his grip. Tasha's arm still stung, her heart continued racing, and her mouth was dry. These few seconds were always agonizing as she stood there, almost shaking, wondering if it worked. Had she said enough? She watched his angry features slowly melt from his face. His wide nostrils stopped flaring, the creases between his forehead disappeared, and his lips relaxed. Tasha almost wilted in relief. She slid a glance to her cell phone, checking to see how far away the Uber was. That was the wrong move. She realized it almost as soon as she saw Jeremy's gaze trail her movements on the phone.

"What are you so focused on?" he asked. His voice rose a few decibels, and Tasha wanted to find a hole to sink into. "You texting some man?"

Tasha took another deep breath, trying to pull from her mostly depleted well of patience. She wasn't sure just how much longer she could avoid shooting off her mouth and making a bad situation worse. She fought down the urge and restrained herself. Her cheeks and stomach burned when she thought of the people walking along the sidewalk looking at the spectacle Jeremy created, *always created*, but she slipped into self-preservation mode. She could deal with a few strangers judging her better than she could deal with what would follow if she couldn't calm Jeremy down. Tasha couldn't help but glance around to see if anyone was paying any attention to the car crash unfolding in front of them. Her heart dropped down to her feet when she saw him.

Cole Mason.

He was the last person she expected to see observing the drama playing out. She knew Cole through her closest friend, Navaya, who was best friends with his friend and bandmate, Xander. They didn't hang out often, but they were around each other enough that Tasha didn't waste time hoping he didn't recognize her. Anxiety gnawed her stomach. If Cole so much as breathed a word to Xander about what he saw, Navaya would find out. The only thing she wanted less than having to explain to Navaya about the true state of the marriage everyone who cared about her had advised against was facing

the brunt of Jeremy's rapidly increasing anger. Just the thought of that was enough to make her pull her eyes away from Cole's and turn to her husband. She angled her phone, so he could see what she'd been looking at.

"I just wanted to see how much longer until the Uber gets here," she explained, taking comfort in the fact it was less than five minutes away.

"I'm sorry for overreacting," he said softly — almost sweetly — after a few tense seconds passed. Jeremy wrapped his hand around her waist and planted a kiss against the side of her head. "I know I act the fool sometimes, but you're my whole world. I wouldn't survive without you."

Tasha remembered when declarations like that used to make her warm and fuzzy inside. She squeezed her eyes shut as she once again thought of just how foolish and naïve she'd been. It took all her strength to hold her body still and not cringe when he started rubbing circles against her lower back. Cole was still leaning against a car, in dark jeans and a fitted shirt, with a beanie pulled low over his bald head when she reopened her eyes. She swallowed the well of panic that rose like acrid smoke in her throat. She'd have to figure out how to deal with making sure Cole kept his mouth shut later. Right now, the insistent caress of Jeremy's hand against her back posed a more urgent problem.

Tasha couldn't bring herself to fake interest in having sex with Jeremy after everything that had happened tonight.

She just couldn't figure out how to tell him no without all hell breaking loose.

CHAPTER TWO

Cole's body felt the way it usually did when he was one repetition from failure during a set of bench presses. Each muscle in his body protested the action or, in this case, the inaction, when his eyes locked on Tasha across the street in front of the swanky restaurant he'd come to check out with a few of his cousins. They were running late, as usual, so he decided to wait for them outside where he could at least allow the late summer breeze to keep him cool instead of having to ward off a server asking him a million times if he was expecting anybody else. He'd been leaning against some sleek black car primed to get a parking ticket, casually scrolling through his business Instagram page and responding to queries under posts when he heard the commotion. His gaze, along with everyone else's, followed the bellowing of what had to be an insecure, needy man to the couple standing there. He didn't recognize the tall man accusing his woman of inviting the attention of men, but he sure as hell recognized the woman. *Tasha*. Her burgundy natural curls were pulled atop her head in a messy topknot, and he could see the grimaced look on her face even with the distance between them. She filled out the short, shimmery dress she wore in a way that would naturally attract the attention of men, but her husband was ridiculous as fuck for blaming an inevitable consequence on her. *Her husband*. He and Tasha weren't exactly friends, but they'd had cause to be in each other's presence enough times for him to notice she never brought her husband along. He would have no reason to even suspect she was married if it wasn't for the large ass rock that sat on her ring finger. Nobody spoke about

Tasha's husband. *Tasha* didn't speak about her husband. He remembered his little cousin, Jay, once begging Xander for the set-up when his best friend laughed in Jay's face.

"Tasha's married — and married to the kind of man who would try to cut you open if he thought you were looking at her too hard."

Jay made some sort of comment about how he'd be insecure as hell too if his wife looked like that, and the rest of the conversation turned to how aggravating possessive men were. Xander hadn't seemed too pressed or concerned about it. He'd laughed casually with them, and Cole got the impression he figured the man's antics were more of an annoyance than anything else.

Cole couldn't fight the unease he felt as he watched the scene in front of him. He clenched his fists while he watched the woman he'd always seen as sharp, quick-witted, and sassy remain mute as the jackass got in her face about how some other man responded to the dress she wore. Everything about what was going on seemed too familiar for him to ignore, and it made him a little sick.

I can't stand your disrespect.

Who do you think you are?

Coming out here dressed like a fucking slut.

Clothes I paid for.

Why do I even put up with you?

His hands remained curled into fists as the man continued screaming while he hoped Tasha would do something. He waited for her to hurl some abuse back, walk away...*anything at all*. But she just stood there. The tension in Cole's muscles increased as he stayed rooted in place. He wanted to walk over there, get up in that man's face, and pull Tasha away from the ugly situation. Yet, he knew better. Experience had taught him better. It might feel appealing to go ahead and pretend to be some knight in shining armor riding in on his Timberlands, but if his suspicions were right — and his gut told him that they were — he would be creating a bigger problem for Tasha. So,

he continued watching while the nigga, whose face he wanted to punch in *twice*, ranted and raved before Tasha, body stiff, leaned into him and whispered something that caused his body to relax. He was wondering what the hell pacified him when Tasha glanced at her phone, and he looked just about ready to start again. Cole wasn't sure he would have it in him to keep his distance if he did. He was still thinking about using the strength he generally reserved for the punching bags at his gym to teach the man a lesson when Tasha started glancing anxiously around, and her eyes locked with his. He couldn't make himself look away, even though he couldn't help but wonder how knowing there was someone looking on who actually *knew* her made her feel. Then just as quickly as the storm arrived, it seemed to pass. Her husband pulled her into him and kissed the side of her head as if he'd been that sweet and tender to her all night, but somehow, that seemed to make Tasha even more anxious than she was before. He brought his attention back to his phone, but he couldn't fight the burning in his stomach. He'd seen all he needed to see. All the signs were there. He stayed there long after Tasha got into the Uber with her husband, wondering what the hell he should do. He thought of calling up Xander and throwing his suspicions at him but stopped himself.

"It's none of my business," he muttered just as he saw a gang of his cousins strolling up the sidewalk, laughing loudly at something as they got closer to him.

"It's none of my business," he repeated again, more firmly this time. He just couldn't make himself believe it.

CHAPTER THREE

Tasha embarked on her mission as soon as Jeremy left for work the next morning. She doubted herself each second that passed. She tried to talk herself out of it every step of the way, worried she was about to make a bad situation worse. Was she overreacting? What would Cole think when he saw her? It didn't matter. Tasha preferred Cole to believe she was dramatic than risk him telling Xander what he'd seen.

He probably already has.

Tasha pushed away the sweeping tension she felt and focused on the task at hand as she exited the Metro. The plan had formed in her mind as she sipped on coffee earlier that morning while Jeremy pattered around their apartment, getting ready for work. It was about two hours earlier than she would have liked to be up, considering how much she had tossed and turned the night before, but Jeremy insisted she get up when he did. It was easier — *so much easier* — to not fight him on it. Just like it was so much easier to not fight him when they'd returned home later that night, and he made it clear he was ready to claim his *marital rights*. She just laid back and tried to swallow the little pockets of revulsion she felt when his lips trailed across her body, deciding to focus instead on the few freelance graphic design gigs she had lined up. She was still thinking about the perfect shade of green for the font of the ice cream parlor ad she was drafting when he shuddered, yelled some expletives, and rolled off her, and his soft snores filled the room.

The king-size bed was too small. The large apartment they shared was too small. Jeremy was sucking the fucking life out of her, and Tasha didn't know how to make it stop. In the early stages, she'd hoped to reclaim the heady happiness of the first few months of their relationship when she looked at him with stars in her eyes and couldn't imagine life without him. She figured she would get *that* Jeremy back if she could remind him of the woman he fell in love with, except she hadn't thought she'd changed and had no idea what she needed to get back to. So, she did everything he asked her to. She pressed her hair every day because her natural hair annoyed him. She'd quit the well-paying graphic design job she had when he insisted he made more than enough money for both of them. She'd transferred all her savings into their joint savings account because *that was what married people did*. She slowly distanced herself from anyone who criticized him and anyone *he* criticized. Tasha dug her fingers into her palms, hoping the sharp pain would ward off the tears that seemed primed to fall whenever she thought of how she fell into every trap Jeremy laid to leave her isolated, heavily dependent on him for money and just feeling...worthless. The only times she was happy, truly happy, were on those occasions she hung out with Navaya and got to pretend she was still the confident, brave woman her friend *thought* she was. She couldn't ruin that. She couldn't have Cole ruin that. She swallowed down her discomfort, straightened her back, and continued toward the gym Cole worked at, even though her shoes felt like they were lined with lead.

Tasha had expected to be able to scan the gym floor for Cole but needed keycard access to get past the reception area.

“Can I help you?”

The young Black woman held a bottle of some overpriced sports drink and was busy adjusting her neat box braids. Her warm smile helped ease some of the tension Tasha felt.

“I'm looking for Cole Mason?”

The young woman nodded. “Sure. Right this way.”

She swiped her keycard and led Tasha down a hall separated from the gym floor by glass doors on the left before stopping in front of a door on the right that read 'MANAGER.' She rapped on it a few times before she opened it.

"Somebody's here to see you," she said, stepping into the office and closing the door slightly. Tasha heard the rumbling of Cole's deep voice for a few seconds before the woman returned and held the door open for her. He was sitting behind a sleek modern desk, staring so intently at a desktop that a few wrinkles appeared on his forehead. Surprise filled his face when he noticed her standing, awkwardly, in the doorway.

"Tasha," he said, "to what do I owe the pleasure?"

He pushed his chair back, crossed the small distance between them, and pulled her into a hug so warm and comforting that Tasha almost broke down right there in his arms. She didn't know Cole well, but he always exuded an aura of raw kindness she was pretty sure would be hard to fake. But what did she know? She stepped out of his embrace before she made it awkward by lingering or erupting into tears.

"Can I sit?" she asked.

He smiled. "Of course."

He helped her to one of the visitor chairs and leaned against his desk as she settled in and tried to find the words to explain why she'd shown up at his work unannounced.

"What can I do for you?" he asked after several seconds of silence passed.

His face didn't give anything away, even though Tasha knew he had to know why she was there. Embarrassment made her neck hot.

"I know what you saw last night," she said slowly, trying to find the best words. "I just wanted you to know that we had a bit too much to drink last. He really isn't usually like that."

"And you felt like you had to come all the way down here to tell me that?" Cole asked. Bushy eyebrows furrowed together as he waited for her response.

“I just wanted to make sure you didn’t have the wrong impression. I know how close you and Xander are, and he basically tells Navaya everything. I wanted to come see you...”

“And what impression do you think I might have?” he asked. His voice was softer now. “What is the wrong impression, Tasha?”

“It’s not what you think,” she started. “He’s not...”

She tried to make the words come, but they clogged up in her throat even as she tried to fight the damn tears welling at her eyes.

Cole pressed his palms against the desk and pushed himself off it. He took a few steps toward her before sitting in the chair opposite to her.

“Look,” he said, swiping his hand across his face. “I won’t tell Xander or Navaya anything. I understand how strongly you must feel about it to seek me out bright and early this morning. I don’t want to get all up in your business, but...what I saw last night honestly didn’t look good. It didn’t look like a one-off, either. Again, it’s none of my business, but maybe Navaya is just who you need right now.”

His words were as soft as velvet and said with such care that Tasha knew the annoyance building inside her was ridiculous. His words cut too close to the bone. She felt vulnerable and exposed. Cole seemed to sense the shift in her demeanor because he raised both palms, facing out. “I’m sorry. I passed my place.”

She took a deep breath, but it still wasn’t enough to soothe the burning in her chest. A wave of weariness washed over her. She was so fucking tired. Tired of putting on a brave face. Tired of the pretense. Tired of the fear. Tired of feeling so trapped that her lungs seemed to close in on themselves.

“You probably think I’m a fool, but you can’t possibly understand,” she said. “Everyone thinks they *know* how they would deal with something like this and have all the advice in the world. Nothing is as simple as it seems. Trust me.”

She expected him to try to offer the same advice she'd talked about, but he didn't. He did something much worse. He looked at her with compassion swimming in his deep brown eyes and started to reach out to her before pulling his hand back as if he thought better of it. That was what broke her. The tears she'd desperately tried to hold back flowed with the force of all the emotions she'd been repressing all along. Her body shook while she cried, trying to cup her hands over her mouth to prevent her wails from echoing through the office.

"Tasha," Cole said. His voice barely penetrated the thick fog of misery wrapped around her. "You look like you could use a hug. May I hug you?"

For some reason, that made her cry even harder as she nodded through the tears, only relaxing when she felt his body's warmth as his arms encircled her. She wasn't sure how long she stayed wrapped up in Cole's arms as he gently rubbed her back while she cried so many tears into his chest that she wondered if his Under Armour shirt would stand up to the claim of being water-resistant. Another wave of embarrassment hit her. Tasha reluctantly pulled herself out of his embrace. She couldn't believe she'd come the closest she ever had to telling anyone about what her marriage to Jeremy was really like to Cole, of all people, and then blubbered all over him. They barely knew each other.

"You don't have to do that," he said softly, settling himself back into his chair.

She pulled her brows together. "Do what?"

"Be embarrassed for being human," he said simply. "Or self-conscious about it. I understand more than you think."

"What do you mean by..." she started to ask just as the door opened, and the same young woman from the front desk stuck her head in.

"Sorry to interrupt. Cole, your private session has just arrived."

He flashed an easygoing smile to the woman and said, "Thanks, Sophie. Tell him I'll be right out."

Cole waited until Sophie left before he turned his attention back to Tasha. The easygoing air around him faded into something more serious. He started to stand as she slowly pushed herself up from the chair. She felt like she'd gone a full six rounds in the boxing ring and lost each one.

"You don't have to worry," he said. "I won't tell anyone your business."

Relief flooded through her. "Thank you."

She turned to leave, but he held her elbow and pivoted her to face him. There was concern deep in his eyes again, and Tasha had to look away from it before she told him all the secrets she'd kept hidden for so long.

"Are you okay?" he asked. "I need to know you are okay before I let you walk out of here."

The tears almost came again, but she managed to nod her head and let the lie slide through her lips. "I am."

He seemed satisfied, though barely so, with her answer. Cole sighed before he continued, "And are you safe?"

That question was loaded as hell. Tasha knew it. Cole knew it. She had no idea how to best answer him. *Was she safe?* She didn't know what kind of mood Jeremy would be in when he returned from work. Even if he came back happy, she had no idea if that would continue throughout the night. But right at this moment, she *was* safe. She probably felt safer than she had in years.

"I am," she said.

"Tasha," he breathed. She could hear the frustration in his voice. He knew the answer was a cop-out, but he also knew there wasn't anything he could do about it. She expected him to start with the kind of advice she thought he would give when she first showed up. The kind of advice she used to give before she learned *the hard way* that life could be so fucking nuanced. Tasha still grimaced every time she thought about when her younger, more naïve, judgmental little ass would murmur that she couldn't understand how women could stay with men who mistreated them.

It couldn't be her. It could never be her. Until it was.

Cole didn't do any of that. He hesitated for a few seconds before he reached into his pocket and handed her a card.

"Call me if you ever need me," he said.

"I don't want to drag you into this."

The protest sounded hollow on her lips even though she meant it. Cole had just been minding his own damn business when Jeremy decided to show his ass.

He gave her a wry smile and shrugged his shoulder. "I'm already in."

He glanced at his smartwatch before telling her he really needed to get to his client and offered for her to hang around the office until she felt good enough to leave. Cole seemed to consider his next move for a few seconds before he pulled her into another warm embrace. She resisted the urge to sink into him as she fought the fresh tears that pricked her eyes.

Tasha didn't know just how much she'd needed that hug until she was pressed up against the hard planes of his chest with his hand resting tenderly and protectively against her lower back.

"Thank you," she murmured.

"Whenever you need me," he said, "I'm just one call away."

And then he left the room, taking the bubble of safety that had started expanding in Tasha's chest with him.

CHAPTER FOUR

Carrington was one of Cole's longstanding private clients, so when the elderly gentleman ran his hand through his silver goatee and asked him if everything was okay, he knew it came from a place of concern and not just because the first half-hour of Carrington's session must have been one of Cole's worst attempts at being a motivating trainer.

"Sorry, old man," he said as he fetched a few kettlebells for the next circuit. "I'm a little bit distracted."

The man laughed, straight, white teeth against nearly obsidian skin.

"It's a woman, isn't it? It's always a woman."

Two pairs of brown eyes flashed through his mind; defiant, but frustrated; vulnerable, and ultimately scared.

"Two, actually," he admitted and shook his head when Carrington raised an eyebrow. "Definitely not in the way you're thinking."

He pushed down the familiar feelings of frustrated helplessness growing within him. He wasn't trying to have this conversation with Carrington. Cole made a teasing comment about being hip to Carrington's scam and advised the man that trying to turn their workout into a therapist's chair wouldn't save him from the circuit ahead of him. Cole pushed himself to focus on the workout he'd planned and tried to keep his dark thoughts at bay.

“I wish I hadn’t said anything,” Carrington teased much later as the session came to an end. “Those last few movements were brutal. You’ve got no mercy. Not even for an old man like me.”

Cole laughed. Carrington loved to pull out the old man card even though he was in better physical shape than a lot of his younger clients.

“Whatever, man,” he laughed. “Wait until you see what I’ve got planned for you on Friday.”

“If you think you’re going to see my Black ass anywhere near here on Friday after that threat, you lie,” Carrington shot back. Cole shook his head as he watched the man saunter off to the locker room. They had this banter after every session, but he knew Carrington would show up early and bright and kill the routine he had planned for him. The old man liked to complain, but Cole knew Carrington looked forward to the sessions as much as he did. They’d developed something akin to a friendship, though Cole was careful not to mix his personal and professional lives too much. Carrington spent half their sessions cursing him out, but the man always managed to impart some bit of wisdom every time. Cole usually left each session feeling an odd tightness in his chest as he thought about how different life might have been for him if he’d had a father figure.

The tightness in his chest after this session was for another reason altogether. He kept his steps measured as he made his way to his office, opened the door, and found it...empty. He shook his head, not understanding why he’d half-expected to find Tasha still there. That he’d *wanted* to find Tasha still in his office didn’t make a single lick of sense, but he chose to not dwell on it. He couldn’t get Tasha’s distraught face out of his mind as he sat behind his desk and tried to massage away the knot forming in his neck. Even though he wasn’t extremely close with Tasha, there was absolutely nothing that might have indicated to him the magnitude of what she’d been hiding. The secret she’d been so desperate to protect that she’d sought him out to beg him not to tell anyone what he’d seen. There was more than panic and pain in her brown eyes. He saw the shame

there. That, more than anything else, made him the angriest. It took a special breed of asshole to go about stripping away the confidence of a woman so far back that she felt ashamed of the abuse she endured. That she somehow thought she was the one to be blamed. It took a special breed of asshole to slowly but methodically ensure he was able to isolate, intimidate, and have enough manipulative influence to be certain his victim would stay under his thumb. He sighed. Maybe he was projecting, but Cole couldn't control the negative emotions storming through him. He recognized the annoyance for what it was. He'd just been going about his life, minding his own business, only to be drawn into something he really didn't want to be part of. It was too raw, too dangerous, and rubbed at wounds he'd been foolish to believe healed. Her eyes. That was what fucked with him the most. He closed his eyes but reopened them quickly when two sets of brown eyes, filled with petrified pain, stung his conscience.

Goddamn.

Cole didn't want any part of this. But just as he told Tasha, it was too late.

He was already too far in.

“**W**here have you been?”

Tasha squeezed her eyes shut and kept her face turned to the front door she'd just closed for a few seconds before she turned to her husband with what she hoped was a bright smile plastered on her face. Her stomach kept twisting in on itself as she struggled to rein in the emotions co-existing in tandem deep within her soul: fear and anger, bitterness and despair, disappointment and shame. Suffocating. Everywhere she turned, Jeremy was there pushing her head underwater so she couldn't breathe.

“You're home early,” she said, forcing her smile wider. “I just got done running some errands.”

He was leaning up against the kitchen counter, arms folded in front of him with what might have seemed like an affable expression on his face. Except Tasha knew him. There was tension around his eyes, and he'd sucked the left side of his bottom lip into his mouth. He always did that when he was slowly starting to lose his shit.

“I came to surprise you with lunch.” Jeremy raised an eyebrow. “Turns out I was the one surprised. Didn't expect to find the apartment empty when you never mentioned having to go anywhere today.”

“I didn't think it was important,” she said, forcing a laugh. “I went to sign up for the gym. You've been making little comments about my weight recently, so I thought it was best I got on top of it.”

He pushed himself off the counter and walked up in front of her, pulling her into an embrace. Tasha forced her body to relax into his arms. She remembered when Jeremy's touch sent goosebumps of pleasure across her skin. Now she just wanted to vomit. She'd thought her love for Jeremy was boundless, but he apparently beat that shit right out of her.

Get your head in the game, Tash.

She took a deep breath, steadying herself so she could make herself cuddle closer to him. The irony wasn't lost on Tasha that just a few hours before, she was able to find comfort in the arms of a practical stranger that she couldn't find in her husband even if she paid for it.

"I found myself a nice trainer," she said, feeling him stiffen against her. "She'll whip my body into shape in no time at all."

Jeremy's body relaxed, and Tasha rolled her eyes into his chest, happy he couldn't see her face. Her husband was nothing if not fucking predictable.

She pulled out her phone and scrolled to the Instagram profile of the first female personal trainer she'd been able to find on the gym's official account while she tried to concoct a story to cover her tracks *just in case*.

"We haven't worked out the details yet. I'm supposed to be doing a trial session with her before I commit," she lied. Jeremy studied the phone, not bothering to hide his appreciative gaze as he scrolled down the screen. *Fucking hypocrite.*

"Alright," he said, his voice softening. "I'm happy you took the initiative."

Tasha's friends used to joke about how hard it was for her to keep her emotions off her face, but she'd be excellent at poker by now. How was it even possible to hate someone as much as she hated Jeremy but still giggle with him as if she found him anything other than repulsive?

"I'm going to head back to the office now," he said, pressing a kiss to her lips and squeezing her ass. "I'll see you

later.”

His voice had gained a buoyancy that hadn't been there just a few seconds before. He'd gotten what he came looking for.

Tasha surveyed the kitchen, which was just as she left it before she hustled to track down Cole earlier that day to beg him to keep her secret. Annoyance pricked her spine. The sensible part of her brain, the one concerned with self-preservation, begged her to leave it alone. She should continue going through the motions and lay low until she could put her escape plans into effect. But Tasha couldn't fight the anger that had been steadily building within her since the night before. Jeremy hadn't stopped by to bring her lunch. That required Jeremy to be considerate to her. Jeremy was many things...but not that. *Never that.*

“Is it in the microwave?” she asked as he turned to leave. She cocked her head to the side, waiting to see if he would continue to play in her face.

Tasha shook her head when his eyebrows furrowed together with confusion. He was so accustomed to her passiveness that he really expected she wouldn't bring it up.

“What are you talking about?” he asked. Irritation began creeping into his voice, and that should've been Tasha's warning sign. She didn't heed it.

“You said you stopped by to bring me lunch,” she said. “I don't see anything. Did you put it in the microwave or something?”

There was a challenge in her voice, and it came as no surprise that Jeremy heard it too. His jaw tightened, and his eyes narrowed before he said, “I don't have time for this. Make something. I give you more than enough money to keep the fridge stocked.”

Tasha tapped her tongue against the roof of her mouth six times, trying to bite back the sarcastic response on her tongue. He'd reverted to trying to throw the fact he was the sole breadwinner into her face as if he was not the one who

pressured her into giving up her job. Jeremy hated anything he saw as a challenge to his authority, and Tasha knew she should consider his extremely mild reaction lucky. She needed to quit while she was ahead, but Tasha was finding it so damn hard to keep her mouth shut.

“I was fine with making myself some lunch. *That had been my plan.* What money you give or don’t give me for groceries has nothing to do with the fact you were the one who said you stopped by the apartment to surprise me with lunch. So where is it?”

She met his eyes and held his darkening gaze. He was so full of shit.

Just admit you popped up on me to make sure I was here and go.

Tasha didn’t dare voice the thought. She was already skating on thin ice.

“Is there a problem, Tasha?” he asked. “I never said I brought you lunch. I said I came to surprise you with lunch. I wanted to take you out, but your ass wasn’t here when I came and didn’t have the manners to let me know.”

Tasha couldn’t help the sarcastic smile tugging at her lips. Jeremy gaslighted her so often she wondered if he actually believed the shit coming out of his mouth.

“Well, just so you don’t try to surprise me with dinner... I’m meeting Navaya tonight.”

“No, you’re not,” he said softly.

Tasha pulled her shoulders back, straightening her spine. “Yes, I am.”

“Don’t fucking play with me, Tasha. You’ve already made me waste an hour of my day. I’m not here for the bullshit.”

The veneer of civility started crumbling as he stalked toward her and grabbed her arm. He squeezed hard, digging into her flesh until she could feel his fingers pressing against the bone. Then he twisted so forcefully that hot, raw pain shot through her, but she kept her face passive.

“Are you going to hit me, Jeremy?” she asked. “For what, exactly? Hanging out with the one friend you allowed me to keep on the night you usually stay late at work anyway?”

He let her go abruptly, nostrils flaring and eyes wild, before he said, “One of these days, you’ll push me too far.”

Tasha stood staring at the door long after the echoes of how hard Jeremy slammed it faded from her ears.

One of these days, you’ll push me too far.

A chill ran down her spine. She didn’t doubt him. A few months before, Tasha put an escape plan into motion. She hoped like hell things came together before it was too late.

The tension in Tasha's body only started fading away when she rang the intercom to Navaya's Bethesda apartment, and her friend buzzed her up.

Soon, she tried to remind herself. She would have enough money to finally be free of Jeremy soon. She just needed to stay the course and remember what was really at stake. She needed to stop getting distracted from her goal. It always felt good in the moment to stick it to Jeremy, but it never felt good afterward when she literally became sick with worry about how he might retaliate. She'd shot off at least six messages after he left, trying to smooth over the situation, but he hadn't responded to any of them. Her stomach cramped with uneasy thoughts, but she pushed them aside. There were only two things in Tasha's life that still brought her joy: her friendship with Navaya and the sneaky freelance graphic design gigs she was able to take to build up the secret bank account that would be her escape ticket away from Jeremy. She refused to let him steal the joy out of the few hours she would have with her closest friend before she had to go back to the hell she called her marriage, the battlefield she called her home. Tasha paused outside Navaya's apartment and took a few deep cleansing breaths, hoping she would be able to get rid of the negative energy clinging to her like bitter perfume before her friend sensed something was off.

She raised her hand to ring the doorbell when male voices caught her attention, and she glanced down the hall. Her eyes widened when she saw the last person she'd expected to see

strolling toward Navaya's apartment with Xander, Navaya's best friend.

"Hey, Tash," Xander said, stopping in front of her and pulling her into a tight, friendly hug.

The smile she sent his way was genuine. "Hey, Xander. Y'all crashing girls' night?"

"Something like that," Xander said with a small smile.

She hoped he didn't catch the way her gaze flicked to Cole, who stood just off to the side holding a bottle of wine loosely in his hand and looking at her with an expression she couldn't read. An expression she *didn't want to read*.

"Good evening, Tasha. How you doing?"

His steady, smooth, deep voice gave absolutely no indication he and Tasha had moved past being anything more than friends of friends who occasionally spent time in each other's presence. It gave no indication that he was now the holder of her deepest, most shameful secret or that less than ten hours ago, she'd cried out her frustration in his arms.

"I'm doing good, thanks," she said. "How 'bout you?"

"A lot better," he responded, his gaze roving over her body as if he was trying to satisfy himself that she was okay.

If Xander noticed a change in the dynamic between Cole and Tasha, he didn't pay it any mind. He was already calling Navaya's name as he made his way into her apartment. Cole sauntered up beside Tasha and lightly touched her arm.

"You sure you're okay?" he asked. "You seem a bit... jittery."

"I didn't expect to see you here. I've never seen you at one of these junk food and Netflix nights."

It came out as an accusation, but Tasha didn't care.

"I was worried about you," he said. "When Xander invited me to come along after our songwriting session, I figured I'd come put my concern to rest."

She shook her head. “No. Don’t do this. I told you I didn’t want to get you involved.”

“And I told you I already am,” Cole said. His voice dropped to barely a whisper. Tasha looked past him because the intensity of his brown eyes made her feel unsure about what to do with herself. She regretted dragging him into this. Cole had just been minding his business on a night out, and now he was saddled not only with the responsibility of keeping her secret safe but worrying about the consequences of doing what she’d begged him to do. She hadn’t thought about the effect that might have on him.

“You don’t need to worry about me,” she said. “I’m nobody’s responsibility but my own.”

“Is that the reason you’re about to walk into the apartment of the woman who loves you more than anything, fighting a battle she knows nothing about?” he challenged.

Tasha narrowed her eyes. “*That* is none of your business. I hope you aren’t going to try to force me to tell Navaya something you promised to keep a secret.”

Her stomach dropped as she realized she’d been foolish to take him at his word. Distress welled in her chest, and Tasha tried to fight against the angry tears pricking the corners of her eyes.

“Hey, I’m sorry. That came off wrong. I’m not going to do anything reckless,” Cole said, his voice dropping even further as he reached out to touch her arm. She winced from the slight pain she felt as he brushed against the spot growing sore from Jeremy’s earlier antics. His eyebrows furrowed. “Why does that hurt?”

His gaze dared her to lie to him. Tasha opened her mouth to do just that when she heard Navaya call out.

“What are you guys still doing in the hallway?”

Tasha took a deep breath and tried to re-center herself. Cole had completely thrown her off her game, and the last thing she wanted was for Navaya to start asking questions. She

gave him one last pleading glance before she plastered a smile on her face and made her way into Navaya's apartment.

“The life of the party has arrived,” Tasha laughed. “Pour me a glass of wine, and let's get this show on the road!”

CHAPTER SEVEN

She was amazing to watch.
It broke Cole's heart.

Tasha moved from casting her big pleading brown eyes in his direction to truly being the self-described life of the party. She laughed, caught up with, and teased Navaya with an easy air that should've been impossible after the tense conversation they had just a short while before. He could understand why Navaya only saw what Tasha wanted her to see if Tasha always put on a show like *this*.

It fucked with him.

I'm nobody's responsibility but my own.

Her voice was so earnest when she warned him to back off. But how could he? He didn't ask to know what was going on. But he did. He couldn't watch Tasha throw her head back, thick coils of her burgundy twist out bouncing, without thinking of the way she'd winced when he touched her arm. He couldn't listen to her debate the best type of wings at Buffalo Wild Wings as they tried to place their order without feeling anger swell in his chest. It took the grimeiest nigga to put his hands on his woman, and Cole wished, again, that he was able to see what the motherfucker would do when confronted by someone nearly twice his size. He let go of the fantasy of giving her asshole husband just what he deserved when Xander called out to him.

"I bet you can't tell us one thing that's happened in this movie so far," he joked. "What's going through your mind?"

You're barely here."

"I'm following," Cole said once everyone started looking at him curiously. "I'm already ready to wager the professor is who we're looking for."

"Nah, no way," Navaya responded. "My author senses are saying it's definitely her roommate."

Xander hadn't been too far off with his assessment of Cole's behavior. He'd tuned out of the apparent thriller Tasha and Navaya selected for them to watch shortly after it started. He spent more time watching Tasha and Navaya snuggled up on the couch, wine glasses and popcorn in hand, as they tried to figure out who was stalking the lead character. She looked so settled, so normal, and so much at ease that it was easy to forget everything that was going on. Understanding hit him like lightning. Tasha was doing everything in her power to keep Navaya in the dark because she wanted to hold on to *this*. She needed a place where she could truly escape it all. She didn't want Navaya to look at her and see her abuse instead of *her*. The shame was swift and hard when it punched him in his gut. Wasn't that what he'd been doing the whole damn night? Cole sat in the realization that the subtle shift in his perception of Tasha now he knew what was going on was exactly what she wanted to avoid with Navaya for the rest of the evening. He felt so bad about himself he barely cracked a joke when it turned out Navaya had correctly guessed the culprit.

"How about we run another one?" Navaya asked. "Let's give you guys another chance to keep up with my skills."

Xander rolled his eyes. "Don't you have a manuscript to be working on?"

"Why you had to go bring that up?" Navaya asked. "If you want to dip out to see your fave barista, just say so and go."

Cole chuckled. "She got you read, bruh."

"Leave Stefanie out of this," he said. "I'm concerned about my bestie's deadline. If y'all haven't recognized her delay tactics by now, you haven't been paying attention."

Tasha had been looking at her phone, but the teasing brought her attention back to the conversation. “Wait? Xander is really going to try to date the girl from his favorite Peet’s?”

“Going to? Been,” Navaya chuckled. “They kinda cute together, though. Won’t lie.”

“But where will he get coffee when...” Tasha let her voice trail off as she pressed her lips together, not bothering to fight the smile blossoming on her face.

“When what?” Navaya asked. Cole met Tasha’s eyes, and they shared a little grin. One of these days, Xander and Navaya would have to admit they were live explosives when it came to the longevity of each other’s relationships, but he wouldn’t be getting into it tonight.

“Nothing,” Tasha said sweetly. “Another movie sounds lovely, but I need to get home to Jeremy.”

Navaya made a face and said, “That man needs to learn to spend more than a few hours without you at a time.”

Cole didn’t know how Tasha managed to keep her voice so light when she said, “What can I say? I’m great.”

He watched the interaction carefully, waiting to see if Navaya showed any hint of not buying what Tasha was selling, but she just pulled her friend into a hug and offered to get her an Uber.

“I’ll take her,” Cole found himself saying. “I’m heading back into D.C. anyway.”

“Great,” Navaya said, but the anger that flashed in Tasha’s eyes when she met his gaze said his offer was anything but. He shrugged, knowing she wouldn’t risk causing a scene in front of Navaya.

He hugged Navaya and slapped Xander’s shoulder before he trekked over to the foyer to put his shoes back on. He felt Tasha’s angry gaze on him the entire time, but he didn’t relent. Cole didn’t want to be involved in this any more than Tasha wanted him to be. A few late cousins and a husband who didn’t know how to control his rage decided differently. He

was involved. He and Tasha were going to have to find a way to deal with it.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“I don’t need you to drop me home,” Tasha said once she and Cole were on the other side of Navaya’s front door. He knew damn well she wouldn’t resist in front of Navaya, but he had another thing coming if he thought she would allow him, well-meaning or not, to become another headache... another thing she had to worry about...another chess piece she had to make sure was in the right place. It wasn’t happening. He moved silently into the elevator, pressed the button to keep the doors open, and waited for her to come inside. She wasn’t accepting a ride from him, but she still needed to get to the lobby. At least that’s what she told herself as she finally stepped into the elevator. She refused to focus on how her mind still recalled how easy it had been to allow herself to fall apart in front of him that morning. She refused to think about how relieving it was, in that brief space of time, to let go of just a little bit of the tension she wore so tightly that it felt like a second skin. She refused to accept that she felt safer than she had in a long ass time when she was pressed against him in that comforting hug. None of that mattered. She got herself into this mess, and she would get herself out of it. She refused to be anybody’s charity case, pet project, object of pity, or damsel in distress.

“We need to talk, Tasha,” he said simply. “I figured it was easier to save you some money and give us some space to do so.”

“About what, Cole?” she asked. The annoyance that roused to life in the pit of her stomach lined her voice. His

thick lips pulled back into a small smile, unaffected by the attitude she was flinging in his direction.

“I want to know why you flinched when I touched your arm.”

The elevator dinged, and the doors were barely open before Tasha brushed past Cole and walked out. She didn't stop walking until she was out on the street, reaching for her phone to order a ride-share.

“Tasha,” he said, catching up with her. “You don't need to call for a ride.”

She took a few deep breaths, exhaling slowly through her mouth while trying to sort out the emotions pummeling her at all sides.

“My arm hurts because Jeremy came home early this afternoon to make sure I was there and wasn't pleased to find me missing,” she spat. “So, tell me, Cole, why the fuck would you think I would be comfortable with some strange man dropping me home after he lost his shit over me coming to see Vaya in the first place?”

Her heart slammed hard against her chest when she noticed the change in his posture once she finished speaking. His shoulders stiffened, jaw tight, eyes narrowed. Anxiety crawled like ants over her skin as she thought of just how angry Jeremy would have gotten if she dared speak to him like that.

“Sonofabitch,” he muttered. Relief shot through her when she realized his anger wasn't directed at her.

Of course, it wasn't, the logical side of her brain not ruled by trying to weather the storm of Jeremy's violence pressed, *why would he be mad at you?*

“I won't push you,” he said softly. “I'm sorry. I didn't mean to cause you any more stress. The thing is, Tasha...we can't turn back the clock. I cannot unknow what I know. I will keep your secret, but I cannot promise you I won't worry about your safety. I *won't* promise you that.”

The earnestness in his voice doused the anger burning hot inside her veins. Now she just felt tired...and sad.

“I’m sorry I’ve put you in this position,” she said. “I honestly didn’t want to drag you into this.”

He took two steps toward her so that their bodies almost touched. “But I’m already in, Tasha, and from where I’m standing, it looks like you could use a soft place to land.”

She licked her suddenly dry lips as her throat tightened from the force of the sob she tried to restrain. She didn’t want the offer to sound as enticing as it did. She was so close...so fucking close to being able to make her escape. But she was tired...so damn tired of the pretense.

“I won’t judge you,” he continued.

She smiled wryly, even though the tears filling her eyes fell to her cheekbones before sliding down her face. She licked away the tears that fell to her lips, and then she said, “You mean you’re not going to tell me I’m silly for not running as far as I can? You aren’t going to ask me if it’s so bad, why am I still here?”

“Real life is a lot more complicated than that,” he said with a sigh. “Trust me, I know.”

“I can’t,” she sobbed. “You worry me. I’m worried you’ll run out of patience with me after a while and try to force my hand. I can’t have that. I’m so close, Cole. I can’t afford to lose focus worrying about when you’ll get tired of being a supportive friend and want to come save me. I can save myself. I need to be the one who saves myself. I put myself here, so I’m supposed to be the one to get me out. I *will* get me out.”

She tried to infuse her voice with more confidence than she felt. Cole brought his palm to her cheek, wiping away the tears flowing in earnest. This was the second time in a matter of hours that he was soothing away her tears, and it made her chest hurt.

“Let me drop you home,” he said softly. “We can work out the details for making it look like you got an Uber or used the Metro on the way.”

The offer was tempting, so tempting that Tasha almost gave in. Her mouth started to form words of agreement when reality slapped her in the face. She couldn't risk it. Not now. Especially after the way she'd left things with Jeremy earlier.

"I'm sorry. I can't," she said. "I can't..."

He reluctantly accepted her answer. "Give me your phone. I want you to let me know that you are safe."

"Cole..."

"Please."

Tasha relented, handing him her smartphone as she shifted her weight from one foot to the other. He quickly keyed his number into her phone and handed it back. She glanced at the new contact card before she returned her gaze to his.

"Apryl?" she asked.

He chuckled. "My cousin's name, but I figured that would go over better than my own."

The levity in his voice disappeared when he spoke again. "I'll wait for you to get an Uber, and I want you to message me when you are safe."

She nodded. "Thank you."

"There's nothing to thank me for, Tasha," he said. "Order yourself up a car before Xander gets down here with questions we can't answer."

Tasha pulled up the app and selected an Uber that was less than five minutes away. He waited with her, just as he promised he would, but didn't try to break through the silence that had fallen between them. It wasn't awkward or tense, and Tasha leaned into the strange strands of comfort that wrapped around her. She was still worried about all the ways Cole knowing her secret could backfire, but she realized she believed him. She believed he just wanted to be a soft place for her to land when things became too much. In that moment, Tasha couldn't think of a good reason to continue telling him no.

Cole knew he should be running in the opposite direction. It was the smart thing to do. The only thing Tasha wanted was for him to keep her secret. It would be an uneasy thing to keep from Xander, but he could do it...he *would* do it. It didn't require him offering to be her support system. It didn't require him giving her his number — *again* — so she could open up a line of communication. It *definitely* didn't require him sitting in his living room continuously unlocking his phone, waiting for a text he wasn't even sure would come. He tried to stop his mind from conjuring up horrible things as time passed and decided to distract himself with checking business emails. Cole worked at the gym because he loved face-to-face contact with clients, but a big chunk of his earnings came from his YouTube fitness channel, Instagram sponsorships, and the various fitness guides he sold. He was in the middle of responding to an email from the programmer he'd commissioned to help create an app when his phone started ringing.

“Hello,” he said after swiping to connect the call.

“It's Tasha,” she said. “I'm safe.”

He leaned back into his couch, allowing relief to flood over him. “I expected a text.”

“I figured you would trust hearing my voice more,” she said. “I'm about to head to bed. He wasn't even here when I got home, so I'm using the opportunity to make sure I'm asleep by the time he does.”

“Okay,” Cole responded, the tension slowly fading away.
“Sleep well. Can I check up on you in the morning?”

She paused for a few seconds before she finally said,
“Yeah. I’d like that.”

* * *

“WHAT HAPPENED BETWEEN YOU AND TASHA LAST NIGHT?”

Cole looked up from the weight rack where he’d been trying to find an appropriate barbell for the deadlifts Xander was supposed to do.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Xander made a face, his brown eyes sparkling with mischief when he reached out to take the barbell Cole offered him.

“Come on,” Xander said. “Y’all were out in the hallway for a really long time before you came in, and then you were offering to give her a ride home.”

“A ride she ended up refusing, mind you,” Cole said. “Let me have three sets of twenty-five.”

He thought jumping into the exercise would be enough to shut Xander up, but his friend’s curiosity was piqued, and he refused to drop the subject.

“Nah,” Xander said. “Don’t brush me off. You trying to get with Navaya’s friend? Her *very married* friend with a needy-as-hell husband?”

“I’m not trying to give my attention to anything that isn’t my LLC, bruh. Drop it.”

“Well, if you were,” Xander said with slow, measured words, “Tasha is the wrong tree to bark up.”

“Did Navaya tell you to warn me off her friend?” he asked with a chuckle. “I can’t believe y’all got all of that off the back of me just trying to be helpful.”

Xander chuckled. “Nah, Navi didn’t. Navi *wouldn’t*. She can’t stand Jeremy’s frustrating ass.”

“What do you mean?” Cole asked, trying his best to appear disinterested. He waited for Xander to complete the first set of deadlifts with his arms folded in front of him as he casually leaned against the Smith machine like he wasn’t dying to see if Navaya had any suspicions about Jeremy’s true nature.

Xander wiped some sweat from his face with the sleeves of his shirt and shrugged. “He’s just a weird fucker. None of Tasha’s friends really liked him. If you listen to Navaya tell it, the man is clingy with Tasha and aloof to her friends. No wonder he convinced her to get married in Vegas with none of her friends present. He was probably afraid one of them would try to put a stop to the wedding. Most of their mutual friends couldn’t put up with the nonsense, and they bounced, but you know how Navaya is. She’ll probably outlast him.”

“That sounds grim,” Cole hedged. “Should Navaya be worried about her?”

“Tasha?” Xander asked. He seemed to think about it for a while before he shook his head. “Nah. I’m not sure if you’ve *met* Tasha. She’s not exactly the type to put up with bullshit. Besides, she would definitely tell Navaya if something was up.”

He wanted to argue that that was an extremely simplistic way of looking at things, but Cole knew that would just make Xander more curious, so he let the conversation die and threw himself back into training his closest friend.

Tasha broke out into a little dance as she read the review her latest client had left on the freelance site she used for graphic design gigs. She'd started freelancing nearly ten months ago after realizing she needed to find a way to save up enough money to leave Jeremy's ass.

She swallowed the usual bitterness she felt when she remembered how she relented when Jeremy argued that her wanting to keep her bank account open instead of moving all her money to the joint account was somehow an insult to their marriage, especially because his generational wealth and successful business meant he had much more money than she could possibly make at the graphic design firm she'd been employed at for about four years before she met the man who would ruin her life. Tasha tried to push the bitter thoughts away and focus on the task at hand. She couldn't undo the choices she had already made. All that mattered now was ensuring she could support herself when she finally walked away. Life still marched on, despite her unhappiness with the Jeremy situation. She still had highs and lows outside of him. Victories and defeats. And this? This client proclaiming she was the most efficient and talented graphic designer he had ever worked with and professing to never use anyone else? This was a victory. The very gracious tip that came with the review was a cherry on top.

Tasha headed into the kitchen and pulled a bottle of Prosecco from the wine rack, pouring a glass and taking a sip. It wasn't the most elaborate celebration, but Tasha was

determined to celebrate anything that could be celebrated since they were few and far between. She grabbed some fruit from the fridge and put together a small fruit bowl to accompany the wine. She hesitated for a couple of seconds before she took a few photos, making sure to include as much of the kitchen's background as possible, and sent them off to Jeremy with a short message about eating healthy — ending with a heart emoji she rolled her eyes at even as she included it.

His temper had been even over the last few days, and Tasha wanted to keep it that way. He started typing almost immediately, and Tasha tried to push away the surge of annoyance she felt. He didn't give a damn about whether she was eating healthily or if she was eating at all, but the photo proved she was still in the apartment where she promised to be all day. She wasn't surprised his responses were light and teasing, but she played along until he finally mentioned he was going to head off to a meeting.

Tasha: Have a good meeting! Tell me what time you're getting home so I can cook something special for you.

Jeremy: No later than seven. Love you.

Tasha: <3

Sending heart emojis was so much easier than trying to force the lie through her fingers or mouth. Thankfully, Jeremy hadn't found a reason to be annoyed about that. *Yet.* She smiled as she sat back down at her computer and checked her order queue. Everything she did with Jeremy was calculated. When she finished her tasks for the day, she'd treat herself to some unscheduled time with Navaya while playing it off like she needed to grab some ingredients for the meal she'd promised. She pulled up her phone and shot Navaya a message.

Tasha: Cocktails and catch up in a few?

Vaya: You had me at cocktails, sis. Shall we throw in some mussels too?

Tasha: You speak my language. See you at 2:00!

* * *

TASHA AND NAVAYA WERE REGULARS AT A RESTAURANT IN THE heart of Bethesda called the Mussel Bar and Grille. She came here with Navaya at least twice per month, and she knew Navaya likely popped in more frequently due to proximity and not having to plan out every move she took. Tasha made her way over to their favorite booth, where she spotted Navaya with her face buried in her Kindle. Navaya loved words. When she wasn't writing, she was becoming engrossed in someone else's work. She looked up just as Tasha slid into the booth and smiled warmly at her.

“Do you have drama or something?” her friend asked. “I didn't expect an impromptu suggestion to meet up.”

“Man, can't I miss my friend?”

Navaya laughed. “Touché. I'm happy you asked me to come out, though. I've been in my damn feelings all morning.”

Tasha's forehead wrinkled as concern for her friend filled her. “What's going on? Who do I need to beat?”

“Easy, tiger,” Navaya said, swirling the wine in her glass. “There's nobody needing beating except my own damn self.”

“Now I'm concerned. What's happening?”

“My last book isn't doing well...*at all*. I'm not even sure when I started dropping off, but my readers are letting me know. *Loudly*.”

She swirled the wine around before taking a large gulp and fixing a woeful look on Tasha. “I don't even know how to get out of this rut. I'm working on *Captive to My Desires* and can't help but freak out about it doing worse than this one.”

“Take a deep breath, sis,” Tasha said, reaching out to cover Navaya's hand with her own. “First of all, I designed the shit out of that cover. There's no way anyone could hate it.”

Navaya rolled her eyes, but a small smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. Tasha always tried defusing tense

situations with humor. She didn't care how many ridiculous or bombastic comments she had to make in order to cheer someone up. That ghost of a smile across her friend's lips was exactly what she wanted to see. Tasha took a sip of her own wine as she thought of a way to approach the situation seriously now that the tension had started to alleviate.

"Maybe you need a break," she suggested. "Take yourself on a little vacation and stop pressuring yourself? How about a nice little weekend getaway with some spa time, good food, and reading the books languishing in your TBR pile for a change?"

Navaya closed her eyes, a bright smile spreading across her face, clueing Tasha in that the picture she painted was very appealing to her friend.

"That sounds great," she said with a happy sigh, picking up her phone, which had been turned face down on the table. "Where would we go?"

"*We?*" Tasha squeaked. "Girl, I was talking about you. I'm not yearning for a getaway."

That was a damn lie, so she smiled as widely as her lying lips would allow.

"Oh, come on," Navaya said. Her voice was full of so much excitement Tasha had to swallow the tightness in her throat as she prayed to all the deities for a small miracle that Navaya would not push much further. Except, she did.

"We haven't traveled together in so long," she said, squinting her eyes and pursing her lips as if she was trying to remember exactly how long *so long* actually was. Tasha took a sip of her wine, but it was tasteless. She knew exactly when it was. She and Navaya last traveled about five months after she and Jeremy got married. It was just a few weeks before he began his campaign to isolate her from her friends. Sadness washed over her like a tsunami. Tasha clenched the wine glass, trying to find a way to channel the negative emotions she felt. She was barely succeeding, barely staying afloat, and suddenly regretted the decision to have an impromptu meetup with her closest friend. Seeing Navaya was meant to leave her feeling

rejuvenated, lighter, happier and more hopeful about the life she would get back to having once she finally broke free. There was nothing rejuvenating, light, happy or hopeful, however, about remembering just how much she'd allowed that man to take from her. In her darkest moments, she wondered if she deserved the gilded cage he kept her in with the threat of violence and bone-weary feelings of defeat. How hard had she really tried to hold on to the Tasha she'd been before Jeremy? How hard had she fought? She took another sip of wine and tried to soothe the dark thoughts. How could she fight back against something she hadn't even realized was happening until it was way too late?

“Since you got married.”

Navaya's soft voice brought Tasha's attention to her friend sitting across the table from her with eyes showing the surprise she probably felt when she sat and realized through all of the excuses, cancellations, and general disinterest...it had really been *that* long since they'd had a trip together.

“It's Jeremy, isn't it?” Navaya asked. “It's obvious as hell that he hates my guts.”

Tasha tried to find an excuse, but Navaya waved her off. “Come on, Tash. He never comes to hang out, even when I've invited him. It seems like he never got over my skepticism of him in the beginning. I was just looking out for you. I've been happy to admit I was wrong. He needs to stop holding it against me.”

Tears pricked Tasha's eyes, but she blinked them away rapidly.

But you were right, so fucking right, she thought bitterly. Navaya had spotted the clinginess, passive aggression, and jealousy right of the bat. She tried to warn her that she shouldn't ignore the red flags and made her promise to slow down and think about things when Jeremy proposed after a whirlwind six months of dating. Instead, Tasha did the exact opposite and got married in Vegas less than a month later.

Tasha cleared her throat and reached deep down until she found the big, bold personality she cloaked herself in to

distract from what truly lay inside. “Jeremy would bore the living hell out of you at any rate. You’d be regretting the invite as soon as he started blathering on about the benefits of cryptocurrency. Consider his absence from our get-togethers as a relief for you and a chance for me to miss him enough so that going home is a relief for me.”

She gave Navaya an exaggerated wink, and soon, her friend was laughing at her silliness as the server put their mussel dishes in front of them. Soon their catch-up session steered back into calmer waters as Navaya caught her up on the latest gossip surrounding Xander’s new blossoming relationship with barista girl. Tasha couldn’t even be bothered to keep up with the woman’s name because everyone knew she wasn’t going to last. It was fascinating to watch just how clueless both Xander and Navaya were about how good they’d be together, but Tasha didn’t think it was her business to intrude.

“Did you get a message from Cole?” Navaya asked suddenly, causing Tasha to almost choke on the cocktail she’d been drinking.

“Cole?” she asked, still trying to clear her throat. “Why would Cole be messaging me?”

“He’s looking for a good graphic artist for his website, YouTube channel, business cards, and so forth. I overheard him and Xan talking about it last night, so I suggested you and gave him your number.”

Tasha slowly released the breath she’d been holding. “No. I haven’t heard from him yet.”

“I’m sure you will soon,” Navaya said. Her friend turned her attention back to her mussels, unaware of the flurry of panic...and something else...her statement unleashed deep in Tasha’s belly.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Cole pulled his attention away from the workout he'd been drafting for one of his clients when his phone chimed.

Navaya: How come you haven't hit Tasha up to help you with those graphics? I asked her about it yesterday and she said she hadn't heard from you. She's excellent at what she does, I swear! I work with her all the time. At least ask to see her portfolio. She might be just what you're looking for.

He reread the message again and shook his head lightly. Cole had spent most of his day trying to convince himself to leave Tasha alone and finally succeeded. *Just barely.* He couldn't believe he was suddenly being nudged right in her direction. The Universe was having a time.

He'd messaged Tasha to check up on her the morning after hanging out at Navaya's just as he said he would. She didn't respond. He'd thought about calling her before he fell back and checked himself. Sometimes silence was a response, and he needed to accept the message she was trying to send graciously. She seemed to be open to the idea of him checking in on her the night before, but that didn't mean her feelings hadn't changed in the cold light of day. She was entitled to that. It didn't matter that his heart was in the right place. He couldn't force Tasha to accept what she wasn't ready or willing to receive. She'd told him she wasn't a damsel in distress and didn't need him to save her. That he felt a compulsion to do just that was his own problem, and he needed to find a way to deal with it. He'd decided then that he

wouldn't force himself into her life when she clearly wanted things to remain as they had been before that night on the pavement and had been acting accordingly ever since.

He didn't need his therapist to know where his desperate desire to make sure Tasha was safe stemmed from. It was more than being a decent human and so much more than abhorring the idea that a man could put his hands on a woman he claimed to love. Brown eyes filled with fear flashed through his mind before Cole had time to prepare. The images still made him feel sick to his stomach after so many years. He took a calming breath through his nose and exhaled slowly through his mouth, trying to regain the control that had become so important to him. He shot Navaya back a message promising he would contact Tasha soon and blamed his lack of follow-up on being consumed with work. She had no reason to doubt the lie and went back and forth with him about a workout plan she kept saying she wanted but never showed up for before she ended the conversation. He sat at his desk long after the last text, fighting the urge to message Tasha. Cole was happy when Sophie stuck her head through the door to tell him Carrington had arrived for his training session just as he was about to yield to the temptation to push through Tasha's clearly set boundaries.

"What torture you got planned for an old man today?" Carrington teased when Cole finally made his way to the training floor.

"Old where?" he asked. "Definitely not too old to run on the treadmill for two minutes at a speed of four miles per hour before we start your circuit proper."

Carrington grimaced. "We're going to have to double down our efforts to get you a woman, son. These sadistic tendencies you've got can't be from anything but not having a soft place to call home at the end of the day."

"Make that three minutes, old man," Cole said with a chuckle which became loud laughter as Carrington made his way to the treadmill, still mumbling about how badly Cole needed a warm body. If the old man kept it up, he'd be running on that treadmill for three and a half minutes, not that he

wasn't more than capable. Carrington's resistance was easily his favorite part of training him. That and the fact he always hit every target Cole set for him and often exceeded them.

Carrington's comment about the lack of a female presence in Cole's life was spot on, though. It wasn't even that the dating game was particularly hard for him. Cole wasn't a cocky man, but he didn't need to be cocky to know he ticked a lot of women's physical boxes. That was usually all he needed to get his foot in the door. When he added that he had a few good jobs, owned his own home, played in a band, and read extensively enough to be able to participate in some interesting ass conversations, Cole was an attractive pick. Yet, his routine was always the same. He'd meet a woman he vibed with and enjoy her company for a few months before dipping out when things started to get too serious. He'd leave before his childhood traumas escorted him out. It was exhausting as hell, so Cole decided he'd stop searching for a relationship altogether. He found solace in the warmth of women who understood exactly what he was offering and exactly what he was not. That went well until it didn't. Now Cole was content focusing on other things — his fitness, his businesses, his band — *safe things*, things he could control. Human beings craved love, but not everybody was lucky enough to fall into the type of love he observed between Jay's parents or Cherry and her girlfriend. Love left many people wandering the boulevard of broken dreams, and they were the luckier ones because, for some people...love destroyed.

Two pairs of brown eyes flashed through his mind. Cole had barely pushed them from his consciousness when he looked away from the treadmill bank where Carrington ran and found himself staring at the owner of one of those pairs of brown eyes. Tasha gave him a little wave before she started making her way over to him.

Yes, the Universe was having a fucking time.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The last thing Tasha expected was to lock eyes with Cole as soon as Sophie gave her access to the training floor. She swallowed the discomfort and guilt she felt, choosing to offer a feeble wave instead before deciding that was hardly going to be enough after ignoring him for nearly a week. She began making her way over to him even though her limbs moved like she was walking through quicksand.

Jeremy was in a gracious as fuck mood that morning. She'd awoken to find him at the foot of the bed with a cup of badly-made coffee and apologies falling from his lips so fast she would have had trouble keeping up with them if she cared enough to. And Tasha hadn't cared enough to keep up with the lies for months. Her husband always tried his best to toe whatever imaginary line he had in his mind that would make him a bad husband if he crossed. It was arbitrary as hell. Something that would make him trip over himself with apologies and lovebomb the hell out of her one day would earn her a slap the next.

She wasn't sure what time Jeremy actually came home the night before. She'd left the lasagna covered on the dining room table as soon as it became clear he wouldn't be home anywhere near the time he said he would. Him getting home so late would've led to a shouting match early in their marriage, with Tasha demanding to know where he'd been and likely crying herself to sleep. A few months ago, irritation at the hypocrisy of it all would have caused the same loss of sleep. Last night, Tasha's nerves eased with every minute that

passed. She curled up on the couch with a thick slice of lasagna and a glass of red wine, watching nonsense on Hulu until she finally took herself for a long, warm shower before falling into blissful sleep in the empty bed. Jeremy thought she was still the woman who worried about where he might be sticking his dick or whether their marriage was under attack from the outside. He had no clue how hard Tasha wished he'd become preoccupied enough with this nameless, faceless woman so he'd leave her the hell alone. She felt guilty as soon as the thought popped into her mind, knowing that Jeremy's behavior wouldn't change no matter who he was with. He'd just have a new canvas of skin to bruise and a new soul to try to break.

Break. He'd done a lot of things over the last five years of marriage, but Tasha refused to allow him that. She sat stiffly in bed listening to his apologies, theatrics, and excuses, choosing to tune him out in favor of mulling over the tidbit of information Navaya had dropped on her the day before. Cole wanted to revamp his brand and was in the market for new designs for everything, really. She could charge much more for a job that included so many designs than the jobs which still trickled in, though steadily, on the freelance site. Every dollar earned from a project put her one step closer to freedom. And as she looked at Jeremy's pathetic face, wanting to call him out on the steady stream of bullshit falling from his mouth but afraid of what would happen if she did, Tasha knew she couldn't pass up the opportunity. She managed to plaster a wan smile on her face, kissed her husband's cheek — so she didn't have to kiss his lying lips — and promised she understood, and then, for good measure, told him she was going to try to get a morning workout in.

“Maybe we can go out tonight,” he suggested. “For a drink and a little bit of dancing, have some fun. Like the good old days.”

She agreed because it was easier but knew she would invent a headache, bellyache, *any ache* to get out of it. She'd come up with that later, though. For now, she had other battles to fight.

She stopped just short of Cole, only then realizing he was actually with a client even though he stood just off the side of the bank of treadmills.

“I’m sorry,” she mouthed. Tasha turned to go back to the waiting area until he was finished, but he strode alongside her.

“Hey,” he said. “Is everything okay?”

Concern lined his kind brown eyes, and Tasha was hit simultaneously with pangs of annoyance and shame. She hated putting anyone in a position to worry about her. She hated that his concern was justified.

Tasha forced a smile that didn’t reflect the turmoil raging inside her. “Navaya told me you’re in the market for a graphic designer. I wanted to show you my portfolio.”

“You came all the way down here for that? You could’ve called or sent me a text or something.” He tapped his index finger to his temple as if he just remembered something while a small smile tugged at the corner of his lips. “Although, I guess all signs point to your phone going out of commission after we last saw each other.”

She accepted the teasing because she’d more than earned it. “I wasn’t sure how I felt about the contact. I’m still not sure. I should’ve said that, though, and for that, I apologize.”

The small smile blossomed into something warm and open. “But you’re not apologizing for thinking my company ain’t shit, huh?”

She laughed before she could stop herself. “Really, Cole?”

“Made you smile,” he said, grin widening. “Wait for me in the office, and we can go over your stuff? Unless you were planning to work out.”

He gestured to the yoga pants and workout top she’d pulled on to really sell her trip to the gym.

She laughed. “Oh, no. I’m not the workout type. I just needed a way out of the house.”

Some of the teasing sparkle dulled in his eyes, but he nodded and pointed her in the direction of his office. “I’ll be

there soon.”

“Way to go, Tash,” she muttered as she walked off.

I just needed a way out of the house. Why would she even say that? As it stood, Cole probably thought Jeremy was a jealous, insecure asshole, but now he knew it went deeper than that. She couldn't even be angry when he questioned her about it — *and she could tell from the look on his face that he would* — when she was the one who'd brought it up in the first place.

Tasha sat in the oversized couch in the corner of the office and sipped the kombucha she'd brought with her. She took a deep breath and chided herself for getting carried away. She had come here with a goal, and she would achieve it. She just needed to keep her eyes on the prize.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

It was like he'd manifested her out of thin air. Cole had decided to call so they could talk over the recommendation Navaya had made once he was finished with his session a few seconds before Tasha walked in. He'd expected her to humor Navaya's suggestion before dismissing it as quickly as she could. He didn't think she'd want to work with him, all things being considered. He definitely didn't expect her to come to him.

He wondered *why* it was so important to her she got this job that she went through all the effort to actually come to see him. The petty in him mentioned calling because he wanted to point out she'd been ignoring the hell out of him for the last few days, but there was truth in what he said. She *could* have just called. Instead, she manufactured an excuse to get away from that sonofabitch and made her way to the gym. This was the second time Tasha popped up on Cole unannounced with trepidation in her eyes because she needed something from him. He glanced at his watch and swallowed a frustrated sigh when it showed there were forty-five minutes standing between him and getting answers to the questions swirling around his mind.

He shifted uncomfortably as he tried to guide Carrington through his workout even though he was having a hard time focusing his full attention on correcting the man's form as he completed his pull-ups.

Carrington drank some water, wiped sweat from his brow, and turned those thoughtful eyes on Cole. "You okay, son?"

This is only the second time I've ever seen you distracted."

Cole smiled at the irony of that. The last time he tried to get through a session while his mind was somewhere else entirely had been another morning Tasha surprised him at the gym.

"I'm good," Cole said. "Come on, we've got two more sets to go."

Carrington jerked his chin in the direction Tasha had gone. "I can see how a woman like that could be distracting."

This time Cole couldn't help but chuckle as he pointed to the pull up machine. Carrington's nosy ass wasn't even trying to be slick about it. "Nothing about that interaction was anything near what you're hoping it is."

Carrington positioned himself and started reaching for the bars to begin the exercise when he turned to Cole and grinned. "Well, that sucks."

* * *

TASHA WAS WORKING ON HER LAPTOP WHEN HE FINALLY finished up with Carrington and told Sophie he'd be busy for the next hour. She was dressed down in black yoga pants and a matching yellow sports bra and shirt set. He thought about her picking out gym clothes, not because she wanted to wear athleisure but to sell a story, and found himself getting agitated again. Cole massaged the back of his neck as if the tension he was feeling came from a physical source before he alerted Tasha to his presence, calling her name softly as he entered the office proper. She glanced up from the laptop and smiled at him. "I'm sorry for dropping in on you without warning... again, but this time, I believe we can help each other."

She offered him the black binder resting beside her on the couch, only to pull it back just before he took it. She peeled off the price sticker and smiled at him sheepishly before she handed it to him once more.

“Sorry,” she said as he opened it and started flicking through the pages. “I forgot to take that off before I got here.”

He looked at her curiously. “You printed this out just for me?”

“Designs are often better looked at in physical format. I figured you might benefit from it,” she said simply. He turned his attention to the showcased designs. Navaya hadn’t been lying at all when she said Tasha was a talented and creative designer.

“Wow,” he whispered. “These are great. I’m surprised some big company hasn’t snatched you up.”

He’d complimented her with a smile on his face, thinking she would grin back at him or make one of those funny quips she seemed to always have at the tip of her tongue. That didn’t happen. Her expression shuttered, and her jaw tightened for a few seconds before she managed to summon a half-dead smile that didn’t reach her eyes.

Interesting, he thought but fought away the urge to question it. Just like he fought back the urge to question why she had to print a portfolio before she came instead of having one already. He focused his attention on continuing to take in her amazing designs.

“I usually work through *DesignMeNow*, but I like the creative challenge of reimagining graphics for so many different platforms and possibly organizing and orchestrating the photos you’ll need to go along with it.”

He could see the excitement creeping into her eyes, and Cole couldn’t help but stare. Tasha was gorgeous. He pushed away the unbidden observation and said, “You’ll work out the photo details too? I really don’t have a choice but to beg you for your service, then. I didn’t even have the slightest clue where to begin.”

The smile she hit him with was genuine this time, and it knocked Cole a little off-balance.

“Let’s talk rates, contracts, deliverables, and all that good stuff,” she suggested, pulling another folder from the

oversized bag she'd brought along with her. He noticed a small price sticker still on the folder when she handed it to him. His curiosity deepened, and even though reason begged him to leave well and well enough alone, he found it hard — no, impossible — to do that. He ran his thumb over the price tag and watched the cheeriness surrounding Tasha fade when she realized she'd forgotten to take that off too, and Cole was getting ready to ask her about it.

“Cole,” she started.

“Level with me, Tasha,” he said, trying to keep his voice even although he knew he wouldn't like her answer. “Are all of these things freshly printed because you're afraid to keep them at home?”

Her back stiffened. “Why should I answer that question? You looked at my portfolio and liked what you saw. Tell me how whether I'm able to leave my portfolio at home or not will affect the service I can provide for you?”

She pulled another folder out of her bag and shoved it at him with her nostrils flaring, eyes narrowed and jaw tight. “*These* are what should concern you.”

He dragged his gaze from her and looked at the papers she'd handed to him. There were pages and pages of four and five-star reviews, all praising her creativity and efficiency.

“Tasha,” he said. “You know damn well I'm not asking you that question as a prospective client.”

“It's none of your business, Cole,” she snapped. “You don't get to use what you know about me against me, for fuck's sake. Just drop it.”

She started grabbing the folders and began shoving them into her bag. “This was a bad idea. I'm going to go.”

“Tasha,” he said, keeping his voice low and firm. “Stop it. I said I wanted to work with you.”

Her eyes were a hurricane of frustrated anger. “I don't want to work with you if you're going to use this as an opportunity to do exactly what I asked you not to do.”

He shook his head. “I know this is a sore point for you. It *must* be a sore point for you, but you are being ridiculous as fuck now.”

She whirled back. “Excuse me?”

Cole closed his eyes and ran his tongue over lips that were as dry as his throat. “Forget it. There’s no use bringing up something that’s going to just hurt your feelings. You’re right. We probably won’t be a good fit for each other. Sorry you had to come all the way down here to learn that.”

He got up from the couch, desperate to put some space between them before he said what nearly spilled from his mouth before common sense took hold. Knowing whether Tasha printed her portfolio fresh because she was afraid Jeremy would find it was exactly his business as a client. He had a right to be concerned about whether the distraction of keeping this hidden from him might blow up in her face and affect the project. He wasn’t going to tell her that, though. It didn’t matter that it was the truth. Not all truths were kind, and Cole prided himself in striving to always be kind. Besides, he was a fuckload more worried about Tasha than whether she could reliably deliver what he needed. Except, one look at the way Tasha’s face scrunched up in anger told him he’d already opened Pandora’s box. There was no way she would allow him to not say the very thing he knew shouldn’t be said.

“No, Cole,” she said, her voice cold as ice. “Say what you got to say.”

“We’re good,” he said. “Not everything needs to be said.”

The air around them sizzled with her increasing anger. “I’ve been dealing with a manipulative asshole for the last five years. Don’t think I haven’t caught on to your passive-aggressive bullshit.”

His own anger roused like fire doused with gasoline, but Cole gripped his self-control and held it tightly to his chest. She was lashing out because she was embarrassed and hurt. He wouldn’t achieve anything by lashing right back out at her. It didn’t matter that he *understood*, though. Cole didn’t entertain anybody’s disrespect.

“Don’t compare me to your pathetic ass husband. I’m nothing like those types of men,” he said. A few seconds passed before he continued, “I don’t think there’s anything left to be said. Let me show you out.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

She'd pissed him off. Badly. Yet, he was offering to see her out. He could've told her to get her ass out his office and not let her shadow grace his door again. His posture, the flash in his eyes, and the tension crackling in the air showed that Cole probably wanted to do *just that*. But, of course, he hadn't. The raw kindness she'd always associated with Cole remained even when he was mad. And somehow, that made her feel even more like shit as he walked with her to the door and started opening it.

"You didn't deserve that."

The words rushed from her mouth in one strained breath. His hand stalled on the door for a few seconds before he continued opening it. Tasha stepped forward, covered his hand with hers, and said, "I'm sorry, Cole. I'm sorry."

"It's all good," he said, but his voice was stiff. He flicked a gaze to her hand covering his, then back to her face in a silent demand for her to remove her hand so he could open the door.

She didn't. "You're nothing like Jeremy, and I shouldn't have alluded to that. I shouldn't have snapped at you. You make me feel so fucking embarrassed that I don't know what to do other than pull away or lash out."

"I'm not holding it against you," he said. The tension was draining from his body, and Tasha allowed herself to be hopeful until he continued speaking. "You were right, though. You asked me to leave you alone and stay out of your business, and I haven't respected your wishes. Working

together will make it more tempting and easier for me to continue to pry, so it's best that we don't try it for both of our sakes."

"I need the job, Cole," she blurted out, feeling herself wither a little by admitting that out loud. She swallowed the bitterness that made her throat burn. "I didn't come find you because I thought it would be an exciting project, although I guess it would be. I came to you because I need the money."

"Tasha..."

"Please come sit down so I can embarrass the shit out of myself in front of you yet again."

Her heart thumped hard against her chest as she wiped her clammy hands on her yoga pants. The slow, steady throbbing at the back of her head signaled she was about to have the mother of all headaches. Tasha waited, body tense, only breathing a small sigh of relief when Cole's face softened. He backed away from the door, returning to where he'd been sitting on the couch before the fireworks started. She took a deep breath, ignored the urge to be sick all over Cole's carpeted office floor, and started to speak.

"The first thing Jeremy convinced me to do was quit my job. It wasn't hard. You see, I wanted to start a family right after we got married, and he agreed. I wanted to stay home with the baby until it was time for school, so he told me it was best I just quit early since we planned to get pregnant soon. I agreed and quit. He continued using condoms. It was like we never had an agreement at all when I challenged him about it. He said a baby would change everything, and we deserved a few years to enjoy marriage. That upset me because, I mean, where was that energy while I was quitting my job? He flipped the script and told me he felt like the only reason I wanted a baby so soon was because I didn't love him enough. I kept reassuring him that wanting to start a family right away had nothing to do with how much I loved him, but he was so dejected, so hurt. I felt like a selfish bitch."

Tasha took a deep breath, not bothering to wipe away the tears trickling down her cheek. The only thing harder than

going over those initial years with Jeremy and realizing how she fell into every trap he set was speaking those words out loud and watching another person come to the same realization. She stole a small look at Cole. He was looking at her with so much sadness in his eyes that she nearly broke. She cleared her throat and forced herself to continue.

“Anyway, I got an IUD put in shortly after that. Mirena. It’s meant to be effective for six years, but he convinced me that there was no way we’d actually wait that long. I believed him. It didn’t take long for me to get bored of not working, so I told him I was going to try to reapply to the firm I used to work at, but he shot that down immediately. He was concerned it would make it look like he couldn’t properly support me. Jeremy started dropping hints about a joint bank account a few weeks after that. It was the first time I dug my heels in and flat out refused. I didn’t see the point. It took him another few weeks of guilt trips and tantrums, but I eventually gave in. Honestly? The year after that was blissful. It was the marriage I thought I dreamed of. He was still clingy and jealous, but I always thought it was down to how much he loved me. Then everything seemed to change. I went out for dinner with Navaya, and the credit card declined. I brushed it off and tried the debit card, but it had insufficient funds. He had...”

The words wouldn’t come. She squeezed her eyes shut and tried again, but she couldn’t bring herself to recount when Jeremy finally played his entire hand.

“It’s okay, Tasha,” Cole was saying. “You don’t have to.”

She shook her head and forced herself to continue speaking. “He’d drained the account, including all of my savings which I’d put into it. I was angry as hell. I think that might have been the first time I cussed at Jeremy. Like *really*, *really* cussed. It was also the first time he hit me. He left that fucking account dry for nearly three weeks to teach me a lesson, and then he started putting enough money in it for me to do the basics. I didn’t realize at first how much he monitored my spending. That was how I got caught when I tried opening another bank account to siphon off money because I’d realized by then that I was in deep shit. That night was the first time he left marks on me...”

“Tasha,” Cole murmured.

“I don’t want your pity,” she said, even though she couldn’t control the sobs now. “I’m just explaining to you. I don’t even know how to explain how I got through the two years after that. Every time I thought about telling Navaya, who was by then the only friend I still had, I remembered how she warned me. I didn’t have any family members I could run to, either. I guess Jeremy was well aware of that. About a year ago, I decided enough was enough, and so I started plotting. He doesn’t know about the bank account slowly accumulating enough money for me to hire an attorney and get my own place. I need this job, Cole.”

“How much money do you need?” he asked. He grabbed her hand and pulled her toward the couch. She shook her head. “I don’t want your money unless I’ve earned it. I’m not a charity case.”

“Tasha...”

“I’m close, Cole. I am so close. I need to do this on my own. You don’t have to understand it to accept it.”

She thought he would press, and everything would go downhill again. Tasha knew it might be hard to understand her desperate desire to be the one to pull herself out of this mess, but she wasn’t going to compromise on it. She met Cole’s eyes so he could see how determined she was to not accept a handout. She could tell it pained him to accept what she was saying, but he nodded.

“Okay, Tasha,” he said. “You’ve got the job.”

The anvil that had been sitting on her chest shifted, and suddenly Tasha felt like she could breathe again.

“Thank you,” she whispered, finally wiping away the tears that continued to fall. He brought his hand to her face and thumbed them away. “There is nothing for you to be embarrassed about. Do you get that?”

Tasha nodded even though she didn’t agree.

“Accepting help does not make you weak. If you ever wrap your mind around that and want me to assist, you just

ask. Will you do that?"

She nodded again, and Cole searched her eyes as if he was looking to see if he could spot the lie in her irises. Her heart thudded against her chest, and eventually, she was the one who broke eye contact.

"Do you want to hear the plans I've got?" she asked, trying to divert his attention elsewhere.

"I'd love to," he said. "How much time do you have?"

She shrugged. "I told him I would be out for most of the day. He's been in an apologetic mood, so he didn't fuss. Why?"

"Let's go grab something to eat and talk plans," he said. "I know a place in Baltimore. That far away enough for you to feel safe? Best burgers in the DMV."

The smart, logical thing to do was to tell him she didn't want to take that risk, but Tasha wasn't feeling smart or logical. She was feeling tired as hell and wanted nothing more than the normalcy of sharing a burger with a... friend... as she told him about the plans she'd dreamed up that morning.

She pushed down the anxious feelings wanting to rear their heads and smiled at Cole. "I'm down."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Tasha sat silently as Cole made some last-minute changes to his schedule and let Sophie know he'd be out until later that afternoon. He could tell opening up like that took a lot out of her by the way she just moved quietly alongside him, looking defeated and morose as fuck. He hated seeing her like that, but there wasn't anything he could say in that moment to make her feel better, so he kept his mouth shut. His insides were a jumbled mess — a jumbled, festering mess — twisting and turning so hard he contemplated putting off the meeting so he could go home and let the negative feelings take him. He shook away the need to sit by himself on his couch with a glass of something strong while he remembered things he wished he could forget. Both he and Tasha needed a pick-me-up, and he knew Gary's Burgers would be just the place. Cole was not exaggerating when he said the little hole-in-the-wall restaurant he and Xander had stumbled across a few years back had the best burgers in the DMV. The restaurant was bright and airy, always had the best playlist playing, and provided a soothing atmosphere. Cole very rarely went there when he was just after a burger. He usually popped up on Miss Rachel when he was looking for some peace of mind.

He glanced over at Tasha sitting in the passenger seat, fiddling with a dainty gold chain with a snowflake pendant hanging around her neck. They'd been driving for nearly fifteen minutes now with only the sounds of Jhené Aiko interrupting the silence that had started bordering on uncomfortable.

“You like burgers?” he asked. The sudden start to the conversation startled her into dropping her hand and looking over at him.

“Who doesn’t?” she asked with a little laugh. “They’re elite.”

“Damn right,” he said. “Gary’s will be a treat for you, then. Xander and I have searched...and I mean *searched*, but we’ve yet to find anywhere that serves up burgers like Gary’s.”

“I wouldn’t have thought you to be a burger aficionado,” Tasha commented. He glanced at her in time to see her lips quirking and humor sparkling in the brown eyes finally coming back to life.

“Oh, really? You think I survive on celery sticks and hummus?”

Her gaze flicked down his body in a way that made Cole’s nerve endings burn with awareness. He brought his eyes back to the road and kept them there.

“Definitely not,” she said. “But you seem like the type to lead by example, and I know you’re not out here encouraging your clients to eat burgers.”

Cole chuckled. “On the contrary. I encourage my clients to consume everything they want but obviously in moderation. A lifestyle won’t stick if it feels like deprivation. Prisons aren’t fun, mental or otherwise.”

“Preaching to the choir,” she said softly, and her mood dimmed again.

“Don’t go there,” he whispered. “Don’t give any more energy to whatever thought or memory you just had that wiped that smile off your face.”

“My entire life is a prison,” she said with a defeated sigh. “I never thought I could end up here. I’d have been offended if anyone ever suggested I could find myself in a position where I’m going to fucking Baltimore to have a burger because I’m afraid my husband might stumble across me with a friend.”

“We’re going to Baltimore because Gary’s has the best burgers,” Cole said with a small sympathetic smile. “It’s just a happy plus that it’s putting us clear off your bitch ass husband’s radar.”

Cole could feel her gaze on him even though he focused on the road. He’d started to think he made the wrong move by trying to lighten the tension when she finally spoke.

“This is so weird. I can’t wrap my head around being able to just...*be*... My mind is so confused right now. I spend so much of my time pretending. I pretend to Jeremy I don’t hate him, I pretend to Navaya I’m okay, and I pretend to myself I’m not halfway to losing my mind. I’m not feeling that pressure now. I didn’t expect it to feel so...”

“Relieving?”

She was silent for a while as if she was turning over the word in her mind to see how well it fit. “It makes me feel free.”

Cole navigated his car into an open parking space and killed the engine. His first instinct was to tell her the relief would be so much better if Navaya was the person she confided in. He knew instantly it would be a horrible idea and that he should keep the thought to himself, but he still battled over it in his mind. Navaya knew Tasha. They had a bond created through love and the test of time. She would be able to provide a type of comfort he would be unable to, no matter how good his intentions might be. He glanced at Tasha, and for a split second, she was not the person he saw sitting in the passenger’s seat rummaging through her handbag. Alarm bells rang loudly through his mind. He shouldn’t be trying to provide comfort to Tasha, period. He had no idea what he might be opening himself up to. Tasha pulled her lip balm from the bag and swiped it over her lips before she turned to him and looked at him with questions in her confused eyes. “What?”

He shook his head, hoping he could shake out the unease slowly creeping through his blood. “Just amazed that you seem to have your whole house in the bottom of that bag.”

She smiled brightly at him, and it was like all the dark clouds around her parted so that sunshine peeked out. He glanced at Tasha and knew instantly that they would create a bond too — a bond forged through trauma, hers and his — and Cole knew he should create as much distance between himself and the situation as he could. But he didn't. He grabbed his sunshades from the glove compartment and opened his door. "Ready?"

She nodded. "Yeah. Let's see if this place lives up to your hype."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Tasha glanced around skittishly as she and Cole made the short walk from where he parked to the small restaurant with a tasteful sign out front that read: *Gary's Burgers*. Jeremy was back in D.C., and she couldn't think of any mutual friends who might be in Baltimore at this very minute to spot her walking along the sidewalk with Cole. She jumped when he rested his hand against the small of her back to steer her into the restaurant.

"It'll be okay," he whispered. Tasha flushed, realizing she hadn't been doing the great job she thought she'd been of hiding how anxious she was. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have put you in this position. We should've ordered in at the gym or something."

"I'm okay," she said. The hairs standing up on the back of her neck told another story. She tried to focus her attention on her surroundings instead of the knot in her stomach that refused to unfurl no matter how many deep breaths she took. Her first impression of the diner-styled restaurant was not *residence of phenomenal burgers*. It was comforting and homey, with bright paintings on the walls and Charlie Wilson and Sebastian Cole's voices streaming through the speakers lamenting about how they got up with the devil to dance a slow dance.

"I love this song," she said, sitting at the table tucked into the corner closest to the bar area that Cole selected for them.

“Really?” Cole asked, grabbing his own seat before flashing her a grin filled with equal parts surprise and approval. She nodded, and that warm smile widened. He swayed in his chair to the sultry jazz crescendo as he removed his shades, joining in to sing about a kiss being the sweetest poison ever found. Tasha knew Cole could sing, even though he spent most of his time in *Serenaded by Mahogany*, the band he’d formed with Xander, his cousin, and two of their friends, singing background vocals while playing the guitar or the piano if needed. She just hadn’t realized he could sing *like this*. She couldn’t help but stare at him as he continued singing along effortlessly even though the perfection in the deep tenor of his voice made her pulse race.

“Damn,” she whispered. “Tell me why you guys have Xander on lead vocals again?”

He found that funny as hell, throwing his head back and laughing with so much gusto it got the attention of a few of the patrons sitting nearby.

“Don’t play like that,” Cole said when his laughter petered off. “Xander could run, *and does run*, circles around my vocals.”

“You underestimate yourself. But I guess the whole bad boy on the bass guitar vibe you’ve got is probably going to drive women wild when you guys hit the big time.”

Cole scoffed at that. “Unlikely.”

“Which part?”

He thought for a while. “Both.”

She was about to give him all the reasons she disagreed with his assessment when a server interrupted to take their orders. Cole ordered something called the Sunshine burger, which was topped with bacon and an egg, sunny side up. Tasha was surprised by the options when she finally got around to looking at the menu Cole hadn’t even bothered picking up. She chose the house burger topped with candied onions, purple cabbage, and jalapeños. They settled into easy conversation as they waited on their orders, having jokes at

Navaya and Xander's expense and talking more about Cole's hopes for the band. Tasha knew Xander really hoped SBM took off, but she could see that Cole was of two minds about it. He loved music, and he was super talented at it, but it seemed like his passion lay with fitness. Tasha took the last bite of her burger. Her expectations were high, and the burger exceeded the hell out of them. It was definitely one of the top three burgers she'd had in her entire life, and it wasn't two or three. She took a sip of her soda before she turned to Cole. It was time to get down to why they were here.

"I'd like to get to know more about you and your business," she said. "Background information always gives me a springboard to jump off when I'm thinking about the best types of design."

"Go ahead," he said. "Ask whatever."

"Why fitness?" she asked, pulling out a small notepad so she could take down any points she thought would be useful.

"Other than the obvious benefits to physical health, it does wonders for mental wellbeing too. A lot of people don't know how much mental fortitude they have until they're on the last few reps of that final set, and they have to reach deep down to find the resolve to finish. And when you see that moment when it clicks to them that they did the thing they didn't think they could? I live for that."

"You've been active all your life?"

"Nah. I was actually a pretty inactive kid. I holed myself up in my room reading comics day in, day out. I'm pretty sure I never actually did a push-up until juvie, and then once I got out, exercise was a means to something else."

Tasha had been sipping on her drink and had barely swallowed her last gulp when he spoke. She was damn lucky she had, too, because she might have choked on it. The question was on the tip of her tongue, but she hesitated. It was none of her business, even though curiosity rose within her.

"You obviously don't have to answer, but...why were you in juvie?"

Cole sighed. The passion that had been in his eyes when he spoke about the importance of fitness was replaced by something else. Something more somber, darker. It set her nerves on edge.

“I’ve been all up in your business for a while now. I guess turnabout is fair play,” he mused. A few seconds passed before Cole spoke again, and his words knocked all the air out of her.

“I went to juvie when I was fifteen because I almost killed my father. I stabbed him about seven times.” Cole stared straight through her when he continued, “I live each day with the regret of knowing I didn’t finish the job.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

She reacted just as Cole expected her to. Mostly. Those lips parted slightly, her eyes went wide, and she couldn't decide if she wanted to meet his gaze. It wasn't a story he told often. It wasn't something he enjoyed reliving, although the memories didn't seem to give too much of a damn about his desires. On the few occasions he spoke about that horrible night and the even worse months to follow, people regarded him with a mixture of morbid curiosity and fear until he got into the meat of it. And then the pity came. Tasha's brown eyes shone with curiosity when she finally brought them unflinchingly to his, but there was no hint of fear. She cleared her throat and then surprised the hell out of him when she said, "So the takeaway from this is your father is a horrible man and had it coming."

She said it in such a confident, matter-of-fact way that Cole wasn't able to hold back the surprised gruff laughter that spilled from his throat. He recovered quickly and took a sip of his water just so he could buy a little time to find something to do with his mouth. Tasha used his stalling to continue talking, and every word that flowed from her mouth in a rambling stream made something deep within him flutter awake.

"I'm sorry if that seemed crass. I'm not trying to be crass. It's just that the thought of you...*you of all people*...feeling the need to kill your father at such a young age. And for you to say you regret you didn't succeed? Oh, no. There's no way I can reconcile the Cole I know...well, kind of know, with a kid who would do something like that frivolously. He had you

fucked up, and I'm thinking he had to have been a horrible, horrible human being.”

Cole allowed memories of Caldwell Mason to flood his mind as he nodded at Tasha until he found his voice. “He was the worst.”

Something flickered in her eyes. It wasn't pity. It was more like understanding. Tasha seemed like she finally got what could possibly drive a fifteen-year-old boy to the brink like that. His throat burned with the words he knew he'd have to speak. Words he wondered if he had any business speaking to *her*. He tried to rearrange the tidy, packaged story he gave to everyone else in his mind — the version that told enough to convince people he wasn't a sociopath but didn't get too deeply into the dark underbelly that had been his childhood. But he wanted to tell Tasha about it. He wanted to tell her about the nights of hiding under his bed as if it could drown out the banging, the tears, the shouts, and the screams. He wanted to tell her of the helpless hopelessness he felt every single day in the stifling air of that house, which reeked of oppressive fear. He wanted to tell her about the times the rage turned on him too.

“You don't have to talk about it,” she said softly. “We can just go back to talking about your brand.”

Shame flooded Cole, and it took a while before he spoke again. “I'm sorry.”

Tasha's eyebrows drew together. “For what?”

“Being so caught up in my own bullshit that I didn't extend you the basic courtesy you just extended to me.”

Tasha reached for her drink but didn't move to take another sip. “I know your heart is pure, and you just want to help. I won't force you to speak about your trauma to satisfy my curiosity. That isn't a worthy reason.”

“I want to tell you,” he said, keeping his words and voice as measured as he could. “I think it would explain my behavior toward you a little bit. I'm just not really sure...”

“That you should bring up an abusive man to a woman who has her own abusive man at home?” Tasha asked with a small, bitter laugh. “There are no soft pieces left inside me that need to be protected, Cole. I can handle it...if you can.”

There was so much to fucking unpack. He could see the earnest belief shining in her eyes when she told him there were no soft pieces left of her...that Jeremy had stolen them all. Cole called bullshit there. Tasha had to reset her spine with steel, but he saw her when she was with Navaya. She was thoughtful, perceptive, funny, and sweet. It didn't matter what Tasha thought; there was still so much softness there. He just hoped she was able to get herself out of Jeremy's claws before he really destroyed all the soft pieces in her. Before he really stole all the light from her eyes, and she would be unable to summon any joy or tenderness even in the company of those she loved. It was a hell of a fucking journey back once that happened, and not everyone found their way.

I can handle it...if you can.

Except, Cole wasn't sure he could. Not right now. Not in this space. Not when he was looking at a woman whose eyes reminded him of his mother's before the light behind them disappeared. But he knew he had to. Cole took a deep, steadying breath, reminding himself he was no longer a scared fifteen-year-old. The old man couldn't hurt him — or anyone — now. Yet, the memories still stung like the lance of a scorpion. He would return there, though. He would pull out the crude stitches. He would dig his fingers into the festering wound. *For her*. He signaled for the server and ordered two whiskeys on the rocks.

“I'm not really a whiskey fan,” Tasha said as he wrapped up the order.

“Order what you want. These two are mine,” Cole responded dryly. “I'm going to need it.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Tasha watched as Cole downed the first whiskey in one large gulp and wondered if he should tell her about his past. Her stomach churned with dread. She showed a brave face, but Tasha knew listening to whatever he was about to tell her would be hard. There would be parallels between her situation and what Cole had to live through, but that was not what lodged Tasha's heart in her throat. She tried to think of the quiet, calm, confident, kind man she knew Cole to be as a scared child, feeling so helpless and so out of control that he felt eliminating his father permanently was his only solution. Her chest ached, and she resisted the urge to reach out and cover his hand with hers as she watched a faraway look creep into his eyes while his body tensed as he took himself back to a place he obviously didn't want to go. Tasha began to open her mouth to suggest they drop the topic altogether and try to rediscover the light atmosphere they had when they were busy talking about food and music less than twenty minutes before. Cole started to speak before she could get the words out.

"I watched my father beat the crap out of my mother so often that I used to think it was something all daddies did."

He was holding the other glass of whiskey loosely in his hand, staring into it as if he could find the strength he needed there. Tasha placed her hands in her lap to stop herself from reaching out to touch him.

He chuckled, but there was no humor there...only the dull echoes of pain that had years to peter off into something you didn't get over but lived uneasily with.

“I was confused, though, because I couldn’t understand how something daddies *were supposed to do* made my mother cry so much. So... I asked my Aunt Sheree about it, and I realized I’d fucked up as soon as the words were out my mouth. Well, as much as a five-year-old could, anyway. We didn’t see Aunt Sheree much after that. To be honest, we didn’t see much of my mother’s family after that. That was the first time he beat me for having a *big fucking mouth*. I’d been spanked before, lightly. My father strongly believed in the ‘spare the rod, spoil the child’ bullshit that will have no place in my home if I ever manage to claw together any sort of family after all the bullshit I endured. So yeah, I’d been hit before, but I’d never been beaten *like that*. I’m sure there were worse beatings after that, but in the years after, in the dead of night when I couldn’t bring myself to sleep...that was the ass cutting I remembered. I was screaming, my mother was screaming at him to stop, and for that, she got her own dose.”

He paused and took a deep sip of the whiskey before he fixed brown eyes that were glassy as hell on her and said, “What you need to know before I go any further is that I started hating my father when I was five. It festered for ten years through nights of putting pillows over my head as if it could drown out my mother’s screams. It festered when I was old enough to try to stand up for my mother, but I would be knocked down and beaten instead. It festered every time I had to explain to a teacher or a doctor that I was really just clumsy, and there was definitely nothing to worry about in my house. And...I hated my mother too.”

He stopped talking abruptly, licked his lips, and took another deep breath. He was holding the glass so damn tightly now, and the tight knot of dread in the pit of Tasha’s stomach tightened so much she wanted to be sick.

“Wow,” he whispered, more to himself than her. “That’s the first time I’ve said that outside of a therapist’s chair.”

“You don’t have to...”

Wanting him to know he didn’t have to continue was more than her feeling the strangest need to protect him from the chaos she knew those memories let loose on his soul. Tasha

wasn't sure she could stomach hearing any more. And she wasn't sure she would be able to keep her distance if she had to listen to the small cracks in his deep voice for much longer. He paused for so long that Tasha thought he would take the out she offered him. He didn't. Cole shook his head, took the last gulp of whiskey, and shifted in the chair.

“I didn't know jack shit about the mental effect of abuse when I was a kid. All I knew was that he was hurting us, but she stayed. I didn't understand why she didn't kick him out or pack us up and leave. I felt unprotected. I felt like she loved him more than she did me, even though he was a raging asshole. I started seeing the nuances as I got a bit older. My mother didn't really have access to any money, and basic things like our health insurance were tied to my father's job. I realized he'd isolated her from almost all of her family and friends. In a very literal sense, I was all she had. I stumbled into an argument one night and realized he'd been making sure she knew she would never see me again if she ever tried to leave him. He wasn't talking about fighting her for custody.”

Tasha was dizzy with how hard the force of his words slapped her in her face. She tried to imagine the kind of monster who'd threaten to kill his own child in order to break his wife. She didn't have to try too hard, Tasha realized with a sickening burn in her throat. Jeremy would do just that if they'd had a child. Jeremy and Cole's father were using the same playbook, move for move. Tears started pricking the back of her eyes, but she swallowed them down with the disgust in her throat. The last thing Cole needed was for her to slip into full weeping mode when he was barely holding it together.

“You really don't have to continue,” she said.

“She protected me in ways I couldn't protect her. I didn't realize that until years after when I went through it with my therapist. There were many times when she redirected his anger to her when he was getting ready to come at me. Or when she would recognize the shift in the atmosphere before I did and send me off to my room before he could lash out. I

was a scrawny little kid and very rarely put myself between them...”

“It wasn’t your job,” she breathed. “You were just a kid. She wouldn’t have wanted you to put yourself in a position for him to hurt you. She wanted you as safe as the circumstances could allow. She probably resented the hell out of herself for not being able to leave either. Everyone makes it seem so damn easy...like... I’m sorry, this isn’t about me.”

She massaged her knuckles, needing to find something to do with her hands and needing to find some way to try to soothe away the tension in her soul that her hands couldn’t touch.

“Isn’t it?” Cole asked. His voice was a gruff whisper, but he could’ve shouted through a loudspeaker for how damn exposed she felt.

“I see the parallels, Cole,” she said, struggling against the defensiveness she held like a weapon. She took a deep breath and let it out. “I didn’t need to interrupt you in the middle of you going through something so hard.”

“I didn’t mind,” he admitted. “I don’t mind. Perhaps because it *is* your story. When you first came into the gym and begged me to keep your secret, I couldn’t stop thinking about my mother. I haven’t been able to stop since.”

“I’m sorry...”

He reached out and grasped her shaking hands, rubbing his thumb in smooth, firm strokes over her wrist. She leaned into the comfort he was offering, comfort she wasn’t sure she deserved now she knew the depth of the wounds she’d reopened for him with her bullshit. Her eyes swam with guilt. She’d had the nerve to be angry at him for trying to help her... trying to protect her when she was the one who’d reached in and awakened the wounded, helpless child inside him. She wished, not for the first time, that she could go back to that night and just not go out with Jeremy. She wanted a reset where neither she nor Cole had to deal with the consequences of her fucked-up marriage.

“You’re right, though,” he was saying when she finally managed to put some distance between herself and the guilt threatening to drown her. “I was a kid, and so I wasn’t able to protect my mother until the very end with the strength of ten years of festering rage and a kitchen knife while he slept on the couch. The next five months were easily some of the hardest and most confusing of my life, but in the end, I set her free. I set *me* free, and even if I lived this life a million times, it’s a decision I’d make over and over again.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Cole could feel Tasha's rapid pulse under his thumb as he rubbed her wrist. His gentle rubs were an attempt to soothe them both as they dove headfirst into a conversation that frankly had no business happening in the early afternoon in a burger joint with people blissfully enjoying their meals around them. His mind was so firmly entrenched in those horrible memories that he could smell the metallic sting of the blood that splattered almost everywhere when that knife connected with his father's flesh. There'd been so much fucking blood, and by the time his father had been able to push himself off the couch, he was too disoriented and too weak to be the bully he spent his entire life being. Everything after that was a blur once the adrenaline started to fade. His mother discovered the scene and started screaming her head off before she managed to call 911 and conveyed to them between shrieks that there was an accident with her husband.

It was the way she kneeled in front of him and took the bloody knife from his shaking hand as she wept and muttered, "*Cole. Oh baby, what have you done?*" repeatedly that remained fixed in his mind. He remembered every minute detail, from the way her lips quivered and how she smelled faintly of Ivory soap to the moment he recognized the wheels in her mind turning and clocked that she was going to try to take the blame. He'd blanked out the frantic words she spoke as she tried to come up with a story to explain what happened in a way that would take the blame off him. Cole was having none of it. He was going to tell the police exactly what happened, and he'd been prepared, in his fifteen-year-old

mind, to face whatever consequences that came his way. His mother would be safe and free with the old man out of the way. That was all he wanted. Cole hadn't shed a tear during the hours he was made to go through what happened with his father. It didn't matter how many times the officer with the unkempt mustache kept saying, "But he wasn't beating your mother when you stabbed him, was he, Cole? He was sleeping on the couch. You could have called the police if you were really scared for your mother."

He didn't shed a tear when the social worker who'd been assigned to him rubbed his back, trying to comfort him as he sat stone-faced when he finally had a break to eat a cold, stale sandwich with orange juice. But when the tall, willowy woman with kind eyes came to visit him in the holding cell a few hours later and told him his father made it through surgery and was likely to survive? Cole sat with his back against the wall and cried out all the rage and frustration he'd felt.

"I remember thinking he had to be invincible or something," Cole said, trying hard to detach himself from the painful emotions needling at him. "I couldn't believe I went through *all that* just for him to end up surviving. Everything was a mess after that. The officers came up with the fucked-up theory that my mother put me up to it, and my mother was ready to do anything to take the heat off me. I ended up being charged as a juvenile with first-degree assault, which, since I'd obviously intended to kill the man and there wasn't actually a threat to me or my mother at the time, was lucky for me. I hated juvie, but there was this little workout room that I gravitated to. It wasn't anything amazing, but I found solace there. It didn't matter how loud and scary things got around me; I could center myself while I tried to focus on repeating the exercises I watched some of the older guys do. I ended up serving just about seven months and two years of probation under a deal with the DA's office. It was hard on me, but apparently, it was harder on my mother. She stayed because she was afraid he'd take me away from her, but in a way, he ended up doing just that. She really hit rock bottom and finally reached out to her sisters for help. It's been a long, hard road for both of us, but we're good. She's learned to let go of the

guilt and a few years ago gave a man who's gentle as fuck with her heart a chance. I love that for her, so yeah...I'd do it all again."

He continued rubbing Tasha's wrist as the tears that had been swimming in her eyes for half of his story started falling. He didn't know which part of what he said would stick with her, but Cole really hoped it was the part that showed her there would be so much more life to live after she got through this. And she *would* get through this.

"What about him?" she asked in a soft small voice as if she worried she would upset him by bringing up something she would naturally be curious about.

"He died before I turned twenty-one," Cole said. "Fell asleep at the wheel of his car one night. I went to the funeral just so I could watch them lower him into the ground."

She gave him a watery smile. "You're amazing."

Something warm blossomed in his chest. "I'm really not. I stumbled through the situation I found myself in, and it just happened to work out."

Tasha shook her head. "I'm talking about what you did afterward. You spoke about therapy, so you realized you needed help to make sense of all of this shit. You channeled your safe space and made an entire career out of it. And nobody just looking at the cool, calm, easy way you move through life would ever guess you'd been through hell. He victimized you, but you were never his victim." Her voice broke as she continued, "I wish I could..."

Cole squeezed her hand. "Don't. You're surviving in the way you think is best for you right now. You aren't a victim any more than I was."

She shrugged, making it clear she didn't agree with him but wouldn't press. "Not for much longer at any rate. I've got a plan."

"Tell me about it," Cole said. He half-expected her to brush him off and retreat behind the safety of the distance she

seemed desperate to put between them. Instead, she removed her hand from his, wiped her face, and took a sip of her water.

“I’m well into the third phase of my plan,” she said matter-of-factly. “I’m going to rent a storage space and start moving the things I need slowly. He won’t notice things going missing if I do it over several weeks, and when I eventually leave, I won’t have to take more than a handbag.”

Tasha slowly went through how she’d been saving and plotting for almost a year, and he couldn’t help but be awed by just how many balls she’d been juggling smoothly for so long. He swallowed the urge to once again try to loan her the money she would need to jump her straight to the final phase of her plan. He could see that she took great pride in being able to outsmart the asshole with her own grit.

“I have a spare room,” he found himself saying instead. “Just let me know if you want to save money on a storage place.”

“Cole...”

“You don’t have to take me up on the offer if you don’t want to. It’s no pressure at all. Listening to you talk — *watching you talk* — has been eye-opening. I *get* what you are trying to do. All I’m saying is that you don’t have to do any of this alone. I understand that Navaya is the only part of your life where you can pretend you aren’t going through this bullshit. I know how isolating this can be, and I’m willing to help alleviate that as much or as little as you’re willing to let me.”

Her entire posture softened as she nodded and said, “I’ll let you know.”

It wasn’t acceptance, but it wasn’t straight-out refusal. Cole could live with that. He persuaded her to try the apple pie on the menu before he asked the server for the check. Tasha was halfway through her first bite when he said, “Tasha?”

“Mmm?” she asked, still focused on what he knew from experience must be an explosion of beautiful flavors on her tongue. He picked up his own fork and dug in, hoping to

lessen the impact of what he was about to say. He brought the fork halfway to his mouth before he paused and held her gaze as he said, "You're amazing."

Fifteen minutes.

Tasha cradled her cup of coffee closer, wishing its warmth and aroma soothed her. She took a sip and relaxed a little bit. She glanced at the clock again. *Fourteen minutes*. Tasha couldn't wait for Jeremy to take his ass to work so she could relax in the solitude she craved. His mood had been subdued for the last three hours, and Tasha guessed that was as much as she could hope for. She'd felt sick to her stomach when she woke up earlier that morning with his hardened dick pressed against her ass and his hands between her legs. Tasha had hoped lying stiffly on her side would dissuade him, but his touches became insistent and aggravating enough that she rolled over and spread her legs just wide enough for him to take what he wanted. She and Jeremy didn't have sex. He masturbated into her rigid, unyielding body, and Tasha often spent twice as much time trying to wash away his touch in the shower than the entire ordeal lasted in the first place.

Ten minutes.

He sauntered into the kitchen right on time, shrugging into his jacket and heading for the thermos of green tea she'd prepared for him. Tasha pulled her robe around her body as she stood and walked the short distance to meet him with a fake smile plastered on her face. She kissed him softly. "Have a good day."

He squeezed her ass and leaned in for a longer kiss. "How can I not with how you woke me up this morning?"

Tasha hoped her smile didn't look as brittle as it felt. She turned around quickly, pretending to start making another cup of coffee, so he didn't see the look on her face. Jeremy still confused her at times, even though she spent a lot of time analyzing him so she could better adapt to his moods. There was absolutely no way he could still be under the delusion that she still had even a glimmer of sexual attraction for him. He couldn't truly believe she enjoyed him touching her, much less fucking her, could he? Tasha didn't even pretend to orgasm anymore. He was still standing there when she turned around. He seemed to be searching her face, and for a few sickening seconds, Tasha wondered if he had been taking note of her increasing lack of responsiveness after all. Worry rose within her. She hoped Jeremy hadn't been conjuring up his own theories about the cause of her distantness. Tasha scalded her tongue as she took a too-deep drink of coffee. She took a few deep breaths, determined to file her panic away for another time. Jeremy was going to be out of the apartment in less than five minutes, and she needed her mind clear enough to focus on the four new design requests she'd gotten in the last two days as well as continue working on a few design options for Cole.

"What?" she asked, unable to keep the slight hitch from her voice when she found him still looking at her in a manner she couldn't read. He shook his head and grinned. "Nothing. Just can't wait to get back home to wear your sexy ass out."

"Neither can I," she managed to say. She waited for lightning to strike her for the blatant lie. Honestly, that was a better option than whatever Jeremy was thinking about.

"I love you, Natasha," he said. His voice was low and soft, but there was no adoration in the declaration. Tasha recognized the challenge buried in the words. She was so wrong to assume Jeremy hadn't been observing and tracking her behavior. She reached deep inside for the brightest smile she could muster.

"I love you more, Jermz."

She saw surprise flicker in his eyes before she tilted her chin and kissed him as deeply as she could stomach.

“Hurry home,” she said, smile still plastered to her face. She was proud of herself for being able to stand there with that fucking smile on her face until the door closed. She counted to a hundred so that she was sure he was really gone before she allowed her panic-filled cries to fill the air. It took nearly an hour before she pulled herself together and logged into her *DesignMeNow* account. She didn’t have time to panic or feel sorry for herself. Not now. Not when she was so close.

She had a plan, and she was going to stick to it. Soon, Jeremy wouldn’t be able to touch her ever again.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“Run this by me again, Uncle Cole,” his twelve-year-old cousin said in the same confused voice she’d had the last three times she’d asked him to run his business proposition by her again. “You gonna pay me a hundred dollars to create a bunch of accounts on *DesignMeNow*?”

“Just make sure they have the same password, and write down the email addresses legibly so I can log in.”

Aja stepped forward and pressed the back of her palm to Cole’s head.

“He doesn’t seem like he has a fever,” she muttered to herself. Cole chuckled. Aja was dramatic, just like her mother. He grabbed her and tickled her until she howled while trying to wriggle away from him and calling for her mother. It was his Aunt Sheree who eventually pushed her head into the living room, shaking it. “I swear you’re just an overgrown kid. What could’ve caused this commotion?”

“Nothing at all but Aja passing up good money,” Cole responded before shouting loud enough so that Aja’s mother could hear him from where she was in the kitchen. “What’s Aja’s allowance like, Apryl? Cause your daughter here passing up good money.”

“Because it doesn’t make any sense!” Aja protested. “You’re the one who told me if it smells like a rat, it probably *is* a rat.”

He swallowed the teasing remark on his tongue and pulled the squirming preteen in for a tight hug. “Wait? You actually

listen to me?”

“Duh,” Aja said with a wide, sweet smile that almost made Cole forget the terror she could be. “You’re my favorite uncle.”

Jay walked into the living room on the tail end of the declaration and made a rude sound as he flopped down on the couch and reached for the remote. “*That* will never not be offensive, considering I’m actually your uncle and all.”

“Make it two hundred dollars, and we have a deal,” Aja whispered. “And I won’t tell your mama you’re probably up to no good.”

“Damn, child,” Cole said, but he was grinning. “I’m not paying you a dime over one-fifty. Akeem can use a computer just as well as you can.”

Her eyes widened at the threat of losing the opportunity to her younger brother. “You wouldn’t.”

Cole cocked his head to the side. “Wouldn’t I?”

“Fine,” Aja sighed. “I’ll get the first five for you by tomorrow. It has to be *DesignMeNow*, or can I do *Fiverr* too?”

“My instructions were clear,” Cole grinned. “You’re not getting a dime unless you follow them.”

She hopped down from Cole’s lap and made her way to where Jay sat digging into a bag of Cheetos. “I was wrong, Uncle Jay. You’re obviously the Uncle I love the most.”

Jay ruffled her braids. “Whatever, brat.”

His cousin waited until Aja had wandered out to the backyard, where most of the other kids were gathered before he turned to Cole.

“You’re paying her to do what exactly on *DesignMeNow*?” Jay asked.

“None of your business,” Cole said. “Can’t a guy find a sneaky way to give his favorite niece money her mother wouldn’t appreciate just being handed to her?”

Jay sucked his teeth. “I’m tired of both of y’all.”

Cole released the tense breath he'd been holding, happy he'd managed to stop Jay from sniffing around.

His mind wandered to Tasha again, and he resisted the urge to send her a message. The last three days had been one long test of self-control. He hadn't spoken to her since she'd emailed him their contract later after their lunch at Gary's Burgers. He'd promised himself he would respect her wishes and wait for her to reach out when she was ready. Cole's phone chimed and pulled him from his thoughts. He glanced at the notification of an incoming email and smiled. It was Tasha, giving him an update on the birthday party invitation graphic he'd requested through the first *DesignMeNow* profile he created before he decided to outsource the tedious job. He'd agonized for hours over the best way to convince her to accept the loan before realizing the answer was right there. He could help increase Tasha's escape fund while still maintaining the boundary she'd set...well, *technically*, at least. That it meant paying Aja way more money than her service deserved was a small matter. Tasha was worth it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Tasha winced a little as she slid her entire body down into the bathtub filled with near-scalding water. She closed her eyes and leaned her head against the white porcelain, not even bothering to wipe away the tears. They would keep coming anyway. Her day hadn't been bad once she stopped worrying about the weird energy she'd picked up from Jeremy before he left for work that morning. She convinced herself that she'd just imagined it and went to work on the surprising number of requests that came in on *DesignMeNow*. She spent the rest of the day adjusting timelines, dreaming up graphics, and sending silent prayers of thanks to the last client who'd written the glowing review that seemed to be sending new clients her way. She loaded Janet Jackson's eponymous album and jammed her way through her workday like it was 1993, pausing only to send Jeremy a few messages throughout the day and cooking a simple dinner so he wouldn't have anything to complain about when he came home.

He'd been earlier than usual, and that should've been the first sign, but she'd brushed it aside, distracting herself by asking him about his day and making him his favorite cocktail.

"Do you really care?" he asked with a small smile when she handed him the gin and tonic. Her heart slammed against her chest because she knew that smile. She feared it. She brushed the fear aside and tried to laugh. "Of course, I do. Why would you even ask that?"

He held her wrist more tightly than he needed to as he drained the gin and tonic and placed the empty tumbler on the

small table next to the recliner.

“You think I don’t notice my wife slowly becoming a robot?” he sneered. “Just going through the fucking motions.”

His grip tightened even more, and Tasha squeezed her eyes shut, the sharp slice of fear in her stomach making it hard to breathe. He yanked her so that she fell on his lap.

“It’s like you’re not even trying anymore,” Jeremy commented. He tugged at her twist out and sneered. “Didn’t we have an arrangement about how you could wear your hair if you intended to keep it wild?”

“I wasn’t leaving the apartment,” she whispered. She couldn’t even find it in herself to be annoyed by the snide dismissal in his voice when he spoke about her hair. She was too busy waiting for the other shoe to drop. And then it did.

“I can’t even remember the last time you sucked my dick, Natasha,” he drawled. “Can you?”

She tried to breathe, but her lungs were on fire. Tasha tried to think of something — *anything* — to say to pull things back from where she knew they were headed, but her mind couldn’t move past the panic buzzing in her brain like a hive of bees.

“Jeremy...” she started, mouth dry, throat tight.

He wrapped his hand in her twist out and pulled her head back, but there was nothing gentle or sensuous about it. It was filled with the aggression radiating off him in waves.

“Tash,” he replied, voice hard and mocking. “Is there a problem with fucking your husband? Is that my pussy, or is it someone else’s?”

“You know I’m not cheating on you,” she managed to say.

“Then prove it.”

Tasha closed her eyes, held her breath, and submerged her entire body in the water, staying there until she needed to breathe again. Warm tears made fresh tracks down her cheek as she muffled her sobs in a fist. Jeremy had been filled with righteous anger and had vengeance on his mind, and every single thing that happened afterward was meant to hurt and

degrade her. He seemed to relish each wince, each shudder, and when she could no longer hold back the tears, he wiped them away and smiled.

Jeremy rolled off her when he found his release before sauntering to the bathroom, humming like what happened between them was the most natural thing in the world. She was still curled into herself on the bed when he returned.

“I want you to make an appointment with your doctor,” he said. “It’s time to start trying for that baby you wanted so bad.”

“Jeremy...”

“I’ve transferred some of the money from your spending account back into mine,” he continued as if she hadn’t spoken at all. “Maybe then you’ll start appreciating how much I do for you.”

She swallowed the retort on the tip of her tongue when she caught his eyes. There was so much anger swirling there that Tasha was sick to her stomach. He was baiting her, she realized. He wanted her to mouth off so he could justify unleashing his barely concealed rage on her.

“Okay,” she said instead, hating herself a little bit more once the word left her mouth. “I’m going to go have a bath.”

Tasha scrambled from the bed and was halfway to the master suite when he called out to her. She breathed deeply before turning to face him. “Yes?”

“I love you,” he said. “Everything I do is because I love you.”

“I love you, too,” she stammered, not missing the sardonic smile that flashed across Jeremy’s face.

Tasha pulled her knees to her chest. The water had long gone cold, but she still hadn’t pulled herself together. She smiled when she thought of how satisfying it would be to poison Jeremy’s food or attack him while he slept, but she knew better than that. Tasha wanted a life on the other side of this. A life that involved freedom, not trading one jail for another. She leaned back against the tub and imagined the

absolute joy on Cole's face as he told her of his mother finding a man who was careful with her heart. There *would* be a life on the other side of this. A happy life. She just had to be strong, stay focused, and bide her time.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The smell of coffee roused Tasha the next morning. She pushed herself up in bed and tried to school her face into a neutral expression when she spotted Jeremy at the foot of the bed with a cup of coffee. He was already dressed for work and was looking at her with a forlorn expression she desperately wanted to slap off his face.

“Good morning, love,” he said, moving close enough to hand her the mug. She accepted it, keeping her eyes trained on everything in the room other than him.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I was an asshole last night. I shouldn’t have joked about transferring the money from your account.”

Tasha furrowed her forehead in disgust. Joked? And *that* was what he chose to apologize for? He was looking for reassurance. He wanted her to tell him that everything was okay like she did when he came home with his tail between his legs after an exhausting night of cheating. She didn’t have it in her. Her soul was chafed too raw for her to find it within herself to pretend even for the sake of self-preservation.

“Tasha?” he said when a few seconds passed without her responding to him or taking a sip of the coffee.

“I don’t have anything to say, Jeremy,” she spat. “I don’t give a fuck about the money. Last night, you accused me of cheating on you, and then you...you made me have sex with you to prove a point, even though I told you I was not in the mood. Even after I asked you to stop.”

He took the cup of coffee from her shaking hands and cradled her cheek. Tasha closed her eyes. Jeremy's cold, clammy hands repulsed the shit out of her. *He* repulsed the shit out of her.

"I love you so much," he said. "I didn't mean to hurt you. I'm sorry I got carried away. You're my entire world."

"You don't treat me like it!" she screamed, regretting the outburst when Jeremy tensed. Time slowed down as she waited to see if he was going to lash out.

"You're right," he said slowly. "I've been crowding you. I'm just afraid to lose you, Tash. I'll do better, I swear. You're my entire world, and I'm going to make sure you know it."

"I am going to the gym," she blurted out before quickly adding, "I need the endorphins."

"Of course," Jeremy said. "How about you take Navaya out to dinner later? I'm sure she'd enjoy the surprise."

Of all the Jeremys, Tasha was sure she hated contrite Jeremy the most. She found it in herself to smile and thank him, even though what she really wanted to do was spit in his face.

"I'm heading out now," he said. "Have a good workout."

Tasha reached for the cup of coffee, keeping her eyes trained on the creamy liquid in the mug until she felt Jeremy leave the room. She waited until she heard the front door close before she crawled out of bed and padded to the kitchen, where she poured the coffee down the drain, wishing she could do the same to every moment she'd spent with the sonofabitch she married.

* * *

"HEY, COLE'S IN A SESSION RIGHT NOW."

Sophie greeted her with the enthusiasm of an old friend who apparently knew that, despite her workout gear and

paying for three months' membership, Tasha had no intention of using the facilities.

"You can go wait for him in his office," Sophie continued. "He should be done in about half an hour."

Tasha didn't bother telling the young woman that Cole wasn't expecting her. She had no idea why she was there. Well, that was a lie. She wanted — *needed* — a soft place to land, and Cole had offered to be that. She made her way to the office and took the spot she always seemed to end up in on the couch. She reached for the folder she'd brought and tried to sketch a few ideas for Cole's media campaign, but she couldn't get her thoughts to settle down. She rested her forehead in her hands and tried to massage away the headache brewing behind her eyes.

"Tasha?"

Tasha's head snapped up at the sound of Cole's voice. He stood close to the door with a surprised expression on his face that morphed almost immediately into concern when he got a good look at her.

He crossed the space between them in what seemed like two long strides.

"What's wrong?" he asked, eyes roving over her body as if he was looking for marks on her. "What happened?"

"I didn't know where else to go," she started. "I... I..."

Her voice trailed off as she thought about actually having to tell Cole what had happened. Why did she come here? Her first instinct was to get as far away from that small office as she possibly could, but Cole's soft voice pulled her out of her spiraling emotions.

"You don't have to tell me what happened," he whispered. "Just tell me what you need."

There were no words to vocalize how much she needed to shift the crushing weight sitting on her chest.

"I'm so alone," she wailed instead. "I didn't want to feel alone."

His face softened. “What do you need?”

The request was on the tip of her tongue, but she swallowed it. She was being ridiculous, barging into this man’s place of work like he owed her anything. She wasn’t anybody else’s responsibility.

“Tee?” he urged. “Tell me what you need me to do.”

She couldn’t hold back the tears. She had absolutely no reserves left. So, Tasha opened her mouth and put into words the need she’d had even as she soaked in the lukewarm water and cried until her eyes were dry, feeling more alone than she’d ever felt in her life.

“I need you to hold me.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

I *need you to hold me.*

The quiet desperation in Tasha's voice broke something in Cole. He had no idea what happened, but he knew it had to be bad. And that made Cole want to break something. Something being Jeremy's neck.

He dropped next to Tasha on the couch and opened his arms for her, his entire body going cold when she scooted into his embrace and sobbed. He rubbed her back and said soothing words, all the while trying to control the steady rage simmering inside him. He wanted to press her to tell him what was wrong, but he bit his tongue. She would tell him when she was ready — *if she was ever ready* — but for now, he would offer her the comfort she wanted. Cole wasn't sure how long they stayed there before she eased out of his arms and tried to straighten her clothes and wipe her face. He grabbed a box of Kleenex and a small bottle of water, offering her both before he sat back down.

"I'm sorry..."

"Don't," he said. "Don't you dare. Do you need anything else? I can run out and get you a smoothie or something."

He hated to see self-consciousness shroud her.

"I need to stop popping up to your workplace to have breakdowns," she said. "I..."

"I heard my manager's a cool dude," Cole teased. "I'm sure he understands."

“I suppose you want to know what happened.”

“Nah,” he whispered. “I only want to know what you need. So, should I go get you a smoothie or something else?”

“He made me...he forced me to have sex with him last night.”

Her words knocked the oxygen right out of his lungs. Tasha stiffened, eyes filled with tears she refused to let fall.

“I know this might seem dramatic as fuck,” she said, raising her hand to silence him when he tried to interrupt. “He’s my husband, right? I’ve had sex with him tons and tons of times. I’ve had sex with him when I wasn’t particularly in the mood or just because I didn’t want an argument, but this time...this time was different. It was the first time he *insisted* on it. This was the first time I told him no, and he made it clear he didn’t give a fuck.”

Cole could barely see straight for how hot his blood boiled.

“You’ve got to get out of there,” he said. “I can help you. Let me hook you up with a foundation I support if you don’t want to take money from me. They will help you with the resources to leave.”

She shook her head. “I’m almost there. I had a look at what I have saved, and I think I can be out of there in three months max.”

“Three months is a long time, Tasha,” Cole said. “What happens if he assaults you again...”

She flinched at his words. “Don’t call it that... It wasn’t...”

“Come on, Tee,” he said. “It was exactly that, and you know it. That’s why you’re sitting here right now. He went further than you thought he would, and you’re scared. Rightfully so.”

She pressed her mouth together. “I’m almost there. I’ve got a few projects lined up. I can do this.”

“You don’t have to,” he said, keeping check of his voice when it started rising. “What good is pride if you are in

danger?”

“It’s not just pride,” she snapped. The words sounded like they were ripped from her throat, and Cole’s heart clenched in his chest. “This man has taken everything from me. *Everything*. When I get out, I want him to know that *I* outsmarted him. I’m not asking you to agree with me. I just need you to *get* it, and you promised me you had.”

Getting it and wanting her safe were two separate things, but as tense and as skittish as Tasha was already, Cole didn’t think pushing would get them anywhere. He brushed his hands over his face trying to combat how off-kilter he felt.

“I want you to design some stuff for the band,” he said eventually. “I’ll talk to the others and get back to you with what we need. Are you willing to accept that?”

She met his gaze, eyes flashing fiercely. “I’m willing to accept anything I can work for.”

She was infuriating with her stubbornness, foolhardy even, but he could see the quiet strength reflected in her eyes.

“Come here, Tee,” he whispered, resigned to the fact he wasn’t going to win any debates with her. She stepped easily into his arms, resting her head against his chest as he tried to control the foreign emotions warring inside him.

“Cole?” she asked in a small, timid voice.

“Yeah?”

She’d leaned back so she could look up at him. “Thank you for understanding.”

Infuriating and stubborn, but so beautiful and brave.

“I’m not happy with it,” he admitted. “But I’m here, and all you have to do is say the word.”

“I know,” she said. “I know. If I can’t pull it together in two months, I will accept whatever help you’re willing to give me.”

“You got yourself a deal,” he said. “I’m going to hold you to it.”

She managed to muster a small smile for him. "I'll be out by then."

"I just want you safe," Cole whispered. "Nothing is more important than your safety."

"I will be careful," she said. "I promise."

He could hear the conviction in her voice, but that did nothing to appease the unsettling emotions he felt. He closed his eyes tightly, trying to ward off thoughts of that man forcing himself on her in that way. As smart as Tasha thought she was being, it was obvious Jeremy had started feeling his control slip and was trying to regain the upper hand.

"Two months," he said again. "Then all bets are off."

"Two months," she repeated.

Cole took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. There was nothing he could do. Tasha was a grown ass woman and would accept the help she wanted. Arguing with her would only push her further away.

Two months.

He hoped like hell she would be safe.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

“I didn’t expect to see you today.”

Cole pulled his mother into a hug before he handed her a paper bag bearing the logo of her favorite bakery. “I came with treats. I missed you at the end of summer get-together at Aunt Sheree’s the other day.”

“Tyrone and I had a little getaway planned that we couldn’t switch up. I keep telling Sheree she can’t keep popping up with dates a week before.”

Little getaway. Cole made a face. Not his mother having a better romantic life than he did.

She ushered him into the house, taking the paper bag from him as she headed down the hallway toward the kitchen. He trailed after her, immediately surrounded by the smell of apples and cinnamon. He smiled. Even when things were at their worst, his mother took joy in ensuring her surroundings matched the changing seasons.

“Fall has barely started, ma,” he teased, taking in the burnt orange curtains and the fall décor around the living room. “You came straight out the gate running.”

He found her in the kitchen plating two slices of the caramel pecan cheesecake he’d bought before reaching for two mugs.

“Coffee or tea?” she asked, even though his answer was always the same. Coffee, black with two sugars. He hesitated for a while, wondering if he should straight up ask her for two

fingers of whiskey, although it was still early afternoon. The conversation they were about to have would require it.

“Make it an Irish coffee, and you have a deal.”

She didn't miss a beat, grabbing a bottle of whiskey from the liquor cart and pouring a generous serving into one of the mugs she'd pulled from the cabinet before getting the coffeemaker started.

“If I know you as well as I think I ought to, you've got something on your mind.”

“I might,” Cole hedged. “But I want to just chill with my mama and talk about her impromptu trip before we get into all of that.”

His mother obliged him. She guided them out to the back porch, where they sat around a circular table with their coffees and dessert. The cool fall air reminded Cole of why he loved this season more than all the others. He hated the summer heat, spring was a minefield for his allergies, and he always counted down the days to the end of the often dreariness of winter. Fall always managed to strike notes that left him feeling reinvigorated, as did the conversation with his mother. She seemed so light and happy as she recounted her trip out to Martha's Vineyard with her husband that Cole seriously contemplated leaving without having the conversation he wanted to have. Just knowing he would take her back to a place where the memories would dull that sparkle in her eyes and silence her contagious laughter shifted something inside him.

“What's on your mind, Cole?” Renee asked once they'd pushed the empty plates away. She brought her mug to her lips, fixing her worried eyes on Cole while she waited for him to answer.

“I wanted some advice,” he said eventually. “But I'm not really sure I should disturb you with it.”

His mother waved off his comment. “I'm your mother. Who can you disturb if not me?”

Cole didn't respond right away, and he could see it slowly dawn on Renee where his sudden hesitance was coming from.

"It's very specific advice you want, isn't it?" she said with a small, sad smile. "You're worried I'll be upset by whatever you have to ask me."

"I hate dredging up the past, especially when I'm reminded of how settled and happy you are."

"I know you do, so the fact you drove here to talk when we're meeting up in a few days anyway is very telling. Whatever it is you're afraid to burden me with has obviously been weighing on your mind," his mother mused. "I *am* settled, and I *am* happy. I had to fight hard and long to get here, but you don't have to worry about me. I can handle whatever it is you want to talk about, and I'm sure there's a reason you figured you should speak to me."

She patted his hand and simply sat back and waited for him to sort through his misgivings. His last meeting with Tasha was still weighing heavily on him. He regretted agreeing to the whole idea of giving her two months to reach the goal she was desperate to meet. Her husband had clearly proven himself to be a dangerous asshole, and he didn't know what it would do to his conscience if something happened to her because he didn't try hard enough. But try hard enough to do what, exactly? That was where he kept coming up short.

"I've got a friend who is in a similar situation to where you were," he said. "I'm just at a loss on how to help her. She knows she needs to leave and is making steps toward that from what she says. She's trying to save up enough money for a lawyer and a place to stay but refuses to accept my help even though it wouldn't be that hard for me to give her the money."

"What does she say when you offer?"

"It's important that she is able to do it by herself. I'd think being safe would be her main concern instead of wanting to hold on to pride, but apparently not."

"Because she already lost it all by being in the situation she's in?" Renee asked. Her voice hadn't changed — not in

pitch, volume, nor tone — but Cole knew she was chiding him.

“No,” he said firmly. “I don’t think that. I understand, I guess, wanting to be the one to pull yourself out of a situation you blame yourself for getting into. But what good is that if you don’t make it out?”

His heart thudded rapidly against his chest as he thought of Jeremy escalating his violence. He thought of the look in her eyes as she recounted how the man who’d sworn to love and protect her had sexually assaulted her. He gripped the mug tightly when he remembered how her first instinct had been to explain away what he did to her.

“You care about her,” his mother observed.

“It’s only human to.”

Renee fixed him with a small, patient smile, and there was no way for him to miss the insinuation plastered on her face. He chose to ignore it anyway. “I don’t know that I could forgive myself if anything happened to her. I found out accidentally on one of those nights me, Jay and the others went out for drinks. She only confided in me because she felt like her hands were tied. She was afraid I’d blab to her best friend about what I saw. Sometimes I regret agreeing to that too.”

His mother ran her finger along the rim of her coffee mug for a few seconds while she organized her thoughts. “You’re not going to like what I have to say.”

“Try me.”

His mother chuckled, placed her hand over his, and leaned into him before she became serious again. “Your friend is a grown woman, capable of making her own decisions. The jury is out on whether her decisions are *good* decisions, but sometimes the only thing a person can do when they find themselves in a situation like that is survive.”

“I’ve offered her a way out. I offered to hook her up with the charity I donate to if she preferred to not take my money.”

“What did she say when you told her that?”

“More of the same,” Cole admitted, feeling the familiar strains of frustration. “She wanted to be the one to get herself out because it was how she would win.”

“And what didn’t she say?”

His mother cocked her head to one side, eyes still kind and firm, as she waited for his response.

“I don’t get it.”

Renee sighed. “She probably didn’t tell you that she is scared shitless to leave. She knows how bad things are now, but she’s probably worried about how bad they could get. It doesn’t matter how bad things are now; she has no idea what she’s going to face once she leaves.”

“I wouldn’t...”

Renee squeezed his hand. The mild expression she’d had on her face morphed into something that made his heart hurt.

“I’m so sorry for what I put you through,” she said, knocking Cole off-balance by taking the conversation in a direction he wasn’t expecting. *That he didn’t want.*

“Mom...”

“I did the best I could’ve done at the time. I made the best decisions I thought I could make, but that doesn’t mean they weren’t bad decisions. Your father really had me beaten and broken down, and I don’t mean physically. I still cringe at how it never occurred to me at the time that all of it affected you emotionally too. I know you can see what’s happening here. You’ve been paying your therapist way too much money to not at least be self-aware enough to know this is coming from how helpless you felt as a child. How helpless *I made you feel* as a child.”

“Mom...”

“I told you that you wouldn’t like what I had to say, but here goes. Your friend hasn’t asked you to stick an S on your chest and come save her, but you feel like you need to because of your own demons. You have to respect the decisions she makes and be a friend to her when she needs you to be.

Pushing much further than that just makes you another man trying to walk all over her even though your intentions are pure.”

Cole was still trying to come to grips with the absolute truth Renee had spoken when a curious expression flitted across her face.

“Does this have anything to do with the fifty *DesignMeNow* accounts you’re paying Aja to create?”

Cole scowled as he made a note to confront Aja about her inability to keep her mouth shut and how that would reflect in her eventual pay.

“It does,” he said. “But hear me out...”

Flowers.

There were four vases filled with bouquets sitting on the dining room table when Tasha dragged herself back to the apartment later that afternoon. She made a face. Contrite Jeremy was still in full swing, it seemed. Tasha used to adore flowers and once took a lot of pleasure in making sure she always had fresh flowers around her apartment. She didn't find the same joy in flowers now. Jeremy never bought her flowers on happy days — never on her birthday, anniversaries, or even as a surprise reminder of how much he loved her. He always bought them when he fucked up. Her throat tightened as she remembered what earned her these bouquets. Tasha wondered what he told the florist. She doubted there were special offers on what to give your wife after sexually assaulting her. Tasha moved to gather the flowers up and put them in the kitchen away from the dining room where she wanted to work on the *DesignMeNow* requests that kept coming in when she saw a white envelope stuck under the vase of roses.

She ripped it open to find a few hundred-dollar bills and a note telling her to enjoy her dinner with Navaya. Tasha rolled her eyes. Jeremy tried to block her outings with Navaya at every turn. There was an argument almost every time she mentioned she was meeting up with her friend. His disingenuousness roused anger in her belly and tasted like wormwood under her tongue. All of a sudden, he was so invested in her having a good time? *Bullfuckingshit*. She slid

the money into her wallet anyway. She wasn't about to spend more than she usually did at dinner with Navaya, but Jeremy had just contributed to her escape fund. The thought of that had Tasha's lips curving upward into her first genuine smile of the day. The smile slid from her face when she remembered her interaction with Cole in his office. Was she being ridiculous in not accepting his help? Doubt gnawed at her stomach, but she pushed it aside. She was so close to being able to say she was able to pull herself out of the mess *she created*. She knew, logically at least, that she shouldn't blame herself for marrying Jeremy. He'd sold her a dream, and she'd bought every single lie.

She pushed the dark thoughts from her mind, choosing instead to prepare her workspace. She brewed herself some oolong tea and set up her diffuser. She hoped the lavender and peppermint would do all the things those wellness gurus swore they would. Tasha took small sips of tea while she waited on her laptop to start up, texting back and forth with Navaya to fine-tune the details of their late lunch. They opted for an early dinner at their favorite restaurant after Navaya was finished with her Hot Fusion yoga session. She looked forward to seeing Navaya and the few hours of peace she'd get from being able to pretend she didn't have to deal with any of the bullshit, especially since Navaya told her there was something she needed to talk to her about face-to-face. She briefly felt panic that Cole had decided what she'd come with to him had been too much and finally unloaded on Xander. Was that what Navaya wanted to talk about? Navaya followed her initial text with: ***'You won't believe what Xander did!!!'*** and she allowed herself to relax. She needed this time with Navaya to truly let go and relax because things would be tense when she returned home. She still had to confront Jeremy about the offhand comment he'd made about trying to have kids. His refusal to start a family right away turned out to be a blessing in disguise. When she left, she'd be truly free. There wouldn't be a damn thing linking them together. She couldn't afford to make a misstep now.

She'd think about that later. As it stood, she'd had three more requests come through on *DesignMeNow* that needed her

attention. She worked for a solid three hours, allowing herself to get lost in the familiar comfort of bringing graphics from her imagination to life on her screen. Tasha felt so much lighter by the time she sent the projects off for approval and started getting ready for her dinner date with Navaya.

“You got this,” she whispered to her reflection in the mirror after she swiped on her favorite nude lipstick. “One step at a time.”

* * *

THE PLEASANT AROMAS HIT TASHA AS SOON AS SHE STEPPED into the Mussel Bar and Grille and chose her and Navaya’s favorite table. She smiled at the server, Leah, when she ambled over with the menus.

“Just you today?” she asked, smiling widely. “Or are you waiting on your friend?”

“You know I am,” Tasha said. “She’ll be here any minute. Can I have two glasses of Pinot Grigio, please?”

“Sure thing.”

Leah nodded, placed the menus down even though Tasha knew it by heart, and headed off to the bar. Tasha glanced at her phone when it pinged, announcing an incoming email. Her brows drew together when she noticed it was yet another request coming in from *DesignMeNow*.

“What the hell?” she muttered, nodding at Leah when she placed the glasses of wine down in front of her before taking a sip and returning her attention to the new design request. She’d been getting good reviews, and so she’d anticipated an uptick in orders, but the uptick was greater than she expected. The types of requests were also confusing. There were a lot of birthday party invitations, house party flyers, sale flyers, and the like. She expected most people to use programs like Canva to do those kinds of things on their own. She sipped her wine again, fingers moving across the phone’s keyboard as she sent her most recent client a timeline for delivery. Her chest loosened. She’d been talking out of her ass when she told Cole

she was certain she'd meet her savings goal in two months. She didn't even know why she told him that. Except, she did. She'd hated the way he was looking at her with so much foreboding in his brown eyes that she started panicking. She'd hated that she saw some disappointment there. Tasha couldn't get over the irony in that. She kept the secret close to her chest because she was afraid of people looking at her the way Cole had been. She'd started thinking of the excuses she'd come up with when the two months came and went almost as soon as she made the deal with Cole. But now, she was wondering if she'd need to. She'd be well on her way if the *DesignMeNow* requests kept coming in the way they were, especially when she factored in the project she had with Cole, possibly designing for the band, and the few book covers Navaya had requested. Tasha sipped her wine before running through the menu again, allowing a small bubble of hope to expand in her chest. Things were looking up for the first time in a long time.

You should tell Navaya.

The thought pulled Tasha up short. It'd been popping into her head a lot more often over the last few days. Even more so over the last few hours. She'd wanted to call her best friend when she emerged from that bathtub, bone-tired and soul-weary, the night before. She defaulted to Cole because he already knew. She didn't see the harm in breaking down in front of him. And there wasn't. He'd been a soft place to land, just as he promised he would be. She had felt safe in the moments he held her in his arms. But he wasn't her best friend. He wasn't the one who'd been joined to her hip from way back during Howard days. The one who she would lie on her bed with and plan out the futures they hoped to have; perfect jobs, perfect homes, perfect partners, perfect weddings. He wasn't the one who provided steady support through every breakup, every rejection, and chased her long-held insecurities away. He was not the one who helped her get through losing her mother during her third year of university. Navaya had literally seen her through hell and back. Guilt gnawed at her, but it was nothing compared to the hot shame that singed her veins when she thought about telling her. She hadn't told Cole about the two months she hadn't spoken to Navaya after she'd

warned her about Jeremy. She'd told Navaya that if she couldn't be happy for her, then she had no place in her life. Tasha's mouth went dry just thinking about the argument they had. She drank nearly half the glass of wine, but her tongue still felt like sandpaper. Tasha had kept her distance from Navaya after the argument, so her friend knew she was serious, and after two months, Navaya was the one who relented. She made Tasha promise to keep the engagement long, and Tasha went ahead and did the exact opposite. Navaya was the one who'd cut her off the second time around. God knows she deserved it. Tasha couldn't tell Navaya. Not after all of that. Not while she was still in the marriage.

“You've got the right idea.”

Tasha's gaze flicked over to Navaya. She grabbed the seat next to her and was grinning as she took a sip of wine. Tasha tucked a few strands of her hair behind her ear, hoping her friend didn't see the tornado of emotions she was feeling inside reflected on her face. She took a deep breath and cleared her mind. It was time to be happy, carefree, irreverent Tasha again. Or die trying.

In the end, it wasn't hard to keep her thoughts of her trouble at bay. It turned out that Navaya's gossip was far more than she expected. Her friend told her about her horrible book sales and Xander's suggestion that she find someone to fuck inspiration into her. Navaya said she'd teased him by suggesting *he* be the one to do it before she broke down laughing at her own joke. Except Tasha thought it was an excellent idea, and she spent the rest of their late lunch trying to convince Navaya of that. She wasn't sure she'd changed Navaya's mind one bit as they finally parted ways a few hours later, but Tasha was lighter — her heart, her mind, her soul. She'd just entered her apartment when another request came in on *DesignMeNow*. It should seem impossible with everything going on, but as Tasha got ready for a shower, she realized she'd had a pretty good evening. She curled up on the couch watching a reality TV show and was off to bed before Jeremy came home.

Tasha couldn't wait until the happy, content feeling that coursed through her just before she drifted off to sleep became her reality instead of one-off occurrences to remind her why it was important to fight.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Tasha reacted just as Cole expected her to.

She was like a damn wave, touching and then retreating almost on cue. He'd spent most of the rest of the day anticipating her calling or texting him to let him know she was still doing okay but eventually turned his focus to other things. His conversation with his mother still weighed heavily on his mind, but he knew she was right. Tasha was an adult, and so was he. He could only offer the help she was willing to accept. He needed to accept that assisting her in getting out of her situation wouldn't do anything for the child inside him, still affected by the years of abuse he watched his mother endure. He contemplated reaching out to her a few times but managed to talk himself out of it each time, sending her generic requests on *DesignMeNow* instead.

By the time he got around to recording two workouts for his YouTube channel and proofing some edits for his workout guide, Cole was running out of ideas for requests. He gave up and sent two more birthday invitation requests before he headed home to get himself and his house ready for his hangout session with Xander, Jay, and Quinn. They tried to meet up a few times per month to have drinks, play some games, and talk about everything except their band. He was going to have to break that rule tonight, though, because he needed to convince them to allow Tasha to redesign their website and other social media sites even though they'd recently rebranded.

“We just spent a good deal of money getting that stuff done last year,” Xander said, taking a deep draw of his beer once Cole finished pitching the idea. “Can’t we hold off? I know you’re excited to revamp your personal brand, but you don’t need to drag the band into it. The band can’t afford to be dragged into it.”

“I think it’s stale-looking,” Jay piped up. He was reclined on the sofa, bag of Doritos in hand, while he half-watched something on the television. “I’m sure Cole will pay for it, but he’s just trying to get our permission first since he’s not the lead singer of this band.”

Jay caught his gaze, arched an eyebrow, and gave him a smile that said he knew Cole was up to something.

“I’m down for the change once Cole’s paying for it,” Quinn said. He turned his cellphone toward the rest of the group where Cherry had joined in briefly via FaceTime.

“The one time I can’t make it and y’all trying to make changes. You seem to be where the money resides, Big C,” she chuckled. “But who am I to fight with that? We can go back to the designs we have now if we don’t like whatever Cole and his money come up with.”

“Fair enough,” Xander said. “I can’t argue with Cherry’s logic.”

They spent a few more minutes agreeing on the parameters of the updates before Cherry ended the call and the guys prepared for their poker game.

Cole expected Xander to have more questions, especially after he was forced to confess he intended to hire Tasha to design the website, but his friend seemed distracted as hell. He wasn’t surprised when Xander finally revealed Navaya was the source of his distraction. He wondered if Xander truly understood how devoted he was to Navaya and how that ruined every relationship he tried to be in. Cole didn’t doubt Xander when he insisted there was nothing sexual between him and his best friend, but he could definitely see how that could be a tough sell to the women Xander dated. Barista Bae became Barista Nay pretty damn quick. Xander eventually

disappeared, saying he needed to check in on Navaya, and Quinn left soon after. Jay didn't even wait for the door to fully close behind Quinn before he turned to Cole and said, "Spill."

He feigned confusion as he moved around the living room, collecting beer bottles and dirty plates. "What are you talking about?"

"Oh, come on," Jay said. "I might be your annoying little cousin, but I'm not your unobservant little cousin. You had Aja creating a bunch of fake profiles on a graphic designing site, and now you're trying to get the band's website overhauled, and your cheap ass agreed to pay for it yourself. Now I know Tasha is the one you have redesigning your site *and* the band's site, the thing with Aja clicks into place. Well, as much as it can, considering it is pretty fucking weird."

Jay patted the empty space on the couch next to him. "Come talk to Jay. What's going on?"

"None of your business," Cole said, keeping his voice light and teasing because he knew Jay would press harder if he picked up on anything in his voice.

"She's married," Jay said eventually, his voice anything but light or teasing. "So, if this is some attempt to impress your way into her panties, I hope you're prepared for it to get messy."

Cole shook his head at his cousin before he left him sitting in the living room and headed to the kitchen to load the dishwasher. He'd managed to sort out the thoughts bouncing around his head by the time he returned to the living room, dropped down next to Jay, and kicked his foot up on his coffee table.

"You need to work on yourself if you think everything is about the pursuit of pussy," he said, shaking his head again. "It isn't anything like that, but I'm asking you to please mind your business."

The way Jay's expression changed was enough for Cole to know he hadn't kept his voice light at all.

"Is something wrong?" Jay asked, eyes widening slightly.

“That is the exact opposite of minding your damn business,” Cole chuckled. “I’ll holla at you if I need you to be nosy, but I need you to back off for now.”

“You couldn’t sound any more ominous if you tried,” Jay said with a lopsided grin. “But I’ll listen to you cause we all know you ain’t afraid to stab people.”

Jay was the only person in his life who dared make light of all the shit that went down with his father, and Cole wondered if his cousin knew how much he appreciated him for it. Those words were never going to come out of his mouth, though.

“Nobody can convince me Auntie Sheree didn’t drop you as a baby...twice.”

“Whatever, man,” Jay said. “I’m heading out. You mightn’t be in pursuit of pussy, but *I am*.”

Cole sat there on the couch long after Jay left, fighting the urge to message Tasha. He’d almost given in to the urge when he noticed she’d returned one of the designs he requested ahead of schedule. The invitation was thoughtful and creative. He didn’t know how she managed to come up with something so detailed and personal, something he was sure ‘Brenda’ would have been happy to send out to her friends for her fifty-fifth birthday. He left her a large tip and a praise-filled review and put his phone away before he gave in to the overwhelming urge to contact her. He ambled up to bed and settled in with his business planner instead. Resisting the temptation to contact Tasha was one thing...keeping his mind off her was a different story altogether.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

“Who are you, and what have you done with Tasha?”

Tasha grinned while she watched confusion blossom on Navaya’s pretty face as she took in her workout gear when she walked into the Starbucks they’d agreed to meet up at after Navaya sent her another SOS.

“I’m trying something new,” Tasha said. “I might be an exercise person after all.”

Tasha wished she’d come up with the guise of going to the gym ages ago. She couldn’t even remember the last time she saw Navaya on two consecutive days. Jeremy accepted the excuse without much fuss, even though Tasha could already see his contrite demeanor slowly returning to its usual mode of controlling abusive fucker.

“Didn’t you work out yesterday?” he asked. “It’s almost like you’re spending more time at the gym than you do at home.”

Tasha chewed on the inside of her cheek, trying to keep herself from saying something that would set him off. Instead, she smiled at him and said, “I definitely do not. I thought you’d be happy I’m finally moving my lazy ass.”

“You know I was joking when I said that,” he said, voice suddenly hard.

She rested her hand against his chest and planted a kiss against his cheek. “Besides, it’s best I get my body in shape for the baby.”

Her breath caught in her throat. She had no idea how to approach the baby situation, and she hoped trying to call his bluff was the right move. However, the more Tasha thought about it, the more she accepted Jeremy never intended to give her a baby. He was way too possessive for that. Way too jealous. He'd spat out the order for her to remove her IUD because he wanted to feed into the terror he knew she'd been feeling in that moment.

"Have you made the appointment?" he asked, surprising Tasha. She'd expected him to back down.

"Not yet," she admitted. It was probably best to switch gears. "I wasn't sure you were serious. It kind of came out of nowhere. I thought we would just wait until the IUD officially expired and use the next few years to travel like we said we would."

He was silent for so long Tasha felt her heart rate ramp up.

"Your next check-up is in two months," he said. "We can get it taken out then. Unless you've changed your mind about children?"

She took a deep breath and flashed him her sunniest smile. "Of course not. I'll book the appointment after the gym."

She'd waited until he'd left before she scrambled for her phone and opened her banking app. Suddenly the two-month timeline she'd given Cole became more than an arbitrary number to distract him. Tasha needed to get the fuck out.

"Tasha?"

Navaya's soft voice brought her out of her memories. She took a sip of her tea and tried to brush off the awkwardness she felt at Navaya catching her spiral.

"Is everything okay?" her friend asked.

"Of course," she said. "I never have anything going on. You know I'm living life vicariously through you. Especially since your SOS messages are coming in hot and heavy recently."

Navaya bit her bottom lip and dropped her gaze before she said, “Promise me you won’t freak out.”

Tasha leaned forward. “Oh? Now this, I’ve got to hear.”

* * *

TASHA WAS STILL REPLAYING THE CONVERSATION SHE AND Navaya had earlier that morning as she hopped on the Red Line back into D.C. to show up at Cole’s workplace unannounced yet again. The interesting situation Navaya was about to find herself in with Xander was entertaining, but Tasha couldn’t help but find herself feeling a little bit jealous. Navaya and Xander’s friendship was stronger than her entire marriage. She didn’t love Jeremy anymore. She was *sure* of that. She mourned the man she thought he was and the life she thought they would live together. Tasha still couldn’t figure out how she got things so wrong.

She’d planned to head home so she could work on a few more *DesignMeNow* orders but found herself exiting the train at a station closer to the gym than her apartment. It was an impulsive decision to go to the gym, but Tasha didn’t fight the urge. She just tried to ignore the little voice needling in the back of her head, wanting to know why she felt the urge in the first place.

“What is the reason, Tasha?” she wondered. “You should be taking your ass home.”

She had no reason to be going to the gym. She didn’t have anything she needed to update Cole on with his media overhaul since she’d been giving precedence to those requests on *DesignMeNow*. There was no frantic panic burning through her blood that propelled her toward him to search for comfort. She wasn’t happy, but she wasn’t sad, either. She was neutral, and neutral was a welcome relief to the things she’d been feeling. It wasn’t business, it wasn’t comfort, and Tasha surely had no intentions to actually exercise. It only left one thing, really. It could only leave one thing. She just wanted to see Cole. Tasha tried to reject the thought as soon as it entered her

mind, but the way her heart thumped hard against her chest when Sophie smiled brightly and told her Cole was in his office basically confirmed the theory.

He was sitting on the couch watching one of his own exercise videos on the flat-screen TV when she walked in. He immediately turned when he heard the door close and paused the video when he realized it was her.

“Everything good?” he asked. She hated that she could see the worry written all over his face. It knocked the weird excitement that had been building at the thought of seeing him right out of her. She’d never be anything more than a pity project to him.

Now where the fuck did that come from?

“Yeah,” she said. “I’m okay.”

His eyes searched hers as if he was trying to decide whether she was lying. He gave up after a while, stood, and pulled her into an embrace. It was the first time Tasha found herself in Cole’s arms without her emotions being a frazzled mess. She sank into the feel of his body and the soft warmth of his skin, where his arms brushed against hers as he pulled away. His smile was bright and wide, friendly and filled with so much kindness her stomach somersaulted.

“To what do I owe the pleasure?” he asked.

The deep tenor of his voice jolted her back to reality. Tasha cleared her throat, awkwardness filling her when she realized *I just felt like seeing you* wasn’t the best answer.

“I figured you’d feel better seeing for yourself that I was okay,” she said after a while. “I thought I’d just stop by and not use the gym.”

He chuckled. “I was sure you were about to ignore the shit out of me after how things went the last time.”

“I thought about it,” she admitted. “It was so em—”

“I know we spoke about that.”

She nodded. “You’re right. I guess what I really should say is thank you. You helped more than you could imagine. I felt

like I was going out of my mind, and you kept me there.”

“I made you a promise, and I intend to keep it,” he responded as if it was as simple as that. Tasha blinked away the tears that sprung to her eyes, not wanting him to interpret it as anything other than the overwhelming gratitude she was feeling in that moment. It was hard for her self-consciousness to not melt away when she could see the sincerity in his eyes and felt it in the air around them.

He gestured to the chair, and she sat while he rummaged through the fridge and brought back a bottle of kombucha.

“You like kombucha?” she asked.

“God, no,” Cole laughed. “But I noticed you drinking it. I figured I’d keep a few in case you ever dropped by to, you know, not work out.”

She couldn’t meet his eyes as she opened the bottle, knowing she probably had a dopey smile on her face.

“You really are amazing,” she whispered when she felt like she had herself back under control.

Cole dropped next to her and pulled her into a side hug that Tasha knew was meant to be friendly and said, “So are you, Tee. Don’t forget that. You’re amazing too.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

He had no right to feel as relieved as he did. He could feel the ropes of tension that had been tightening inside him slowly loosen as he watched Tasha take sips of kombucha while he returned to playing the workout video he'd been watching.

“You like that type?” he asked, glancing from the TV to the woman who sat close enough to him that their bodies pressed together. That their closeness caused a jolt of awareness to pass through him was something Cole wasn't ready to think about too hard.

“It's my favorite. I always buy the Gingerberry. I'd go somewhere else if the store I was shopping at didn't have it.”

“It's a good thing I didn't try rocking the boat,” Cole mused. Her wide smile highlighted the apples of her cheeks as she said, “I would've been grateful for anything you brought me.”

“That's a damn lie. There was one called a raw kombucha multigreen. If you were grateful for that, then I've got some follow-up questions for you.”

She laughed loudly, and damn if it wasn't a beautiful sound. “Questions like what?”

“Questions like...is everything okay with you?”

She was laughing so much now that her eyes had gone all squinty.

“Fine, fine,” she said once she caught her breath. “You’re right. I tried it once, and I swear it tasted like something a bunny shat out.”

“Damn, Tee,” he laughed. “That bad, huh?”

Tasha wiped away some of the amused tears that had fallen to the tops of her cheekbones. “Worse,” she said. A few seconds passed before she spoke again. “Why do you call me Tee?”

The question caught Cole by surprise. He hadn’t even realized he’d done it. He shrugged and decided to be honest. “I don’t know. It kind of slipped out. Tee seemed like a fitting nickname.”

“Tasha is a nickname.”

He cocked his head to the side. “Word?”

“Yeah, it is,” she said. Her eyes went a little bit sad when she continued, “My mother named me Natasha Rose Dixon, Junior.”

That new piece of information about her was an interesting surprise and drove home to Cole how although he knew her darkest secret, he didn’t really know her at all.

“I’m two seconds away from calling you Junie,” he teased.

Her surprised gasp was followed by a small burst of laughter. “Don’t you dare!”

“That was really cool of your mom, though,” he commented.

Those brown eyes blossomed with all the adoration Cole needed to know exactly the kind of relationship she had shared with her mother.

“My mom had me late in life,” she explained. “I was a surprise baby in the truest sense of the word. She was surprised to find herself pregnant with me and then surprised to find out my father had a wife and a couple children in another city.”

“Damn.”

“She handled it like a boss, though. She basically lost his number, moved us across the country, and built the best life for us both. She’d be so damn disappointed in me...”

He covered her hand with his. “Don’t do that to yourself.”

She opened her mouth and closed it again as if she decided whatever it was that was heavy on her heart shouldn’t be spoken out loud. Instead, she flicked her gaze to the TV and asked, “What are you doing?”

“I don’t have any sessions until later in the afternoon, so I’m using the time to watch some of my most popular YouTube videos to find ways to improve them.”

“Yes, superstar,” she laughed. “I won’t lie. I was kind of surprised when I saw how many views your videos had when I started doing research for your redesign.”

“I do okay,” Cole responded, but she brushed off his false modesty. He was doing pretty damn good for himself.

“Okay, my ass,” Tasha said with an eye roll. “Are you on TikTok? Twitch? There are so many ways to maximize your popularity.”

“Twitch?”

She nodded. “Livestreaming your workouts may actually be popular. You should look into it.”

Cole thought about it for a few seconds, realizing he’d never considered Twitch as anything outside of people streaming themselves playing video games.

“Thanks, I’ll look into it,” he said. “What do you know about Twitch?”

“I may or may not spend a lot of time watching people stream themselves playing *Animal Crossing*.”

She looked a little bit embarrassed but in the kind of way Cole found cute and wanted to tease her about instead of making his heart ache.

“You play?”

She shook her head. Her voice was bitter when she said, “I play the very limited version offered for mobile. Jeremy keeps a pretty close eye on the money I spend. I’m pretty sure he’d have a brain aneurysm if I bought a Switch.”

“An aneurysm? Seems like *Animal Crossing* wouldn’t even be the biggest benefit of buying a Switch.”

It took a few seconds for his comment to sink in, but when it did, Tasha broke down into another stream of giggles.

“I can’t believe I’m sitting here sharing what an asshole my husband is with another human being, and you’re actually able to make morbid jokes about it.”

“I’m sorry...”

Tasha cut him off by flinging herself into his arms. He hesitated for just a little while before he wrapped his arms around her.

“Don’t apologize,” she whispered against his shoulder. “Thank you for not treating me like some broken thing even though you know I feel that way.”

He squeezed her closer to him, appreciating how soft she felt in his arms for the first time. They startled away from each other when loud knocks sounded at his door.

“Come in,” he called.

Sophie appeared inside and closed the door behind her a few seconds later. She looked uncomfortable as hell as her eyes moved from Tasha to Cole and then back to Tasha again.

“Tasha, your husband is here.”

CHAPTER THIRTY

All of the oxygen rushed from Tasha's lungs.

Sophie looked like she wanted the entire ground to open up and swallow her. It was only in those few seconds Tasha realized how it must look that she kept showing up to the gym in fucking workout gear without ever working out and only interested in being locked in this office with Cole.

"Oh my God," Tasha breathed. Her heart raced so fast her chest actually ached. She felt herself freefalling until the light brush of Cole's fingertips brought her back to reality.

Pull it together, Tash, her mind scolded, how do you get out of this?

Her mind kept drawing blanks. What the fuck was she going to do? And how the hell didn't she see this coming?

"Tee," Cole said. She jerked her attention to him. "It'll be okay."

Her throat was dry and raw as she shook her head. Jeremy was going to lose his ever-loving mind when he realized she was lying about going to the gym, and he would come to the same conclusion Sophie had. Only there would be far more to pay than a little bit of judgment. Tasha could feel herself begin to hyperventilate. She didn't notice Sophie had moved from her position next to the door until she thrust a bottle of water in Tasha's hand.

"Pour it over yourself or something," the young woman said. "Make it look like you've been working out. I'll tell him

you're finishing up a class, okay?"

She took a deep breath and nodded at Sophie, who glanced at Cole before she started moving to the door.

"Sophie," he said. "Ask Laci to pop in here before you go back out."

Sophie cleared her throat and nodded even though annoyance flashed brightly in her eyes.

"She thinks we're involved," Tasha said as soon as Sophie left. She buried her face in her hands. "I..."

"We can't get into that now," Cole said. His eyes went to the door when another knock sounded.

A tall, lithe woman with deep brown skin sauntered in. "You rang, boss?"

Tasha tried to focus on the pressure of Cole's fingers against her side. "I need you to go to him and act like you've just had a session. I've seen you pretend to be okay with Navaya when you weren't. You can do this."

She couldn't control her breathing. "This is different."

Everything changed *that night*. She was more afraid of Jeremy's anger than she'd ever been before, and she could barely think past the terror.

The fear must have shown all over her face, or perhaps Cole noticed the slight tremors in her body because he pulled her into a hug.

"I got you," he whispered against the side of her head. "Trust me."

Trust? The man she'd once loved with her entire being violated her trust in the worst way imaginable. How did she trust a man she barely knew? But...she did. Somewhere deep in her soul, even though her mind wouldn't settle itself, she trusted Cole.

"Okay," she whispered, easing out of his embrace. She didn't miss the confused look on Laci's face when she moved past her on shaking legs toward the door. The hallway from

Cole's office to the reception area felt like it was covered with upturned nails. She spotted Jeremy leaning up against the desk with a scowl on his face.

"Is everything okay?" she asked, stopping just short of him. She lifted the hem of the shirt she'd generously soaked and pretended to wipe her face. "Did I miss your call?"

He smiled at her, but it didn't meet his eyes. Tasha was thankful for Sophie's presence because she knew it was keeping Jeremy's anger in check.

"I was just in the area and decided to pop by and say hi. You left for the gym quite a while ago, so I expected you'd be home by now. How long was your workout?"

"They..."

"There you are, Tasha!"

Laci strode toward them with a wide smile on her face, stopping just next to Tasha. She squeezed Tasha's shoulder before glancing up at Jeremy, who was looking Laci over. Her relaxed hair fell to her chin, and her body was supple and firm. She wasn't surprised by the small appreciative smile that crossed his face. Laci was just his type.

"This is the hubby I've heard so much about?" she laughed, smile still firm on her face. She stuck her hand out. "I'm Laci, your wife's personal trainer or possible worst nightmare. Right, Tasha?"

She nodded mutely, unable to even wrap her head around what was happening. Jeremy's jaw loosened, and his posture started relaxing slowly. She watched him transform to the most charming version of himself for Laci's benefit. Sophie watched on with hardened eyes, which made Tasha's stomach burn. She tried to focus her attention on anything but the young woman standing behind the counter with her arms folded in front of her.

"I know I'm a bit much," Laci continued. "But Tasha did ask me to whip her body into shape for you. Did I cut into a lunch date?"

The question put Jeremy on the spot, and Tasha allowed herself a few seconds to relish his discomfort.

“I was in the area and just wanted to check in on her,” he said. “Tasha knows she’s perfect just as she is. I didn’t want her overworking herself.”

Laci chuckled. “Never. A good portion of today was just planning out where we intend to go for the next few months. We still have our strength training session left.”

She turned to Tasha, and it was only then Tasha realized for all her laughs and cheers, Laci was actually angry. “You didn’t think your husband could save you from that, did you?”

Tasha managed a smile. “I was hoping.”

“Sorry to disappoint you, love,” Jeremy chimed in. “I don’t want to get into trouble with Laci. I’ll see you at dinner.”

“Are you going to warn him, or should I?” Laci asked in a conspiratorial tone.

“Warn me about what?”

Your guess is as good as mine, Tasha thought, but she allowed Laci to continue the conversation.

“Your dinners are going to be a lot greener from now on.”

Jeremy made a face. “See you *after* dinner.”

Tasha made her feet move the small distance between them and planted a small kiss against his cheek. “I love you.”

“You are my world,” he responded. It should have been a sweet statement, but the declaration felt like a threat. She remained rooted in place as he said his goodbyes to Sophie and Laci before heading to the exit. The relief that shot through her was so sudden she could barely stand. Tasha leaned against the counter, resisting the urge to sob when she remembered Laci and Sophie were still nearby. She glanced up at Sophie, whose expression was shuttered.

“Cole and I... Cole and I aren’t... I’m not...”

“I don’t know you,” Sophie said, her eyes glistening with anger. “But I do know Cole, so I never considered *that*. And

because I don't know you... I'll shut my mouth."

Tasha shook her head. "Tell me."

"He was a completely different person with me than he was with Laci. He was spitting mad when he came in here... barreled in, really. He nearly lost his shit when I didn't let him come inside the workout space so he could surprise you. He made me feel uncomfortable."

Tasha turned to Laci and forced a smile. "That was a performance."

The woman laughed. "I'm a tortured actress."

"I guess Cole told you."

Laci shook her head. "Nah. You did."

Tasha didn't know how to respond to that. Her heart continued beating wildly against her chest when Laci continued, "Cole's waiting for you. He gave me ten minutes to defuse the situation before he came out here. I'd say your husband should feel lucky it didn't come to that. You better go let him see you're okay so he can breathe again."

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

“I’m so sorry,” Tasha exclaimed as soon as she stepped through Cole’s office door. He glanced away from the timer he’d been paying keen attention to. He hadn’t lied when he told Laci he would come deal with Jeremy’s ass if she wasn’t able to calm the situation down in ten minutes. Laci must have been curious about his request, but she didn’t ask any questions. He’d been grateful for it because it stopped him from having to break Tasha’s confidence. The last time Cole felt this frustrated was when he watched Tasha and Jeremy argue outside that bar knowing his intervention would likely make things worse for her. And that was before he understood the actual threat that jackass really posed. She sank into the couch, leaned forward with her face in her palms, and started rocking slightly. The anguish the sight caused was alarming. He hated that less than half an hour before, they sat on that couch getting to know each other better. The teasing, laughing Tasha was gone now, and in her stead was a woman whose fear was so great that the recycled air in the office stank with it. She didn’t start sobbing until he pulled her into a hug.

“I should have seen this coming. He hasn’t done a spot check in a long time, and he’s been complaining about how much time I’ve been spending at the gym,” she whispered, her voice shaking. “I made up the gym thing so that I could grab coffee with Navaya. I should’ve gone straight home. I shouldn’t have come here. Now, look at what I made happen. I’ve put you in an uncomfortable position with your workers. You were literally out one night minding your own business, and I’ve started ruining your life...”

“Put the blame where it should be, Tee,” Cole said. He kept his voice low and soothing even though his throat constricted with anger at Jeremy. “He’s a fucking sociopath.”

“I can’t leave him,” she said suddenly. She pulled herself out of his embrace and shot up from the couch. She paced the room as Cole tried to make sense of the words she’d just uttered.

“What?”

She caught his gaze, and the look in her eyes broke him.

“He won’t let me leave,” she responded as if something was dawning on her for the first time. “I’ve been here like a fool thinking I’d be able to get out once I hit that arbitrary figure, but I won’t... He’ll never allow me to do that.”

“Tasha...”

Cole moved toward her, reaching out to stop her pacing, but she shrugged away his touch. She reached for her bag. “I’ve got to go.”

“Tasha,” Cole repeated. “You can’t leave while you’re like this.”

He knew she wouldn’t listen. She was in panic mode now, and Cole had no idea how to talk her down. He had no idea how to soothe those fears. He wished he could bundle her up and take her someplace, *anyplace*, where he’d know she was safe, but he couldn’t force her to do anything she wasn’t ready to do. That was another punch to the gut.

“I won’t be coming back,” she said again. “I’m so sorry.”

She started moving toward the door, and Cole took two long strides to catch up with her, placing his hand over hers as she reached for the handle.

“Tee,” he said. “You can’t stay with this man. He’s dangerous.”

Her eyes were filled with tears when she finally looked at him. “And that’s exactly why I can’t leave.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

One of these days, you'll push me too far.

Tasha couldn't get the look on Jeremy's face off her mind as she kept thinking about the threat he'd made a few weeks before. It wasn't even the way his jaw tightened, his nostrils flared, or the veins in his forehead poked out. There was something about his eyes. She saw more than an insecure, jealous, controlling man. She saw the first flickers of true evil. It was the first time she'd feared he could do more than beat and choke her. She saw that same flash of spite in his eyes when he brushed away the tears that streamed down her face when she begged him to stop, while he smiled that bitter, vacant smile that made her heart almost stop beating altogether. And then she saw it again when he reminded her that she was his world before he left the gym. Panic filled each crevice of her soul so that no other emotion could push its way through. Her heart constricted when she remembered the disappointed but worried look on Cole's face when she frantically left his office. He didn't understand — he *couldn't* understand — what she was feeling. But did she even try to make him see? Tasha tried to take deep breaths, hoping it would chase away the panic that lodged somewhere deep in her chest, but it didn't work. All she could think about was that she'd end up being a statistic if she tried to leave Jeremy. She'd be a story some true crime YouTuber told while sitting in front of a cute backdrop at odds with the absolute horror they were relating. She'd end up being mindless entertainment to be consumed by some woman as she went about her chores convinced that *she* could never meet such a sad end.

Tasha's mind still raced even as she made her way to her apartment, carefully looking around to make sure Jeremy wasn't home before she allowed herself to relax even a little bit. She poured herself a few fingers of Jeremy's favorite whiskey and shot it back, relishing the way it burned her throat and chest. The jolt of discomfort was a welcome change to the steady numbness that started icing her body.

It was dangerous to leave.

But could she stay?

Could she really keep living a life where she had to keep making excuses just to meet a friend for coffee? A life where she had to keep looking over her shoulder to make sure her husband didn't pop up on her so that she'd think twice about lying about where she'd be? Then there was the way bile crept to her throat whenever she thought about him touching her... kissing her...rubbing up against her...being *inside* her. Tasha poured another few fingers of whiskey and shot it back, but it did nothing to soothe her worries. Jeremy hadn't tried approaching her sexually since *that* night, but Tasha wasn't sure how long the truce would last. Especially since it seemed like he was serious about getting her pregnant. Tasha tried to contemplate a life where she had to try to protect herself *and* a child from Jeremy's wrath and wanted to fill up the bathtub, submerge herself, and never come up for air. Cole's mother obviously loved him, but she hadn't been able to shield him from the effects of his father's abuse. She started tilting the whiskey bottle to refill her tumbler but stopped herself short. Getting drunk wouldn't do her any good. She needed to have her wits about her when Jeremy came home...especially if he wanted her. She squeezed her eyes shut and took a deep drag of air.

It was dangerous to leave.

But she couldn't stay.

So, what the fuck did she do?

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

“Did my extraordinary acting skills work?”

Cole hadn't even heard Laci come into his office for how lost he was in his thoughts. The wide smile on her face vanished immediately when she caught his expression. He uncapped the bottle of water sitting on his desk and took a sip, hoping it would go some way toward cooling the rage heating his blood. It didn't help, but Cole was sure nothing short of being able to smash Jeremy's face in would.

“I think the damage was already done,” he murmured. He'd expected Tasha to be shaken up by Jeremy's stunt. It caught him by surprise too. Tasha cultivated the gym as a safe space, so he knew she would take it hard that he had managed to infiltrate it. Especially when the moment they'd been sharing had seemed so...cozy. He just hadn't expected her to react like *that*. He was so unprepared for that reaction that he hadn't even been able to formulate a proper response before she was already halfway gone. It took everything he had in him not to follow her. His mother's words were still firm in his mind but, more than anything else, he didn't want to make the situation inadvertently worse. What if Jeremy was sitting in the Pret-a-Manger or Starbucks near the gym just waiting to see when Tasha came out or who she came out with? He couldn't believe he had to resist the very strong urge to go after Tasha — to reason with her, to comfort her, to be the soft place he'd promised her he'd be — because he couldn't account for the irrational jackass's behavior. It was easy to see why these spot checks, as Tasha called them, were an

important tool in her husband's arsenal. It was the unpredictability of everything that kept Tasha in a constant pattern of fear.

“What’s going on, Cole?” Laci asked. She came to stand in front of the desk. “Who was that woman? You didn’t give me any details, but her reaction was hard to watch. What did you get caught up in?”

What did you get caught up in?

Cole wished he had an answer for that, but he didn’t know. He didn’t even know how he was going to handle where things were at between him and Tasha at the moment. Laci was still looking at him like she had a ton of questions on her lips. Cole made Tasha a promise he wouldn’t tell Xander or Navaya, but did that mean he couldn’t speak to someone else he trusted who had no connection with them to sort out the chaos in his head? He’d spoken to his mother already, but he was hesitant to drag her any further into all of this.

“She’s a friend of a friend,” he said eventually. “She’s in a tough spot right now, and I’m trying to help her through it.”

“A friend of a friend?” Laci asked. “You weren’t acting like she was just a friend of a friend when you had me convinced you were about to roll up on homeboy and go Hulk on him if I didn’t get him to leave.”

“I’m not fucking her,” Cole said. His voice was filled with the tired patience he felt whenever that insinuation was made.

“Whoa,” Laci said. “I wasn’t going all the way there. Interesting that *you* did, though. I’m just saying you seem to care about her beyond all of this.”

Cole thought about randomly picking up kombucha to keep in his mini fridge because he thought it might make her smile and the easy comfortableness that had been flowing between them before Jeremy showed up. He thought of how much she made him laugh when he joined Xander at Navaya’s for junk food and a movie. She had a wicked sense of humor, and he couldn’t help but wonder how she would be if she didn’t have all of this shit hanging over her.

“I’m going to take you zoning out as the answer I need,” Laci said. She sat in one of the chairs on the other side of his desk.

“I’m just worried about her, Lace,” Cole said. “My upbringing wasn’t exactly the best, and I know how toxic that kind of environment is. Her husband has been ramping up his...tendencies. I’m concerned she’ll get hurt if she doesn’t leave soon.”

“But she doesn’t want to leave?”

Cole scrubbed his hands over his face, trying to wipe away the headache brewing behind his eyes. “It’s complicated. What did he do out there? She was falling apart when she came back.”

Laci’s forehead creased. “I don’t know that he did anything out of the ordinary...other than actually showing up. He seemed to accept the excuses I gave. Hell, he was charming even. If she hadn’t been having an obvious visceral reaction when I came into the office, I’d never have suspected anything weird was going on.”

Cole sighed. “She’s been planning to leave. We were going to give it two months. She was resisting financial help, but she had this escape plan all drawn up. When she came back in... the look in her eyes, *damn*. She told me she couldn’t leave because he was too dangerous. I wanted to tell her that *that* was why she needed to leave, but she was running out of here before I could, and I didn’t want to follow her in case...”

“...he was lying in wait,” Laci finished with a small, sad smile. “There’s a special place in Hell for men like him, I swear. I understand her panic, though. The most dangerous time for an abused woman is when she leaves. Sometimes protection orders aren’t even worth the paper they are printed on to a really despicable man. I don’t know what to tell you, Cole. This is a shitty situation all the way through.”

Cole took another sip of water even though he wished it was something far stronger. He’d hoped speaking to Laci would help him work through things, but it had the opposite effect. He’d known Laci for a few years now, and of all of his

coworkers, she was the most levelheaded. She rarely spoke without giving things full consideration, so for her to tell him that she had no idea what kind of advice to offer weighed deeply on him. Cole chuckled bitterly when he thought of how his hands seemed to be just as tied now as a grown ass man as they were when he was a child. He felt like a sitting duck, and foreboding pulsed through him so hard, it made him feel sick to his stomach. He could feel Jeremy escalating things much in the same way he could feel the way the air in his childhood home grow colder and tenser just before his father exploded. His hands became clammy as memories he usually kept tucked deep below the surface pushed their way to the light. The petrified look in Tasha's eyes was not unlike the haunting look he saw in his mother's the night he decided to take matters into his own hands. He wanted to pull Tasha out of the ugly situation, but he couldn't think of a way to do it without antagonizing her or making things worse.

“I hate feeling helpless,” he muttered.

“Yeah,” Laci sighed. “Imagine how she feels.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

A pryl: Please call me.

Tasha stared at the text message the same way she'd been doing for the last thirty minutes. She knew what she needed to do, but she wasn't ready to talk to Cole about it yet. Maybe it was because just thinking about what she was going to ask him had her stomach twisting in shame. Or maybe she wanted to give herself the space to change her mind. Whatever the reason, she'd been hesitant to respond to Cole's message, but it was time.

Tasha: Thank you for reaching out. I am still available for my workout session tomorrow.

Her fingers shook as she typed the message before she went back to trying to pay attention to the *Animal Crossing* stream she'd been watching on the flat-screen TV. Her thoughts were such a jumbled mess, and she hoped the mindless entertainment would calm her down while she waited for Jeremy to get home. It wasn't working. Tasha had never been concerned about Jeremy monitoring her calls or messages before, but now she couldn't really be sure of anything. She'd spent the last few hours going through the house looking for anything that seemed out of place enough to be a camera before she finally sank into the couch, exhausted as hell, and tried to cry all her frustration away. That was when she made the decision she had to leave. She wasn't sure anymore if staying would be any safer, and she knew whatever it was she was doing couldn't be called living. Jeremy was

killing her soul. She worried Cole would be confused by her weird message, but he didn't miss a beat with his response.

Apryl: Noted. Is 9:30 still a good time for you or do you need it adjusted?

Tasha: It is a good time. I will see you then.

She stared at the screen for a few more minutes, wondering if she should call him after all. Perhaps it would be easier to tell him what she had to over the phone. She swallowed the urge and turned her attention back to the stream. She gave up on finding any type of comfort there and returned to the kitchen, where she quickly put together a shrimp alfredo linguine for Jeremy. She'd just finished plating their food, making sure to lessen her portion size and increasing the creamy garlic spinach she'd prepared to continue selling the story Laci told. She was so fucking tired.

"Something smells great," he said, walking into the kitchen as he loosened his tie. He pulled her back into a hug, splaying his palm against her lower stomach, and Tasha flinched when she felt his dick pressed up against her ass. He seemed to be in *that* kind of mood, but Tasha was happy the Universe decided to be benevolent to her for once. The tightness in her lower stomach all afternoon should have been a giveaway, but Tasha refused to believe her luck until she found evidence of it a few hours ago when she went to the bathroom to deal with her needs. She'd bought herself another five or six days from Jeremy's advances, and Tasha was so relieved she wanted to cry.

"I wasn't sure if you were joking about seeing me after dinner," she said. "Wanted to make sure you had a nice meal in case you weren't."

"That was sweet of you."

She eased herself out of his arms. "I just want you to be happy. Let me go make you a gin and tonic while you get comfortable."

He kissed her cheek and headed off toward the bedroom. Tasha gripped the edge of the counter and steadied her

breathing. She could do this. She *would* do this. She had the plates and drinks set by the time he returned from the bedroom, dressed down in a white shirt and jeans. She pushed her food around her plate, not paying much attention to the stories he told about work. He was talking about some sort of project he and his partner were trying to enter into, with a small startup in California, but Tasha found herself zoning out every couple minutes. Jeremy was trying to paint himself as the one who saw the potential of the startup and who was behind the negotiations, but Tasha knew better. Marius was the brains of their operation. She wondered how hard her husband would slap her if she told him that. Her ears rang just thinking about it. She gave up on trying to follow Jeremy's winding, arrogant spiel. He was hard to follow under the best of circumstances, but he was almost impossible to keep up with when Tasha had other things on her mind. Having other things on her mind was a pretty big understatement when she considered the chaos going on inside her. She was going to have to stick by her decision once she talked to Cole in the morning. The thought scared the living hell out of her. And that was her hoping Cole would agree to help her in the first place.

“Are you even listening to me?”

Tasha's gaze flicked to her husband, and she recoiled at the irritation she saw on his face.

“I am,” she lied, hoping he would drop it. He didn't. Of course, he didn't. He never did.

“What's the last thing I said?”

Tasha made a face. “Come on, Jeremy. Is this elementary school?”

He jerked his head back. “You calling me childish or something?”

She took a deep breath and chewed on the inside of her lips. There was too much riding on not stoking his anger.

“Of course not,” she whispered. “I wouldn't do that.”

“Come here,” he said. “Let’s pass the time some other way since you’re not interested in talking.”

He pushed his chair back and patted his lap, but Tasha shook her head.

“It’s not a good time,” she said, trying to inject disappointment into her voice that she didn’t feel.

“Excuse me?” Jeremy asked. His voice thundered with anger, and he was up out of his chair and yanking her toward him before she could speak. She winced.

“That hurts.”

He squeezed her wrist even tighter. “Good. I thought I made it clear I was pretty fucking tired of you denying me what’s mine.”

Tasha tried to yank her hand away, fear and anger competing for the top spot inside her.

“I’m not your property,” she whispered. “You can’t force me to be in the mood.”

He cocked his head to the side, and a lazy smile tugged at his lips. “Can’t I?”

Tears sprung to her eyes. “Wow, Jeremy. Do you know how cruel you’re being right now?”

His face hardened. “I don’t care, Tasha. For all the fucking time and money I invest in you, I deserve to get my dick wet when I want my dick wet. This isn’t even a conversation we’re about to be having.”

He let go of her wrist and shoved her forward.

“What are you waiting on?” he asked. “I’m running out of patience, Natasha.”

“We can’t have sex, Jeremy,” she said softly. “I wasn’t even rejecting you. I’m on my period.”

She held his gaze, expecting she would see the regret that usually filled his eyes once he realized he’d gone too far. She expected him to morph into contrite fucking Jeremy before her eyes, but that did not happen.

“I don’t believe you,” he said. His voice was hard and clipped, and he held his body tight, like an animal ready to strike.

“What do you mean by you don’t believe me?” she asked. “Why would I lie about something like that?”

He didn’t answer her. Instead, he reached out and grabbed her elbow, yanking her toward the half-bathroom off the kitchen. He shoved her so hard toward the toilet that she had to grab onto the sink to steady herself. He leaned against the wall, folding his arms in front of him, and looked at her with hard eyes and a raised eyebrow. Her eyes widened, and her throat tightened as reality slammed into her.

“Jeremy,” she whispered. His name sounded like it was being dragged over broken glass from her throat. “You can’t be serious...”

“Show me,” he said simply as if his request was a reasonable one and not fucking ridiculous.

“I’m not going to show you my bloody tampon, Jeremy,” she said. “That’s outrageous.”

He clenched his jaw, stepped forward, and dropped into a squat so that he was level with her.

“You’re a fucking liar!” he bellowed.

Tasha’s body wouldn’t stop shaking. She could barely get enough breaths through her burning lungs as she tried to find whatever words she thought could pacify him.

“Let me see,” he said again, his voice back to a normal pitch. She hesitated — only slightly — and that was all it took for Jeremy to lose it all.

“If it’s one thing about you, my love,” he whispered, “you always choose the hard way.”

His hands reached for the waist of her yoga pants, and Tasha tried batting them away.

He yanked her entire body down off the toilet, and she cried out when her shoulder hit the porcelain on the way down.

“I’ll do it myself!” she screamed at him, but Jeremy rarely saw reason once he got going. She tried to squirm away. “Please. Let me do it myself.”

It was best she hadn’t said anything at all. He leaned against her upper torso, his elbow digging into her chest as he yanked those yoga pants down, ignoring every scream ripped from Tasha’s throat. And then she could feel his fingers brushing against her as he tried and failed a few times to find the tampon string. She’d stopped screaming and squirming by the time he yanked it out of her. Tasha’s entire body shook as she tried to process what had just happened. She pulled herself into a sitting position — knees drawn against her chest — as soon as he stopped pinning her down with his body. Her gaze went straight to the bloody tampon resting against the gray tile. Jeremy was looking at it too. His shoulders slumped when his gaze met hers.

“I’m so sorry...”

“Don’t you fucking dare!” she screeched. His jaw tightened, but she didn’t care. Tasha couldn’t think of anything he could do in that moment that could be worse than what he’d just done.

“Tasha, baby...”

She pulled herself unsteadily to her feet and moved as fast as she could to the en suite bathroom. She slammed and locked the door before she slid to the floor and allowed the sobs to overtake her. Crying didn’t assuage the tightness in her stomach and her chest, so Tasha pulled her knees to her chest and screamed.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

The scent of coffee wafting into the bedroom woke Tasha the next morning. She shook her head and sighed. It was always wash, rinse, and repeat where Jeremy was concerned. She blinked rapidly to avoid the tears threatening to fall. Her life had become a sick joke.

Tasha didn't even remember when she finally pulled herself from the floor and hopped into the shower. She stood under the scalding spray, hoping the heat would wash away the disgust that clung to her skin like sweat. Jeremy hadn't been in the apartment when she finally emerged from the room, so she swallowed the emotions threatening to leak from her eyes and cleaned up the mess in the half-bath. She had no idea when he returned that night.

Tasha stayed in bed for another half an hour, hoping he would leave, but she could still hear him pattering around. It seemed like he was determined to push contrite Jeremy in her face, whether she wanted to acknowledge him or not.

Tasha pulled on her robe and sauntered outside, unsurprised to find him sitting in the living room with a cup of coffee and a plate of scrambled eggs, bacon, and toast laid out where she usually sat.

"Tasha," he started when he noticed her standing there. "I'm sorry."

She shook her head. "I don't want to talk about this. I don't want to relive the moment my husband pinned me down on the

floor like we were involved in some kind of WWE matchup and yanked my tampon out.”

He winced, and a look of hurt crossed his face that might have seemed genuine, but it was the exact same look he’d used when he’d apologized about forcing himself on her... something he smiled about when he threw it back into her face.

“I shouldn’t have done that,” he said. “I should’ve believed you. I know I have a lot of issues I need to work on, but I am not lying when I say you are my entire world, Tasha. I love you so fucking much it makes me irrational at times.”

“I don’t want you to love me like *that*, Jeremy,” she said, not knowing why she was even wasting her breath when what happened last night already confirmed the decision she’d made. “I want you to love me so much that you treat me right.”

“I know,” he whispered, injecting enough emotion into his voice that Tasha wondered once again whether he actually believed the shit that came out of his mouth. “I’ll do better.”

“That’s what you said the last time,” she reminded him.

He crossed the space between them and dropped to his knees, wrapping his hands around her thighs.

“I’m really sorry, Tash. It’ll never happen again.”

This time he managed tears. Tasha resisted the urge to peel his hands from around her.

“Thanks for breakfast,” she said. She made herself sit at the table and take a few sips of the horrible coffee, thankful when he finally stopped hovering over her.

“I have a work trip coming up in the next few days. I’m going to be gone for a month. I considered bringing you along, but honestly, I think I need some space. I think maybe we should try couples counseling when I get back. I will never do this again, Tasha.”

Tasha from two years ago would have jumped at the opportunity. She would have given anything to rediscover the

man she'd fallen in love with and save her marriage. This Tasha had to accept that man never actually existed. She'd fallen for a mirage, and there was nothing about the cesspool she called her marriage to be saved.

She smiled at him anyway. "That sounds like a lovely idea. I'll look into it and see what our insurance covers."

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Cole didn't pretend to be focused on anything once he made it into his office just after nine that morning. Sophie barely managed to hide her surprise when she saw him sauntering into the lobby on his day off. He guarded his days off fiercely since they were the only days he got to devote his full attention to his business or things he needed to do for the band. Understanding flashed across her face when he mentioned he had to meet someone, but she didn't push further. He was happy for that. He glanced at his watch again. It was pushing ten in the morning, and Tasha had yet to arrive. She hadn't sent any messages to let him know she was running late, either. He knew half an hour wasn't even *that* late in the larger scheme of things, but Cole couldn't help but panic anyway. He was accustomed to Tasha returning at least one of those *DesignMeNow* orders each day, but she hadn't sent anything last night. Cole was halfway through sending a text message to check up on her when his door swung open, and Tasha walked inside. He immediately knew something was very wrong. His stomach dropped as he got up off the couch and moved closer to her.

"What did he do?" he asked.

She wouldn't meet his eyes when she said, "I don't want to talk about it right now. There's something else I have to ask you."

Cole couldn't decide if he needed to focus on the way her voice broke during the first part of her sentence or the urgency in the second part. He led her to the couch all the same,

grabbing a bottle of kombucha for her once she'd settled in. A ghost of a smile crossed her face when he handed it to her, but Cole didn't miss the way her hands shook when she took it from him.

“What's on your mind?” he asked.

A few seconds passed before she began to speak. “I'm going to tell Navaya what's been happening.”

He tried to keep his face neutral, but he knew the excitement must have shown on his face when she continued quickly, “Not right this moment. She's been really stressed out about her upcoming book. I don't want to add to that. As soon as she's finished, I'm going to sit her down and tell her all that has been going on and ask her if I can go stay with her for a while.”

“That makes me really happy,” Cole said. “I feel like this is the first time since all of this started where I can kinda breathe easy.”

“I need your help, though,” she said. Her eyes darted around the room as she stiffened her back.

Cole reached out to grasp her hand. “Name it.”

“You don't owe me anything,” she said. “I know this is my mess, and I'm nobody's responsibility but my own.”

“What do you need, Tee?”

There was so much pain and sadness in her eyes when she finally looked at him. “I'm going to need money. I don't have nearly enough, but I need to leave as soon as I possibly can.”

“Done,” he said, trying his hardest to keep his face and his voice neutral. He didn't want his absolute joy at her being out of Jeremy's direct path to show on his face and be misinterpreted as an ‘I told you so.’

“I also need a place to stay until I can tell Navaya,” she said. Her voice had gone soft, sounding so small that he barely heard her.

“That's fine as well,” he said. “I've got so much extra space. We can move you in whenever you are ready.”

“Give me two weeks.”

“Tasha...”

“He’s traveling for work in a few days. He’ll be gone for nearly a month, and that will give me the time to make sure I have everything I need. I’d also feel so much safer leaving when he is out of D.C.”

“A lot can happen in a few days,” Cole said. He knew he was pushing, but Cole didn’t care. Even though she refused to talk about it, something must have happened for her to have a hundred-and-eighty degree shift. The suspicion only intensified when he saw a flicker of doubt flash across her face.

“I think it is the safest way to get this done,” she said. “I’ll be able to just leave the key at the front desk and disappear. This way, I won’t run the risk of him coming home early while I’m packing up. A few days is a lot less than two months.”

He sighed. “I just want you safe.”

Tasha squeezed her eyes shut. He could see tears swimming there when she opened them again. “I’m just a charity case to you, and you’ve managed to treat me with more care and consideration than the man I believed loved me. That’s wild.”

He thumbed away the few tears that fell. “You’re not a charity case.”

Her laughter was humorless. “You can’t possibly see anything other than pity when you look at me. I’m broken. He’s ruined me.”

His heart constricted in his chest as he pulled her in for a hug, rubbing the small of her back as she allowed the sobs to overtake her.

“I see a beautiful woman when I look at you,” he said. “A woman who doesn’t even know her own strength. He hasn’t ruined you, Tee. He couldn’t. You’ll come out on the other side of this. You’ll heal.”

“How can I possibly heal when I feel like I’m torn to pieces?”

“Healing is just tearing yourself apart from the inside out, having faith you’ll be able to put yourself back together again,” Cole said. “Therapy will help.”

“I won’t be able to afford that for a while.”

“You’re not getting it, are you?” Cole said. He eased away from her so she could see the sincerity on his face when he spoke. “I got you.”

“Cole…”

He silenced her protests by pressing his index finger gently against her lips. “I got you just as Navaya will have you when you finally tell her. That’s non-negotiable. I can show you my house so you can see if things are to your liking, and we can go from there.”

He expected her to protest, but she surprised him by hitting him with a wide, relieved smile.

“I’d like that.”

The way his entire chest shifted inside his body as he took in the warmth of her smile jolted Cole, but he tucked it away.

You can’t possibly see anything other than pity when you look at me.

Cole almost chuckled at the irony of that. Tasha truly had no idea.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Her mind was a pool of anxiety as she tried to navigate the overwhelming, often contradictory things she felt. She was so damn relieved when Cole immediately agreed to help her out even though she hadn't expected him to say no. It was a jolt to her senses whenever she realized she trusted him at his word. He'd told her repeatedly he would be a soft place for her to land and then proceeded to show her that he meant it.

Still, asking him had been hard. Possibly one of the hardest things she ever did. The anger that swamped her was surprising — anger at Jeremy, the situation, and herself for ending up in a position where she had to ask anyone, much less a friend of a friend of a friend, for cash and a place to stay.

A friend of a friend of a friend.

Tasha almost laughed at how feeble of a descriptor that was of what Cole had become to her. Maybe that was true before he stood leaning against a car and watched her husband berate her. Maybe it was true before he sat across from her at Gary's Burgers and shared his pain with her. Maybe it was true before he held her in his arms while her mind and soul still reeled from memories of her husband violating her. But definitely not now. Not as she sat stiffly in the passenger seat of his car as he drove them to the place she would call home for at least the next few weeks while Navaya finished up her book. He kept glancing at her but didn't confront her silence head-on. Tasha was grateful for that. She needed the time to sit with her emotions. Her stomach was twisting in on itself as

she tried to fight the small bit of hope wanting to bloom in her chest that she was too afraid to let take hold. A few days was a long time, especially since Jeremy's moods were becoming more and more irrational, but Tasha knew she had to play the long game. What were a few days when the prize at the end would be freedom for the rest of her life? Tasha grimaced. So much for not being idealistic. Jeremy had already made it clear he wouldn't let her go easily, but Tasha would fight. She would fight long and hard because there was no way in hell she would remain under Jeremy's thumb. There was no way she *could*. She glanced at Cole, who was busy humming along to a smooth jazz song he'd found on his phone at the last stoplight. She was her own responsibility, yes, but Tasha was accepting that didn't have to mean she needed to fight through this alone. She'd almost called Navaya the night before to release all the secrets that had been a tourniquet around her throat and deep, dank poison searing her veins. She had already started dialing the number before she talked herself out of it. Navaya had a lot going on, and Tasha felt like she owed her the space to work through her own shit before she dropped the news on her. Nothing would compare to being finally able to cry her pain out on her best friend's shoulder, but she could wait a few weeks. She looked at Cole again, one elegant finger tapping against the steering wheel as he bobbed his head to the beat of the song. She'd been angry as hell when the Universe pushed him into her fucked-up life with no warning when she believed accepting help was weakness. Jeremy acting the fool that night would probably go down as the best thing he'd ever done for her. Cole glanced toward her and caught her staring, and his forehead furrowed with concern.

“Everything okay, Tee?”

She took a deep breath and nodded. For the first time since this nightmare started, she was sure the light she was seeing at the end of the tunnel wasn't just a speeding train en route to knocking her flat on her ass.

“You sure?” Cole asked. “You've been really quiet. Tell me what's going on in that beautiful head of yours.”

Tasha's heart thudded rapidly in her chest. The airy feeling that filled her at Cole's offhanded comment had her wanting to grin so widely her cheeks would become apples, and that... *that* was a complication Tasha didn't want or need. It was a complication she couldn't fucking afford. She took a few seconds to ground herself back in reality before her flights of fancy cost her. It seemed her fanciful heart needed a strong reminder of how unwise it would be to get carried away by her gratitude to Cole. Tasha continued playing with her bracelets before she turned to him and asked, "Is it because of your mother?" This time, her heart thudding against her chest was accompanied by a wave of nausea and immediate regret she'd even chosen to go there.

He didn't meet her gaze but kept his eyes firmly on the road. The tapping against the steering wheel paused. "Is what because of my mother?"

"All of this," she said slowly. "You are going above and beyond for someone you barely know. Let's not forget I wasn't particularly nice to you either."

The corner of Cole's mouth tipped up as he finally glanced at her. His brown eyes were filled with warmth, and the corners of his eyes softened. "A lot was going on, Tee. You behaved plenty better than most people might have, all things considered."

"That doesn't really answer my question," Tasha said, even though she couldn't figure out why she was pushing a conversation that was likely to hurt her feelings. He sighed.

"I can't answer your question," he said after a few seconds. "Because... I don't know."

"I don't understand."

Cole chuckled. "Neither do I."

Tasha couldn't think of a way to follow up on that, so she busied herself looking out of the window as the tree-lined streets zoomed by. Cole broke the silence. "My desire to help stems from my childhood, most definitely. That's why I donate and volunteer to organizations that assist people in abusive

relationships. If I have a particularly good month on YouTube or get a good Instagram sponsor or something, I will go on GoFundMe and look specifically for posts about people trying to get out of abusive situations so I can donate directly. So yes, part of it is because of what happened to my mother.”

“And the other part?” Tasha queried, hating the way her heart raced in anticipation of his response.

“That,” Cole said softly, keeping his eyes on the road.
“That I don’t know.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

It was a cop-out.

It was a necessary one. A worthy one, even. But it *was* a cop-out. Because even though Cole couldn't be certain about the driving force behind his desire to move heaven and hell to make sure Tasha was okay or his desperate need to corner Jeremy's ass and wring his pathetic neck, he had a pretty good idea. It was in the way he waited with bated breath for those moments when the clouds around Tasha lifted, and she laughed. Her beautiful, breathy laughter felt like sunshine against his skin. It was in how often he found himself having to fight against lingering in their hugs. It was in each time he had to remind himself that this was neither the time nor the place to give space to the strands of intrigue, fondness, and attraction which were steadily wrapping themselves around him. He liked Tasha, and if he'd come to that realization under just about any other circumstance, Cole wouldn't have been too shy to let her know exactly how he felt. But things were what they were. Tasha only recently started leaning into trusting him, and he wasn't about to fuck things up with selfish wishes that things had been different. Tasha didn't need that right now. She didn't need him to be her suitor any more than she needed him to be her savior. She needed him to be exactly what he promised her. He would be her safe space in whatever form she needed it to take.

"Do you often do things without knowing why?" Tasha asked. Her soft voice pulled him out of his spiraling thoughts. Her voice was even, but Cole swore he heard shards of

disappointment there — like she knew his answer was a cop-out too.

“I don’t,” he admitted. “I might not know exactly why I’m doing this, but my intuition knows I’m supposed to. That’s enough for me.”

The sunshine came out then, a smile so bright and wide that Cole’s heart clenched a little. Life was an ironic bitch. He’d meandered through life for so long without wondering what it might be like to nurture something more than the physical with a woman, but now a smile from Tasha had his heart spluttering in his chest like a long-dead, rusty engine roaring to life. Of all the times. Of all the circumstances. *Of all the women.*

“I don’t know how I’ll ever repay you,” she said, her smile dimming just enough for him to reach out and squeeze her thigh. He was about to reassure her when she continued, “The money, of course, I’ll get that to you once I am settled with an appropriate interest added. But this?” Tasha shook her head, leaned her head against the headrest, and sighed. “How do I ever make up for all of this? The time, the energy...the gray hairs I might have caused if you had any.”

She smiled a little then when he exaggeratedly patted his bald head and said, “I’ve been plucking gray hairs out my beard every morning. You don’t know my life.”

He could listen to her laugh forever.

“You’re silly,” Tasha teased.

“So are you if you think there’s a debt to repay.”

He kept his voice soft and light before quickly starting to talk about the guestroom he thought suited Tasha to distract her. He’d reassure her as often as she needed it because Cole understood how disorienting and frustrating all of this must be for her. He remembered the fiery determination that flashed in her eyes outside Navaya’s apartment a few weeks before when she told him she wouldn’t rely on anyone’s help to get away from Jeremy. He knew asking for his help and accepting she’d have to tell Navaya must feel like she’d let herself down. He

wished he could find a way to reassure her that what she was doing now was so damn brave. Cole's mouth went dry when he thought of how scary things must have gotten for Tasha to decide it was best for her to alter the plan she'd been so determined to stick to. He continued telling her about the room with the large windows that looked out onto the backyard, but the anger swirling within him was dark and deep. Men like Jeremy needed to learn what it was like to feel the fear and pain they rained down on their partners. Cole was finding it harder and harder to come up with reasons why he shouldn't be the one to teach him that well-deserved lesson.

“Cole?”

Cole pulled his thoughts away from just how much he'd enjoy being something out of Jeremy's worst nightmares and turned his attention to why he needed to keep his focus on what was important. Cole couldn't think of a single benefit of following through with his thoughts aside from the immense satisfaction he'd feel from giving Jeremy a taste of his own medicine. But it wasn't about him, was it? It was about the beautiful, brave, but currently unsure woman, who sat next to him, looking up at him with eyes filled with panic, that his sudden shift in behavior was down to him changing his mind.

“Where did your mind wander off to?” she asked. “You zoned out mid-sentence.”

He thought about lying to her. He could tell her he was wondering how she would like the house they were only a few minutes away from, or he could say he remembered something from work, but he chose not to.

“I swore off violence after everything that happened with my dad. I tend to work through negative emotions through meditation even more than going a few rounds with the punching bag. In fact, I try to make it a point to not use the punching bag when I'm angry. I probably have a lot to unpack in therapy because just now, I was thinking of how much I'd like to fuck Jeremy up and how I have to keep reminding myself of the one important reason I shouldn't.”

“It *is* a bad idea,” Tasha said after a while. “He’d run to the nearest police station and make a report without the slightest thought about the hypocrisy of it all.”

He pulled into the driveway of his house and killed the engine before he responded, “I don’t give a fuck about whether he’d run to the police.”

Tasha’s forehead scrunched as she tried to make sense of his words. “What’s the one important reason, then?”

He met her gaze and held it so she could see the absolute truth in his eyes as he spoke. “You.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Y*ou.*

Tasha mulled Cole's quiet statement over in her mind. She thought about it as he led her into the beautiful Colonial-style home with its red brick and white paneling. It bounced around her head as she took in the polished light brown hardwood floors, the beautiful large windows streaming in the afternoon light, and the plants thriving in the corner of the living room. She didn't pull herself out of trying to analyze the cadence in Cole's voice when he spoke that word until he led her past the large homey, though modern kitchen up a short set of stairs and down the hallway where he stopped in front of a closed door and gestured to her to open it.

"This is the room I thought you'd like," he said.

There were nervous undertones to his deep voice, and Tasha realized it mattered to him whether she liked the space he'd allow her to occupy for the next few weeks. She smiled, warmth flooding her. He was doing her a huge favor by opening his home to her. Tasha would have easily and *gratefully* slept on his couch. She pushed the door open and just stood there for a few seconds, mouth slightly parted and heart hammering against her chest. Tears pricked her eyes, and she blinked rapidly to push them away before she turned to Cole.

"I have another room you can look at if you don't like this," he rambled, and Tasha couldn't stop herself from launching into his arms. She didn't hold back the sobs, but this

was different from the other times she soaked his shirts. The relief that rocketed through her body was so forceful she shook from it. *Four days*. She only had to walk on eggshells for the next four days before she would be able to start moving her things into the bright, airy room with its bay windows which, as Cole predicted, would be the perfect space to fit a desk. She lingered in Cole's arms longer than she needed to before she pulled away.

"I expected to be sleeping on a couch," she admitted with a little laugh. "This is beyond anything I allowed myself to expect."

Cole chuckled, shaking his head slightly as if she'd said the most ridiculous thing. "You were never at risk of sleeping on a couch, Tee. I would've taken the couch if I only had one bed."

"I would have never asked you to do that."

"Don't I know it," Cole said with another small chuckle. "You wouldn't have had to, though."

He nudged her further into the room, pointing her to the bay window that drew so much joy from her when she'd first seen it. "Check out the view."

He rested his hand lightly against her hip as he steered her in the direction of the window, but it could have been a caress for how her body warmed at the soft pressure. She took a deep breath and tried to steady herself as she stepped in front of the window. It overlooked a backyard of large trees, leaves tinged with the reddish-brown promise of fall. Tasha could imagine herself sitting at her desk looking out at the minimalist but elegant backyard décor. There were black iron-wrought benches nestled under the large trees, which she imagined were perfect for sitting with a cup of tea while birds danced around encouraged by the bird feeders littered around the yard. Having bird feeders was the most authentically Cole thing ever, Tasha thought with a smile before she continued looking around the backyard. Low-cut green grass gave way to gray masonry tiles in the right-hand corner of the yard where there was a gazebo with a trellis roof under which a Jacuzzi, outdoor

seating with plush, deep orange cushions, and a sleek, silver grill were placed.

“You entertain a lot?” Tasha asked. She turned away from the view and leaned against the windowsill before flashing a teasing smile at Cole.

“You’d be surprised how little that backyard gets used,” he said. “I mentioned to my mom once that I needed to do something with the backyard. She was so excited when she came around with her Pinterest board and ideas that I couldn’t bear to tell her she was going overboard.”

His eyes sparkled with the fondness they always did whenever the conversation turned to his mother, and Tasha was surprised by how much she wished she could see Cole interact with the woman he obviously adored.

“Was the backyard the only area of the house you gave her full rein?” she asked.

“You got me,” Cole laughed. “I loved the house and the location, but it needed a lot of tender care when I bought it. It became my mother’s pet project. There’s still a small part of me that thinks it was her way to nudge me into family life. In her mind, I’ve got the job and the house, so the next logical step will be a wife and grandbabies. Emphasis on *grandbabies*.”

Tasha chuckled. “Give the woman what she wants.”

Cole sobered. “She’s going to remain disappointed.”

His answer shocked Tasha. He seemed like the type who’d be excited for a family of his own. A family where he could love on his wife and nurture children with his hallmark kindness and patience, creating the kind of home life his father denied him with his cruelty. She stalled her train of thought and chided herself. They’d shared things — deep, dark, disturbing things — but that didn’t mean she knew enough about Cole to assume those things about him. Or perhaps she hadn’t been assuming at all. Maybe she was projecting the image she had of him in her head onto him. Cole would make some woman an excellent husband, the kind of husband she’d

be happy to come home to. A husband who offered love not just in words but in his actions. Cole made Tasha feel safe from the inside out, and she wasn't even his. Tasha hoped whoever ended up being *his* would understand just how fucking lucky she was. Then again, Tasha wouldn't wish the kind of understanding *she* had on anyone.

"I didn't expect that," she admitted, sitting at the edge of the bed. "I see you with a wife, two point five kids, and weekend workout sessions for everyone in your household, including the dog."

The bed dipped with Cole's weight as his shoulder brushed against hers.

"What the hell is two point five kids?" he queried.

"The dog!" she exclaimed. "They are permanent toddlers. No job, no bills, stubborn when ready, and spoiled as hell."

"I don't know about you, but Fido will earn his keep," Cole chuckled. "I'd get him his own doggy segments in YouTube videos."

"It's the fact that I know you're serious that's killing me," Tasha responded, joining his laughter.

They sat there long after their laughter faded into silence, shoulders pressed together and Tasha trying to not be distracted by the warmth of his body as she really thought about him, the wife, the kids, the dog, and those damned weekend workout sessions. She chewed on her bottom lip when she realized she wasn't thinking about some nameless, faceless woman in the sitcom intro montage scenario rushing through her mind. Tasha pictured herself.

She was halfway through working herself into a panic trying to analyze whether that meant anything when Cole's deep voice finally broke through her thoughts.

"I worry, you know?" he said. "What if I end up just like him?"

The pain etched on his face was as clear to see as the tension lines that appeared when he furrowed his forehead.

“You could never,” she whispered. Her heart ached to think that Cole, as kind as he was and as gentle as he was, really feared he could be a monster.

“I’ve already proven myself capable of violence.”

He was speaking matter-of-factly now, his face schooled into an impassive mask.

“You’ve proven yourself capable of protecting the people you love,” she said. Her voice rose with the strength of her conviction. “Even as a kid, even knowing the consequences, you did what you could to try to end the suffering your mother endured.”

Cole didn’t respond. He kept looking straight ahead, and Tasha could make out the stiffness in his spine.

“There’s no way the man who held a virtual stranger while she cried out the remnants of the terror on his shoulder, who opened his home, who kept a secret that turned out to be more of a headache than anything, who handled all her outbursts with patience that he didn’t owe her, who tried to respect her wishes and boundaries even though it was eating him up inside, would violate someone he loved in the ways your father violated your mother and Jeremy violated me. No fucking way, and I stand by that.”

Cole finally turned to face her, and in that moment, the tension that swirled between them was thick enough to cut with a knife. Tasha’s breath caught in her throat so fiercely she was convinced she’d never breathe again when he brought his hand to her cheek and leaned toward her. He was going to kiss her, Tasha realized. Her heart thumped hard against her chest in anticipation. She marveled for a few seconds as she tried to recall the last time her body yearned so badly for someone’s lips against hers that she could feel herself moving closer, tilting her chin up to meet lips that never came. Cole paused with his face so close to Tasha’s that his breath tickled her nose before he pulled back slowly.

“I’m sorry,” he said, clearing his throat. “I shouldn’t have done that. I don’t know what came over me.”

He paused before he shook his head and laughed. “That’s a lie. I know *exactly* what came over me, but I can’t. I shouldn’t.”

Tasha’s heart continued beating erratically against her chest as she replayed the near-kiss in her mind. Cole had to know from the way she’d reacted that she wanted him to kiss her, but he’d stopped himself. She waited for embarrassment to flood her senses, but it never came. What Cole did should feel like a rejection, but it didn’t. Something soft and warm expanded in her chest.

“You’re trying to protect me,” she said.

He nodded.

“Even from something I want?”

“I don’t want to be another thing for you to regret. I promised to be your soft place to land, and that’s what I’ll be.”

Tasha took a deep breath and tried to let all the confusing emotions seep from her. He was right. She knew he was right. There was too much going on. Her emotions were too wild for her to weaken in a short moment of intimacy. She might have welcomed his lips against hers in that moment, but she didn’t know how she’d feel later. How did Cole really think he wouldn’t be anything but a protective force to the people he loved when he was so stubbornly protective of a woman he didn’t owe anything?

“You really are amazing, Cole,” she whispered.

He smiled at her as he responded, “So are you, Tee.”

CHAPTER FORTY

Cole watched Tasha poke her head into the bathroom across the hall from the guest bedroom he'd chosen for her while he tried to understand how he'd come so close to fucking things up. The jolt of common sense that shocked reason back into his senses was almost a few seconds too late. He'd been close — *so close* — to capturing Tasha's lips in his own and kissing her until he had his fill.

Tasha was unexpected in every sense of the word, and Cole had no idea what he was going to do. He wouldn't do *that*, though. It didn't matter how soft her skin felt under his hands or how his heart constricted hard in his chest when she looked up at him with so much quiet faith in her eyes that his head spun.

Cole swore softly under his breath. Life had a hell of a sense of humor. A morbid one, at that. He'd spent the entire drive to his house reminding himself that Tasha was off-limits, and he needed to do everything in his power not to act on the fragile strings of attraction strengthening in his blood. He hadn't been prepared for how it felt to see her in the space he'd cultivated to be his sanctuary. Her request had been unexpected, so Cole hadn't had time to consider the implications of sharing a space with Tasha, even for just a couple of weeks. He hadn't thought of what it might be like to find her sipping on kombucha, swallowed up in one of the oversized couches in his living room watching one of those *Animal Crossing* streams she'd told him she liked. He hadn't paused to contemplate that the scent of her perfume or the

notes of her laughter would linger in the air even after she'd left a room. He hadn't yet accepted the mindfuck it would be to know she was just down the hall in the room he usually reserved for his niece working on projects or just working on putting her life back together again. He hadn't considered how much he wanted to be a part of that life, even though it was selfish as hell to have that sort of expectation from her. Definitely not now. Perhaps not ever. He'd seen her at some intensely dark and vulnerable moments and would forever be a reminder of what she'd survived. Cole was trailing behind Tasha as she explored the backyard, but the thought stopped his feet in their tracks. He'd never given thought to any possibility other than him and Tasha coming out of this with a friendship forged from the bond they'd created. But for her, that bond was one held up by her trauma, and Cole realized he'd been ignorant to expect they'd remain anything other than what they'd been before — virtual strangers who occasionally found themselves in each other's company because their friends were yet to discover they were soulmates.

Cole felt like a fool. He'd been busy imagining cuddling Tasha into him when he found her swallowed up in his couch, smelling that faint scent of her perfume on his pillow, and tasting her lips when he wasn't sure he'd remain in her life at all.

“How often do you use the hot tub?”

Tasha's voice pierced the haze of uncomfortable thoughts settling in the pit of his stomach like rocks.

“Not as often as you think,” he said. “My niece adores it, though. She would stay in until her skin pruned and her internal organs cooked if I let her.”

“I don't blame her,” Tasha commented. “There's nothing better than a long, scalding soak. I'd like to use it while I'm here if you don't mind.”

He hated when she did that, even though he knew painting herself as some leech he'd be grudgingly putting up with was her way of asking for reassurance. God, how he wished she had never been in the position to need that reassurance in the

first place. He wondered how much of it came from her hating needing to ask for help and how much of it was down to Jeremy's treatment.

He kept his voice soft and measured as he asked, "Why would you even think I'd mind?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "This is your space. I'm not coming in here like I have free rein of anything other than the room you're letting me stay in. I don't want to be fish."

Cole was watching anxiety flash across her face when her last sentence made him frown. "What?"

She smiled, but it was one of those small uncertain smiles that only came out when she was uncomfortable.

"Benjamin Franklin," she said, and when his face didn't show any sign of understanding, she continued. "He said something along the line of guests like fish start to smell after three days."

He wanted to laugh at the imagery his mind conjured from the statement, but he didn't. He needed her to understand that nothing about the next words he spoke were tinged by jest.

"You won't overstay your welcome, Tee."

She leaned against one of the gazebo's columns and cocked her head to the side. Brown eyes met his, and it took self-control Cole hadn't been aware he possessed to resist taking her into his arms and soothing away the turmoil he saw there.

"You don't have to do that," she said. "Don't lie to make me feel better. I appreciate it, honestly, but I have to face the facts here. It's damn easy to overstay a welcome you shouldn't have in the first place."

"Give me some credit, Tee," Cole said. He tried to keep the hardness from his voice because the frustration that set his teeth on edge had nothing to do with the woman standing in front of him. "I've said this to you before. There are many ways I could have assisted you without you being here."

She pressed her lips together, doubt painting a mask over her features. He knew she heard what he was saying, but he needed her to understand him. He needed her to believe.

“I agreed to you staying here instead of offering to get you a rental because I didn’t want you to be alone. I wanted you to be in a place where you don’t have to walk around on eggshells because you know I’d never be a threat to you and where you didn’t have to fear for your safety because you know I would cut that nigga down before he had a chance to hurt you. I want to see more of the Tash I’ve seen the few times you’ve been hanging out with Navaya but knowing you aren’t hyping up your bubbly nature to hide the sadness. I want you to know I’m right down the hall if you need to vent, cry, or just sit quietly with someone. Tash, I agreed to you staying here because I look forward to all that comes with you being in my space. Believe that when I say you won’t overstay your welcome. I know *exactly* what I mean.”

“I know you think you mean that...” she started, but her voice trailed off when she caught the expression on his face. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

Cole grinned. “Because I knew you weren’t going to accept what I said without arguing with me. There’s nothing to argue about, though. I know my own mind, Tee.”

He knew his own feelings too, but he pushed those aside to concentrate on the task at hand.

“It’s just hard for me to believe,” she started. “Jeremy tried to simultaneously convince me I was the most important person in the world to him but also more worthless than a piece of gum under his shoes. And I gave him *everything*. Too much, really. My heart, my body, my money, my dignity... literally all that was left was for him to take my life. The least he owed me was respect, and he didn’t even think I deserved that. I just can’t grasp why you would go out of your way to be a soft place for me, to want to wrap me up and protect me like I was something that deserves to be treasured when you owe me nothing.”

He watched her break before him, chest rising and falling hard under the weight of her emotion as tears that scalded Cole's heart streamed down her face. Her lips trembled as she tried to lick away the falling tears.

"I'm not, Cole!" she cried. "I'm not something to be treasured. Not when I can still feel the hands and lips of the man who broke me whenever I close my eyes."

She stared at him, eyes wide for a few seconds, clearly shocked that she'd said as much as she did. He reached out to wipe a tear from her cheek, but another one fell to his thumb almost instantly.

"Tasha," Cole breathed. He struggled to fight against the emotions at war inside him. What each fiber of his being urged him to do was foolhardy, brash, and might eventually bite him on his ass, but Cole was finding it hard to resist when Tasha stood with her eyes swimming with tears and pain sparkling around her like shards of broken glass.

He leaned forward, hesitating only slightly before he brought his lips to hers. He pressed firmly against the soft plumpness, tongue darting out to lick away the remnants of tears. Cole kept the kiss soft and gentle, resisting the urge to kiss her deeply as if he could search for all the traces of the darkness bearing down on her with his tongue and brush them away with his lips. He cradled her cheek in his palm, moving his lips over hers for a few more sweet seconds before he pulled away. He pressed his forehead to hers and whispered, "Now, when you close your eyes... I want you to think of this."

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

Now, when you close your eyes... I want you to think of this.

Tasha's cheeks still heated when she remembered how many times she thought about Cole's lips pressed against hers over the last few hours. She thought about kissing him while she sat at her desk and tried to focus on the *DesignMeNow* orders she'd yet to complete. She thought about kissing him whenever she allowed her mind to wander while she sat with a lukewarm cup of coffee, counting down the seconds until Jeremy left for work and she could breathe just a little more freely.

Tasha still couldn't explain what came over her in Cole's backyard. Her tear-filled confession caught her off-guard, and she'd been ready to curl into a ball of shame. Did she really feel the things she'd screamed at him while her chest tightened so much that each beat of her heart sent pangs of pain all over her body? Did she believe them? Her stomach dropped to her feet when she realized that she did. She'd tried to hide from the reality of her feelings, but they refused to remain hidden any longer. They demanded to be acknowledged, and Tasha wasn't quite sure what to do with them.

I'm not something to be treasured.

She'd wanted the earth to open and swallow her whole when those words flew from her mouth like she hadn't been trying to deny the feelings of worthlessness that followed her around like a corporeal entity every fucking waking moment.

His eyes had widened for a few seconds before they filled with understanding, warmth, and a little bit of something she couldn't place before he kissed her with a soft tenderness she wanted to close her eyes and get lost in. So, she had. For those brief moments, Tasha let go of the embarrassment that simmered under the surface and focused on how Cole's lips brushing tentatively against hers felt. The pleasant tightening that unfurled in Tasha's lower stomach was almost foreign to her for how long she'd gone without welcoming a man's touch.

The rest of the tour passed by in a heady haze, with Tasha unable to stop herself from staring at Cole, wondering what might have happened if he hadn't been so damned determined to look out for her. She'd seen the regret in his eyes almost as soon as he'd pulled away and had to ignore how that turned the pleasant tightening in her stomach to a rock of dread.

A pity project, but before she could voice the realization that lay like bitter fruit on her tongue, Cole pulled her into his arms and kissed the top of her head, and she allowed the insecurities to flow out of her.

Pity project or not, he treated her like he believed she deserved to be treated with care and deserved to be treasured. He did so unprovoked and in ways that helped silence the insidious thoughts in her mind insisting Jeremy found it easy to treat her like nothing because she *was nothing*.

In so many ways, even after everything he'd already done, *that* was the best gift Cole offered her. That and the memory of his lips against hers. She locked the memory away in a little part of her brain where nothing Jeremy did could touch it. She smiled in his face, feigned interest, and allowed him to put his lips on hers, all while replaying the tender moment she'd shared with Cole and counting down the days until he left. Tasha wasn't hopeful enough to think Jeremy would let go easily. Yet, she couldn't wait until she no longer had to share the same space with him. She couldn't wait until he had no idea how to find her.

Four days.

The days moved like they were soaked in molasses. There were times Tasha thought Jeremy would never leave, or he would change his mind at the last minute, and her plan would blow up in her face. She didn't release the tension that clung to her like a second skin until after she walked him to his taxi early the morning of his departure day. Her emancipation day. Tasha didn't fully relax until he sent her a message a few hours later to let her know he'd landed in California. It took over two thousand miles between her and her soon-to-be ex-husband for Tasha to start feeling secure. She lingered for a few hours until photos started going up on his social media to confirm he was truly on the other side of the country before she finally grabbed her phone and video-called Cole. She could've sent a text or a simple call, but the moment felt like it deserved more than that. She needed to see his face.

The video call surprised him, and she could see the concern in his expression until he got a good look at her. It would be hard for him to believe anything might be wrong after he caught sight of the wide bright smile she couldn't wipe from her face. Adrenaline coursed so rapidly through her body she could barely keep still.

“He's gone?”

Tasha nodded, smiling wide enough that her cheeks hurt.

Cole pumped his fist into the air and let out a delighted whoop. “Finally! Let's get this show on the road.”

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

Her wedding dress did her in.

It wasn't the fairytale gown Tasha used to dream of wearing when she imagined her wedding as a child, but getting married in a simple off-the-shoulder silver cocktail dress instead of her dream dress seemed to be the smallest trade-off to marry the man of her dreams.

Tasha had spent the last day and a half slowly sifting through her wardrobe, finding clothing she wanted to donate and clothing she would pack into boxes to remain sealed until she found a place of her own, with hopeful optimism bubbling inside her as she sang along at the top of her lungs to Mariah Carey's 'The Emancipation of Mimi' album.

It all fell apart when she pulled the cocktail dress from the very back of the closet. She'd wanted to throw it into the pile of clothing to donate, but she couldn't make her hands move. The sequins that had excited her so much when she'd come across the dress in a fancy Las Vegas boutique shortly before she made the single worst mistake of her life felt like thorns now. She couldn't donate something like that. Could she? Every moment of her loveless, abusive, soul-destroying marriage started with that dress. She couldn't imagine someone picking it up at a thrift store hoping to wear it to create joyful memories being bogged down by its legacy.

What happened to you had nothing to do with the dress.

Tasha understood the truth in her thoughts, but it didn't stop the unease that flourished in her stomach. She rose from

her knees and bypassed the donation pile along with the boxes set out for clothing she'd store in Cole's garage, heading to the kitchen to retrieve a large garbage bag. It didn't matter if her thought pattern mightn't resonate with most people. She wasn't *most* people. Tasha now belonged to an exclusive club she wished never had space for membership to begin with. She was on the cusp of canceling that fucking subscription, and some things didn't deserve to come along to her next chapter.

Tasha tossed the dress into the garbage bag, almost crumbling under the weight of emotion deep inside her chest. Pain stole her breath. She sank into one of the chairs around the small breakfast nook in the kitchen she'd excitedly decorated when she'd thought their kitchen would be filled with laughter, shared memories, and later, a child spilling cereal over breakfast.

She'd been foolish. So fucking foolish. There had been so many signs that everyone in her life had been able to see. Except her.

Don't lie to yourself.

The thought came so suddenly, Tasha was unprepared for the onslaught of fresh pain. Her eyes leaked with agony she couldn't contain because the truth always stung with more venom than the bitterest lies. There were enough red flags to make Tasha pause, very briefly, every once in a while. The pauses were always fleeting because she was blinded by her love for him. Her fears were neutralized by associating those over-the-top displays of jealousy for his need for her. And if he needed her, then he must love her an awful lot, right? *So fucking foolish.* Love wasn't cruel. It wasn't possessive. It wasn't selfish. Love didn't hurt. It didn't break down. It didn't suffocate. Tasha would preach and scream about the nuances of staying with an abusive partner to anyone who dared pass their place by asking her why she didn't *just leave*, but the question haunted Tasha as she sat at the breakfast nook with her face buried in her palms. *Why hadn't she?* Why had she stayed after the first time he really mistreated her? Navaya didn't stick around after Callahan showed his ass. Neither had her mother, and she had a baby on the way when she put a

country's worth of distance between herself and the man she knew wouldn't be good for her and her unborn child. Her stomach clenched when she thought of her mother.

She gave me her name but none of her backbone, Tasha thought bitterly. She couldn't imagine how ashamed her mother would be if she'd lived to see the mess her daughter made of her life.

Tasha tried to hold back the flood of negative emotions, but it was useless. She couldn't stop the destructive thoughts from worming into her mind, so she stopped fighting. She wasn't sure how long she sat paralyzed in that chair crying. She sobbed until the tears wouldn't come anymore, and all that was left was the hacking rise and fall of her chest as she struggled to breathe through the sadness suffocating her. Tasha cried for all she endured. She cried for all she lost. She cried because she had no clear idea of what was to come. But Tasha knew she would fight Jeremy straight to the gates of hell before she endured more than she already had. The thought struck a chord deep in her soul, and Tasha felt her spirit settle. She'd stayed for many reasons — some of them she could barely make sense of in her own mind or heart — but Tasha was leaving for one very clear reason: saving herself.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

Give her some space.

Every fiber of Cole's being protested the thought that had pounded through his mind for almost the entire day and a half since Tasha let him know the asshole had left D.C. They'd chattered excitedly back and forth for most of the first day as Tasha made a list of what she needed to get her packing started. He'd volunteered to help her get the packing boxes, duct tape, garbage bags, and the other things on her list, but Tasha declined. He accepted it because she sounded so damned excited about doing it all by herself. But slowly, the excited chatter was replaced with silence so loud Cole's nerves prickled. He'd wanted to call right away, but he held off on the impulse. He didn't want Tasha to feel like he was crowding her. They had been making steady progress, and Cole knew part of the reason was because Tasha was starting to trust him to respect her space. Not that he'd respected her space while he was kissing her the last time they'd been together. Cole's heart hammered against his chest the way it continuously did whenever he remembered the moment he and Tasha had shared. He'd spent the entirety of that day trying to resist kissing Tasha, but his resolve broke when he saw the pain etched on her face as she told him she wasn't something to be treasured because she could still feel that asshole's lips on her. He'd started trying to find the words to convince her that she was a treasure, would *always be a treasure*, but his mind was stuck on the idea that Jeremy was the last person to kiss Tasha, even though he was the least deserving. A tornado would have had to literally rip him away from Tasha once he decided that,

at least for a little bit, she deserved to have memories of the lips of someone who thought she was the greatest treasure instead of that man. The short taste of her sweet lips ignited a yearning in Cole he'd been reluctant to admit existed and now worried the shit out of him. Had he gone too far? Did he fracture the small bits of progress she'd felt them making? He'd spent the rest of the day observing her, looking for any sign that he'd upset her but found none. Then suddenly, he was dropping her off to the Metro station nearest to the apartment she shared with Jeremy, and his worry was for an entirely different reason altogether.

He'd suspected the four days that remained before Jeremy left for California would be hard on his nerves, but he'd underestimated *how* much. The incessant worry faded almost instantly when she'd confirmed he was really gone, but it had risen its head again. Why had Tasha suddenly gone so quiet? His determination to give her space withered to nothing by the time he finished his last personal training session just after six that evening.

Cole pulled out a bottle of water and grabbed a seat on the couch in his office as he tried to decide if he was going to send her a message, call her, or straight up pop up to her apartment. He disregarded the last option almost immediately. He had no idea if her sudden silence had anything to do with Jeremy. The thought settled like concrete in the pit of his stomach, and Cole quickly pulled up Tasha's number and made the call. She didn't answer for four rings, and Cole's panic continued rising until she picked up. The soft listlessness in her voice set his nerves on edge.

"What's going on, Tasha?" he asked. "Did something happen?"

There was a long pause before she said, "Just reality."

He waited for her to offer more, but she didn't.

"Tash," he implored. "Talk to me."

She sighed. "Packing was going well. I ran out and got all the supplies I needed, and I was really getting into it until I came across the dress I got married in. I just hate myself so

much when I think about how much I allowed. The signs were all there, but when it came down to it... I just ignored them. I ignored them because I was so desperate for love...to be chosen.”

“Tasha...” Cole tried to interrupt her so he could soothe away the bitter pain lacing her voice, but she wouldn’t allow him.

“I sat there and couldn’t get over that *this* was my life. I had to wait for my husband to fly across the country so I could sneak out of the apartment we share because I am too fucking scared about what he’d do if I tried to end things in person. What the hell does that make me?”

“It makes you a survivor,” Cole said earnestly. “It also makes you someone who has had a pretty shitty day and could probably do with some good food, a few drinks, and a shoulder to cry on.”

He wanted to be much more than a shoulder for her to cry on, but Cole knew he needed to set those selfish desires aside. Tasha needed a friend, and that was what he was going to be for her. There was a long enough pause for Cole to begin to wonder if possibly he’d made the wrong move, but eventually, Tasha sniffled and said, “That sounds good.”

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

“Hot date?” Sophie asked with a broad grin when Cole sauntered out into the gym’s lobby, dark jeans and a forest green sweater replacing the gym kit he showed up in earlier that day. It was common knowledge around the gym that Cole kept a few outfits in his office in case something unexpected came up in D.C. and he didn’t want to head back home, but his coworkers teased him every time he left the gym dressed up.

The way Sophie’s mouth quirked up showed she didn’t actually believe he had a hot date. Cole couldn’t blame her. He very rarely had dates, hot or otherwise. He chuckled as he reminded himself he didn’t have a hot date now. It didn’t matter if he was nervous like he did or that his entire body vibrated with the anticipation of being close enough to Tasha to see her dimples when she smiled.

“We can’t all be popular like you,” he said to Sophie. “I’m just meeting a friend.”

Sophie tucked a few strands of her braids behind her ear before she grinned. “How is Tasha doing? I haven’t seen her around here in a few days.”

Cole had been busy signing a few documents for deliveries that might arrive before he got to the gym the next morning when Sophie spoke. His fingers stilled. “Excuse me?”

The receptionist shrugged, eyes still sparkling, as she said innocently, “You just said you were meeting Tasha.”

Cole made a face and shook his head. “You know damn well I didn’t say that.”

Sophie didn’t even pretend to feel chagrined. She just laughed and made a face. “You not exactly telling me I’m wrong, though. Just tell her hi when you see her and that I miss seeing her face around here.”

Cole thought about arguing with Sophie about how presumptuous it was to automatically assume he was heading out to see Tasha, but it didn’t make any sense. She was presumptuous as hell, but also right.

“Sure thing, Soph,” he said instead. “Remember to call me if you need any help.”

“Will do,” Sophie said. Her grin widened. “Enjoy your *date*.”

* * *

SOPHIE’S GOOD-NATURED TEASING LEFT COLE SITTING IN HIS car outside Tasha’s apartment complex, trying to figure out what about his interactions with Tasha made her feel comfortable enough to be so bold about suggesting there was something going on between them. Sophie had been working with the gym part-time since her first semester at Georgetown University. She’d just graduated with her Masters and was working with the gym full-time while she got her PhD applications sorted out. If he’d learned anything about Sophie during the seven years he knew her, it was that she didn’t have a malicious bone in her body, and she was very good at minding her own business. That meant whatever it was she’d picked up off his behavior had been really loud. Cole put so much effort into ensuring the confusing feelings he had for Tasha were kept under wraps, especially as they seemed to be escalating, so it was alarming to have to consider he was being more obvious than he thought.

“Shit,” he mumbled, wondering whether things had started becoming obvious for Tasha as well.

More obvious than you kissing her?

The thought pulled him up short, but he didn't have time to dwell on it because Tasha had just stepped out of her building and was walking toward his car. She was wearing light jeans, black ankle boots, and a lavender sweater which made him want to pull her into his arms to see if it felt as soft as it looked.

He kept his curiosity at bay, brushing his lips gently against her cheek after she'd settled into her seat. Cole shifted the car into gear but paused for a few seconds so he could get a good look at Tasha. She still seemed tired and a little bit sad. Cole only had one goal for the rest of the night: putting that happy, carefree smile he loved so much back on Tasha's face.

"How do you feel about sushi?" he asked, glancing at Tasha as he pulled out onto the road.

"I'm not obsessed, but it's something I enjoy every once in a while."

"Damn," he said. "I should've asked this question before I made the reservations."

Tasha chuckled. "It's fine. I can't remember the last time I had sushi, so you're good."

"We could go somewhere else," he suggested. The whole purpose of them going out was to get Tasha to relax. He didn't want her to have to pretend to enjoy the food. "We can try the Mussel Bar."

Tasha smiled. "It'll be fine, I promise. Where did you have in mind?"

"Sushi Hachi. It's this place on Barracks Row. The owner has another restaurant in Arlington called Sushi Rock, which is meant to be more casual with a rock & roll theme. I've been there once and had a really good time but never actually got around to checking out this one. You can apparently cook your own wagyu beef on a hot plate, and I'm kinda excited about trying that."

Tasha laughed. "These restaurants that manage to con people into paying to cook their own food always amuse me. It's like Joanne the Scammer but make it an LLC."

Cole laughed along with her. “I’ve never thought about it like that. It still sounds great, though, so I’m humbly suggesting we try it.”

“We can,” Tasha agreed. “But I’ll be judging you.”

“I can live with that. As long as you don’t try to steal any of the beef I worked so hard to cook off my plate.”

“Sorry, Cole. I’m not making you any promises I’m unlikely to keep,” Tasha replied with another light laugh, which slowly started loosening the tightness in his chest. The conversation to the restaurant was filled with light teasing, with Cole trying his best to steer clear of topics like her packing and eventual move. She was howling with laughter when he told her about one client, who decided twenty minutes into their last session that a Brazilian butt-lift was a better option for getting the ass she wanted than the training program Cole put together.

“What kind of torture did you subject that woman to for her to believe surgery is a better option than dealing with you?”

“Absolutely nothing. The workouts were tailored to her aims and her fitness level,” Cole said. “Laci thinks she never really had exercise on her mind when she signed up.”

It took a few seconds for it to dawn on Tasha, and then she was laughing even harder than she was before. “You think she was trying to get with you and pulled off more than she could squat?”

She ended her laughing fit with a little giggle and sigh that Cole found endearing as fuck.

“You find that really funny, huh?” he said, stealing a glance at her to see her wiping tears of laughter from her face.

“More than you could ever know,” she responded.

“Good,” Cole laughed, turning his attention back to the road. “Those are the things I love to hear.”

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

Tasha couldn't remember the last time she laughed so much. It was a welcome surprise to feel as light and happy as she did, considering how fucking awful she'd felt a few hours before. Cole kept cracking her up with stories that ranged from difficult clients in the gym to confiding in her that he mistook the wasabi for avocado the first time he had sushi and almost threw up in his date's lap.

"Oh no," she giggled, reaching for her wine and taking a sip to prevent herself from suffering a similar fate as Cole and his unfortunate date. "Was there a second date, then?"

Thick lips curved upward into a shy smile, which caused Tasha's heart to thump hard against her chest.

"We had a few more," he admitted. "Apparently, she found me charming."

I bet, Tasha thought. She took a good look at Cole for the first time since they'd been led to their table. His green sweater emphasized the broad shoulders and thick biceps that probably should have reminded her he could seriously damage anybody he wanted to, but that was not what she thought about when she looked at Cole. She saw arms that felt steady and safe around her whenever he pulled her into one of those warm, secure hugs she found herself yearning for. His eyes were puddles of chocolate Tasha was sure she could drown in, and she couldn't stop thinking of how soft his lips felt against her own. Shame slammed into Tasha whenever she entertained those kinds of thoughts about Cole. But the shame didn't stop

the thoughts from implanting like seeds in her mind and blossoming into gardens of attraction, nourished by the steady stream of attention she couldn't help but give them.

Cole was probably still recounting funny tidbits from that date, but Tasha wasn't willing to bet anything important on that. She was too busy taking him in, watching his lips move as he spoke and wondering what he'd do if she pushed back her chair, settled into the chair next to him, and leaned in for a kiss. Would he wrap his arm around her and kiss her back? Would the kiss be as tender as the last, or would this kiss sting with the sparks of attraction she swore she sometimes noticed in his eyes when she looked at him? Maybe she was imagining all of that because she wanted it to be so. Tasha was still turning over possible outcomes of trying to kiss Cole in her mind when the wagyu beef he'd been so interested in cooking showed up. His excitement was infectious, and her worries quickly evaporated as she watched him take strips of beef from the platter they were brought on and place them on the sizzling hot plate.

"Come sit next to me," he said suddenly. "It'll make your beef theft easier to execute."

Tasha laughed. "As long as you don't get any smart ideas about trying to make me help you cook it."

She pushed her chair back and took the few steps over to Cole's side of the table, and sat next to him. Tasha realized her mistake almost as soon as her butt hit the cushions. She was sitting closer to him than she'd been for the entire night. She could feel the heat radiating off him and could smell the scent of the soap that clung to his skin. Tasha tried to ignore the pangs of attraction as she watched him continue placing beef onto the hot stone.

He was getting way too much pleasure out of waiting for the pieces of beef to cook to what he believed were their preferences, medium rare for him and very well done for Tasha. His little comments as he placed the pieces he'd finished cooking on her plate occasionally pulled her out of taking everything about Cole in. She couldn't stop watching him. His fingers, long and elegant, handled the chopsticks he

used with the kind of precision that left her curious about how often he ate food requiring him to use chopsticks since she was so bad at using them, she often opted for a fork instead. His eyebrows were furrowed in a way she could only describe as *fucking cute* while he tried to make sure he cooked the beef just right. The ghost of a smile that crossed his face each time he was satisfied with what he cooked? Tasha couldn't even explain the things that did to her concentration, her body...her heart. She wanted this man. She wanted this man in ways that made her heart go soft. She wanted him in a way she had no business wanting anybody considering everything going on in her life. Reality was a rush of cold wind that left her feeling sad as her thoughts from earlier started needling their way back into her mind. Her life had changed irrevocably, and it was all her fault.

“You okay?”

Tasha took a deep breath, tried to fight off the melancholy, and fixed Cole with the brightest smile she could muster.

“Yeah,” she lied. “Just admiring your amazing chopstick use.”

His smile was gentle, but Cole didn't have to open his mouth for Tasha to know he didn't buy her performance. She waited for him to push. He didn't. Instead, he explained to her how abysmal his chopstick talent had been when he first started realizing how much he liked Asian food. She listened to him, hoping she looked engaged and that she was smiling at the right moments, all while trying to fight the tears she knew were on the verge of pouring from her eyes.

“Tee,” Cole whispered after a few seconds of silence. She expected him to demand she told him what was wrong, but he didn't do that either. Of course, he didn't. He reached out for her hand and entangled his fingers with hers, and gently squeezed for a few seconds before he hugged her into him. “You don't have to pretend to be okay. You don't have to pretend to feel anything you don't. I know it's hard to see right now, but things will be okay. You can hold me to that promise.”

Tasha allowed herself the comfort of his embrace, but her mind couldn't get past what he said.

You don't have to pretend you feel anything you don't.

She would have laughed at the irony of that if her heart wasn't so damn heavy. She no longer had to pretend she felt things for Jeremy that her heart was no longer capable of feeling, but if these emotions for Cole went unchecked, she'd soon spend a lot of time trying to make sure she didn't give away the feelings her heart seemed destined to have.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

Something changed.

Cole couldn't quite put his fingers on what caused the light behind Tasha's eyes to dim just a little but enough for him to notice. Enough for the tender protectiveness that always surged through him when he was around her to sing in his blood.

"What's wrong, Tee?" he asked, trying to keep his voice light. He only wanted to take as much as Tasha was willing to give, but sometimes the line between *knowing* she didn't have to tell him shit and *understanding* it was a fucking tightrope. She turned her gaze away from him, looking down at the table as if it would help her decide whether she wanted to be honest with him. Cole's insides tightened, a myriad of worries at the forefront of his mind, as he took a sip of his drink and waited. A few seconds passed before he reached out and covered her hand with his, gave her what he hoped was a comforting squeeze, and said, "Don't feel pressured to tell me anything, 'kay? There should never be a point between us where you believe you have to tell me anything because I'm being a soft place for you to land. Your feelings are your own. Your thoughts are your own. Your worries are your own. It doesn't matter how much I care about you. My care for you will never be sufficient currency for the invasion of your privacy."

She looked at him then, eyes quickly filling with tears his hands itched to wipe away.

“You have no idea how confused you make me,” she said. Her soft, defeated voice set Cole’s nerves on edge.

“Confused?” he queried, suppressing the urge to apologize before he knew what the hell he’d done.

Tasha brought her drink to her lips, and it was only then Cole realized her hand was shaking. He wished he could reach out and soothe the anxiety coming off her in waves so strong he could taste its bitterness on his tongue. His own anxiety ratcheted up when she removed her hand from his and rested it on the table.

“Did I do something to make you uncomfortable, Tee? Talk to me.”

The silence stretched out like a galaxy between them before she answered with words that made Cole’s heart catch in his throat.

“Yes,” she said softly, and then after a few seconds, “I don’t know how to explain it.”

“Try.”

He waited, body tense, for her to bring up the kiss he knew had to be at the root of her discomfort.

“I just can’t wrap my mind around any of this,” she said, finally bringing her eyes to his. The way she held her body and the slight edge to her voice reminded him of the conversation they’d had in the car the day he showed her his house.

“Any of what?”

“You treat me with more care, more respect, more *everything* than my fucking husband did, and I’m just a pity project for you...”

“I need you to get that out of your head,” he said. “I feel many things for you, but pity isn’t one of them. I empathize with your situation, I’m angry as hell on your behalf, and I am in awe of the strength you don’t even seem to be aware you have. But pity? Nah, Tee. I do not pity you.”

Cole thought his words would offer comfort to Tasha, but they seemed to have the opposite effect. She chewed on her

bottom lip and started playing with her bracelets.

“Tell me what’s going on in that beautiful head of yours,” he said, hoping he wasn’t pressing too hard.

“Cole,” Tasha whispered, bringing her eyes back to his. He looked at the wealth of emotions he saw there and finally understood.

“I get it, Tee,” he said once his nerves settled. He wanted to draw her into his arms so he could soothe away her frustrations. He regretted the words as soon as they left his mouth because they only served to agitate Tasha further. Another few seconds passed before she spoke again.

“You get it, Cole? You *get* it? Tell me, how you can possibly get what I myself can’t understand?”

* * *

THIS WAS A DISASTER.

Tasha was watching the train crash happen in slow motion, and she couldn’t seem to do anything to stop it, even though it was the words coming out of her mouth that continued to send the train off the fucking rails.

Shut up, her mind urged, but her thoughts were no match for the frantic emotions flowing like magma inside her, desperate to erupt.

“I’ve got one foot out of my marriage,” she said with a humorless laugh. “God, marriage isn’t even the word to describe what *that was*. I shouldn’t be... I can’t be...”

She couldn’t make the words come. She couldn’t say them straight. Maybe he didn’t *get* what he thought he did. Maybe she still had time to walk back this disaster she’d dragged them into near the end of a perfectly pleasant dinner. But when he reached out and brushed his thumb across her cheek, Tasha knew the ship had sailed.

“Neither should I,” he whispered, his voice gruff with an emotion she’d heard many times before but was only now able

to place. She swallowed, trying desperately to moisten her dry mouth. She didn't know what to say. She couldn't find the words to describe how *nothing* made sense anymore. She choked on telling him he scared her before she got the words out. He scared her in ways Jeremy couldn't. Cole made her want. He made her yearn for things she had no business yearning for...at least not now. He made her hope. He made her feel safe without making her feel inadequate, and Tasha wondered if he knew how his quiet confidence was a balm to the raw parts of her soul.

Tasha wanted to lean into the things she felt as much as she knew she needed to stop them in their tracks. She knew she shouldn't blur the lines between her and Cole, but that didn't stop her from wanting to lean into his touch. She was dizzy from the thoughts spinning in her mind and was floored by the sudden urge to hear Cole verbalize what flowed in the undercurrent between them.

“What shouldn't you?” she asked, not caring that her voice cracked a little and her heart began racing so damn much she dug her fingernails into her thighs to steady herself. His thumb continued stroking her cheek, a small smile crossing his face, as he trailed his finger down her cheek to her jaw until it came to rest on the side of her neck. Her body reacted instantly, hot heat unfurling in the pit of her stomach. Her mind registered surprise that she didn't flinch at his touch.

“Are you asking for an answer you already know, Tee?”

Tasha wanted to be coy. She wanted to find some teasing response to lighten the tension between them, but she didn't have the mental capacity for that. Not when Cole looked at her with a gaze so intense, she had to look away from it. She opted for honesty, instead — the truth, raw and unvarnished, even if it left her feeling vulnerable as fuck.

“I need to hear you say it.”

He moved closer to her, cradled her cheek in his hand, and pressed his forehead against hers. She could feel his warm breath against her lips and fought against the urge to lean into him.

“I shouldn’t have fallen for you, Tee,” Cole whispered.
“But by the time I realized what was happening, I was halfway here. The timing is the worst, *the fucking worst*, but that’s fine. Because Tee? We have time. You don’t need me to be your lover now, and that’s okay. I’ll be your safe space because that’s what you need in *this* moment. But this moment won’t last forever, and when we make it to the next one...it’ll be worth the fucking wait.”

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

“**Y**ou got everything?”

Tasha slowly surveyed the apartment, allowing the steady crush of feelings to rush over her. She knew she would feel a lot of emotions when this day finally came, but she hadn't expected *so many*. She understood the anxiety that gnawed so hard at her stomach that she felt a bit queasy. She expected the fear. Tasha honestly couldn't remember a time over the last few years when there wasn't the steady pulse of fear running through her veins. Anticipation, tart but sweet, licked at the edges of the anxiety struggling to maintain its grip on her. Cole had spent the last thirty minutes helping her load the boxes and suitcases she'd finished packing over the last couple of days. Tasha couldn't believe she was doing this. She was *really* doing this.

She looked around one more time. “I think so. I'm not too pressed about finding out I missed some stuff. I've got a few weeks to come back and grab whatever I missed.”

“Fair enough,” Cole said. “So...you ready?”

The question was loaded. Tasha leaned against the kitchen table and gave herself some time to consider it. The emotions warring inside her were pulling her in so many directions, Tasha wasn't sure she could accurately answer the question. She was ready as hell to get out from under Jeremy's thumb. But was she ready for the fallout she knew would follow? Tasha didn't expect Jeremy — as vindictive as he was and as possessive as he was — to take her leaving him easily. Hell,

wasn't that the entire reason behind her trying to leave like a thief in the fucking night? Icy dread formed in the pit of her stomach just thinking about how angry Jeremy would be when he came home from California and found out she had left. Tasha brushed the fear away. It didn't matter how angry Jeremy was; she'd be so long gone then that he wouldn't be able to do anything about it. Cole watched her from a few feet away, holding the last bag in his hand as he waited for her answer. Relief was warmth settling in her stomach, chasing the last pieces of icy dread away. Cole unwittingly gave Tasha the one thing her fear of Jeremy had denied her all along — *support*. Navaya would finish her book in a few weeks, and Tasha would finally be able to come clean about what had been going on. Her net of support would only get wider and stronger as she found her voice to let people in on what *used to be* her private hell. *That*, Tasha realized, was Jeremy's true nightmare.

"I'm nervous," she said softly. "But yeah, I'm ready."

Cole crossed the small distance between them and pulled her into a hug she had to fight sinking into.

"I got you," he said in a voice that left no room for doubt. "We're just going to put one foot in front of the next until we get you where you want to be."

Her eyes were watery when she smiled up at him. "How do you always know the right thing to say?"

Cole shrugged, reaching out to thumb away a few tears that spilled from her eyes. "I'm just telling you the truth, Tee. It might not feel like it right now, but *you got this*, and for what you don't have, I got you. Now come on, let's get you home."

Tasha stayed there, frozen in her position even as Cole turned to leave.

"*You ready?*" he'd asked again. Tasha had been so caught up with the fallout of leaving her abusive marriage that she hadn't stopped to consider that she'd be living with Cole. He'd probably be the first person she saw every morning and the last person she saw before she went to sleep. She was already

barely able to control the slowly simmering emotions growing for Cole in the small chamber of her heart Jeremy hadn't managed to infect. How would she be able to withstand him when they were around each other all the time? Especially now that she knew her feelings were not a one-way street. Her heart slammed against her chest.

You ready?

Tasha wasn't sure she was ready. *At all.*

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

Let's get you home.

Cole wanted to slap himself as soon as those words spilled from his mouth. *Really, nigga?* Cole continued putting his foot in his mouth no matter how many times he reminded himself to chill. He'd expected things to be awkward between him and Tasha after their sushi dinner a few days before, but thankfully, he didn't notice much of a change. That didn't mean he could keep pushing his luck, though. Cole still couldn't figure out what the hell had come over him when he decided to be *that* honest with Tasha when she'd tried to figure out if he was being hit with confusing feelings too. He could have answered the question without laying it *all out* like that. Yet, a part of him was relieved. Telling Tasha that he was willing to — *planned to* — wait until it was a good time to explore what could happen between them was the first time he'd truly admitted his desire to himself. It was hard trying to push those feelings back into a box now that they were out in the open. It wasn't just the cringy '*Let's get you home.*' It was in the way he'd become more open about lingering when he reached out to touch her and how he no longer looked away if she caught him admiring just how fucking beautiful, strong, and brave she was. It was in how much it took to resist brushing his lips over hers and to unwrap his arms from around her body whenever he pulled her in for a hug. It was in the way he damn well nearly told Xander everything while they grabbed dinner at Gary's Burgers the night before.

My attention is somewhere else. Firmly.

He couldn't believe he'd told Xander that. Even though Cole knew it was a lot more than just his *attention* fixated on Tasha, sharing even what he had was risky. Xander was inquisitive as hell, and while his friend was embroiled in his own confusing feelings for Navaya, the last thing he needed was for Xander to try to get to the bottom of things. He couldn't wait for Tasha to finally have the long-overdue heart-to-heart she needed to have with Navaya so Cole could seek advice from his closest friend on how best to proceed with the confusing but strong ass feelings keeping their feet on his neck. A small, selfish part of Cole was way too excited at the prospect of being around Tasha all the time and wasn't looking forward to Tasha's conversation with Navaya because it spelled the end of her time living with him. He allowed himself to sit with the ridiculous feelings earlier that morning while he nursed a cup of coffee, relieved that they had faded away by the time he made his way upstairs to put fresh sheets on Tasha's bed and leave out the surprise he hoped would put a smile on that gorgeous face of hers.

The drive to his house was just as quiet as when he'd driven Tasha out so she could see it, but it was different this time. Tension didn't fill up the space between them so that they couldn't breathe through the thick of it. There was some tension, yes, and Cole could tell from the way Tasha still played with her bracelets that she was a little bit nervous. But there were other things hovering in the air between them: curiosity about what was to come, anxiety about what Tasha had left behind, and in the case of Cole...*fucking relief*. It didn't matter that living with Tasha might be an ultimate test of resilience for him. It didn't matter that he'd spend the next couple of weeks trying his hardest not to say too much, not to touch too much, not to hope too much. He would gladly take the pieces of diamond-encrusted hell his life was about to become, over the actual hell he had experienced over the last few weeks filled with worry about Tasha's safety.

"You good?" he asked once he started maneuvering the car into his garage. "Are you rethinking this?"

Tasha shook her head emphatically. "Leaving? *Never.*"

“You have no idea how much I love hearing that,” he said. “But, no. Not leaving. Are you rethinking coming to stay here? The option to put you up in a rental is still on the table if you’re going to feel uncomfortable. Especially after...”

Tasha turned her body in the seat so she could face him. “Especially after what?”

Cole stalled, wondering if it made any sense to bring up the conversation they’d had at Sushi Hachi since Tasha never made any further reference to the declaration he made. Tasha looked at him expectantly in the few seconds that passed before he finally continued, “What I said at the sushi restaurant.”

“What part?” Tasha asked, a small smile tugging at her lips. “The part where you admitted to feeling things for me but respecting and caring about me enough to wait until all of this chaos is over before you play your hand? Because surely it can’t be *that* part.”

“Tee...”

Tasha shook her head and reached out to squeeze his shoulder. “It’s weird how you manage to make me feel protected without ever making me feel like I need you. It’s wild to me. You haven’t once made me feel less than or incompetent or *any* of the things I was afraid anyone I let in would make me feel. I don’t feel uncomfortable, Cole. In many ways, the room I’m going to be staying in at your house will be much more of a home than the apartment I shared with Jeremy. For the first time in a long time, I feel like I can try to exist in a space that isn’t survival mode. I feel like I can be excited about what a future without Jeremy can look like.”

Tasha glanced away, but when she brought her attention back to Cole, her brown eyes shone with an emotion that had tenderness blossoming in his heart. “When I allow myself to dare to hope... I allow myself to be excited about you.”

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

Tasha couldn't stop crying.

It didn't matter how many times she tried willing the tears to stop or that her mind knew she'd choke on her sobs if she didn't ease up soon. It definitely didn't matter that Cole was sitting on her bed, trying very hard not to laugh at her.

"Don't you dare smile!" she demanded through sobbing laughter.

He pressed his lips together in a straight line, but barely any time passed before he started laughing.

"Come here," he said with a chuckle. "I can't help it if I enjoy knowing those tears are happy tears for once."

Her heart flipped like an acrobat in her chest as she stepped between his legs and allowed him to tug her gently down to sit on his knee. The embrace was intimate as hell, but Tasha enjoyed how good it felt to be cuddled so close to him that she could feel the steady beating of that big ass heart of his.

"I'm happy you like it," Cole murmured against her temple.

Tasha leaned back so she could get a good look at him. "You knew damn well I would. How could I *not*?"

He shrugged. He looked boyish as hell in the moment as Tasha realized that he was nervous. Oh, her heart.

“I was worried you might think it was too much,” Cole said. “I didn’t want to overwhelm you.”

“I’m overwhelmed as hell,” she teased. “But I guess you got that from the way I immediately burst into tears.”

Tasha chewed on her bottom lip because it was all she could do to fight the urge to lean into Cole and kiss him... *thoroughly*. She’d stumbled into her room to find Cole had made up the bed with a pretty yellow duvet and was still smiling about that when she found a box wrapped in gift wrap paper adorned with sunflowers in the middle of the bed. She glanced back as Cole entered the room just after her. “What’s this?”

“Only one way to find out,” he’d replied, moving to grab a seat on the bed while he eyed her with excitement sparkling in his gaze. Tasha hadn’t known what to expect, but she definitely didn’t expect to find a Nintendo Switch along with a few games. She’d expected the *Animal Crossing* but chuckled when she saw *Stardew Valley*, *Gris*, and *The Last Campfire*. That he’d listened to a throwaway comment she’d made about wishing she could play *Animal Crossing* instead of watching other people play was enough to do her in, but realizing he’d done his research to get a few more games, so she didn’t get bored, delivered the knockout.

“What do you even know about *Gris*?” Tasha asked.

“It appeared on a lot of lists of calming games,” Cole smiled. “The guy at the store recommended the other two. Did I do okay?”

“More than that,” she said. “How are you literally the sweetest man on the planet?”

The boyish smile returned. “I don’t know about all that. I bought these things for purely selfish reasons.”

Tasha laughed out loud. “Oh, really? Pray tell.”

“I didn’t want you hogging the TV in the living room watching Twitch streams.” He fixed her with a cheeky smile that made her body heat.

“Likely story,” she said, smile widening.

“It is a *true* story,” he protested, but the fact he couldn’t stop laughing didn’t do anything to sell his statement. After a few seconds, he continued, “That, and I wanted to see you like this. I wanted to hear your happy laughter. I wanted to see excitement light up your face. I wanted to make you smile.”

Tasha didn’t think about it. She wrapped her arms around his neck and turned so she was fully facing him. “You see? Sweetest man on earth.”

Cole chuckled, but it wasn’t as lighthearted as his last. “Once again, I don’t know about that, Tee. The thoughts going through my head right now aren’t exactly sweet.”

Tasha’s heart thudded so hard in her chest she couldn’t catch her breath, but she was determined to meet the challenge in his eyes.

“Neither are mine,” she breathed.

“Tee,” he said. “We shouldn’t...”

Whatever else Cole wanted to say was muffled when Tasha gave in and brought her lips to his. Cole hesitated for a second, and then...he was *devouring* her. *God*. It was only when his hand came to the back of her head so he could pull her closer to his mouth while his other hand cupped her ass as he moved his lips aggressively over hers that Tasha realized the innocent exchange they’d shared in his backyard hadn’t been a kiss at all. He ran his tongue along the inseam of her lips, and Tasha sighed, giving him full access to her mouth. She pressed her body hard against his, trying her best to get as close to him as she could, but she couldn’t seem to get close enough. Not when she could feel his fingers trail over the sliver of skin exposed along her back where her shirt rode up. Not when he pulled her bottom lip between his and sucked on it until she was almost moaning into his mouth. Not when she shifted her body so that she straddled him, and she could feel his arousal pressed up against her.

“Tee,” Cole whispered when he finally broke their kiss. His eyes were wild with the same arousal slowly turning Tasha’s blood to molten lead.

“I know,” she said, her mouth seeking his again. “I know this is absolutely the wrong time, but I don’t care.”

He welcomed her kiss, holding onto her waist when she rocked her hips against his arousal. Her entire body stilled when the first bolts of pleasure shot through her. It’d been so fucking long since she wanted a man...since she craved his touch...since her pussy throbbed with the need to feel him move inside her. She kissed Cole harder as she ground against him once more. This would *have* to do. Tasha explored his mouth with her tongue, kissing him like it could douse the desire burning hot in her veins. She wasn’t sure when she lost control, when the rocking against him became a frenzied, erratic dance as she tried to soothe the raw aching inside her. Cole kissed her lips, her jawline, and nibbled on her ear as Tasha felt a quickening tightness in her stomach that stole her breath. She came with a cry against his lips as he stroked her back and whispered, “There you go, baby. Just let go.”

Tasha pulled away from Cole as if he burned, unable to stop the embarrassment heating her cheeks. “I don’t know what came over me...”

He cocked his head to the side and fixed her with an easy-going smile. “You don’t?”

She tried to move out of his embrace, but he held her there, his hardness still pressed up against her sensitive core sending little zaps of pleasure down her spine. Cole kissed her forehead. “You’re doing that thing where you start to feel embarrassed about things you shouldn’t.”

“I just dry-humped you to an orgasm.”

The best orgasm I’ve had in a while, too.

Tasha covered her face with her hand before she started laughing at the absurdity of it all.

“And I enjoyed every second of it,” Cole teased. “I need to dip out, though. I’ve got to go fill my tub with ice.”

Tasha opened her mouth, but Cole kissed her words away.

“Don’t dare apologize,” he said. “Get settled in. I figured we could go out for pasta or something.”

“I’d like that,” Tasha whispered, finally easing herself off him and sitting on the bed. She watched Cole saunter to the door and felt a new wave of lust surge inside her, but it was overshadowed by the tenderness that made her want to spend the night cuddled into him as he told her every single one of his hopes and dreams.

“See you in a few, roomie,” he grinned. He took another few steps toward the door before he turned back to her and said, “I’m happy to have you here, Tee.”

And damn if her heart didn’t try its best to beat its way out of her chest and follow Cole out of the room.

CHAPTER FIFTY

Cole stirred a few cubes of sugar into his coffee and waited for his mother to ask the question he'd seen in her eyes from the moment he'd given her an update on things with Tasha. A week and a half had passed since Tasha moved in, but Cole had only just found the time to meet up with Renee.

"Are you sure you haven't gotten *too* involved?" she asked, bringing her own mug to her lips.

"She needed a safe place to stay once she decided she needed to leave her husband. Things started escalating really bad, and she had to leave. She hasn't even told me what the final straw was."

Renee's gaze was unflinching when she met Cole's. "We both know you could have assisted in providing a safe place for her that was not your home."

"I know," Cole responded. "I didn't want her alone in some rental unless she *wanted* it. I have the space and..."

"You're interested in her," Renee said simply. She tried bringing her mug back to her lips again, but this time, it was shaking. Cole sighed. The last thing he wanted to do was give his mother a reason to worry about him, but he also refused to lie to her.

"Yes," he said after a few seconds passed. "I am."

"Cole," his mother said. "This is a very complicated situation. Leaving is one thing, but the road after? It's long and

hard. You aren't doing yourselves any favors by introducing intimacy into a situation like this."

"We're not sleeping together."

Renee laughed. "Don't even try that with me, Cole. We both know sex can be far less dangerous than what I see written all over your face when you speak about Tasha."

Her comment caught him by surprise and knocked the defensive explanation he'd been primed to give from his lips. "What do you mean by that?"

His mother sighed. "You look like you already think she's yours. You have the look I always wished to see on your face whenever I introduced you to a woman I hoped you'd take interest in. You don't look like you're *just* interested in her. You look like you're already halfway to falling in love with her, and there isn't one word of caution I could throw your way that will make a damn difference."

Cole knew everything his mother said was rooted in concern. Hell, everything she said made reasonable and practical sense. His heart wasn't interested in reason or practicality, though. Even less so now he knew just how soft Tasha's body felt pressed up against his, had tasted the fire in her kisses, saw how adorably grumpy she was before her first cup of coffee each morning, and was becoming accustomed to sitting with her on the couch each night and going over the highlights of his day. No. His heart wasn't interested in reason or practicality...*at all*. It was interested in what a life with Tasha could be like — *all of it* — even the parts that required patience and might be tricky to navigate. Cole chided himself for letting his mind get ahead of itself, as he usually did whenever he tried to imagine being with Tasha in a way where he wasn't required to hold back on what he felt for her. It didn't matter that Tasha was upfront about having some feelings for him or that there were times she couldn't mask her desire for him quickly enough, and he was left fighting the urge to give her what he knew they both craved. Those were all positive signs, but Cole still had no idea how things might end up. Maybe they might have a go at things only to find out they just couldn't overcome the shitty ass timing. Or, perhaps,

they would never try at all. He wouldn't blame her if she wanted to distance herself from anything that might remind her of this horrible period in her life. Cole's chest tightened at the thought of possibly being estranged from Tasha someday. He pushed the thought away. He'd cross that bridge when they got there...*if they got there*. He just wanted to enjoy the bubble they'd created together, a rainbow amid the turbulence around them. He wanted to think of Tasha curled up on the couch, chewing her bottom lip in concentration while she played with her Nintendo Switch. He wanted to find happiness in realizing that her smiles came more easily, her laughter was louder, and her amusement always met her eyes more easily over the last few days. She moved differently, too. Cole hadn't realized until now just how wound-up Tasha always seemed to be. Always anxious, always waiting, always on edge. Freedom was so close that she could feel it, and Cole couldn't get over how much she bloomed with the knowledge. Yesterday she asked him to accompany her to see Jacintha Reid, the lawyer she'd selected, and Cole sat next to her, watching the set of her jaw as she maintained she was okay with walking away from the marriage empty-handed. She didn't care what she was entitled to in law. She didn't care that evidence of his abuse would provide compelling testimony during a divorce hearing. She just wanted to be free of him.

Everything else I can rebuild. I just need the freedom to do so.

She'd spoken the words with quiet confidence, and Cole still didn't know how he resisted kissing the stubborn pout of her lips. He was in fucking awe of Tasha, and he hoped he would be around to remind her of how awesome she was whenever she doubted herself. He wanted to be her soft place, but Cole wanted to be so much more. It didn't matter that the timing wasn't perfect. It didn't matter that it might be tough. It didn't matter that he ran the risk of breaking his own heart. He was willing to take the risk. He was *going* to take the risk. And the only person who could convince him otherwise was Tasha herself.

Renee was quiet for a long moment after he related all of that to her. The silence stretched long enough that Cole started

to wonder if he'd unloaded way more on his mother than he'd had any business doing. Relationships weren't something they usually talked about, and when those conversations occurred, it was usually Cole trying to patiently explain he didn't need or want help with being set up.

“That was a mouthful,” Renee said. “An unexpected mouthful.”

Cole chuckled. “For me, too.”

“Well,” his mother continued with a small smile. “There's not much I can say in response to that other than...when do I get to meet her?”

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

Tasha padded downstairs to the kitchen, desperate to drown herself in a vat of coffee. It wouldn't do much to soothe away the irritation deep in her soul, but it might do something for the fatigue, making her move more slowly than she wanted to.

She wasn't surprised to find Cole already in the kitchen. He was standing over a frying pan of what she knew likely contained his trademark breakfast: an ungodly number of eggs, sausages, and spinach. She'd tried to get up before him so she could prepare his breakfast when she first moved in, but he put a quick stop to that. Cole had reminded her that they were both grown ass adults capable of feeding themselves, and there was absolutely no reason for her to ever lose sleep to prepare breakfast for him.

"Your coffee is ready to go," Cole said without turning from the stove. "It's in the thermos warming on the counter."

Tasha fought back the small smile tugging at her lips when she spotted the black thermos sitting next to the mug she usually used. She pulled her attention away from watching Cole, already decked out in his gym gear, transfer his scrambled eggs from the frying pan to a plate before moving to pour the coffee into her favorite mug.

Tasha took a deep sip and sighed at the perfectly made coffee coating her tongue.

Two shots of espresso. One tablespoon of heavy cream. No sugar.

Jeremy couldn't remember the way she liked her coffee if his life depended on it. He still made some overly sweet, too milky, weak ass concoction even when the coffee was supposed to be a peace offering. Tasha's mood soured just thinking about Jeremy. She shouldn't compare them. She *knew* she shouldn't compare them. But it was so hard when Cole constantly showed her Jeremy had been mediocre as fuck, even in the start when he was trying to show her his best side. He never truly loved her. Tasha was forced to admit he never *intended* to. He wanted to possess her, and he was willing to break her to secure the ownership over her mind, body, and soul that he craved. He *almost* did.

“What's wrong?”

Cole stood with his back pressed against the stainless steel fridge, eyeing her with concern. Tasha started to tell him she was fine, but he brushed away her lie by nodding to the coffee mug she held in her hand. “You've barely touched your coffee, and you usually finish your first cup in a single gulp. Something's clearly wrong. Whether you want to speak on it is another matter.”

Realization dawned on Cole in the few seconds it took for Tasha to try to organize her thoughts.

“He called?”

Tasha nodded. It was the one point of contention between them. She wanted to keep up her charade so Jeremy didn't get spooked and do something rash like return home sooner than expected. Tasha wanted her lawyer to have time to prepare, getting all the documents ready to be filed and served without having to contend with Jeremy. At least that's what she told Cole. In reality, she wasn't ready for the other shoe to drop. She was enjoying taking her laptop to coffee shops and restaurants to work on her *DesignMeNow* gigs without having to give an excuse. She enjoyed meeting up with Navaya at a moment's notice, even though she was starting to find it harder and harder to keep the secret from her friend, especially now that she had a front-row seat to Navaya slowly falling in love with Xander and desperately wanted her friend's advice on her increasingly tender and complicated feelings toward Cole.

That she could start falling — *so organically and deeply* — for another man so soon after leaving her marriage wasn't hard to understand. She hadn't loved Jeremy in years. The hate she had for him burned hotter than any passion ever had. The wisdom of letting Cole into her already-bruised and tender heart was a different question altogether. Yet he made it so damn easy. He was a balm to those bruised and tender parts of her. He never wavered in his support, even when he disagreed with what she was doing. He didn't treat her like she was a wounded bird in need of his direction and protection, even when she felt like she would drown under the weight of her lack of confidence in herself.

Cole put his plate on the counter and moved toward her, placing a hand on either side, so he was boxing her in. He was a big man, but she never felt like he crowded her.

“I don't like knowing this nigga still has the power to ruin your morning,” he said, bringing her mind back to the conversation they were having.

“Not for much longer,” she said. A rush of happiness flowed through her when she thought of the truth in that statement.

He placed his palm to her face, brushing his thumb across her cheek. Tasha leaned into his touch, enjoying the small beats of pleasure coursing through her veins. These moments came more naturally than before, even though not as often as Tasha wished. Cole was open about his feelings for her, but he seemed to fight giving in to the desire that was as clear as day to see. Tasha loved the days when he gave in a little bit...when his touches lingered longer...when his caresses were more languid...when his kisses betrayed his fraying restraint. Tasha tilted her chin upward, anxious to feel his lips on her own, sighing with relief when he finally bent his head and kissed her. Cole always kissed her like he wasn't sure if it would be the last time. There was always enough reverence to make lust pool like honey in her stomach. She angled her head so he could deepen the kiss, fingers digging into his shoulders as she wrapped a leg around his waist. His hand had gone to her head, removing her bonnet so he could fist the small twists in

her hair as he drew her even closer to him. Time stalled with them wrapped up in each other against the counter as Tasha tried to pull on the last fraying cords of Cole's control. It didn't work. It never did. He pulled away far too soon and pressed his forehead against hers.

"Have a good day today," he whispered, kissing her again. "Message me if you need anything."

She nodded. "I'll see you later."

Cole tugged at one of her twists and grinned. "Make sure you send me a picture of your hair when you take those down, so I can tell you if that new product was worth the effort."

Tasha laughed, affection tempering the haze of lust threatening to consume her. "Aye, aye, Curl Cream Captain."

She could hear Cole's laughter booming through the house as he made his way to his room to continue getting ready for work.

Yes.

This man made falling for him so damn easy.

“It can’t be my uncalled-for torture that has you grinning over there like that,” Carrington quipped, wiping some sweat from his forehead before he settled back into his cardio. The old man smirked at Cole, who glanced away from his phone a few beats too slowly. Carrington’s smile widened. “I guess not. Something on your phone seems mighty interesting. Have you finally taken an old, wise man’s suggestion and found you somebody to love?”

He took a final look at the photo Tasha just sent him before tucking his phone into his pocket, choosing to ignore Carrington’s probing. It didn’t matter that the old man had all but hit the nail on the head. He would never hear the end of it from Carrington if he confirmed the suspicions the man kept voicing over the last few sessions. Besides, even though he was quite open with his feelings to Tasha and pretty much unloaded his entire soul on his mother, Cole wasn’t ready to involve anyone else just yet. There were so many things he needed to figure out. Things like why his heart responded so viscerally when Carrington said ‘*found somebody to love.*’ Cole tried to keep his attention on the man grumbling while he ran on the treadmill, but his mind was stuck on that comment. *Somebody to love.* He told his mother he was *falling* for Tasha, but he never stopped to consider he might already be there.

But was it surprising, though?

Cole already knew he felt things for Tasha he’d never felt for another woman before. It wasn’t just that he allowed himself to be vulnerable with her in ways he always avoided

being with other people no matter how much he adored them. It was because that vulnerability came easily. He trusted her with the parts of him he hid from other people. He always told everyone *the one thing* he was certain about in life was he could *never* become the fucking bastard who fathered him. He said it with an easy-going smile on his face and so confidently that people always took it for granted that he was telling the truth. The only person who'd come near to challenging him was his therapist, but that was her job. He couldn't believe how easily he confided in Tasha that the opposite was true. Cole wasn't confident at all, and sometimes, he tossed and turned at night, filled with fear he would become his father. In those dark moments, he worried he'd never have the family he craved — that he'd never *deserve* the family he craved. Tasha's instant reassurance was everything he didn't know he needed. Her eyes flashed fiercely like she was offended on his behalf that he would dare have those thoughts about himself.

Maybe Cole fell in love with Tasha a little bit then. Maybe he fell in love a little more every time she wandered into the kitchen, bleary-eyed and grumpy until her first gulp of coffee turned the sunshine back on. Maybe he fell in love some more each time she cajoled him into the hot tub, wearing bikinis that made it hard to keep his hands to himself. Maybe he fell in love a bit more every time she brought him new suggestions for his rebrand, and he saw the way she infused her plans with little pieces of Cole that he hadn't even realized he'd shared with her. Maybe he fell in love a little bit more every time he returned home and found her excited as hell to tell him what she'd got into that day. Maybe he fell in love just a little bit more every time he stayed up longer than was wise, considering his early starts each morning, because he wanted *just a little* more time in her presence. And maybe he was falling in love with her a little bit more right now as he sat in his office a few minutes after his session with Carrington came to an end, gazing at the selfie she'd sent him to show how happy she was with how bouncy her twist out came out after she followed through on the new product and technique she'd stumbled across on YouTube.

He smiled at the phone. Her hair framed her face in a cloud of thick, fluffy curls, and she'd swiped on lipstick a shade of burgundy so deep it was almost purple, matching her freshly dyed hair. Cole wondered if Tasha knew just how effortlessly beautiful she was.

Tasha: It was well worth it, don't you think?

Cole thought of how long the process was from start to finish. Watching her meticulously twist her hair into small sections while he lay sprawled on her bed, trying to figure out why the hell she found *Animal Crossing* so endearing, was enough to make *him* tired.

Cole: It's gorgeous as fuck, giving everything it's supposed to be giving...and then some. But... your last twists were gorgeous too and took way less time.

Tasha: The difference in quality isn't even slight. Come to think of it, the pictures don't do it justice. You'll just have to wait until you get home.

Home.

Cole's heart always performed Simone Biles-level gymnastics whenever Tasha casually referred to his house as home. He always got ahead of himself then, wondering how things might have played out if they'd met in a less complicated way. What if she'd never married Jeremy at all? What if the first thing that caught his eye when Navaya first introduced them after one of SBM's gigs hadn't been the huge ass rock on her finger? Would he have given himself permission to fully enjoy her warm smile and engaging personality? Would he have made a move? Cole pushed those thoughts away since they weren't going to get him anywhere. It didn't matter how much Cole wished he and Tasha discovered their connection under easier circumstances. It didn't matter how much he wished Jeremy had never had the chance to hurt her the way he had. In the end, no amount of wishful thinking could change the past. Cole just wanted to make sure every step he took going forward was purposeful and geared at securing the future with Tasha he craved.

CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

Every day was not the same. There were days when Tasha's anticipation and excitement for her future filled her up so much her cells vibrated, but there were days when the fear was intense enough to make her sick to her stomach. She always tried to put on a brave face for Cole, even though he always saw through her masks, but the reality of the matter was that Tasha existed in a constant state of extremes.

She'd already started tasting the sweet nectar of freedom, but Tasha couldn't help but worry Jeremy would find a way to snatch it away from her like he'd taken almost everything else. In some ways, Tasha couldn't wait for the next two weeks to pass, so she no longer felt like she was in limbo, waiting for the anvil to drop. Life was funny, though. Despite the anxiety threatening to consume her if she thought about things long enough, Tasha was happier than she'd been in a long ass time. She'd seen Navaya more often in the last two weeks than she had in years. Her eyes still filled with happy tears when she remembered how happy Navaya was when Tasha randomly surprised her with a spa getaway the weekend before after she complained about hitting an unexpected tough spot in her book. The look on Navaya's face when she realized Tasha wasn't fucking around and truly intended them to have their first girls' trip in years was worth digging into her savings. Tasha pulled the happy memories of lounging in hot tubs, getting massages and facials, and eating delicious food with a constant supply of good wine while listening to Navaya slowly but obviously recount all the stages of falling in love with Xander around her like a blanket. It was like the good old

days, the days before she had to plan out her movements, always have an excuse ready, and be prepared for the fallout of any defiance whenever Jeremy tried to push Navaya from her life like he had everyone else. It was getting more and more difficult to keep things from Navaya, but each time Tasha thought she'd worked up the courage to broach the topic, uncertainty knocked her off her feet. Certainty was a hard-fought battle in most things in Tasha's life nowadays. There were only two things she felt sure about despite the chaos constantly unfurling and tightening in her chest — that leaving was the best decision she could've made, and...Cole.

He amazed her in little ways every single day, and Tasha often thought back to that horrible night on the sidewalk in D.C. and wondered if it hadn't been...fate. She always tried to write off those thoughts whenever they popped into her mind, knowing how silly it was to conflate a simple coincidence with fate. Yet, it felt like more than happenstance, more than chance, more than just the best luck. Cole was such a gentle soul — intuitive, kind, encouraging, and supportive in ways Tasha hadn't even realized she needed. But it was more than the comfort she found in his quiet strength. Cole was fun as hell to be around. It was easy to break free of the chains of worry when there were so many good distractions. They'd gone out to dinner most nights during the week and ended their nights watching random movies when they got back home. They'd enjoyed re-watching *Love and Basketball*, *Bridget Jones' Diary*, and *Fight Club*, but they both drew the line less than half of an hour into *The Tree of Life*, or at least their bodies did. She and Cole had woken up with cricks in their necks due to the uncomfortable ass positions they'd fallen asleep on the couch in and spent the entire day roasting the shit out of the movie. Cole finally agreed to look into signing up on Twitch and TikTok, but the tradeoff was her working out with him a few times per week. Exercise was never going to be something Tasha loved, but she couldn't deny the endorphin rush she got after a good workout, even though it could be lust from proximity to Cole making her giddy. And then there were the unexpected things, like Cole entertaining himself nearby while she spent hours caring for the hair Jeremy often derided as being wild and unkempt.

She'd worn more twist outs in the last two weeks than she had in the last year since the only way to prevent Jeremy from running his mouth off about her natural hair was to pull it back into a sleek bun. Cole was keen to watch her process, excited to see the results, and always requested photos since he usually left for work before she undid her twists. He'd surprised her by offering to help her with her twists the night before, and she all but laughed in his handsome face.

"You don't think I'm up for the challenge?" he asked.

"Frankly, I don't," Tasha smiled. "The offer is sweet, though."

"Bet I can put twists in so good that you'd be happy to wear the hair out in public to dinner tonight."

Tasha actually laughed then, patting his shoulder like he was a poor, misguided soul. "Quit while you're ahead."

"If you don't like it, I'll watch a full *Animal Crossing* stream of your choosing with you."

Tasha cocked her head to the side. "You have my attention. What would I have to do in the very, very, very, very, very unlikely circumstance your experiment doesn't crash and burn?"

"You come hiking with me."

She'd agreed to the conditions because she was so sure he'd lose. There was no way he could succeed, right? Her first slivers of regret came when he moved them to the living room and sat her on a cushion on the floor, bringing her between his legs as he parted her hair and placed it into sections. Tasha could feel her heart's loud thumps in her ears, and her blood ran hot. Tasha had sat in that same position so many times as a child growing up while her mother cared for her hair. It had always been uncomfortable because the floor was too hard, and it took too long, but her discomfort stemmed from another source as she sat with Cole's powerful thighs pressed against her shoulders. It was titillating. It was erotic. It was sensual. It turned her blood into lust-tinged molasses, and Tasha found it hard to keep her cool while Cole, with intense concentration,

proceeded to twist her hair, stopping every so often to check back on the YouTube video he'd selected to make sure he was doing it right. By the time he was finished with her hair, Tasha's body felt like it would explode with the simplest touch, and her entire soul sighed with relief when he helped her off the floor, fixed a bonnet on her head, and leaned in to kiss her.

She sank into the kiss, running her fingertips under his shirt and grinding herself against him, wondering — hoping — praying that he'd finally let go of the self-control he'd wrapped tightly around himself. Cole never let things go too far despite their kisses burning hotter and more reckless each day. He'd grope her ass and sometimes cop a feel of her breasts, but he refused to go any further, always leaving Tasha feeling like a high schooler anxious to get on to the good stuff while her partner insisted that they stay at second base. She always ended up frustrated as hell, sprawled on her bed, pleasuring herself to thoughts of what she wished would be, but Tasha couldn't bring herself to press the issue. She knew why Cole found it easy to be upfront about his feelings for her but hesitant to act out on the lust between them that was so strong it had become its own entity. She didn't have to look much further than her breaking down in his office, raw with panic and exploding with pain as she told him what Jeremy had done to her. Each time they came together, but not nearly close enough, Tasha pushed her disappointed frustration away and hated Jeremy a little bit more. Hated the situation a little bit more. Oh, what a fucking sense of irony the Universe had! But she knew things could not continue as they were indefinitely. She couldn't rage silently forever. Something *had* to be done.

Tasha waited until she finished getting ready, dressed down in black jeans and an oversized sweater for the casual dinner they planned to have at a nearby pizza place before she undid Cole's twists, shocked to find she *liked them*. If she'd thought about lying, the bright smile on Cole's face as he walked through the door and fixed his eyes on her hairdo was enough for her to take the L and prepare for whatever hike he had planned.

“Admit it, Tee. I did a great job,” Cole said when he returned after changing into a fresh pair of dark jeans, a red polo shirt, and a black jacket.

She shrugged and pretended to be disinterested. “I mean, it’s aight.”

It wasn’t until after she’d finished stealing a slice of his pizza before digging into the one she ordered that she thought to ask Cole about why he’d chosen to try doing her hair in the first place. Surely there had been an easier way to con her into going on a hike with him. He took a deep draw of his beer and shrugged. “I figured I could give you a break occasionally if I knew how to do it. It can’t be comfortable keeping your hands up so long almost every night.”

He spoke like it was the simplest thing in the world. He saw an opportunity to make her life better, and so he did. Tasha’s heart melted as she leaned into the reality, which had started to become harder and harder to deny as time marched forward. She was in love with Cole Mason, and with that acceptance came another realization. She’d shared everything with Cole, from her greatest hopes, deepest fears, and darkest secrets to her most rampant insecurities. She trusted him to keep them safe. She trusted him to keep *her* safe. He knew her mind better than anyone else at the moment, and he had her heart. Tasha wanted him to have her body too. She wanted him to touch her in ways Jeremy should have never had the privilege to. She didn’t want to stop halfway when her body was hot and wanting and filled with need. Tasha brought her drink to her lips, ignoring the way her hands were shaking. Something *had* to give. And it had to give tonight.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

Something was up.

Cole couldn't put his finger on it, but tension had strolled in, planted itself in the middle of the red and white checkered tablecloth, and settled in for the long haul. He didn't bother pointing out to Tasha that she'd suddenly gone quiet or that she'd moved from stuffing slices of pizza into her mouth with little moans of pleasure after each bite to pushing the remaining slices around on the plate. She would talk to him once she worked through whatever thoughts were plaguing that beautiful mind of hers. Instead of pointing out the change in the atmosphere between them, Cole distracted Tasha with updates on *Serenaded by Mahogany's* biggest gig yet, performing at the *Kimani Exchange* in a little under two weeks. They were all nervous as hell, and tensions had flared slightly when Cole announced that practice sessions would have to move out of his garage without giving a straight reason. He didn't tell Tasha about *that*, though. He didn't want her to feel bad about the short bout of discomfort between him and the band since the reason for the change in location was down to her living with him. Jay, perceptive as ever, didn't ask Cole for an explanation but busied himself with finding a warehouse for them to practice in for a cheap rate that Cole agreed to cover.

"You've got a lot of explaining to do," his cousin said. "You've been acting pretty damn out of character. I'm helping you out and keeping my questions to myself...for now. But you owe me a straight answer when the time is right."

He agreed because Jay stood as a buffer between him and the band not once but twice, enabling him to keep Tasha's secret each time. He paid the money without complaint, too, since it was better than the alternative. He couldn't have Xander, Quinn, Cherry, or even Jay wandering around his house while Tasha was there. He also couldn't try to ban them from places they used to have full access to. Questions would be asked. Questions he wouldn't be able to answer. At least not yet. The time was coming, though. Tasha spoke more often about how much she wanted to tell Navaya what was going on, and he was surprised she hadn't already. It was weighing heavy on her heart, and Cole hated seeing it. He couldn't wait until all the things weighing down Tasha's soul disappeared so that beautiful light could finally shine through, unencumbered by the misery and pain he wished he had the power to take away.

“Are you excited?” she asked, perking up a little. “How has practice been going?”

“I'm quite excited. Practice has been fine, except Xander has become a real diva. We're trying to indulge him, though. It must be extra nerve-wracking to be singing lead.”

Bringing up the upcoming gig was the right thing to do. The ice around Tasha melted slowly while she teased him as she usually did about how the band would benefit from him stepping out of the shadows and taking on more vocal responsibilities.

“You hear a man sing once, and you decide you know him,” he laughed. “I hope you'll be able to explain to Xander how you were responsible for everything going wrong if I took your advice and then fucked up.”

Tasha laughed loudly, putting her hand to her stomach as her body shook. Her eyes sparkled with something that shone like adoration. “You're so fake. I can't imagine you messing anything up.”

Her confidence in him landed like lead in his stomach. He wished she knew how afraid he was of messing *this* up. The beautiful, fragile thing blossoming between them, fighting to

find its place in the sun. They said a person never knew how badly they wanted something...how badly they *needed* something...until the thought of losing it caused something to wither inside them. That was how Cole felt about Tasha, and it scared the shit out of him. He didn't have a lot of time to dwell on the feelings unleashed inside him because Tasha took a final sip of her drink and said, "You ready? I want to get in the hot tub before bed."

His body reacted immediately to the anticipation of having Tasha's barely clothed, slick body in his arms as they gazed up at the night sky and talked until their eyes and limbs were heavy with sleep. It was getting harder and harder to resist the unspoken invitation Tasha gave him every time their bodies touched and flames ignited between them. He wanted her with an intensity that could bring a giant to his knees, but Cole wanted a future with her more. He didn't want to ever give Tasha a reason to look back on this intimate, uncertain, yet beautiful in-between time and feel like he'd taken advantage of her. So he resisted, even though he cursed himself every time he returned to his room and had to dull his ache with his own hand and thoughts of Tasha floating like wisps of passion in his mind. Each day he got closer and closer to proving himself to be weak and selfish, though, and Cole knew he should tell Tasha he was too tired to soak in the hot tub with her.

"You going to join?" she asked, lips slightly parted and eyes filled with excitement as she waited for him to answer.

Who the fuck am I kidding? When have I ever been able to resist her anything?

"Of course," Cole said, managing to smile even though he'd just committed himself to a few hours of agony that would only be soothed by the one thing he couldn't have.

Tasha told Cole she had a quick email to send so she'd meet him in the hot tub and promised to bring a bottle of wine on her way down. She looked at the bunch of swimsuits she'd tried on and discarded in the fifteen minutes she'd been in her room. None of them were *enough* for what she planned to do. Her swimsuits were all perfectly standard, perfectly run-of-the-mill...nothing that would push a man to lose his grip on control.

So don't wear anything.

The thought sent a small delicious thrill down her spine as she surveyed her naked body in the bathroom mirror. She gasped, imagining Cole's lips trailing down her collarbone, latching onto her already hard nipples as he finally gave in to the hot surge of electricity between them. She brought her fingers between her legs, swiping at the wetness that always gathered there whenever she was within a few feet of Cole. She pulled her pale pink silk robe from off the hook on the back of the bathroom door and took a few deep, steady breaths. She could do this. She *would* do this. Cole wouldn't know what hit him.

He was already in the tub when she made her way to the backyard, a bottle of wine in tow, her nerves lodged in her throat. She handed Cole the bottle of bubbly, and he was busy angling away from her to pop the cork, so he didn't see her nakedness under the robe right away. He didn't seem to notice until she shimmied into his embrace, her bare breasts pressing flat against his chest. She caught his small gasp of surprise in

her mouth, kissing him firmly and guiding his hand so he could feel the bareness of her pussy. Or, at least, she tried to. Cole jerked his hand back as if her touch burned. Embarrassment, hot and fierce, flowed through Tasha.

“Tee...” he whispered, his voice thick and heavy with something she couldn’t place but made her want to curl herself into a ball and die of shame regardless.

She put some distance between them, wanting to laugh at the absurdity of Cole’s supreme effort to look anywhere but at the nakedness of the parts of her body not submerged in water.

“Yes?” she asked, not bothering to keep the bite out of her voice.

“We can’t.”

Anger surged.

“We can’t do what exactly?” she asked. “Act on what’s between us? I’d bet everything I fucking have that if I put my hand down your shorts right now, you’ll be as hard as a rock.”

His jaw twitched as he leaned to place the full bottle of wine on the small table next to the hot tub. “I’ve never denied wanting you.”

“You don’t act like it, though,” Tasha spat. “Do you know how mortifying it is to have the man I...the man I want pull away from me like there’s something wrong with me whenever things start becoming intimate?”

The war Cole fought was clear to see on his face. He wanted to reach out to hold her and take the edge off the raw hurt she felt, but her nakedness was an armor between them.

“I don’t want you to do something you might regret,” he said matter-of-factly, like his reasons should be obvious. *Like she should be grateful.* Tasha was too bitter to be grateful. It wasn’t even the sting of rejection that made her angry. It was the way his one-sided decision infantilized her...her desires... her wants.

“You think Jeremy fucked my agency out of me too?”

“Tee...”

His face looked pained now, and he finally gave in to the struggle playing out on his face, pulling her into his arms and brushing his thumb across her cheek. She usually leaned into the tender move, but Tasha was spitting mad. She pulled away from him.

“Answer me, Cole,” she said, voice low and shaking way too much for her liking. “Is this because of what he did?”

His hesitation said it all, and Tasha felt her heart break a little. “After all you’ve said, you *do* see a broken woman when you look at me. I’m not fragile, Cole. I’m not so damaged that I don’t know what I want. *Who I want*. I’ve had sex forced on me for years by a man whose touch I couldn’t even stand. I submitted because I couldn’t think of any other way to survive. You might think you’re doing the noble, worthy thing. Hell, a few weeks ago, I found what you’re trying to do endearing. But can’t you see how things have changed? I know you *know* I want you. You aren’t protecting me right now, Cole. You’re making my choices and desires irrelevant. *Just like he did.*”

Anger flashed across Cole’s face before pain etched itself there, but Tasha wasn’t interested in waiting around to see what he’d say when he finally found the words. She pushed herself out of the hot tub, not bothering to retrieve her robe, and ran toward the house. The brisk coolness of the fall night was enough to take her mind off the aching pit in her stomach just long enough for her to retreat to the safety of her room.

There, in the still darkness, Tasha allowed herself to fall apart.

What the fuck just happened?

Cole watched Tasha stumble out of the hot tub and run off into the house, unable to process how quickly everything went to shit. He recalled the stricken look on Tasha's face, and his heart felt like it'd stopped beating altogether. He'd hurt her. God. He'd spent so long trying to soften all the hurts she'd experienced, but here he was, causing hurt of his own. Shame flooded him when he recalled the words she'd spoken. They stung like barbs because each word was true.

He wanted to rush after her, but Cole forced himself to sit with his feelings for a while before he went in. He wanted to make sure he could articulate how he felt properly.

What a mess.

His heart was in the right place, obviously, but Cole learned a long time ago that having pure intentions didn't necessarily prevent causing unintended hurt. He'd shied away from being intimate with Tasha because he was worried he'd hurt her but wound up doing exactly that. He was so often awed by Tasha's resilience and strength, but he'd been treating her like someone incapable of knowing what she wanted.

You're making my choices and desires irrelevant. Just like he did.

Damn.

The accusation caused him physical pain. It twisted like an arrow in his chest, leaving him properly chagrined and

embarrassed as hell.

Cole had half the bottle of wine before he pushed himself out of the tub and made his way to Tasha's room with regret and water drops trailing behind him. He rapped on the door and waited uneasily, shifting his weight from one foot to the other until she finally opened it.

The tear streaks down her cheeks shattered his heart.

"I'm sorry, Tee," he whispered, trying his hardest to resist the urge to reach out and touch her.

Her chin jutted out stubbornly. "For what exactly?"

He sighed. "For being arrogant enough to think I was better able to decide when you'd be ready to take things to the next level than you were. I swear I didn't set out to be a controlling asshole."

He watched some of the fight go out of her. "You weren't a controlling asshole. Maybe misguided, but never an asshole. I know everything you do is because you care for me..."

"So fucking much," he whispered.

Tasha sighed. "I know you mean well."

"It doesn't matter how things end up between us, whether I get to keep you forever or just for a short amount of time. I don't want you to ever regret the time we spent together. And I was afraid you'd eventually resent me if we moved too fast."

This time, he did reach out to wipe the falling tears from her cheek.

"Cole," she sniffed. "You have to know the only thing I could ever regret about you is that I didn't meet you first."

He cupped her cheeks and kissed her softly and sweetly, wiping away the salty tears from the top of her lip. His heart felt like it had grown wings and fluttered around his chest so fast he felt lightheaded. Or perhaps that would always be the effect of holding this woman who'd turned his life upside-down and made everything right all with one smile.

“I’m sorry for yelling at you,” Tasha whispered when he finally broke the kiss, flashing him one of those shy smiles he adored so much.

He grinned. “I deserved it.”

“Do you know what I realized after I got up here, had a shower, and snuggled into bed?”

“Tell me.”

“I really lost my temper at you,” she said. “I screamed at you and everything.”

Cole chuckled. “It didn’t escape my notice.”

“I didn’t feel afraid. Not even for a second. It never occurred to me that it could be dangerous for me to be authentically pissed with you.”

“I’d never hurt you, Tee,” he said. “And you can always be honest with me.”

“And you can be honest with me,” she whispered. She started speaking again before she abruptly shut her mouth.

“Tell me what’s on that beautiful mind of yours,” he coaxed.

“Are you resisting me because you find me repulsive because of what...”

The anger sloshing through him burned his throat so that his words came out in a low growl. “Get that thought out of your head *right now*, Tasha. Resisting you has been *hard* for me. I’ve masturbated more in the last couple of weeks than I have in my entire life. I’ve never wanted anybody more than I’ve wanted you.”

She fixed him with a look so intense in her brown eyes that Cole felt like he could drown in her gaze. “There’s nothing stopping you, Cole. Have me.”

CHAPTER FIFTY-SEVEN

It seemed to take an eternity for Cole to absorb and act on Tasha's words. In reality, it was just a few seconds. She stood at her bedroom door with her chest heaving, heart thudding, emotions jumbled to the point she could barely form a coherent thought. *Barely*. Her mind fixated on one thought beating in forceful waves through her body: *I want him*.

She wanted Cole with a ferocity that would be terrifying, except the primal lust was forged in the purifying flames of her love. He made her so heady — with want, with need, and with passion burning more brightly than should be possible or safe. Her entire body vibrated with anticipation, and Tasha feared one touch from him would turn her into dust. And then he kissed her, gently probing, quietly demanding confirmation she was sure. Tasha angled her head and opened her mouth, deepening the kiss. She stroked his tongue with hers and pushed her body into his, hoping he could taste the certainty in her kisses. Hoping he could feel how languid her body was pressed against his...soft with desire and need. His fingers dug into the pillowy flesh of her hips as they moved into the room, lips still teasing each other's, toward the bed.

She felt the exact moment Cole let go of whatever reservations remained. One minute, he was kissing her; the next, he was devouring her, claiming her, branding her so intimately Tasha's body broke and set itself back together again. She couldn't describe the way Cole made her feel — body and heart — when he backed her down on the bed and began trailing kisses down the column of her neck, jaw,

shoulder, and collarbone before he lifted his head, gazed into her eyes, and brought his lips to hers again.

He took his time as if he was savoring the feel of her lips roving over his, each gentle nip of her teeth, and her fingers intertwined behind his head, pulling him closer and closer, even though Tasha knew she could never get close enough. She wanted to crawl inside Cole's soul and make a home there, but for now, his fingers tracing circles where her silk nightdress rode up to expose her ass was enough. *Had to be enough.*

He cupped and squeezed her ass, nibbling at her earlobe before easing off her body and propping himself up on his elbow. Tasha missed the comforting heaviness immediately, but before she could voice it, Cole slid a hand under her nightdress. He traced circles over the expanse of her stomach, her ribcage, and the swell of her breasts, leaving embers of passion in their wake. She moaned when he caught her nipple between his fingers, pinching and rolling it lightly until those moans became little cries of pleasure. He continued playing with her until her body burned all over.

"I want to taste you, Tee," Cole whispered roughly against her cheek. "Can I taste you?"

Tasha struggled to climb out from under the haze of lust, making her feel like she was wading through water. Head swimming and tongue heavy, Tasha didn't bother trying to formulate a response. Instead, she grabbed the hem of her nightdress and pulled it over her head so that she lay there naked under the harsh brightness of her bedroom light. Cole's gaze roamed hungrily over her body before he bent his head and captured a nipple in his mouth. Tasha arched her back, the gentle lapping of his wet, warm tongue against her hardened peak pushing her closer to the edge. Her body shivered as his big hands caressed her hips and thighs. Each touch, each caress, each flick of Cole's tongue across her sensitive, engorged flesh left Tasha breathless. She might have been worried about her body's forceful reaction to Cole's slightest touch if she wasn't so busy anticipating finally falling off the cliff of pleasure she stood precariously on. The fall promised

to be the kind of earth-shattering, gravity-defying release Tasha's body longed for. She welcomed Cole's lips when he kissed her again. He pressed his forehead to hers, breaking the kiss lightly enough so he could speak.

“This changes everything, Tee,” he whispered. “Are you sure?”

Her body sang with need for him, but her heart played an entire orchestra as she pressed her lips lightly against his. “Yes.”

CHAPTER FIFTY-EIGHT

She was so beautiful.

Cole knew he had to pace himself, but his body refused to get on the same page as his mind. He couldn't blame it, though. Not with how enticing Tasha looked spread out on the bed. He kissed her deeply, trying his best to concentrate on the soft, firm pressure of her plump lips instead of just how badly he wanted to spread her thighs to see if she tasted as sweet as he imagined she would. He denied himself the pleasure for a few more minutes, kissing Tasha until he couldn't fight it any longer. He couldn't ignore the scent of her arousal lingering in the air between them, making him a little giddy with anticipation. He couldn't ignore the echoes of her sweet cries in his mind and the need to hear those cries morph into frantic screams of pleasure once he had her right where he wanted her — under his tongue.

Cole dismissed the small worry that they were moving too fast, trying to push its way to the surface. Tasha was right. She was fully capable of deciding what she wanted. And she *wanted him*. She *chose him*.

She chose him every time she arched against him, sending bolts of pleasure through his body.

She chose him with each moan, each kiss, each time she dug her fingers into his back.

And she was choosing him now, with fingers trailing down his chest toward the elastic of his swim shorts. His dick jumped with anticipation, but Cole grabbed her wrist. He

brought her hand to his lips instead, kissing the back of her fingers before drawing her index finger into his mouth and sucking it. He couldn't allow her to touch him yet. Neither he nor his dick was prepared. He watched those beautiful brown eyes widen as he continued sucking each long, elegant finger without breaking her gaze. He placed light kisses against Tasha's wrist, down her arm, across her shoulders, trailing his way across her ribcage and belly button before he gave in and sought out the sweet spot he desperately wanted to taste. Cole buried his head between her legs, parting her folds with his tongue, and set about exploring her.

None of Cole's fantasies prepared him for the reality of having Tasha's soft, warm wetness against his tongue. He lapped at her, groaning into her wetness when her soft cries filled the air around them. He smiled with satisfaction when her body jerked against him after he tensed his tongue and pressed it against her clit. His dick swelled and throbbed against his shorts, but Cole would gladly allow his body to combust with need. If he met his end buried in the nirvana that was Tasha's pussy, it would be a fucking good way to go. He licked his way up her slit before pulling her clit into his mouth and sucking until those cries became louder, more frenzied, and Tasha bucked against him. He pressed his palm down on her lower stomach, keeping her in place as he went to work, eating her out in earnest. He ate her with the enthusiasm of a man who had to wait way too long to get served his favorite dish. Cole could get drunk off Tasha, and he probably already was because each of her little whimpers made his head spin. He thrust his tongue inside her, and his dick throbbed when she grabbed the back of his head and made a little mewling sound in her throat.

Fuck. She was going to be the death of him. His body was strung so tight with wanting that Cole ached from it, but he was determined to move slowly. He was determined to wring each drop of pleasure out of Tasha's body. There would be time for fucking, but now was not the time. Neither was it the right time to make love to the woman who owned his heart. Tonight was for worship. It was for reverence. Cole wanted to lay himself down at her altar and offer himself up as a living

sacrifice. He needed her to see — *to feel* — that she was more precious than the rarest gem, deserving of utter devotion and praise. Cole dug his fingers into her thighs, drawing her clit back into his mouth and sucking until he found the pressure that made Tasha’s legs tense before they started to shake.

“Don’t stop,” she urged, voice thick and breathless.

Not even if my life depended on it.

He continued pleasuring her with his mouth, and when Tasha’s entire body tensed and her cries became a bunch of gibberish, he brought his hand to her core and slid two fingers inside. She was so fucking soft and hot, clenching his fingers so tightly Cole barely suppressed a moan imagining how she’d feel wrapped around him. She dug her fingers hard into the back of his head, jerked herself off the bed, and fell apart with a cry that was halfway between a sob and a scream. He continued working her with his mouth all through her orgasm until she was pushing his head away and begging him to stop. He kissed his way back up her body, propping himself up on his elbows so he didn’t crush her with his full weight when he made his way back to her mouth. He hovered over her lips for a few seconds, close enough to feel how they quivered lightly against his. Then he was kissing her again — hard and deep — wanting her to taste her essence coating his tongue. Her eyes were glassy with satisfaction when he finally pulled away, and even though Cole was prepared for that to be enough, Tasha smiled lazily at him and said, “I’ve got condoms in the bedside drawer.”

She wiggled a bit, and he eased off her to allow her to retrieve the condoms. Cole didn’t think he could get harder, but his dick managed to surprise him when she rolled back on the bed and handed a shiny wrapper to him with a broad, satisfied smile on her face. A smile *he put there*. He took it from her, settling himself on the other side of the bed, never taking his gaze off Tasha as he took off his swim shorts and finally allowed his dick to spring free. He watched Tasha’s eyes dip below his waist before she brought them back to his again. The soft, satiated look in her eyes was replaced by a fiery heat that made Cole burn from the inside out. He tore

open the condom with his teeth, running his hand from the base to the head of his dick — already soaked with precum — and then back down again. His tight fist was a sad ass substitute for Tasha’s intoxicating pussy, but he continued stroking, loving the way her eyes fixated on his dick and the little sounds he knew she didn’t even realize she was making. He rolled the condom on when he couldn’t take it anymore, then spread his arms wide and smiled at her. “C’mere, Tee.”

There was no hesitation. She crawled toward him on the bed, straddled him, and buried her face in his neck as she positioned his dick right at her entrance.

“Look at me,” he whispered, wanting, no, *needing* to see the look in her eyes when they finally joined together. Cole didn’t think he’d ever seen, or would ever see, a sight more beautiful than Tasha’s eyes glazing over with pleasure when she finally sank down on him.

“Fuck,” he straight up moaned as her pussy clenched around him. He held her waist but didn’t try thrusting into her even though his body begged him to. Now was not the time.

“I’m yours to control, Tee,” he said, squeezing her hips. “Take your pleasure.”

Her lips parted slightly, and then she hit him with one of those smiles that always stole a little piece of his heart. She kissed him *hard*, placed her hands on his chest for leverage, and smiled at him again. Then she lifted herself up and slammed back down on him, doing exactly what he asked her to do.

T*ake your pleasure.*

Tasha's heart stopped as she eyed the sexy ass man resting against the headboard with his arms spread wide as he offered her *control*.

Cole was just... Tasha couldn't even find the words to describe this kindhearted, intuitive sweetheart life seemed to offer up to her on a platter. Being with Cole like this had already surpassed her wildest expectations. She'd forgotten how it felt to want someone so badly her entire body shook. She'd forgotten what it was like to be with a man who prioritized her pleasure. She'd forgotten how it felt to feel safe. She'd forgotten that sex could be a fucking beautiful dance between two people who craved each other. Tasha's stomach tightened, remembering just how hard Cole had brought her to climax with his tongue caressing her clit while he stroked her. She didn't think she could feel as light or as full of emotion as she did when she finally came back down from her high, but she'd underestimated Cole.

Take your pleasure.

He said it easily like it was no big deal, but they both knew...*he had to know*... Tasha swallowed down the emotion she felt by leaning forward and kissing him, hoping her lips would say what she wasn't ready to voice before she guided him inside her.

Fuck.

She wanted to moan, but she couldn't make her mouth work. She couldn't make her brain work. She couldn't make *anything* work as her body was hit with the overwhelming sensation of his beautiful dick filling her up. Her pussy clenched around him hard, letting his dick know she'd waited way too long to meet his acquaintance. Cole swore, gripping her hips, and Tasha couldn't stop pride from swelling in her knowing she was affecting him. She placed her hands against his chest to steady herself before she slid her pussy back up his dick and sank back down again. This time she found her moans as she prayed for her knees to keep up with her. She rode him hard, relishing the feel of his thick hardness soothing the ache in her pussy, her nipples brushing against his chest, and the way his tongue danced with hers. He squeezed her hips, trailed his fingers down her spine, and cupped her ass, but Cole didn't try to control anything. He didn't thrust up to meet her; he didn't try to get her to slow down or speed up... He allowed Tasha to do exactly what he asked her to do.

Take your pleasure.

She rode him until her knees protested and pleasure coiled so tightly inside her that she couldn't even keep her rhythm straight. She moaned into Cole's mouth as she was hit by a need so great that she stopped moving immediately. His hands came to her hips, concern deep in his eyes. "You okay?"

She nodded. "I want you."

Cole smiled, thick lips pulling back to reveal straight white teeth.

"I'm not sure if you realize, Tee, but you *have* me."

Her pussy throbbed around his dick.

Yes, I do.

She kissed him, stalling for time to find a way to articulate what she wanted. Taking control had been empowering as fuck, but now? Now she wanted to feel the power of being safe enough to relinquish it.

"I want you to take me," she said between kisses. "And I don't want you to hold back."

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Cole started, hastening to continue when her face dropped. “I’ve been holding back for a long fucking time, Tee, and I don’t want to hurt you.”

She bit her lip, clit throbbing and pussy clenching at the thought of Cole finally letting go of his tightly held control. “I’m a big girl. I can handle it.”

He almost came.

It took the last ounce of self-control Cole possessed to hold off from nutting right there and then as Tasha spoke. She was so damn beautiful, skin slick with sweat, pussy tight and wet, lush and full breasts, and that wicked grin on her face as she tried to convince him to stop holding back. She rocked her hips against him. Cole dug his fingers into his palms, thinking of all the ways he wanted to *not hold back* with Tasha. He imagined her peachy ass jiggling as he slammed into her from behind, fingers wrapped up in her hair as he pulled her head back so he could kiss her neck. His dick twitched. He imagined her leg on his shoulder as he hit her with hard thrusts, playing with her clit until she fell apart. He imagined bringing her knees to her chest as he gave her the deepest strokes until they both lost control. He imagined making love to her without the condom between them so he could feel just how hot and wet she was for him before filling her up with every ounce of his pent-up desire. She ground against him, one hand on his shoulder while the other squeezed her nipple and caressed her breast. He wrapped his hands around her waist, laughing when she squealed as he flipped them over on the bed. He lifted one of her legs to his shoulder and bent the other at the knee around his waist as he slid into her. He paused, struggling to regain control before he picked up his pace. He thrust into Tasha hard and fast until all that was left was the sound of their skin slapping against each other, punctuating the silence of the room. Her pussy quivered and then clenched him so tight, Cole wondered if he'd be able to move. He had all of

her, but he wanted more. He wanted to go as deep as her body would allow. Cole placed her other leg over his shoulder as he eased out of her hot, welcoming softness before slamming himself to the hilt inside her, over and over again, until he could feel his heart thudding in his ears. Tasha tensed under him.

“What’s wrong?”

She shook her head as tears spilled from her eyes. “It feels...too good. I can’t...”

He let himself relax a bit, dropping a small kiss on her lips. “Yes, you can, babe. Just relax for me.”

She relaxed a bit, but he felt her go stiff again a few strokes later.

“Just let go, Tee. I promise it’ll be worth it.”

Relief skirted right alongside the pleasure flowing through his body like static electricity when Tasha finally heeded his command to relax. He could feel the tension flow right out of her body as she let go for him. She was just softness and ecstasy as she tilted her body to meet every thrust. Her little cries drove him wild as she told him how good it felt and how close she was to losing all control.

“Oh my God,” she whimpered over and over again. Cole brought his forehead to hers, savoring how good it felt to be inside her.

“God hasn’t got anything to do with this, Tee,” he growled. “Scream my name.”

His name sounded like heaven on her lips, and soon Cole couldn’t fight the tsunami of pleasure poised to drown him. She felt so good...too good...so fucking good. He buried his head in the crook of her neck as he thrust frantically into her. Soon, the entire room was filled with their groans and moans, whimpers and screams. Her pussy clenched him tight as his thrusts started to falter. Tasha came with Cole’s name on her lips, and he came with Tasha in his soul.

Home.

CHAPTER SIXTY-ONE

She could watch Cole sleeping forever. Tasha propped herself up on her elbow, watching the way Cole twitched his nose in his sleep, resisting the urge to kiss him. She wanted to run her fingers through his beard and then sit on his face so he would wake to the taste of her pussy on his tongue. Her stomach growled, indicating that both she and Cole could probably do with a more nutritious breakfast. Tasha stretched her hands above her head, stifling a yawn. The idea of Cole waking up smothered by her pussy was an appealing one, but perhaps a warm breakfast would be more useful. He'd need his energy for all the things she had planned for him. Last night had unleashed desire she hadn't really been prepared for. She knew she'd wanted Cole from how much she craved and longed to know how it felt being as close to him as humanly possible, but that longing and craving had nothing on how her body was going haywire now it knew what having Cole was *actually* like.

Tasha yelped when warm arms encircled her waist, causing some of the coffee she was pouring to slosh over the top of the mug but relaxed when Cole placed tender kisses against her neck.

“You could've woken me up.”

“Then it wouldn't have been a surprise,” she chuckled. “Even though it isn't really much of a surprise now. You couldn't sleep for ten more minutes?”

Cole chuckled. “You know you don’t have to do all of this, right?”

Tasha smiled, reaching out to hand him his mug of coffee. “Oh, I know. This isn’t by any means an unselfish act.”

“Oh?”

She laughed. “Remember when I went to use the bathroom at dinner last night and took a weirdly long time? I popped into the pharmacy across the street and picked up the condoms I have stashed in my bedside drawer. I’m planning on us using all of them today, so you need your energy.”

Cole took the plate of eggs, sausage, and waffles from Tasha with a smile. “How many do we need to get through?”

“Eleven.”

The smile Tasha loved so much widened into a wolfish grin that made her clench her legs together in anticipation. He leaned forward and brushed his lips against hers. “I look forward to it.”

“Let’s eat under the gazebo,” she suggested.

Tasha picked up her own plate of food and coffee and began walking toward the backyard when her phone blared from where she left it on the kitchen counter. The ringtone she’d assigned to Jeremy almost stopped her feet in their tracks. Cole tossed a look over his shoulder. “You gonna get that?”

She thought about it for a split second before she shook her head. “Nah, I’m good. Let’s go have breakfast.”

CHAPTER SIXTY-TWO

Cole kept his eyes trained on Tasha, looking for the slightest hint of discomfort so he could swoop in and pull her out of the conversation she was having with his mother and Aunt Sheree in the corner of the living room. He couldn't believe he followed through with his mother's suggestion and asked Tasha to come with him to his Aunt Sheree's birthday dinner. His actions were even wilder when he considered the dinner was meant to be an intimate family gathering. Bringing Tasha here was bound to lead to questions, and he'd been generally trying to avoid putting himself and Tasha in situations where they'd be asked things they didn't necessarily have the answers to. Tasha caught his eye, gave him a little wave and smile, and then turned her attention back to his mother. Whatever she said made the older woman laugh.

He adored Tasha so fucking much.

He'd been willing to risk the curious glances and the eventual questions because asking her came naturally while they were cuddled in bed together a few days ago, both worn out from intense lovemaking. God, so many things came naturally with Tasha now Cole had stopped holding back. Something had shifted deep inside him while he held Tasha as she came apart with pleasure in his arms the first time they made love. He couldn't even begin to describe the sense of rightness that settled over him. Suddenly, he knew he'd been going about things wrong. He'd been holding back, waiting for some arbitrary time in the future when he could love Tasha out loud and truly start exploring the inexplicably potent

connection between them. He'd thought of the time they shared now as an in-between place, but it wasn't. It was just life...*real life*, with its messiness and frustrations, but also surprisingly beautiful and tender moments. Each day he spent trying to douse the flames of his emotions for Tasha with the cold, hard reality that he *still* didn't know how things would end up was a day he'd never get back...*especially* if things ended going ass-up anyway. Perspective was a hell of a thing. He was already awed at the potency of his feelings for Tasha, but he hadn't been prepared for the last week. He'd forever categorize his feelings for Tasha into two parts: before the fall — and after. His heart, unfettered by the restrictions he'd placed on it, soared. It continued to soar with each touch, each kiss, each time he buried himself so deeply inside her he thought he'd lose himself there forever. It soared higher whenever she cuddled herself into his chest at night, and he felt her body slowly relax as she fell into slumber. It soared highest when he woke up next to her in the mornings. He always spent a few seconds taking her in...the face he swore he could trace in his sleep, the way she always managed to curl herself into a ball while she slept, and how all the tension seeped straight from her body. He'd adjust the bonnet that was always in varying stages of coming off her head, then plant a kiss on her forehead before reluctantly pulling himself out of bed to start his day. He'd missed more than one of his early morning workouts the last week because he couldn't bring himself to leave his warm bed or the woman in it.

He remembered when his mother told him that he looked like he thought Tasha was his, and he felt the truth in her observation. And maybe he had thought Tasha was his even then, but Cole was realizing that *feeling* like Tasha was his was something else entirely. Everything was different, which was interesting since not that much had changed outside of the sex. They still hung out after Cole was finished work, trading stories about their days. Tasha still opened up to him about her hopes, dreams, and fears. Then there were the times when she spoke about what her marriage to Jeremy had been like, and Cole had to fight to contain his rage. He was still her soft place, and she filled his home with warmth he hadn't even realized it lacked. So no, on the surface, things hadn't changed

much at all, but the change within Cole was the difference between night and day.

He started moving toward Tasha, Renee, and Sheree when Jay called after him to wait up. Cole swore under his breath.

So far, the questions Cole worried about exposing himself and Tasha to hadn't come. There were curious stares, but the small group of family members present seemed to just accept that Cole had *finally* brought a woman around. His cousin knew differently, though, and Cole knew the chances of Jay allowing him to put off his questions were slim to none as soon as he saw the look on Jay's face.

Cole sighed. "Not the time or place, man."

"Nuh-uh," Jay said, shaking his head. "Not after all the little fires I had to put out for you. I promised you patience, and I've given you patience. But you can't just bring Tasha to my mother's *family-only* birthday dinner and not expect me to have questions. Bringing her here sends a loud ass message which everyone else probably finds a little bit curious but hella cute. I'm not everyone. I happen to know that Tasha is very fucking married, even though it's kinda hard to tell from the ring she isn't wearing."

Jay jerked his head toward the back door. "Go ahead and tell Tasha you're gonna step outside for a few because we need to talk."

A quick glance in Tasha's direction showed she was still preoccupied with his mother, so Cole followed Jay out to the back porch. He couldn't settle between being angry at Jay's intrusion and desperately needing to talk to someone.

Jay leaned up against the railing, crossed his arms in front of him, and said, "I didn't know you had homewrecking in you."

"Aye," Cole said. "Chill." He put enough bass in his voice for Jay to know he wasn't messing around.

His cousin made a face. "Oh? Word? This is interesting."

"Look, Jay," Cole said. "Don't be flippant about this. Just. Don't. When we spoke a couple weeks ago, you probably

backed off because you got the sense something serious was going on. I'm going to need you to keep that energy going forward and also shut your mouth."

A few beats of silence passed before Jay finally responded, "You managed to speak a lot of words that don't necessarily say much."

Cole tapped his temple and pointed at his cousin. "You smart."

Jay rolled his eyes, pushing himself up off the railing so he could sit next to Cole. "I know I've got the reputation of being annoying..."

"Reputation?"

"Shut up," Jay laughed. "Look, I'm not just being nosy. I *am being nosy*, but it's more than that. I'm worried about you. You're right. The way you behaved when I first asked about your sudden interest in giving Tasha jobs made me worry she might be in trouble, and you were trying to protect her. But you guys showed up here looking loved the fuck up, so I figured my initial read on the situation was wrong."

Cole sighed. "Two things can be true at once."

Jay nodded his head as he absorbed what Cole said. "You know this is messy, right? People are going to have tons to say when you go public with this."

He couldn't stop gruff laughter from escaping his mouth. "You got no idea. It's probably going to get messier too. Lemme tell you something about that woman in there, though. I love her. I will protect her. Nothing anybody says can change that, and nothing anybody does can stop it. Especially not that motherfucker she married."

"Wow," Jay said after a while. "I don't know what to say to that."

"Music to my ears," Cole replied. "Are you done poking into my life now?"

Jay seemed to think about it for a while. "Why are you hiding this from Xander?"

Cole sighed. "I'm not hiding it from Xander as much as Tasha needs some time before she gives Navaya the whole story."

"The whole story?"

"Jay," Cole said. "I already told you *my* story. I fell in love with a woman I didn't see coming, and I'm working hard on being able to keep her. You want details, but it isn't my story to tell."

Jay nodded. "Gotcha."

Cole pushed himself up from the swing and started heading back into the house as Jay called out to him. "It may not be worth much, but you guys look good together."

Cole tossed a look at his cousin over his shoulder and saw that he had something else to say written all over his face. "And?"

"And if I'm picking up what you're putting down, I'm down and ready to help you give that asshole the beatdown he deserves."

Cole grinned. "Thanks, Jay."

His eyes roamed the living room for Tasha as soon as he got back in. The private chefs, Russ and JB, had just announced it was time for guests to move to the tent in the backyard, where seating was set up for the first course. His mother hooked her arm in his. "She's already outside. Aja led her out, yapping her mouth off as that little girl does best. Let's walk together."

They walked in companionable silence through the living room, the kitchen, and then out to the backyard. His eyes still roamed around until he saw Tasha laughing with Aja as they sat at the large rectangular table decorated in rose gold, and his heart swelled in his chest.

"I like her," his mother said. "I can see why you are so taken with her. She's funny and sweet, and you light up whenever you're around her."

A few seconds of silence passed before she spoke again. “The road is still a long one.”

Cole pulled his mother into a small hug and squeezed. “I know, ma. I’ve got my walking shoes on.”

His mother started to say something, but whatever advice she was about to offer got lost when Aja almost ran into both of them. Her face spelled trouble, and so Cole didn’t even think before he asked, “What did you do?”

His cousin-niece made a face. “Was Tasha ever supposed to find out about the *DesignMeNow* accounts or no? Because if she wasn’t...”

“Aja...how did that even come up?”

“I told her she was pretty, and no wonder my uncle tried so hard to get her attention.”

He started threatening her with non-payment for services rendered when he saw Tasha sauntering over toward them. His mother grabbed Aja by her arm and guided her away, leaving him alone with Tasha. He couldn’t quite get a read of her.

“How many?” she asked softly.

He shrugged. “I lost count, to be honest.”

She shook her head. “I told you...”

“That you wanted to work for the money, and so I thought outside the box.”

Tasha rolled her eyes, but there was a ghost of a smile on her lips. “I don’t know if I want to kiss you or choke you.”

Cole pulled her into his arms and placed a kiss on her forehead. “Save it for later. In a few hours, there won’t be anything stopping you from doing both.”

CHAPTER SIXTY-THREE

Tasha didn't know what to do with herself.

How did she control the emotion that coated her soul like warm honey whenever she looked at Cole? Did she even want to? She hadn't thought twice when Cole invited her to come along to his aunt's birthday party. She'd wanted to change her mind as soon as she agreed to attend, but curiosity held her in a vice grip and refused to let her go. Cole spoke about his family often and with so much tenderness that she couldn't help but wonder how he'd be around them. And then there was his mother. She wanted to meet the woman who rose from a situation intended to destroy her. She was living proof that Tasha could make it out in one piece. That she *would*. Her nerves still rattled as they made the drive to his Aunt Sheree's house and didn't stop rattling until he finally introduced her to a woman whose face mirrored Cole's from the shape to the kindness in her brown eyes. It was hard to feel nervous when his mother was so warm and welcoming, pulling her into a hug almost immediately as if she was truly excited to meet her. She was quickly swept up in meeting his various family members and avoiding the curious looks Jay kept casting in their direction. Cole didn't pay much attention to his obviously curious cousin, and he didn't let it curb his behavior either.

At first, Cole's displays of affection shocked Tasha. She'd expected him to revert to the same stiff formality that existed between them whenever they were around people who knew them. No such thing. His touches lingered at the small of her back. He squeezed her thigh when they sat next to each other.

He thumbed some chocolate frosting from the side of her mouth and stole little kisses when everyone was preoccupied with listening to speeches in honor of his aunt Sheree. Tasha didn't expect to enjoy it as much as she did. She couldn't describe how it felt to be openly affectionate with Cole. She allowed her mind to wander further than she'd ever allowed it before. She wanted this man! She wanted a life with him. She wanted more family dinners; she wanted vacations; she wanted double dates with friends. She wanted it all. Did that make her foolish? Naïve? Reckless? The dark thoughts were invading when she grabbed a seat next to Cole's cousin-niece, who smiled broadly at her and told her that she could understand why her uncle tried so hard to get her attention. Tasha must have looked confused because Aja's smile widened as she leaned toward Tasha and, in a conspiratorial tone, detailed all the accounts Cole paid her to create on *DesignMeNow*. The preteen thought it was her dorky uncle — her words — trying to get Tasha's attention and figured the sheen of tears in Tasha's eyes was down to her thinking it was cute. It was so much more. Tasha didn't think she could get any softer for Cole, but in that moment, she did. She got softer when she saw how worried he was that she'd be angry at him. And she got even softer during the rest of the night while she watched Cole interact with his family. He was simultaneously a doting son and nephew, annoying cousin, and goofy uncle figure to his cousin's kids. Watching him pick up his youngest cousin, a three-year-old with too much energy, and zoom him across the lawn as if he were a plane, caused something to knot in her chest. The knot unfurled when he caught her eye and winked at her.

“I kinda threw you in the deep end, huh?”

Tasha flicked her attention to Cole, who sat at the edge of the bed unbuttoning his shirt. Her skin flushed. It was almost overwhelming wanting him as much as she did. It had been so damn long since she wanted anyone that her body didn't know what to do with itself. Her eyes trailed his fingers as he unbuttoned each button, remembering how the slightly calloused tips felt against her body. She crossed the small

distance between them, helped push the shirt down his shoulders, and straddled him.

“I didn’t mind,” she whispered. “I liked hanging with your family. It was cool seeing you in that light.”

“What light?”

He brushed his lips against hers, fingers toying with the zipper of her dress. Tasha started to sink into the kiss before she remembered she was supposed to be answering his question.

“You were goofy as hell with your little cousin,” Tasha chuckled. “It had me imagining you and those two and a half kids for real.”

Cole kissed her earlobe and trailed his tongue along the outer shell of her ear before he finally whispered, “Look at you having wholesome thoughts. The only thing I could think about all afternoon was how fucking sexy you looked in your dress and how I couldn’t wait to do this...”

The lightness was gone from his kisses. When his mouth found hers again, there was only fire and need, and Tasha’s body ignited from the embers. She moaned into the ferocity of the kiss, the small, intuitive motion opening her mouth just wide enough for his lips to lash his tongue against hers. He fisted her hair in his hands, pulling her deeper into the kiss as he pushed the dress off her shoulders with his other hand. She shivered when her already hardened nipples brushed against Cole’s bare chest and then again when he sank his teeth lightly into her bottom lip before devouring her mouth again. Her body burned, her head was light, and Tasha couldn’t get her heart to slow down. *Damn*. She’d expected her body’s extreme reaction to Cole’s touch to start leveling out the more they came together, but it seemed like the opposite was happening. His fingertips trailed down her spine, featherlight, but Tasha’s body wanted to implode on itself. His hand settled around her waist as he fell back onto the bed. She landed on top of him with a laugh, but he kissed away her teasing comment before she could get it out. He pulled her dress down so that it bunched around her waist as his fingers brushed against the

lips of her pussy. Tasha's breath caught in her throat as she sank into the pleasure of his fingers gently stroking her folds while he did wicked things to her mouth with his tongue. She wondered if it was an ego boost to Cole that he always found her wet and wanting whenever he touched her. She didn't have time to dwell on that because soon, he was pushing two thick fingers inside her, and the only thing Tasha could concentrate on when he started playing her like an instrument was the pleasure curling deep in her stomach. She whimpered in protest when he suddenly stopped touching her.

“Let's get you into a more comfortable position,” he whispered against her cheek. He brought her to her feet, gently sliding the rest of her dress down her body so that it pooled on the floor, massaging her skin each step of the way. Tasha felt so hot and uncomfortable in her skin that she wanted to climb out of it, but it was discomfort of the sweetest kind. Cole fixed her with a small smile as he tugged her toward him, easing her onto her back on the bed. Tasha's stomach flipped. The smile was soft, sweet even, but she'd learned that this smile, along with the insistence she be *comfortable*, meant Cole was prepared to wring as much pleasure from her body as she could possibly stand. He ran his hand over her skin, cupping her breasts before he moved his stroking lower and lower until he cupped the part of her that made her arch off the bed with a moan caught in her throat. Cole slid his fingers along her folds and massaged her clit before slipping his fingers inside and stroking her until her keening cries rang out. He always kept his eyes on her when he touched her like this, like he was cataloging all her reactions; each shiver, each expression, each moan. He pleased her until Tasha thought she couldn't possibly take anymore, and then he kneeled before her, parted her legs even wider, and covered her with his mouth. The way his tongue teased her clit had Tasha trying to grab onto hair Cole didn't have before she clenched her fists at her side and gave herself over to the havoc he was wreaking on her body. Gave herself over to the way pinpricks of pleasure danced along each nerve ending until lights erupted behind her eyes and her body shook. She was still coming down from her high when Cole slid back up her body and kissed her...deeply,

thoroughly, so that she was left tasting every drop of her essence she'd left coating his tongue.

“You see what I mean when I tell you that you've got no fucking business tasting as good as you do?”

Cole was always effusive with his compliments, in and out of bed, but Tasha always heated at them. Especially compliments like this, compliments said with such fiery awe even as she licked the taste of herself from her lips. Tasha didn't know sex could be like this. She didn't *expect* that sex could be like this. Her body craved his touch in ways that left her breathless, but it went beyond that. Her heart skipped beats whenever his body brushed against hers. Her soul sang when his fingertips trailed across her skin. Her entire being vibrated now as his hand slid down her waist, digging his fingers into the flesh of her hips, rolled to his side, and brought her to face him. He looked into her eyes as if he was searching for something and must have found it because a small smile tugged at his lips before he kissed her. There was no heat there. She sighed into the sweet pressure of his lips moving against hers. Cole made quick work of opening the condom he'd brought to bed with him, rolling it on, wrapping Tasha's leg around his waist, and thrusting into her. It was like the first sip of hot chocolate on the coldest winter's night. Tasha leaned into the warmth of the pleasure spreading through her body until her limbs were heavy and languid, and she could no longer fight off the tremors that started deep in her belly and exploded from her in loud, guttural cries while her fingers dug into Cole's back as he began chasing his own release. She snuggled into Cole as her erratic heartbeats returned to their normal pace, and he absentmindedly traced patterns with his fingers on the small of her back. He brushed his lips against her temple. “Goodnight, Tee.”

“Sweet dreams.”

He chuckled, as he usually did. “I don't need to dream when you're already here.”

Tasha settled herself on his chest, feeling the lightness of the peace and safety she felt when she was in Cole's arms spread over her. Sleep didn't come easily, though. Things were

good. *Too good.* Tasha couldn't fight the knot of dread in the pit of her stomach that she was foolish to be lulled into finding comfort in it. She couldn't remember the last time she was so happy, and it was hard to fight the fear that things were bound to fall apart.

CHAPTER SIXTY-FOUR

“**Y**ou nervous?”

“Definitely not,” Cole said. Tasha made a face as she stepped between Cole’s legs. He wrapped his hands around those thick thighs that were threatening to distract him from their conversation before laughing at his ridiculous assertion. Nervous? He was beyond that. The *Kimani Exchange* was in a few hours, and he couldn’t shake the apprehension making him a little jittery even though he knew the band sounded pretty damn good.

“I’m a bit nervous,” he admitted with a bashful smile.

“Let’s see if a kiss will make it better.”

Tasha tasted like the maple syrup she’d slathered over the pancakes she’d just finished eating as she tried to kiss away his nerves. She was on to something. It was hard for him to think of anything other than Tasha’s tongue moving languidly over his and how soft her curves felt under his hands. It was so damn easy to get lost in her.

Nerves? What nerves?

He pulled away from her slowly and, with a lazy smile, teased, “What would you have done if I said I was very nervous?”

Tasha pulled her lips through her teeth. “I might have tried more aggressive methods to calm you down.”

He laughed. “Now that I think about it...my nerves are definitely shot to hell. Man, I don’t even know if I’m gonna be

able to perform.”

Her laughter, soulful and breathy, always made Cole’s heart skip a few beats. It raced when she trailed her fingers down his bare chest before dipping her hand into the waistband of his sweats and cupping his hardness. His breath caught as she began to stroke him slowly and firmly, leaning forward so she could kiss him in languid strokes to match what she was doing in his pants. His dick throbbed as he went even harder when Tasha leaned back and hit him with a look that made his stomach tighten. “I think I know just the way to fix that.”

* * *

“HOW ARE YOUR NERVES NOW?”

Cole ran his finger along the indent of her spine, enjoying the way she still shivered under his touch even as she lay spent in his arms.

“I might have a few jitters left.”

Tasha rolled her eyes and kissed her teeth. “Now you’re just being greedy.”

He settled his palm on her ass and caressed it. “And how could I not be? I guess it’s because you don’t get to experience yourself. Then you’d see why I can’t get enough of you.”

And he wasn’t just talking about the sex either, as passionate and intimate as it was. He was talking about all aspects of Tasha. The Tasha who always spent a good amount of time selecting the soundtrack she wanted to work to each day. The Tasha who’d yet to get through a meal with him without stealing something off his plate. The Tasha who would wander down to his home gym and sit in the corner with coffee and her Switch, wanting to be in his presence but not interested in working out. The Tasha who was brave enough to be vulnerable with him even though life had given her a million reasons to remain closed off. He loved her. He hadn’t been looking for love, but love had damn well been looking for him. And even though the words hadn’t been exchanged,

he saw it in the way Tasha looked at him, in the way she allowed herself to be vulnerable with him... He felt it in the way she kissed him with so much tenderness, wanting, and promises for the future.

“I wish I could lie up in this bed with you all day,” he murmured against her cheek, fingers seeking the soft wetness of her pussy, knowing how eagerly her body would receive him again if he nudged her legs open and slid inside. His dick twitched, encouraging him to test the theory, but he controlled himself. He had less than two hours before he and Tasha needed to leave for him to drop her off by Navaya’s apartment and head to the concert space so he and the rest of the band could begin setting up.

“You can lay up with me all night, but for now, you gotta go be a superstar,” Tasha responded with another kiss. She eased herself out of bed, and he prayed to the universe to save him from his quickly fading willpower as he watched the sensuous curves of her ass moving toward the bedroom door.

It took him another half an hour to get ready, and Cole found Tasha making an iced coffee in the kitchen when he emerged from his room. The flash of her wedding ring as she poured creamer into her coffee sent a flash of annoyance through him. He couldn’t fucking wait until everything was out in the open. His emotions must have been plain on his face because she flashed him a sad smile and said, “Soon. I promise.”

Tasha offered him a sip of her coffee and then a taste of her lips, resting her head against his chest as he tried to best articulate what he was feeling.

“Tonight’s going to be a big night for me, and I can’t stop thinking about how much I’ll want to walk right off that stage directly into your arms.”

“I know,” she sighed. “I’ve been thinking about how great it felt to be open with everyone at your aunt’s party, and I decided I’m going to tell Vaya this week.”

“I’m not trying to pressure you,” Cole said softly. “I want you to move at the pace you feel comfortable with.”

She tilted her chin up and kissed him again. “I know. It’s time. Let’s not think about that right now. Today’s all about how you, Xander, Jay, Cherry, and Quinn are going to blow everybody away.”

“You think so?”

She laughed again, and it felt like she was sprinkling gold in the little crevices of his soul.

“Of course,” she said eventually, eyes bright. “You’re my superstar.”

CHAPTER SIXTY-FIVE

Tasha's entire being buzzed with excitement and pride as she watched Cole perform. The *Kimani Exchange* was filled with many brilliant Black artists, but *Serenaded by Mahogany* was leagues above them all. Not that Tasha was biased or anything. Xander was working the stage with excellent vocals, but her attention remained fixed on Cole. He strummed that bass guitar with skill and dexterity that had her thinking about the way those same fingers teased pleasure from her body. Tasha took a sip of her overly sweet, oversized Slurpee, trying to cool the heat in the pit of her stomach. Her body turned wanting Cole into a damn Olympic sport.

“He’s amazing, isn’t he?”

“For damn sure,” Tasha laughed, not caring about the way her voice became a dreamy drawl until she looked up and saw Navaya looking at her weirdly. She laughed mid-sip of the Slurpee and almost choked. She patted her chest to settle herself before she grinned at her friend. “Oh? You were talking about your *beeessst* friend? My bad, I was thinking about Cole up there looking all intense, talented, and sexy.”

Navaya tucked some of her box braids behind her ear and made a face. “Girl, you need to stop making those kinds of jokes about Cole before somebody thinks you’re serious.”

She bit back the protest that rose to her throat that she *was* being serious. This wasn’t the time to come clean about her and Cole, but Tasha meant it when she said the time was fast approaching.

“I think we should meet up later in the week to chill.”

Navaya grinned. “But of course. I need to squeeze in as much time as I can with you before Jeremy comes back next week and you forget about me again.”

Her friend smiled as she said this, but Tasha could hear the small pangs of hurt in her voice and felt like shit. She leaned her head against Navaya’s shoulder. “Things won’t go back to that. I promise.”

Navaya rested her head on Tasha’s. “I’ll hold you to it.”

“Please do.”

* * *

IT TOOK A WHILE FOR TASHA TO SHAKE OFF THE DESOLATION clawing at her with icy fingers at the interaction she and Navaya had nearing the end of the band’s set. Navaya had all but forgotten about it right after, spending so much time with her eyes glued to Xander that Tasha wondered how her friend couldn’t see that she was in love with her best friend. It was plain to everyone else. Tasha couldn’t even find it in herself to tease Navaya because she couldn’t stop replaying the small, sad look on her friend’s face when she accepted that Jeremy being back automatically meant distance between them. She wondered if she would see the same hurt on Navaya’s face when she told her all the things she’d been hiding from her. She gave herself permission to sit with the fear and the unease she felt. Everything would be okay. It *had* to be. She refused to let Jeremy’s taint on her life ruin anything else she held close.

Her funk lifted after the concert when they finally met up with the band to celebrate their successful set. She knew how important it was for all of them. This was the largest crowd they’d ever played in front of. Navaya walked straight into Xander’s arms for a hug that seemed to go on forever. Cherry’s long-term girlfriend, Debbie, literally jumped into her arms, smothering her with kisses and praise. Tasha had to look away from the intimate moment, chiding herself for the irrational jealousy she felt at Debbie’s ability to be openly

affectionate with her girlfriend. She caught Cole gazing at her from a few feet away when she finally looked up. His eyes were as soft as clouds, and a wide smile tugged at Tasha's lips as she dipped her head, afraid she would show too much if she continued looking at him. It was amazing how one look from Cole was like sunshine, chasing away the storm bands of negative emotions swirling inside her. He was still looking at her when she returned her gaze to him. A smile spread across his handsome face, and her insides started flipping for entirely different reasons.

“Yo, get a room,” Jay suddenly commented. Tasha tore her gaze away from Cole. Everybody had turned their attention to Debbie and Cherry, who were making out a few feet away, but Tasha realized Jay wasn't looking in their direction at all. He was looking at Cole with a small smirk that showed he was trying to irritate his cousin. Cole didn't take the bait. He hung behind as the others headed for the door. They'd agreed to find a bar to have a toast to celebrate the successful night.

His arms encircled her waist as he placed a quick kiss against her neck when he was sure no one was looking.

“I can't wait until we get home,” he whispered. “I've got a few nerves I need you to take care of.”

Colo loved watching Tasha sleep. He fixed that damn bonnet that always managed to come askew before planting soft kisses against her shoulders. He knew he should just let her sleep, especially since their personal celebration of the concert's success went into the very early hours of the morning. But what could he say? He was greedy. She stirred in her slumber, turning to look at him through sleep-lidded eyes as she smiled for him. Her smile punched him in the gut every single time.

"Hey, superstar," she whispered, her voice still full of sleep.

"I'm sorry for waking you," he said, "but I wanted to say goodbye properly before I left for the gym."

Her smile widened as she wrapped her hands around his neck. "Is that you petitioning for an early morning quickie?"

He kissed her lightly. "I wish, but I gotta be out this house in fifteen minutes if I hope to make Carrington's appointment on time."

They kissed until he could feel strands of his self-control slipping, but eventually, Tasha pulled away and offered to make them both coffee while he got himself ready for his day. As much as he wanted to spend the entire day in bed with her, Carrington was unable to reschedule his appointment, and he planned to stop by Xander's after the gym so he and his friend could have talk about what was going on with him and Navaya. There was an awkward moment during their after-

concert drinks when Xander's ex-girlfriend spotted him and Navaya being cozy, and all hell broke loose. He'd seen the look in Xander's eyes as he defended Navaya, and Cole recognized that it was time for him and Xander to have a serious talk.

"Remember, I'm going to be late tonight," he said to Tasha as she walked him to the door. He welcomed the sweet softness of her lips against his, lingering in the kiss before he pulled away.

"I remember. I'm probably going to see Navaya as well to make sure she's okay after everything."

"You plan on telling her today?"

Tasha shook her head. "I did, but after that blowout, I'm sure she'll want to vent. I'll probably do it later this week. I need to do one final sweep of the apartment anyway, so I can kill two birds with one stone."

Cole signaled his agreement with a quick nod of his head, pulling her in for another hug before he left to start his day. He had just slid behind the wheel when his phone vibrated.

Tee: Miss me while you're gone ;).

He couldn't stop the smile that spread across his face. He missed Tasha even when she moved from one room of the house to another. Tasha had no idea how deeply caught up he was with her. Sometimes he felt like he would never come up for air again. And he didn't mind that one bit.

* * *

"HOW DID IT GO?"

Tasha twirled some of her pasta around her fork before placing it in her mouth. Cole fixed his gaze on his drink, hating that something as simple as watching Tasha's mouth curve around her fork made his dick throb.

"It went okay," Cole said, giving her the rundown on what happened with Xander since she was dead asleep when he

made it back the night before. He'd also had a super early start that morning so he could film videos for his channel while the gym was empty, so they hadn't had time to connect until this evening when they came into Bethesda so Tasha could have her favorite seafood linguine in the DMV.

"Stop looking at me like that," she laughed, cutting Cole's commentary short. "I'm trying to make it to dessert tonight."

Her flirty comment knocked whatever he'd been planning to say from his mind. Cole licked his lips and fixed her with a look that said he wasn't trying to get to anything other than home as soon as possible so he could lose himself inside her.

"I've been told I'm sweet," he said with a smirk. "I might even melt in your mouth."

"Cole!"

But it wasn't an admonishment. He could see her shuffling and was enjoying how obviously affected she was when suddenly, a soft pressure against his pants where his hard-on pressed uncomfortably against the material stopped him in his tracks.

"What are you doing?"

Her smile widened, the pressure growing slightly as she continued making languid circles with the ball of her foot.

"What does it feel like?"

He doubted anyone could see what was happening under the tablecloth, but Cole didn't know how he would look himself in the mirror if he busted a nut from Tasha stroking him with her foot in public.

"Tee..." he pleaded. "Don't make this hard for me."

The pressure increased as her soft chuckle filled the air between them. "Too late."

"You're going to regret this later when I've got you spread out in front of me."

Tasha blew a small kiss his way as she upped the pressure and speed of her strokes. "I look forward to it."

* * *

THEY DIDN'T LAST MUCH LONGER IN THE RESTAURANT. IT seemed like Tasha's mission to torture him backfired, and they could barely keep their hands off each other as they made their way to the parking garage.

Cole said a silent prayer of thanks when they finally made it home and had to pull on the last drop of strength in his reserve to stop himself from taking her right there next to the front door. He still wasn't sure how they made it to the bedroom for how they became a mass of entangled limbs and crevices, barely coming up for air, much less to make sure they didn't trip over furniture or stairs.

When he finally had her naked and spread on that bed in front of him, Cole could barely wait to dip his head between those legs and taste heaven. He licked at her, teasing her clit while he slid his hands under her ass so he could hold her in place until she was trying to buck against him...screaming her throat raw as she begged him to keep licking her *just like that* and then begged him for his dick. His dick twitched, wanting nothing better than to be cocooned in the pussy Cole now knew was made just for him, but he held off. He flattened his tongue, desperate to have every bit of her wetness coating him, and lapped at her until she came hard under him. And then, the torturous wait was over. Tasha turned over and got to her knees so that he could take her from behind. His fingers dug into the softness of her ass cheeks as he slammed into her repeatedly. He groaned in his throat as he worked Tasha over, delaying himself the release his body craved until he could feel and hear her unraveling. He came so hard that he could barely keep himself upright with Tasha's name on his lips and the knowledge that even if he lived a million lives after this, he could never tire of the woman in his arms.

CHAPTER SIXTY-SEVEN

“**Y**ou sure you don’t want me to wait?”

Tasha grabbed her handbag from the backseat of the car before turning to face Cole. “It’s fine. You’re already late, and I want to do a quick walkthrough to make sure I haven’t left anything.”

“Do you want me to come grab you after?” Cole asked.

She shook her head. “I’m not going to take as long as a workout session. You can pick me up from Navi’s. I’m going to head there when I’m done.”

His face softened. “How are you feeling about that?”

“Very nervous,” Tasha admitted. Even though she knew it was time to tell Navaya the truth, her nerves were on edge. She had no idea how her friend would react, and the uncertainty made her stomach cramp.

“It’ll be okay,” Cole said softly. “She might feel a little hurt, but your friendship will be strong enough to withstand it.”

She gave Cole a quick hug, resisting the urge to seek comfort in his lips. There were very few things Tasha enjoyed as much as kissing Cole. His lips had the power to comfort her like a warm blanket on a cold night or set her entire body aflame. Her mind wandered to Cole using those same lips to pleasure her until she wept the night before. She was still thinking of the sight of Cole between her legs, lapping lazily at

her pussy while she climbed the crest of pleasure when she stepped into the apartment.

Cold washed over her as she took in what should have been an inviting space. Tasha rubbed her hands, although she knew the warmth wouldn't touch where the cold seeped into her soul. She took a deep breath and walked further into the apartment, her footsteps echoing like bullhorns in the quiet, empty space.

"You never have to come here again," she whispered to herself as she made her way further inside. Tasha immediately decided against looking around to make sure she'd taken everything she wanted. She would put her rings on the table and leave. She didn't want to spend a single moment longer than necessary in the space that held so many painful ghosts for her. She'd just placed the rings on the dining room table when the sounds of footsteps pricked her ears. Tasha's heart dropped to her stomach as she turned quickly on her heels, desperate to get to the door. She was almost there, hand reaching out for the knob when she was jerked back.

The force of it knocked Tasha to the floor, and her breath caught in her throat when she looked up and saw Jeremy hovering over her. His face was contorted with the ugliest rage — rage deeper than anything she'd ever seen reflected on his face before. And that was when she knew. Fear was such a tourniquet around her neck that Tasha couldn't force words out of her stunned mouth.

"Where the fuck have you been?!" Jeremy bellowed.

The sharp sting of his palm against her cheek brought tears to her eyes as she pushed herself up into a sitting position and tried to back away from him.

"You thought I wouldn't notice all your shit gone?" he asked. He paused as he observed her for a while. "You fucking bitch. You really thought I wouldn't come back early, especially since you've been acting so fucking weird. The question remains... *where were you?*"

Tasha scrambled to her feet, eyeing the front door, but her stomach sank when she realized there was no way she'd be

able to get past Jeremy quickly enough to reach it. Her heart hammered against her chest. She couldn't get to the front door, but she *needed* to put distance between them.

“Answer my fucking question, Natasha!” he screamed.

Tasha closed her eyes and tried to control her breathing. She needed to run to the bedroom and lock herself in so she could call 911, but she had to be smart about it.

“I needed some space,” she said, her voice shaking more with each word. “I thought of leaving, but I realized I couldn't, and that's why I'm here now. I swear to God.”

Tasha knew it didn't fly as soon as the words were out of her mouth.

“You smell like another nigga,” he said simply, his voice low and cold. “You been fucking another man, Natasha? Is that why you were so excited for me to leave? So you could prance around Falls Church with another man like a slut?”

Tasha's heart stopped beating, stunned by the precision of his accusation. “I don't know what you're talking about.”

“Picture my surprise when a friend calls me up and tells me that after debating for a few weeks, he needed to tell me he spotted you, walking hand-in-hand with some man. I changed my tickets the same night, and imagine how I felt when I came home to find you'd stripped our apartment of every trace of you. Just imagine.”

He took a step toward her, full of anger and menace. Tasha tried to run to the bedroom, but Jeremy grabbed her and slammed her against the floor. Hard.

“Jeremy,” Tasha begged through fresh tears. “Don't do this.”

“Remember what I told you?” he asked, straddling her so that his weight pinned her to the floor. “I told you one of these days you would push me too far. Today's the day, you fucking bitch.”

“Jeremy...”

He hit her with a closed fist until she felt the metallic sting of blood under her tongue. Tasha had seen Jeremy in various states of rage, but nothing...nothing ever came close to this. She closed her eyes tightly and tried to float away from the pain, but the punches were too insistent — his knee pressing hard into her stomach too painful — her fear too strong. She kicked when his hands wrapped around her throat, but it didn't connect. He straddled her again as he put more force into choking her. Tears leaked down the corners of her eyes as he squeezed her throat while she clawed at his hands, trying to splutter for air. He hovered over her, face twisted into manic rage, and continued trying to strangle the life out of her. Tasha closed her eyes tightly. Was this how it ended? Did Jeremy get to take *everything* away from her? Anger flickered to life within Tasha, intermingling with the fear and disgust she felt. He did not get to take it all from her. She wouldn't accept that. She *couldn't* accept that. She had too much life left to live. Too many memories left to make. She squeezed her eyes shut and forced herself to stop fighting to breathe. A few eternal seconds passed before she felt the tightness around her neck ease. Tasha took desperate gulps of air.

“Did you let him fuck you?” Jeremy demanded. “Did he fuck you?”

Tasha met the angry darkness in his eyes with anger of her own. She knew better than to poke the bear, but it might be the only way to make him angry enough to give her the one chance, the one opportunity, the one shot she needed to have any hope of getting away from him.

“Answer me!” he screamed, hitting her in the face again. Tasha swallowed the blood and tried to find her voice.

“No, he didn't,” Tasha coughed, managing to pull her lips back into a shadow of a smile. “*I* fucked him.”

He lost his shit then, grabbing her shirt so he could yank her entire body up and slam it back onto the floor. She hurt so fucking much, but Tasha kept her eyes trained on him, even as the blows rained down, waiting for a chance, *any chance*. He stopped straddling her and yanked her to her feet, pulling at

her shirt until her buttons popped off, and she stood almost topless in front of him.

“I’m going to make sure *this* hurts.”

Every breath Tasha took hurt as fear and panic sliced into her. Her thoughts went instantly to the night before with Cole, where every touch was engineered for her pleasure and filled with love.

“You’ll have to kill me first,” she spat, not knowing if she’d found courage or if she was just being foolhardy.

Jeremy chuckled, bringing his palm to her cheek much in the same way Cole usually did to comfort her. “Don’t threaten me with a good time, my love.”

And then she saw it. Her moment. Her chance. Her shot.

His thumb rested near to her lips, so Tasha summoned all the energy she possessed, opened her mouth, and bit down. *Hard*. She bit so hard her jaw hurt, and Jeremy’s pained scream rang out. He tried to yank his finger from her mouth, but she bit harder. He tried to grab her hair to pull her off him, but she kept on biting. She used the few seconds he was more concerned with the pain in his finger to drive her knee into his stomach with as much force as she could muster. He staggered backward, and Tasha took the opportunity to kick him hard in the balls. Jeremy released his grip on her immediately, and although Tasha’s blood sang with the vindication of finally being able to hurt him, she took off running toward the front door...yanking it open and stumbling out before Jeremy could catch up with her. Her body screamed each step of the way, and her heart dropped to the floor when she realized she couldn’t possibly outrun Jeremy down the stairs. She almost wilted with relief when the door across the hall opened.

“Help me, please!” she screamed. She hobbled quickly across the hall and pushed her neighbor back into her apartment before slamming the door shut and turning the deadbolt. She only briefly caught the horrified look on the woman’s face before her body succumbed to the pain and loss of adrenaline. Tasha sank to the floor as she met the woman’s alarmed gaze with pleading eyes. “Please don’t let him in.”

The woman's gaze went from the front door Jeremy was pounding on like he was trying to break it down to Tasha lying bloodied on the floor. She could see the quickening rise and fall of her chest as the shock wore off and panic started flowing through her. She took a step toward Tasha and helped her from the floor, settling her on the couch.

"I'm going to call the police," the woman said, and Tasha almost cried with relief. She patted her body, wincing in pain but surprised as hell that her cell phone was still in the back pocket of her jeans. She grimaced at the cracked screen protector when she thought of how much force Jeremy must have slammed her to the ground with. Tasha pushed the thought away as she scrolled to the number of one person she needed. Her fingers shook so hard it took her three attempts before she pressed the connect button.

She couldn't hold back the tears when Cole finally answered.

"Cole!" she screamed. "He's back."

CHAPTER SIXTY-EIGHT

Cole was wrapping up Xander's workout when his Apple Watch flashed that Tasha was calling him. He pushed away the instant panic he felt as irrationality as he signaled to Xander that he needed to get the call. His chest constricted with a vice grip when he heard Tasha screaming that the sonofabitch was back.

"Are you hurt?" he asked, his heart slamming against his chest. He needed to get her as far away from Jeremy as possible. "Go straight to my place. I'll meet you there."

"I can't," she said, with enough panic in her voice that Cole's blood ran cold. "I'm locked in a neighbor's apartment. She called the police."

Jesus Christ.

Cole could barely draw a breath the way panic sat like an anvil on his chest. Why the fuck had he let her go back to that apartment on her own? He pushed the guilt away. It wasn't going to help either of them right now.

"Are you okay?" he asked, his hand forming a fist at his side as he waited for her answer.

"I need you to come," she said quietly. "You need to come."

"I'll be there," he whispered. "I'll be there as quickly as I can."

He disconnected the call and headed back to Xander, with the knowledge that Tasha never really answered the question

about whether she was hurt sitting like a stone in his stomach.

He found Xander looking at him curiously when he returned to where his friend was finishing up his set. “Yo, I’m going to have to go. Call Jay and Cherry for me. I gotta call off practice tonight.”

“Is everything okay?”

Cole took a few deep breaths, Tasha’s scared voice infiltrating his senses as he grabbed his gym bag. “Make sure you pick up if I call you, ‘kay? You might have to bail a nigga out of jail.”

He could see the confused look on Xander’s face when he turned to leave, but he didn’t have the time to explain anything to his friend. He tried his hardest to keep a lid on the rage threatening to explode like a volcano within him. He knew sitting right alongside the anger was helplessness and fear because when Cole got to Tasha, he had no idea what he would find.

* * *

IT WAS WORSE THAN HE IMAGINED.

Cole had expected to find Tasha frazzled, but he hadn’t expected her to be battered. He swore loudly when the neighbor, Jane, opened the door to the apartment after verifying through the peephole that he wasn’t Jeremy and found Tasha lying on the couch. Her blouse was ripped, exposing the bra he’d helped her hook earlier that morning. His heart stopped beating when she turned to face him, and he finally got a good look at her. Her lips were split, her left eye was swollen, and she was holding her stomach like something was broken as tears slid down her cheek. He rushed to the couch and kneeled in front of her, trying to tuck away the anger to focus on what was important. He should have expected things to be bad when he saw the frantic look in Jane’s eyes as she told him the police were on their way.

“Tee,” he whispered, brushing his thumb lightly against her cheek. “He won’t fucking get away with this.”

She shook her head. “Don’t try to find him. *Please*. Stay with me.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” he whispered fervently, even though he refused to make any promises about not hunting that sonofabitch down and giving him a bitter taste of his own medicine.

The next few hours were some of the longest of Cole’s fucking life. He sat impatiently while the police took a preliminary statement from Tasha, barely holding on to his temper when they ignored the fact she needed to be seen by a doctor. He almost got into an argument with triage in the emergency room at the nearest hospital for ranking her as low-priority until he gave up and took her to a private clinic instead. The strange looks he received weren’t lost on him, but it wasn’t until the doctor at the clinic asked him to step out so that she could speak to Tasha that it dawned on him they thought he could have been the monster who did this to her.

The woman with the dark brown skin and short locs looked apologetic when she came back to usher him into the room.

“She wants you with her.”

The helplessness was a tourniquet around his neck, stopping his breath. Every tear she cried was a shard to his chest; each wince when the doctor tried to clean her up left him with his hands fisted at his side. That nigga had no idea what was coming to him. He clenched his jaw so tightly he thought he’d break it when Tasha screamed in pain as the doctor pressed on her stomach. The x-ray confirmed that a rib was broken, just as he feared, and that just added gasoline to the rage burning within him.

He sat stiffly as the doctor spoke about prescriptions to fill, healing times, and next steps, but all he could think about was how badly he wanted to beat Jeremy until he drowned in his blood and inadequacy.

“Are you going to be her caregiver?” the doctor asked as she finished writing the scripts.

Cole cleared his throat. “Yeah.”

“Step outside with me.”

Dr. Reynolds escorted him outside for the second time. “You know who did this?”

“Her husband,” he said even though it caused him physical pain to refer to Jeremy as such. “The last I checked, the police were looking for him.”

That seemed to surprise the doctor, and she took a few seconds before she spoke again. “I figured you were involved.”

“We are,” he said, daring her to challenge it. One of the police officers had snidely asked Tasha if the blowup had come about because of her cheating, dragging his glance to Cole as he asked the question. His partner had stepped in before Tasha could answer the question, but Cole almost lost his shit on the officer all the same.

“She needs you more than you need to seek whatever revenge I see being plotted in your eyes whenever I look at you,” she said softly. “The broken ribs are the worst of it, and those will resolve in six weeks with enough rest once she follows the guidelines and breathing exercises I’ve laid out. I want to see her in a week. In the meantime, focus on her instead of the anger I know you are feeling. She’s going to need you to love up on her extra hard.”

Cole wondered what was in his demeanor that the doctor felt the need to ensure he didn’t do anything reckless, but he accepted her words.

“Okay,” he said. “I’ll do that.”

It took another few hours for him to fill the prescriptions and get Tasha settled in the downstairs bedroom. He wrapped the blanket around her, pressing a soft kiss to her forehead before allowing her to succumb to the effects of the painkillers and the valium Dr. Reynolds prescribed. He watched her sleeping for a few hours until hunger forced him into the kitchen to make something to eat. He was so angry his head

felt light, and Cole could feel himself about to do something reckless, so he called the one person who could talk him down.

“Hey, baby,” his mother answered. He could hear the smile in her voice and regretted the way he knew the conversation was about to go.

“He hurt her really bad,” he said. “And it’s the grace of God preventing me from finding that man and fucking him up.”

He gave his mother an overview of the last few hours of hell and wasn’t surprised when she didn’t have an answer for him right away.

“The doctor was right,” she said. “Leave the husband to the police. Tasha is more important right now. And Cole, you can’t risk getting yourself into any more trouble.”

There was logic to what his mother was saying, but it was hard to see behind the blinding light of Cole’s anger.

“He can’t get away with this,” Cole insisted.

“And he won’t, but his comeuppance won’t be by your hands. Do you hear me? This is exactly what I’ve been afraid of all along. You don’t go making a bigger mess out of things because you want to make him pay, Cole. Do you hear me?”

His voice was soft when he responded. “I hear you.”

“And do you understand?” his mother asked, tension lining the shaky edges of her voice.

Cole sighed. “I hear you.”

CHAPTER SIXTY-NINE

The sadness pressing against Tasha's chest was in some ways more painful than the steady aching in her stomach and head. Sleep was fitful, plagued with dreams of how things went down inside the apartment and how much worse things might have been.

She didn't remember how much she tossed and turned or how often she awoke with sweat on her brow. But she did remember that Cole was always there...with a warm hand caressing her back, a package of frozen veggies to soothe her face, water, more pain killers, or sometimes just a shoulder to cry onto until the tears wouldn't come anymore.

"You need to get some sleep."

Cole was sitting up in bed, leaning against the headboard and staring off ahead. Tasha's heart hurt. She couldn't imagine his headspace in that moment.

He turned to face her, giving her a smile she was a little bit offended he thought she would buy.

"How are you feeling?"

"Achy," she said. She tried to sit up in bed, wincing as a sharp pain in her ribs stole her breath.

Cole moved quickly to steady her and prop enough pillows around her so she could sit up comfortably. He checked his watch. "It's about time for you to have your next dose. Let me go get you something to eat."

“Cole,” she said. “You need to rest. I know you didn’t get much sleep, if any.”

“I’m good,” he said, even though nothing about him seemed okay. His jaw was clenched, eyes hard, and his body was so stiff, Tasha worried he’d break if she tried to reach out and touch him. She allowed him to go, knowing neither of them had the strength for a back-and-forth in this moment. She closed her eyes and tried to fight away the tears but reopened them quickly. She didn’t want to see the image of Jeremy’s face contorted with anger which seemed to be burned behind her eyelids.

My God.

How the hell did it come to *that*? She knew Jeremy was dangerous. She feared him. It was the reason she’d tried to escape while he was away. Nothing could have prepared her for the nightmare that unfolded within the walls of the apartment, not even all the nights she fell asleep with the stink of fear. This was the first time Tasha knew without the barest hint of doubt Jeremy would kill her. Tears leaked from her eyes as she continued struggling to halt the macabre slideshow playing in her mind. That was how Cole found her when he returned with strawberry jam on toast, scrambled eggs, coffee, water, and her painkillers — crying silently, trying her best to not aggravate her ribs.

His shoulders slumped like he was carrying the entire world on them as he took in the sight in front of him. He made his way to her and placed the tray on an empty spot on the bed before he cuddled her, gently rubbing her back and stroking her scalp as she cried. He placed tender kisses along her bruises, and Tasha was overwhelmed by all the feelings warring inside her.

“I promise you everything will be okay,” Cole whispered. “I’m sorry I failed you.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I shouldn’t have let you go alone,” he said. He sounded so damned disappointed in himself, and Tasha’s heart hurt a little bit more.

“You didn’t do *anything* wrong,” she said. “How could you even think that?”

His jaw muscles flexed as she watched the man she’d grown to love so damn much struggle to contain his feelings.

“He could have killed you, Tee.”

The raw pain in his voice chafed at Tasha’s already tender heart. She tried to breathe deeply as she pushed away memories of Jeremy’s fingers digging into her neck, cutting off her oxygen supply. She brought her hand to her neck, wincing at the tender flesh.

“He could’ve killed me,” she accepted. She reached out and covered Cole’s hand. “But he *didn’t*. I’m here with you and *safe*. I don’t need you to beat yourself up about something you didn’t have any control of. I don’t need you to be planning ways to fuck him up, either.”

She didn’t miss the way the muscle in Cole’s jaw jumped. Tasha fought down the urge to argue with him about that. She’d find the strength for that battle some other time.

“So, what is it you need me to be doing?” he asked. She could hear the effort he put into keeping his voice playful and light.

She thought for a while. “Sing for me while I eat. You know you got that superstar voice and all.”

His lips twitched, but he surprised her by lying diagonally across the bed and motioning for her to start eating. Once she took a bite, he scooted closer to her, making small circles with his thumb on her thigh as he started singing a rendition of ‘Make You Feel My Love’ that had Tasha’s heart squeezing in her chest for how much it expanded. Her hand shook each time she brought the toast to her lips as she fought tears while she listened to Cole singing in his deep, smooth voice about offering her a warm embrace, drying her tears, and there being nothing that he wouldn’t do to make her feel his love.

This man.

He finished the song with a goofy falsetto which revealed once again how much of his vocal ability he kept hidden

before reaching over to hand her the painkillers she needed to take. He watched her take them; then he was taking the dirty dishes to the kitchen and returning with more frozen vegetables and a dish towel so he could ice her face. He gently kissed her forehead each time she winced.

“It’s like the Universe knew I’d need you and conspired to put you in my path,” she whispered, unable to stop the tears brimming in her eyes from falling to the tops of her cheeks. “How can you make me feel so light when I should be suffocating?”

He shifted the makeshift icepack to his other hand so he could wipe those tears away. “I will do whatever to keep you feeling light. Even if it means dragging my guitar here and performing a personal concert for you.”

Tasha chuckled lightly. “Don’t be making promises you won’t keep.”

Cole raised an eyebrow and cocked his head to the side. “Wait? You’re doubting me? Aight.”

He was off the bed and heading to the door before she could tell him she was just teasing. Cole proved time and time again that he backed up his words with actions, and he never made a promise he didn’t intend to keep. She was still thinking about just how steady Cole was when her phone started to ring. Navaya’s name flashed on the screen, and Tasha watched it for a few seconds. She allowed herself to breathe a little when the ringing stopped. She knew the moment she heard Navaya’s voice, the tears would come again, and the entire story would come spilling from her mouth. She wasn’t quite ready for that yet. She sent her a quick message, apologizing for missing their meeting and promising she would set up another time for them. She was about to toss the phone to the side when it began to ring again. She forgot to breathe. The ringtone she’d used for Jeremy felt like ice-cold fingers wrapped around her throat. She watched it ring, hysteria rising within her, and was almost in tears when the ringing stopped. He started calling again almost instantly. Cole found her staring at the phone as it rang when he returned.

“Is that him?” he asked, not bothering to hide the anger in his voice. Tasha nodded before moving to turn the phone face down on the bed. She tried to summon a bright smile. “I can’t believe you actually went for your guitar. Come play me some Ari Lennox.”

“Don’t do that,” Cole said. He came to sit next to her, placing the guitar on the floor. The teasing had flown straight out of his body. He was just anger and tension now. Tasha reached out to cover his hand with hers and gave him a little squeeze.

“I’m not doing anything other than not letting him get to me,” she said. “Please don’t let him ruin the moment.”

He started to say something, but her phone chimed loudly, indicating a new message had come in. Despite trying to play it cool, Tasha felt sparks of anger flare inside her. Jeremy really was scum. She wouldn’t answer the phone, so he moved on to another tactic to make sure she heard what he had to say. Morbid curiosity flowed alongside her anger. What exactly could Jeremy possibly be trying to say to her? Did he think there were any words that could erase, excuse or even explain the levels of violence he’d inflicted on her? She snatched up the phone, trying to ignore Cole’s intense gaze, and checked it, fully expecting to see messages from Jeremy showing his ass. Except, it was Navaya explaining she had called and asking Tasha to text her when she could. She typed out a half-dead message promising she would before she switched her phone to Do Not Disturb mode and placed it on the bed.

Exhaustion filled her, but she tried not to dwell on the ache in her chest that kept widening. How the hell was this her life? She tried to fight the overwhelming urge to fall apart, but soon, it suffocated her. Cole, as usual, was there to catch her before she fell...to be that soft place he promised to be. He was on the bed and cuddling her into him before the first sob broke, and then he held her as she once again cried out the sadness, frustration, and exhaustion she felt. He rubbed her back as he whispered repeatedly against her temple. “Let it all out, Tee. I got you.”

She allowed his assurance to fill her up and soothe at the raw parts of her soul as she leaned into the sweetness of the truth he spoke.

I got you.

CHAPTER SEVENTY

His anger was a visceral thing.

Cole knew the last thing he should do was feed into it, but it was so damned hard. The police said they were still looking for Jeremy, but it didn't seem like they were looking *that* hard if the nigga still had time to be blowing up Tasha's phone. He bet he wouldn't have to look much further than the apartment to find the asshole. Cole wanted to do just that, but he paused every time he thought of lying to Tasha about needing to grab something from the gym. She was trusting him not to give in to the poisonous impulses of his anger. It turned out Cole wanted to keep Tasha's trust more than he wanted to bash Jeremy's head in. He tried to let the tight cords of rage loosen in his chest as he soothed Tasha. He brushed his lips against her forehead, unable to fight the increasing helplessness he felt. How did he even begin to start making this right? He'd told Tasha he had her back, but he wasn't even there when she needed him most. He remembered how fiercely Tasha tried to put those thoughts to rest. Logically, he knew there was no way either of them could have suspected Jeremy would be back. He'd asked her if she wanted him to come with her, but that was because he worried about how she'd react emotionally to stepping foot in that apartment for the first time in so long. That she might have been in danger never crossed his mind. He wished it had.

Cole was so lost in thoughts, he didn't immediately take notice of the fact Tasha had stopped crying, and her breathing was leveled out, indicating she'd fallen asleep. He was

thankful she managed to fall off. He hadn't slept a wink the night before, but Tasha didn't really get much rest, either. She'd tossed and turned nonstop while she cried in her sleep. There wasn't a circle of hell low enough for that asshole, but as Cole stroked Tasha's scalp, he realized he had lost track of *who* was important in all of this. Jeremy's time would come, Cole swore that. But right now, Tasha needed to be his sole concern. He stayed there for a short while, just enjoying the feel of her against him before he got up and went to arrange his schedule at the gym as well as let his bandmates know he wouldn't make their next gig. Calling off the gym for the next few days would be easy enough as he only had two personal clients to juggle around, and another trainer agreed to take them on. He anticipated a little more resistance with practice. The *Kimani Exchange* led to a few people wanting to discuss management opportunities, and they'd agreed for Annalisa, the prospect they all vibed with, to come watch their next gig. He was about to tell everyone he couldn't make it without giving them a concrete reason why.

Cole grabbed a beer and settled on a bench in the backyard, ignoring the gentle nip of cold air as he placed a call to Jay. His cousin answered on the third ring.

"You better not be looking for another favor," he teased.

Cole sighed. "Things got pretty fucked up, Jay. I won't be able to make the next few practice sessions or the gig."

There was a brief pause.

"You know Quinn and Cherry gonna have your head, right? Hell...Xander, too. What happened?"

Cole recounted everything that had gone down for the second time, noting that his anger burned just as hot as it did when he spoke to his mother the night before.

"Damn," Jay said about thirty seconds after Cole finally stopped speaking. "What are you going to do about it?"

He couldn't stop the gruff laughter that rang from his mouth. *Finally*. Finally, somebody expected him to do

something other than sit on his ass and let that man get away with hurting the woman he loved.

“Unfortunately, nothing,” he spat, more harshly than he intended — more harshly than Jay deserved. He softened his voice when he continued, “Tasha and my mother *and the doctor* have all begged me to keep my cool and keep my focus on Tasha. So, I’m doing that.”

“Reluctantly as fuck, though,” Jay laughed.

“I can’t pretend I’m happy about it. I don’t want to add to all the things I know Tee’s feeling right now, so I’mma fall back for the time being.”

He could imagine the way Jay nodded as he took in what Cole was saying. It was a while before his cousin spoke again. “So, you’re *in love* in love? It’s beautiful to behold.”

“What are you even talking about?”

“That nigga has ‘beat me’ etched into his damn forehead because I can only imagine the rage brewing in you right now. The last person who got you this fucked up got a few stab wounds for his trouble,” Jay said, chuckling a little bit at his own joke before he checked himself. “I really need to stop doing that, don’t I?”

Cole rolled his eyes. “You’re good, bruh. Just get to your point.”

“I only need to have the emotional depth of a puddle to know this entire situation is probably bringing up a lot of parallels, and so it must suck musty balls to force yourself to be still. But you’re doing that. You’re taking on that discomfort because Tee’s happiness means more.”

Jay was rarely ever serious, but he could be insightful as hell when he put his mind to it. That’s why Cole chose to ignore the teasing, high-pitched way he said ‘Tee.’

“Her happiness means everything, man. It cuts me up inside to think about anyone hurting her that much and not doing anything about it. But you’re right...it ain’t about me. I’m going to spend the next few days keeping a smile on her face instead of thinking of bashing in that fucker’s.”

“I hear you,” Jay said. “And I got you too. I’ll keep everyone off your back while you take care of what’s yours.”

“I appreciate it.”

“There are about five hundred ways I can think of for you to show your appreciation,” Jay chuckled, “but that’s for another time. You go get back to making your woman happy.”

CHAPTER SEVENTY-ONE

Cole did just what Jay suggested in the two days that followed. He distracted Tasha with as many things as he could. They got halfway through what felt like a never-ending game of Monopoly, and Cole couldn't even feel a way about Tasha handing his ass to him because she was so damn gleeful about it. They watched three seasons of *Orphan Black*, and when they weren't playing games or watching shows, Cole played the guitar for her. He sang her songs he wrote with her in mind but always stopped short of admitting she was his muse. Someday, when the time was right, but not one of these days. He didn't want his first utterance of the emotion that had a vice grip on his heart to be shadowed by the cloud of the ugliness Jeremy had created. Because there *was* a cloud. It didn't matter how many board games they played. It didn't matter how many *Animal Crossing* streams he suffered through with her. It didn't matter that they'd stumbled across a clip of *Family Matters* on YouTube, which led to them watching Urkel and his antics in a haze of nostalgia with Tasha cuddled against him in the position she found aggravated her ribs the least. The cloud was there because she *had to consider her ribs in the first place*. It hovered because he had to watch the bruises on her body start going through the phases of healing, which shocked him at first by seeming darker and more swollen one morning Tasha woke up. It took a deep dive down the Google rabbit hole before he convinced himself that bruises, like many other things, got worse before they got better.

Over the last two days, Jeremy wouldn't stop calling, and calling, *and calling*. When he realized Tasha wouldn't answer the phone, the text messages started. Cole had never wanted to punch someone in the face as badly as he did Jeremy. Whenever audacity was shared, that nigga helped himself to a quadruple dose because there was no way in hell any normal person could fix their fingers to type out the things he did to the woman he abused for years and tried to kill. Things like he loved her more than life itself, and he couldn't live without her. He threatened to end his life if she didn't come back *where* she belonged and managed to reduce everything that had happened in the apartment to a *misunderstanding*. He watched as the messages became angrier and crueler the more time that passed without a response. *Then?* Then the asshole's real colors came out. He reminded her she was nothing, had nothing, would be nothing to "*the nigga trying to finesse you out of some pussy*" and that she would eventually be dropped like the trash she was.

He'd wanted to take the damn phone, but Tasha stopped him. She was still texting back and forth with Navaya, who was becoming alarmed by her radio silence, promising her they'd meet up and talk in a few days. She eventually had to tell Navaya she wasn't staying at the apartment, which led to Navaya blowing up her phone almost as much as Jeremy was. Navaya was calling out of love and concern while Jeremy was an egomaniac, frightened that he was losing control, but the result was the same... Tasha was stressed as hell, and Cole wasn't about to have that.

"Give me the phone, Tee," he said, trying to inject as much finality into his voice as he could without seeming controlling. "You need to rest awhile."

She hesitated, but when Jeremy started calling again, she allowed him to take the phone. Her face was still streaked with tears, and Cole tried to fight against the waves of helplessness he felt as he told her he needed to run to the kitchen to check on the lasagna in the oven.

Some things get worse before they get better.

He tried to keep that thought in his mind as he pulled the lasagna and the chicken from the oven and placed them on the countertop to cool. He checked in on Jay and Cherry as he gathered the ingredients for the tossed salad, happy as hell that the gig was going well without him, even if Cherry was a little bit salty he wasn't there. He hated that he'd disappointed them, but Cole didn't regret his choice to sit the gig out. Tasha was his priority and would remain his priority for as long as she allowed. No ifs, ands, buts, or maybes.

He was grabbing plates when the phone he'd taken from her and casually tossed on the counter next to the stove started ringing again. He wasn't surprised to find Navaya's name flashing on the ID. He wasn't sure what the last thing Tasha texted to her friend was, but Navaya had been calling since then. He sighed, torn between knowing he had to respect Tasha's privacy and knowing Navaya was worried as hell. He made the decision without thinking too hard about it.

"Hey, Nav," he said, leaning against the counter.

"Cole?"

Navaya didn't even try to hide the bewilderment in her voice.

"Tee's fine. I know you're worried, but calls are overwhelming her right now. She'll talk to you."

There was a short pause before Navaya started speaking again, voice thick with confusion. "You answering Tasha's phone calling her a pet name when I didn't even know y'all talk like that isn't helping, Cole."

"You trust me?"

"I do, but..."

"Then trust me," Cole said, hoping he sounded a lot calmer than he was feeling. "And please don't tell Xander about this."

Xander was smart, and Cole knew it wouldn't take much for him to connect this with his little oversharing session at Gary's Burgers.

"Wait. You're not coming tonight?"

“Cherry got me covered. I needed to stay with Tee. Tell me how much they suck without me, ‘kay?”

Then he was hanging up before Navaya could ask any more questions. He really wanted to tell her what was going on because as scared as Tasha was to admit she’d been keeping something so big and ugly from Navaya, she needed her best friend. He was thinking of ways to gently nudge Tasha in that direction sooner rather than later when the phone rang again. This time, it wasn’t Navaya calling. It was an unknown number, but Cole didn’t have to think too hard to know who it was. He let it ring for a while before he answered.

“Hello.”

There was a pause before the man responded. “Who the fuck is this?”

Jeremy sounded just like he remembered him sounding that night on the pavement in D.C. His voice dripped with enough arrogance to make Cole dig his fingers into his palm.

“Who the fuck am I?” he said with a humorless chuckle. “I’m the guy you should hope remains a voice on the other end of the phone.”

“I want to speak to my wife.”

“Nigga, you don’t have a wife,” Cole said, infusing his voice with the type of deathly calm that would scare any rational person. “And if you keep it up, you won’t have a life, either. Leave Tasha alone, you fucking asshole, because all the things I’ve got planned if we ever come face-to-face will easily attract twenty-five to life.”

Cole knew anything Jeremy said next would invite him to test the twenty-five to life theory, so he disconnected the call and powered the phone off. He finished plating dinner, grabbed Tasha’s pain meds, and headed back to the bedroom, where they ate while watching another episode of *Family Matters*. He helped her take a quick shower before they returned to bed, where she snuggled into him as much as she could as she allowed sleep to start taking her.

“Cole?”

Her drowsy voice always made him want to hold her close and kiss the sleep away.

“Yes, babe?”

“Thanks for being here.”

He kissed her forehead and smiled. “Where else would I be?”

She laughed softly at that and then allowed sleep to fully claim her.

He couldn't tear his gaze away from the woman sleeping in his arms. She looked so soft and so peaceful, even though Cole couldn't imagine the chaos in her mind.

I love you so fucking much.

Jeremy was going to fuck around and find out if he didn't get his act together real soon.

Cole Mason didn't play with people he cared about.

He pulled no punches when it came to the people he loved.

And Tasha?

Tasha was his entire world.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-TWO

Tasha couldn't get a grip on the myriad of emotions pummeling her from each side the more she thought about Navaya being right outside the bedroom door. She heard her friend exchange pleasantries with Cole, and then there were two soft knocks against the door. She held her breath. She'd put off meeting with Navaya for a further two days after Cole told her friend she would meet with her to talk soon. When Tasha thought about it, she had been putting off this conversation with Navaya for years now, and she still didn't feel ready for it. Far from. She'd fussed over the bruises on her face, neck, and arms, contemplating trying to see if she could cover them up with makeup before she stopped herself. Tasha sat with her feelings for a while. She didn't like recognizing the shame that still knocked around her chest, making it ache. She was ashamed to admit what her marriage had been like... she was ashamed for Navaya to see her like *this*. Tasha had often imagined how telling Navaya would go. Hell, in those early days, while she was still figuring out how she'd make her escape from Jeremy, she often counted telling Navaya as the final step. The step that made her exit from the hell that was being married to Jeremy real. She pictured confidently and happily telling Navaya how she outsmarted him, showing her all of the exciting plans she had for her future and having her see that she was *fine*. She wanted to tell Navaya when she had everything *under control*. She wanted to be able to accept that she had made a fucked-up mistake allowing Jeremy to get close to her in the first place, but she was able to pull herself out. She wanted Navaya to see that she was a survivor.

She didn't feel like a survivor.

Not with bruises Jeremy had inflicted still on her body.

Not when she thought about just how badly things could've gone each time she closed her eyes.

Not when she still felt like she was buckling under the weight of the last five years.

"Tee, Navaya is here."

Her eyes flicked to the door at the sound of Cole's voice. She took a few more seconds to gather her strength before she told him they could come in. She was surprised for a split second when Cole was the one who came through the door. He sat on the bed, cradling her cheeks in his hands. "Hey, you okay? Have you changed your mind? You don't have to do anything you don't want to."

And just like that, the knots that were so tight in her lungs that she struggled to breathe loosened a bit.

"I'm scared," she admitted. "What if she doesn't forgive me?"

"There's nothing to forgive, and even if there was...of course, she'll forgive you," Cole assured. "Navaya loves you. You're good. You just got to do the hard thing so you can both start moving forward from it."

She took a deep breath and nodded, acknowledging the wisdom in his words even though they didn't offer the comfort she was sure he intended. Cole brought his forehead to hers. "I'll be right outside, and no matter how this goes... I'll be here."

Tears welled in her eyes. "It's not your job to make everything better."

"The fuck it isn't," he said, voice serious. "I love you, Tee. Whose job is it to make your life better if not mine?"

Her heart slammed against her chest. It wasn't even that she needed Cole to tell her that he loved her. She already knew since he'd been *showing her* he loved her all this time. He made her heart so fucking soft. Tasha didn't have to think too

hard when he started thumbing away the tears that pooled atop her cheekbones and pressed a soft kiss to her forehead.

“I love you too, Cole,” she breathed.

He brushed his lips across hers, and Tasha resisted the urge to deepen the kiss.

“I was waiting for the perfect moment to tell you for the first time,” he admitted. “I couldn’t keep it in anymore.”

She kissed him. “*This* was the perfect moment.”

“Good,” he whispered. “Are you ready?”

Cole smiled when she nodded and then placed soft kisses against the bruise-marred skin of her face. He offered her a few more words of reassurance before he returned to the door and held it open. Tasha’s heartbeat tripled when Navaya walked through the door.

Navaya looked past Cole, and when her gaze finally landed on Tasha sitting on the bed, her eyes widened, and her mouth fell open.

“Tasha?” she said, moving toward the bed with quickening steps. “What the hell is going on?”

CHAPTER SEVENTY-THREE

Tasha watched Navaya's gaze sweep over her, wincing ever so slightly as she took her in.

"Tasha?" Navaya said. The questioning note in her voice was lined with panic. Knowing the story she was about to tell her friend wouldn't soothe the panic but instead make things so much worse made Tasha a little bit sad. She patted the spot on the bed Cole vacated mere minutes before. "We need to talk."

Navaya was dressed down in black yoga pants and an oversized forest green sweater with her box braids pulled back in a ponytail, but the anxiety that clouded her aura was what stood out the most. She walked woodenly to the bed and sat. She raked her gaze over Tasha again, stopping to stare at her fingers before she fixed her watery eyes on her. Her lips trembled as she finally spoke.

"Jeremy did this."

It wasn't a question.

Tasha didn't try to wipe away the warm tears flowing down her cheek as she nodded. "Yes."

A kaleidoscope of emotions flashed across Navaya's face. Tasha watched as confusion, anger, and sadness filled her eyes. She could tell Navaya had a million questions circling around her head, so she remained quiet, allowing Navaya to lead the difficult conversation they needed to have.

You just got to do the hard thing so you can both start moving forward from it.

She allowed Cole's words to wash over her, offering her the fortification she needed as she braced for the question she was sure Navaya would ask. She tried to steel herself to be able to go through what happened in the apartment less than a week ago. It turned out Navaya was interested in more than how she got the bruises healing about her body.

"How long, Tasha?" she asked in a quiet, shaky voice. "How long has Jeremy been doing this to you?"

Tasha squeezed her eyes shut. "Almost our entire marriage."

Navaya gasped. "That's years we're talking about..."

Her words trailed off like she was hoping Tasha would somehow amend what she said. Tasha's voice was soft when she responded, "I know."

Navaya's eyes widened. "Years, Tasha? Years? How could you not tell me that he has been hurting you for *years*?"

Her voice went really soft, and the tears started flowing like a dam had broken when she spoke again. "How did I not realize?"

She cupped her hand over her mouth and tried to smother a sob. "What kind of fucking friend am I that I didn't realize you were going through this? Oh my God."

Tasha's heart dropped. She'd been so busy worrying about Navaya being mad at her for keeping such a huge thing secret that she hadn't paused to consider...not even once...that her friend would feel guilty. That Navaya would feel like she'd failed *her* as a friend for not noticing something Tasha went to great lengths to hide.

"You couldn't have noticed something I made sure you didn't, Vaya," she said.

Navaya shook her head, lips tight, immediately rejecting what Tasha said.

“But things *were* off sometimes. Every so often, you’d say something or be in a mood that made me wonder if something was wrong in your marriage. I’d ask you about it, and you’d brush me off... I’d *allow* you to brush me off because I was worried if I pressed too hard or said anything foul about Jeremy, we’d have a repeat of what happened when you got engaged.”

“You were afraid I’d push you away,” Tasha said sadly.

Navaya nodded, scrubbing her hand over her face before pushing herself into a standing position and pacing the room.

“I convinced myself you’d confide in me if something was truly wrong.” She stopped pacing. “I thought you’d trust me enough.”

“Navaya, *of course*, I trusted you enough! I was embarrassed... *I still am*. You were the only space I had where I didn’t have to think about all the shit that was going on. Shit I was sure *I caused* by being all up in my feelings when you tried to make me see Jeremy was bad news.” Tasha paused, trying to gather her emotions and the words she needed to make Navaya see how important their friendship was to her surviving that hellhole. She was still gathering her thoughts when Navaya spoke again. “I’m so confused. How does Cole even play into this?”

“He saw,” Tasha whispered. She thought back to that awful night in front of the restaurant. “Jeremy was roughing me up on the street a few months ago, and he just happened to be there. I knew he recognized me, so I showed up at his job to beg him not to tell Xander anything. I figured Xander would tell you immediately, and I didn’t want you to look at me differently...treat me differently. Then I guess I kind of got stuck with him...”

She couldn’t stop the small smile from spreading across her face when she thought of how grateful she was that she *got stuck with* Cole. It didn’t escape Navaya’s notice.

“Wait...is there...are you and Cole...” Navaya stopped talking, seemingly forcing herself to focus on the immediate

issue at hand. “Tasha, what happened? How did he do this to you? *When* did he do this to you?”

You just got to do the hard thing so you can both start moving forward from it.

Tasha tried to keep Cole’s words close as she took a deep breath and asked Navaya to sit next to her.

“This is going to take a while,” she said, swallowing hard. “I need to start at the beginning.”

CHAPTER SEVENTY-FOUR

“**Y**ou’re wearing out those damn hardwood floors,” Xander said with a soft chuckle. “Let’s get a beer and go on the deck so you can sit your ass down. I’m getting tired just looking at you.”

Cole ignored the teasing tone in Xander’s voice. He’d lost track of how long Navaya and Tasha had been talking in the bedroom. He couldn’t help but worry things weren’t going well, and that didn’t sit well with him at all. He was so absorbed in his thoughts that he didn’t notice when Xander moved from where he’d been leaning up against the wall until he placed a hand on his shoulder.

“Come on,” Xander said. “Standing out here isn’t going to make time pass quicker. Besides, I think I deserve an explanation too.”

Cole went with Xander because several points were made, the first being that he and his friend needed to have their own conversation about the last several months.

Xander waited until Cole lit the patio heater and settled next to him with a bottle of beer before he turned with a sly smile and mimicked Cole’s voice when he said, “My attention is somewhere else. *Firmly.*”

Xander sucked his teeth. “I can’t believe you were talking about Tasha. What the fuck, man? *How* the fuck? When I warned you to stay clear of her, you gave me some bullshit and brushed me off. Now, plot twist...”

“Aye, chill,” Cole said. “It wasn’t bullshit. There wasn’t anything going on when we had that convo. I’d just become privy to something Tasha wished I didn’t know.”

Xander nodded, allowing Cole’s words to wash over him.

“And I guess that thing is the basis of the conversation those two are having in there?”

Cole sighed. “Yeah.”

“And I guess that thing is why you were so curious about whether Jeremy was violent or just a pest.”

Cole cleared his throat, trying to get rid of the instinctive flare of anger that flooded his body whenever he heard the asshole’s name. “Exactly that.”

“And I guess I was wrong.”

He flashed Xander a wry smile. “As fuck. I wanted to tell you then, but she made me promise I would keep her confidence. I didn’t want to push her away.”

Xander took a sip of beer and stared at the heater’s flame for a few moments. Cole couldn’t tell if he was just digesting everything or trying to choose where to take the conversation.

“I didn’t mean to fall in love with her, man,” Cole said eventually. “But it felt inevitable, you know? Like I was barreling down this path as soon as she showed up at my office, begging me to keep her secret, and I pulled her into my arms.”

“I relate to that heavy as fuck,” Xander replied. “I finally told Navi how I felt, and we’re making a go of things.”

The atmosphere was heavy, but Xander’s declaration brought a smile to Cole’s face. “Fina-fucking-ly.”

Xander sipped his beer again, falling right back into that reflective mood that had Cole itching to ask him to tell him what was really on his mind.

“Spit it out,” he said after another stretch of silence.

“What are you going to do about your feelings for Tasha?”

“What can I do? She owns my heart in a way I didn’t think was possible. All I want to do is keep her safe and spend the rest of my life finding new ways to love her.”

This time, Cole knew Xander’s silence was down to him, shocking the words out of him.

“It’s like that, huh?” Xander asked. “That’s powerful.”

“And scary as fuck,” Cole admitted. He brought his beer to his lips and took a deep gulp.

“Why?”

“Because half the time, I’m terrified that the same thing that brought us together will tear us apart.”

CHAPTER SEVENTY-FIVE

THREE MONTHS LATER

His fingers gently traced lines up the front of her thigh as his lips brushed against her neck. Cole was half asleep, but Tasha leaned back into him all the same, unsurprised to find his hardness pressed against her ass. She loved the way he reached for her, even during sleep, like his soul just needed to hold her close. She chuckled when those fingers started moving their way up her abdomen until Cole was cupping and caressing her breasts. She pushed herself harder against his length, grinding her ass against him. It was ridiculous how badly her body still craved him even though they'd drifted off to sleep less than five hours ago after making love all night. Her sex throbbed when she remembered all the times and all the ways Cole fucked her. She trembled as she thought about how he had her spread eagle, pretzeled and otherwise contorted. Her rib pain had been gone for nearly a month, and the x-rays showed them fully healed two weeks before, but last night was the first night Cole made love to her without holding back since the day she got hurt. She enjoyed making tender love to Cole, but she'd missed this too. She'd missed him losing himself in his passion for her so that her skin burned from it.

His touches were becoming more insistent now as his hand moved to her core, sliding fingers between her plump, moist flesh and pulling keening cries from her lips.

“That’s my girl,” he whispered against her ear, sleepiness gone from his voice and in its place the deep molasses of desire. Tasha rode his fingers until her body tensed, then

shattered into shards of glorious light, and when Cole covered her body with his and nudged her legs open with his thigh, she was ready to receive each delicious inch of him. The love they made was tender and deliberate, intense in its reverence as his fingertips dug into her pillow-soft flesh, and his lips trailed her forehead, cheek, jawline, and neck. She rolled her hips to meet him thrust after thrust until those slow motions became more frantic as they succumbed to the pleasure pooling deep within, desperate to break free. And when they came, they came together, foreheads pressed against each other, cries intermingling in the air filled with the sweetness of sex and sweat and love.

“Well, that’s one way to wake up,” he whispered against her lips. “Good morning, Ms. Dixon.”

Hearing him call her that never failed to spread sunshine in her chest. That was probably why he’d been doing it constantly for the past three days.

Ms. Dixon.

It wasn’t *official* yet since she had a lot of paperwork to fill out before Turner was dropped from her documents, but the hard part was over. As of three days ago, Tasha was no longer Jeremy’s wife.

She’d cried *hard* when her lawyer called her to her office to collect her divorce decree. Cried harder still when Jacintha Reid handed her a check with the money she had battled with Jeremy’s attorney for, minus her legal fees.

Mrs. Reid had taken one look at Tasha’s fading bruises when she’d gone to her office a few days after the attack, pursed her lips, shook her head, and said, “Oh, hell no. Being free from that man is the bare minimum, Natasha. You deserve more than that. I *will* get you more than that.”

She started by collecting the information needed to apply for a restraining order — an affidavit from the neighbor who likely saved Tasha’s life, a medical report, text messages between them, and a detailed statement from Tasha.

Once the restraining order was granted, she filed documents indicating how heavily she intended to rely on the prolonged physical, emotional, and financial abuse if the divorce was contested. It didn't help Jeremy's case that he had been formally picked up, arrested, charged, and brought before the Court on aggravated assault charges. He pleaded not guilty and put up his bail, but his lawyer eventually persuaded him that a contested divorce was a nightmare scenario, so he agreed — *bitterly so* — to pay back the money he'd stolen from her in addition to what the lawyers agreed was a reasonable amount of spousal support in a lump sum.

Tasha had been present for the negotiations via video link because of the restraining order and would have given anything to look Jeremy in the eye as he seethed while knowing he couldn't touch her. Perhaps that's why he lashed out a few hours later with an Instagram rant, calling her a whore, a cheat, and out to get his money. She'd discarded the screenshots Navaya had sent, feeling oddly satisfied. Jeremy could say whatever he wanted to say, but the one thing he wasn't going to do was touch her...ever again.

It'd taken about six weeks from Jeremy's lawyer depositing the agreed funds into Mrs. Reid's account and the papers being signed to the official decree being issued.

Free.

She had always thought the wait for her divorce would be straight agony, but it wasn't. There were moments when she was down, yes, but she mostly spent those weeks starting her healing process, living, loving, and reconnecting. It was so freeing, finally being able to be fully open with Navaya. Tasha felt like she had released a breath she knew she was holding but hadn't realized how suffocating it was. It took a while for the easy casualness to return between them. They had to get past the hurt and the guilt. But they did. Cole's ass finally got a break since Navaya insisted on showing up early in the mornings and getting into bed with Tasha, chatting those hours away, finally able to shake off some of the heaviness. They giggled and teased each other about the new developments in both their lives. It was such a relief to finally be able to truly

talk about Cole with someone else. She hadn't planned on falling in love with him, but she was there...and deeply so. Jeremy's treatment should have jaded her to the idea of loving anyone else, but it was hard to hold on to the cynicism when Cole constantly showed her that what she experienced with Jeremy wasn't love.

Love did not hurt, oppress, or destroy. Love was beautiful, transformative, and restorative in every fucking way that mattered.

It was that love she felt oozing from her pores when Cole kissed her thoroughly before rolling off her. So much had changed between them in the last three months. Not outwardly, no. Their routines remained mostly the same, even though Tasha now accompanied him to dinner with his mother and her husband at least once a week, and she spent Thanksgiving and Christmas with his extended family. His niece, Aja, had formed a particular attachment to her, staying behind her like a shadow, as her mother would tease, always chattering nonstop. Tasha couldn't help the warm feeling that spread within her when Aja made her promise to help her pick out a dress for her sixteenth birthday. That was years away, but the silent expectation she'd be around meant *everything*. She was feeling more settled than she had in years but was constantly fearful she'd do something to rip away the peace she was building. Maybe that was why she had been pushing back conversations about when she planned to finally start seeing a therapist. She wasn't ready to face the wounds. She wanted some time to just...be. She wanted to enjoy this brief period where things felt like they were going right.

She knew Cole was disappointed in the decision she made, even though he tried his best to be supportive.

Sometimes the best thing you can do for yourself is to face it head-on. Hiding from the feelings won't do a thing but make it three times harder to deal with them when you work up the courage.

The words Cole spoke when she eventually told him her problem wasn't finding a therapist she wanted to work with but that she hadn't been looking at all had been living in her

mind rent-free. That she knew he was speaking from experience made things all that more chilling, but she shook away the panic that formed like a knot at the base of her spine when she started worrying she was making the wrong decision. It wasn't that she wouldn't seek therapy at all. It wasn't even that she wouldn't be seeking out therapy soon.

She just deserved this time...this space...to breathe a little.

Then she'd face it all head-on, just like she promised Cole.

“Trouble in paradise?”

Cole flicked his attention to his mother. She'd paused pouring scalding water from the teapot to glance at Tasha, who was clear on the other end of the living room, talking to Tyrone.

“Why are you asking that?”

His mother made a face. “Other than me not being born only yesterday? Both of your energies were off from the moment you got here. I've never seen you two so out of sync.”

Renee's words were a punch to Cole's already heavy heart. He glanced at Tasha, watching her force herself to be upbeat in her interactions with Tyrone but knowing it was all an act. Intellectually, Cole knew the road to healing wasn't short, nor was it linear, but that didn't stop his emotions from being all over the fucking place.

Flowers.

The hell that had been the last few hours started because Cole decided to surprise Tasha with flowers on his way home from the gym. She'd been getting a steady uptick in orders from *DesignMeNow* and looked so damn gorgeous when he rolled out of bed that morning that he decided to surprise her with a bouquet of sunflowers, hydrangeas, and lilies.

Her reaction had not been what he expected.

She'd been sitting at the desk in the bedroom she used to occupy, looking out of the bay windows when he came in. Her

face widened into a smile when she saw him before it slid to the bouquet he held in his hands, and pain twisted her features. She tried schooling her expression back into something pleasant, but it was too late. She was quick to brush off his concern, but eventually, she turned tear-filled brown eyes to him and explained why she reacted the way she did to what was supposed to be a cute gesture.

Tasha had never told him about how Jeremy always used to surprise her with flowers to defuse the situation when his abuse became out of control, particularly when it was sexual. That shit had him seeing red. It was that anger that made him speak without thinking, managing to put his whole foot into his mouth.

“This is why you need to stop dragging your feet with therapy, Tee.”

He wasn't wrong about her needing to start therapy, but it wasn't the time to point it out, and he realized it as soon as the words flew from his mouth. Anger glinted in her eyes before she pushed her way past him. He didn't follow her, even when he spotted movement in the backyard from the bay windows.

Cole knew that it was always best to respect when Tasha needed to process her feelings on her own. If he was honest with himself, he needed some time too.

He couldn't love Tasha's trauma away, no matter how badly he wished he could reach deep inside her and brush away the hurt that asshole caused. Life didn't work that way. No matter how much he loved her, no matter his good intentions, he couldn't give her the tools she needed to fight this the way a therapist could. Yet, he felt like a failure, and that fueled impatience that wasn't helpful to either of them. She'd stalked back into the house nearly half an hour later and only said four words to him while they got ready to meet his mother and Tyrone for dinner. They were going to have to talk when they got home, that much he knew, but he was allowing her the space she needed.

“What happened to those walking shoes?” Renee asked once he got done telling her what caused the ice between him

and Tasha.

He turned to his mother. “They’re still on my feet. That doesn’t mean I have to be happy that she isn’t doing what she needs to do.”

His mother shook her head, reaching out to squeeze his arm. “Tasha is doing what she thinks she needs to do to get to the point you *think* she should be right now. I told you the road was long and that it isn’t easy. I *know* this. Your heart might be in the right place, but you need to make sure you aren’t letting your desire to have *normal* things make you try to rush her down a road she feels like she needs to be resting on. If you can’t be patient with her, then perhaps you aren’t as ready for this as you thought you were.”

The anger rousing in his stomach at even the suggestion he wasn’t ready to be in a relationship with Tasha was unreasonable, but it burned all the same.

“Don’t say that,” he whispered, defeat crawling along the edges of his voice. “I love her.”

His mother squeezed his shoulder again. He could see the sadness in her eyes. “As she does you. It’s impossible to miss that when you guys are together, but sometimes it isn’t even about the depth of the love two people have for each other. Sometimes the timing is just shit.”

“We’ll get through it,” Cole said. Determination made his voice steel. “No matter what it takes.”

His mother kissed his cheek. “I’m rooting for you.”

CHAPTER SEVENTY-SEVEN

Tasha loved watching Cole sleep, even though it was something she rarely found the time to do with how early he usually woke up. He was sleeping on his stomach, arm spread on the bed as if he was reaching out for her, and she couldn't stop the small smile from forming on her face at how peaceful he looked. He hadn't been looking all that peaceful over the last few weeks, and Tasha hated that worry for her was the cause.

Flowers.

She couldn't believe she'd reacted the way she had to Cole popping up with a bouquet of bright flowers he said reminded him of her. If she'd needed a sign that she wasn't really okay, the Universe sent her a whole billboard. Yet, she couldn't take what she knew was the next logical step. If flowers broke her open so damn raw, what would a therapy session do?

Cole shifted in bed, his eyes opening after a few seconds and locking onto her. His full lips pulled back into a smile. "Morning, baby."

Tasha breathed a small sigh of relief. They'd gone to bed with tension so thick between them that she'd wondered, though briefly, if he would give her the silent treatment. A little part of her crumbled when she realized she was *still* comparing them. The fact that her mind still searched for connections between a man as gentle, as solid, as loving, and as protective as Cole and her abuser was jarring.

Concern flashed across Cole's face, and Tasha realized she hadn't answered him.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I can't believe I lost my shit over flowers and at you because I didn't want to hear the good advice you were trying to give me. I just..."

"Hey, hey, hey," Cole said, brushing the tears that fell to the tops of her cheekbones away. "There isn't anything to apologize for. After everything you told me, I completely understand. I'm sorry I tried forcing the issue about the therapist. I know you need the time and space to be comfortable with it, and my frustration doesn't help."

She allowed him to pull her into a hug, resting her head in the hollow of his neck and marveling at how soft, safe, and secure Cole managed to make her feel whenever she felt herself spiraling out of control.

He deserves better.

The unbidden thought knocked all the air from her lungs, dried up her mouth, and made the tears flow even more. She tried to push it away, but it returned like the persistent knock at the door of someone determined to be let in. It brushed hard against her already raw emotions. Would she ever truly escape the shadow of all the things Jeremy had done? Was she too damaged? Cole deserved better than a woman who flipped out on him when he bought her flowers. The tears came harder then. Cole eased away from her, tipped her chin up with his fingers, and asked, "What's wrong, Tee?"

Tasha tried to get the words out a few times but choked on her tears each time. "What if I can't love you the way you deserve? Cole... I'm broken."

Pain, hot and raw, flashed across his face.

"Tee, if you're broken, then I'm broken too, but guess what? Our sharp edges fit together just right."

Cole brushed his lips across hers. "I love you."

"I love you, too," Tasha whispered.

He kissed her again, but this time he lingered in the kiss like he was trying to chase the doubt and pain away. “I know you do. Your love is the love I deserve. Your love is the love *I choose*. Don’t ever doubt us again.”

Tasha’s head was too filled with thoughts to respond, but she didn’t have to. Cole was kissing her slowly, possessively, like he wanted to make sure she understood what he’d said.

Our sharp edges fit together just right.

His words echoed in her mind even as his lips trailed down her neck and his hands sought her sex. He touched her until she was arching into him, forgetting the doubt that made her mind and heart heavy. And when Cole finally rolled over so that she was pressed underneath him and slid into her inch by inch, Tasha couldn’t think of anything other than how their sharp edges were not the only things that fit together perfectly.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-EIGHT

Tasha stared at the screen, cataloging the details of the *DesignMeNow* order that had just landed in her inbox. A shudder slid down her spine. She tried to push the unease away, just like she had when an order showed up two weeks before that also gave her pause.

“You’re just overreacting,” she muttered to herself, pulling up the order in its entirety. She scrolled through her inbox until she found the previous order, a get well card for a woman called Lola, who’d apparently had an accident and broken a few ribs. Tasha had completed the order with her heart in her throat, her mind a cesspool of memories of the event that led to her own broken ribs and unease trickling down her spine. Her fingers shook all the way through, but Tasha convinced herself she was just too in her head, too fearful, Jeremy’s grip on her firmer than she’d like to admit. It had to be a coincidence, right? She tucked the fear away in a small corner of her mind and continued going about life, not even bothering to tell Cole or Navaya about her suspicions that Jeremy might have found a way to contact her now that she’d changed her number.

Now she wasn’t so sure.

She looked at the order again, knowing in the pit of her stomach that this was no coincidence. Bile rose to her throat. The order was for graphics for a thank you card going out to all who had supported the client ‘James’ during the difficult period following the gruesome death of his wife, Natasha. She couldn’t reason her way out of her intuition. It was more than

the name Natasha. Why the hell would anyone want to reaffirm that his wife died *gruesomely* when thanking friends for their support?

“Fucking hell,” she whispered, heart thudding hard against her chest. Where did she go from here? She wanted to tell Cole. She had even started pushing herself up from the office chair before she stopped. No, she wouldn’t bother Cole with this...not when things were finally returning to normalcy after the whole flower incident the week before.

Tasha’s stomach ached with the anger rousing deep inside when she accepted she was losing hold of some of the threads keeping her together. She took a deep breath. She couldn’t let Jeremy win. She *wouldn’t* let Jeremy win. But she still wasn’t going to talk to Cole.

Her phone chimed almost on cue with a message from Navaya, asking if she wanted to grab mussels for dinner.

Tasha breathed deeply, holding onto the lifeline the Universe threw in her direction.

Tasha: Let’s meet even before then. How about we grab some coffee too?”

Navaya: I’m there. Just say when.

Tasha: Getting ready right now.

She hovered over the order for a full minute before she declined it. Feeling a little bit better, she closed the browser and wandered back into her and Cole’s room. He was lying on the bed flipping through a fitness magazine. He looked up when she opened a drawer, his face breaking out into a wide, adorable ass smile when he saw her. Tasha’s heart raced in her chest.

“Hey, baby,” he said. “Finished working?”

She pulled out a pair of jeans and searched for a top before crossing the room and crawling into bed with Cole. He immediately wrapped her up in his arms. She wanted to tell him about the fear sitting like an elephant on her chest so badly her throat hurt, but she pushed it away. Cole was so tender, loving, and patient to a fault, but Tasha couldn’t fight

the increasing panic that Cole deserved better than what she could offer *right now*. Her eyes burned with tears she refused to shed.

My ex-husband is stalking me.

“I couldn’t get my mind to settle,” she said instead. “Going to play hooky and meet up with Navaya. I might spend the night with her if Xander doesn’t beat me to it.”

He chuckled, kissing her lightly. “Good luck with Xander not beating you to it. Do you need me to do anything?”

Promise me we can make it through this.

Tasha only shook her head. “I’ll get a cab. I love you.”

“I love you too, Tee.”

“I know,” she said with a smile and lightness in her voice she did not feel. She eased herself out of his embrace and shot up off the bed, fleeing to the en suite bathroom. It was only there while she sat on the toilet that she finally allowed the bitter tears stinging her eyes to fall.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-NINE

“Tasha, you need to tell Cole.”

Navaya took a sip of her coffee and fixed a pointed look at her. Tasha shook her head, allowing the suggestion to wash away in the waves of her stubbornness.

“It’s probably just in my head.”

Navaya made a face, reaching for a few of the pastries they’d bought. “Girl, you know it isn’t in your head. I don’t believe in coincidences, and neither do you. That is why you couldn’t help looking over your shoulder the whole way here when you thought I wasn’t paying attention.”

Tasha watched Navaya, her box braids falling to her shoulder and face screwed up with worry, and sighed. “I don’t want to worry him.”

“Don’t you see, Tasha?” Navaya asked with slight exasperation creeping into her voice. She softened her tone when she continued, “We love you. We’re going to worry about you regardless. You don’t get to unilaterally decide to suffer in silence to protect our feelings. We just feel all the shittier when we finally find out what’s going on.”

Guilt swept over Tasha, and Navaya must have seen it in her face because she immediately sighed. “I’m not trying to make you feel bad. Just think about how you would feel if Cole kept something like this from you. All he wants to do is protect you.”

That rubbed at the raw, aching spot in her heart that wouldn't stop hurting, no matter what she did.

“How is that fair to him?”

She hated how her voice shook and how tears welled in her eyes. Tasha tried to blink them away and meet Navaya's eyes, but she couldn't hold her friend's gaze.

“What?”

“Being stuck with a woman who has to worry about shit like her ex-husband plotting against her. Or a woman still affected by her trauma even though she is trying so hard to be okay.”

Navaya's face softened. “Have you started looking into therapists yet?”

“I have.”

She'd really put a lot of effort into trying to find a therapist who was properly suited to her needs over the last week or so. She had her list narrowed down to three, but Tasha was exhausted just thinking about baring her soul...her shame...her sadness...to a stranger. She told Navaya this, choking on the tears that clogged her throat.

“You need to give yourself some grace,” Navaya said, covering her hand with hers and squeezing it. “You are so fucking strong. Everyone can see it. You just have to believe it.”

Navaya's face didn't invite any debate, so Tasha swallowed her comment with a sip of her coffee.

“Back to this possible Jeremy situation, though. You need to make Cole aware.”

“Cole is looking for the simplest reason to hand Jeremy's ass to him,” Tasha said. “I am not going to put him in that position.”

Navaya rolled her eyes. “Jeremy *deserves* to have his ass handed to him.”

“And you know he would report Cole with zero sense of irony. Cole’s business is coming together. I don’t want to propel him into doing something that could put any of that in jeopardy.”

“That man loves you...”

“And what if he shouldn’t?”

Anger flashed in Navaya’s eyes. “I hope you know that this is Jeremy speaking, sabotaging you.”

Tasha shook her head. Her feelings were so confusing, her thoughts hard to put into coherent words, but Tasha knew she wasn’t just parroting insecurities Jeremy put into her head.

“I love Cole so much,” Tasha whispered. “More than I ever loved Jeremy. It’s overwhelming, but not as overwhelming as how sick to my stomach I feel at the thought of ever being without him. Vaya, I don’t think I could walk away from Cole...for his good...or for mine. That scares me. What if I’m not good for him? What if he stops being good for me? Would I stay because the thought of leaving makes me cold? Because I feel like I would, Navaya. I feel like I would try to rationalize *anything* to not have to give him up because I love him so fucking much it hurts. And that is still the Tasha who was with Jeremy. It means I haven’t learned *anything*.”

“Tasha...”

“What if, just like I know everyone was thinking, this is too soon? What if I need to give myself time to heal...time to grow...time to face the shit that keeps me up at night? Love isn’t always enough, Navaya. That is an optimistic lie fairytales feed us. Love always has to contend with reality, and my reality isn’t looking so good right now.”

Tasha didn’t think she would be able to wipe the horrified look on her friend’s face away anytime soon. Navaya’s brown eyes widened, and her mouth dropped open. “Are you considering ending things with Cole?”

The question was like a sledgehammer to her gut, even though that was effectively what her rant to Navaya was about.

“I...” Tasha started, unable to find the words. “I don’t want to. I just don’t... I feel so lost. The only thing I’m sure about is that I love him.”

Navaya leaned over and pulled Tasha into a hug that almost caused the tears to fall. “Come, let’s head back to mine. I’ve got the good liquor there, and God knows we both need it.”

Tasha almost managed to pull her feelings together after washing her face in the restroom. She and Navaya exited the small café where they’d settled for coffee and pastries and stood outside while waiting for the Uber Navaya had ordered.

“Everything is going to be okay,” Navaya was saying. “You two are light in each other’s presence. Nobody can convince me you don’t belong together.”

“I’m not—”

The rest of the words in Tasha’s sentence were swallowed up in a scream when someone grabbed her hand and yanked her hard toward them.

“Hello, Natasha.”

Her heart thudded against her chest when she looked into Jeremy’s face. He was wearing a cap pulled down low and an oversized hoody and jeans. This was so unlike the way Jeremy dressed that Tasha hadn’t given the person who she’d briefly spotted standing on the other side of the road looking at their phone a second glance. The disguise worked.

“You rejected my order?” he sneered. “I figured you needed the work.”

“Let go of me,” Tasha said, yanking her hand.

“Are you still going through with this bullshit case?” he asked, grabbing her even tighter.

“Let her go, you asshole!” Navaya shouted. She grabbed Tasha’s hand and continued screaming at Jeremy, drawing the interest of people nearby.

“You’re only alive because you weren’t worth the effort to kill, Natasha. I’ll have to rethink that position if you dare take

the stand.”

Then he was gone, stalking down the road while a few people who witnessed the incident started coming up to ask her if she was okay.

Tasha’s heart thumped so hard that waves and waves of nausea swept over her.

“Did he just threaten to kill you?” Navaya shrieked, eyes wild.

Tasha couldn’t make herself speak, so she just nodded, placing her hand to her stomach when the nausea became too much to bear.

She managed to push herself through the crowd, bursting back into the small café and toward the bathroom just in the nick of time to lean over the sink and retch.

CHAPTER EIGHTY

It had been two days since Navaya's frantic call interrupted Cole's personal training session with Carrington. The panic in her voice still rang in his ears. The words that spilled from her mouth didn't seem to make sense. She and Tasha were out for coffee, Jeremy followed them, he grabbed Tasha, he threatened Tasha, he threatened to *kill* Tasha, Tasha was a wreck, hyperventilating, vomiting, Navaya couldn't calm her down.

He. Saw. Red.

And Cole had been seeing red ever since.

He saw red when he finally rushed to Navaya's apartment and found Tasha curled into the couch, looking so fucking scared and so fucking sad that everything inside him broke. Jeremy had hurt her...again. Cole promised to keep her safe, and he hadn't been able to do that. He'd failed twice now. That was unacceptable. It wouldn't happen again.

"Cole?"

He turned in bed, brushing his thumb across Tasha's cheek. She was having issues sleeping again, and none of his assurances helped. He didn't blame her. The police were apathetic at best when she reported that Jeremy had breached the restraining order. They invited her in to take a brief statement, but they hadn't done shit since, as evidenced by the fact he had an appointment with Jeremy at his workplace at 9:00 a.m.

He kissed Tasha's forehead. "You good, Tee?"

“What’s going on in your head?”

He smiled at her, hoping the tenderness she saw there would push her to abandon the line of questioning. Cole had been playing it cool for everyone — Xander, Navaya, his mother, and Tasha — because they were all freaked out about him trying to retaliate. He sold them whatever dream they wanted to buy because nobody, no matter how much he loved or respected them, was going to talk him out of what he had planned for today. Tasha was probing, which meant she didn’t buy his bullshit.

“How much I love you,” he whispered. “And how much Jeremy needs to be stopped.”

She frowned. “The police will do what they need to.”

He barely held back his scoff, knowing it wouldn’t help the notion he was going to let it go. “They haven’t inspired confidence as of right now, but I guess we’ll see.”

“Whatever you are thinking about doing, Cole... Don’t.”

He tried to ignore the pleading notes in her voice. It would be all too easy to give in to her the way he had after Jeremy assaulted her. The lack of action had just emboldened the sonofabitch, and Cole wouldn’t make that mistake again.

He settled his hand against her lower back. “You mean I shouldn’t be trying to make love to you?”

Cole didn’t give her a chance to respond. He kissed away the doubt from her mouth and proceeded to brush away her apprehension with each stroke of his lips and fingers. When he finally slid into her, he distracted her with the pleasure that he often felt would drown them both. He worshiped her with each thrust, driving her higher and higher toward the place where there was nothing in existence but him and her and the pleasure they pulled from each other. They came together with low growls and startled cries, the conversation long forgotten as he pulled her against his body, waiting for their hearts to stop racing.

“I love you, Tee,” he whispered, brushing his lips against her forehead.

“I love you, too.”

He kissed her again, letting the love he felt for her fill him with the determination he needed. He knew what he was about to do was reckless as fuck, but Cole no longer cared. Jeremy was due a message. And Cole was going to enjoy being the one to send it.

CHAPTER EIGHTY-ONE

Cole kept his eyes fixed on the pretty receptionist who sat behind the desk, typing away at the computer. The woman was dark and lithe and so young, Cole wondered if it was her first week on the job. It was already 9:30 a.m., but she wasn't showing any indication of letting him and Jay access the office where he could see Jeremy engaged in a discussion with a tall, dark man Cole presumed was the asshole's business partner.

"Fuck this," he whispered to Jay, pushing himself up from the chair and beginning to stalk toward the office. Jay was quick on his heels, quite aware that his main purpose on this little expedition was to ensure Cole didn't go too far. It wouldn't be hard for him to tip over the edge, Cole conceded, with the way rage burned hot inside him.

"You can't go back there yet," the receptionist yelled after them. Her voice sounded a bit alarmed as she got up from behind the desk. She didn't get there quickly enough to stop Cole from yanking open the door and stalking through. Jeremy stopped talking mid-sentence, gaze traveling over Cole to Jay, who'd closed the door and was standing in front of it.

"Can I help you?" he asked. "Are you my 9:00 a.m.?"

Just the sound of his fucking arrogant, almost nasal voice had Cole stalking forward until he was standing right in front of the seat Jeremy occupied. He grabbed him by the lapels of his suit and yanked him up out of the chair, registering brief surprise and then panic flicker in his eyes.

Good.

“I’m that voice on the other end of the phone. The one who warned you that you didn’t want to meet him.”

Jeremy stiffened in his arms. “Get your fucking hands off me before I call the police.”

Cole chuckled. It was humorless and cold. He let Jeremy’s punk ass go but shoved him so hard he tripped over the chair. He turned his eyes to the business partner, Martin, Marius... whatever his name was, who looked like he was about to make good on Jeremy’s threat to call the police.

“This is the kind of man you do business with?” Cole yelled. “A sick, sadistic abuser? A stalker? A rapist?”

“What the hell is he talking about?” the man asked, his eyes turning to Jeremy, who was busy picking himself up off the floor.

“Nothing,” Jeremy spat, then to Cole, “Get the fuck out of my office.”

Cole shook his head. “No. I told you what would happen if you didn’t leave Tasha the fuck alone. Come to find out you’ve been harassing her online and following her in public so you could threaten her not to testify against you? The fuck you thought she was going to do after you almost killed her?”

“What is he talking about, Jeremy?” The partner sounded more urgent this time.

“Tell him,” Cole said. His voice was eerily calm, and he could tell from the way Jeremy’s nostrils flared that he was annoying the hell out of him. “Tell him how you beat up on your wife so bad that you broke three fucking ribs, gave her a black eye, and left marks around her neck. Tell him while you can still talk, sonofabitch. You’re about to find out how shitty it feels to be on the receiving end of a beatdown from somebody larger and meaner than you could ever be.”

Cole gave the nigga credit. He actually tried to swing at him, grossly underestimating the level of pent-up rage Cole was ready...*had been ready*...to unleash on his ass. Gratification shot through his body when he easily sidestepped

Jeremy's pathetic attempt at a punch before connecting his fist to Jeremy's jaw. *Hard*. His knuckles stung from contact with bone, but Cole didn't care. He drew back and punched him again, knowing he didn't have much time before either the business partner — who looked stunned as hell — or the receptionist called the police. He rained blows down until Jeremy staggered back and fell to the floor...right where Cole wanted him to be. The man couldn't make any of his hits connect, nor could he shift Cole's weight when he straddled him and wrapped his hands around his neck.

"It doesn't feel so good now, does it?" he yelled into his face. "I'm going to tell you again, man. Leave. Tasha. Alone. Do you hear me?"

Jeremy, to his credit, glared at Cole as much as he could with the force at which Cole was squeezing his neck.

"This? This is just a warning. This is just a taste of what I will do to you if I ever...ever see tears in Tasha's eyes again, and they were caused by you. I'm not threatening you. I'm just reciting facts. Do you understand?"

He applied more pressure to Jeremy's neck, and finally, the man's eyes widened while he tried to nod as if he was just realizing that Cole was serious.

"Let me tell you something," Cole said, returning his voice to the quiet, deadly calm he knew was far more terrifying than shouting. "When I was fifteen, I stabbed my father seven times, and the only thing I ever regretted was that he didn't die. You are *nothing* to me. Tasha is *everything*. I will not make the mistake I made with my father with you."

The fear that flashed in Jeremy's eyes was delicious as Cole brought his hand back and punched him so hard in his face that the sound reverberated through the almost silent room.

He didn't want to stop, but he was wise enough to know he'd done enough. He pulled himself to his feet and started walking off before he stopped. He pivoted and took the few steps toward Jeremy, where he still lay, on the floor, and

kicked him as hard as he could between his legs. The man yelped like a wounded dog.

“That was for every time you fucked her after she told you no.”

He turned to the partner, whose hand was still wrapped around his phone as his gaze darted from Cole to Jeremy to Jay, who still stood by the door.

“You should get him medical attention,” Cole suggested. “I bet he’ll be concussed.”

CHAPTER EIGHTY-TWO

Silence echoed so loud in the dining room that Tasha's cutlery sounded like fireworks against her plate. If he coaxed enough, there would be conversation...but it would be stilted, her smiles forced. Cole had had enough of those over the last three weeks to know he preferred to deal with the silence.

Things had been tense as hell between him and Tasha since he returned with Jay after the visit he paid to Jeremy with bruised fists. Navaya had shaken her head, quickly grabbing Xander and telling him they needed to head out. He'd asked them to keep Tasha company — babysit her, as Tasha complained — while he was out. He'd let her vent her frustration but reminded her of the hand Jeremy tried to play the day before, so she reluctantly agreed.

She'd been silent as Navaya, Xander, and Jay left, waiting until they were alone before she turned to him, eyes filled with angry tears.

"I told you to leave it alone."

Her voice was infused with rage as she brushed past him and began walking toward the kitchen. Cole followed behind her, knowing she had every right to be upset but also knowing he would do that shit again...and again...and again. Her body was still stiff with annoyance when she yanked the freezer open and rummaged through it. She returned with some frozen peas, wrapping them in a tea cloth before she motioned for

Cole to give her his hands. Tasha placed it on his knuckles, refusing to meet his eyes.

“What do you think is going to happen now, Cole?” she whispered, her voice thick with anxiety, and Cole felt the first pricks of guilt. She capitalized on his silence to answer her own question. “Jeremy is going to run squealing to the police, and they will show up at our door, and *you* will be in trouble. Suddenly, the narrative will be about what you did instead of the monster he is.”

“Tee...”

“I asked you to stay out of it, Cole,” she said, voice weary. “I wasn’t trying to bring trouble into your life. Jeremy once told me I ruin everything I touch, and this proves him right.”

He grabbed her waist and pulled her into him. “Fuck whatever Jeremy said. I’m not fifteen years old anymore. I know the consequences I could face. I considered each one before I made the decision. And you know what? I’d make it again. Nobody gets to think that I won’t fight for you...that I won’t destroy for you. I protect what is mine, and you have been mine since the day you walked into my office. Do you understand that?”

Tears, fat and wet, fell down her cheeks, and Cole sighed as he wiped them away before kissing the path along which they had fallen.

“I love you, Tee,” he whispered against her cheek.

“I love you, too.”

She sounded so damn sad that Cole couldn’t fight the shard of fear to his heart.

It turned out he had been right to be afraid because the distance that opened between him and Tasha in the last three weeks was wider than the Grand Canyon, and Cole just didn’t know how to close it.

“Tee?”

Tasha stopped moving her chicken breast around on the plate and brought her gaze to his. There was still so much

sadness there that cut Cole the entire fuck up.

“Yeah?”

“Are you afraid of me?”

Surprise flickered to life in her brown eyes. “What? What are you talking about?”

“Do you think because I beat that asshole up and because of what happened with my father that I’d put my hands on you?”

A grimace flashed across her face. Tasha shook her head. “Of course not. I know you are nothing like him.”

“What’s going on, then?” he asked. He hated the tightness spreading through his chest as if his body was warning him to avoid the conversation he was about to start at all costs. “Tee, you’ve been distant as hell for the last couple of weeks. We’ve barely laughed together, barely made love... We’ve been more like roommates than anything else. I just want to know what’s going on because I can’t seem to get through to you. You won’t talk to me. You won’t tell me what’s wrong so that I can fix it...”

“You can’t fix it,” Tasha said, frustration making her voice loud as she let her utensils fall to the plate. “That’s the whole point.”

She pressed her hand to her chest. “You can’t fix *me*. You can’t undo all the shit Jeremy did just because you love me. It doesn’t matter how much I wish you could. It doesn’t matter how much I love you.”

There was so much damn resignation in her voice, and suddenly, Cole knew exactly what was coming.

“Tee,” he managed to whisper, even though his throat was raw and aching as a level of pain he could barely describe made a home in his tight, burning chest.

“I love you,” she said. Her body shook slightly with the force of the tears she could no longer hold back. “I love you so fucking much.”

“And that is enough.” Cole pushed back his chair so he could make his way round to her, kneeling and clasping her hands in his. “I know things are really hard right now, but we will get through it.”

Somehow, that just made Tasha’s tears fall harder as she picked one of his hands up and brought the back of his palm to her lips. The wetness of her tears slid over his skin before she pulled back and fixed the saddest eyes on his. He held his breath, knowing Tasha was about to shatter him with her next words but hoping all the same that he was wrong...that he hadn’t heard what he thought he did in her shaking voice.

“I’m sorry, Cole. There is just so much...too much I need to sort out. There are only two things I’m certain of right now. I love you...and as much as I wish I was wrong...*this* timing is just not right.”

CHAPTER EIGHTY-THREE

So many emotions flashed in Cole's eyes and spread over his face, but the one that stood out was pain. Tasha knew that would keep her up at night.

She'd hurt the man who'd done nothing but dote on her, love her, and try to protect her, and in doing that, she was destroying her own heart. But she had to do it. She'd ruminated over, panicked over, cried over, and tried to talk herself out of the decision she did not want to make, but sometimes the right thing and the hard thing were the same damn thing.

"Don't do this, Tee," he whispered, his deep voice cracking with so much emotion, Tasha wanted to change her mind, but she didn't. She couldn't. She knew with every piece of her still-shattering heart that she *had* to do this. Even if it hurt. Even if it ached. Even if walking away from Cole stung harder than leaving Jeremy ever could.

"I'm sorry," she said, hoping he could hear how much it hurt in her voice. "I am so, so sorry, but I need the space to work on myself. I want to ask you to wait for me, but Cole, that would not be fair."

"I will."

She shook her head, thumbing away the tears that just kept falling. "Please don't."

Tasha paused, pondering if it made her a selfish bitch to ask him for the one thing she felt she needed more than

oxygen in her lungs, but it spilled from her mouth like a plea anyway. “Please make love to me one last time.”

“Tee...”

“Please,” she murmured. She could see him debating it, but eventually, his body relaxed, and he moved forward, capturing her lips in his. Cole’s mouth tasted salty, but Tasha couldn’t tell if they were her tears or his. She tried to chase away the sadness by focusing on the tender way his lips moved over hers, the way his fingertips dug into the pillows of her hips, and the way her body felt pressed against the man who’d become home to her. She held onto him the way she wished she could hold onto him forever as they made their way to his bedroom. Tasha swallowed the sob in her throat when she realized that this might be the last time she was ever in this bed with Cole. The last time she’d feel him slowly remove her clothes with a reverence that made her feel like she was a goddess.

Cole made love to her like he wanted to cover her body inside and out with hieroglyphics spelling out his love. When he pulled her into him after they both climaxed, Tasha felt like her heart would fall out of her chest, so she tilted her chin up so she could kiss him.

“I love you,” she whispered, wanting, no, needing him to remember that they were both right about *that*.

“I know you do, Tee.” His voice was thick with hurt that made Tasha’s stomach burn. “That’s why I know you don’t have to do this.”

She took a deep breath, releasing her frustrations with a sad sigh. “I do. You’ll see. Maybe not right now, but eventually. Maybe it’s best if I sleep in my room tonight.”

He pulled her more tightly into him as she tried to leave. “No. Stay with me. If this might be the last time we’re together, I want to wake up in your arms in the morning.”

It would hurt like fuck, she knew it, but Tasha couldn’t find the strength to say no, so she rested her head on his chest

and listened to the steady thudding of his heart as he stroked her hair.

Was she making the wrong decision?

You know you aren't, her mind scolded her. *Don't make this any harder than it needs to be.*

Tasha wasn't sure when the war in her mind lulled enough for her to fall asleep, but when she awoke to sunlight filtering into the room, she was no longer in Cole's arms.

The bed was empty.

And so was she.

CHAPTER EIGHTY-FOUR

TWO MONTHS LATER

They didn't speak about breaking the heart of someone you loved nearly enough.

It fucking hurt.

No, a stubbed toe hurt. Hitting your elbow against the wall hurt. A migraine hurt. *This*. This was something different. This dug deep with icy claws and killed something inside. It was agony.

Two months had passed since the night Tasha imploded the happy life she thought she'd been building since she left Jeremy, and she'd been in agony ever since.

Her throat still got tight when she thought of the absolute pain in Cole's eyes when she told him their timing was off.

The guilt was suffocating, and there wasn't a corner of Tasha's mind where she could escape it. God, she missed him. Her therapist tried to remind her it was possible to grieve a decision made while knowing it was the right thing to do, but that was shallow comfort.

Tasha spent another week and a half in Cole's house after she broke things off. He insisted she stay while she sorted out somewhere to go instead of moving to Navaya's and then moving on from there. He was still the gentle, caring, protective Cole she loved so much, even if he couldn't hide the tiredness in his face and the sad way he looked at her when he thought she wasn't looking. She eventually moved into an empty unit in Navaya's apartment complex, which was known to not mix matters when it came to security. The one thing she

refused to compromise on was security, so that was a plus, and being close to Navaya also helped her feel a little safer.

Tasha cradled the coffee that had long gone cold in her hand. She needed to find a way to deal with the chaotic brew of emotions inside her. Now was not the time to fall into her feelings about Cole, not when in less than two hours, she had a demon to face.

Jeremy surprised them all by accepting the plea deal offered by the prosecution. They agreed to allow him to plead guilty to a lesser charge in return for less than a year in prison. Tasha couldn't even find it in herself to feel let down by the system because she had been debating, more and more as the weeks crawled by, not going through with testifying. Her therapist had asked her whether facing the man who'd made her life a living hell in court might provide some closure for her, but she hadn't been able to answer. She was too busy wondering if the jurors would give her the same skepticism the police had, causing her insecurities to curl around her spirit until she bowed under the discomfort. Truthfully, Tasha wasn't sure she would have made it to the stand. Still, Jeremy being able to get away with a seven-month sentence, of which he might only serve two-thirds after everything he put her through, rankled. Acknowledging that most abused people never even got *that much* was wormwood under her tongue. She politely declined when the prosecutor asked her if she wanted to address the judge since the woman warned her that it wouldn't increase his sentence. She told Tasha that she might find it therapeutic. Tasha didn't know about all of that, so she maintained her decision not to speak. Nothing could prevent her from attending the hearing, though. She wanted to see the sonofabitch being led away. She closed her eyes and allowed the grim satisfaction to flow over her, hoping it would distract her from the way her stomach twisted into knots.

The twisting didn't stop, not even when Navaya came over with some chamomile tea and rubbed her back while promising her everything would be okay. She sat in the back of Xander's car, tugging on her fingers, playing with her bangles, and trying to control her breathing as they drove to the courthouse.

It didn't take too long before she saw him, standing just outside the entrance to the courtroom flanked by his attorney, a thick-set man with deep brown skin and graying hair, and a woman. She'd never seen the woman before, but Tasha couldn't help but notice the way she held onto Jeremy's arm and flashed him concerned but adoring looks every so often as he continued speaking with his lawyer. Bile rose to Tasha's throat. That woman didn't have a clue about what lay in store for her. Leopards didn't change their spots, and demons did not ascend to become angels.

A few things clicked into place in that moment. She remembered the prosecutor saying the reason Jeremy's attorney reached out about the plea bargain was that his client wanted to put everything behind him as quickly as possible so he could return to California. She couldn't stop looking at the scene playing out in front of her, and it was while her eyes remained glued to the woman that she noticed the ring. *Her* engagement ring. She'd last seen the ring when she dropped it with the wedding band on the dining room table before Jeremy attacked her. What a sick sonofabitch. She wanted to look away, and she probably should have listened to the voice telling her to do just that when Jeremy looked over and saw her watching them. His lips curved into a self-satisfied smirk at what she knew must be the stricken look on her face. Of course, he believed she was jealous. He was too self-centered to think the bile that churned in her stomach was down to knowing this woman would be his next victim. Fearing that she may not be lucky enough to walk away. She started to avert Jeremy's gaze when she noticed the smile slide off his face. It was replaced by something that looked very much like fear. She turned her head so she could follow his gaze, and her heart slammed into her chest.

Cole. He was wearing dark jeans and a pale yellow button-up dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up. She'd always loved the outfit, and tears welled in Tasha's eyes when she realized him wearing it was probably not a coincidence.

She missed him so much that Tasha dug her fingers into the palms of her hands to keep herself rooted in place so she didn't run over and curl herself into him.

He busied himself, giving Navaya a hug and a kiss on the cheek and slinging his hand over Xander's shoulder before he turned to her. Navaya and Xander quickly made themselves scarce, with Navaya flashing her a comforting look before she allowed Xander to lead her away.

He tucked his thumbs into his pockets, shifting his weight from one foot to another, nerves radiating off him in waves.

"I hope you don't mind," he said, eventually breaking the silence that spread in front of them.

"I don't," Tasha said, trying to smile even though her heart thudded so hard she found it difficult to breathe. "I just didn't expect to see you."

"Xander told me," he said. "I know it's a closed hearing unless you tell them the person can be let in, but I figured I would take my chances."

"Why?"

She hated how soft and shaky her voice sounded.

"Why?" Cole repeated as if she'd asked the most ridiculous question. "How could I not be here?"

"I left."

He stepped closer to her, reaching out before reconsidering the action. A few seconds passed before he gave in to it, pulling her into his arms and brushing his lips against her temple. "Whether you're with me or not, I will always be your soft place to land. Only you can decide when that is no longer the case."

A sob rose to her throat, but Tasha tried to center herself by sinking into his embrace. Far too soon, he pulled away and placed some distance between them.

"I'll tell them to let you in," she said, clearing her throat as if it could chase away the emotions flowing through her.

"Are you going to speak?"

She cast her gaze to where Jeremy stood with his lawyer and found the woman watching her with her eyes flashing and

posture stiff.

She looked at Cole, took a deep, fortifying sigh, and said,
“Yes. I think I am.”

CHAPTER EIGHTY-FIVE

Tasha's body shook so hard, she was worried she would have to lean over the witness box to empty the contents of her stomach on the carpeted floor.

“You can begin now.”

She nodded at the judge, who was peering at her from behind round, gold-framed glasses with what the man probably thought was a calming expression on his face. Tasha felt even more sick to her stomach. She regretted her impulsive decision to speak now that reality smacked her in the face. She didn't have anything written down and was about to dive back into memories she hated unlocking, even with the comfort and safety of her therapist's guidance. Jeremy was still sitting there in a perfectly tailored black suit, looking too smug for his own damn good. His gaze pierced her, but Tasha stiffened her back. She sought out Cole, who sat next to Xander and Navaya, still looking like every bit of the soft place he'd been for her for all those months. Tenderness rose within her, fighting down the bitter anxiety she felt, giving her the strength to shift her gaze to the other end of the courtroom until she locked eyes on the person she hoped would not only hear but really understand what she had to say. Jeremy's sentence was already set, and he was too narcissistic and cruel to care about a single word that was about to come out of her mouth. She kept her eyes fixed on the woman, who looked like she desperately wanted to look away but couldn't bring herself to.

“Jeremy didn’t start out as a monster,” she started quietly. “I guess he must have always been a monster... A man doesn’t turn into someone who would slap, punch, choke, and rape his wife overnight.”

She flicked her eyes back to Jeremy, her voice becoming harder and colder as she continued. “You don’t just get up one morning and decide it is perfectly normal and logical to pin your wife down on the floor and yank her tampon out to satisfy yourself she is on her period because that is the only time she can say no to sex from you.”

An audible gasp rang through the almost empty courtroom, but Tasha didn’t turn her gaze toward Navaya. She couldn’t look away from Jeremy now that she faced him.

“You broke me down physically, emotionally... You took my own damn money and then used it to bend me to your will. I hate you more than I ever loved you. You wanted me to suffer in the apartment that day. You wanted me to feel pain for daring to try to walk away from our marriage. But you know something, Jeremy? When you threatened to rape me and *make it hurt*, I realized I would rather face certain death than ever be under your control again. Don’t think what you agreed to plead guilty to changes what happened inside of that apartment. You tried to kill me because you couldn’t handle not being able to control me. I want to say I hope you’ll spend the time in jail reflecting on what you’ve done and become a better man, but I know better. You won’t ever change. You don’t have the humanity in you. You will forever be dangerous to any woman unfortunate enough to love you. Thank God I’m no longer that woman.”

Tasha stared pointedly at the woman who wore his ring while she said this, only looking away when she shifted her gaze. Her heart beat hard against her chest as she turned to the judge and flashed him a weak smile. “That is all.”

Tasha left the stand on slightly wobbly feet, moving straight to the chairs where Xander, Navaya, and Cole sat. Now that her adrenaline started fading, she felt a little bit weak. Tasha knew the last thing she should do was seek comfort in Cole, but she was too tired to fight against the urge

to rest her head against his shoulder. So, she did just that. Her body stiffened, not knowing how he would react, but she relaxed when he brought his hand around her to cuddle her close.

“You were great,” he whispered. “I’m proud of you.”

His words wrapped around her like the warmth of his hand gently holding her waist as she watched the rest of the proceedings play out.

Her heart raced when the judge finally ordered that Jeremy be taken away to start serving the sentence the man described as woefully inadequate. Jeremy kept his head straight, not even turning when his fiancée started wailing loudly. Tasha wasn’t surprised. Such selfishness was pretty on-brand for Jeremy’s personality. She resisted the urge to go to the woman and tell her to run...to warn her that nothing good could come out of tying herself to Jeremy, no matter which version of himself he was showing to her right now.

“Let’s go get you something to eat,” Navaya said, breaking through her thoughts.

Tasha sat up, about to protest she wasn’t hungry when her stomach growled. “I guess you’re right.”

“You coming, Cole?”

This was from Xander. He was already standing, reaching for Navaya so he could help her to her feet.

Tasha stopped breathing. She could be vulnerable enough with herself to admit she wanted him to come. So damn badly. But realistically, she knew spending any more time with Cole would lead to her second-guessing the decision she’d made even though hours of talking about it in therapy made her know that as much as it sucked, it *was* the right decision.

“I’ve got an appointment,” Cole said, but the small pause was a giveaway that he was looking for the least awkward way out. “I’ll see you guys around, though.”

He walked with them to the entrance of the courthouse before pulling Tasha into a short hug, telling her he was proud

of her and promising her, again, that he was only a call away if she ever needed him.

“Thank you for coming,” she said. “It means more than you know.”

He gave her one of those smiles she loved so much, and Tasha’s heart somersaulted in her chest. “There’s no other place I could’ve been, Tee.”

Then he was gone, taking the bubble of comfort he’d brought with him away. She started after his retreating figure, fighting against the tears welling in her eyes, but they fell anyway when Navaya pulled her into a hug and kissed her cheek.

“I know it’s hard, Tash, but you’re doing what you need to do to ensure when you guys get back together, you have the best shot.”

“When?” Tasha sniffled. “That isn’t a guarantee.”

Navaya made a small, rude sound in her throat. “Like hell, it isn’t.”

CHAPTER EIGHTY-SIX

Time without her passed like a series of sharp, painful staccatos. He missed Tasha. Her absence hurt. Cole yearned for her in ways that sometimes paralyzed him when he confronted how much he wanted to spend the rest of his life by her side. He understood why she felt she had to leave, but understanding and accepting were two different things. Everything was different without her. Cole hadn't appreciated, not truly, just how much of a vital part of his life Tasha had become. The house was too quiet — there were no Twitch streams playing idly in the background as she went about her day, no Janet Jackson albums on repeat while she sang at the top of her lungs. She wasn't there to steal food off his plate at dinner time. She wasn't there to cuddle into each night. It took weeks before Cole stopped making too much coffee each morning. It took longer still to accept that there was a real possibility he and Tasha would never be together again, no matter how much he hoped...wished for it.

Xander and Navaya's engagement at one of *Serenaded by Mahogany's* gigs was bittersweet. He was proud of his closest friend for taking that next step with the woman he loved, but watching Navaya pitch herself into Xander's arms while she accepted his ring twisted something inside him. He'd made eye contact with Tasha as the audience erupted into applause at the sweet scene playing out in front of them, and something broke. When he overheard Tasha promising Navaya not to worry about her having to be in close contact with Cole in the lead-up to the wedding as the Maid of Honor and Best Man,

respectively, because they could be *civil* to each other, something shattered.

Perhaps his hope they would find their way to each other again was misplaced. Perhaps the longing he thought he'd seen in her eyes when he popped up at the asshole's sentencing hearing was fanciful.

Perhaps holding onto his love for her was a fool's errand, liable to cause him nothing but pain.

But he couldn't let go. He threw himself harder into his business, the gym, and the band more than he ever had before. Cherry, Quinn, and Jay often complained that Xander had finally mellowed out, but Cole's intensity level had ratcheted all the way up. Carrington and a few of his other clients complained that his programs had become so hard they were about to start looking for another trainer. His YouTube and Twitch subscribers were excited about all the new, frequent, and unexpected content. Even the branding of his business pages and the very existence of his Twitch account brought memories of Tasha flooding back. Sadness and disappointment cloaked him like a second skin, but Cole couldn't find it in himself to regret the beautiful season of bliss he and Tasha had. For that, he would endure the pain time and time again.

"I'd ask what's on your mind, but that would be foolish. I already know the answer to that."

He glanced over to where his mother was sitting on the couch as Tyrone pattered around the kitchen, plating their desserts. He'd put on as much of a show of ease as he could during the weekly dinners that now had a Tasha-sized hole until he just couldn't anymore.

"I'm sorry things turned out this way," his mother continued when Cole didn't respond right away.

"But you're not surprised."

When he'd shown up at his mother's house the day Tasha moved out, wild with pain and loss, she'd just opened her arms and held him the way she used to when he was a child, and she

tried to protect him from all the ugliness in the world. She didn't ask any questions. She didn't have to.

His mother sighed. "I knew it was a possibility."

"I knew it would be a long, challenging road, but I thought we were solid enough to make it through."

"It isn't about you, Cole. It isn't about what both of you had. This is about Tasha. I think everyone was worried it was too soon, but we were so charmed by how good you were together that we became hopeful. As I said before, Tasha went through hell...and you cannot erase what she's been through with your love."

"I know that..."

He wanted to explain to his mother that in addition to missing Tasha, his guilt suffocated him too. It didn't matter how much he tried to listen to reason; he kept wondering if his decision to confront Jeremy was what ultimately pushed Tasha away. He was as surprised as anyone that Jeremy didn't immediately run to the police, but Cole sometimes felt like Tasha leaving was his punishment, and that was far worse than anything the law might have doled out.

"If I had met Tyrone even a few years after things ended with your father, I wouldn't have been ready for him. He might have thought otherwise, but he wouldn't have been ready for me either. And I know as surely as I know my own heart that that man is my soulmate. Sometimes, it isn't the connection that is off. It isn't the love...sometimes, it is all about the timing. But here's the thing, love. You can't force a connection, nor can you force love...but you can bide your time."

"That sounds great in theory, but it's been months. I miss her so much. I miss her laughter. I miss her voice. I miss being in her presence."

His mother paused for a while, contemplating her response as she took a slice of chocolate cake from her husband with a warm, enamored smile.

“You don’t have to be her man to do any of that,” she said eventually. “See where she stands on a friendship. Maybe you ought to get back to the basics.”

Cole thought about his mother’s suggestion all through the rest of his time at her house. He thought about it even while he and Tyrone had a glass of whiskey in the living room as they discussed a politician causing controversy in the news and Tyrone and Renee’s upcoming trip to Dubai.

“She’s right, you know,” Tyrone said, taking Cole’s empty tumbler from him.

“About?”

“Time has a way of working everything out.”

Maybe it was the optimism in Tyrone’s voice and the way he missed Tasha that had Cole reaching for his phone once he was settled in bed later that night. She answered on the third ring with equal parts hesitance and curiosity in her voice.

“Hello.”

“I was thinking about how much I miss you,” he said, going straight off the bat for brutal honesty. “I realized I don’t have to miss you the way I am. It doesn’t have to be all or nothing. How do you feel about me checking in once in a while? We can text if that’s easier than being on the phone. I don’t want to be this disconnected from you anymore.”

The brief pause before she answered was enough for Cole to second-guess his decision to call in the first place, but her eventual soft reply blew all the clouds away.

“I think I would like that. A lot.”

CHAPTER EIGHTY-SEVEN

“I am surprised you reached out to me.”

Dr. Edwards, Tasha’s therapist, leaned back in the pale green armchair and picked up Tasha’s folder, which was resting on the small table beside it. She wasn’t shocked that Dr. Edwards was surprised she’d reached out for a session. They’d just had a session the day before and were not due another until the next week. Tasha knew she couldn’t wait until then, so she’d called Dr. Edwards’ office, asking her to fit her in as soon as she could.

“Is everything okay?” the older woman asked. Her pen was poised over the notepad, and she was looking at Tasha expectantly. Dr. Edwards was an expert on keeping her face neutral, but Tasha was sure she saw a small spark of concern for a split second. Their last session had been one of their calmest. Tasha was in a good place...with work, with her comfort of living on her own, with the peace she’d begun to find. This peace wasn’t fragile, the way it had been months before. It wasn’t built on careful avoidance of her trauma. Over the last few months, Tasha had reached deep inside and found all the cracks Jeremy made to her soul with his malevolence, and she worked on acknowledging she had to live uneasily with them, while she found ways to fill those cracks up with love, with light and with the confidence she once had before Jeremy stripped it all away. She spoke to Dr. Edwards about things she’d barely acknowledged herself; how alone and abandoned her mother’s death made her feel, how resentful she was that her mother was all she had, and how

determined she'd been to ensure she never felt that alone again by creating what she thought would be the picture-perfect family. She was so focused on that dream that Tasha had been willing to overlook some of the red flags Jeremy couldn't mask even when he had been trying to be on his best behavior. The inner work she had to do was hard as fuck, but it was worth it.

You just got to do the hard thing.

Cole's words were firmly ingrained in her for the times when she didn't want to rip herself open and sit with the hurt and pain before finding ways to heal. It took months before she realized she was slowly redirecting the negative thoughts and emotions she had about being a survivor without any external help. She didn't need Cole, Navaya, or even Dr. Edwards to tell her she was strong. She could take a deep breath and remind herself she was more powerful than she gave herself credit for, and she was in no way to blame for the things that had happened to her. She still had control. She was in control. Jeremy couldn't take that away from her anymore. No one could. That shift in her mentality, though slow, was a game-changer because finally, for the first time, Tasha wasn't defining her life and what happened with Jeremy by refusing to acknowledge it, overcompensating because of it, or being paralyzed at the thought of how it might affect her future.

She'd started buying herself a small bouquet every Sunday to place on her kitchen countertop. The first few weeks were rough, but eventually Tasha started looking forward to choosing a bouquet to set the theme for the rest of the week. Slowly, Jeremy stopped being her first thought when she looked at the bright petals that adorned her kitchen. She saw the flowers for the beauty they created instead of the ugliness Jeremy attached to them.

“How is work?”

Tasha blinked away her thoughts. She focused her attention on Dr. Edwards as the woman with the dark brown skin and low-cut afro, dressed down in blue jeans and a navy blazer, shifted in the armchair.

“Work is going great,” Tasha replied.

The second change she made was reapplying for a role within the marketing firm she worked at before she got married. She wasn't successful, but she eventually got hired by another company. It was slightly smaller than the first, but Tasha ended up getting a position with more responsibilities than she would have had if her old firm took her back. She still had her *DesignMeNow* profile, but she took fewer gigs. Her end goal was owning her own marketing boutique, and she couldn't wait to start building up her résumé and client list. Just the other day, she saw an ad she'd helped design at Judiciary Square station, and Tasha had been floating on air ever since.

“Are you having difficulties with Jeremy's release?”

Jeremy had finished his seven-month sentence nearly a week before, and Navaya told her he hightailed his ass to California, at least according to his Instagram posts. Tasha had him blocked on all platforms and hadn't been interested in checking for herself. She thought about Dr. Edwards' question for a little while. She still believed Jeremy received a far less sentence than he deserved, but she'd spent months coming to terms with that. She was a bit worried initially, but slowly her concern faded when she realized not only was he out of state, but he had moved on to his next victim. She hoped the woman gathered the strength to leave sooner than she did because nobody deserved that kind of hell. Other than that, Tasha was ready to put Jeremy as far behind her as she possibly could at this stage of her healing. She couldn't wait until he was just a well-healed scar.

“I'm doing okay,” Tasha answered truthfully. “He crosses my mind a few times per day, but he isn't constantly in my head like he used to be.”

“I'm happy to hear that,” Dr. Edwards said, giving her a small smile. “Is everything okay with your friend group?”

“Really good. Navaya and I are closer than ever, and I'm slowly working on fixing some of my other friendships. Rashad invited me to his and Zia's wedding in Antigua.”

“Do you consider what you’ve been doing with Cole as fixing your friendship?”

Dr. Edwards’ face was straight, but Tasha could see the softening in her eyes. Tasha cleared her throat, realizing the woman probably already suspected why she called for an emergency session.

She played with her bangles as she tried to organize her thoughts. “I don’t know what I’ve been doing with Cole.”

Tasha and Cole had been talking sporadically over the last few weeks. He didn’t call every day, but when he did, the conversations would go on for hours. Tasha found herself cataloging little things about her day so she could tell him during the conversations she found herself looking forward to. On the days he didn’t call, he’d either send a short message in the morning wishing her a good day or in the evening wishing her a good night’s sleep. Tasha stopped herself more times than she could count from inviting him over to catch up over dinner or drinks because she didn’t think she could be in his presence without succumbing to the intense pull that still existed between them.

“How does being in contact with him again feel?”

Like heaven.

“Easier than I expected,” Tasha said after a few minutes of thought. “I didn’t expect things to flow seamlessly. I expected him to resent me for making a decision that affected both of us without giving him the heads up.”

“Do you regret making the decision to leave?”

It wasn’t the first time Dr. Edwards asked her this question. Cole had been a big topic of discussion from Tasha’s very first session. In the early days, Tasha moved between believing she’d made the right decision to being sure she’d made a huge mistake. She was confident now.

“Of course not,” she said. She stopped playing with her bangles so she could meet and hold Dr. Edwards’ gaze. “I know I made the right decision. It’s just that...”

“It’s just that?”

Tasha took a deep breath, recalling the realization that stopped her in her tracks as she made coffee that morning and found herself smiling, remembering how Cole always had a cup ready for her just how she liked it.

“I want to be with him,” she said eventually. Dr. Edwards stopped taking notes and nodded.

“And this thought made you call for another session?”

Tasha released an audible sigh which she imagined was filled with all the indecision and frustration she felt, along with the little wisps of anticipation that fluttered in the pit of her stomach.

“How do I know I’m ready?”

Dr. Edwards paused for a while, tapping her pen against her file, before she leaned back into the armchair and said, “Tasha, how do you know you’re not?”

CHAPTER EIGHTY-EIGHT

“I am surprised you reached out to me.”

Tasha chuckled nervously as she took a sip of the sparkling water the server had just poured.

“I’ve been getting that a lot lately,” she admitted, and then after a brief pause, “I’m surprised you came.”

Renee raised an eyebrow. Eyes the same shade of brown as Cole’s looked at her questioningly. “Why wouldn’t I?”

“I broke your son’s heart.” The words still lodged in her throat when she thought about it.

Renee reached over and squeezed her hand. “Don’t do that, Tasha. We’re not going to sit here and pretend like you left Cole for malicious reasons.”

“It doesn’t matter what my reasons were. The result was the same.”

Perhaps sensing she wouldn’t get anywhere with that line of conversation, Renee picked up her menu and began perusing it. Tasha had asked her to meet up at a small restaurant in Silver Spring known for their sandwiches. She settled on a Cuban sandwich and fries while Renee opted for a roast beef sandwich with a salad on the side. The older woman waited until the server left before she returned her gaze to Tasha. “You need to forgive yourself, both for breaking my son’s heart and for breaking your own.”

“I have,” Tasha said honestly. “I love Cole. I would’ve done anything in my power not to hurt him, but I had to leave.”

I risked losing him forever, but I had to do it for *me*. I'm the longest, deepest relationship I'll ever have, and I realized a little bit too late that I wasn't always very good to myself. I needed to be the best version of myself...*for myself*, but I know every other relationship in my life will benefit from me taking the time to do the work."

"Life changes immensely when we start making ourselves our top priority," Renee mused. "You owe it to yourself to protect yourself ruthlessly in all aspects of your life. Acknowledging what is best for yourself and taking all available steps to make it happen might seem like a risk at first, but always choose that path. The things you lose along the way will be replaced by the things that are truly meant for you."

Tasha's entire heart lodged in her throat. "Or people."

Renee's smile was soft and sympathetic. "Maybe you should've invited Cole out to lunch instead of me. I cannot speak for my son, and even if I could...I wouldn't."

"I'm not asking you to," Tasha said. "I wanted to ask you how you make it work with Tyrone."

"All the same ways it takes to make any other relationship work — respect, trust, love, devotion."

"But..."

"You are not your abuse, Tasha. You will never be. Will you struggle sometimes? I hate to tell you that you might, even with constant growth and healing. We all have our things. Even Tyrone. Cole more than most." Renee smiled. "You and whoever you end up with will figure your way through the struggles."

"I don't feel the same way I did before," Tasha said. "I used to look at Cole and be awed that after everything, he'd want to be with *someone like me*. I guess I always felt a little bit grateful that he'd chosen me, and that isn't a great basis for any kind of relationship."

"I agree."

“But my love was...is real,” Tasha continued. “It’s been steady these past couple months while I worked through the issues. And you know what I realized after I finally saw myself? Of course, he fell in love with me too! We were so good together. I didn’t need to meet his love with gratitude... just my own love.”

Renee pushed her sandwich to the side so she could reach out for Tasha’s hand again. “Oh, sweetheart. I know what you are doing now, but you don’t need to. You don’t need my blessing.”

“I just...”

Renee shook her head. “No. We’re going to sit here, enjoy our sandwiches, and talk about everything else under the sun. You can take all the time you need, but when you are ready... I’m not the one you need to speak to. You know where to find the person you do.”

CHAPTER EIGHTY-NINE

“**Y**ou should look to your left.”

“Don’t distract me, old man,” Cole grinned. “Continue with your set.”

Carrington dropped the dumbbells he was holding and jutted his chin to the left. “I will continue when you look.”

He and Carrington often teased back and forth throughout their sessions, but there was a stubbornness to Carrington today that Cole didn’t often see, so he turned to his left just as the man suggested. Cole’s heart stuttered in his chest. *Tasha*. She was sauntering over to the gym floor wearing a flowing burnt orange dress with chunky turquoise bangles on her wrists, and her hair, now streaked with gold, piled on her head with a turquoise band formed into a bow. Dangling gold earrings hung from her ears.

His mouth was dry as he watched her make her way slowly toward him. Cole could hear Carrington chuckling softly in the background, but he couldn’t get his mind to settle enough to pay him any attention. His mind couldn’t settle on anything but Tasha. She stopped a short distance away from him and fixed a shy, beautiful smile on him. “Look, no gym clothes.”

Only four words, but the implication ran so damn deep.

Cole found himself smiling too. “You’re looking good.”

So damn good. He wanted to pull her into his arms and bury his face in the crook of her neck so he could just surround himself with her essence.

“Do you think we could talk when you’re done with this session?” she asked, flicking her gaze to Carrington, who was leaning against the leg press machine, not even bothering to pretend he wasn’t being nosy as hell.

“It’s all good,” the older man said. “Cole’s done for today.”

He grabbed his gym towel and tossed it around his shoulders. “I’ll see you on Friday.”

Carrington didn’t give Cole the time to protest. A few weeks after Tasha left, Cole had accepted Carrington’s invitation to head to a nearby restaurant to eat. The man had noticed something was off with him and wanted to find out what was going on. Cole obliged, happy to be able to talk with someone new about what had happened. He had started to feel like he had become repetitive to those closest to him. Carrington knew Tasha was his entire heart, so he wasn’t sure if the man was trying to ease his anxiety — by making it so he didn’t have to wait forty-five minutes to hear what she had to say — or if he was trying to get out of his training session. It didn’t matter why he did it, though. Cole was grateful to be able to smile at Tasha and suggest they head to his office. She turned and walked from the gym floor through the glass door that separated the floor from the hallway leading to the rooms and offices. Tasha continued down the hall, stopping just in front of his office. He stepped forward so he could open the door before leading her inside.

“Do you want something to drink?” he asked, trying to break the ice a little. He moved toward the mini fridge and pulled out a bottle of water. “I wish I had a kombucha, but you know I don’t fuck with those things.”

“I remember,” she laughed. “I’m good on the water, though.”

There were a few uncomfortable seconds of silence before Cole asked the question resting heavily on his mind.

“What’s up, Tee? Is everything okay with you?”

“I’m good. Things are pretty good, actually. I just... I miss you.”

There was something in her voice — a note toward the end — that had a small bit of hope blossoming in Cole’s chest. He tried to fight it down, knowing he wouldn’t be able to withstand the disappointment if she wasn’t here for the reason Cole hoped like hell she was. It had been nearly a year, and the only thing the last few months confirmed was how much he loved her, how well she fit in his life, and how badly he wanted her back. But he hadn’t been lying when he told her he would accept friendship if that was all she could offer him. Gladly so.

“I told you it isn’t all or nothing, Tee,” he said. “We’re working on being friends, remember? You can pop by whenever you want.”

“I don’t want to work on being friends.”

Her words came out as a single breath as she continued, “I want it all. When I say I miss you, I don’t mean I want to pop by whenever I want. I mean... I miss *us*.”

“Tee...”

Tasha put up her hand, silencing him. “Wait, let me get this all out. You wouldn’t believe how long I practiced this in front of the mirror.”

Cole didn’t know how he managed a smile, not with the way all the synapses in his brain were firing at once. “Go ahead.”

“It was hard to leave. It was hard being without you...but I don’t regret it. You used to call me beautiful and strong so earnestly that I *had* to believe it, but that was the issue. *I* needed to find that in me.”

“And did you?”

“Along with a lot of other things,” she said with a small smile Cole desperately wanted to kiss off her face.

“I am sorry if you ever felt like I was suffocating you,” he said instead. He and his therapist had a few sessions where he had to accept he’d tried to overcompensate in some ways with Tasha because he felt like he failed his mother. It took a while, but he was able to let go of some of the guilt he felt about not

being with Tasha when she'd been at the apartment or when she'd been with Navaya when Jeremy accosted her on the street. He promised his therapist he'd learn to have realistic expectations for himself in his relationships, romantic or otherwise, so he didn't smother the person even though his intentions were pure.

"I know you were only trying to protect me," Tasha said.

"I won't apologize for beating the shit out of that asshole."

This time she chuckled. "Don't. He deserved it. My anger wasn't at what you did. I was just worried about what could've happened to you."

"All's well that ends well," Cole said.

"Cole..."

Her voice lost all tinges of humor and shook a little as she took a few steps, so she stood directly in front of him.

"I wasn't ready then, but...I think I'm ready."

Cole had thought about this moment for months, but he couldn't find the right words to capture how happy those four words made him now that it was here. He hesitated just a bit too long, and Tasha started to turn away.

He grabbed her hand and pulled her to him, so her body was flush against his. "You've been mine since the moment you walked into this office so many months ago and I pulled you into my arms. The time hasn't changed the way I feel about you. I've never taken my walking shoes off."

He chuckled at the confusion in her eyes. "I know this is a long road, and I am ready to walk it with you, to put in the work, to do this wild, beautiful thing called life together. Just say the word."

He brushed away some of the tears that flowed down her cheek. "I love you, Cole."

"I love you, too," he whispered, cradling her cheek in his hand. "Does this mean you're coming home? The house isn't the same without you. *Nothing* is the same without you."

She smiled then, and Cole's heart filled with sunshine. "I have a while left on my lease."

He brought his forehead to hers, brushing his lips over her mouth. "Fuck your lease."

Tasha only chuckled, leaning into his mouth, but he pulled away slightly, needing to sort this final thing out before claiming the lips he'd craved for months.

"Are you coming home, Tee?"

"I already am."

He crashed his mouth over hers, savoring the softness of her lips against his. She tasted like his wildest dreams come to life. She tasted like forever. She tasted like home.

Cole didn't know what the Universe had in mind when it pushed Tasha into his path, but he knew he could wander the world for a million lifetimes and not find anyone who owned his heart the way she did. His heart beat in the syllables of her name. He'd found the woman his soul loved, and Cole couldn't wait to spend the rest of his life showing her how much she meant to him.

She was his everything.

She was his destiny.

She was his forever.

Cole pulled back from the kiss and brushed his lips across Tasha's cheek before pulling her even closer to him.

"Welcome home, Tee. Welcome home."

EPILOGUE

THREE YEARS LATER

Tasha's gaze flicked from the television to the baby monitor when a wail pierced the living room.

"I'll go check on her," Cole whispered. He started extricating his limbs from hers, but Tasha pressed her palm to his chest and leaned in for a kiss. "Nah, I'll go. You continue sitting with the boring ass movie you chose. I'm not going to let you use Frankie to get out of the consequences."

She padded to the guestroom she and Cole were using as a makeshift nursery while they babysat for Navaya and Xander, who were having a weekend trip to celebrate the success of Navaya's most recent book. Tasha was eating up being a godmother and honestly lived for the times she and Cole got to keep little Frankie overnight.

The one-and-a-half-year-old was sitting up in the middle of the playpen, rubbing her eyes when Tasha entered the room, scooped her up, and placed loud raspberry kisses on her stomach. She checked Frankie's diaper and found it dry.

"Just wanted some company, huh?" she asked, giggling when her goddaughter answered her question with excited babble. She looked exactly like Navaya when she was born, but as time passed, Tasha could see a lot of Xander in her. She'd found herself wondering whether a baby would take after her or Cole more often in the last couple weeks, and the thoughts were always more frequent on nights like this as she slid into the bed and cuddled Frankie into her, stroking her

back and placing little kisses on her forehead until she drifted back off to sleep.

She stirred when she felt the bed dip what felt like a few minutes later. Cole's beard tickled her shoulder. "I thought you came to set the baby back to sleep, not hide out until the movie finished."

She'd protested vehemently when Cole chose the movie he'd wanted them to watch before bed that night but eventually let him have it, knowing he was usually more put out than her when he couldn't get into a movie. She knew that movie would make him suffer.

"I had to pull out all the tactics in my arsenal," she said with a grin, gaze flicking back to Frankie. "She's so peaceful when she sleeps."

Cole chuckled. "Because she is an absolute terror when she's awake."

"True."

"Who do you think our kids will look like?"

The question caught her by surprise because she'd been thinking about that before she drifted off to sleep. "Probably you, 'cause I can see your genes being as stubborn as you are."

"Not you shading me while I'm trying to have a cute conversation."

Tasha grinned. "You know our kids would be cuties if they came out looking like you, so you're being dramatic for no reason."

A few seconds passed before she continued, "I don't care who he or she looks like, though. I'm just excited to watch you dote on them like the big softy you are."

"I'm going to be a strict dad," Cole said, and both he and Tasha laughed since they knew that was furthest from the truth. Cole couldn't even be strict with their English bulldog, Fido, who'd managed to flout every rule with zero consequences in the two years since they adopted him. Tasha

was pretty sure Fido was curled up on the couch right in that moment, someplace he was not supposed to be allowed to go.

“Maybe we should get started right now,” he said, voice filled with humor. She swatted his hand away even though she knew he was teasing.

“You’re talking really wild with a baby in the bed.”

His hands slid around her waist. “There’s a baby in the bed, but I’m trying to put one in you.”

Tasha laughed so loud she snorted. “You are such a corny ass.”

But she loved him. So fucking much. The last three years were more than she could ever dream they might have been. Things were not always easy, but Cole hadn’t lied when he said they would put in the work together. She never knew love could be like this — beautiful, easy, pure. He was still her safe space, where she wanted to go after a long day whenever she felt beat down and stressed or whenever she just wanted to sit in silence with the man who meant everything to her. Sometimes she sat and wondered how her idea of what love was could have ever been so corrupted that she thought anything about the way Jeremy treated her could have had its roots in love. She didn’t think much about Jeremy these days. The last she heard was that he was finally doing serious time behind bars after taking his rage out on his latest wife. There were no plea deals this time. He faced trial, was found guilty, and the judge sent him away for fifteen years. She hoped he stayed there, but she did not dwell on him. There were too many beautiful things in her life for her to dwell on. Things like the fact she was on track to being able to start her business within the next year. Things like her soul felt lighter than it had in so many years. Things like the man who had drifted off to sleep beside her who loved her openly and intentionally every single day. Cole made the simplest, most mundane tasks an adventure, and there was never a boring moment between them. He treated her like she deserved the world and made it so easy for her to try to give him the same. That was why she had been pretending for the past month she hadn’t stumbled across the engagement ring he’d hidden while she was

cleaning. They had a trip planned to Japan and South Korea at the end of the month to watch the first cherry blossoms, and Tasha expected he would propose then. She couldn't wait to say yes. It was a poignant reminder that after dark, cold winters, beauty bloomed in Spring.

Just like their love and the wonderful life they'd created together.

She flipped across a few apps on her smartwatch until she found the app she was looking for before she lifted Frankie from the bed and nestled her in the playpen.

Maybe the cherry blossoms wouldn't be the only thing blooming when he proposed. She shook Cole awake, smiling at him when he sat sleepily up in the bed.

"I love you," she whispered, bringing her lips to his.

"I love you too, Tee."

She reached for his hand and pulled him to his feet with a grin. "Let's head to our room to see if you can make good on your promise to put a baby inside me."

He leaned down and kissed her thoroughly. "Your wish is my command."

***** THE END *****

AFTERWORD

Tasha's and Cole's love was a *journey* but I hope you found it to be a fulfilling one.

If you liked this book, please think about rating it and/or leaving a review on Amazon and/or Goodreads and telling your friends about it. Word of mouth is so important for indie authors.

Peace. Love. Light.

Rilzy

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Denicia: I would have given up on this book a million times over if it wasn't for your unwavering support and not-so-quiet confidence in me. You create a safe space for me to share my work in its rawest forms where I know you will always give me the real but in the gentlest, most affirming ways possible. Because who needs tough love, anyway? Thank you for continuing to choose to take these journeys with me. I could never find the words to express my gratitude.

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Kaitesi: It was fitting to save you for last as you were the last person to see Tasha and Cole before I send them out (anxiously) into the world. Thank you! Honestly. You have been more patient with me than you had any right to be. I don't know how I didn't work your nerves when I stayed getting on my own. Thank you for your genuine excitement and interest in this project. The memes, the messages and the support meant so much. I am so happy I got over myself and shot my "will you be my editor" shot. You're stuck with me now.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rilzy Adams believes all you need is love. Or, at least it should. She may, or may not, be a huge Beatles fan. She spends too much time living in her head watching the romantic lives of her ‘imaginary friends’ play out and then being the chatty friend to tell the world about them. When she isn’t living in her head, she must show up to work every day and be a lawyer. She resides, with her two dogs, on an island in the middle of the Caribbean Sea, which is perfect for her sun addiction, love affair with Prosecco and sushi worship.

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