WALL STREET JOURNAL & USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LAUREN LANDISH

DIRTY Talk

He knows just what to say.

DIRTY TALK

LAUREN LANDISH

Edited by

VALORIE CLIFTON

Edited by

STACI ETHERIDGE

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The following story contains mature themes, strong language and sexual situations. It is intended for mature readers.

All characters are 18+ years of age and all sexual acts are consensual.

CONTENTS

Dirty Talk
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23
Chapter 24
Chapter 25
Chapter 26
Chapter 27
Chapter 28
Epilogue
Motorhead
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5

Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23
Chapter 24
Chapter 25
Chapter 26
Chapter 27
Epilogue
Excerpt: Baby Daddy
Excerpt: Mr. Fixit
Excerpt: Anaconda
Dirty Laundry: Coming Soon!
About the Author

DIRTY TALK

BY LAUREN LANDISH

He makes dirty sound so good. So right.

The moment I heard his velvety voice growl that I'm his 'Kitty Kat', I knew I was in trouble.

Derrick 'The Love Whisperer' King gives out relationship and sex advice on the radio to everyone, but he's giving me something a bit more personal. Nobody's ever talked to me the way he does. Daring, Demanding, Sexy… and oh so **Dirty**.

Maybe we started this whole thing a little backwards. Sex first and getting to know each other after. But as we get closer, he's healing the cracks in my untrusting heart and making me believe that maybe fairy tales do come true.

I feel beautiful and hopeful when he worships my body. I feel dirty and naughty when he whispers filthy things in my ear.

But is it real? Can something so bad **really** be good for me?

And more importantly, against all odds, can it last… **forever**?

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CHAPTER 1

KATRINA

"Checkmate, bitch," I exclaim as I do a victory dance that's comprised of fist pumps and ass wiggles in my chair while my best friend Elise laughs at me. I turn in my seat and start doing a little half-stepping Rockettes dance. "Can-can, I just kicked some can-can, I so am the wo-man, and I rule this place!"

Elise does a little finger dance herself, cheering along with me. "You go, girl. Winner, winner, chicken dinner. Now let's eat!"

I laugh with her, joyful in celebrating my new promotion at work, regardless of the dirty looks the snooty ladies at the next table are shooting our way. I get their looks. I mean, we are in the best restaurant in the city. While East Robinsville isn't New York or Miami, we're more of a Northeastern suburb of . . . well, everything in between. This just isn't the sort of restaurant where five-foot-two-inch women in work clothes go shaking their ass while chanting something akin to a high school cheer.

But right now, I give exactly zero fucks. "Damn right, we can eat! I'm the youngest person in the company to ever be promoted to Senior Developer and the first woman at that level. Glass ceiling? Boom, busting through! Boys' club? Infiltrated." I mime like I'm sneaking in, shoulders hunched and hands pressed tightly in front of me before splaying my arms wide with a huge grin. "Before they know it, I'm gonna have that boys' club watching chick flicks and the whole damn office is going to be painted pink!"

Elise snorts, shaking her head again. "I still don't have a fucking clue what you actually do, but even I understand the words *promotion* and *raise*. So huge congrats, honey."

She's right, no one really understands when I talk about my job. My brain has a tendency to talk in streams of binary zeroes and ones that make

perfect sense to me, but not so much to the average person. When I was in high school, I even dreamed in Java.

And even I don't really understand what my promotion means. Senior Developer? Other than the fact that I get updated business cards with my fancy new title next week, I'm not sure what's changed. I'm still doing my own coding and my own work, just with a slightly higher pay grade. And when I say slightly, I mean barely a bump after taxes. Just enough for a bonus cocktail at a swanky club on Friday maybe. *Maybe* more at year end, they'd said. Ah, well, I'm excited anyway. It's a first step and an acknowledgement of my work.

The part people do get is when my company turns my strings of code into apps that go viral. After my last app went number one, they were forced to give me a promotion or risk losing my skills to another development company. They might not understand the zeroes and ones, but everyone can grasp dollars and cents, and that's what my apps bring in.

I might be young at only twenty-six, and female, as evidenced by my long honey-blonde hair and curvy figure, but as much as I don't fit the stereotypical profile of a computer nerd, they had to respect that my brain creates things that no one else does. I think it's my female point of view that really helps. While a chunk of the other people in the programming field fit the stereotype of being slightly repressed geeks who are more comfortable watching animated 'girlfriends' than talking to an actual woman, I'm different. I understand that merely slapping a pink font on things or adding sparkly shit and giving more pre-loaded shopping options doesn't make technology more 'female-friendly.'

It's insulting, honestly. But it gives me an edge in that I know how to actually create apps that women like and want to use. Not just women, either, based on sales. I'm getting a lot of men downloading my apps too, especially men who aren't into tech-geeking out every damn thing they own.

And so I celebrate with Elise, holding up our glasses of wine and clinking them together in a toast. Elise sips her wine and nods in appreciation, making me glad we went with the waiter's recommendation. "So you're killing it on the job front. What else is going on? How are things with you and Kevin?"

Elise has been my best friend since we met at a college recruiting event. She's all knockout looks and sass, and I'm short, nervous, and shy in

professional situations, but we clicked. She knows I've been through the wringer with some previous boyfriends, and even though Kevin is fine—well-mannered, ambitious, and treats me right—she just doesn't care for him for some reason. So my joyful buzz is instantly dulled, knowing that she doesn't like Kevin.

"He's fine," I reply, knowing it's not a great answer, but I also know she's going to roast me anyway. "He's been working a lot of hours so I haven't even seen him in a few days, but he texts me every morning and night. We're supposed to go out for dinner this weekend to celebrate."

Elise sighs, giving me that look that makes her normally very cute face look sort of like a sarcastic basset hound. "I'm glad, I guess. Not to beat a dead horse," —*too late*— "but you really can do better. Kevin is just so . . . meh. There's no spark, no fire between you two. It's like you're friends who fuck."

I duck my chin, not wanting her to read on my face the woeful lack of fucking that has been happening, but I'm too transparent.

"Wait . . . you two *do* fuck, right?" Elise asks, flabbergasted. "I figured that was why you were staying with him. I was sure he must be great in the sack or you'd have dumped his boring ass a long time ago."

I bite my lip, not wanting to get into this with her . . . again. But one of Elise's greatest strengths is also one of her most annoying traits as well. She's like a dog with a bone and isn't going to let this go.

"Look, he's fine," I finally reply, trying to figure out how much I need to feed Elise before she gives me a measure of peace. "He's handsome, treats me well, and when we have sex, it's good . . . I guess. I don't believe in some Prince Charming who is going to sweep me off my feet to a castle where we'll have romantic candlelit dinners, brilliant conversation, and bed-breaking sexcapades. I just want someone to share the good and bad times with, some companionship."

Elise holds back as long as she can before she explodes, her snort and guffaw of derision getting even more looks in our direction. "Then get a fucking Golden Retriever and a rabbit. The buzzing kind that uses rechargeable batteries."

One of the ladies at the next table huffs, seemingly aghast at Elise's outburst, and they stand to move toward the bar on the other side of the restaurant, far away from us. "Well, if this is the sort of trash that passes for dinner conversation," the older one says as she sticks her nose far enough

into the air I wonder if it's going to be clipped by the ceiling fans, "no wonder the country's going to hell under these Millennials!"

She storms off before Elise or I can respond, but the second lady pauses slightly and talks out of the side of her mouth. "Sweetie, you do deserve more than *fine*."

With a wink, she scurries off after her friend, leaving behind a grinning Elise. "See? Even snooty old biddies know that you deserve more than *meh*."

"I know. We've had this conversation on more than one occasion, so can we drop it?" I plead between clenched teeth before calming slightly. "I want to celebrate and catch up, not argue about my love life."

Always needing the last word, Elise drops her voice, muttering under her breath. "What love life?"

"That's low."

Elise holds her hands up, and I know I've at least gotten a temporary reprieve. "Okay then, if we're sticking to work, I got a new scoop that I'm running with. I'm writing a piece about a certain famous someone who got caught sending dick pics to a social media princess. Don't ask me who because I can't divulge that yet. But it'll be all there in black and white by next week's column."

Elise is an investigative journalist, a rather fantastic one whose talents are largely being wasted on celebrity news gossip for the tabloid paper she writes for. I can't even call it a paper, really. With the downfall of actual print news, most of her stuff ends up in cyberspace, where it's digested, Tweeted, hashtagged, and churned out for the two-minute attention span types to gloat over for a moment before they move on to . . . well, whatever the next sound bite happens to be.

Every once in awhile, she'll get to do something much more newsworthy, but mostly it's fact-checking and ass-covering before the paper publishes stories celebrities would rather see disappear. I know what burns her ass even more is when she has to cover the stories where some downward-trending celebrity manufactures a scandal just to get some social media buzz going before their latest attempt at rejuvenating a career that peaked about five years ago.

This one at least sounds halfway interesting, and frankly, better than my love life, so I laugh. "Why would he send a dick pic to someone on social media? Wouldn't he assume she'd post it? What a dumbass!"

“No, it’s usually close-ups and they’re posted anonymously,” Elise says with a snort. “Of course, she knows because she sees the user name on their direct message, but she cuts it out so that it’s posted to her page as an anonymous flash of flesh. Look.”

She pulls out her phone, clicking around to open an app, one I didn’t design but damn sure wish I had. It’s got one hell of a sweet interface, and Elise is using it to organize her web pages better than anything the normal apps have. It takes Elise only a moment to find the page she wants.

“See?” she says, showing me her phone. “People send her messages with dick pics, tit pics, whatever. If she deems them sexy enough, she posts them with little blurbs and people can comment. She also does Q-and-As with followers, shows faceless pics of herself, and gives little shows sometimes. Kinda like porn but more ‘real people’ instead of silicone-stuffed, pump-sucked, fake moan scenes.”

She scrolls through, showing me one image after another of body part close-ups. Some of them . . . well damn, I gotta say that while they might not be professionals or anything, it’s a hell of a lot hotter than anything I’m getting right now. “Wow. That’s uhh . . . quite something. I don’t get it, but I guess lots of folks are into it. Wait.”

She stops scrolling at my near-shout, smirking. “What? See something you like?”

My mouth feels dry and my voice papery. “Go back up a couple.”

She scrolls back up and I read the blurb above a collage of pics. *Little titty fuck with my new boy toy today. Look at my hungry tits and his thick cock. After this, things got a little deeper, if you know what I mean. Sorry, no pics of that, but I’ll just say that he was insatiable and I definitely had a very good morning. ;)*

The pictures show a close-up of her full cleavage, a guy’s dick from above, and then a few pictures of him stroking in and out of her pressed-together breasts. I’m not afraid to say the girl’s got a nice rack that would probably have most of my co-workers drooling and the blood rushing from their brains to their dicks, but that’s not what’s causing my stomach to drop through the floor.

I know that dick.

It’s the same, thick with a little curve to the right, and I can even see a sort of donut-shaped mole high on the man’s thigh, right above the shaved area above the base of his cock.

Yes, that mole seals it.

That's Kevin.

His cock with another woman, fucking her for social media, thinking I'd probably never even know. He has barely touched me lately, but he's willing to do it almost publicly with some social media slut?

I realize Elise is staring at me, her previous good-natured look long gone to be replaced by an expression of concern. "Kat, are you okay? You look pale."

I point at her phone, trying my best to keep my voice level. "That post? The one right there?"

"Oh, Titty Fuck Girl?" Elise asks. "She's on here at least once a month with a new set of pics. Apparently, she loves her rack. I still think they're fake. Why?"

"She's talking about Kevin. That's him."

She gasps, turning the phone to look closer. "Holy shit, honey. Are you sure?"

I nod, tears already pooling in my eyes. "I'm sure."

She puts her phone down on the table and comes around the table to hug me. "Shit. Shit. Shit. I am so sorry. I told you that douchebag doesn't deserve someone like you. You're too fucking good for him."

I sniffle, nodding, but deep inside, I know that this is always how it goes. Every single boyfriend I've ever had ended up cheating on me. I've tried playing hard to get. I've tried being the good little go-along girlfriend. I've even tried being myself, which seems to be somewhere in between, once I figured out who I actually was.

It's even worse in bed, where I've tried being vanilla, being aggressive, and being submissive. And again, being myself, somewhere in the middle, when I figured out what I enjoyed from the experimentation.

But honestly, I've never been satisfied. No matter what, I just can't seem to find that 'sweet spot' that makes me happy and fulfilled in a relationship. And while I've tried everything, depending on the guy, it never works out. The boyfriends I've had, while few in number considering I can count them on one hand, all eventually cheated, saying that they just wanted something different. Something that's *not* me.

Apparently, Kevin's no different. My mood shifts wildly from self-pity to anger to finally, a numb acceptance. "What a fucking jerk. I hope he likes

being a boy toy for a social media slut, because he's damn sure not my boyfriend anymore."

"That's the spirit," Elise says, refilling my wine glass. "Now, how about you and I finish off this bottle, get another, and by the time you're done, you'll have forgotten all about that loser while we take a cab back to your place?"

"Maybe I will just get a dog, and I sure as hell already have a buzzing rabbit. Several of them, in fact," I mutter. "You know what? They're better than he ever was by a damn country mile."

"Rabbits . . . they just keep going and going and going," Elise jokes, trying to keep me in good spirits. She twirls her hands in the air like the famous commercial bunny and signals for another bottle of wine.

She's right. Fuck Kevin.

CHAPTER 2

DERRICK

My black leather office chair creaks, an annoying little trend it's developed over the past six months that's the primary reason I don't use it in the studio. Admittedly, that's probably for the better because if I had a chair this comfortable in the studio, I'd be too relaxed to really be on point for my shows. Still, it's helpful to have something nice like this office since it's a hell of a big step up from the days when my office was also the station's break room. "All right, hit me. What's on the agenda for today's show?"

My co-star, Susannah, checks her papers, making little checkmarks as she goes through each item. She's an incessant checkmarker, and I have no idea how the fuck she can read her sheets by the end of the day. "The overall theme for today is cheaters, and I've got several emails pulled for that so we can stay on track. We'll field calls, of course, and some will be on topic and some off, like always. I'll try and screen them as best I can, and we should be all set."

I nod, trying to mentally prep myself for another three-hour stint behind the mic, offering music, advice, hope, and sometimes a swift kick in the pants to our listeners. Two years ago, I never would've believed that I'd be known as the 'Love Whisperer' on a radio talk segment called the same thing. Part Howard Stern, part Dr. Phil, part DJ Love Below, I've found a niche that's just . . . unique.

I started out many years ago as a jock, playing football on my high school team with dreams of college ball. A seemingly short derailment after an injury led me to do sports reporting for my high school's news and I fell in love.

After that, my scholarships to play football never came, but it didn't bother me as much as I thought it would. I decided to chase after a sports

broadcast degree instead, marrying my passion for football and my love of reporting.

I spent four years after graduation doing daily sports talks from three to six as the afternoon drive-home DJ. It wasn't a big station, just one of the half-dozen stations that existed as an alternative for people who didn't want to listen to corporate pop, hip-hop, or country. It was there I received that fateful call.

Looking back, it's kind of crazy, but a guy had called in bitching and moaning about his wife not understanding his need to follow all these wild superstitions to help his team win.

"I'm telling you D, I went to church and asked God himself. I said, if you can bless the Bandits with a win, I'll show myself true and wear those ugly ass socks my pastor gave me for Christmas the year before and never wash them again. You know what happened?"

Of course, everyone could figure out what happened. Still, I respectfully told him that I didn't think his unwashed socks were doing a damn thing for his beloved team on the basketball court, but if he didn't put those fuckers in the washing machine, they were sure going to land him in divorce court.

He sighed and eventually gave in when I told him to wash the socks, thank his wife for putting up with his shit, and full-out romance her to bed and do his damndest to make up for his selfish ways.

And that was that. A new show and a new me were born. After a few marketing tweaks, I've been the so-called 'Love Whisperer' for almost a year now, helping people who ask for advice to get the happily ever after they want.

Ironically, I'm single. Funny how that works out, but all the good advice I try to give stems from my parents who were happily married for over forty years before my mom passed. I won't settle for less than the real thing, and I try to advise my listeners to do the same.

And then there's the sex aspect of my job.

Talking about relationships obviously involves discussing sex with people, as that's one of the major areas that cause problems for folks. At first, talking about all the crazy shit people want to do even made me blush a little, but eventually, it's just gotten to be second nature.

Want to talk about how to get your wife to massage your prostate? Can do. Want to talk about how your girlfriend wants you to wear Underoos and

call her Mommy? Can do. Want to talk about your husband never washing the dishes, and how you can get him to help? I can do that too.

All-in-one, real relationships at your service. Live from six to nine, five days a week, or available for download on various podcast sites and clip shows on the weekends. Hell of a lot for a guy who figured *making it* would involve becoming the voice of some college football team.

So I want to do a good job. And that means working well with Susannah, who is the control-freak yin to my laissez-faire yang. “Thanks. I know this week’s topics from our show planning meeting, but I spaced on tonight’s focus.”

Susannah nods, unflappable. “No problem. Do you want to scan the emails or just do your thing?”

I smile at her. She already knows the answer. “Same as always, spontaneous. You know that even though I was a Boy Scout, being prepared for this doesn’t do us any favors. I sound robotic when I read ahead. First read, real reactions work better and give the listeners knee-jerk common sense.”

She shrugs, scribbling on her papers. “I know, just checking.”

It’s probably one of the reasons we work so well together, our totally different approaches to the show. Joining me from day one, she’s the one who keeps our show running behind the scenes and keeps me on track on-air, serving as both producer and co-host. Luckily, her almost anal-retentive penchant for prep totally doesn’t come across on the air, where she’s the playful, comedic counter to my gruff, tell-it-like-it-is style.

“Then let’s rock,” I tell her. “Got your drinks ready?”

Susannah nods as we head toward the studio. Settling into my broadcast chair, a much less comfortable but totally silent one, I survey my normal spread of one water, one coffee, and one green tea, one for every hour we’re gonna be on the air. With the top of the hour news breaks and spaced out music jams, I’ve gotten used to using the exactly four minute and thirty second breaks to run next door and drain my bladder if I need to.

Everything ready, we smile and settle in for another show. “Goooooood evening! It’s your favorite ‘Love Whisperer,’ Derrick King here with my lovely assistant, Miss Susannah Jameson. We’re ready for an evening of love, sex, betrayal, and lust, if you’re willing to share. Our focus tonight is on cheaters and cheating. Are you being cheated on? Maybe *you* are the cheater? Call in and we’ll talk.”

The red glow from the holding calls is instant, but I traditionally go to an email first so that I can roll right in. “While Susannah is grabbing our first caller, I’ll start with an email. Here’s one from ‘P’. ‘Dear Love Whisperer, it says, my husband travels extensively for work, leaving me home and so lonely. I don’t know if he’s cheating while he’s gone, but I always wonder. I’ve started to develop feelings for my personal trainer, and I think I’m falling in love with him. What should I do?’ ”

I *tsk-tsk* into the microphone, making my displeasure clear. “Well, P, first things first. Your marriage is your priority because you made a vow. For better or worse, remember? It’s simple. Talk to your husband. Maybe he’s cheating, maybe he isn’t. Maybe he’s working his ass off so his bored wife can even *have* a trainer and you’re looking for excuses to justify your own bad behavior. But talking to him is your first step. You need to explain your feelings and that you need him more than perhaps you need the money. Second, you need to get a life beyond your husband and trainer. I get the sense you need some attention and your trainer is giving it to you, so you think you’re in love with him. Newsflash—he’s being paid to give you attention. By your husband, it sounds like. That’s not a healthy foundation for a relationship even if he is your soulmate, which I doubt.”

I sigh and lower my voice a little. I don’t want to cut this woman’s guts out. I want to help her. “P, let’s be honest. A good trainer is going to be personable. They’re in a sales profession. They’re not going to make it in the industry without either being the best in the world at what they do or having a good personality. And a lot of them have good bodies. Their bodies are their business cards. So it’s natural to feel some attraction to your trainer. But that doesn’t mean he’s going to stick by you. Here’s a challenge—tell your trainer you can’t pay him for the next three months and see how available he is to just give you his time.”

Susannah snickers and hits her mic button. “That’s why I do group yoga classes. Only thing that happens there is sweaty tantric orgies. Ohmm . . . my . . .” Her initial yoga-esque ohm dissolves into a pleasure-induced moan that she fakes exceedingly well.

I roll my eyes, knowing that she does nothing of the sort. “To the point, though, fire your trainer because of your weakness and tell him why. He’s a pro. He needs to know that his services were not the reason you’re leaving. Next, get a hobby that fulfills you beyond a man and talk to your husband.”

I click a button and a sound effect of a cheering audience plays through my headset. It goes on like this for a while, call after call, email after email of helping people.

Well, I hope I'm helping them. They seem to think I am, and I'm certainly giving it my best shot. In between, I mix in music and a hodgepodge of stuff that fits the daily themes. Tonight I've got some Taylor Swift, a little Carrie Underwood, some old-school TLC. I even, as a joke, worked in Bobby Brown at Susannah's insistence.

Coming back from that last one, I see Susannah gesture from her mini-booth and give the airspace over to her, letting her introduce the next caller. "Okay, Susannah's giving me the big foam finger, so what've we got?"

"You wish I had a big finger for you," Susannah teases like she always does on air—it's part of our act. "The next caller would like to discuss some rather incriminating photos she's come across. Apparently, Mr. Right was Mr. Everybody?"

I click the button, taking the call live on-air. "This is the 'Love Whisperer', who am I speaking with?"

The caller stutters, obviously nervous, and in my mind I know I have to treat this one gently. Some of the callers just want to laugh, maybe have their fifteen seconds of fame or get their pound of proverbial flesh by exposing their partner's misdeeds. But there are also callers like this, who I suspect really needs help. "This is Katrina . . . Kat."

Whoa, a first name. And from the sound of it, a real one. She's not making a thing up. I need to lighten the mood a little, or else she's gonna clam up and freak out on me. "Hello, Kitty Kat. What seems to be the problem today?"

I hear her sigh, and it touches me for some reason. "Well . . . I can't believe I actually got through, first of all. I worked up the nerve to dial the numbers but didn't expect an answer. I'm just . . . I don't even know what I am. I'm just a little lost and in need of some advice, I guess." She huffs out a humorless laugh.

I can hear the pain in her voice, mixed with nerves. "Advice? That I can do. That's what I'm here for, in fact. What's going on, Kat?"

"It's my boyfriend, or my soon-to-be ex-boyfriend, I guess. I found out today that he slept with someone else." She sounds like she's found a bit of steel as she speaks this time, and it makes her previous vulnerability all the more touching.

“Ouch,” I say, truly wincing at the fresh wound. A day of cheat call? I’m sure the advertisers are rubbing their hands in glee, but I’m feeling for this girl. “I’m so sorry. I know that hurts and it’s wrong no matter what. I heard something about compromising pics. Please tell me he didn’t send you pics of him screwing someone else?”

She laughs but it’s not in humor. “No, I guess that would’ve been worse, but he had sex with someone kind of Internet famous and she posted faceless pics of them together. But I recognized his . . . uhm . . . his . . .”

Let’s just get the schlong out in the open, why don’t we? “You recognized his penis? Is that the word you’re looking for?”

“Yeah, I guess so,” Kat says, her voice cutting through the gap created by the phone line. “He has a mole, so I know it’s him.”

There’s something about her voice, all sweet and breathy that stirs me inside like I rarely have happen. It’s not just her tone, either. She’s in pain, but she’s mad as fuck too, and I want to help her, protect her. She seems innocent, and something deep inside me wants to make her a little bit dirty.

“Okay, first, repeat after me. Penis, dick, cock.” I wait, unsure if she’ll do it but holding my breath in the hopes that she will.

“Uh, what?”

I feel a small smile come to my lips, and it’s my turn to be a little playful. “Penis, dick, cock. Trust me, this is important for you. You can do it, Kitty Kat.”

I hear her intake of breath, but she does what I demanded, more clearly than the shyness I expected. “Penis, dick, cock.”

“Good girl,” I growl into the mic, and through the window connecting our booths, I can see Susannah giving me a raised eyebrow. “Now say . . . I recognized his cock fucking her.”

I say a silent prayer of thanks that my radio show is on satellite. I can say whatever I want and the FCC doesn’t care.

I can tell Kat is with me now, and her voice is stronger, still sexy as fuck but without the lost kitten loneliness to it. “I recognized his cock fucking her tits.”

My own cock twitches a little, and I lean in, smirking. “Ah, so the plot thickens. So Kat, how does it feel to say that?”

She sighs, pulling me back a little. “The words don’t bother me. I’m just not used to being on the radio. But saying that about my boyfriend pisses me off. I can’t believe he’d do that.”

“So, what do you think you should do about it?” I ask, leaning back in my chair and pulling my mic toward me. “Is this a ‘talk it through and our relationship will be stronger on the other side of this’ type situation, or is this a ‘hit the road, motherfucker, and take Miss Slippy-Grippy Tits with you?’ Do you want my opinion or do you already know?”

“You’re right,” Kat says, chuckling and sounding stronger again. “I already know I’m done. He’s been a wham-bam-doesn’t even say thank you, ma’am guy all along, and I’ve been hanging on because I didn’t think I deserved better. But I don’t deserve this. I’m better off alone.”

Whoa, now, only half right there, Kat with the sexy voice. “You don’t deserve this. You should have someone who treats you so well you never question their love, their commitment to you. Everyone deserves that. Hey, Kitty Kat? One more thing. Can you say ‘cock’ for me one more time? Just for . . . entertainment.”

I’m pushing the line here, both for her and for the show, but I ask her to do it anyway because I want, no need, to hear her say it.

She laughs, her voice lighter even as I know the serious conversation had to hurt. “Of course, Love Whisperer. Anything for you. You ready? Cock.” She draws the word out, the k a bit harsher, and I can hear the sass, almost an invitation, as she speaks.

“Ooh, thanks so much, Kitty Kat. Hold on the line just a second.” My cock is now fully hard in my pants, and I’m not sure if my upcoming bathroom break is going to be to piss or to take care of that.

I click some buttons, sending the show to a song, Shaggy’s *It Wasn’t Me* coming over the airwaves to keep the cheating theme rolling. “Susannah?”

“Yeah?”

“Handle the next call or so after the commercial break,” I tell her. “Pick something . . . funny after that one.”

“Gotcha,” Susannah says, and I’m glad she’s able to handle things like that. It’s part of our system too that when I get a call that needs more than on-air can handle, she fills the gap. Usually with less serious questions or listener stories that always make for great laughs.

Checking my board, I click the line back, glad that Susannah can’t hear me now. “Kat? You still there?”

“Yes?” she says, and I feel another little thrill go down my cock just at her word. God, this woman’s got a sexy voice, soft and sweet with a little undercurrent of sassiness . . . or maybe I really, really need to get laid.

“Hey, it’s Derrick. I just wanted to say thanks for being such a good sport with all of that.”

“No problem,” she says as I make a picture in my head of her. I can’t fill in the details, but I definitely want to. “Thanks for helping me realize I need to walk away. I already knew it, but some inspiration never hurts.”

“I really would like to hear the rest of the story if you don’t mind calling me back. I want to hear how he grovels when he finds out what he’s lost. Would you call me?”

I don’t know what I’m doing. This is so not like me. I never talk to the callers after they’re on air unless I think they’re going to hurt themselves or others, and I certainly never invite them to call back. But something about her voice calls to me like a siren. I just hope she’s not pulling me into the rocky shore to crash.

“You mean the show?” Kat asks, uncertain and confused. “Like . . . I dunno, like a guest or something?”

“Well, probably not, to be honest,” I reply, crossing my fingers even as my cock says I need to take this risk. “We’ll be done with the cheating theme tonight and it probably won’t come back up for a couple of weeks. I meant . . . call me. I want to make sure you’re okay afterward and standing strong.”

“Okay.”

Before she can take it back, I rattle off my personal cell number to her, half of my brain telling me this is brilliant and the other half saying it’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever done. I might not have the FCC looking over my shoulder, but the satellite network is and my advertisers for damn sure are. Still . . . “Got it?”

“I’ve got it,” Kat says. “I’ll get back to you after I break up with Kevin. It’s been a weird night and I guess it’s going to get even weirder. Guess I gotta go tell Kevin his dick busted him on the internet and he can get fucked elsewhere . . . permanently. I can do this.”

“Damn right, you can,” I tell her. “You can do this, Kitty Kat. Remember, you deserve better. I’ll be waiting for your report.”

Kat laughs and we hang up. I don’t know what just happened but my body feels light, bubbly inside as I take a big breath to get ready for the next segment of tonight’s show.

CHAPTER 3

KAT

I knock on the door to Kevin's apartment, the voice of Derrick the Love Whisperer still running around in my head. I deserve better than to be cheated on.

"Hey, babe," Kevin says when he opens his door. He's still wearing his 'work clothes,' a black tank top with *KH Nutrition* emblazoned on it along with track pants that are just a little tight and normally worn just a little low on his hips when he works out. I've never really understood why he does it, but it's part of his 'thang.' Every Instagram pic and video he does, he whips off the tank, adjusts his track pants in a way that highlights the Adonis belt V-cut of his abs, then flexes and sort of makes a hooting grunt before finishing the show with "KH, Bay-bay!"

I used to think it was sexy, in a musclehead, caveman-ish sort of way. No longer. "Don't 'hey, babe' me," I growl, looking up into his eyes. I'm not in work clothes, so I'm missing the extra inches of height my heels normally give me. But I'm a legit five-two of fury right now, so I don't care if he's nearly a foot taller. "How long have you been fucking her behind my back?"

"Huh?" Kevin asks, but in his eyes I can see he has a damn good idea what I'm talking about.

"Don't act stupid, you son of a bitch!" I hiss, poking him in the chest. "You know exactly what I'm talking about. Titty Fuck Girl. Where'd you meet her, the gym? When you went out shopping for a new smartphone with the money I gave you because you swore you needed the better camera for your Instagram page? How long has it been going on, Kevin?"

Kevin looks up and down the hallway. For a guy whose Internet presence makes him look like a big baller, he's living in a cracker box POS

apartment building, and I know he's worried about his neighbors hearing me blab his private business. "Come on inside. We can talk—"

"If you don't tell me how long it's been going on, I'm going to put my knee right in your nuts," I growl. "This isn't a negotiation, Kevin." It really doesn't matter at this point. It's most likely just going to make me angrier, but I can't stop myself.

He looks like he's about to run but sighs. "Fine. I met her a couple of months ago when she came into the gym. I was filming a squat."

"What? So she just walked up behind you to compliment your form and suddenly, you're in bed?" I laugh, realizing just how short I sold myself. He's fake—the tan, the persona, the entire image. Just to get more followers.

Kevin looks sheepish but nods. "She said she'd promote my supps, do some spots on her Instagram feed, and let me shoot some selfies with her wearing a KH tank top."

"So you titty fucked her?" I hiss, shaking my head. Seriously, what the fuck? I can hardly take it as I stare at his chiseled face, wanting so badly to slap him. "Do you realize how ridiculous you sound right now? How stupid do you think I am?"

Kevin looks pouty, the same look he used when he hit me up for four hundred bucks for his new smartphone. "You never believe in me, never think I can be successful even though I work so hard."

It's in this moment that I see it. Though his face is schooled into a puppy dog look, his eyes are alight as he turns the blame back on me, thinking he's pulled one over on me once again. And all the fire leaves me. I'm mad he cheated, but I don't even really like him right now, and honestly, I haven't for a long time but was too afraid to do anything about it.

My voice takes a parental, lecturing tone. "You're not working. You're a lazy ass who spends hours at the gym bullshitting with the bros and thinking some scam is going to magically make you money without your having to actually do anything. But you know what? I looked the other way for too long even though everyone told me you were no good. None of that even matters now. You cheated on me. Done. Game over."

Kevin inhales, trying to stand at his tallest, most imposing. His forearms clench and his biceps start to strain as he puffs up. It strikes me that once upon a time, he'd stand over me like this and I'd find it so damn sexy I'd be

instantly wet, but now, his attempt at intimidating me is just ridiculous. “You’ll be sorry. You’ll never find someone who treats you like I do, who satisfies you like I do.”

God, how could I have been so blind? “Like you do? You know, I hope you’re right because you treat me like an afterthought, using me as an ATM when you’re a little short, screwing around, and blaming me for your lack of success when it’s your own fault,” I reply, keeping my voice calm but firm, not letting him get an inch on me. I’m not going to raise my voice, to yell or let him think that he’s gotten to me, because for some reason, honestly, he hasn’t. “And as for satisfied in bed, I have literally never had a single orgasm with you. Ever. I’m not gonna lie, your dick is nice to look at and photographs well, apparently, but you don’t even know what to do with it. Sticking it in and out for two minutes before blowing into a condom and then rolling over to gasp while staring at the ceiling doesn’t quite cut it, Kev. So yeah, I hope I never find someone who treats me like you do. I thought I could settle for content, just float along and not rock the boat, but I deserve so much more.”

Before Kevin can reply, I turn and walk toward the stairs, not wanting to lose my nerve in front of him. It’s not until I’m halfway down that the shakes start as the adrenaline leaves me, but I keep it cool until I get to my car.

One Week Later

A week since the blow-up with Kevin and I’m surprisingly not upset. Disappointed, sure, but if you end a one-year relationship with someone, shouldn’t you feel sad? I’ve felt a lot of other emotions, anger mostly, but they’ve faded too. Instead, I’m just left with this . . . I guess more than anything, lack of things to do. I’ve got more free time on my hands, but I’m not sad or upset.

I guess the lack of depression goes to show how far apart we’d drifted and how unattached I was from him without even realizing it. Really, the most annoying part of this whole thing has been that I’ve had to change my gym membership because I didn’t want drama or to limit myself to when I could or couldn’t go based on his haunting the place.

Maybe I never really was in love with him. We’d met at the gym, and he’d been charming and admittedly hot, so when he asked me out, I said yes. Our dating just naturally progressed, and somewhere along the way, we

started calling it a relationship, but who knows if he was ever really committed? I was faithful, but that was more out of habit and the fact that I would never cheat than any obvious commitment we had. It's not like he ever put a ring on it.

Even though it had been over a month since we'd been intimate, I'd gone to the doctor for a checkup just to be safe, and luckily, everything was clear. I can't believe he'd put me at risk, but I guess I should've seen it coming considering guys always cheat.

Taking the opportunity to do a purge on everything in my life, I've got the radio turned up and I'm cleaning my apartment like a mad woman when I hear the voice. *His* voice.

It's like velvet-covered gravel, and just a few words make me breathless and hot. "Good evening, listeners. Derrick King here, aka the 'Love Whisperer'. What's happening in your love life? Our focus tonight is on pushing boundaries in the bedroom. What's encouraging and fun? What's demanding and over the line? Call in if you've got something to discuss."

I've gone stock-still, my cleaning completely forgotten as his voice washes over me. I turn it up a little more as I finish sweeping, deciding everything else can wait as I listen.

Over the next few hours, Derrick is surprisingly simple in his answers to callers, who want to try a variety of things sexually but for whatever reason haven't discussed it with their partners. It's almost comical how every call gets into a groove, and it sort of goes like this:

I want to do this crazy thing.

Have you asked your partner?

No.

Talk to them. Maybe they're into it.

But I'm not sure they want to.

How could you know if you don't talk with them? If they are, great. If not, decide if it's a deal breaker and move forward according to your answer. Chances are it's not a deal-breaker if you're not doing it now.

It's funny and spiced up with plenty of little anecdotes and witticisms that leave me grinning, while his voice turns me on even as I'm comforted. I listen to his no-nonsense approach as he advocates conversation and honesty at every turn, and I only wish I had a man like that who'd actually talk and be honest with me.

As the show wraps up, I remember his request for me to call him back and tell him what happened with Kevin. He was probably just being nice and doesn't actually expect me to call, but something about it felt real.

I wait for a bit after the show ends to give him time to get out of the studio and wherever it is he goes after work, and then I call. I'm heading out anyway. I've got a late-night rumbling tummy that can only be satisfied by something cheesy and takeout.

The phone rings several times and I'm about to hang up, mad at myself for being stupidly excited about talking to *The Love Whisperer* again, when he answers.

"Talk to me."

It's the same purring growl. That panty-melting voice of his isn't an act.

"Hey, Love Whisperer. It's your Kitty Kat."

There's a throaty chuckle on the other end, but there's concern in it too, which helps me feel better. "*My* Kitty Kat now?" he asks, and I can hear the smile in his voice. "After a week went by, I wasn't sure if I was going to get that return call. I was starting to doubt whether I had an effect at all."

"You set me straight. Hold on. Let me put you on speaker. I've got this technogeek wonder phone that I love to use speaker on."

"Well, I'm in my office, so this isn't private . . . but tell me, how'd it go?"

I plug my phone into the charging dock in my dash and slip my Bluetooth earpiece in as I fire up my car. "First off, I can't believe I didn't listen to anyone."

Derrick

"I can't believe you're the type to settle for anyone," I reply, relaxing back in my office chair. It's late. Almost nobody is around the studio right now. It's one of the benefits of satellite radio, I guess. You can run a lot more shows pre-recorded. "So he fessed up?"

"He gave me the most ridiculous line of shit ever," Kat says, her breathy voice causing a stir in my pants. What the fuck is wrong with me? "He said that he did it because she was willing to pimp his line of supplements on her Instagram page."

"You're shitting me," I say, rolling my eyes. "What a stupid asshole."

"You're right there. Honestly, I waited a week to call because I wanted to get a clear head."

“I can understand that. So he fed you a line of bullshit, and you chucked his ass out on the street. That’s what I wanted to hear.”

“Not quite,” Kat says. “I went to his apartment to give him the news. No waiting around.”

“Good for you,” I tell her. “So, that’s it? I mean, I like it, but sounds a bit easy, don’t you think?”

“Well, he did try to puff his chest out and tell me no man would ever treat me like he did or satisfy me like him. I took a little delight in telling him that I sure as hell hoped not since he’s a cheater whom I had to fake it with because he’d never even made me . . .” Kat says with spunkiness before stopping herself short. “Uhm, I mean—”

“Wait, seriously?” I ask in a sputtering laugh. “Is that true? You weren’t just busting his balls? Damn, Kat . . . for how long?”

“It’s okay,” she says, seemingly comfortable talking to me. “My best friend told me to get a dog or a new rabbit. Or both. She’s probably right.”

“A rabbit?” I ask, my brain half-buzzed from her voice. Fuck me, I need to get laid.

“Well, um, not a bunny rabbit,” she replies, her voice becoming even a little breathier. “You know . . . a rabbit.”

She makes a buzzing sound, and all of a sudden, it hits me. She’s making me seem like an amateur. I talk about sex for a living. I shouldn’t be caught off guard like this. Trying to maintain at least a veneer of professionalism, I clear my throat. “Yeah, I can see where that’d come in handy. Take matters into your own hands, so to speak. I’ve done that myself more than a few times.”

What I just said sinks in for both of us, and the tension between us can be felt even over the phone lines. If I could see her right now, I’d swear we’d just crossed a line. And I’d probably see how far I could push to make a move.

Kat can feel it too. “So, uh, yeah, anyway. That was probably an overshare on my part. Sorry about that.”

Fuck it. I don’t know why I’m doing this, but I’m just gonna go for it. Her sweet voice is doing something magically delicious to me, something about her intriguing me in a way I haven’t felt in a long while. Time to jump in the pool and see if she’s willing to swim with me. I look around the studio, not seeing Susannah. “Not an overshare at all. I’m just in the middle of picturing you with your new pet bunny, what you would look like spread

wide open with your tits pearled up, pussy pulsing around a little toy that can't fill it, and what you'd sound like when you come."

I know my voice has gotten deeper, lust making it even rougher than my usual smooth radio sound, but I can't stop it. I adjust myself in my jeans, glad she can't see the effect she's having on me right now.

There's a slight hitch in her voice as she adjusts to what I just said. "Derrick, wow. I don't know what to say to that. Fuck."

She's all but whispering by the end of her sentence and I wonder if she's touching herself to let out some tension. I don't even know what she looks like, but I don't care. I want to see her just like I said, maybe in a little skirt that's hiked up so she can show me as I inhale her scent. "You don't have to say anything unless you want me to stop."

I pause, hoping she doesn't say stop because I damn sure don't want to. I barely know this woman, this voice coming through my phone, but she's got me rock hard and on the edge with barely a word. I reach down and undo the button on my jeans, giving myself at least a little room to breathe.

"I think I need to—"

I interrupt, hoping to give her what she wants and needing my own release as well. "What do you need, Kitty Kat? I'll give it to you."

Kat pauses, and I can feel her trembling on the edge before she lets out another deep breath, half moan, half sigh of regret. "I think I need to go. I'm sorry. This is all new to me and I wasn't expecting this tonight. And . . . well, I'm driving. Gotta stay safe. Good night, Derrick."

Before I can say a single thing to stop her, she hangs up. *Damn it, Derrick! You pushed her too far, too fast.* I literally just did a show about listening, not going beyond your partner's limits, and I just blasted past Kat's, lost in my own desire.

My brain is yelling at me, disappointed that she hung up, but my cock is still at full attention, begging for release. I let the image of Kat take over my mind, not even knowing what she actually looks like, but imagining her pink pussy dripping as she rubs a vibrator across her clit.

I reach into my briefs, taking my cock out and grabbing it in one fist, then stroke up and down my shaft, giving me instant relief as I groan. To hell with it. As hot as I am, this will be fast, so the odds of anyone catching me are slim. And if they do, well, they're in for a sight because I can't stop.

I imagine Kat holding the vibe to herself as she slips two fingers into her pussy, thrusting them in and out in time to my own strokes, her eyes

hooded with lust and watching my every breath.

In my head, I talk to her, telling her to fuck herself with her fingers. To show me how much she wishes it were my cock filling her tight pussy, how she wants to squeeze and milk me until I fill her up with so much cum that it spills out of her, too much for her little cunt to hold.

The combination of memories of her voice and my own mind filling the gaps and imagining dirty talking to Kat sends me over the edge. I explode, my come coating my hand as I jerk, getting every last shudder from the orgasm as I picture Kat screaming my name as she's lost in her own pleasure.

I glance around my office again, seeing the box of tissues on the corner of my desk. I grab a handful, glad there's something to help clean up this particular spill . . . and damn glad nobody's around to see the mess I've made.

CHAPTER 4

KAT

"Yo, Kat!"

"You already spent that new bonus check?"

I huff, wishing I got a bonus check, but I play along anyway. I give a wave to Harry and Larry, two of my co-workers. "You'll see when the pizzas come in at lunch!" I joke back.

Harry rubs his Monday shirt, a stretched and faded *Pizza The Hut* custom job he got off the Internet. "Just remember, no sausage!"

"That's not what I've heard," I tease, and Harry snorts. He claims to be a ladies-man love machine, but I have more than a sneaking suspicion that's all talk and some serious next-level self-aggrandizing. He's a good guy, though, and he doesn't take anything too seriously.

"Yeah, well, hope you've got another doozy cooked up," Larry says. "My latest game's gonna have me taking your shine soon enough."

I laugh and head to my cubicle. I've finally gotten it exactly the way I want, with triple screens that allow me to code, visualize, and debug all at the same time.

I immediately pull up my next project, an ambitious attempt at totally integrating calendars, social media, and office apps that could turn the whole damn system on its head.

I need to focus because the coding on this is going to be tricky. Integrating all these systems is easy. Doing it without turning someone's smartphone into a brick that works at the speed of a turtle? That's tricky.

As I work, I know I should be focusing on code. Every line has to be correct and every phrase has to be perfect. I can't have any mistakes or any clogs. But instead, my mind keeps wandering back to my phone conversation with Derrick.

The conversation had been nice until it got a little too heated. I mean, he had me half moaning even before he said what he did. I can't believe I just bailed like that.

Sure, I know I was a total coward, but I truly wasn't expecting it and I didn't know what to say. Especially since all of my blood was rushing to my neglected pussy, making me squirm around in my seat and tempting me to pull over right then to take matters into my own hands once again. I was this close to telling him exactly what I needed.

Face it, Kat, you wanted to, my mind tells me. *In fact, you wanted him to be there, his silky voice telling you what to do, talking you through every action as his eyes watched you with rapt attention.*

Shaking my head, I try to get back to work, putting in hour after hour of work and making little progress. Coding is a lot like speaking a foreign language. For some people, those folks who get paid big bucks, they can translate on the fly, able to listen in one language and talk in another almost instantaneously.

Others, like me, might be just as fluent in both languages but can't operate in both at the same time. So for me, coding means I have to put my brain in 'code mode' to really get in the groove.

Just as my left-hand monitor flashes me a signal that it's noon and time for lunch, my phone rings. It's my sister Jessie, who's learned to never, ever call me during my work hours unless someone important is dying.

Jessie's always been like a second mom to me. Eight years older, we never really had that period when she was a teen where she thought taking care of her little sister was a pain in the ass. Instead, she looked out for me, making sure I got my schoolwork done and never letting me veer too far off the path into crazy.

She's not some stick in the mud though. Actually, the first time I ever got drunk was with Jessie, and we both have had plenty of good laughs along the way. With hair two shades darker than mine and another three inches on me, she's beautiful and a stellar wife and mom, all the while holding down a full-time job as a risk management specialist for an insurance company.

She's truly Super Woman and everything I want to be when I grow up, whenever that'll be. With my new promotion, I'm at least *halfway* there, the professional success coming more readily than the personal. "What's up in

the land of vehicle recall calculations?" I ask her. "Got anything that'll blow up in my face?"

"Very funny," Jess says with a laugh. "Actually, I called to say congrats on work and your promotion. Good job, Sis. I knew you could do it. Acing it at work, and on the home front too? How's Kevin?"

I wonder for a split second if she can read my mind, the professional-personal discrepancy coming out of her mouth just a beat after it crossed my mind. I can tell she doesn't care but feels like she should ask.

"What about Kevin?" I ask, trying to not sound snippy. Hell, maybe I should listen to her more because she was spot-on with him and has been right before about boyfriends too. "There *is* no more Kevin."

"What do you mean?" she asks, and I tell her about our breakup, leaving out the issues with our sex life and focusing on his cheating and my not putting up with it.

When I finish, Jess gives me a little cheer. "Good for you, girl. You're beautiful *and* smart, and there's no reason you should have to put up with any man who can't see that."

"Well, I don't want to be a downer, but not everyone finds a fairytale Prince Charming who loves you like Liam does you. Gonna be honest here. He's the only thing giving me hope that such a man exists in the real world, because all the ones I run into are cheaters, liars, and users looking for a booty call and nothing else."

Jess knows my experience with men so she gives me a pass. "He's out there," she tells me reassuringly. "You'll find him soon. Probably when you least expect it."

Unbidden, my mind jumps to Derrick and how that was so unexpected. But I don't even know him. Not really, just his radio persona, although he did seem genuine and real when he was listening to my drama about breaking up with Kevin.

Of course, he seems to have a bad boy side too. Good guys don't start talking about how they want to watch me toy my pussy on a second conversation unless they've got at least a decent naughty streak running through them.

There's a part of me that wants to get my own bad girl vibe going . . . kind of. I mean, I want to, but my wild child streak is sadly narrow, but maybe I could learn a few things from Derrick.

“Yeah, well,” I finally say, not wanting to go down that particular rabbit hole at the moment, pun intended, “either way, I’m single now.”

“Sexy and single,” Jess replies. “Whatcha gonna do with all that ass inside them jeans?”

“I’m wearing a skirt today, actually,” I retort. “But I do need to get some lunch.”

“I gotcha,” Jess says, letting it drop. “Listen, don’t let any of those cretins you work with have a heart attack because your beautiful ass goes walking by, okay? And if anyone tries to grab anything, you break their wrist with one hand and slap a sexual harassment lawsuit on them with the other.”

“I will,” I promise her, smiling. “See you later, Jess.”

“Will do. Call me tonight. We can catch up on Mom,” Jess says. “Love ya, Kat.”

“Love you too. Bye.”

Getting home tonight, I can’t help it. I find myself listening to Derrick’s radio show.

“Good evening, listeners, your Love Whisperer Derrick King here, and tonight, our topic is something that seems mysterious to most men. Some men say it doesn’t even exist.”

“The stupid bastards,” Susannah says with an exaggeratedly venomous tone of disdain, making me chuckle.

“I wouldn’t say stupid, just . . . uneducated and in need of some enlightenment,” Derrick purrs, making the muscles on the insides of my thighs tremble. Oh, what this man could educate me on.

“So tonight, our topic is The Female Orgasm. We’re going to start off with an email. This is from . . . ‘H’. H writes that her girlfriend and her have sex often, but she is frustrated that her girlfriend can only climax from a dildo or a strap-on. H feels like that’s off limits. What can she do?”

I lift an eyebrow. Derrick’s chosen a doozy to start the night. “Sounds like someone needs some dick,” I murmur to myself before my body whispers back that yes, it does need some dick.

“H,” Derrick says, his voice sure and slightly stern, making my mouth go dry, “first, penetration has nothing to do with sexual orientation. What your girlfriend needs is what she needs. There’s nothing wrong with her body saying that’s what it likes best. It has nothing to do with how she feels

about you as a person or her attraction to you. I'm just going to be straight with you. What your email tells me is that you might need to deal with your own insecurities. Talk to your girlfriend. I'm sure you two will be just fine."

I'm hanging on to his every word, and I idly wonder if perhaps my confession to him last week inspired this topic.

"Susannah's got us another caller, Z. Z, go ahead."

"Yeah, D, listen . . . I'm trying my best with my lady, but it seems like no matter what I do, she just doesn't get there. Like, we have sex and stuff, and she says she enjoys it, but she rarely has an orgasm. It's messing with my head and I really want to please her."

In his velvety voice, Derrick tells the caller to take his time and he's gotta build up to the main event with foreplay, not just dive in and pound her and think that'll do it.

"It starts in the mind, talking to her and telling her how sexy she is, what you want to do to her," he purrs. I can't take it anymore. I can feel my nipples tightening in my t-shirt and I cup my left breast, imagining Derrick telling me this face-to-face.

"Cup her face in your hands and kiss her gently at first, then devour her. Move down her neck, maybe tease a little nibble to see if she's into that, and lick along her collarbone. Make it down to her breasts which by now should be full and heavy," he says, and I echo him, massaging both of my breasts. It feels so good I have to sit down on my couch, leaning back and my legs spreading slowly.

"Tease her nipples, palm them and circle your hands, cradle her breasts and lick the nipples until they tighten up, then suck them deeply. If she liked the neck nibbles, maybe light bites or easy pinches here too. Your mileage may vary with that because everyone is different. Make your way down her body, layering kisses with licks and sucks along the way."

"Fuck," I moan, my eyes rolling up as my pussy quivers in anticipation. I let my left hand slide down, cupping myself through my shorts, the heat making me gasp at the first touch. The whole world swims away and all I can hear is Derrick's sexy growling.

"Compliment her pussy and let your hot breath warm her as you let the anticipation build. Then lick her with a flat tongue from slit to clit several times before focusing on her clit for circles. I've heard writing the alphabet with your tongue can be good, and when you find a letter that makes her moan, do that one over and over, but if that's too much, just trace patterns

and rhythms. Flat tongue, pointed tongue, fast, slow to see what she responds to best. The answer's easy really, just pay attention to her. Take your time. Take as much time as you need to help her get into it. You'll be able to tell. She's not gonna be shy about it and you'll know. She'll open up like a flower."

I can't take this anymore. I slide a hand inside my panties, rubbing at my lips and wishing it were Derrick. I bet he's got strong fingers that could leave me dripping with desire and a tongue that could write poetry on my clit.

"Eventually," Derrick continues, "slip a finger inside slowly and pull it out, teasing her opening and stretching her. Hell, who knows, maybe two or three fingers or more. Like I said, just pay attention. Curl them toward her front wall to slide across her G-spot if you can find hers."

I follow his words, slipping two fingers inside my soaking pussy and pumping them slowly before finding my G-spot. Derrick's got me so turned on that finding the spot is easy, and each intense stroke leaves my toes curling on the carpet.

"All the while, you finger bang her and you lick and suck her clit like a starving man. It might take a few minutes, it might take a lot longer, but you do what she likes and stick with it until she comes. It'll be the best reward ever, trust me. After that, well, you see what it takes. She'll be open to you. Just listen to her body and be creative. No wham-bam, thank you, ma'am. Most women are more complex than that, all right?"

Susannah interrupts, and I can hear it in her voice that she's turned on too. "Wow, Derrick. That was rather . . . descriptive. Fellas, from a female perspective, let me tell you . . . hell yes to all of that. Hell. Yes."

They laugh, sending the show over to a song, and Mazzy Star's *Fade Into You* comes grooving out of my radio. I keep my fingers going, pumping them in and out and finding all the ways that my body likes it, grinding the heel of my hand against my clit before easing up and brushing it with my thumb.

The whole time, I can only imagine that Derrick's there doing it. I don't even know what he looks like, but holy fuck, I don't know if it matters when a man knows what he knows. My pussy clenches around my two fingers as I strum my clit with my thumb, and I cry out, pushing myself over the edge and coating my hand in my sweet slickness. The orgasm's intense, and I bite my lip hard, moaning his name. "Derrick."

Fuck me. God, I want him to fuck me so badly. When I come back to reality again, I realize the commercial break's over, and I take my hand out of my soaked panties, panting shakily.

Holy Shit, Derrick's cohort is right. Hell yes to all of that. Listening to his voice describe how he gets a woman to come, giving but always in control . . . it's worshipful mastery and I want it.

I want it so badly.

I definitely should not have hung up last night. Kicking myself for my cowardice and the missed opportunity, I click off the radio as Derrick moves on to another caller who apparently wants to know why his girlfriend can't come from anal.

I can't take another answer from Derrick. Not if I want to get any sleep.

CHAPTER 5

DERRICK

The restaurant is full, but not too busy as I scan the tables. It doesn't take long to find my target. After all, there aren't too many six-foot-five, two hundred and eighty-five pound men who have a build like my best friend.

"Jacob!" I call, seeing my friend turn. He's so massive, I didn't even see that he was talking to someone, a petite blonde girl who's looking up at him with one purpose in her eyes. Jacob gives me a nod and turns back, scribbling a signature along with something else on the piece of paper the girl's holding before sending her on her way.

"Good to see you, Derrick!" Jacob says as we embrace like we did back when we were roommates in college. It was a pure chance pairing, two jocks, one on the football team and one moving away from the sport, but it clicked.

"You too. How's the shoulder treating you?" I ask.

"Not as bad as the sportswriters made it out to be. Mostly it was just one hell of a bruise. I've been resting it for two weeks now since we've got a bye week. I'm good heading into the rest of the season. Then, of course, contract talks."

Contract talks. Big money. Jacob's coming off two All-Pro years, and if he's going to stay with his current team, they're going to have to pony up some top-flight money this offseason to do it. Everyone's saying the team would be smart to try and sign him to an extension before crunch time.

"Big contract so you can pay for all of your groupies," I joke. "What is it, thirty-two girls for thirty-two cities now?"

"Don't hate the player, hate the game," Jacob jokes. "Green ain't your color, bro. You ain't a Notre Dame fan. Besides, I know that when I find the right girl, I'll settle down. Until then, fuck it. What about you?"

“Not my thing,” I admit, sitting down at the table across from him. The waitress comes over, taking our orders, and then I continue. “I’m not gonna hate on you, but that’s just not what I’m looking for right now.”

“You never were,” Jacob admits. “No matter how many times I tried to bring you to the dark side.”

“What can I say? I saw the real thing with my parents, and I’ve never been able to settle for less. Besides, it’s not like I don’t get out there at all.”

“We all heard that. Lookin’ for that perfect freak in the sheets, lady in the streets, I guess. Anyway, I won’t bust your balls. How’s work?”

“Fine. Been busy, more folks calling in and we can’t even get to them all in a three-hour show. But the show seems to be helping people and the ratings are through the roof.”

Jacob laughs, sipping his sparkling water. “Yeah, I’m not surprised. I heard last night’s show. You probably caused every woman listening to come right then and there. Shit, I’m good, never get complaints for damn sure, but hell, even I was taking notes. Never hurts to up your game a little bit.”

We laugh, and I remember what Jacob told me last time we got together. Apparently, more and more of his teammates are listening in to my show as well. It seems odd that celebs and people I know would be listening to the show, but I do majorly appreciate the support. Somehow, when I’m on the mic, it feels more anonymous. The ‘Love Whisperer’ is just more of an amped-up facet of my personality, not exactly the real everyday version of me.

“You ever miss ball?” he asks me after we finish our food. “I mean, you helped me train during the offseasons. I know you still had the skills back in college.”

I shake my head, leaning back. I remember those days, sweating it out in the winter weight room, the summers running wind sprints with Jacob up and down the steps of the stadium. Even though I’m ninety pounds lighter than him, there were too many times I was a step behind or busting my ass just to keep pace. I had the love of the game, but not that one in ten thousand talent like him. “No, not really. I miss the teamwork, the brotherhood. But it wasn’t meant for me. I’m happy where I landed. You?”

He nods, rolling his shoulder unconsciously, and I wonder how much of what he told me about his injury being just a bruise was bullshit. If it is an injury, his season’s going to be a lot harder than he’s letting on. “Definitely

happy. It’s a crazy amount of work and I already feel like an old man on some days, but it’s all I ever dreamed of.”

“I’m glad,” I reply honestly. “You think you’ll make All-Pro again?”

“Pretty sure,” Jacob says with a smile. “You coming to the game tomorrow? Season kick-off.”

I nod, grinning. “It’s a hell of a drive, but no way I’m missing it. Already pre-recorded my show for tomorrow. It’ll be an all-write-in show so that I can watch my boy get his ass whooped.”

Jacob laughs. “Fuck you, man. You know I’m going to be having a party in the backfield.”

“I hope you party all fucking night long. I’ll be partying right with you if you do.”

One of the benefits of being a radio celebrity is that my face isn’t as well-known as my name. So as I sit in prime seats, fifty yard line, two rows up, right behind the players, I’m pretty anonymous. If I yelled, Jacob could probably hear me, but I won’t distract him like that because he’s at work.

The game is close coming out of halftime, and the tension strums through the stadium. I can see Jacob stretching his shoulder subtly as he leans low to keep his hamstrings warm and loose. He’ll be going out with the defense to start the second half and there’s a bounce in his step that reminds me how much I loved playing ball.

It started when I was only four years old, throwing a miniball around with my dad, watching games, or at least highlights, since what four year old can sit through a three-hour football game when there were cartoons around, but I loved pretending I was one of the guys on the big TV in our living room.

When I was six, Dad started me with peewee flag ball, the ball damn-near the size of my head. In some ways, I was lucky. Spending four years playing flag allowed me to learn and understand the movements of the game without taking hits. Not that it started that way. For my first year, it seemed every snap the play turned into everyone being directionless ants, running around the field and sometimes generally toward someone who had the ball.

Once I got into sixth grade, he let me play a year of Pop Warner ball before junior high started, and the games got more serious. I learned to

appreciate the smell of sweaty plastic and to listen for the sound of my parents in the stands, cheering for me. They never, ever missed a game.

It was during the last game of my junior year that I jacked up my knee. I was playing fullback and linebacker for my team—we were that sort of small school. A chop block on my blind side, two pops, and I was down on the grass with a lot of my dreams strained but not yet shattered.

The surgery wasn't much, a quick repair to my meniscus,

some therapy, and I would've been good to go for my senior year. But while it healed, I reported on the playoffs for the little in-school TV program, and I was gone, hook, line, and sinker.

Sure, I played my senior year. I'd put too much into the team and too much time with my boys to just let it go like that. But I didn't eat, sleep, and breathe football like I did before. Dad was disappointed at first, but I'd shown him how serious I was, even interning the summer after I graduated with our local news station as a gopher guy, running for coffees and making copies just so I could be in the excitement of the whole process.

Sitting in my seat, enjoying the late summer breeze and sunshine, watching Jacob and his team fight for victory, pushing their bodies to the limits . . . there's a part of me that wants to be out there. But knowing that they'll be traveling in a few days just to do it all again doesn't make me miss playing.

Maybe I miss reporting sports, but not the actual playing. It was fun to be able to get to know and to watch the athletes, and hell, it was a lot of fun to be paid to watch. Then again, I had a lot of late nights trying to cram a story in to meet a deadline. The job I've got now is a pretty sweet gig, and I can always watch the game without playing or reporting on them. I can be casual and have fun with it now.

The second half kickoff soars through the air, and I sit forward, cheering as Jacob snugs his chinstrap tight. He jogs out onto the field, ready to defend his house.

In this instance, better him than me.

CHAPTER 6

KAT

I pick up my phone for what feels like the hundredth time, my thumb hovering over Derrick's name in my contacts. Since last night's show, all I can do is think about how much I want all the things he described, want to experience them with his silky voice making me putty in his arms.

But even as I'm about to call, I know deep down that although it felt like he was speaking directly to me, that's just his shtick. It's his *job* to answer the relationship and sex questions, use his sexy voice to get all the female listeners hot and bothered, and maybe add a little shock factor to keep folks tuning in day after day, week after week.

I was able to hold out for hours simply because of the announcement at the top of his show that he wasn't taking calls. It's a recorded show, so he may not even be around.

But as the evening's worn on, I can't help but think that maybe he'd *want* to take a call from me. Even as I admit it's a stupid move, sure to end in disappointment, I just have to find out. I'm curious if he used our conversation as inspiration for his show, if he was talking to me, maybe even just a little bit subconsciously.

It rings a few times and I'm on the edge of losing my nerve and hanging up when he picks up the line, his smooth voice instantly putting me at ease. "Kitty Kat. I was hoping I'd hear from you again."

I notice that he knew who I was before I even said anything. That must mean he programmed my number into his phone, right?

I take a second to calm myself so I can sound casual and cool, even as my brain keeps jumping to conclusions that he must have really wanted to hear from me. I clear my throat before answering. "Hey, Derrick. I wanted to apologize for freaking out on you the other night. I wasn't expecting that

and I handled it like a jumpy virgin instead of the smooth, mature seductress I am."

I hope he hears the sarcasm in my voice because I'm so far from smooth and mature, it's actually laughable. Despite having a sex drive that I think is pretty respectable, I'm no queen of the bedroom either, even if I have desires to the contrary. Hell, the last time I gave Kevin a blowjob was months ago, and he nearly put my eye out when I jumped back because he came without warning me first.

I'm good with swallowing, but it's considered polite to give a girl a little head tap as a warning so she can catch a breath first. Instead, I ended up sputtering, my left eye burning from a blast right in the eyeball and a rug burn on my ass that stuck around for a week. So yeah, I'm totally smooth and mature. Not. I mentally sigh at my lack of game.

Derrick's chuckle is deep and rumbly, and it makes me feel like not only does he see through my sarcasm, but he's ready to have fun with it. "I feel like you're making fun of yourself here, but I'd be willing to bet that's more true than you realize. You just need a partner you feel safe with to explore how smooth . . . or rough . . . you'd like to be."

Two sentences. Just two sentences, and hearing the implied challenge, my body's instant response is a resounding 'yes, yes, yes.' I decide to be coy, adding a flirty tone to my voice. "Perhaps you're right. Maybe I do just need the right guy. Do you happen to know anyone?"

There's flirty and then there's jumping in the deep end, and I'm definitely jackknifing about two inches above the surface as I wait with bated breath to see if this really is as deep as he's letting on or if I'm going to crack my head open and have to back out in total shame.

I hear him swallow, the gulp audible through the line in the prolonged moment before he growls in my ear, turning my knees to jelly and my nipples to diamonds. "Where are you right now, Kitty Kat?"

I stammer, shocked that I'm brave enough, horny enough, or stupid enough to be doing this. But fuck, I need him like I need air right now, even if all I really know is his voice. "At home. I–I worked from home today."

I have a flash of a thought that maybe he's going to demand to come over, and that seems a little too real even as my pussy flutters in excitement at the idea. Still, my nerves are screaming, waiting for his response. "Good, good," he says, making me lick my lips. "I just got home too. Go to your bedroom for me."

With a tinge of regret mixed with excitement, I realize that I've never told him my address. He *can't* come over unless I tell him. This is something different, something I've never done before, but as much as I want him and need him, I'm completely on board even if I am feeling in over my head a bit already.

I try to reassure myself. I'm a grown ass woman and this isn't all that unusual, if Elise can be believed. I can do this. Worst-case scenario, I make a fool of myself, hang up, and never talk to him again. Best-case, this could be just what I need. There's no worries about a relationship here. Intimate, but totally secure because it's casual. There's no concerns of whether he's going to cheat on me because there's no commitment to be more than just this. Faceless, no strings, just his velvet voice softening all the anger and disappointment from the last few weeks, getting me off and making my pussy throb in the best of ways. Resolving myself to go through with this, I feel a thrill of excitement rush through me.

Walking quickly down the hall to my room, I sink into the fluffiness of my soft white comforter, perching on the edge of the bed. "I'm here. What about you? Where are you?"

There's a sound in the background of someone walking, then a settling sound before Derrick replies. "I'm in my bedroom. I'm lying back on my bed, propped up on the pillows. What are you wearing?"

I look down at my dowdy work-from-home outfit of a tank top and Winnie the Pooh pajama pants that's decidedly unsexy, and I decide to lie. I don't want to kill the mood. "I'm wearing a sexy pajama set with little boy shorts and a crop top. The boy shorts keep riding up, showing more and more of my ass."

Derrick laughs a bit, and I can hear the grin in his voice. "Kitty Kat, I don't want you to create some fake story about what you think is sexy. Right here in this moment, all I'm thinking about is you and what's real. What do you *really* have on?"

I smirk, knowing I'm busted but somehow, the fact that he wants the truth puts me at ease and sends another little flutter through my belly. "Loose pajama pants and a black tank top. But . . ." I bite my lip, letting the tease build for a split second before continuing, "I don't have a bra on. The girls are free, perky under my favorite black tank."

"Mmm, that's more like it. A natural woman is always better than some fantasy," Derrick says, making my breath catch. Does he understand that

he’s a fantasy himself right now? If he does, he’s not letting on. “How big are your tits? Small little handfuls, medium ripe melons, or large mouthfuls I can bury my face in and feast upon until my lips ache? Be real.”

I look down, knowing that I’m curvy in all the right places, but I want to do this right, whatever the hell that means. “They’re definitely more than a handful. I wouldn’t say they’re huge, but I’d love for you take in a mouthful and suck and lick them.”

I can hear the tension in Derrick’s voice at my little secret, and he hums for a moment. I can imagine him adjusting himself, picturing me in his head. “Take your shirt off and tease your nipples so they’re stiff and achy for me.”

As I do what he asks, a small sigh escapes my mouth, and I know he heard it. “That’s it, Kitty Kat. Imagine your hands are mine, running through your cleavage and pinching those needy nipples.” I whimper, rolling my left nipple between my fingers and watching the dark pink nub turn almost red. “Soothe the shock of pain away. You’re not gonna hurt yourself. Just enough to let the sensations mix.”

I keep rubbing, arching my back into my own hands as I flip it on him. I love feeling the warm touch of fingers on my skin, but I want more. “Your turn. Take your shirt off.”

He chuckles, adjusting himself by the sound of it. “Already done, Kitty Kat. I took my shirt off when I told you to.”

Feeling bold, I follow up, my knees parting on their own as I undo the bow tie at the waistband of my pants. “All right, move your hands down your chest and belly to your waist. What kind of pants do you have on?”

There’s the sound of a belt buckle being released, and in my mind’s eye, I can see it, black leather and shiny as it dangles from the belt loops. “Black denim Levi’s.”

Black denim? Holy shit, he knows just what to say. “Slip them down and off.”

There’s a rustle on his end of the line, then his voice comes back strong. “Kat, I’d ask if I should take my underwear off too, but it seems that the same way you were letting your tits free, I’m commando over here too.”

The thought of him lying naked in his bed is doing crazy things to my head and especially to my body. I smile to myself, knowing I want to push him the way he pushed me with his questions about my breasts. My pussy flutters in my panties as I mewl like a kitten, hungry for him.

“Is your cock just enough to fill me up, maybe more than I can handle, or a monster I’m gonna choke on?”

I know I hit my mark when he groans, and I can almost imagine him reaching down, holding himself and trying not to stroke. “I bet you could handle me. I’d stuff you so full of cock you’d feel places touched that you never even knew existed . . . but something tells me you could handle everything I could dish out. Am I right?”

“I’m no extra-small, teeny tiny thing,” I admit. “Is that a problem?”

Derrick purrs, and when he speaks up, his voice is raspy, thick with desire. “No, I like a woman with some curves, hips I can dig in and hold on to. I’m stroking it for you now, up and down my shaft, spreading out my precum and thinking about your pink pussy, imagining how wet you are right now. Slide those pajama pants off for me, Kat.”

I do as he says, settling back against the pillows as he tells me to spread my legs wide and trace my fingers across my heated pussy.

“God, Derrick, I’m already so wet. My panties are . . . fuck, you’ve got me soaked. Your words, your voice . . .” I trail off as the pleasure gets too intense for my brain to multitask, my focus gathering on the slide of my fingers across the drenched cotton.

“Slide your panties to the side. Let me help you make that beautiful pussy feel good. That’s the way your whole body should feel, Kitty Kat. So good and ready . . . ready for more. Rub from top to bottom. Let your fingers spread your honey all over your lips and up to your clit. Tell me how that feels, Kat.”

When my fingers find the bundle of nerves, I can’t hold back the moan, which rises until I can barely breathe. “Mmm, right there. Derrick, what are you doing to me? How does it feel so good with your voice washing over me, telling me what to do? Are you touching yourself still? I want you to feel this with me. Stroke your cock slow and tight.”

Derrick’s moan is deep, rumbling and making my fingers speed up a little. “Fuck, yes, I’m touching myself. Your breathy sighs and moans are so damn sexy. I’m imagining it’s your hand stroking me. I don’t know how much longer I can hold out when I know your needy pussy wants me to fill it up. Is that what you want? You want me to fill you up?”

Incoherent, I moan, but he hears my meaning loud and clear, and I can hear his breath quicken. “Slip your fingers inside for me. Imagine it’s my

cock thrusting into you, every thick inch stretching you and taking you right to the edge."

I do as instructed, my palm grinding on my clit with every press of my fingers inside. "Fuck, Derrick . . . yes, fuck me just like that."

My hips are bucking, helping my hand, and I ride so close to the edge. I know the sounds I'm making are guttural, but they're out of my control and Derrick is echoing them back in my ear, taking his pleasure as I find mine.

"Faster, Derrick. Fuck your hand like you'd fuck my pussy, pounding into me hard, bottoming out deep inside me." I pant, barely holding on. "I'm about to come, and I want you to come with me."

I can hear the smile in his voice and the tension in his breathing. "Kitty Kat, I've been holding back as much as I can, letting you get there. As soon as I hear the sounds of you coming, I'm a fuckin' goner. I'm gonna nut all over my hand an instant after you come on yours. Together."

In my mind, I picture him pumping his hard cock, his eyes squeezed tight and tension through every muscle as he holds onto the edge for me. I can see him shiny with precum dripping down his shaft and wanting me, and his stomach muscles are tensed, ridged under his skin with the repressed power inside him.

I hear him growl at me. "Kat . . ." And it feels like a warning that he's reached his threshold. When I imagine his come coating his hand as it rushes out of his cock, it's all I can take. The orgasm crashes over me in waves, the cries loud even to my own ears.

Faintly in the background of my climax, I hear Derrick's grunts and know he's coming with me. I tease it out as long as I can, eventually forced into taking a big breath to settle my body from the intense release.

"Wow," I half whisper in total wonder. That was the most intense orgasm of my life, to the point I can almost feel a cramp developing somewhere in my hips because I was bucking so hard and squeezing so tightly. "That was . . . you're fucking amazing."

Derrick laughs, and I'd feel bad except . . . he's out of breath just like me, and I know he's just as shaken as I am. "Mmm, yes it was. You sound surprised. Have you ever had phone sex before?"

I shake my head before remembering that he can't see me, and I giggle lightly. "No. Never. But definitely checking that off my bucket list now."

"How about you don't mark it off, and maybe we can do that again?" Derrick asks.

“I might take you up on that,” I reply, biting my lip. Late-night sessions with the Love Whisperer? Lucky me.

There’s a moment of comfortable silence before my brain kicks in and I remember why I called in the first place. Well, I remember the excuse I used to justify calling. “Hey, can I ask you something?”

“Shoot,” Derrick replies easily, and I feel another notch of comfort with him. He’s not trying to cut the call short now that he’s gotten a little action. No wham-bam, thank you, ma’am here. Vaguely, I wonder if he’s the rare type that actually likes to cuddle. He might be an actual freaking unicorn . . . sexy, sweet, and dare I say it, nice. “What’s up?”

“This is silly, but . . . I listened to the shows this week. The female orgasm topic seemed rather on point.”

Derrick laughs softly, and another little tremble goes through my belly. I could listen to that throaty rumble all fucking day. “Yeah, you got me. You mentioned that in our conversation, and it made me think about how many women are not getting what they need. If I can help one guy be a better, more considerate lover and one woman have the orgasm she deserves, I’m calling that a successful show. Thank you for the inspiration. And I’m sure that somewhere out there in the city, there’s at least one woman thanking you too.”

Me, an inspiration and a muse? He knows how to make me feel even sexier. “See, and here I was thinking you just wanted to get all of us ladies turned on. I bet power companies all over had to fire up an extra reactor for the electrical surge from all the vibrators turned on as soon as you finished that bit. Hell, it sounded like your cohort had to run to the bathroom to rub one out before continuing the next call.”

He laughs in that way that tells me something else. Whoever his coworker may be, he’s not interested in her. He’s not calling her up late at night and causing her to come her brains out. “Susannah? Definitely not. Most of the time, she barely puts up with me, but she does a great job of keeping the show on track. She’s the real backbone. I’m just the pretty voice. As for the rest of the listeners, I don’t know. I just hope to help, I guess.”

I smile, realizing he does seem like a truly nice guy, with a sexy voice and an unabashed sex drive. I feel a shot of warmth through my cynical heart, a drop of hope for mankind taking hold before I remember that Kevin was like that once too. Actually, several of my boyfriends were.

Too many men in my life start off charming and kind, on their best behavior to get you to relax around them. They made me laugh, they were warm and built trust until I let my guard down, and they found purchase in my heart. I didn't mind, of course. I thought everything was cool until they used that foothold to rip my life to shreds, leaving me spinning, wondering what happened.

My mood darkens, even as my body still hums with satisfaction. Trying not to let the change show in my voice, I try to lighten the vibe. "Ah, noble Sir Sex-a-Lot, riding in on his steed to save the citizens from a woeful lack of romance."

He laughs at my comment, and I can tell at least this one time, I fooled him. "Well, maybe not quite that dramatic, but something like that. Hey, you asked a question. You mind if I ask you one?"

"Sounds fair. I keep the bodies in the attic."

Derrick laughs, sending another thrill through me. "I'll be sure to remember that. But . . . would you mind if I texted you during the days too? I mean, I've got your number, after all."

I smile, lying back on my pillows. "I'd like that."

CHAPTER 7

DERRICK

I'm floating, trying not to get too far ahead of myself. But the mere fact that Kat called me back and was equally engaged in our phone proclivities makes me smile.

Part of me can't believe it really. It's been so long since I found a woman interesting, and I was beginning to wonder if my work had made me jaded. I've certainly had several serious relationships, in college and after, but for one reason or another, they weren't the one.

All except one were good women. I tend to be a decent judge of character, but things never really clicked. I couldn't picture myself with them decades from now, happily hanging out and still chasing each other around the room to get frisky.

I don't even really know Kat yet, but something tells me that she's worth getting to know to see if she has potential to be the one.

There's a shy sweetness to her, even as she stands strong against a shitty boyfriend and says dirty things to me. It's an intoxicating combination. It's been a few days since our late-night session, but even with our conflicting schedules that have her working days and me working well into the evening, we've found time to text. A lot.

There's an anonymity to sitting behind a small screen, a disconnect that somehow lets you feel like you really know someone while simultaneously making it easier to spill your guts because there's no eye contact. There's always that built-in safety net of stopping the texting.

But we've never stopped, and sitting at my desk now, I've got my phone out, tapping away.

Hey KK, I text, my shorthand for Kitty Kat. *What are you doing?*

It's only moments before the reply pops up, making me feel good. *Work stuff. Nothing fun like you.*

I smirk, dipping into the naughtiness that's become a regular for us. *Oh, you want to do me?*

Funny . . . I meant your work is fun. She sends back after a moment. *Mine's dry & I'm rushing to my latest deadline.*

Dry, huh? Well . . . I bet I can change that. *I could distract u. Maybe make things a little less . . . dry. Maybe even slick and wet.*

So tempting . . . so very tempting, but I need to get this done. What's tonight's topic? Should I tune in?

Message received. You want to talk but can't afford to get naughty. That's okay, there's later. *Always. I like knowing you're listening. I don't remember what the show is about tonight. We do the whole week's schedule at once & I forget. Languages of love? BDSM kink? One of those.*

LOL . . . those are very different topics.

Almost as if she were here, I shrug as I type out my reply. *Not really. Both about open communication & respecting ur partner's wishes.*

If you say so, Kat sends back. *I guess I'll have to listen.*

I glance up and see the clock, hissing at the time. *Gotta go. Pre-show meeting has probably started without me.*

I see her kissy face emoji as I slip my phone into my pocket, smiling as I enter the conference room. Susannah raises an eyebrow as I sit down. She's always one to dress nice, especially nicer than my usual jeans and t-shirt, but she's dressed even better than usual in a creamy silk blouse with understated gold jewelry at her neck and ears. Wonder what's up with that, who she's trying to impress? This is radio, after all. We could do this in our pjs and listeners would be none the wiser since they can't see us. "Nice of you to join us, Mr. Love Whisperer. Something more pressing than tonight's show?"

She's scolding me like she's my boss. There's even a thinly veiled trace of anger in her voice, and I wonder why she's so upset and behaving like a snarky child. Shit, I'm less than five minutes late for the meeting, and beyond a refresher on the topic, I don't need any more prep. I'm ready to roll like I always am. I attempt to defuse, showing I'm on board. "Nope. Here and ready. What's tonight . . . love language or BDSM?"

She clucks, obviously surprised I knew what was on the agenda and disappointed that she doesn't get to ream me out. Looking down at her checklist, she makes a mark with her pen. "Technically, it's called *Languages of Love* tonight. Remember, we're doing an on-air interview

with the psychologist who wrote the book. She's hot shit on the Amazon market and there's talk she might end up on New York Time's Bestselling list by year end. So we're basically a big commercial block for the book without sounding like an infomercial. Here's the monologue for the top of the show explaining it all, along with a background on her so you don't stumble into any issues. I picked emails to highlight each of the points she wants to cover so we need to hit those as a priority over phone calls."

I take her typed notes, skimming the psycho-babble descriptions contained in each section. Boring as fuck, honestly. It takes me fewer than ten seconds to realize that whatever this lady has to say, it could be summed up in two paragraphs written in really little words. Ah well, guess my job's the same. "Letters are the priority. Got it. Hey, Susannah?"

She looks at me, her eyes still flinty. "Yes?"

"Thanks for this. There's more here than usual. I can see you pulled a lot together for tonight's show, and I'll try to do all of your hard work justice," I say, but not just to assuage her hurt feelings. She's a good co-worker and does do a great job of keeping me on track, especially with a fancy topic like this. I'm more of a 'love her well and treat her right' kinda guy, but obviously, some folks need a bit more guidance, and I'm glad Susannah is here to make sure I don't do something stupid like contradict the author.

She really is the glue that keeps the show successful, even if her work is more behind-the-scenes. There've been several times she's had to feed me good advice for a caller when the questions got a little beyond dark and into *whoa* territory. I have a pretty broad 'book knowledge' at least on most things, including some of the darker sides of sexual relationships, but I've always been sort of the 'good guy with an edge.' Nobody's ever accused me of being the bad boy.

That's one of the ways Susannah balances me. She's dabbled in a lot of things I haven't, or at least she comes off as familiar with them in a way I'm not, and she's always focused on making the show the best it can be while I focus on helping the most folks. Without her driving us and scheduling topics, I'd have run out of shit to say months ago.

I see her soften, and I know despite the hard-edged bitch persona she likes to project, she's got a real side to her too. "Sure thing, Derrick. We've got this. C'mon, Love Whisperer."

There’s a teasing note back in her voice, and I know whatever made her mad about my being late is settled, or at least pushed to the back burner. Susannah is an utmost professional, and she’s ready to rock this show with me like always. “Good. Now, what’s the schedule for the other upcoming shows?”

“Like you ever remember?” Susannah says, and I smirk. She’s right.

“Amuse me,” I retort. “Imagine that I actually am a professional at this, and forget to remind me that I’m an idiot tomorrow and the rest of the week.”

“Don’t I always?”

CHAPTER 8

KAT

"And that, ladies, is why you should always tell your man where exactly you want him to bury his tongue. That's what I call 'quality time.' Am I right?"

I was just getting my dinner ready and missed the opening segment of Derrick's show, but now, as he gives advice to a woman who wrote in about her partner's oral skills, I have to set my fork down before I drop it on the floor. The deep intensity in his voice sends a shiver through my body even as he talks to the whole state. It feels like he's talking just to me.

Setting the bowl of pasta down, I hold my breath, not sure if I'm listening to *Languages of Love* so I can get to know Derrick's heart a bit better, or *BDSM* to get to know his sexual leanings better. I've never been into hardcore BDSM, but the way Derrick speaks . . . maybe a little spanking wouldn't be too bad at all.

Of course, there's always a degree of fakeness for the airwaves. Derrick's careful. He's not going to divulge too much personal information, but he always manages to weave enough of himself into the advice he gives that you can't help but get to know him. So I keep listening, mixing in the little tidbits he tosses the listeners with the information he's shared only with me . . . and liking what I'm finding more and more.

"Okay, here's an email from Lexus," Derrick says. "Now, I'd like everyone's opinion on this one. It says, Dear Love Whisperer, I've been with my boyfriend for three years now, and I've got a problem. You see, I only really feel like he loves me or gives me attention when he buys me things. For the first two and half years of our relationship, he bought me diamonds, pearls, even a new car for my birthday. Recently, though, he lost his job and he's tried to make up for it with what he calls 'little things' like

cooking me breakfast in bed or drawing me pictures, but it doesn't feel the same. What should I do?"

"I have no idea what *she* should do," Susannah says, "but if I were Lexus' boyfriend, I'd be thinking it's time to trade her in and see if there's a better ride that doesn't cost so much."

"Hold on," Derrick says, barely holding back his laughter.

I snort, thinking Susannah's right. But the special guest tonight butts in. "I disagree," she says in a haughty voice. "It's obvious that L has felt a lack of dialogue with her partner as their situation has changed, and she must take the initiative to make sure both of their needs are being met on a level they agree on—"

Derrick interrupts, his tell-it-like-it-is self not wanting to wait his turn. "Let me put it to Miss L straight. I get that some people feel loved with gifts, surprises that let you know your partner was thinking of you and wanted to give you something to make your day a little brighter. But hell, honey, it sounds like you're venturing into gold digger territory here. It seems like you don't want a boyfriend. That's a relationship of partners, of equal give and take across all areas of your life. That's what it sounds like your boyfriend's tried to do. I'm curious how many late bills he's accumulated to buy you those diamonds and pearls. Unless he happens to play second base for the Red Sox, I would think quite a few."

"Now, hold on—" the guest says, but Derrick is on a roll and wants to finish.

"Sorry, just one second. L, what you want is a sugar daddy, someone who will just take care of you and spoil you. And just so it's clear, there's nothing wrong with that. Just recognize what you really want and set out for that. Find someone who gets his joy from buying you things."

It's surprisingly good advice for a listener who sounded rather unlikeable from the whiny tone of her email. Maybe they were a little harsh, but with an email like that, it's hard not to get a little snappy.

With that, the show goes into a song break, the recognizable beats of Iggy Azalea's "Fancy" blasting out of my speakers. Feeling light and happy, I dance around my apartment a little bit, the song infectious and making me laugh at how decidedly *not* fancy I am.

I'm mid-twerk, dropping it down at the start of the second verse when my phone dings on the table, signaling a text message. I'm surprised to see it's from Derrick.

U listening? Just had a doozy.

Always listening, I text back, smiling. *U kno I'm ur #1 fan. Btw, can you buy me a Benz, Daddy?*

Stop it. I'm on air. Can't laugh yet. Suz is still pissed at me.

Then y r u texting me?

Song break. Was thinking of you.

I smile, the simple idea of him thinking of me while he's supposed to be focused and attentive at work somehow making me feel good.

He's all I think about too, playing and replaying the phone conversations and texts over in my mind. I bite my lip, knowing I shouldn't do what I'm considering. This is going to take things to a whole new level, but it's not too serious.

U want something to really think about?

There's a bit of a delay, and in the back of my mind, I hear the song change over from "Fancy" to "Yeah!" by Usher. Nice transition.

Song says it all.

Fuck it, if a man is willing to send me messages through the radio, I'm doing this. I slip into the kitchen where there's better light and pull my V-neck tee down, revealing the deep line of my cleavage and the pretty floral bra I selected this morning because I was feeling extra sassy.

I snap a pic from above, being smart while doing something totally crazy and making sure nothing else is in the shot. No face, no room, nothing identifiable. Ensuring it's flattering and anonymous, I click *Send*, along with the note, *think about these.*

I've never done this before, but he makes me feel so wanted even though I've never met him face-to-face. And something about the whole thing with Kevin makes me feel like taking this risk, like it's a common cultural phenomenon I've somehow never participated in and am maybe missing out on. This is a fuck you to Kevin, an invitation to Derrick, and a shout from my spirit that I am the head bitch in charge of my destiny. Seems like a lot to ask from one spontaneous shot of my breasts, but I have to admit, they do look great from this angle.

The response comes back so quickly that I know he's watching his phone like a hawk. *Holy shit, KK. So fucking hot. Look at that, they're begging me to taste them and mark them as my own. Bad girl, gonna make it hard for me to focus on the next segment because all my blood is rushing to my cock.*

I smile, glad that it worked. This is a big step for me. And a big step in whatever this is I'm doing with Derrick. Phone calls and texts are not the same as real-life pics, and I'm well aware how quickly a simple pic can send things into a tailspin.

But I'm not cheating like Kevin was, and I'm not trying to get more out of Derrick. I'm just having a bit of fun. I'm single, he's single, and it's all good.

Right?

Give me a call later. Maybe you can see . . . more.

CHAPTER 9

DERRICK

My pulse is racing in my veins as I set my phone aside, my throat suddenly dry at the thought of what Kat just said.

Holy fuck, did she just invite me to see her? I'm going to be hard-pressed . . . wait, I'm already hard. But more to point, after the beautiful set of breasts that I just saw, I'm going to have to do my best to be semi-gentlemanly. Gotta at least see what color her eyes are before I dive into those puppies for a suckle.

I look up and Susannah is giving me the evil eye, obviously annoyed that I'm texting during the show. It's not against the rules. We don't have too many rules that we actually have to follow, but it is something I rarely do since my focus is supposed to be work. And during the songs, Susannah and I usually chat about the last caller or sometimes the next segment.

Tonight especially, I should be schmoozing with the guest author, not pushing that off to Susannah to handle alone. Still, this fucking pic . . . I smile at Susannah sheepishly, hoping the silent recognition will be enough apology to move on as I hit *Send* on one last text to Kat, promising to get her back later.

Susannah's not buying it, it seems. "Who's so important that you're texting them mid-show, Derrick? We've got a lot of information to cover tonight and I need you here with me. You could've at least said bye to our guest, especially after cutting her off."

Something in her tone of voice makes me think the first question was what she really wanted to ask and the last bit about the show or guest was an afterthought.

I shake my head, trying to clear my thoughts. "Just a friend," I lie through my teeth. "She's listening in and we're chatting about the show."

Susannah snorts, shaking her head and making her brown hair bounce. “Lovely. Perhaps you’d like to discuss the show with me too, considering we’re still in the middle of it?”

Damn, what’s up with her tonight? First the pre-show meeting and then busting my balls about texting Kat. For the first time ever, I’m ready to get off the air and out of here.

“My bad,” I reply, trying to keep it light. “Let’s keep it rolling for the rest of the show.”

“Of course. Just keep your head in the game. We’ve still got two hours of show left, several more emails to read, and callers too. You can’t just drift off whenever you want.” She’s back to chastising me, not responding to my semi-apology.

She’s riled up now, almost ranting. “We have to stay focused so the show doesn’t bomb tonight. The bigwigs will be listening to see how we handle a guest that’s a paying advertiser, and so far, it wasn’t stellar. She’s gone, but we still have to do a few plugs for her. Pull it together, Derrick, so that we represent the book effectively.” She rolls her eyes. “In case you didn’t know, or care, advertisers are how we actually make money for the station.”

“Fine,” I snip as I move back into position for the next bit. Maybe I was off my game tonight, but I don’t need her bitching me out. “Let’s get this done.”

It’s a lot later than normal when I get home, but it’s all I can do to get inside before I’m texting Kat again to see if she’s still up. I’ve been thinking about this all fucking night, and after the night I’ve had, I need this. I want to see more of her, but I don’t want to scare her off either.

As soon as she responds, I hit dial, calling her. Her voice is like a shot straight to my dick, breathy and low and purring like the sex kitten I know she has buried deep inside her. “Hello.”

“Kitty Kat, you don’t know what you’ve done,” I growl, yanking my shoes off and sitting on the couch.

I’m so heated that I realize I made her worry when I hear the apprehension in her voice. “What? Did I get you in trouble at work?”

I know the pic had to be a big leap for her, and I appreciate that she did that with me, *for* me. Quickly, I reassure her. “No, Kitty Kat, I’m not the

one in trouble. *You* are. Because all I have been able to think about are those tits."

Kat's voice is lighter now, playful as she realizes everything's more than okay, and she's been waiting for this too. "Oh, really? Seems I did get promised a little something in return that I haven't gotten yet. I have to tell you, Derrick. You're my first. I have never done something like this, so go easy on me."

I growl, something about her teasing about my being her first making my cock grow to full hardness in the blink of an eye. "Hang on, then. I have something for you."

I lean back on the couch, pulling my shirt up and my pants down to grab my throbbing cock in my hand and snap a pic. I check to make sure it's showing just how thick and hard I am for her and hit *Send*. "There you go, Kitty Kat. That's what you do to me."

I hear her breathe in as the pic comes through on her end and she sees what she does to me. "Damn, Derrick," she gasps, her voice quavering, "Is all of that for me?"

We're starting to slip into this with ease, the buildup from multiple get-to-know-you texts and flirty jokes making the initial awkwardness a thing of the past. "All yours, Kitty Kat. I need you to do something for me tonight."

"Anything," she replies immediately. The lack of hesitation makes me shake, knowing that she's with me, whatever I say next. "I want to see you. I want to see you come for me. Can you FaceTime or Skype me, Kat? Let me see you."

There's a long, silent pause on her end, and I wonder if I scared her. "Derrick, I don't know. I've never done anything like that and I'm not done up. What if . . ."

She trails off, and I'm eager to put any concerns she may have at ease. "What if what? It's just you and me like it was before, turning each other on."

Kat sighs in my ear, her voice quiet and insecure. "What if you don't like what you see?"

I laugh. This woman is crazy in a good way. "Kat, I already know I'll like what I see because it's you. I've pictured you a million times already, in all different shapes and sizes, and they're all sexy as fuck because they're

you. I just want to see you for real. Are you saying that if I'm old and fat and hairy, you'll never want to talk to me again?"

I wait a split second before I continue, "By the way, I'm none of those things, in case I just scared you." When she chuckles a little, I know she's relaxing and I can tell she's thinking about it.

I hear her take a big breath, and I'm already prepping for the no I know is coming when my phone beeps.

Oh, yeah, this what I know we both need. She's changed our phone call to a video call. My pulse pounds in anticipation, palms sweaty. I know it's intense, but I'm so ready to show her just how intense I can be and still keep her within her comfort limits.

A huge smile breaks across my face as I accept the call, and a split second later, I see her.

Kat's eyes are huge, the brown orbs wide with nerves, but she's stunning. Her honey blonde hair falls in messy waves down around her bare face like she just pulled it out of a bun, and she's wearing the same V-neck t-shirt from the picture earlier.

There's no way to describe her except to say that she's an angelic dream. So fucking beautiful.

She waves shyly, and I realize neither of us has said anything yet. Finally, she finds the nerve, even if her voice is small, worried that perhaps I wouldn't accept her. "Hi, Derrick."

I smile widely, both at having a face to match to the pure eroticism of her voice and also in surprise that this gorgeous woman would ever doubt that she is the epitome of sexiness. "Hello, Kitty Kat. I don't want to sound trite, but . . . you are stunning."

I watch as she bites her lip, obviously not really believing me but pleased with the compliment nonetheless. Her eyes race across my face, taking in my wavy dark hair, blue eyes, and my trimmed beard. I have a moment of uncertainty, hoping she likes what she sees too.

"You too," she finally manages. "Well, not stunning. I mean . . . you're handsome. Hot."

The last bit comes out quieter, like she meant to only think it but it slipped out anyway. It makes me smile, but it's softer, and I lean forward, setting my phone on my coffee table. "You okay? We good?"

Kat nods her head, her smoldering eyes on me through the screen driving me insane. It's like her body knows what she wants, and most of her

mind knows it too . . . but she's got something that's pulling her back. "Yes. I'm okay."

I grin, planting my elbows on my knees and watching my screen like a hawk. I smile before continuing. "Take your shirt off, just like before. Show me those tits I've been dreaming about all evening."

There's a jostle on her end as she props the phone up and steps back, letting me see more of her curves. I swallow as I take her in.

She's about average size but has a thickness to her in all the right places. I don't even realize that I haven't said anything yet so she speaks up instead. "Derrick?"

I hear the uncertainty in her voice and finally drag my eyes back up her body slowly to meet hers, "Damn, Kitty Kat. You are so fucking sexy."

I see her chest rise and fall as she takes in a breath, for courage, I think. I consider encouraging her more, but I back off slightly, wanting this to be her choice. I want her to want to do it for me as much as I want her to do it, so I stay quiet, my eyes rapt on her, telling her everything that I want.

After what seems like an eternity but is probably really just a few seconds, she pulls the t-shirt hem up and over her head, revealing that she doesn't have on a bra anymore.

Her breasts are full and ripe with deep pink areolas surrounding her hard nipples. I pull my eyes away from the mesmerizing force of her nipples to scan down her body, across her nipped-in waist, soft tummy, and curvy hips to her pussy covered in black bikini panties.

They're functional and basic, not designed for seduction but oh, so sexy anyway. The high straps curve up and over the swell of her hips, making the whole visual even sexier. My cock throbs with hunger to feel what she'd feel like against me, under me.

Somewhere deep inside, I like that she's not *done up*, as she called it, not some fake version of herself that only highlights the good stuff. This is really her, just hanging out at home in comfy clothes and no makeup, and she's letting me into her life for a moment, vulnerable and real. For that, I can only say one thing. "You're absolutely stunning. I know I said that already, but this is better than I've imagined."

She blushes but smiles. "Thank you."

"Can you touch yourself for me?" I ask, transfixed by the image on my screen. "I need to see you . . ."

I watch as she traces her hands up her hips, across her waist, and up to cup her breasts, lifting them up and together. As she does, the uncertainty and shyness vanish in increments as she gets more aroused and comfortable with what we're doing.

My eyes lock on the image before me, my mouth watering as I fantasize about licking her luscious mounds. I hear her make a noise, a soft moan of desire mixed with an admonition. My eyes shoot up to meet hers, and she's smiling at me.

"Nuh-uh, Derrick," she says, *tsk*ing me. "This isn't one-sided. I want to see you too. Take your shirt off."

I don't even think. I reach back to grab my shirt and rip it over my head and off. The cotton stretches but holds enough that I don't embarrass myself by just Hulking out of the shirt. I slide my fingers across my chest and down my stomach, letting her see where I'm put together.

"You have tattoos," Kat mentions, looking at the ink work I had done in college. "I wasn't expecting that, for some reason."

I nod, looking at my left arm and ribs, the intertwining designs still something I like. "Do you like them?"

Kat's eyes gleam and I recognize that she's turned on. Not necessarily by my tatts, but my questions. "I guess I've never really thought about them before, one way or another, but right now, I want to trace them with my fingers and tease and tickle you as I draw every line across your arms and chest."

I do what she suggests, tracing the lines I have memorized from seeing them in the mirror every day, closing my eyes and imagining it's her soft touch. I hear her breathing hitch, and I open my eyes to see her drawing circles around her breasts, getting closer with each round to her stiff nipples, her back arching to chase her own fingers.

"Fuck, Kitty Kat. Are you ready? I need more." She nods, giving me permission. "Can you sit down somewhere? Prop the phone up so I can see you spread wide for me."

"Yeah, hang on . . ." There's a bit of shuffling, and the phone swirls wildly around her room, but I'm too busy ripping my pants off to get a good look at her apartment.

In a moment, we're both settled back down on our couches, the phones propped on the tables in front of us, and we're both flushed with anticipation. Kat looks nervous again, excited but definitely a bit anxious. It

makes her even more beautiful, the light flush of her skin letting her feel real to me. I lean forward, taking her in. “Kat, you okay?”

Her breasts shudder as she takes a deep breath, causing my cock to throb but also something else to move inside me. This woman, she’s one of a kind. “I am now,” she finally says. “Just . . . this is so hot. Crazy. And hot.”

I grin, letting her see just a hint of the bulge in my shorts. “Rub your tits for me again. Show me exactly what you want me to do. Get back in the moment, here with me.”

She does as I say, the tension leaving her body as she responds. “You too. Lean back. I want . . . I want to see.”

I smirk, knowing she’s with me now even as she stumbles a bit in her demand. I lean back on the couch, easing my underpants down until my dick comes into her view through the screen. Her breath catches, and I wrap my hand around my shaft. “This? Is this what you want to see? My cock hard for you? Because fuck, I’m rock hard for you right now.”

I give myself a few strokes, spreading the precum across the head and down my shaft as she watches. I see her pinch her nipple a bit, and the sound she makes forces me to squeeze myself tight to stop from coming right then.

“Fuck, Kat,” I gasp, trying to hold on. “More . . . I want to see your pussy.”

She bites her lip, pausing for a second before adding a pillow behind her back and adjusting to lift her feet to the table edge out of my view. She’s laid back, her pussy close to the screen and her body rising up in perspective from her wide hips to her small waist, to her lush tits, and to her flushed face. She smiles dreamily, her hooded eyes looking down her body at me. “How’s this? Can you see?”

“Oh, I can definitely see,” I reply, my hand moving slowly up and down my cock again, totally of its own volition. “I can see everything a man could ever want. I can see your pretty pink pussy, so wet for me it’s leaving honey on your thighs where you were pressing them together. Touch yourself, Kat. Tell me how wet you are.”

Her fingers move down, running up her inner thighs to brush lightly across her lips. “Mmm, I’m soaked, Derrick. I need more. Fuck, I need . . .”

Without my telling her to, she starts to trace her fingers through her lips, slipping up to coat her clit with moisture as she swirls a circle around and

then begins the pattern over again. Something about her knowing her own pleasure and confidently taking it without me is so fucking hot. She's in control right now, and I love being the lucky fucker who gets to see her in this moment of strength. I'm still slowly stroking my length, enjoying the sight before me, and I decide to let her stay in charge for now.

"What do you want me to do, Kitty Kat?"

Her eyes pop open to meet mine, and she grins naughtily. "Jack yourself off, Derrick. Fast. I need it now."

Just her words are almost my undoing, so I give my head another squeeze, and with a breath, the moment passes so I can do as she said. I watch her fingers beginning to blur across her clit, and damn, the limits of digital technology because I want to see every detail of her hard nub pulsing as she rubs. "That's it, Kat. Imagine those are my fingers strumming across your slick clit, spreading your juices everywhere I want to touch and taste you. Hold yourself open for me. Show me your sweet little cunt."

I lift my hips, thrusting into my fist in time with her strokes, and I start to groan. Looking up, I realize that as closely as I've been watching her hand, she's been watching me too. Knowing that she's turned on by my body, my hand sliding up and down my shaft does it and I can't hold back. "Kat, fuck, baby. I'm gonna come. Come with me."

She cries out, her head falling back and her eyes rolling as her orgasm overtakes her. Seeing her so gone like that is all I can take, and I come too, the thick ropes slicking the way for the last few strokes.

We catch our breaths, our pants slowing as we come back to awareness. Kat's eyes are wide as she sits forward, robbing me of the beautiful sight of her pulsating pussy but at the same time gifting me with the flushed, smiling face of this angel I just came with.

"Fuck, Derrick. I don't think I've come that hard in . . . well, maybe never. I thought you tore me apart last time, but this time was even more intense."

She's done, already satisfied and settling, but I'm roaring inside. That orgasm was probably the hardest I've ever come too, but it's not enough. I need more. I need her. I know my voice is full of gravel, every touch of my trademark velvet gone as I'm filled with lust.

"Kitty Kat," I rasp, staring into her eyes. "I know I said it earlier, but I need you. Let me come over. Fuck, I need your sweet pussy."

She blinks, then grins. "Here's my address. Hurry."

CHAPTER 10

KAT

I sit back, my still-damp thighs trembling, whether in fear of what the fuck I just did or in anticipation of what the fuck is about to happen, I'm not sure.

Oh, my God, I told him yes. Derrick "The Love Whisperer" King, the sexiest man on radio and the sexiest man I've ever laid eyes on, is on his way to my apartment right now.

What am I doing?

I need to . . . something. When I told him my address, he said it would take him fewer than twenty minutes to get here. He told me not to get dressed, to stay just like I am, but sitting here is killing me.

I know. I'll call Elise. Probably a good idea for someone to know that I have a stranger coming to my house anyway, but she'll tell me if this is crazy or not because it feels crazy. Making sure I've turned off my camera, I dial her number, running my fingers through my hair as it rings.

"Kat," she greets me, not surprised at all that I'm calling her this late at night. "What's shaking, baby?"

"Elise, this is urgent. I need your advice."

Elise's voice immediately sobers, and I can hear her sit up. She's probably been binge-watching TV again. "What's wrong? Need something?"

I run my fingers through my hair again and decide that staying ready for Derrick doesn't mean I can't brush my hair and teeth. I head toward my bathroom, talking all the while. "Okay, so I'll try to make this long story really short because time is of the essence here. You know the radio guy, Derrick King?"

Elise chuckles. She was the one who turned me on to his show to begin with. "Oh yeah, the Love Whisperer. Let's get it oooonnnnnn."

She says it with the full effect of Marvin Gaye singing the ultimate sex song, but I'm not in the mood to laugh. "Yes, *him*. So I called in a couple of weeks ago about Kevin."

"You did what?" she says, shocked. "I know it's hard, Kat, but you have to let him go. Kevin is a total douchewaffle and you deserve so much better. I can fix you up with someone if you want. Maybe we could even double-date?"

I roll my eyes, loving this girl, but sometimes, she needs to be quiet and let me finish. If not, she's going to snowball the whole time Derrick's driving and I won't get any advice. "Elise. Stop talking for a second and lemme finish. This isn't about Kevin. It's about Derrick."

Elise stops mid-word when she realizes what I just said, and when she speaks again, her voice is rapt with attention. "Sorry. Continue."

"So I called, and he told me to dump Kevin and then told me to call him back personally because he was interested in how it turned out."

"I didn't know he did that," Elise says, surprised. "That's surprisingly nice for a radio semi-celebrity."

I find my hairbrush and start running it through my hair, smoothing out the tangles. "He *doesn't* do that. He did that . . . with me."

Elise hums knowingly, already deciding she knows where this is going now. "We-he-hell, now, you just made my night interesting."

Great, I made her night interesting. Meanwhile, my previously semi-behaving waves are now a knot of tangles where I thrashed my head against the couch. Definitely some freshly-fucked hair going on here. I grab my spritzer bottle and lightly spray the back, detangling the mess gently so it doesn't frizz out like an electrified poodle. "So I called him back, and we got to talking, texting, and other stuff."

"Oh, and what 'other stuff' is my oh-so-shy but oh-so-beautiful friend talking about?" She knows what I mean, and I don't know if I can say it out loud, but I need advice, so I try to charge ahead like this is normal, no big deal for me.

"Fine, we've been having phone sex, texting dirty innuendos, and tonight . . . tonight, we had sex on FaceTime."

Elise is clapping, cheering in my ear like I just won an Olympic medal or something. "That's awesome, Kat! Welcome to the 21st century. Everyone does this, you know. How was it?"

I'm blushing. Apparently, I'm behind the times if this is supposedly common. Maybe I'm reading too much into it? At least my damn hair is starting to look decent again.

"Well, it's been great, really great. But tonight was different. It was . . . wow. I don't even know what to say, but that's why I'm calling. I've never, ever come so fucking hard, and at the end . . . it was like epic or something, and now he's coming over! What do I do?"

"Uh, wait a minute," Elise says, stuttering a bit at the end. "You had phone sex and *now* he's coming over? Have you ever met him face-to-face?"

I hear the tone change in her voice, and I know she's worried about something. "No, is that weird? You know I have no idea what I'm doing here. I've barely dated, just one semi-long relationship after another. And I certainly never had phone sex before. Is it not common for him to come over afterward?"

Elise sighs, but like the supportive friend she is, she gives the truth as she sees it. "Uhm, honey, that's definitely not the norm. Usually, it's just an awkward bye after you're both done with business. But if it was *that* good, and you like him, hell, this could be a good thing."

I set my hairbrush down, picking up my toothbrush and stopping just as the drop of green gel is a fraction of an inch about the bristles, listening. "A good thing?"

Elise chuckles, but it's not derisive. "Yes, a good thing. You need this, Kat. It's not serious, you're not jumping into some fairytale here. But some wallbanging sex with a hot man to get over the last douchcanoe is just what you need. Oh, wait. He is hot, right?"

I feel something icky on my thumb and realize my drop of toothpaste has become a veritable splooge of minty freshness, and I quickly put the tube aside, flicking the majority of the junk into the sink. "He is so fucking hot, Elise. I couldn't have programmed a hotter man."

"Now I'm jelly," Elise replies with a chuckle. "Not too jelly, but jelly."

"I was nervous he wouldn't like me after he saw me."

"Honey, I'm not gonna listen to a word of that," Elise growls as I start to brush my teeth quickly. "You're a fucking gorgeous woman, not some twiggy pre-pubescent little girl. And any man worth your time will not just accept your curves, but he will drool for them with appreciation."

I laugh, feeling a little better, and spit into the sink before answering. “So you think this is okay? I’m not being stupid?”

“Yeah, babe. You’re good. Just don’t get too tangled up,” Elise advises. “Use this for what it is . . . some hot sex to rebound, a nice casual hookup. Not some Disney shit where he’s going to sweep you off your feet.”

I know what she’s saying, but she doesn’t have to worry. “You know I don’t believe in that fairytale crap anyway. The last thing I need is some guy playing me for a fool again. I think I’ve finally learned my lesson.”

I hang up with Elise, feeling more confident in the whole thing but nervous because I’m about to have sex for real for the first time in months, and I don’t exactly have a good track record with guys satisfying me.

I look at myself in the mirror, hoping I’m not playing myself. I’m hoping Derrick will be different because somehow, this feels different. I may not believe in getting swept off my feet romantically, but something tells me Derrick might be able to knock my socks off.

Well, if I were *wearing* socks.

The knock on the door comes almost too quickly. I barely feel like I’ve finished rinsing my sink out. Padding in my bare feet to the door, I take a big breath, still deciding whether I’m going to go through with this. Maybe I just don’t answer and I’ll never have to face the reality of this.

But I know I’ll fucking regret that for the rest of my life. I’ll never know just how good Derrick can make me feel. There’s this nagging feeling inside me that for the first time in my life, I’ve got a chance to meet a man who will satisfy my every carnal desire, to take my body places that I’ve never imagined it could go.

Forget the humor and sweet conversations we’ve had that make my spirit lighter and my heart clench in my chest. Forget the fact that every time I talk with him, I’m left smiling for hours or that even a short text from him can bring a little twitch to my lips. I focus on the need deep in my core and make my decision.

Just sex. That’s all we’re doing and all I need. If we can be friendly too . . . that’s great. I can’t expect more as I stand here naked, not getting dressed like he instructed, and I open the door to find Derrick standing there, his breath coming in fast pants and his eyes bright with lust.

He presses a hand to either side of the door frame, not coming in yet, but if I wanted to leave, I’d have to go through him to do so.

“I thought you weren’t going to answer for a second. Are you not as sure about this as I am?” He seems like he’s on the edge of control, ready to burst into my apartment and take me. It’s a heady sight to see him so close to the edge . . . over me.

I shake my head, biting my lip to keep my nerves and insecurities inside. “You don’t see any clothes, do you?”

He smiles. “The whole way here, I’ve been picturing you under me as I pound into you, you straddling me to ride, the taste of your sweet pussy, and you on your knees, sucking me down. God, I want you every way you’ll let me. I want to know you inside and out. If you don’t want that, tell me right now and I’ll go. But if you let me in, neither of us is going to be the same again.”

Every word from his mouth is like he’s weaving a spell around me, his voice dripping with sex and turning me on as I picture all the things he describes.

I lower my hands away from their protective stance, showing off my naked body to him and anybody else who happens down the hallway. Fortunately, it’s late and the hallway is empty. I’m somehow more upset that someone might see the thick tent Derrick has going on in his pants than I am about someone possibly seeing me nude in my doorway.

His cock is mine, just for me. And that’s what does it for me. I want this. I want him. I dip my head once, and it’s all the affirmation he needs to rush me, slamming the door behind him as he grabs my ass, lifting me to straddle his waist.

His lips meet mine in a desperate kiss, nothing soft and sweet. This is instant fire spreading through me as our bodies meet for the first time. His touch is electric, his lips devouring mine as he carries me deeper into my apartment, so worked up that we don’t even make it to my couch but instead, he presses me against the wall.

Our tongues tangle, fighting to lessen the heat but only serving to intensify the need pulsing through me. He kisses to my neck, sucking and licking at my ear, jolts going through me with every stroke.

“Where?” he growls, my lust-overloaded brain lost for a moment before I realize he’s asking where I want him to fuck me.

“On the left, end of the hallway,” I groan, tugging on his hair and looking him in the eye, any uncertainty blasted away by his presence. “Fuck me, Derrick.”

“God, yes,” he says, striding with me in his arms. His grip never loosens, and I feel secure in his arms as I lick down his neck, nibbling on the thick cord of muscles connecting to his shoulder. He groans, squeezing my ass and grinding my pussy against the hard ridge in his pants. “Fuck, Kat. I don’t think I can wait. I need to be inside you. I swear I’ll take care of you, but I need to feel you surrounding my cock.”

God, I want that too, and I mewl out my agreement as we reach my bedroom. He lays me down on my bed, moving down to taste my neck with licks and sucks and then to my nipples, hard with desire.

He swirls his tongue around before sucking my breast in deep, pulling draws. Shit, that’s new and awesome. He moans, the vibrations deep in his chest rumbling against me.

My body writhes in waves, my tits lifting for him to suck at me more, before I shudder and my pussy lifts, begging silently to be filled. It’s beyond my control as the surge of desire flows through me. I don’t know how much longer I can wait to have him inside me. “Derrick . . . I can’t wait any longer. Fuck me.”

Too soon, or maybe not soon enough, he lifts away, standing up to grab a condom from his back pocket before stripping naked. He’s even sexier standing in front of me, his skin tanned golden and his tattoos rippling over top of his muscles. Suddenly, he freezes, both of us fully able to take the other’s body in for the first time.

“My God, Kitty Kat. You’re even better in real life. I can’t wait to feel you.”

I spread my legs, letting him see, using my fingers to open up my labia just for him. “Derrick, fill me, please.”

I hear the begging plea in my voice, but I can’t even care right now because if he wanted me to, I’d damn sure get on my knees at his feet to beg and not feel a bit of guilt about it. He doesn’t seem to need it as he strokes his shaft a few times, opening the condom with his teeth and then rolling it on.

I watch, mesmerized, and slip my fingers down to play through my folds, relishing the way his eyes widen and lock onto my now-wet fingers.

Climbing onto my bed, Derrick grabs my hand. “That’s my job now, Kitty Kat. I’ve got you, but fuck, I need your taste on my tongue when I fuck you.” He lifts my coated fingers, inhaling my scent before licking and sucking them into his mouth. I moan, the thought of him tasting me on my

own fingers doing strange things to my suddenly dirty mind. “That’s it, taste me.”

For a good minute, he savors me, his eyes never leaving mine until we’re both gasping with need. Reaching down, he takes his cock in his hand, rubbing it along the length of my slit and coating himself, teasing my clit and preparing me for him. “That’s it, cover me, baby, mark me with your honey. I could come just rubbing my cock against your little clit, Kat. Does that feel good?”

The circles he’s drawing on my pussy with his cockhead are driving me wild, and I chase him, moving my hips to get him where I need him. “Ready, Kat?”

I nod, and he thrusts inside me in one deep stroke, filling me completely. Inside, he pauses to let me adjust as I cry out, the stretch both sharp and so good all at once. I begin to move, rolling my hips as my fingers dig into his forearms, pulling him down. I need more. I need to feel him pressing me into the mattress and dominating me with his strength, his masculine essence that nobody’s ever been able to bring enough of before.

Derrick takes the cue, beginning to press in and pull out slowly but powerfully, bottoming out deep inside me on every stroke. His body presses into mine, my breasts flattening against the hard muscles of his chest, and I wrap my arms and legs around him, drawing him in tighter.

“You’re so tight, Kat,” Derrick rasps in my ear. “It’s like you can barely take me. Please tell me I’m not hurting you.”

I’m barely able to string a coherent thought together, so I use my feet to urge his hips closer to mine, rambling, “Not hurting, just so good. Fuck, Derrick . . . I don’t think I’ve ever been this full.” My rambles die out into breathy hitches with every thrust of his cock into me.

I see him smile and know I said the right thing. He keeps pressing inside me, and I tighten my grip, letting my fingers roam over the muscles that stretch across his back. He covers my mouth in a kiss, holding my hips still as he stays deep, grinding into me. “You can take me, Kitty Kat. You’re squeezing my cock just right. You’re fucking milking me every time you fuck me back.”

I tense my inner muscles, lifting my hips to meet his, the rhythm becoming frantic and my movements becoming wild. Derrick pulls back slightly, slipping a hand between us to strum across my clit, and I cry out. “Yes!”

“Keep telling me what you want, Kat,” he growls as he strokes my clit. “Do you want me to tease your needy clit, barely brush across it, or do you want it slow and steady? Maybe fast and hard?”

As he says each option, he demonstrates, progressing from a feathering touch to soft circles and finally to a blurring stroke. It doesn’t matter. My orgasm is building with every thrust, every caress of my clit, and I squeeze him, loving it.

“Yes! I’m coming,” I cry out, and he pinches my clit firmly, the sharp sting mixing with pleasure as he pounds into me. It shatters me, my body flying apart, and I buck wildly beneath him, my hands grabbing for the blanket to keep me grounded. Somehow, I’m floating away, white sparks flashing across the blackness of my closed eyelids.

From far away, I hear Derrick panting, his voice growling and wondrous at the same time. “Goddamn, Kitty Kat. You’re damn-near choking my cock. Keep squeezing me like that and I’m gonna fill you up. Your pretty little pussy, so full of my come until you can’t even hold it.” The idea must trigger something for him, and his whole body tightens as he holds himself deep inside me.

He roars as the orgasm takes him, and he loses the rhythm, his body jerking as he comes. I lift against him, taking over the rhythm to help him ride out the pleasure as long as possible until he collapses onto me, our gasping breaths mixing as we smile at each other.

He lifts up to kiss me gently but thoroughly before he pulls out slowly, both of us groaning. I feel the immediate loss of fullness and already wish he were inside me again. He steps out to the bathroom to handle the condom and I take a big breath. It’s late, and after the two best orgasms of my life, both of which shockingly happened in one night, I can’t keep my eyes open.

He walks back into the bedroom, and there’s no need to ask, and even if he did, I think my open arms answer the question well enough. Snuggling up, we drift off together, and it’s probably less than ten seconds later before I’m fast asleep.

CHAPTER 11

DERRICK

It feels a little weird to be getting dressed up for a first date with a woman that I've already seen naked and had sex with, but that's what I'm doing. Weirder still, we're getting ready for our 'first date' while the sun is still up. With my job making me a consistent night worker and Kat's job leaving her with a lot of flexibility as to when she does her work, it seemed just natural to have our date now.

There's a cool early fall wind ruffling the collar of my leather jacket as I get out of my car and head toward Kat's building. It's not the fanciest apartment building in the city, but it's cozy. It suits her, not flashy but somehow just right when you pay you attention and really see its charm.

I walk up the stairs to the third floor, nervous for some reason. It's not like we don't kinda know each other. After all, we've talked and sent messages back and forth for weeks . . . and we've rocked each other's bodies to the point I'm aching while still wanting more.

But this is different. This isn't a late night video chat and booty call. This is a *real* date, and there's *real* consequences to this.

In the days since our little impromptu sleepover, we've been almost mentally inseparable. Text messages have led to phone calls. Phone calls have led to flirting, and even one more late night rush over here to tear our clothes off for hot, pulse-pounding, brain-rattling sex that has shaken me to the very core.

So here we are. We're both off work tonight and I'm picking her up for our first real date. Maybe we're going at this whole thing backward, sex first and getting to know each other after, but I'm determined to play on the attraction we've had from the beginning because no one has intrigued me quite like Kat has in a very long time. She deserves, hell *we* deserve, a proper date with fancy clothes, dinner, and a walk around the park. A date

where we’re going to talk face to face, where all the nuances and details can’t be hidden behind emojis and blurry screens that lag at the most inopportune moments.

Knocking on her door, it feels strange to have her open up and see that she’s not half naked or more, her full breasts heaving with desire and her eyes sparkling with need.

Instead, when the door opens, she looks . . . almost shy. Her beautiful hair is pulled back in a ponytail and her eyes are guarded, like she realizes something is different, special about tonight too. “Hi.”

“Hi,” I reply, nervous as well. I look her over and realize one of the biggest differences. Every other time I’ve seen Kat, she’s been barefoot. No idea why that’s what I notice first, but I do.

She’s wearing sky high heels, at least six inches tall, her poor toes nearly bent ninety degrees in them. Her jeans hug her thighs and hips, showing off her curves in delicious relief. Her left shoulder peeks out of an off-center sweater that looks soft and inviting, making my palms itch to pet it.

“Would you like to come in?” Kat asks after a moment, and I understand. I’ve been standing in her doorway like an idiot ogling her. “Uhm, if there’s time.”

“No rush,” I reply, giving her my most reassuring smile. “Actually, the place I picked out was in the park. You might actually want to change shoes.”

Kat looks down, blushing. “But . . .then I’ll be short. I thought these heels were . . .sexy, and I didn’t want to look so short next to you.”

I blink, surprised, and say the first thing that comes to mind. “I haven’t minded your height when your ankles have been wrapped around my head.”

Kat blushes more deeply, then laughs. “Good point. Okay, well, fill me in on the plans and I can adjust.”

“I thought we could go down to Jordan Park, there’s a restaurant that gets great views of the pond over there and has some of the best crab soup in the entire city. Good other stuff too, if you’re not up for crab.”

“No . . . I love crab,” Kat replies, smiling. “Did I tell you that before?”

“No, but you mentioned something about seafood once, so I ran with it.”

Kat smiles and goes to change into some more appropriate shoes, wedge-heeled boots that still bring her up a few inches, but aren’t going to

have her walking a tightrope down the sidewalk. We head downstairs, and I do a slight double take when she reaches into her small purse and pulls out her wallet. “Wow . . . what is that thing?”

She looks at the device, which has carbon fiber sides and a couple of other high tech looking things on it. “Nerd moment. It looks a little intimidating, but I’m just techy. My wallet is RFID scanner secure, waterproof, and holds my IDs, cards, and work access behind an access code. You can never be too safe these days, especially in my industry.” She uses a swipe card to let us out of a side door, and slips the contraption back into her purse.

I chuckle, “Wow. Talk nerdy to me some more. I think I like it.”

She smiles as we start driving and I feel like we’re off to a good start. There’s a slight tension between us, but it’s casual, not uncomfortable. This is just a new milestone for us. My mind clicking through our interactions like a slideshow, a thought occurs to me. “Hey, can I ask,” I say as we pull up to a stop light, “how’d you meet Kevin? I mean, you describe him as this meathead, but you don’t seem the type to be into meatheads.”

Kat smirks, looking down at her lap and blushing a little. “I guess it’s because of my background. I’ve always been the girl who was more comfortable with tech than people, but even in my area of expertise, I’m an anomaly. Somehow both an outsider of the boys club and intimidating because I’m damn good at my job? So I guess when Kevin approached me, it just seemed easy to go along with it. Until it wasn’t. Every guy I’ve let in has been like that, charming but on some level, just meh.”

“Well, I promise you one thing,” I reply as we start moving again, “I’m nothing like Kevin.”

“I would never think otherwise,” Kat says. “My past relationships, even with Kevin, were pleasant at first, but there was never any fiery passion. Not like how we seem to be.”

For some reason, that gives me a buzz of pride. “If you don’t mind me saying, I know what you mean. This isn’t how I usually feel either, especially on a first date.” I turn into the parking lot at Jordan Park, and we take in the view in front of us. Set aside by a wealthy businessman who wanted to have a little bit of immortality, the park’s built on his old estate grounds, complete with a pond, small river, miles of walking paths, and lots of other stuff.

As she scans, I look at her profile, long lashes brushing her cheeks as she blinks, the corners of her lips turned up in a bare hint of a smile. I want that smile, full watt and focused on me. My voice is quiet, soft as a cashmere whisper, “I’m glad you realized you deserve more, Kat.”

She blushes and looks over at me. “I’ve never really had this before. You make me feel so sexy.”

Inwardly, I shake my head. I don’t know how that’s possible, but it makes me want to show Kat just how sexy she really is. I lean across the seat, cupping her cheek in my palm and tracing her cheekbone with my thumb before meeting her lips with my own. She sighs, our lips parting as we kiss, stoking the fire that’s always burning just below the surface with her. With a groan, I pull back, trying to lighten the mood before I pull her into my lap right here in the parking lot. “Date. We need to . . .” I swallow, looking up at her from below the flop of hair that’s fallen in my face. Continuing, “We need to walk. The nerd herd does exercise, right?” I give her a saucy wink, and she takes the hint.

Kat mimes pushing up a set of glasses on her nose and snorts. “Uhh . . . is that where we get all sweaty? My heart rate is rising already.”

We get out of the car, and I have to give my cock a thump to get it to calm down so we can start walking. As we move along the sun-dappled path, I can’t help but keep looking over at her. Her bare shoulder is close to me, and all I want to do is kiss it, maybe lick the line of her collarbone. My cock starts to harden in my jeans again, and I have to look away before I start perving on her in public. “Derrick?”

I blink, and look at Kat, who’s giving me another shy look. “Yeah?” I ask, confused.

“I just wondered why you looked away,” she says.

Heat creeps up my neck, and I lean in to whisper in her ear. “This is supposed to be a first date, all polite and maybe a little romantic, right?”

“Right,” she whispers back. “Why?”

“Because I’ve spent the last two minutes thinking that you look hot as fuck in those painted-on jeans and pettable sweater, but I know you’ll look even hotter in those fuck-me pumps we left back at your place. Those heels and nothing else . . . maybe pinned back next to your ears as I watch you take all of me.”

Kat blushes and grins, and I move my hand to her lower back. “I’ve been checking out your ass in those jeans too, so I guess we’re both guilty.”

We move closer toward each other, and I can feel her hands sliding inside my jacket when music fills the air. I place the tune quickly, *She Blinded Me With Science*. “What’s that?”

Kat reaches into her purse and pulls out her phone, holding up a finger while mouthing a *friend*. I step back, inhaling the cool air and letting it chill my burning blood while she talks. “Uh huh? Oh no, I’m so sorry. I understand. I’ll be right there. No, it’s okay babe. Yeah I am, but he’ll understand. Besides, you’re my bestie, right? Okay, see you soon.”

She hangs up, and turns to me sighing. “You’re not gonna believe this.”

“There’s an emergency,” I say, making little air quotes with my fingers, “and you have to go? Is this a fake friend call to get you out of our date?”

We both laugh, and Kat shakes her head. “No, I swear. But my bestie, Elise . . . she’s having a man crisis.”

“You seem like you’ve done that before.”

Kat looks surprised, and snorts. “No, just been the girl on the other end of the line with Elise a few times. Somehow this time, I’m the rescuer, not the rescue-ee. This is a little different, which makes it important. It’s time to return the favor.”

“A woman with her head on straight, taking care of her friends when they need it. I like it,” I reply, resisting the urge to ask the obvious question of if Kat’s talked to Elise about me.

She laughs, and I find myself more enchanted with her even as my desire to take her back to bed doesn’t diminish at all. “Elise has a wild and crazy side, but most of the time she doesn’t need saving, just uses me to be polite on occasion if the situation calls for more finesse than bridge-burning. She’s fun, the yin to my yang, and would burn the world to ashes, no questions asked, to protect me. That’s more than even my sister would do.”

“What’s with your sister?” I ask, tucking every detail away for later. If Kat’s trusting me enough to let me know about her background and her family, it’s a start, even if we’re not getting our early dinner.

“Oh, that came out wrong. She’s awesome, just *too* perfect,” Kat admits with a laugh. “Jessie’s happily married to a great guy. He’s the rare one-in-a-million, but she thinks there’s carbon copies of him on every street corner just waiting to be picked up. She forgets sometimes about the reality the rest of us live in. Even my mom. She was married to my dad for years, but he stepped out on her all the time, we just didn’t know it for a long time. When

she found out, she kicked him out, and Jessie and I supported her through the divorce, even when her friends told her she should've looked the other way and made do. I was still a teenager, but I did what I could. Jessie and Mom are really the powerhouses though, I'm just the little sister still figuring things out. Sometimes, I wish life could be like one of my programs . . . organized, predictable, and when an issue comes up, you troubleshoot and resolve it logically, no facades or ulterior motives. Just data."

She looks up a bit, and I feel like of everything she just said, the last part was probably the most insightful thing about her true self. After a beat, she finishes, "Mom's remarrying in a few months, he seems like a great guy, but we'll see. Odds are not in her favor."

Ouch, that's harsh. Then again, with what she's gone through, I guess Kat's earned a few harshness points, and maybe even some cynicism. "I hope for the best. May the odds forever be in her favor."

"Me too," Kat admits, then shakes her head, smiling. "Come on, nice nerd moment there, now tell me your story while you walk me back to the car. You know, being a gentleman and all, maybe I can bum a ride to Elise's place while you go grab us some caffeine since it's too early for the wine I'm betting Elise will want?"

"Sure," I reply. I'm quiet for a few while I try and figure out how I'm going to answer Kat's question, then just decide to jump in. Fuck it, I can't help I've had a pretty ideal childhood. "I know it's a little boring, but my parents did well together. They loved each other fiercely until Mom died a few years back, and Dad has said he'll never remarry because he's already had the great love of his life."

Kat smiles, shaking her head in disbelief. "Really? That's old school romantic. What's he doing now?"

"He's doing okay now, still works hard and has friends to keep him busy," I answer. "He sold the old house, totally understand that, but stayed in town, moving into a little starter home. I go see him a few times a month, more during football season so we can watch the games together. I wish I could go more because he's getting older, but it's a ways out to see him, and he's staying busy and happy."

Kat looks down, looking sad. "I'm sorry to hear about your mom. If anything, she seems to have raised a good son."

I swallow, thinking that Mom would be happy to hear a girl like Kat say that. “It’s okay. It was a sudden aneurysm, she didn’t suffer, and she left behind a lot of friends, a lot of good memories. I don’t think there’s too many bad feelings in the world about her.”

Kat hums, “That’s really sweet, a testament to how she lived. You said your dad is ‘*getting older’*, how old is he?”

“They had me when they were almost forty, tried for years and years. She thought she was going through menopause, but . . . surprise. It was me. They were thrilled and I always knew how much they loved me. I was a lucky kid, their little plot twist in life.”

“Damn . . . your parents were like one in ten million,” Kat says. “Does that mean you’re the same?”

“I’d like that happily ever after sort of thing,” I admit. “Wouldn’t you?”

“I’ve never thought that was meant for people like me,” Kat finally says. “It’s like catching lightning in a bottle. For most of us, that just doesn’t happen.”

We get back to the car and I don’t really know what to say. I mean, if we’re not in this for trying to find something more than a short-lived flash of fun, then what the hell is this all for?

Kat and Elise take forever to handle the man crisis, but seemed appreciative when I returned with Chinese takeout and wine instead of the requested coffees. I sat by quietly, not sure if my input would be welcome but mostly because Elise didn’t need advice, just some support as she bitched about finding out that her slimy boss, who’s married, is sleeping with one of the other reporters. Kat had given me a look like, “See? Always happens.” and it felt like another nail in the coffin of her perception of reality. Elise hadn’t even paused in her rant, going on about nepotism in the workplace and that maybe she should report him to HR, even if the reporter had been doggedly pursuing the boss in a flawed attempt to get better stories. It was draining, and lasted until later than I’d thought. The moon is high in the sky and the stars are twinkling as I pull up in front of Kat’s place. I’m thinking the day, and date, are pretty well done.

Kat seems to think so too, and looks exhausted as I walk her to her door. “Thanks,” she says, smiling softly. “Maybe next time we can have an actual first date.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” I joke. “I mean, I know all about what’s happening in Hollyweird now from flipping through Elise’s coffee table magazines. That’s not too bad, right? Did you hear about the pregnant Kardashian?”

Kat chuckles, “Which one? I guess I could say that I’ve had worse dates, but I’m not sure if that’s particularly flattering to say.” She smirks and I smile back, happy to find some humor after this decidedly unusual first date.

There’s a moment where we just look at each other, and I lean in, breathing in the scent of her floral perfume, “So . . . think I might be able to come inside?”

Kat bites her lip, looking up into my eyes where I see desire building inside her. “That sounds like a loaded question. We’re switching gears here, from whatever we were . . . to actually dating. And I don’t fuck on the first date and that’s what you said this was. Even if it wasn’t epic.”

“True, I did say that, but sometimes first dates end with a little more than a kiss at the door.”

Kat blushes, mocking outrage. “What kind of woman do you think I am?”

I pull her into my arms, pressing her voluptuous curves against me and lowering my voice to growl in her ear. “Apparently, a lot more proper than I thought. I like it, but I also appreciate the naughty side of you that likes it when I talk dirty in your ear, and loves to moan my name when I make you come.”

Kat’s hands wrap around my neck, pulling me down closer. “Well, as long as you can respect me in the morning, you can have a good kiss.”

“That,” I say as I bring my lips closer for a searing kiss, “is a given.”

Our lips touch, and moments later I’m pressing her up against the door and staking my claim on her mouth. She kisses me back just as hard, clutching at my ass until she feels my cock pressing against her belly. We don’t stop until our moans become too loud for the public hallway, and I pull away, leaving her gasping for breath.

“Well Miss Snow, that was a very fine and proper kiss,” I say in a mocking formal accent. “It was such a delight to spend the afternoon and evening with you. I hope you’ll do me the honor of escorting me again. Soon.”

Kat catches her breath, smirking as she leans in close again. “I’d be delighted, Mr. King. Don’t get any ideas though. I’m a lady, and even if

you've got a world class cock . . . I don't fuck on the second date either."

She breathily draws out the word fuck, intentionally emphasizing it to drive me out of my mind. I pull her close again, groaning as I admit . . . she wins this time. There's a demand, an order in my steely voice. "Say it again, Kitty Kat."

Her eyes are wide, innocent as she looks up at me, her lip quivering and her nipples hard against my chest. "What? Fuck. Is that what you want me to say? How about . . . no matter how much I want you to fill me up with that thick cock of yours, fuck me hard, and maybe even bend me over the arm of my sofa to smack my ass . . . I don't do that on the second date."

She's killing me as she accentuates the dirty words, knowing that I love it when she lets loose on those triggers, already so much easier than our first conversation when I had to force her to say cock on the radio.

I grin at her, playing even as desire courses through my veins. "Yeah, *that*. You're playing with fire here. You know . . . you never said anything about me licking your pussy until you soak my face. Maybe that can be an acceptable second date activity?" She giggles a bit and hope soars in my chest. "Maybe I can call you when I get home?"

I kiss her neck, hopeful that somehow she'll relent, our phone calls being somehow separate from our first date, that she wants me so much she'll give in to a phone call at least. But she's loving this game, and as she runs her fingernails down my neck, she chuckles under her breath. "Oh no, that definitely wouldn't be proper after a first date. I guess I'll just have to take care of things myself tonight. When did you say our next date will be?"

My brain zeroes in on the image of her pleasuring herself like I've seen so many times already, and my cock jerks in my pants. "Tomorrow night. It'll have to be late because I've got a meeting with a sponsor as well as the show . . . but fuck I need it to be tomorrow."

She's driving me wild, this almost dual nature of Kat as she reaches down, cupping my cock. "I can do tomorrow, I'll be listening in after work. Call me around ten or so?"

I nod, reaching up and rubbing a thumb across her stiff nipple. "Ten. Be ready."

Kat smiles mysteriously and gives my cock a final caress through my jeans. "Have a good night, Derrick. I know I will." She says it with a raised eyebrow, obviously teasing me further about just what she'll be doing tonight.

She steps back, closing her door and leaving me stunned. It’s not until the brass knocker presses against my chin that I realize I never said goodnight.

I lean close, whispering loudly through the door, trusting that she’s just on the other side. “Goodnight, Kitty Kat.”

CHAPTER 12

KAT

"Kat? Earth to Kat?"

The fog of my daydreams lifts as I realize my sister is calling me, and by the look on her face, she's been saying my name for a while. We're taking a long lunch for a family errand, I'm going to work late tonight to make up for it.

"Sorry, what?"

Jessie smirks at me, tilting her voice salaciously. "And what, pray tell, are you fantasizing about dear little sister?"

Blushing, embarrassed at being caught red-handed, I try to divert the attention away from me in any way I can. "Not fantasizing, you horny bitch. Get your mind out of the gutter. I'm just daydreaming, thinking about work, and a new project I'm developing."

She nods wisely, before rolling her eyes hard enough to let me hear the thunks as they hit the backs of her eye sockets. "A project you're developing? Is that what the kids are calling it these days? Take a hint from an old lady, if he's a project model, move on. Guys that need work aren't worth the time. Find a grown up." She freezes, a look of horror shooting across her face. "Oh god, you're not talking about Kevin are you? Please say you're not trying to *fix* him. Girl, tell me I'm wrong."

I flinch back, wondering if Elise and Jessie have been sharing a brain or something. "God no, definitely not Kevin. He's long gone and I've moved on . . . way on."

She smiles triumphantly and I realize I walked right into her trap. Dammit, that's what I get for being the little sister. "So moved on to . . . who? What's his name?"

I give in. Besides, I kind of want to tell her anyway. "His name is Derrick, he's a radio personality. That's actually how we met, but it's not

serious. We've just . . . chatted a bunch, and we had our first official date yesterday. So it's all super new."

I'm relieved when she gloms on to the date part and doesn't question my stutter as I described our late-night phone proclivities as 'chatting,' or to Derrick's job. I mean, how do I explain to my sister that her nerdy, seemingly straight-laced little sister is dating a sex advice expert?

"First date?" Jessie asks, leaning far enough forward that she's invading my personal bubble. "Oh my gosh, so how was it? Are you going to see him again? When?"

She's almost jumping up and down in her chair as she lobs questions at me faster than I can answer them. It's joyful to watch, and I laugh at her excitement, forgetting my nervousness a little. "It was great, yes, and tonight."

She squeals, making a sound I haven't heard since . . . well, since about the time she got that fan form-letter from Justin Timberlake back when she was in high school. "Tonight!!!! Oh, my gawd!"

As she's still buzzing, our mom steps out of the dressing room behind Jessie. I'm breathless as I take her in, stunning in a soft ivory floor-length gown covered with lace and beading. Jessie sees my face and whirls around, her jaw dropping in shock too. "Well girls," Mom asks, "what's the verdict?"

"Mom, you look gorgeous," I tell her truthfully, stepping forward and taking her hands. "Truly. Bob is going to forget his vows when he sees you walking toward him." I mime a fish mouth opening and closing. "The whole church is going to see him rendered speechless."

She laughs lightly, smoothing invisible wrinkles in the dress. "Really? You think it's all right?"

Jessie and I look at each other and then back at her, shaking our heads before Jess speaks up. "No, Mom. It's not *all right*. It's amazing."

We walk around her, taking in all the little details of the dress while Jessie, who's always been the fashionista of our little duo, gives a rundown. "It hugs your hips just right, not so tight you can't sit down, but tight enough to show your curves."

I have to chime in something, so I blurt the first thing that comes out of my mouth. "And the girls look va-voom! Thanks for the good genetics there, Mom."

Probably not the smoothest line that's ever been said, but Mom laughs, posing and visibly more confident in her dress. "Thanks, girls. I don't know what I'd do without you two here for this."

Her eyes fill with tears as she pulls us in for a tight three-way hug. After a moment, she giggles, letting go. "Okay, enough of that. You two are going to get makeup on my dress and I can't have that."

We step back, standing behind her as she looks in the mirror at herself, but she seems to be talking to us.

"I never thought I'd do this again. Your father . . . well, he really did a number on me. You know I don't like to talk bad about him because he's your father, and we did have a lot of good years together. But there at the end, it wasn't pretty. I hope I protected you from most of that."

We nod, knowing that she'd done her best, but Jessie and I spent many evenings curled up in the same bed as they'd fought, our mother's screams and our father's booming yells the soundtrack more than once. We hugged each other to sleep on too many occasions to be completely fooled by her comfortable lie.

She never told us, but we knew he'd been cheating, had heard her accusations, his denials, and his eventual admissions but always with some justifying reason why it was Mom's fault he had to resort to that. Even when she would take him back, we didn't understand why, but in some ways it was nice . . . at least we had peace and quiet again, and a comfortable normality to things. But it tore us apart.

It's why when she finally had had enough and divorced him, we supported her and cut him out of our lives. Dad didn't understand at first, thinking we didn't know about his affairs and that Mom had poisoned us against him. The emails and even calls from his lawyer as they dealt with the divorce lasted for months, until Jessie had been the mature one to tell him that we knew, we didn't approve, and to never contact us again.

I just avoided the whole confrontation and didn't return his calls until eventually he stopped calling altogether, much to my relief.

If I learned anything from my father, it's that whatever happiness you get . . . it's just an island in the sea of misery. It can be a big island the size of Antarctica for some . . . for others it's like a Styrofoam cup floating in the Pacific. And sometimes you don't know when you're getting too close to the shoreline, the wave will just crash suddenly and pull you back out

with the tide. “Mom, you deserve this. For as long you can have it with Bob, enjoy every moment.”

I mean it to sound loving and supportive, it’s not her fault or mine that we tend to be Styrofoam cups, but she hears the bitterness. She turns around, and comes over to hug me. “Kat, I know you don’t understand this . . . but I would happily take one blissful day with Bob over a lifetime alone. It’s not a risk to love him and let him love me. It’s a gift, one that I am blessed to have for as many days as we get. Sure, maybe one day it’ll explode and I’ll cry in devastation. But even then, the days of joy will be worth the pain. Even as bad as it got with your father, we had a lovely life for a long time and he gave me the two best gifts of my life, you two girls. So yeah, I’ll take this happiness for as long as I can have it, without bitterness or cynicism.”

I’m taken aback, my mom’s words hitting rather close to home. I am bitter and cynical. And she’s right, because Bob really is a good guy who wants to make her happy.

He didn’t have to ask her to marry him, I know. After his first wife died of cancer, he could have just been a rather well-to-do older bachelor. Mom would have been happy just dating him exclusively, I know it. She never asked for his support, and didn’t need it after she made her way successfully after the divorce. Neither of them needed the other, they just wanted to be together, forever. So when he dropped to a knee on Valentine’s Day and asked her to marry him . . . it was totally legit and love-filled. Even since then, he’s been great while they plan their second weddings as if they were kids doing it for the first time. There’s no reason I should doubt him.

Unfortunately, it’s not just my dad’s influence. I’ve had a run-in or two myself.

The good memories with them definitely don’t outweigh the bad endings. Kevin was, if anything, one of the longer ‘islands’ in my history. Some of us just aren’t destined for happily ever afters. Or even happy for nows.

Jessie pipes up, ever the optimist. “Maybe this new guy, Derrick, will be the one . . . tonight!”

I turn to Jess, ready to go claws and hissing on her, but Mom smiles. “Tonight? Do you have a date? Is that what Jessie’s caterwauling about?”

I try to smile back, but the thought of having a bad ending with Derrick is already pressing on my heart. The fact is, despite whatever guards I’ve

put up about Derrick, I like him already. A lot. We're barely started in whatever this is, but I already know it's gonna hurt like a son of a bitch when it ends.

It's not just the sex, or the fact that he pushes me just enough that I feel like I'm stepping outside my comfort zone without feeling like I just got chucked out of an airplane with no parachute. It's in the way he looks at me, the way he talks with me when we're not being dirty . . . even the fact he spent hours last night hanging out while I helped Elise through her latest drama, and did it without a single complaint.

Derrick . . . god he's everything I could ask for. So hot I find myself thinking of him and wondering if I could run to the bathroom at work to send him a quick naughty video, intelligent and perceptive, and even gentlemanly in a lot of ways. If telling a woman you want to fuck her until she passes out from so many orgasms can be called gentlemanly, Derrick's figured out how.

But that's what's scaring the shit out of me . . . every high has to be met with an equal low. Locking a forced excitement to my face, I tell my mom the same thing I told Jessie about it being our second date but we've been talking for a few weeks. "Really, it's no big deal."

Mom rolls her eyes, refusing to be put off. "No big deal? This is so exciting! New potential, new stories, the anticipation of liking each other and falling in love."

She hugs me, forgetting her earlier concerns about getting makeup on her wedding gown, and I just smile and nod back. Maybe Mom is getting her big island of happiness again, but I'm still last week's floating Styrofoam cup. "Yeah, we'll see."

CHAPTER 13

DERRICK

"I really think tonight's sponsor should be ChapStick or something," I joke, glancing again at the pre-show sheet. "I mean . . . blowjobs? They actually approved that one?"

"Well, there was a few requirements," Susannah says, smiling. She's been a lot nicer today than the past couple of days. I dunno, maybe whatever was biting her ass has worked itself out, or maybe she just realized being pissed wasn't doing us any favors.

"What's that?" I ask, sipping my water and already thinking to tonight. Kat . . . blowjobs . . . Kat's blowjobs . . . fuck, I'm hard again. "Sorry, one more time?"

"I said, they want us to do a series of shows on oral sex," Susannah says, looking at her clipboard.

I groan. "Sounds like we're going to be fielding a lot of callers to fill all that time."

"We'll make it work like usual," she replies. "You ready?"

"Five minutes," I reply. "Just want to make sure . . . well, no early bathroom breaks."

I rush to the bathroom, pulling my phone out of my pocket as soon as I'm in the stall. *Thinking of u.*

Oh? What's tonight's show?

I smirk, wondering if I should tell the truth or not. *You'll just have to listen and find out. See you tonight.*

I do try to force out whatever's inside, but no dice. Still, I flush and get to the studio just in time to plop down in my chair. The entry music starts, and I lean into my mic just as Suz gives me a thumbs up. "Good evening, listeners! This is Derrick King, the Love Whisperer, welcoming you to the

next three hours of advice, music, and a little bit of fun. With me, of course, is my right-hand woman, Susannah ‘Don’t Call Her Jenna’ Jameson.”

“Tonight’s show is about a subject that, well, let’s just say it’s near and dear to my heart.”

“I didn’t know your heart was next to your balls,” Susannah jokes, and I have to grin, that was a good one.

“Well, let’s just say I’ve thought about this subject a lot. You want to have the honor of telling our audience what we’ll be discussing?”

“Sure, D. Tonight, let’s talk fellatio. Blowjobs, knob slobbing, or sucking cock. Take your pick. If it involves dicks and lips, we’re gonna talk about it tonight.”

“Hell of an intro. I always liked the term *blowjob* myself,” I admit. “By the way, if blowjobs aren’t your thing, don’t worry folks, we’re having a show on licking pussy too. But for now, you know the deal. Give us a call, drop us an email, the lines are open. First, let’s go to an email. Suz, will you start us off?”

“Love to,” Susannah says, lowering her voice to a sultry purr to set the tone. She’s got a great range of voices, from shrill to sexy. I guess that’s why she’s working in this business. “Dear Love Whisperer, I’ve got a problem. You see, my boyfriend wants me to blow him, but I struggle with it. Am I doing it right? Is he gonna choke me? What about when he comes . . . what do I do? His birthday is coming up, and I’d love to give him this gift. See if I can make it happen for him. Advice? From Kitty.”

Kitty? Great, just fucking awesome. I’m trying to work, and all I can think of is Kat crawling across the floor like a kitten, her lips stretched wide around my cock, balls deep in her mouth. Shit. Focus, I gotta be a pro here. “Well, Kitty,” I husk, licking my lips before I can continue, “first off, I’d like to say you’re quite the girlfriend if you’re worried about this. For a lot of guys, blowjobs tend to consist of a little begging, some half-hearted licks, and then it’s time to move on.”

“Not me,” Susannah teases, and I give her a raised eyebrow. She normally doesn’t get this expressive, maybe she’s just really into it tonight. “I love feeling my man slide over my tongue.”

“That’s the thing,” I add in. “Kitty, there’s two main ingredients to a good blowjob. One, you have to really devote yourself to it. Don’t just do it because you think he’ll like it, you have to suck him off because you *want* to. Show some excitement about it because it’s supposed to sexy and fun!

Second, pay attention to what he likes. Does he want it hard, lots of tongue action, deep throating, hands involved or not involved? Maybe some ball play or even a little bit of anal play. Pay attention to what he likes, and then when you find out, give it to him and don't hold back."

"So Derrick, what do you like?" Susannah asks, a gossipy tone to her voice. "I'm sure our listeners would love to know your hottest desires . . . fast and rough, teasing little sucks, maybe the grapefruit trick I've been hearing about?"

I purse my lips, thinking, and all I can see is Kat. My cock throbs in my pants, and I smirk before answering. "I'm gonna be honest, I'm not sure there's such a thing as a bad blowjob. Unless there's teeth," I say, a shudder of fear snaking through my body. "But I'm sure some guys are into that too. But I'd advise on a Q-and-A before going that route, ladies. But let's just say that I'm loving what I'm getting."

"Oh, *he* must be good then," Susannah shoots back, a little cattier than I expected, but before I can say anything she gives a big laugh. "All right, let's try a caller. Go ahead, Eric."

I don't have time to ask Suz what the fuck was up with that crack because I've gotta help this caller. *"Yeah, uh first thing, big fan Derrick, you've helped me a lot with my girl. Big props to you."*

"Thanks Eric. What can I help you with tonight?"

"Well, how can I convince my girl that swallowing isn't deadly? I swear every time she goes down on me it's either she pulls off in time for me to blow on her face, or she starts spitting like a garden sprinkler. But I really, really want to see her take a mouthful and swallow it down, know what I mean?"

"I do, it's a pretty common thing for a lot of guys," I reply, trying to pull my thoughts together. "At the same time, a lot of women don't like it. Some of it is cultural or demographic, they've been taught that cum is somehow dirty or gross. Spitting can feel like they're rejecting you on some level, and swallowing seems sexy, like they're taking a part of you into themselves." I pause. Susannah raises a hand at me, and I segue to include her, "Susannah, what's your take?"

She smiles, her eyes glinting with naughtiness, "So many thoughts. From the woman's perspective, there's a point of gag where nothing's going to stop your body's natural reaction. The trick is to get behind the gag or in front of it. She needs to take you deeper down her throat so that when you

come, it goes down easier. Or, maybe compromise and stay in front of the gag, come into her open mouth, get the visual of her with a mouthful and then she swallows like a good girl without the pressure of you continuing to fuck her face at the same time."

"Good advice. Thanks for the female point of view. Also, Eric . . . man-to-man here, this might not be about her. Are you making it attractive for her to want to put her face in your crotch? I mean, what's your lifestyle like?"

"*Uhm, I'm pretty busy. I work long hours but do my best to stay healthy. I take vitamins, stuff like that."*

"All good, but before you want to get down with your lady, make sure you're showered and fresh, and stay hydrated," I reply. "And lay off alcohol, caffeine, and if you do smoke . . . well, this is another reason to quit. Eat right too. All of these things have been shown to affect the taste of your cum. Keep it clean, keep it healthy, and hopefully tasty."

We continue, and I give Eric a few pointers. Once we're done, it's time for a music break, so I turn it over to Susannah, who spins Madonna's 'Like a Prayer.'

"Little old school, isn't it?" I ask once the mics are off. She gives me a look, and there's something different about the way she's looking at me. Back to that upset look, I don't know.

"Best song about blowjobs ever made," Susannah says before singing along with some of the lyrics. I raise my eyebrow. She's got a point, but I've got other things on my mind.

Leaving the booth, I pull out my phone, texting Kat. *You listening?*

Of course. And no, I'm not Kitty, just in case you were wondering. I know just how to make you come in my mouth. And don't worry, it's delicious.

I moan, thinking of the sight of her and text back. *I wish I could see you naked and with my dick in your mouth right now.*

Well, we'll see if I can make that happen later.

I hear the song wrapping up, so I hop back in the booth while Susannah grumbles. "We've got work to do."

"Chill Suz, we've got this," I reply. Madonna finishes up her ode to the sacrilegious blowjob, and we go to an email about a woman who gets off most when she's got her head tilted back off the edge of the bed. The idea's

hot, though I've never tried it. I toss it to Susannah. "I dunno, Suz, sounds like a good way to get a head rush for the sucker, not the suck-ee."

She laughs a little. "Maybe some people like a little head rush? For real, don't hang upside down too long, this is a finishing move that will get you past your gag reflex like we talked about earlier with Eric. But don't go falling off the bed and blaming your concussion on us."

We bounce back and forth, taking calls and doing music breaks for the next hour. I try to stay focused on my job, but about halfway through, I get another buzz on my cellphone. Dad.

How is the show going tonight, Derrick?

That's Dad, never uses a single text contraction or emoji or anything. *Not bad. Hey, Jacob will be at home to play in a few weeks and got us box tickets. Can you go?*

Of course I can go. It's football so I'll be watching either way, there or at the house.

Growing up, that was what he and I bonded over first. Not that he didn't let me explore other things, but where some fathers would tell their son about the baseball greats, or take their sons camping, with us, it was football. Oh, we'd still go fishing or hiking, but his 'old man stories' weren't about fish that got away, but about watching Dwight Clark make 'The Catch,' or Doug Flutie's miracle throw while at Boston College. We bonded over the somehow fated Super Bowl win of the Patriots after 9/11, and now that my former college roommate is a pro and relatively local . . . well, Dad's got a reason to closely follow the team.

I know he felt like it was the end of an era when I quit playing, but ultimately, I think he's glad I did reporting. Especially with all the medical data these days about players getting their head smacked on the field. Now, I think he's still trying to understand just what this whole Love Whisperer thing is about. Personally, I'm glad he's probably not listening in tonight. Better for him to think I talk about love and relationships than blowjobs and swallowing.

OK, I text him. *I'll send you details tomorrow, Jacob should have them to me by then.*

"Yo, Derrick!" Susannah growls, and I look up guiltily. "We've got a show to do!"

"My bad," I reply, setting my phone down on the table. The light comes on saying we're live. "We're back, and I hope you've been drinking plenty

of water, because it's getting warm in here. What do we have next, Susannah?"

"A little offshoot from the norm," she says, grinning wickedly. "We've got Jamie, who has one of my personal fantasies happening in real life."

"Go ahead Jamie, I'm listening."

"Hi Derrick," a woman says. *"I've just started a new relationship with a guy from France, and he's had a lot more experience than me. Last Friday night, I came home and he . . . well, he was on his knees with another man. They invited me to join in, and while the sex was mind-blowing, I'm a little worried in that my boyfriend seems to be more into sucking cock himself than into me. He's asked if he could invite his friend over again this weekend, and I'm not sure what to say."*

Well now, that's awkward. I get through the call with the same advice I normally give, communicate and be honest with each other, because what the fuck else can I really say to that? But by the time we're done, it's time for another commercial break. As soon as the clear light goes on, I reach for my phone, tapping out a message to Kat.

1 hr left.

U can do it!

I smirk, naughty thoughts running through my head. *Got anything to motivate me?*

I seriously don't expect her to reply, and at first I think maybe she's busy. With about thirty seconds left in the commercial break, my phone buzzes again and I pick it up to see it's a pic.

"Oh Jesus," I whisper as I see Kat, naked from the waist up, her hair framing her face as she shows me a mouthful of what's obviously milk or something, but the image gets through, especially as she's let a little dribble from the side of her mouth.

Motivated enough?

I gulp, my cock surging in my pants until I'm nearly desperate to have some relief. With shaking thumbs, I text back. *Don't plan on sleeping alone. And no panties 4 our date.*

She sends back an evil smiley emoji, and I've got a very horny and very worried feeling that I've unleashed a long repressed . . . perfection.

So what is a second date to you?

Kat's quick with her reply. *It's late, so pick me up. We can have drinks at a bar around the corner.*

I’m aware enough to see Susannah giving me the signal, and I go back to the show, faking my way through another email. As soon as I can, I’m back on my phone with Kat.

Still listening?

Always. Getting some new ideas too. If you’re good . . . maybe I’ll show you. Not second date tho. Gotta wait a little longer.

My balls are aching, but her message is clear. No sex tonight. Fuck. Okay, I guess I’ll survive. I try to go back to the show, but I’m distracted by thoughts of Kat and I know I’m fumbling my way through some of the calls. Hopefully no one’s noticing.

During the next song break, Fifty’s *Candy Shop*, I duck out to not only take a piss, but to get my head right.

Honestly Suz does have a reason to be upset with me. I realize I’ve phoned it in tonight, on exactly the type of show I shouldn’t be. God, just the idea of three hours of talk about blowjobs has me rolling my eyes while at the same time my cock pulses in my pants, thinking of Kat and her pic.

But that’s the problem, I should be focusing, I should be able to for three hours. I shouldn’t be focusing on Kat but instead on each of my callers. If I get bored, I crack jokes with Susannah about the calls or emails. I deliver on the mic, not on text.

“Tomorrow,” I promise myself as I head back down the hallway. I open the door to see Susannah not in her mini-booth but in mine. Surprised, I stop to see her set my phone down on my desk. “Somethin’ wrong?”

“Sorry,” she says, seemingly all smiles. “Your phone was buzzing around again. I turned it off for now if you don’t mind. We really need to focus and finish tonight out right.”

“I agree,” I reply a little sheepishly. “I’m sorry about tonight’s show. I know it’s been a clusterfuck sometimes, and you’ve saved my ass. I’ll do better tomorrow.”

“I get it, I really do,” Susannah says. “Derrick, we’ve all got shows that are tough, and lives outside this place. But we’ve got the potential to do really great things here, bigger and better than ever, but that will never happen if you’re fucking around, barely dialing it in for the shows. I’m happy to do the prep, research, and planning. All you’ve got to do is show up and speak, but tonight, you’ve barely done that. I need you to be a fucking pro like usual, okay?”

The venom in her last sentence irks me and I'm about to shoot back about her own cattiness, but Fifty's ending and we've got to get back on the air.

Somehow, we get through the rest of the show and ironically things go well enough that as the outro music plays, Susannah's in a lot better mood. "Hey, D?"

I'm in a hurry to see Kat, but still I look over, leaning back in my chair. "Yeah?"

"Sorry about the bitch act before. I'm just worried about you, that's all. Is everything okay? You keep texting and calling and that's not you. This isn't the first time that's happened lately either. You seem distracted. Anything I can do to help?"

I shake my head, getting out of my chair. "No, I'll get it together. I'm sorry too. Do me a favor though, let's just keep this between us, but I met someone and it's a little all-consuming. I got this, promise."

"Fresh relationships are like that," Susannah agrees. "Lucky girl. Is that all?"

"No, I was talking to my dad but he's fine. Just been awhile since I really spent time with him, so I gave him some more text time than I should have. All good, sorry if I wasn't pulling my weight. I'll do better."

"Okay," Susannah says, giving me her trademark smile. "Keep it up though, and I'll make sure that we do a whole slew of topics that you hate. Should I go crazy romantic until you vomit pink roses, or some seriously kinky fetish that makes your ass pucker? I got it . . . baby talk. Does Derrick-werrick need a little powder-poofy?" She laughs maniacally, and I can't help but grin at her. This is why we work together.

"Okay, okay . . . I promise to get it together as long as you never, ever call me *that* again! You mind wrapping up the studio? I kinda have a date." I smile, knowing it's a big ask after the night we've had, but hopeful she'll cut me some slack because I need to get to Kat.

"Go party, Don Juan de Radio," Suz says. "But I demand perfection tomorrow. We're poised for great things!"

I'm already walking toward the door, thankful for the reprieve, but answer her. "We *are* doing great things, Suz. We're actually helping people here."

She says it softly, but I hear it anyway. "But we could help more if we had a bigger platform. Syndication, Derrick. We're so close."

“It’ll happen or it won’t, Suz. I’m happy either way. Don’t worry about chickens that aren’t even eggs yet. Anyway, gotta run. Thanks! You’re the best. Tomorrow . . . I promise. I’m back on track and ready to rock.” And before the door even closes behind me, all thoughts of work whoosh out of my head to be replaced with Kat and how she’s waiting for me.

CHAPTER 14

KAT

"Well, well, this isn't too bad," Derrick says as he closes the door to the bar behind me, cutting off the icy wind. The holiday season isn't that far off, and honestly . . . I'm making a few early Christmas wishes even if I know they won't come true.

"It's no dive, but it's not so fancy that nobody can afford a mineral water," I admit. "As long as you don't mind not having a coat check girl."

"Never had a need for that," Derrick growls, looking me over. "I've got everything I want right here."

Heat creeps up my neck as he consumes me with his gaze, and I know that I made the right choice in clothes. Sure, my calves are cold, but this hip hugging skirt and tight blouse look sexy as hell. Or at least it seems to tick all the boxes that Derrick likes.

"Should we sit?" I ask, and Derrick nods, his hand warm on my lower back as he leads me over to a corner table. The lights are low, it's that time of night where people are here to either drink their sorrows away quietly or find someone.

"You know," Derrick says as he takes my jacket to hang it over one of the spare chairs, "you didn't have to."

"Didn't have to what?" I ask, waiting while the waitress comes over. I order a glass of white wine, while Derrick orders a beer on tap, and we decide on some tapas to give us something to nibble on besides each other.

"You didn't have to get dressed up," Derrick says. "You don't need to show off for me. I feel like you've never been more comfortable than when we hung out over breakfast and you were wearing yoga pants and an old white t-shirt."

“I’m trying to be more comfortable,” I admit. “But no way I’m going out with you wearing *that*.”

Derrick smiles and nods. “Just so you know. You’re sexy, beautiful, *and* you’ve got brains. What’s there not to like?”

“Good question,” I reply. “What about you? You gotta have a few bad tendencies.”

“Sure,” Derrick says, pausing when our drinks are brought and we toast each other. “For one, I’m terrible at laundry. In fact, I’ve got a single method, I pick up everything on the floor and chuck it all in the washer at once. Main reason I have all dark clothes . . . black, grey, charcoal, navy.”

“You what?” I ask, sipping my wine. It’s good, and warm as it flows down my throat.

“Let’s just say . . . pink football practice pants,” Derrick says with a chuckle. “Take one pair of football pants, two brand new red cotton t-shirts, throw in hot water with cheap detergent and magic happens. So yeah, all darks and that doesn’t happen.”

I laugh, imagining Derrick wearing pink football pants. “Okay, that’ll teach you. Thankfully for me, wearing pink pants isn’t a problem.”

“Nope, never had a problem with you and anything pink,” Derrick purrs, heat blooming between my legs. “So . . . how was your day? Miss me?”

I giggle, thinking of all that we’ve done so far today. “How could I have? You were texting me all day.”

“When I get motivation like you sent me, I have to.”

“I admit, that was pretty dirty. I hope you didn’t get in trouble.”

“Not too much. Susannah did almost kill me today between texting you and my dad, but that’s not your fault.”

“Is he okay?” I ask, worried, and Derrick waves me off.

“Yeah, he was just checking in. I think he didn’t realize the time at first. He knows I work in the studio, even if he doesn’t listen in often . . . thankfully.”

“Oh, I’m sure,” I tease. “I mean, what father would want to listen to their son talk all about how to please a man with your mouth. Speaking of which . . . you never answered some questions tonight about what you like best.”

Derrick leans in, smiling. “I think you know the answer to that one, you know exactly what I like. And for a woman who said that she wasn’t going

to do it anyway, you're waving a red flag at a bull that's about to charge you."

"Don't let me taunt you at work, I know how serious you take helping your listeners. After all, look where we are," I joke back, my pussy tingling underneath my skirt. "You've helped me a lot so far."

Derrick nods, reaching across the table to place his warm fingers on top of my hand, sparks radiating from the contact up my arm. "I take it very seriously. What can I do to keep helping you, Kitty Kat?"

There's a thousand things Derrick could do, but as we've moved into something more fragile here with actually dating, I know the most important thing he can do. "Maybe just show me a good time, that not all guys are after one thing?"

"And what one thing is that?"

"You know . . .," I whisper back, heat creeping up my neck again. "Fucking."

Derrick leans in closer, his voice low and seductive. "But what if I do want to fuck you? Right now, as much as I know I should be, I don't want to be a gentleman. I want to bend you over this table and slip your skirt over your ass. I could make you come right here."

I'd let you and come like a freight train, I think, but I have to keep control somehow, so I flirt back instead. "Rather public don't you think?"

Derrick glances around, then comes back to me, his eyes burning. "Would you rather disappear to the back? We could do that if you want? Kat, I respect you and if you say no I'll accept that. But . . . I think you want to say yes."

My breath catches in my chest, he's got me. Sure, I don't want to be easy to get, but the way he makes me feel, I want him inside me every fucking moment we're together.

Derrick leans in, his thumb drawing circles on my hand, making my nipples tighten in my bra and my pussy clench. "There's nothing wrong with wanting it, I want you just as much. We could sneak back there and find a dark corner, maybe you sink down to your knees and suck my cock right there. I'd stand in front of you so no one could see. No one would be the wiser but us. Only we would know how much you drive me crazy."

"I drive *you* crazy?" I murmur, feeling a little bit of control return. He's right, we both want it . . . we just have to figure out where. "Little ol' me?"

Derrick leans in closer, and our lips are this close to touching when there's a harsh harrumph next to us, and a sneering laugh. I'm horrified to see Kevin standing there, smirking like he's busting me doing something wrong.

He looks a little extra swollen, obviously using his free time in the gym the last few weeks. And like super tan . . . orange fake-bake tan. Eww. I sit back, my elbow bumping my wine glass, but I catch it before it crashes to the floor. I definitely don't need any more attention in this moment. "Kevin? What the fuck?"

Kevin chuckles. "Seriously Kat, this is sad. I mean this guy? He looks like a total douchebag."

"Fuck you!" I hiss, feeling the flush paint my cheeks. Deep down, I don't really care what Kevin thinks or says, but in the moment, with him sneering at me, it's hard not to react or to fall into old habits. "You don't get a say in who I see. You cheated on me, remember?"

"Didn't take you long to find some new dick," Kevin replies, not taking the obvious hint to leave. He looks at Derrick, who's coiled tight, ready to get up if need be, but is also letting me handle this myself for now. I appreciate that he knows I need to do this. He talks to Derrick, but Kevin's eyes are on me, watching his barbs hit home. "Can I give you a tip, man? You don't need to go through that much effort. She's an easy fuck. Not that good, but easy." He leans back, the pride at seeing the insecurities he's brought up in me obvious in his eyes.

Derrick's heard enough and gets to his feet. For the first time, I see that he actually towers over Kevin by a couple inches.

"Okay that's it," Derrick rumbles. "I've heard enough of this."

"Oh, I'm shaking in my boots," Kevin drawls, wiggling his fingers. "Why don't you sit back down, buddy? You don't know who you're talking to."

"Sure I do," Derrick says, his voice dropping to threatening whisper. "You're the two-pump chump piece of shit who couldn't give Kat what she deserved. You took advantage of her, fucked around on her and lost her. Now you've probably figured out she was the best damn woman to walk into your life and you blew it. She figured out you're worthless, and she deserves better."

"And you think *you're* better?" Kevin says. He laughs, half turning away, but it's a feint. His left hand flashes out, catching Derrick just above

the eyebrow, and the fight's on.

It's the first fight I've seen since a little push-shove thing in high school, and it's nothing like the movies. Nobody gets involved to peel them apart, but at the same time it doesn't last long. Kevin tries to follow up his punch with another, but Derrick grabs his arm and somehow pushes it across his body. Kevin's thrown off-balance, and as he stumbles past, Derrick picks him up in a massive bear hug before slamming him to the floor of the bar.

"That's enough!" the bartender yells. "Don't make me call the cops!"

"Call them, I'm pressing charges," Kevin whines from underneath Derrick. "He assaulted me."

"Boy, from where I'm sittin', you threw the first punch and he defended himself from your shenanigans. Where I come from, you put money in the register, you gon' get a receipt more often than not," one of the bar patrons drawls. "Figure at least four more of us saw the same thing."

Kevin looks like he's about to whine, but slumps down. Derrick gets up, and I notice he's bleeding. I go to touch the wound as Kevin gets up, grabbing a tumbler off a nearby table, but one hard look from Derrick is all it takes, and he lets go of the weapon to leave the bar.

"Are you okay?" Derrick asks, turning to look at me for the first time. "I'm sorry, I would have let you handle that, but he was being a bit too much of an asshole."

I feel oddly excited. I mean, Derrick just went Neanderthal. Why not clunk me on the head, and drag me back to his cave by the hair? But I'm turned on, power coursing through me not only in that I stood up to Kevin, but that Derrick had my back.

I grab his head and pull him down into a deep kiss, our tongues swirling as I reward him for being there for me. "Let's get out of here and get that cut looked at," I whisper.

Tusher Derrick onto the couch, where I strip off my jacket. "Okay, let me get the alcohol," I say, going to grab my kit.

I come back, soaking a few cotton balls in alcohol. I dab at his cut, which is a lot deeper than I expected. "Damn," Derrick says, inspecting it. "Got any tape?"

"Uh . . . probably," I say, looking in my kit. "Why?"

“Learned from a friend,” Derrick says, taking the roll. He tears strips and carefully covers the cut with a narrow piece of gauze before taping his eyebrow back together. “Damn . . . could have done without this, but there was no way I was throwing the first punch.”

“You let him hit you,” I whisper, running my finger through his hair just above his eyebrow. “Why?”

“Because you deserve to have someone take a punch for you,” Derrick says, his hand closing over mine and pulling me closer. “Besides, I heard somewhere that chicks dig scars.”

I chuckle, and gently trace my fingertips along his forehead and down around his eye to his cheek. I’m checking for any tender spots, but mostly just marking him with my touch, appreciating that he was willing to sacrifice himself for me. I dip down, finding his lips with mine, hoping he feels the *thank you* I’m trying to communicate with my kisses. The fire we’ve been stoking for the last few days rages at my center, and I need to . . . worship him. This man, who isn’t showing me who I am, but is helping me actually discover who I am for myself, which feels even more important. I lower to my knees, my face level with the hardness already pressing against his jeans.

“Kat, you don’t have to. What about our second date?” There’s a plea to his voice, and I know he’s trying his damndest to do the right thing. But I know that *this* is the right thing. It’s not some guidebook dating rule, arbitrary so everyone thinks you’re a ‘good girl’, this is just real and what I want. Using all the tips from the show today, and maybe a few tricks of my own, I take Derrick to the edge in minutes.

“Damn it, Kat. Just like that . . . suck that cock, take me all in. Are you gonna swallow for me because I’m about to fill you up. Where do you want it?” I feel his balls pull tight, and I suck him in deep, leaving no doubt to my answer. I swallow down every drop, satisfaction humming through me.

I lay my head on his thigh, tracing lines along his softening cock as he pants above me. I realize that I’m really falling for him, despite my misgivings and fears, and that’s both exciting and terrifying. He’s not just healing my heart like the casual rebound I though this might be, but he’s filling my heart with new hopes and dreams, which feels dangerous.

CHAPTER 15

DERRICK

I wake up in an increasingly familiar, comfortable tangle of arms and legs, opening my eyes to see again the increasingly familiar poster of Einstein with his tongue poking out that's next to the closet. I stretch, feeling Kat's breast shift to press against my ribs warmly. "Mmm, good morning."

"Mid-morning," Kat yawns sleepily. "You better be glad that my job lets me do flex time, stud. Let's get brunch."

I hum happily, turning over and kissing her forehead. "I don't know about brunch, but I've got a nice sausage for you if you're interested."

Kat chuckles, but reaches down and gives my cock a good morning stroke. "I've never thought of myself as sexually insatiable before meeting you. Now it's like sex is as necessary as oxygen or high speed Wi-Fi."

I laugh and give her a kiss. I can feel it though, after the passionate heat of last night, both our bodies are taken care of for now, and we roll out of bed, getting ready for the day.

"How's the eye?" Kat asks as she quickly showers. "Oh, and if you don't mind pink, I've got some disposable razors in the medicine cabinet. Gonna have to use soap though."

"Conditioner will do the trick," I reply, finding a bottle and squeezing it out. "Did a show on grooming for lovemaking once, found out that conditioner is better for softening the hair and the skin than soap. As for the eye, not too bad, the tape held it together."

We swap places, and I wash carefully, avoiding my eye. When I get out, Kat's already in her bedroom getting dressed. What I see stirs both my loins and something else as she pulls on a pair of her ever-present jeans, but instead of one of her normal shirts, she has on one of mine. "Where'd you get that?"

“You left it the second night you came over,” Kat says, blushing. It’s adorable, my shirt practically swallows her to the point she could wear it like a dress if she wants. “Mind if I wear it?”

“Looks better on you than it ever did on me,” I say, pulling her in close. “You’re beautiful, Katrina Snow. And you make me feel lucky to be part of your life.”

We kiss tenderly while I pick her up, amazed at how far things have gone and glad at the same time. I set her down, looking at the way my shirt covers her, wrapping her up the way I’d like to, but knowing we need to get some food . . . fuel, whatever.

She steps back, putzing with the oversized shirt, rolling the sleeves and tying it at the waist in an almost country-girl fashion, but when she’s done, I whistle. “Woman, you definitely make that shirt look better than I ever did. As far as I’m concerned, it’s yours. And I want to see you in that and nothing else very soon.”

Kat looks at herself in the mirror, and gives me a grin. Reaching down, she unbuttons one more button, giving me a hint of her cleavage. “You make me feel sexy, and I want the world to know it. Now . . . pancakes!”

We drive to a nearby restaurant, ordering complete brunch specials, and chat innocently while sipping our orange juice. Just after our plates arrive, I hear a voice call out my name. “Hey, D!”

I turn, grinning as Jacob dominates the room, his massive presence almost making the tightly packed tables and booths melt away. “Jacob, I didn't even know you were in town.”

“Yeah well, team’s got a long week with the Monday night game, so Coach gave us an extra day off. Who’s your friend?” Jacob asks, giving Kat his Sports Illustrated megawatt smile. “Jacob Knight, pleased to meet you.”

“Jacob, this is my girlfriend, Katrina Snow. Kat, Jacob’s my old college roommate.”

His eyes widen a little at me calling Kat my girlfriend, and I didn’t even mean to say it at first, it just sort of came out. But it feels right, and as the surprise melts away, I can see that Kat’s pleased as punch with the designation.

“It’s nice to meet you,” Kat says. “Join us for brunch?”

“That little snack? We’re in the middle of the season, I need protein, so excuse me . . .” He motions to the waitress, who buzzes to the table, seemingly overjoyed to be asked to come over judging by the way she’s

been eyeing Jacob. “Can I get a half-dozen eggs, scrambled, four slices of bacon, extra crispy, and a bowl of oatmeal with a touch of brown sugar.” The waitress nods absently in a trance as she stares at Jacob’s mouth before she snaps out of it and scurries off. Jacob laughs, looking back at us, “What do you think the chances are she’s going to get that right?”

He settles in, and under the table I can feel Kat’s hand rest on my thigh. She gives me a squeeze, and when I look in her eyes, they’re full of emotion that I know we’ll talk about soon.

For now though, Jacob’s full of energy and questions. “So where’d you get the shiner, man? Didn’t I teach you enough to avoid a beating?”

“It’s not a shiner, it’s a cut. And that deflection move that you and I drilled for two summers came in handy,” I tell him. I fill him in on the incident with Kevin, Jacob’s face clouding at first before clearing.

“So he did you right?” Jacob asks Kat, who smiles and nods. “Good. Because if he doesn’t, give me a call. I’ll show him a few moves that I haven’t taught him yet. I wouldn’t worry though, D’s a good man.”

I watch as Jacob and Kat get to know each other, and I’m glad to see that they get along well. They’re total and complete opposites, the towering physical gladiator who makes his millions by terrorizing quarterbacks while she makes apps for smartphones and tablets, but it seems to be working. He’s gregarious and rarely stops talking, asking questions and giving her quieter approach a direction to keep the conversation rolling.

“So you listen to Derrick’s show?” Kat asks in surprise. “Just didn’t think that’d happen. You’re sort of . . ..”

“Big?” Jacob asks ironically, making Kat laugh. “Yeah well, if anything, that helps guys like me. I ain’t ashamed to admit it, I’ve used a few tips D’s said to help things along. Haven’t found the right girl yet, but that’s okay. I gotta say though,” he says as he stares Derrick down. “You’ve never called me up after a breakup to see if I was doing okay?” He fakes a sniffle, tracing a dry fingertip down his cheek like it’s a tear before grinning madly.

I see Kat blush, and I know just what she’s thinking about. “You’re a big boy. I figure you know to pick up the phone if that’s what you need. No offense.”

“None taken,” Jacob says. Kat gets up, and he rises like a gentleman. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” Kat giggles, charmed. “Just two cups of coffee and then OJ . . . ladies’ room is calling. Excuse me a moment.”

Kat walks away, and Jacob turns back to me. “Seems like a good girl. She gets the stamp of approval.”

I laugh. “Didn’t know I needed one, but thanks. Why’s that?”

“Just seems like the girl for you, that’s all. Listen D, I’ve known you for almost a decade now. Everyone has a type that’s meant for them. Me . . . I need some kick ass chick who’s going to take no prisoners and probably butt heads with me right up until the point we’re tearing each other’s clothes off. You though, you’re the kind that needs someone that you just gel with. And while you two aren’t peas and carrots, you gel.”

“Peas and carrots?” I ask, smirking. “Let me guess, *Forrest Gump* on the last cross country flight?”

“Besides,” Jacob continues, not getting thrown off at all, “you like her too. I can see it in your eyes and not just that cut over your eyebrow. She’s doing something to you man. And in my opinion, it’s a *good* something.”

“Yeah well, I gotta take my time. The asshole ex we told you about isn’t the only guy who’s treated her like shit in the past. So I plan to just treat her right, go slow, and treat her with the respect that I don’t think any other man has ever given her and we’ll see what happens.”

Jacob nods sagely. “Well said, brother. Might not be a complex game plan, but it’s a solid one. Hey, I can get you another ticket for the game if you want to bring her with your dad.”

“Fuck yeah!” I reply, grinning. “You’re the best, man.”

“I can get you one of the cheerleader outfits for her too . . . if the Love Whisperer is into that.”

I close my eyes, imagining Kat in a cheerleader outfit, not a bad idea, but maybe later. “Probably not a safe idea for now. But thanks for the offer.”

CHAPTER 16

KAT

I feel giggly and light as I wrap up my coding for the evening, knowing that I'm rocking this new app and am right on target for my deadline. I kick back in my cubicle, pulling out my phone. "I can miss Derrick's show for *one* night," I say to myself. "Besides, I can get the real deal any time I want now. So . . .."

I hit speed dial, glad that I have most of the office to myself.

After just two rings, the call's picked up. "Hey babe, how's life in the silicon world?"

I smile, sounds like Elise is doing better. "Not bad, how's life in the dirt sheets?"

"Same as always, dirty and I can only tell half of it," Elise says. "Gimme some good news, I can use some after the shit I listened to today."

"Well . . ." I say, drawing it out, "you won't believe what happened last night."

I tell Elise about my night out that turned into a night of passion with Derrick, leaving out my nude 'swallow' pic, glossing over most of my day and really starting the story after Derrick picked me up and we went to the bar.

"That local place we've been to?" Elise asks. "Fancy."

I chuckle at the sarcasm, and continue. "Derrick didn't mind. Actually, it was going great, we'd gotten our tapas order in and were sharing more about ourselves. Derrick was flirting with me pretty hardcore, but I liked it."

"You seem to like everything he does," Elise says, but there's not too much jealousy there. "At least tell me he's hung like a peanut so I don't have to kill you."

“Sorry, you’re just gonna have to kill me,” I joke back. “But, you’ll love him too when you hear what happened next. Kevin showed up.”

“That son of a bitch,” Elise growls. “Bastard better be glad I wasn’t there, I’d have castrated him with a broken beer bottle.”

I don’t doubt it, and that’s why I love her so damn much. “Derrick wasn’t too happy either. But he was so fucking awesome. First, he let me handle it, just having my back. But when Kevin crossed the line . . . Derrick handed him his ass.”

“Is that so?” Elise comments, impressed. “Well then babe, I’m starting to like Derrick more and more. Anyone who stands up for my girl is worth a thank you grope.”

“Uh huh, hands off my man. This morning we went to brunch and he introduced me to Jacob Knight . . . as his girlfriend.”

“Jacob Knight the football stud?” Elise says, whistling. “Phew, that’s a lot of man there. I’ve heard rumors about him too. Let’s just say the man knows his way around the field, in football and with women.”

“Maybe, but he was a total gentleman with me. As we were leaving, he even said he’d get me a ticket to join Derrick and his father for an upcoming game. I’m . . .I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I’m excited to go to a football game!”

“Sounds like you’d be excited to go to a demolition derby if it was with Derrick,” Elise says. “Maybe he can use that sexy radio voice to tell you all the plays step by detailed step . . .” She mimics a sultry seductress tone, “the tight end grabs the ball, tugging it close to his body, and letting loose a burst of speed as he thrusts toward the end zone. Touchdown. Oh my . . . the celebratory champagne seems to have spilled all over his sweaty body. Bubbles popping . . . everywhere.”

I erupt into giggles at her silly antics. “Holy shit, Elise. That’s some upper level imagination there, and I didn’t know you had that voice. You never told me you were a phone-sex operator, but I’d believe it now. Were you undercover for a story, or just needing a bit of extra cash?”

She laughs back, taking my teasing in stride, “Whatever. You try that voice on Derrick and he’ll be eating out of your hand . . . or whatever orifice you want him to eat out.” We’re both quiet for a moment, the laughter giving way but the smile still stretching my face. “But seriously, babe, if I didn’t know any better . . .”

“What?” I ask, curious where she’s going now after her little tangent.

“Nothing, it’s just, what do you feel for him? What’s happening with you two?”

I bite my lip, chewing thoughtfully as I try to figure out the words. “Elise, since getting together with Derrick, I feel like a little bit of that darkness inside me is starting to fade. He’s a gentleman, with a naughty streak a mile wide that he still respects me with. He’s protective, he’s kind, he listens when I bore the shit out of him talking about work . . . I think I’m falling for him. Hard.”

“Whoa. You sure babe? I mean, I’m happy as fuck for you, but . . . you’re you. And no offense, but this sounds awfully fast. I mean, considering what you’ve been through.”

“I know, which is part of what scares the hell out of me. There’s no logic in this, and I need a balanced pro/con sheet to feel like life makes sense. He’s a radio personality with a sports background. I’m going to be reading *Football For Dummies* so I can understand the damn game I’m invited to. He’s tall and built like a Greek statue. I’m . . . well, like you said, I’m me.”

“So you’re scared,” Elise says. “You’re going by your guts and not your brains.”

“And you know what happens when I let my heart get involved,” I reply. “What if D’s just like every other man I’ve let inside?”

“He could be, but he could also be the guy who might give you what you most totally deserve,” Elise says. “A happy ever after.”

“A happy ever after? Those are for cheesy romance books and fairy tales.”

Elise snickers and raises her voice, singing. “*When you wish upon a star . . ..*”

“Yeah, yeah,” I snort. “You’re a horrible Jiminy Cricket. No offense, but your conscience is not much better than mine, and you’re a hell of a lot hotter.”

“Why thank you, I do say I’m a lot more fuckable than an insect,” Elise retorts. “Listen, I gotta ask up front after your Kevin bombshell, or lack of bombshelling, I should say. Does Derrick knock your socks off?”

I giggle, feeling warmth between my thighs as I think of Derrick last night. “My socks, my panties, my bra . . . he’s the best *ever*. If he were a computer program, he’d be the Big Oh-S-E-X.”

“Apple’s so going to love that you’re making fun of their operating system,” Elise snickers. “Nerd dirty talk, gotta love it. So what’s his style, pound you into submissive bliss or do you like to take charge?”

“That’s the thing,” I admit, my heart beating a little faster, “he’s so good at listening, reading my body language. Like last night, I started off saying I wanted to be all prim and proper, no sex on the second date. But he read me so well and pushed his flirting to delicious naughtiness. My god Elise, I was so ready to go to a dark corner and get it on in public. Me! In public! Can you imagine? But this morning, after we woke up, he totally saw that I wasn’t really feeling it for sex, and we just talked as I showered. We even broke the toilet barrier.”

“You’re fucking shitting me,” Elise says wonderingly. She’s the one who introduced me to the various barriers, with the toilet barrier, or feeling comfortable enough to use the toilet in front of the other person, being one of the greatest. “You aren’t *maybe* falling for him, you’re head over heels for this guy. Is there any limits you won’t cross with him?”

“I don’t know. Sometimes I feel like if that man asks me anything I’d do it,” I admit. “God, I can’t believe it. I am so head over heels for this man. Okay, pause button pressed or I’m gonna get too worked up and have to call him back for a repeat performance.” I shake my head a bit, rattling the sexy thoughts of Derrick out and hear Elise laughing at me across the line. “What about you? Tell me about your day. Any better news about your boss? Are you still dating that same guy? The chef.”

“Trevor?” Elise asks, snorting. “Nah, he was a tumbling, bumbling dickweed. Today’s mostly sucked because I’m chasing some stupid celeb rumors. Fuck, why couldn’t I have been on the Prince Harry and Meghan Markle beat?”

“Because you’re barred from the UK after that little incident five years ago?” I tease, making Elise give me a long, loud raspberry in my ear.

“I wasn’t banned from the whole country, just the Defence Ministry,” Elise says. “And besides, the reporter’s not going to England, it’s all stateside reporting. I didn’t get the assignment though because I’m not willing to fuck my way into plum assignments, unlike some people in my office,” she says with a snotty tone. “Really though, I’m cool. Standard stuff, nothing too exciting right now . . . usual celeb sightings, gossip mongering, and ass-kissing and covering to prevent lawsuits. Hey, what do you think of money shots?”

“Money shots?” I ask.

“Oh, come on, Kat. You know what a money shot is. When a guy blows his load all over--”

“I know what a money shot is. That was just so random I figured you meant something else.”

Elise laughs. “Sorry, I’m chasing a rumor that there’s a TV star whose specialty is getting money shots with some pretty A-list celebs. Can’t name names yet, you know how that shit is, but what do you think?”

“I guess it depends on the couple? I mean, if they’re both into it, who am I to say no?”

“Yup, you’ve been Love Whispered,” Elise jokes. “So sweet, yet sexy, and no smut to you at all.”

“You mean, too high class,” I tease. “Like you, babe. Elise, you’re a legit journalist, I’ve read your real work. Why are you chasing down who blows a load in who’s face?”

“Pays the bills for now, you know that. Just like your work on that never-to-be mentioned again adult dating sim. Not saying I always like it, but it does pay well.”

“Yeah but . . .,” I reply, then sigh, not wanting to make her feel bad about her job, even if she really is too good for the drivel she reports on. “Okay, I get it. So, now that Trevor’s out of the way, anything interesting for you?”

“Not really, but I am hitting a club tonight with a few coworkers. It’s *mostly* a work outing though, I won’t be there looking to get my freak on,” Elise admits. “Wanna join us? I got a new skirt that would make your ass look like a million bucks.”

I think about it, then hum. “No can do. I got a man.”

“What’s your man got to do with me?” Elise asks, joking right along with me. “Come on, be my wing girl. I’m not going to get my freak on, but I didn’t say I’m not gonna flirt. Drinks are on me.”

I shake my head, leaning back. “No, that’s okay Elise. Not saying I’m not interested in hanging with my best friend . . . I’m just sort of hoping to see or talk to Derrick after his show, know what I mean?”

“I know exactly what you mean. Four letter word, starts with L, ends with E. You know I . . .,” Elise says, her words failing her for a moment. “I’m happy for you Kat. I really am. Listen, I need to maintain my saucy

bitchiness, so I’m gonna get ready to go. This weekend or something, girl time though, okay?”

“Only if you bring chocolate chip cookies to my place. And you can teach me about football. You dated a quarterback in college, right?”

Elise laughs. “I caught more balls from him than anyone on the team, but that doesn’t mean I know a damn thing about football. But we’ll figure it out together. Talk to you later.”

CHAPTER 17

DERRICK

My phone is out of my pocket as soon as my front door's closed, and I flop down in my favorite chair, the line ringing in my ear.

"Hey sexy man," Kat purrs, making my cock twitch. "I thought I heard a little tension in your voice tonight. What, behaving while you talked about how to go down on a woman for three hours have you worked up?"

I reach down, massaging my already hardening cock. "Fuck Kitty Kat, you know I was thinking of you all show long. You were right to have your phone turned off. But . . . goddamn I couldn't stop thinking of how good you taste."

"Mmm, I was thinking of you too. Especially when you talked about doing that figure eight with your tongue, you naughty man, giving away your special move on me. Millions of women will thank you later."

"Just need one," I rasp, my cock hard and tenting my pants. "Fuck I miss you. Remind me again why we couldn't get together tonight?"

Kat chuckles, lowering her voice just the way she knows I like it. "Because *I* have to put in a *very* long, *hard* day behind my keyboard tomorrow," she teases. "*Someone's* been keeping me so distracted with thoughts of his big cock pumping in and out of me that I've got a lot to catch up on."

"You know I'm sorry about that," I half tease. "I thought I was inspiring you."

"Oh, you are, but if we saw each other tonight, we both know we're not going to get any sleep. I'd spend all night with my legs wrapped around your hips, pulling you into me and holding you deep inside."

"And that's a problem why?" I tease, reaching for the button on my jeans.

“Because I have to put the finishing touches on this app for the presentation at the end of the week, you know how hard I've been working on this. Other than being with you, I’ve put nearly every minute of every day for the last few months into this and it’s all coming down to the presentation. I’ve got to prove myself as more than a one-hit wonder and the graphics are giving the team a hard time to integrate with the gestures sensing technology . . . oops sorry, get a little excited and fall down the rabbit hole sometimes. It’s just a few days apart and then we can have our next date at the football game.”

I run my hand through my hair, knowing she’s right, but also knowing that I have to have her. “I know, I just miss you. Your business doesn't mean we can't go back to our roots a bit though does it?”

There’s a throaty, sexy chuckle that makes my throat go dry, and Kat comes back on. “Definitely not. But promise me one thing . . . one and done, this can’t be an all-nighter.”

One and done? The way I’m feeling right now, it might be five minutes and goodnight, but I’ll do my best. “I promise.”

My phone dings, and I see she’s sending me a FaceTime call. I quickly hit the accept button, and what I see makes my jaw drop.

Kat’s grinning at me, already changed into a set of not trashy but definitely sexy lingerie, a sheer teddy and lacy boy shorts that give me quite a view of her ass cheeks as she poses, twirling for me before sitting down on her couch. “Whatcha think, boyfriend?”

“You little cock tease!” I growl, even as I grin. “You had this planned all along.”

“Maybe,” Kat says with a naughty smirk. “Are you complaining?”

“Definitely not, just wish I was there with you to take that sexy top off with my teeth.”

Kat giggles naughtily, running a thumb under the strap on her teddy. “Oh this thing?” She plays with the straps on her shoulders, dipping them down in turn before pulling it back up and cupping her breasts, lifting them up for my inspection. “I just figured it showed off the feature you like best about me.”

“You know I love your tits,” I growl, leaning forward. “But I love every single thing about you. That’s why I love you.”

Kat stops, her eyes wide with emotion. We’ve said it to each other before, but it still hits with a lot of feeling every time. “And I love you.

But . . .” she says, slipping back into her playful flirtiness, “I can’t just pull my heart out of my chest, things don’t work that way. I can, however . . ..”

Kat lifts her breasts up again, sliding the teddy down to reveal the beautiful half globes to me. Pressing them together, she jiggles them a little. “You do like these too, right?”

Reaching down off camera, I open my jeans, letting my cock jut out tall and stiff. “Yes Kitty Kat, just like that. Show those perfect tits to me, rub your thumb across your nipples until they're all pearled up for me.”

Kat moans, doing just as I ask while lifting them. She tweaks and rubs her nipples, and I can’t stop myself from reaching down to slowly stroke my cock. “Mmm, baby, I know you’re amazing in person. But I won’t lie, I've missed this. It's been awhile since we've had to do this long distance, and it’s . . ..”

Her voice drifts off, and I add a bit of steel to my gravelly voice. “Tell me, Kat. Tell me what you’re thinking, what you’re feeling.”

She lets out a sigh. “You make me feel clean and dirty at the same time. I love imagining it’s your hands squeezing me.”

Kat tells me exactly how she feels, her hands massaging as she throws her head back, and my cock throbs in my grip. “Fuck you’ve got me so hard.”

“Show me,” Kat rasps, picking her phone up. “Show me that thick, beautiful cock that I love to feel stroking in and out of my soaked pussy.”

I tilt my camera, showing her. I wrap my hand around my shaft, pumping it slowly until a drop of precum oozes out the top. “Is that what you like? You want that little raindrop, a bit of sweetness? I want to trace it along your lips like lipstick until you’re glossy with it. And then have you lick it all off before you suck my cock to get more.”

“Mmm,” Kat moans. “You know I do. I love the taste of you. God, you make me feel so naughty.”

“You’re my naughty little slut now, aren’t you?” I ask as I pump my cock for her, letting her see how the head swells with each stroke. “You dream of having my cock fucking you anywhere and everywhere you are.”

“Oh, shit,” Kat gasps. Her screen shifts, and I see that she’s got two fingers buried inside her pussy already, pumping them in and out. “I love being your little plaything. Nothing boring about me now.”

“Never was, you just needed to feel safe to explore,” I moan, watching her fingers. “That’s it, baby. Watch me, pace yourself with me. Slide those

slick fingers into your tight little cunt as I fuck my fist for you.” I time my strokes with her hand, both of us rising.

Kat cries out, needing more and uses her other hand to tug her boy shorts the rest of the way down, lewdly spreading her legs and showing every sexy inch of herself to me. “Mmm . . . so are you going to show me your pretty little asshole after the anal show?”

“Oh god . . .,” Kat whines, her fingers smearing her wetness around her clit before she plunges in again, her thumb stroking her clit. “I . . . I’d let you be my first. Fuck . . . oh fuck I’m gonna come soon.”

“Do it baby, I’m gonna come for you too,” I reply, my hand speeding up. My cock throbs as I pump myself quickly, squeezing and relaxing. “My hand’s not nearly as good as your hot, tight pussy, or even your little hands, but I could watch you tighten around your fingers, your thighs shaking forever. Squeeze your pussy tight, Kitty Kat. Choke those fingers the way I like it when you milk my cock.” We both moan louder and louder, and it’s enough. “Oh fuck . . . Katrina!”

“Derrick . . ..” Kat gasps as we both climax at the same time. I come hard, my cock erupting in thick spurts. Kat’s hips shake and buck up and down on her couch, and it’s a long time before either of us can move. When she does, she turns her phone to show me her smiling face. “Damn baby . . . god I love how you know just what to say.”

“Just saying how you make me feel,” I tell her. “And Kat . . . I love you.”

She smiles, then giggles. “You love me all the way up to your chest from the way it looks. Glad I make you wear a condom, or else you’d have come shooting out my nose.” I grab my discarded t-shirt, wiping off the mess a bit.

We chat for about another thirty minutes until Kat yawns. “Ready to turn in?”

“I’m beat,” Kat admits. “I just hate getting up to an alarm. You wake me up so much better.”

“After your presentation Friday, I can wake you up just the way you like more and more often,” I assure her. “Uhm . . . maybe this is too quick, but if you’d like, you can move some things over here. I’ve got space in my closet for you.”

“The closet barrier, huh?” Kat says, giggling when I give her a confused look. “I’ll explain later. Let me think on it, and I’ll call you after work

tomorrow. I love you Derrick. G’night.”

“G’night, Kat. I love you too.”

CHAPTER 18

KAT

It seems almost prophetic as I walk into the office, chugging what's already my second coffee of the day. It's Wednesday, and of course the local radio station is cranking it loud. *I don't wanna work, I want to bang on the drum all day . . ..*

"How nearly appropriate," I mutter to myself, half slinging my backpack onto my desk. Looking up, I see Tyler, one of the other coders. "Hey Tyler, you mind turning that down?"

"Oh lighten up Kat, it's Hump Day!" Tyler, who isn't facing a deadline and certainly isn't worried about proving himself in this industry, calls back. "If you want, I can change it. Maybe some Rihanna on repeat? Work, work, work!"

I give him a glare that says I'm ready to work, not joke around. "As soon as the ode to Wednesday ends, can you turn it down though? I gotta focus and get this done."

"Will do," Tyler says. "Hey, Kat?"

"Yeah?"

"Kick some ass Friday. You know . . . because you're awesome."

I smile, feeling good that the guys around here support me. "Thanks Tyler."

I sit down, reviewing the results of my last bug check. With a hundred thousand lines of code, it's a bitch to wrap my head around. Until now, it's been a matter of sending the app to various beta testers who put it through its paces, and then tracking down the errors they find.

But no amount of beta testing is going to be able to catch everything, so I hunker down, obsessively looking at my notes and trying to hunt down which lines need to be adjusted. It's hard, stressful work, and I'm running out of time.

Part of me knows I shouldn't stress. Lots of programs are released without being perfect. That's what updates and patches are for. But I really want to make sure this is good right off the bat so it doesn't get a bad rap.

Still, it's slow, dull work, and my mind keeps going to thoughts of Derrick. Since my talk with Elise where I realized how hard I was falling, and our subsequent confessions of 'I love you', we've texted constantly, even as he's given me time to do work. Pic exchanges helped some, but damn there's no substitute of being in his arms.

The day wears on, lunch scarfed while I try to focus, but by the time six o'clock rolls around, my eyes are half crossed and I'm needing a break. Firing up my browser, I go to the website that lets me listen in to Derrick, ready for my own Love Whispering on my headphones.

"Good evening, it's my personal second favorite day of the week, Hump Day Wednesday," Derrick says, making me grin. At least someone enjoys Wednesdays, even if it's just for a corny opening joke.

"What's your favorite day of the week?" Susannah asks. "Friday?"

"Nope," Derrick replies. "Saturday. Get to sleep in, watch cartoons in my PJs, and have the whole day and night to do whatever, or whoever, I want."

You mean you have all evening to spend with me, if the last month or so has been any indication, I think. *I like Saturdays too*.

Susannah gives a grade-school-worthy "Ooh!" and her delight at Derrick's joke is palpable.

"Tonight's show is about something that could even be more important than actual bedroom performance," Derrick says.

"Wait, there's something more important?"

"Yep. What's the point of having all the best tricks in the toolbox if you never get a chance to show them off?" Derrick asks. "What I mean, of course, is flirting and the art of meeting someone. Now, unless you get all your dates off of Craigslist, you gotta actually talk to someone and meet them. That takes guts and sometimes reading signals. Not everyone has a blinking sign on their chest that says 'take me to bed, you big stud.'"

"You and I must go to very different parties then," Susannah quips. "Personally, I just have to say one word . . . yes."

I giggle, Susannah's funny sometimes. Normally she's not, but recently, she's been a lot more playful as Derrick's been more straight talking, less flirty.

“Maybe that works for you,” Derrick says, chuckling, “but for a lot of us, we need some help. I sure did.”

“You?” I ask in stereo with Susannah. “How?”

“Way back when, I developed a crush on one of the girls in my school. She was pretty, a social leader, played on the girl’s volleyball team, all that. I was a sophomore and basically ate, slept, and breathed football. Didn’t have much practice talking to the opposite sex. Needless to say, she left me tongue-tied.”

“Oh really? Mr. Love Whisperer didn’t know what to say?”

“Nope. Every time I had a chance to talk to her, I found myself acting stupid or posing awkwardly like I was Mr. Chill. In the end, I lost my chance. She started dating a guy, and they stayed together until they both graduated. That’s okay, I’ve moved on and things are great, but lesson learned. Take the shot! I never even knew if she liked me back because I didn’t know how to read her signs or if I was giving out any signs myself other than a Wyle E. Coyote ‘Help!’ sign. Anyway, let’s get to some callers. Who’s up first, Suz?”

“First up, we’ve got Rich.”

“How’re you doing, Rich?”

The voice that comes on has to be partly played up, this guy sounds like he just came out of a *Dukes of Hazzard* re-run. *“Well D, I done got me an issue. You see, there’s this lady that I see quite often, actually she’s my hair stylist.”*

“So you see her how often?” Derrick asks, and I lean forward, forgetting my work.

“About twice a month, but every time I swear she’s lookin’ at me like she’s interested. I mean, I know she’s single, a little older than me but not too much, and she’s as purty as they come. But I don’t want to make it awkward if I approach her and she says no, know what I mean? I mean, I’ve got one of those heads of hair that just needs a good touch, and she’s about the only one who can keep me from just saying fuck it and shaving the whole thing off.”

The call continues, with Susannah taking most of the lead on that one. “A lot of how women flirt can be almost subtle, and it’s a combination of things,” she says. “For example . . . Derrick, describe what I’m doing.”

“You just tossed your hair over your shoulder,” Derrick says, and inside I feel a little jealous.

“And now?”

“You did the same thing.”

“Right, but this time, I smiled and kept eye contact for longer. You see, when a woman is interested in a man, we usually play it like . . . well Rich, do you fish?”

“Who doesn’t like to fish?”

“That’s up for another debate,” Derrick says. “But go ahead, Suz.”

“Sometimes we try to play it like a fisherman trying to get that big bass to latch onto the hook. If we just throw ourselves out there, the fish knows either the bait’s bad or it’s just a trap to get them on a big fucking hook, right? But if you play it too hard, the fish will lose interest and move on to something easier. So sometimes teasing a man along to see if they’re really interested is the best way. But Rich, you’ll never know if you don’t try.”

“And if there’s a big fucking hook in the middle of the bait?”

“Some people call that marriage,” Derrick jokes, and even I have to laugh at that one. “Seriously though, sounds like good advice. If you think she’s interested, and you’re obviously interested, go for it. Not saying you have to show up next time singing Alan Jackson for her, but hell man, call her up and ask if she wants to get a cup of coffee or go to dinner. Worst thing that could happen is she says no. Best thing . . . well, there’s a lot of great things that can happen too. Even with big hooks.”

The calls continues, and as I listen, I notice a trend. I realize the show is about flirting and how to ask the opposite sex out, but I can’t shake the idea of Susannah flirting with Derrick, even if it’s for the radio. Normally, I’m not the jealous, possessive type, but damn . . . I’m ready to kick some ass when the song break comes on and I fire off a text to Derrick.

How’s the show coming along?

Fun, but I can’t wait until its over. Getting awkward.

Relief. He’s upfront about what’s happening, which means he’s just doing this professionally. I can deal with that. *Me2. OK, gonna try and work. Call U after show.*

Reassured a little, the show comes back on and I turn back to my code. “Okay everyone, after spending the last hour or so talking about how ladies’ show attraction, let’s talk about how men do it.”

“Besides popping a stiffy, you mean.”

“Obviously,” Derrick says.

“Well, if that’s the case, since I did you, you have to do me now,” Susannah says. “I mean . . . well, that certainly didn’t come out how I meant it.”

I can hear bullshit in someone’s voice . . . and I’d say right now Derrick’s studio stinks like a dairy farm.

Derrick laughs a little awkwardly. “You know Suz, I think a list might be better, since our fans listen and don’t watch. Quit pouting, Suz, we’ve only got a three hour show.”

Pouting? What the fuck, Derrick, are you blind? She’s flirting with you right now! All that shit she’s been doing for the past hour hasn’t been for the show!

Derrick is trying to get back on topic while Susannah tries to play it off. Finally, he gets around to listing out how guys like to flirt. There’s nothing all that groundbreaking from my point of view. Eye contact, compliments, smiles, brushing hair behind ear, touching the small of her back.

Actually, listening to him makes me smile and forget the anger at Susannah. Derrick’s done all those things to me, plus some. I blush, knowing that Derrick’s little flirts fill my belly with warmth and that he still does them makes me feel . . . I dunno, safe? Appreciated?

“Okay, time for another caller,” Derrick says. “Now, we’ve been covering a lot of classical flirting, but our next caller’s got a slightly more twenty first century problem. We’ve got Kim. Go ahead, Kim.”

“Hi Derrick,” a slightly nervous girl says. *“I’ve been talking to this guy online. How do I know if he’s flirting with me? A lot of guys just send me pickup lines, or after the bare minimum of back and forth conversation, they send dick pics. But what about the ones that aren’t perverts?*”

Derrick hums. “Sounds like you’ve learned to avoid the sketchy ones. That’s fishing . . . just looking for a hole to put a hook in. Some are just looking for some attention, maybe seeing if they can get some nudie pics without having to actually work for it. Now, maybe you want that, nothing wrong with casual hook ups if that’s what you both want. But if you want more, it’s hard to get to really know someone through words on a tiny screen. Eventually, you need to talk and spend some time together. You need those physical clues.”

Susannah speaks up in agreement. “You gotta look into their eyes for real. And be on the lookout everywhere. You might find the one person you’ve been looking for somewhere you go all the time, like the coffee

shop, the gym, or work. Be open and friendly with everyone, and see who's receptive and then flirt away."

"That's kinda hard. I don't really have a lot of guys around."

Derrick chuckles, "Kim, roughly half of the population is male, they're around. I promise. Just stay open to finding them."

He ends the call, and hums into the mic. "One other area of flirting we haven't addressed yet is the flirting you do after you've already snagged someone." His usual velvet radio voice has a hint of gravel and I know it's for me, a signal that he's thinking of me with this topic. Warmth builds in my tummy.

"Even after you're in a relationship, flirting is still important. Send good morning and goodnight texts or calls, get them little presents if something reminded you of them. It doesn't have to be anything big, just a sign you thought of them and what they'd like. Maybe get him a coffee cup from his favorite team to keep at your place, or buy her favorite lotion to keep at yours. Speak to each other and more importantly, listen. Compliment them, their body, their brain, their talents. Your partner should always know what attracted you to them in the first place and what attracts you to them today, whether it's the same things or new things."

I smile, thinking that this is nearly a blueprint of how we get along. He's right, every day he does something to remind me how I make him feel, and he helps me feel beautiful every day. He helps me feel like maybe, just maybe, there's a silver lining to the clouds in life. Maybe my little Styrofoam cup isn't so small after all and I can have a bigger slice of 'happy ever after' like the one Jessie has and the one my mom is finally getting.

It also reminds me, he needs to get that too. Reaching for my phone, I send him another text. *Just to let you know . . . you're the sexiest, kindest man I've ever met. Just thinking of you. Call me later.*

Count on it.

They take two more calls, nothing major although one is cute as he says this is his chance to tell the girl he's interested in her, and then they go to another song break, old school Sophie B. Hawkins with *Damn, Wish I Was Your Lover.*

I jam out for a bit, this was a song Mom loved to sing along to before Carpool Karaoke was around, but after a moment, my phone rings. Derrick.

“I’ve only got a minute while the song plays,” he says, his voice low, “but I was missing you. And thanks for the text.”

“I miss you too, not just sex but actually being with you. In your arms, hearing your voice turn to gravel just for me. Just hanging out, spending time together.”

Derrick growls lightly, and I know exactly how he feels. “Damn, Kitty Kat. I know you’re busy and I don’t want to take away from your work, but I need to be with you tonight. I need to touch you, feel you.”

Just his words already have me simmering and I need him just as much. “How soon can you get home after work?”

“As soon as this song ends, we’re wrapping up for the night,” Derrick says. “Leave the office, I’ll be home in less than an hour. Hey, Kat . . . wear that teddy and boy short set from the other night. I believe I promised to take them off with my teeth.”

I whimper at the thought, and remind myself, I gotta start packing a backpack for nights like this. “Fuck, Derrick. Yes you did. I’m gonna hold you to that promise. Oh, one other thing.”

“What’s that?”

“I’m dropping off my toothbrush too.”

“Damn right you are.”

CHAPTER 19

DERRICK

It's only thirty minutes later that I'm opening my front door, rushing to pick up my coffee cup from the table. Usually there's a post-show meeting, but I bailed tonight with an excuse about having plans.

Susannah gave me the stink eye, but that seems to be her status quo lately. And it wasn't a lie, I do have plans. Specifically, to slip that sexy lace right off of Kat's body, slow and easy with my teeth, licking all along her skin as I do it.

I rush to the bathroom and give my teeth a quick brush, making love after spicy enchiladas for dinner is *not* a good idea, and just get my mouth rinsed when there's a knock on the door and I grin, looking at myself in the mirror. The man who looks back is overjoyed, not just horny, and I know I've found a woman who could really be for me like Mom was for Dad.

Opening the front door, my stomach leaps as I see Kat standing there. There's none of the elevated heels, none of the little pretentious pieces of armor she used at first to hide her worry and insecurity. Instead, there's just a five foot two inch, honey blonde beautiful woman in sweatpants and a zipped-up jacket, her eyes sparkling as she looks up at me. "Well hello there lover. Wondered if you might have space to put me up for the night."

"I can think of a space I can fill," I joke, tugging her inside. She's got a backpack over her shoulder, she did just like I asked and brought clothes for tomorrow too it looks like. "God I missed you."

"I can tell," Kat says, setting her bag down and half jumping into my arms. "I missed you too. How was work?"

"Susannah's being kind of a tyrant, but I get it, I'm not exactly putting a hundred and ten percent into each show recently," I admit, hugging her tight

and nuzzling her neck. “I need a bit more practice at work-life balance, because I’ve found someone more important than my work.”

“Mmm . . .anyone I know?” she teases, her eyes glinting with delight.

I look up at her, deviling her back. “Oh, just my new pet . . . Kitty Kat.” I move back to her neck, nibbling at the soft skin, hoping I leave tiny marks to show she’s mine.

Kat purrs, “God that feels good. Really, Derrick. You make me feel special, worthy.” Her words light me up, knowing that she’s finally letting go of the chinks her life has left in her armor, she’s developed her own self-confidence. She’s always been worth so much more than she’s received, I didn’t change that, I just offered her what I could . . . all of me, and I’m proud that she’s giving herself back to me. I trace along her jawline with my tongue, finding her lips in a breathy kiss. Our kiss deepens as I carry her through my living room, but she pulls back, her eyes alight with naughty heat. “Not the bedroom . . . not yet. I want you to have dessert first. Take me to the kitchen.”

I nod, my brain swirling with excitement and anticipation for what Kat might have in her mind. Along with her blooming self-confidence, she’s definitely unleashed her inner sex kitten. She said she was quiet, even repressed, but as we’ve explored together, she’s relaxed and has shown that she has a deep well of passion inside her that I feel damn lucky to swim in.

I set her on the countertop and step back, watching as Kat unslings her backpack and opens it. The first thing she pulls out is a set of black heels, which she sets aside. “Tomorrow’s work outfit. The rest is downstairs in the car.”

“You have something for dessert in there for me?” I ask, and she nods, pulling out a jar of maraschino cherries. “Cherries?”

“Uh-huh,” Kat says, unzipping her jacket. Underneath she’s only wearing the same see-through teddy she wore for our hot phone chat the other night. I can see her pink nipples already pulled tight, poking out the thin, silky fabric, inviting me to taste. “Just have to choose the right bowl.” She opens the jar, plucking a single cherry out and holding it up, her tongue peeking out to swipe the small drop of juice off the fruit. “Here . . .here . . .” She questions as she traces the sweet fruit along her cleavage, before pulling down her sweatpants to reveal panties that match her top. “Or maybe here,” and she dangles the cherry right over her bare mound, visible through the sheer fabric.

Kat spreads her legs and I can’t help but lick my lips at the almost see through window of her panties and I watch her puffy lips spread slightly. “I’m feeling a little gluttonous, might want more than one cherry,” I tease, pulling my shirt off and stepping between her creamy thighs to snap my teeth around the cherry, pulling it roughly off the stem before swallowing it almost whole. I kiss her, the sweet tang of the cherries blending with our breaths as she sets the jar down on the counter to tangle her hands in the belt loops of my jeans, pulling me close as she wraps her feet around my legs, locking me in place as if there’s anywhere else I’d rather be.

The cherries momentarily forgotten, like promised, I take the strap of her teddy in my teeth and slide it off, kissing down the exposed swell of her breast until I find the stiff, crinkled tip of her nipple. I run my tongue around the edge and then bite it gently, pulling her into my mouth and stretching her breast until she gasps. “Oh fuck Derrick . . . god you’re making my pussy so wet.”

“Let’s find out,” I growl, reaching down and slipping my fingers inside her panties. She’s more than wet, she’s nearly dripping, and I let my fingers slide through her slick folds, teasing her lips and clit as I look in her eyes. “Who does this belong to?”

“You. Only you,” Kat mewls, wiggling her hips as my thumb rubs over her clit. “I can’t imagine anyone but you.”

“Good, because all I am, all I have, belongs to you too,” I promise. I dip two fingers deep inside her, brushing along her velvet walls as she squeezes me tight. Pulling out my coated fingers, I smear her cream over her other nipple, before pulling back to lock my eyes on her perfect tits, “And sometimes it’s fun to mix your desserts.”

I devour her coated breast, sucking and feasting upon her warm, sweet flesh until I can’t wait any longer. I kiss my way down her body, tracing designs with my tongue around her belly button and making her giggle. “I thought you were going to make me come, not laugh.”

“Why not both?” I reply, grinning up at her. I see the jar of cherries and reach over as I lay her back, her petite frame and wide hips perfect for keeping her balance on the countertop. Uncapping the cherries, I peel her panties off before letting a drizzle of the bright red syrup flow over her glistening lips. Kat watches, her breasts heaving as she breathes deeply in anticipation. “Mmm, looks tasty.”

“I hope I can have a big banana split later,” Kat teases, licking her lips. I nod and kiss up the inside of her thigh, letting my warm breath play over her wet folds until she’s squirming in need.

“Be still or you’ll spill it all. Tell me, Kat. Tell me what you need.” I can feel the tension in her thighs as she tries to fight the urge to lift her hips toward my mouth.

“Oh, Derrick . . . don’t tease me. Lick my pussy, taste me. Please.”

“I can never deny you, especially when that’s exactly what I want too,” I growl, looking up her body into her beautiful eyes. Keeping my eyes locked on her, I drag my tongue through the sweet juice and syrup covered folds of her pussy, tasting every nerve ending crackling along my tongue as Kat shivers, moaning from deep in her chest.

“Yes . . . that’s it, make me come,” Kat says, grinding her pussy against my lips. I dive in, taking turns using my tongue to lick up and down her silky lips, and nibbling on her soft flesh, the sweet sugar of the cherries mixing with Kat’s natural taste and making my head whirl. I cup her ass, pulling her close as I feast on her.

Kat’s naturally spicy and tangy and sweet. Irresistible, and I know that half of my daydreams of Kat are filled with memories of how she tastes.

I nip lightly at her inner thigh and she bucks, begging, “Derrick . . .more . . .” I understand, she needs something intense, something that will ground her and let her soar. I could happily lick and suck her for hours, but after all the teasing we’ve given each other tonight, she needs something now. I bite each inner thigh harder as I thumb her clit, leaving a round imprint of my teeth, praying that the outline stays. Some dark place inside me liking that she’ll have that reminder of my claim on her.

Satisfied with the visual, I nibble at her clit, biting, not hard, but just enough to set her body shaking, her ass rising off the countertop as she cries out, coming hard. I keep sucking and biting her clit as she pulses, loving every quiver of her body as she unleashes on me.

When she sags to the countertop, I pull back, standing up to gather her in my arms. “You’re fucking delicious. I want your taste on my tongue all the fucking time.”

“Your turn,” Kat says, wiggling. “You can fuck me later . . . but I’ve got a few tips from the Love Whisperer I’ve been wanting to try.”

I set Kat down and she gets on her knees, reaching for the waistband on my jeans. She doesn't have to do much, I'm so fucking hard by everything I've just seen that my cock nearly bursts my zipper, and Kat chuckles, watching it bob in time with my racing heartbeat. "You look like you're about three seconds from coming down my throat."

"You know I'm better than that," I boast, but she's pretty much right. Still, I spread my legs a little, watching as Kat reaches up, fondling my balls in her soft hands before rolling them gently, tugging them down and relieving a little bit of the pressure that's building inside me. I moan, reaching down to stroke a hand through her hair as she reaches up with her other hand, barely wrapping her fingers around the base of my cock as she brings her face closer, rubbing the head with her cheeks, moaning and closing her eyes. "Fuck me, Kitty Kat, you're good."

"One of the lessons that I've been taught," she says, her eyes gleaming as she gives me feather light butterfly kisses up and down my shaft. I moan, she's amazing. "And I can see you love it."

"I love everything you do," I tell her, groaning as she licks my cock from base to tip before spreading her lips and sucking just the head of my cock like a lollipop. "But damn you have talent."

I can't form any more words as Kat continues. From running her tongue just around the head and then down the bottom and around the spot that she knows makes my toes curl, she uses every hint that I've ever talked about on my show to tease out my pleasure. I'm brought to new heights, my cock throbbing nearly painfully as my brain swims in pulses of light. I can't stand the teasing anymore, my voice gone as I growl. "Suck me, Kat. Suck that cock down like my good girl." Kat slowly bobs up and down on my cock, her cheeks hollow as she swallows my entire shaft before pulling back.

I wish it could go on forever, this feeling that she's creating in me. Never before have I felt so powerful, this honey-blonde angel lovingly worshipping my cock. Kat closes her eyes, pinching her nipples with her right hand before slipping it between her legs, rubbing her pussy in time with her head. "That's it," I rasp, watching her fingers speed up. "Touch yourself for me. Rub your needy little clit so you come when I do. Swallow me all down, baby."

Kat mumbles something that sounds like 'yes' around my cock and sucks faster, her tongue caressing and stroking every inch of my shaft. She

reaches up, grabbing my left hand and guiding it to the back of her head. Gathering her hair in my fist, I use it to hold her still as I start pumping my cock in and out of her eager mouth. Her moans increase in pitch and volume until we're both groaning, gasping while Kat takes me all the way, burying the head of my cock in her throat and swallowing. "Oh shit, babe . . . is this what you want? You want me to fuck your face like you're my dirty little slut? God damn, you are so fucking sexy. I'm gonna come, Kat. You ready?"

I pull back just as Kat starts shaking, her fingers pumping in and out of her pussy so fast that her hips jerk, and we both go over the edge. I cry out, my cock filling her mouth with my cream as Kat's groans vibrate to the very depths of my soul. I think I say her name, but if I do it's so swallowed up in the heat of my orgasm that all that comes out is something primal, animal.

This is the woman I love. This is the woman I need for as long as I live. "Holy shit babe . . . you didn't miss a single bit."

"Good," Kat says, getting up and kissing me softly. "Now, how about some real dessert to get our strength up, and then you can have one last round before we hit the bed. And this one, cowboy, is going to be very special."

"Why's that?" I ask, kissing the tip of her nose. I've gotta have some ice cream or something around here somewhere. I eat right, but not perfect.

"Because if you want, how about you do a little research and practice for that anal episode you're going to do?" she asks. "I figure I'm ready. If you want to."

I look into her eyes and see the mix of desire, excitement, love, and yes, a big helping of fear in there, and it fills my heart with an intense need to do this right. "Of course. On one condition. You say stop, I stop. No judgement, no worries. Agreed?"

Kat's eyes sparkle in tears and she kisses my chest. "Agreed." Her voice tickles across me as she lays her cheek against my chest, wrapping her arms around my waist. "Derrick, I'm . . . a little scared."

I lean down to kiss the top of her head, hugging her back. "Hey, no pressure. We don't have to do anything you don't want to."

I feel her smile against me, "Not about that, well, not really. Just this, us. I've really never felt like this before and it's scary. It feels big, and

you’ve got me dreaming of things I never thought I’d be dreaming about. Like a future. Like forever.”

I take a big breath, knowing that this is a turning point for her and for us. We’ve said ‘I love you’ and meant it, and have woven ourselves together into a routine that’s become the focal point of my life, and those things are easy for me, both because of who I am and more importantly, who *she* is. But it’s more difficult for her to trust, to believe and hope. I want to be worthy of her heart, even if I have to earn it every day for the rest of our lives. “Kat, I’ve got you and I won’t hurt you. I love you.”

She leans back, looking up at me. “Thank you, for everything.” And with a bearhug-tight squeeze, she shifts the mood. “All right, let’s get some damn cookies!”

CHAPTER 20

KAT

The faces around the table look slightly less than convinced, and there's a little bit of sweat trickling down the small of my back as the twin projectors pump heat through the room.

"So how is this supposed to be targeted to the female audience?" one of them asks. "There's not a lot of real on-the-surface differences between your app and the competitors already on the market."

"On the surface, you're right," I reply. "It's when you get into the guts and the way the app seamlessly and uniquely integrates various systems within the architecture of the pre-existing operating system and apps that makes it a winner."

"But what's the marketing angle? Your user interface is rather plain. Nothing really screams feminine."

I squirm, feeling the heat. They're really coming at me.

"If by feminine you mean frilly laces, a lot of pink fonts and motifs, you're right, this isn't feminine," I reply. "This is meant for the modern powerful female, the post *#MeToo*er who's kicking ass and taking names at work and in her personal life. Because she's making a name for herself in the office, she's gotta look professional. So the interface does look professional . . . except that it's going to have that perspective that's going to give her the edge she needs in her life."

"So twenty-first century Boss Bitch?" someone else, part of the marketing group, asks. "I like the sound of it and I think I can work with that. How's the guts of it?"

"As good as any other app in the category, better in a lot of ways," I say. "It's lean. There's no bloat, so it runs faster. Let me give you a test drive . . .."

The meeting continues, and while there's a few times I have to really drive my point home hard, I feel like it went easier than my last app presentation. Maybe it's that I've earned at least a little cred with these people . . . but more than anything I think it's the newfound strength and confidence I've had since meeting Derrick. I've always felt pretty confident in myself when it came to work, but I can't help but feel him giving me more personal confidence has given me that extra leg up when talking to these guys. It's not only that Derrick makes me feel sexy. I just feel like I'm starting to truly understand the strength and power that comes from my own femininity, and that's a huge plus considering I create apps for the modern woman demographic.

"You know Katrina," one of the company vice-presidents says after playing with the app for almost an hour, "this app of yours, while I guess it's got a feminine touch, it's just a good app for everyone. Can we consider just marketing it to the general public, or giving it a slightly different skin and releasing it again as a partner app for men?"

"We will whip up presentations for both ideas," the marketing guru says. "Either way, with the muscle behind this hustle . . . congrats Kat. I think you've got your next number one on your hands."

The congratulations go around the table, and I feel like I'm floating, damn near seven feet tall as I walk out. Reaching my cubicle, I flop down, kicking off my high heels and rubbing my toes. Another sign that I'm getting comfortable with myself, these stripper heels aren't daily wear any more. I still like wearing something that elevates me, but only because it makes it easier to kiss Derrick.

"Tomorrow I'm wearing stacked heel boots," I promise myself as I pull out my phone. I hit the speed dial, knowing I might not reach him but I promised him I'd give him a call as soon as my meeting was over.

Before the call can connect, one of the company Vice Presidents, a forty-three year old tech geek named Edgar knocks on the edge of my wall. "Katrina?"

"Hi, Edgar," I reply, setting my phone down. "How can I help you?"

"I think you can help the company in a lot of ways actually." He says. "Because your app is streamlined and clean. What would you think about being a team leader for the new game app we're developing?"

"Team leader? Game app?" I ask, surprised. "I'd love the opportunity, but are you sure? Games haven't really been my experience, and most of

those guys have been at it for a long time."

"That's exactly why you're the man . . . woman, for the job. Bring in some new blood, different perspective than what they're used to. Maybe find a way to bring the conciseness of your coding style to the game side because they're always working to balance the functionality with the size and speed of the game. You've proven yourself and I'm confident you'll whip them into shape."

"I . . . of course! Can we discuss the details Monday?"

Edgar nods, flashing me a grin. "Enjoy your successful presentation. We'll talk about the future Monday morning."

He leaves, and I blink before a small sound from my desk makes me realize . . . "Derrick?"

"Hey Kitty Kat, I got to hear the good news," Derrick says in my ear. "Always knew you were as smart as you are beautiful." He's switched to his deeper, richer voice and it fills me with heat.

"Yeah well, right now I'm wearing lined granny panties and squirming in my chair because of you," I tease back. "Thanks."

"Anytime, love. So, you nailed me . . . I mean, you nailed the presentation I take it?" Derrick asks, making me chuckle.

"Honey, as good as I feel right now, I'm feeling like a million bucks," I purr, dropping my voice. "I've got the sexiest man in the world, and I feel like I can do any damn thing I want."

"That's because you can," Derrick says. "Listen, can we get together tonight then? My place, your place, I don't care. I just want one of us to come to the other, then we both come together. Guaranteed."

I shake my head, and look up to wave off another congrats from one of the other coders in the cubicle crew. "Sorry babe. I was already told before the meeting, the whole Geek Patrol is going out to celebrate, and it'll be late. I think someone's already got their Jedi robes ready."

"Jedi robes?" Derrick asks, and I laugh.

"I'm just kidding, we're not that far gone. How about tomorrow afternoon, I come over to your place and we spend the whole rest of the weekend together?"

I can hear his smile even through the phone, and the naughty lilt to his voice. "Twenty-four hour wait . . . by then I'm going to be ready to pound you into total submission, my little Kitty Kat. I've got a confession, you've

got me addicted to your sweet taste, your tight pussy. I need you every day, at least once a day."

"Don't worry, you've got me the same way. If I'm not getting a big, throbbing Vitamin D injection at least daily, I feel empty . . . speaking of which, I'm feeling a little empty now."

"Oh, don't tease me," Derrick growls. "I'm already keeping Susannah waiting for our pre-show meeting . . . and I want to give you the time you deserve. And let's be honest, you're not in a place to turn on your video either."

"Nah," I admit. "The cubicle's a little . . . lacking in soundproofing. But later, maybe I can find some privacy to show you something."

"Mmm . . . you know you always knock my socks off," Derrick replies. "Listen babe, I'm thinking, if you want to stay the weekend, bring some more stuff over. You know, just in case you want to stay longer or something."

I smile. "Careful there, love. You're going to regret it when I bring in a hundred pairs of shoes and take over your closet."

"You don't have a hundred pairs of shoes."

I laugh, mockingly evil. "Bwahaha, after this app hits number one and I get gamer coding bankroll, I might go shoe shopping!"

Derrick laughs. "Add in a couple more pairs of fuck-me pumps, and I'm happy. You can wear them while I make you scream my name in ecstasy."

"You mean like this?" I ask, lowering my voice to my breathiest whisper. "Oh, Derrick . . . yes baby, please . . . god I need you to fuck me."

The answering moan on the other end of the line is all I need, and I smile. "I love you."

"I love you too, Kat." There's a holler on the other end of the line, and Derrick growls. "I'll be there in a minute!"

He comes back on, slightly abashed. "Okay babe, if I don't go now, Susannah's going to be doing a special show tonight on castration with a pair of office scissors."

"Can't lose those, I need them too much," I laugh. "Go do your meeting. I love you."

"I love you too. Bye. And congrats."

The line goes dead, and I lean back, smiling to myself. A great presentation, a huge opportunity, and I think a backdoor invitation to move in if I want with the man of my dreams?

How’d this happen? For so long, I thought this sort of life wasn’t possible. That I’d never have a chance to have it all, a good man, a good job, and best of all, some actual inner peace. I thought I’d always be hustling, worried about what others would say about me, that I’d never be able to get on top . . . and suddenly I feel like I am. And the view up here is fucking awesome.

The old me would be looking for the other shoe to drop any time now, but that was the old me. The new me, she’s going to celebrate with her co-workers. And tomorrow, I’m going lingerie shopping before going over to Derrick’s, so we can do our own kind of celebrating.

“Like the man said, it don’t get much better than this.”

CHAPTER 21

DERRICK

"So anyway, we're going to spend the last hour doing an interview with a woman who's making a series of videos . . .."

I let Susannah's words just descend into a sort of buzz in the background. Hell, I can't even pretend to focus on what she's saying in the pre-show meeting because my head is in the clouds with thoughts of Kat and how well she's doing.

Hey babe, I read, looking down at my phone, *just leaving work now. Wish you were here, but I'll try and catch your show later. Love you.*

I smile, earning a growl from Susannah. "For fuck's sake Derrick, you said you were done with that."

"I'm listening. You know I'm always impromptu," I lamely defend myself. "I got it. Guest coming in, makes videos, blah blah."

"That blah blah is what's going to make up the last hour of the show," she shoots back. "Or do you plan on pissing this one off like you did the last?"

"Hey, I can't help we didn't agree," I reply. Before I can continue, my phone buzzes again. I don't even have a chance to look down before Susannah erupts.

"Dammit Derrick, it won't hurt you to turn that thing off for a while! You didn't even hear what I said about her, did you?

I feel a bit bad, she's right in that I have no idea what the hell this guest is about, but hoping to salve her temper tantrum, I set my phone aside and focus my full attention on her. "Let's start over. What's this guest's deal?"

Susannah shakes her head, tossing her clipboard aside. Rubbing at her temples, she looks up, taking a big breath before answering. "You've been completely off your game for over a month now. After I found out why, I've

cut you some slack. But things haven't gotten better, if anything, they've gotten worse. You're distracted during the shows, barely talking to me before or after, and just generally being an asshole. We've got a good thing here I think, and you're ruining it for some chick of the week. You need to ditch the needy bitch."

I slam my hand down on the table, pissed off. "She's not a chick of the week and don't you dare call her a bitch. What the fuck, Susannah? You know I don't fuck around like that. Kat and I have something serious going on here. I'm sorry if I've been distracted during the show, but we're doing fine other than you trying to dictate my every word and action. You're not my boss, Susannah. We have a good thing going with the show, but let's keep it there. Stay out of my personal life."

"That's it?" Susannah shoots back. "That's it, like all we've done is do shows about gardening or some lame ass Top 40 countdown. In case you haven't noticed, I know more about your sex life than even your avid listeners do. Hell, I've been able to see when you're talking book talk, and when you're talking fantasies, and when you're talking real life experiences. You've seen the same from me."

"We work together, that's the nature of the show, of course you know a lot about me. I don't get what your point is. "

"I'm just fucking pissed, Derrick. I've poured my guts into this show and I thought you were too. It works because we bounce off each other and balance each other's styles. Now you're just phoning it in? That's bullshit and it's only a matter of time before it costs us."

Her little speech puts me on my heels, and I look down, wondering if she's right. I've checked our ratings, they're still holding strong, even if Susannah is freaking out. "Suz, I've never been a prepper. The show's doing okay, and we're fine on-air. I'm sorry if you feel like I'm not giving you as much focus, but I'm as committed as I've always been. You need to chill out."

Susannah sighs. "I wasn't going to say anything until we got something harder on the plate, but there's been a few feelers by a production company. They're talking national syndication plus maybe TV or Internet video broadcasting our shows too."

"What?" I ask, shocked. I've heard nothing about this. "Why?"

"Well, you *would* have, but you haven't stuck around. It'd be a lot like how Stern and some of the other talk radio people have their shows

broadcast. They'll set up a couple of hard cameras in a new studio that they'll pay for, and then we do our show like normal. But none of that can happen unless these guys see you at the top of your game. I'm doing everything I can to hold this shit together and grow the show, but I can't do it by myself."

I blink, stunned. "Okay . . . okay, you've got a point. But Suz, and this is serious, if you're mad at me, leave it work related. It's not Kat's fault, so leave her out of it. I think I may have found the one and I'm not going to listen to that."

I see something glimmer in Susannah's eyes, but she nods. "Okay then, agreed. Now, about tonight's show."

"Yeah," I say, putting aside the bad feelings. We aired them out, it's over. Kinda like when I was in football and two guys on the team had beef. We'd hash it out, sometimes a punch or two was thrown, but after that, it was time to play the game and turn that anger against our opponents. "I get the feeling there's something unique about her. You said videos, what's the deal?"

Before Susannah can speak, my phone rings again. "For fuck's sake!"

"Sorry," I reply, looking down.

She's right back pissed again, muttering under her breath. "Of course you're going to answer it, regardless of what you just said. Her little lap dog, running whenever she calls or texts a damn thing." She stomps out of the room, venomous contempt dripping from every word.

Knowing we'll definitely have to revisit that since apparently our truce from mere moments ago didn't last, I growl and answer the call. "Dad?"

Dad's breathing is heavy and labored, and inside I immediately start to worry. "Derrick, I'm so sorry."

"Dad, what's wrong?" I ask, standing up. "What's happening?"

"I was outside, moving stuff around in the shed, and . . ." he says, gasping for air and groaning. "My heart. I think I'm having a heart attack."

"Dad, I'm calling 9-1-1." I go to grab a desk phone, but he stops me.

"Already called. They're on their way. Derrick, I love you, son. I'm damn proud of you." There's a tone to his voice, it sounds like he's trying to say goodbye.

Choking back a sob, I growl at the phone, "I know, Dad. I love you too, but don't do that. You're gonna be ok, I'm gonna meet you at the hospital."

I keep talking, but I'm running out of the office to my car. The show never even crosses my mind as I peel out of the lot and head toward the hospital.

"Dad, I met someone. She's the one and I'm going to marry her. I want you to meet her, so you gotta fight. Just like you always taught me when football got tough. You gotta keep fighting, okay?"

"Ok, son . . . they're here." There's a jostling sound on the phone and a woman's voice comes on the line.

"Hello? We're taking him to City Center Hospital. You can meet us there."

I think I say okay, but then it's just dead air. There's not much traffic, and I'm admittedly driving way too fast, but it still feels like forever and a day to get there.

Rushing inside, I get help from the first nurse I see. "I'm here to see Daniel King, he was just brought in. I'm his son."

She leads me over, but other than looking in through a glass window to see a man who has my father's face but I swear looks about twenty years older, there's nothing I can do. I pace back and forth in the hallway, doing my best not to get in the way as nurses and doctors come in and out. Occasionally, I hear some medical jargon that scares me, but before I can even ask them what the hell 'hs-CRP' or 'Troponins test' means, they're gone. I'm left to sit in a chair by the door, staring down at the tile and hoping that the next time a doctor comes out, it's not to tell me it's time to say goodbye to my father.

"Mr. King?"

I look up, it's nearly eight o'clock now but the doctor who's looking down at me has a relieved look on his face. "Is he . . .?"

"I think we've gotten him out of the woods," the doctor says as he holds out a hand. "Glen Stoker, I'm the on-call cardiologist. When your father was brought in, it was for a suspected myocardial infarction . . . a heart attack. We've confirmed that he did in fact have a pretty severe MI. We've stabilized him for now, and I think he's out of the woods. He looks like he's normally a pretty active guy, so that's in his favor."

"He is," I confirm, standing up to look at Dad. He's sleeping, but I can see the heart monitor next to his head, and the little wiggly line reassures me. "He's been on blood pressure and cholesterol meds for a few years, but nothing like this has ever happened."

“We’ll have to keep him here a few more days, and talk with his primary care doctor. Do you have that information?”

“I think he’s still going to Dr. Jack Reynolds, I don’t have his number though. That’s at home.”

“That’s okay, I know Jack,” Dr. Stoker says. “Listen, it’ll be a few minutes before we can have a room ready for him. For now though, he’d do better if his son was with him. And Mr. King?”

“Yeah?” I ask, not looking at the doctor at all.

“He’s in good hands here. For now, just make sure he stays calm.”

I go inside the exam room, where the beeping of the various machines still reassures me that my father is still alive. Looking down at him, he looks so old, so frail . . . my vision doubles, then blurs, and before I know it tears are running down my face as I reach down, blindly taking his hand.

“I never told you how much you mean to me,” I whisper, afraid to wake him. “But I promise you, you’re going to find out. You think you never understood why I do what I do . . . but I’m just trying to tell the world that love, real love, like what you and Mom had . . . it does exist. And I want to do everything in my power to make sure that type of love doesn’t die. I love you, Dad.”

In the movies, he’d wake up right now, maybe whisper a few words, either sarcastic or loving, depending on the type of movie. But this isn’t a movie, this is real life, and all I can do is sit down in another chair and rest my forehead against the bars on the side of his bed.

I want to call Kat, I need to hear her voice telling me it’ll be okay, but in my haste of rushing into the hospital, I left my phone in the car and I can’t leave right now.

It’ll be all right, for now. She’s out with friends, happy and celebrating. I don’t want to ruin her celebration, I know how hard she worked for this. I’ll let her enjoy the evening and when dad gets transferred up to his room, I’ll slip out and grab my phone.

It’ll be late, but I need to hear her voice.

CHAPTER 22

KAT

The bar, one of those weird little spots that could only exist in a city near a university with a large computer science department and plenty of techies like me, is rockin' for the type of customers it collects. On one side of the place, three of the interns from the company are engaged in a sick *Starcraft* battle royale, while around my table are a gaggle of people tossing back European microbrews, trying to look hipster and utterly failing. But we're having a blast, and that's all that matters.

"So, what's next?" my co-worker asks as he looks over at me. "Plan to take over the world?"

I shake my head, sipping at my wine. "Nope, team lead for the new game app. Apparently, they need a healer."

It's a cheesy as fuck joke, but I've already downed a few glasses, and we're all at that point where we can set aside our worries and just be silly. Thankfully everyone else is maybe drunker than I am, and they all laugh even if it wasn't that funny.

Cheers go up, each of them congratulating me. I finish off the glass of Merlot I'm drinking, and just as I set my glass down, my phone rings. I grin, figuring it's Derrick on a song break on his show.

I hate that I'm missing it tonight, listening in has gotten to be such a daily dirty habit. His voice coming through my stereo, or even my earbuds, all sex and silk, just warms me up for when he whispers dirty things in my ear later, that softness turning to sex just for me. Sure, it's meant a few nights of working different hours . . . but then again, I'd say the benefits have been more than worth it.

I look at my phone, and see that it's not Derrick.

It’s Elise. Getting up, I head out into the chilly night air, where it’s not quite so insane and the cool helps me clear my head. Still, the music is easily heard “Hey Elise! What’s up?”

“Kat? Where are you? It’s loud on your end. Can you hear me?”

“Sorry, I’m out with people from work. They loved my new app, we’re sort of celebrating. Why, what’s up?”

“So you’re not listening to the show right now?”

There’s something in Elise’s voice that does more than the cool air to pierce through my wine-induced haze. “No, why? Should I be?”

“Honey,” Elise says, in that voice that she uses whenever shit’s hit the fan somewhere and she knows I’m going to need her to be strong, “I need you to come to my place right now. Wherever you are, whatever you’re doing, just stop and come here now.”

The fact that Elise isn’t telling me what’s going on scares me, and I rub at my face, another part of me already in emergency procedure mode. I need to settle tonight’s bar tab, get a ride, get to Elise, and . . . well, I don’t know from there. Ugh, I hate being buzzed and adult at the same time. “Elise, what’s wrong? What aren’t you telling me?”

“Just come,” Elise says. “Now. Get over here.”

That settles it, I trust her with my life. “I’m on my way.”

I head back into the bar, prepared to make half-hearted excuses, but as soon as he sees me, Tyler sets his drink aside. “You okay?”

“A friend called, something important came up,” I tell him. “Listen, can you cover the tab? I mean, I don’t want to-” I look at the door, the urgency live in my chest.

“You can PayPal me the tab on Monday,” Tyler interrupts, waving me off before hooking a thumb at the assembled crew. “As long as these fuckers don’t drink five thousand dollars of cheap beer and wine, I think we’re okay.”

“Deal. Thanks, Tyler.”

I gather my purse and head out the door, flagging down the first taxi I see to head to Elise’s place. “Hey,” I ask as I settle in, “you got satellite radio?”

“Sure do, this baby’s almost brand new,” the driver says. “Whatcha want me to put on?”

“Think you can put on The Love Whisperer?” I ask. “Channel fifty-seven I think.”

“No problem,” the cabbie says. He turns his dial a few times, and soon enough, *The Love Whisperer* pops up. “You ain’t the first lady who’s asked to listen to that guy, he’s got a voice that could talk the panties off a mannequin.”

They’re in a song break, and when they come back, my heart skips a beat.

“We’re back everyone,” Susannah says, and I give the radio a raised eyebrow. What the hell? *“I’m Susannah Jameson, and welcome back to The Love Whisperer. We’re continuing our evening chat on technology in dating before getting to our special guest tonight. More specifically, how to use technology to spice up your love life, and get you to the bedroom, since some folks need a little help even getting there for some real-time action.”*

“Ain’t that the damn truth,” the cabbie mutters.

“So let’s continue our discussion of phone sex and video chat sex, and how it can spice things up for long distance relationships, new hook-ups. Or even for regular Joe-and-Bettys who want to try something a little more . . . dirty, raunchy, or dare I say . . . naughty. Whether its Skype, FaceTime, or whatever new app you like, technology can lend a lot of fun to your nighttime activities. Hell, maybe your daytime ones too. But really, once you decide to try a little verbal foreplay beyond just flirting, what do you actually say? Any suggestions, oh Love Whisperer?”

There’s a pause and Derrick’s satin voice comes across the radio, *“Just keep it hot, hot, hot, and it’ll do the trick. Guaranteed.”*

There’s a hint to Susannah’s voice that I don’t like, an edge that makes me think things aren’t right with her. She sounds . . .angry. And I wonder what’s happening in the studio to cause that. Maybe something happened on air? Did her and Derrick have an argument? Maybe that’s what Elise is calling about?

“Now, we’ve played a few clips already, as shared by our generous Love Whisperer from his personal collection, but we saved this one for last, the crème de la crème of some crazy-hot phone sex. Make sure you’ve got a pen to take notes listeners. Maybe a towel too . . . for the drool.” She giggles throatily. *“Let’s take a listen, and we’ll open up the lines for you after this.”*

Derrick chuckles, saying *“Let’s hear it.”* And there’s a split second before the recording starts.

From the first grunt, all the blood rushes from my face as I recognize who it is. *“You know I love your tits,”* Derrick growls. *“Show those perfect*

tits to me, rub your thumb across your nipples until they're pearled up for me.”

It’s edited, but not for content. Instead, every mention of emotion, every dimming of anything except lewd, nasty fucking sex is stripped out. I listen as my voice comes through the radio, mewling that yes, I’m Derrick’s dirty little slut, my breath audibly quickening and the squelching noises obvious even over the radio as I finger fucked myself for him.

Just as I call out his name, the cabbie reaches over, switching it off. The taxi driver looks at me in the rearview mirror, “Sorry Miss, that’s a bit much for me. The wife would skin me alive for listening to something like that with a lady in the car.”

I nod absently, the ice in my gut rushing through my entire body. Why is there a recording of our conversations? What’s this shit about a personal collection?

I thought those were private, just Derrick and me. I guess he never said that, but obviously I assumed. Why *wouldn’t* they be? And why would he play them on the air?

Oh god, I’ve been getting played this entire time. The thought hits me like a grenade in the stomach, and the shakes start. I’m barely keeping it together when the taxi pulls up to Elise’s apartment and she’s outside waiting for me.

“I can tell by the look on your face that you already know. What the fuck is happening, Kat?”

Her matter of fact tone gives me some stability, and I hug myself, shaking my head. “I don’t know. That’s us, our private conversations. Why?”

Elise gives the cab driver his fare, and leads me into her place. “I don’t know what’s going on, but that shit’s not okay.”

“Why would he even record them in the first place?” I ask softly, hurt and confused. “I . . . they weren’t meant for the public, they were me baring my heart to him.”

Elise looks at me with pity, then sighs. “Well I could see why he would, they’re pretty fucking hot. Maybe he was just recording them for later . . . spank bank type deal?”

I snort, if Derrick needed spank bank material all he had to do was give me a call, the way we’ve gotten it on over the past few weeks. “He never told me he was recording me, us. Oh god, Elise! He played it on the air,

everyone heard me have an orgasm and tell how hungry for his cock I am. He said my name!”

The last fact saps the last of my reserve and I dissolve into tears. Elise does what she can as she gathers me up, pulling me into a hug. I collapse on the couch and she covers me with a blanket, mistaking my shivers of heartbreak as cold. “It’ll be okay, Kat. I listened to the first couple before calling you, he said your name, but there’s gotta be what, a million ‘Kats’? Nobody can prove it was you.”

She rushes into the kitchen, making me a cup of coffee but I just hold it, not able to take a sip with my heart in my throat.

“People will know,” I whisper. “God, he’s been to my place, I’ve been to his. Kevin knows I’ve been with him . . . it’ll get out, Elise. If Kevin knows, he’ll make sure of it. It’ll get out, and I’ll be ruined.”

Elise slips an arm around my shoulders, hugging me from the side. “You need to call him. Figure out what the hell is going on!”

I sigh, looking into the black mirror that is the surface of my coffee. “You’re right. Maybe there’s some reason . . ..” I look up at Elise again, but the truth is clearly written on her face. “Guess not, huh?”

Elise shakes her head. “Damn it, Kat. I’m so sorry. I pushed you into this, I really thought he was a good guy with all the things you said about him.”

“I felt like I had a good feel on him from our dates and his show too, but I guess that’s all façade. Love Whisperer, my ass. God, I should’ve known better, hell I do know better! Guys are always out for themselves and a piece of ass. But he made me believe, and I played right into his hands. This hurts so much worse than before, because he made me . . . hope.” The tears come, hot and burning as they roll down my face, and I cry my heartbreak out for Elise, who strokes my hair and kisses my forehead.

“I promise you Kat, I don’t care if the whole gender of men is going to hell, I’m right here with you.”

“I guess I need to get this over with,” I whisper. I reach into my bag, grabbing my phone. It hurts to see his name in my recent contacts, surrounded with little heart-eyed face emojis, but I need to get this over with before I lose my nerve. And I need answers.

The call rings . . . and rings . . . and rings. “Hey, you’ve reached Derrick King, leave me a message. Or, as this is the twenty first century, send me a text. Bye.”

The phone beeps, and I clear my throat before speaking, but my voice is still wavering. “Derrick, it’s Kat. You need to call me.”

As I hang up, I look at the time and I realize the show is over. He should be able to pick up his phone if he wanted to, just like he has countless times before. He’s avoiding my call. Ignoring me after what he’s done. He doesn’t have the balls to face me.

The ice in my veins freezes. He’d systematically broken down all my defenses from the beginning, one by one pecking away at them to get me to open up to him, and make me think he was one of the good guys. But he lied. This is so much worse than Kevin or my other boyfriends cheating on me, this is a public betrayal at a foundational level. I loved him, truly and deeply, and I thought he loved me. But obviously not if he can air our private life without even asking me. Fuck, he even joked and laughed about it, like it was no big deal.

I don’t know why he’d do this, but fuck him if he thinks I’m some fuck toy he can screw around with.

I’m done with him, done with men.

Forever.

I turn my phone off and hug Elise in tight as the tears roll down my face. I’ll cry out every last tear so that there’s nothing left and then I’ll turn my heart off and never risk loving some backstabbing asshole again.

I’m done, my heart shattered into unfixable shards in my chest.

CHAPTER 23

DERRICK

The sun is just creeping over the horizon when I can sneak out of the hospital and down to my car to grab my phone.

It was a long night. Once Dad was transferred, he'd woken up a little, but was disoriented. I was uncomfortable leaving him alone, even with nurses twenty feet away and watching the monitors.

I stayed by his bedside until he fell into a fitful sleep. I drifted off soon after, uncomfortably perched in a chair beside him until the shift-change nurse woke us both to take his vitals.

Turning on my phone, I see it's been blowing up all night. I've got several missed calls from Jacob, one from Kat . . . but more worrisome, at least two dozen calls from Susannah and the station number.

I rub the back of my neck, not sure what I'm going to do. I knew I'd likely get shit for bailing on the show with no notice, but what the hell did they want me to do? My dad was having a heart attack.

If Susannah couldn't handle things, there's plenty of archived shows they could air if need be. We already do that on our two-night off each week and listeners seem to like the classics. If Suz was in a lurch, she could've just punched play on one of those.

Yeah, shitty on my part to duck like I did, but a necessary deal when there's a medical emergency. I decide to give Jacob a call first. He doesn't call often so it must have been important for him to call multiple times. Kat was probably just checking in to tell me everything was going okay and she was being safe. I won't wake her up with the bad news just yet.

Besides, Jacob will want to know. He and Dad got pretty friendly back in my college days, and Jacob really took a liking to my father, often

hanging out at the house when the lifestyle of being a superstar student-athlete with a professional future got to be a bit too much to deal with.

I hit dial and lean against my car, yawning as the cold morning air wakes me up.

As soon as Jacob picks up the line however, all sleepiness is driven from me when he yells. “What the fuck, man?!”

“Hey bro, I know it’s early as fuck, you just don’t normally call multiple times like that. Besides, aren’t you usually up at this hour?”

“What the hell are you doing? The show last night? How could you do that to that girl?”

Oh hell, what happened on the show? Did the guest go apeshit or something? “Do what? I’m at the hospital with dad. He had a heart attack, man. He’s gonna be okay but if you’re in town or close, I’m sure he’d love it if you could come see him.”

Jacob quiets, and when he speaks up, he sounds more like his normal self. “Holy shit man, is he okay?”

I sigh, purging some of the fear that’s been roiling in my gut all night. “Yeah, it was some scary shit there for a bit, but he called in time. He knew right away something was wrong, so he got help within minutes. It was serious, but he’s gonna be okay.”

“I get that, and I don’t mean to be insensitive, but I gotta ask. What about the show last night? You didn’t air the recordings?”

“Recordings?” I ask, confused. “What recordings? I ran out the door as soon as Dad called, figured Susannah would handle it.”

I’m getting an ugly feeling in the pit of my stomach as the silence on the other end of the line stretches out, and I’m nervous as hell waiting for an answer. “Fuck, Derrick. Susannah, she played . . ..”

“What?” I ask, nearly panic stricken at this point. I don’t need this shit, I so don’t need this shit right now. “Just say it.”

“She spent most of the first two hours playing recordings of you and Kat for the audience to comment on. It sounded like you were in the studio, talking with her, answering her questions and even laughed and said ‘let’s hear it.’ Then, after that, it was you and Kat. Uh, getting down and dirty.”

“What are you talking about? Are you sure, did you hear it yourself? How in the fuck are there even recordings of that?”

“You didn’t record them? I mean, that doesn’t sound like something you’d do, but how else?”

I feel the world start to spin, and I lean against my car, planting my hand on the roof to make sure I don't pass out. "No, I didn't record them. How bad was it?"

"It was bad. I'm not gonna repeat it all to you, you should know, but it was bad. I mean, I've seen pornos that had less explicit dialogue."

Oh dear god. "What? How do those even exist!? I didn't record them. I have to go, Jacob. I have to find Kat, find out what the fuck happened. Can you come to the hospital and sit with dad for a little bit?"

"I'll be there this afternoon. The team's doing okay, I can take a day off for personal time. Hell, training staff keeps telling me to rest my shoulder anyway. I'm on my way, brother. Go get your woman and fix this. From what it sounds like, you might want a lawyer. If you do, I know a guy."

"Uh, right. We'll figure that out later though. Thanks, I appreciate it."

I hang up and run back upstairs to Dad's room, trying to figure out what to do as my mind races. Susannah could totally use sound bites of me on-air to make it sound like I was in the studio. We do that all the time for popular jokes so we can replay them and laugh at ourselves. But this is wholly different, she made it sound like I agreed with airing my own sex tapes, for fucks sake. She might have ruined everything . . . with work, and more importantly, with Kat.

"Derrick?"

I stop, realizing I've been pacing the floor and turn to see Dad. He's woken up, looking better than he did last night, but he's worried. "Everything okay?" I ask him.

He reaches over, and uses the buttons on his bed to elevate himself to a near-seated position. "Son, you look worse than me, like the world just came crashing down on your head. What's going on? Besides the obvious."

I come over to his bed, feeling like I really shouldn't be burdening him. But, looking in his eyes, I realize that maybe that's exactly what he needs right now. To not feel like a burden himself, but to be able to be that strong man who helped me so many times before in my life. "I don't know what happened but I think my entire relationship with Kat just got really messed up last night."

"Kat's the young woman you told me about," Dad says, nodding. "The one you say you want to marry?"

I nod, swallowing. "And work, but I don't care about work . . . just Kat." I give him the fast and dirty of what I know, which admittedly isn't

much. I try to leave out some of the graphic details, as if it were just a little dirty talk. “And then last night Susannah apparently aired some recordings of my chats with Kat. What the hell am I supposed to do?”

Dad nods, speaking slowly in that way he does when he’s handing out his wisdom and wants to make sure you hear his best advice in your heart, not just your ears. “You love her?”

I nod. “Yes, of course. I love her so much.”

“I know I raised you better than to disrespect any woman like that, so I won’t even ask if you had anything to do with it.”

It’s a statement, but there’s a threat in his tone and I can tell he’s fishing for me to put his mind at ease. “Stay in bed, old man. I swear I had nothing to do with this, I’m just as horrified and pissed as she probably is. I never recorded any of it. How it got recorded, I have no idea.”

He nods, his eyes flinty with furious anger and righteous determination. “Then you need to go fix this. I’ll be fine right here in this bed, I ain’t going nowhere. Make your mom and me proud, son, just like you always have.”

“Thanks, Dad. Jacob said he’d stop by this afternoon though. He’s going to take a personal day and sit with you as long as you want.”

I lean in and give him another hug, knowing that I could’ve lost him yesterday and I’m so damn thankful for the man he is and the man he taught me how to be. Whatever the hell just happened, I’m going full throttle to fix this shit.

CHAPTER 24

KAT

The knock on the door comes at a time when the last thing I want is more people around, but Elise is having nothing of it. “I already called them. Jess heard the show anyway, so she’s not going to take no for an answer.”

She’s right, my mother and sister come into Elise’s apartment like a pair of Tasmanian devils, whirling around and searching for me. “Kat?” Jess says, before seeing me curled up on the couch underneath Elise’s comforter. “There you are. Good. I’ve got that ginger beer you like, those flannel pajamas from your third drawer down in your dresser, and my samurai sword.”

“You’ve got a samurai sword?” Elise asks.

“Not really, but I do have a big ass chef’s knife back at home if I need to go get it. Just as good,” Jess replies.

“That won’t be necessary,” I grumble, smiling some at her being so protective. “But thanks for the PJs.”

“Of course,” she says, handing me the threadbare but much-loved Elmo pajamas.

“Sis, if I give one of my clients a call, he knows some guys that could pay him a little visit and rough him up.”

“No,” I mumble around a mouthful of ice cream. “Please no.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right,” she says, sipping at the ginger beer, “but if you don’t rip him a new one, I’m doing it for you!

Mom butts in, getting down to business. “Katrina, I don’t want to put you down, but have you thought that maybe there’s an explanation for this?” she asks. “I mean, I’ve never talked to Derrick but from everything you said, he seems like a good man. While his show’s not *Mr. Roger’s*

Neighborhood, why would he do it? Seems like he'd be just as embarrassed as you. I can't imagine his employers liked that going on the air either."

"Wait, you listen to *The Love Whisperer*?" Elise asks. "Oh my god, I'm so glad my parents don't have satellite radio."

"Mom," Jess says, shaking her head. "Mom, I love you, but even I've got to say you're being a little too naive here. Come on, the recordings were phone calls and video chats, not police wiretapping or some spy cam action."

"But Derrick broke the law if he recorded them, right?" Mom asks. "I mean, you can't just broadcast someone's sex life without their consent, can you?"

Elise shrugs. "Gray area right now. Recording a call one-sided is legal in this state. Trust me, I know all about that one with my job. Beats me if the content matters."

"Besides," Elise says, "he gave his permission to broadcast. Kat, I know you missed that part, but I heard it."

I sniffle, tears threatening again. "Can we just change the subject please?"

Mom nods, hugging me again. "I'm so sorry, baby."

I lean against her, drawing scant comfort from her presence but at least there's something. "Remember when you said that even with the pain of it ending with Dad, you wouldn't trade the good days?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I would," I declare miserably. "It's not just the good days, it was the hope that maybe I was wrong, that I could have what you and Jess have. This isn't about us being over, this is about my hope being dashed beyond recognition. I'm not doing this anymore, ever again."

Before anyone can say anything, I get up, wrapping up in Elise's comforter and shuffling off to the bedroom. She's got a big bed, and between the comforter I've already got and her fluffy blanket she's got here, I quickly get a good misery nest wormed up and snuggle in deep, hiding in my cocoon. I have a half-formed thought that instead of eventually emerging a beautiful butterfly, I'm going to come out of this a hardened bitch. But maybe that's safer in the end.

There's no way I'm going to sleep, even if I couldn't still hear them talking.

“Has she even talked to him yet?” Jess asks Elise quietly. “I mean, all jokes aside, I’d like to hear this excuse.”

“Maybe screaming and cussing him out would help?” Elise asks. “I mean, it couldn’t hurt, right? Sorry, she hasn’t even turned her phone back on after that call to him when she realized that he ignored her.”

Mom sounds bleakly hopeful. “Maybe he’s called by now?”

Elise lowers her voice, but I can still hear her. “No. I turned it back on when I forced her into the shower this morning. He still hadn’t called and I deleted a bunch of texts from people at work who heard about it. Oh, and Kevin sent her stupid shit that makes me want to slap his fucking face. I’m planning on dealing with his ass soon enough.”

I hear my Mom’s gasp, and while I’m pissed that Elise screwed with my phone, she’s got a good heart. She’s right, I should have checked for Derrick to call back. “I never liked that weasel,” mom says.

I groan and roll over. Everyone knows I’ll never be able to show my face at work again. Fuckstick Kevin even thinks he’s worthy of my time now. I may be embarrassed as hell but I’m never falling that far off the scale again.

Nope, just gonna stay alone, me and my lines of code that are predictable and reliable, unlike men. Maybe get that dog after all.

There’s a buzzing sound, and then Elise’s voice. “Ugh . . . They’re not being completely rude like Kevin, but I’m going to have to teach some of her co-workers a lesson too. I’m gonna turn this back off for now. She doesn’t need any of this shit right now.”

I bury my head underneath the dual comforters, hoping to drown out the noise. Maybe eventually, I’ll get to sleep and wake up to find out this was all just a nightmare.

CHAPTER 25

DERRICK

"Hey, this is Kat. I'm busy so leave a message at the beep."

I slam my fist down on the passenger seat of my car, growling. Each time I call, it goes straight to voicemail.

I went to her apartment, banging on her door loud enough for one of the neighbors to stick their head out and tell me to shut the fuck up or else they'd call the cops. Yeah, that's the last fucking thing I need.

Knowing I've got at least one more shitstorm I've got to deal with, I head into work. Walking through the small reception area, I know I've got laser beams shooting from my eyes and fire drifting from my nostrils as two of the front staff cower from my glare. They normally are pretty nice. I've shot the shit with them plenty of times. Not today.

"What the fuck was that last night?" I explode as I storm into my office to see Susannah seated at the work table, her little clipboard arranged perfectly in front of her. "What was going through your fucking head?"

She taps her clipboard with a pen, looking up with an expression on her face of total and complete calm. "Nice to see you too. I covered for you when you bailed and didn't answer your phone the dozens of times I called to find out where the fuck you went. You've been mentally absent for weeks now, Derrick. I saved your ass and the show, just like I always do. You're welcome, by the way."

I stop in my tracks, dumbfounded. Not sure what excuse I was expecting, but it damn sure wasn't that. "Covered for me? You should've just played an old show. How the hell did you get those recordings?"

My yelling is attracting an audience, people poking their heads out and freezing in the hallway to watch the show through the glass door, but I'm way beyond caring.

Susannah, on the other hand, is playing it cool as a cucumber. “You’re the one having phone sex in the middle of the studio. I just aired them. I could’ve filed suit for creating a hostile work environment, you know. I did you a favor.”

The door to my office opens and the station manager, Quincy Kilborne, comes in. A long-time veteran of the radio game, Quincy’s been a strong supporter of my show from the beginning. Today, though, he looks pissed.

“What the hell’s going on in here? Why are you two yelling at each other when the show starts in an hour?” He crosses his arms over his chest, looking at us like we’re misbehaving children.

I swallow back an eruption of rage and stifle my voice. “Susannah played recordings of my private conversations on air. Last night’s show . . . I didn’t make those recordings and I damn sure didn’t give my permission to air them.”

“Is that true?” Quincy asks, raising an eyebrow. “Let’s be clear, we’re talking about a possible felony accusation here. What happened yesterday?”

“He . . .” Susannah says, her mask of self-control faltering as she stutters slightly. “You heard it. I played it. He gave permission to play those recordings. Go back and listen, you’ll see.”

Quincy looks at me, but before he can even ask, I’m all over it. “Bullshit. That was an edited soundbite. The whole damn thing was edited. I left during the pre-show meeting yesterday in a hurry.”

“Yeah,” Susannah scoffs. “Running off to go see your fuck buddy instead of working, just like you have every day for weeks. So typical of you these days. I’ve been covering for you every damn day.”

Quincy looks between us, and I can see it in his eyes that he doesn’t believe Susannah either. Who would? I fucking hope Kat doesn’t. “I went to the hospital to see my dad,” I explain. “He had a heart attack. He called during the pre-show and I ran to meet the ambulance at the hospital. I didn’t have time to explain. I was in a panic. Call the damn hospital. I spent the whole night there. Fire me if you need to for bailing, but the bigger problem here is how Susannah got the recordings. Those were private.”

Susannah starts to fidget in her seat for a few moments. “Well?” Quincy asks. “How did you get those conversations?”

“I recorded them!” Susannah finally explodes after seeing the silent act isn’t going to work. “You’re sitting there in the studio every night, just winging the whole damn thing by the seat of your Jockeys while I’m

prepping the music, the emails, the next caller. Meanwhile, you're fucking off talking to your latest and greatest. Fuck that. We had something good going when you were single, or at least you were focused on the show and helping me make it great."

"Wait . . . but how's that possible?" I fume back. "And yeah, I admitted to you I wasn't giving a hundred percent. I apologized for that. But I was still pulling my weight. The show's been doing fine and that's no fucking excuse!"

"Because I'm picking up your slack!" Susannah screams. "I'm the one who sets up the callers. I'm the one who does the music. I'm the one who chooses the emails. I'm the one who does every *fucking* thing this show needs except, of course, milk your fucking cock when you want it milked! And for that, what do I get? You texting your goddamn girlfriend while I'm busting my ass!"

"Susannah, I already apologized—"

"Stick your apology up your ass!" Susannah screams. "I do all the work, and somehow you get to waltz in, drop some Barry White smooth tones and lame advice, and you get all the credit. The damn show's even named after you. I'm not even a fucking side note. I'm the one carrying the whole show on my shoulders, working to get us into syndication and studio deals, and I barely get anything! ANYTHING!"

"What you do get is invading my privacy," I seethe, my voice dropping to an enraged calmness. "I talked it over with a friend, pulled the archives of the show. That wasn't just phone calls, and it wasn't stuff I did in the studio. At least three of the clips you played were things I did in my apartment on *my* time. How the fuck did you do that?"

Susannah says nothing, crossing her arms over her chest. "I want a lawyer. This is sexual harassment."

Quincy speaks up. "If anyone has a case for harassment, it's Derrick. Can I see your phone?" he says, nodding to me.

I'm hesitant for a second, considering what's just happened with my phone, but I hand it over and he starts tapping at the screen. He hands it to me, showing me the task manager with something running in the background I've never installed. "Uh-huh . . . thought so. Wouldn't have had a damn clue how to check this, but saw it on TV the other day. She must've installed this on your phone somehow."

“What—” I start, taking the phone in trembling fingers before remembering. “That time you were screwing with my phone, when I stepped out to take a piss.”

Susannah shrugs, finally deciding that offense is the best defense. “I had to do it. I just wanted to see what I was up against. I needed you here with me, and knowledge is power. If I knew what you were doing, I could cover for you, work with you, maybe get you to see the light that you don’t need her and she’s screwing everything up. We’re on the cusp of greatness here, and it’s everything I’ve worked so hard for. And you’re not only letting it slip away, you’re walking away for some damn pussy. After I listened to a few of the conversations, I thought it would be good for the show. Hell, it got me hot and I don’t even think of you that way. If she got mad and dumped you, then you’d re-focus on the show and we could go back to how it was before. Win-win.”

“Win-win? Like before?” I ask, staring at my phone. My hands are shaking so hard I can barely control myself, and the world narrows to a single black tunnel as I stare at the welcome screen for the spyware. My fist clenches, squeezing the sides of my phone until there’s a cracking sound, and suddenly, my phone’s screen goes black. I drop the wreck on the table and look up at Susannah. “How on earth could it be like before after what you did?”

Quincy doesn’t let her respond. “Susannah, you’re fired. Gather your shit and get out.”

“You’ll be hearing from my lawyer,” Susannah growls. “You hear me? I’m gonna own this station by the time I’m done with you.”

“Ms. Jameson, you’re going to be lucky if you don’t serve time. I’m reporting your actions to the police even if Mr. King here doesn’t. You’re not walking away from this. Your actions have risked the station and the show. I’ll call security to escort you out.”

Instead of waiting, Susannah storms out, kicking my office door open before screaming in rage as she heads down the hallway. In the strange silence that follows, I turn to Quincy, who’s watching my office door close on its pneumatic hinge. “I’m sorry about all—” I attempt.

“Forget it,” Quincy says. “I actually listen to the show, Derrick. Not as a boss, but just as a listener. Maybe she was carrying more load behind the scenes, but the success of the show on-air is about you and there has been something different lately. You seem *happier* on-air, like you believe the

happily ever after shit you peddle, and it gives us all hope, even my crusty old soul. Maybe we need to get you an assistant for the prep and a co-host for on-air, but regardless, what Susannah did is about as wrong as it gets."

I let out a relieved sigh, realizing I'm not fired too. "What about the show? We *had* to be breaking some rules last night."

Quincy shrugs. "We'll probably catch some shit, but as long as we don't pull anything like that again, we'll be fine."

"And the show tonight?" I ask, looking at my cracked phone. "I really shouldn't have done that . . . how the hell am I going to call Kat now?"

"Go get a new phone. If she meant that much to you, you have to know her number," Quincy says. "As for your show, we'll cue up one of the recorded ones. Take a few days, get yourself together, and we'll line up some help for you. I know we've got some producers in-house who would give anything to work with the Love Whisperer, and I'll put out some feelers for a co-host. Think of it this way, you've got a hell of an opening monologue to do if you want."

"Yeah . . ." I mumble, not sure what else to say. "Quincy, I know I should start helping with everything now, but—"

"Go handle your business," he says, patting me on the shoulder. "We got this."

I think. How am I supposed to reach out to Kat when she isn't answering me and I don't know where she is? Suddenly, it hits me, and I look Quincy in the eye. "Actually, I need to get on the radio tonight. At least that first half hour or so. Think Phil would mind being my producer tonight?"

He gives me a small, tight smile. "Hell, if he can't, I think I can still run a basic board. Just don't ask me to do any digital magic."

CHAPTER 26

KAT

I'm lying on the couch, trying to ignore the pain inside me by shooting balloons with monkeys on Elise's laptop when she comes in, carrying her phone. "Kat!"

"What?" I mutter, watching as a giant black blimp appears on screen. How appropriate, it fits my mood.

"Kat, you gotta listen to this," Elise says, dropping her phone into her stereo system. "Derrick's on!"

"You know I don't want to hear-" I start to shoot back, but before I can, Derrick's voice fills the room. It's raw, different than anything I've ever heard on the radio before. No, I've heard this voice . . . but only when he's just talking to me. I close my mouth, listening to every word.

"Okay, that was our opening break . . . Toni Braxton's Another Sad Love Song," Derrick says. *"Now normally I'd start off the show with an introduction, a few laughs, maybe a little innuendo to get things rolling. But right now . . . well, this isn't The Love Whisperer talking. For those of you who are looking for some advice, maybe something closer to what we normally do here, tune in next hour. This hour, this is just me . . . plain ol' Derrick King trying to fix something that happened last night."*

"You see," Derrick continues, *"last night was something that I never planned. Those of you that tuned in heard me give permission for certain racy recordings to be played on the air. Let me be clear. At no time did I authorize that. Folks, I didn't even know I was being recorded. What you heard last night was the highly edited versions of private conversations between me and the woman I love more deeply than I can ever say."*

"Do you believe him?" Elise asks.

"Shh!"

I turn my attention back as Derrick keeps going. *"I was betrayed by a now former coworker who put spyware on my phone when I wasn't looking. This person, and I'm not naming names due to pending legal action, but this person then took intimate private phone calls and video chats and spliced them together to create what she wanted. Fuck it, let's be plain. Who knows how many people heard it live, no need to beat around the bush. Kat, I didn't know about the recordings. I left the studio yesterday because my dad's in the hospital. What happened last night I had no part in. Last night I missed your phone call because I left my phone in my car when I rushed into the ER. I damn near puked when I talked to Jacob this morning and he told me what had happened. I . . .I'm sorry."*

I stand up, walking toward the radio. "Derrick . . .."

I can hear the honesty in his voice, the raspiness as he speaks. *"Kat, I never wanted to hurt you. You've been through so much, and all I wanted in our lives was to keep making you happy. You've told me so many things, and I'd never do what happened last night even to an enemy . . . let alone to the woman that I love. Please, I know you're angry. I'm angry too. Call me. I sorta broke my phone when I found out about the software, but they got me a new one and it's clean, I promise. Same number, it's sitting here in front of me. If you don't want to do that, call the show. I'll put the whole damn rest of the show on a mixtape if I need to. I love you, Kat. Call me."*

"I need to go to him," I say, turning to Elise. "I don't want to do this over the phone. I have to look him in the eye."

"Not like that you aren't," Elise says with a tiny smile. "No offense babe, but you smell like stale wine, along with a shitload of sweat and other general yuckiness. And you're still in your pajamas."

I look down, and pull my pajama top off. Elmo drops to the floor, and I rush to the shower. "Lend me some clothes!"

"Got some sweats . . . not much else for this weather, you're too damn short!" Elise calls from her bedroom. "Good enough?"

"Good enough!" I say, scrubbing quickly. I hit the major areas, and am jogging out the door exactly six minutes later, Elise's phone still broadcasting Derrick's voice.

"Folks, to everyone listening, I have this advice for you. Check your computers, check your phones. What happened to me . . . well, I didn't even know spyware like that existed. It's invisible and they don't even need your phone password to install it, just your number. But you see, even knowing

that, I don't regret having phone sex with a woman I care deeply for. I don't regret the video chats either. I do regret that what was loving and private between us was broadcast by someone jealous of my position on this show. I do regret that my sweet Kat, who is one of the kindest, most precious people in the world, was made to sound like something she's not through the magic of sound editing. Guys, you never heard the important parts of our calls. You didn't get to hear that, in between the sexy playful talk, we exchanged words of love, of commitment. You never got to listen as she joked with me about us breaking the closet barrier right after that last sound clip where she called out my name. So protect yourselves. If you want to have phone sex, that's fine. You want to naughty chat, that's fine too. But protect yourself."

We peel ass through the city, heading toward the studio. When I get there, Elise struggles to keep up with me as I rush in the front door. "Where's Derrick?"

"I'm sorry," the receptionist says, "but Mr. King-"

"Goddamit, I'm Kat!" I yell. "His Kitty Kat!"

The receptionist's eyes flash in recognition, and without another word, she leads me down a short hallway to a studio, where she knocks on the door. "Derrick? You have a visitor."

I step into the studio, where Derrick cuts off his most recent monologue mid-sentence. "Excuse me everyone, we're going to cut to some music. Uh . . . Kat's here. Wish me luck."

In another connecting booth, an older, slightly balding man in a suit throws some switches, and Nirvana's 'All Apologies' starts playing.

"Kat," Derrick says, but before he can say anything more I collapse into his arms, holding him close. "I'm so sorry."

"I'm so sorry too." I cry, burying my nose in his shirt. He smells a little funky too, and is going on a couple days growth of untrimmed beard for sure. Somehow, those two little details tell me that everything he's said is the truth.

Derrick holds me close, "Kat, I know I hurt you—"

"No . . . *she* did," I reply, looking up at him. "Yeah, I was furious at you last night, but I should've trusted that something wasn't right. It wasn't like you to do that, but it was hard to trust my heart over my own ears. It brought up old issues and insecurities, and I just fell back into that dark place so fast, but it was so much worse because it was you and I love you so

damn much. But I heard you just now, it wasn't your fault and we were both hurt by her actions. It wasn't our fault. Where is she?"

"I love you too, Kat. She's been fired, and both me and the station have retained lawyers," Derrick says. "Illegal wiretapping, invasion of privacy, I don't fucking know what you call it but it's damn sure illegal. She'll never work in radio again, and might do jail time. Quincy, the station manager, says he'll back me in whatever I want to do."

I nod and settle deeper into Derrick's arms. "Okay, we'll deal with that. But I've got more important things to worry about now that I know it wasn't you."

"Like what?" Derrick asks, and I reach up, cupping his face.

"Tell me what happened with your dad," my eyes imploring here, the concern shining genuinely.

Derrick nods. "He's gonna be ok, but he had a major heart attack and it was pretty serious for a while last night at the hospital. It was scary." He shrugs as if even saying he was scared isn't okay, but it's obviously the truth. "He's my dad, and I thought I was gonna lose him."

I wrap both arms around his waist, hugging him tight. "I'm so sorry, Derrick. I know that must have been terrifying. I'm glad he's gonna be okay though."

He smiles a bit, his eyes crinkling at the corners, "I told him about you, by the way."

The fact that he was thinking about me at all with everything going on with his dad warms my heart. He was lost last night, unaware of the storm raging on the radio and in my heart, but even in his dark moment, he thought to tell his dad about me. "Really?"

He kisses the top of my head, "He can't wait to meet you."

He turns to the producer, who gives him a single finger. "One minute, then let's get out of here."

I wait as Derrick slides behind the mic, leaning forward and looking at me, his eyes gleaming. As soon as the little red light on his board lights up, he speaks. "Love Whisperer fans, there are times when I don't know if I'm reaching anyone with my show. But tonight, I know the most important person was listening and I reached her, and she reached right back out to me. So, we're going to flip the show over to one of our *Best of the Love Whisperer* shows, because I'm taking the love of my life to see my father. Until next time."

Derrick tosses the producer a wave as another song starts up. I have to laugh as Smashmouth's version of *I'm A Believer* starts playing. As we walk out, I see the receptionist give a little fist pump. "You know all your fans are going to want to find out the details now."

"They're going to have to wait," Derrick says. "Our business is our business."

"Actually, I was thinking . . . It might do you both some good to get in front of the gossip and address it, maybe do a bit of damage control on air with a special guest . . . chick named Katrina. Might help your reputations, the show and the station. Just a thought."

"I'll think about it," Derrick growls, pulling me close. I wrap my arms around his neck as he lifts me in his powerful arms. Our lips touch, and in the first tender caress of his lips, I know all I need to know.

His tongue strokes over my bottom lip and I open up to him, moaning softly as his hands pull me against his body. I'm exhausted, I barely slept last night, but it doesn't matter as I press my body against his. I feel a tingle deep inside, but it's more than just desire . . . it's my heart.

"I love you," Derrick whispers when we part to breathe.

"I know, and me too," I reply. "Come on, take me to see your dad."

As soon as we make it to the car, Derrick roughly pulls me into his lap, his warm kiss taking the breath out of my lungs in the chilly night air. I moan as he brings a hand up to cup my breast, squeezing gently as he kisses and nibbles down the line of my neck. I reach between us to trace the line of his growing cock in his jeans. Panting, Derrick breaks our kiss, pulling back to rest his forehead against mine. "Make no mistake, you are mine, Kat. Now and always."

I nod, biting my lip. "Yours forever. And you're mine too."

He presses one more quick kiss to my lips in agreement. "Yours too."

It seems to be the reassurance we both need, and he works to calm the heated tension sparking in the confined space of the car. "Can't wait to finish this. But first, I've got an old man for you to meet."

It's a normal looking hospital room, but the giant of a man sitting in the chair next to the bed certainly isn't. "Well now, we weren't expecting you two to stop by," Jacob says as he gets up. "I figured you'd be at home."

“Yeah well,” Derrick says, scratching at his head, “Dad, this is Katrina Snow, my girlfriend. Kat, this is my father, Daniel King.”

Daniel sits up, smiling a little, and I see he’s wearing a t-shirt from Jacob’s team. “Check out the new swag,” he says with a grin before looking at me. “So you’re the one that’s making my boy see stars?”

I know I’m blushing but I step forward, shaking his hand. “Maybe so, sir, but he’s the one making me believe in fairy tales, that sometimes they do come true, even if they’re a bit messy.”

“Not messy,” Jacob says, grinning. “Just sometimes a little . . . dirty. And there ain’t a thing wrong with that.”

I smile a bit uncomfortably, it’s more than a little weird to know that my boyfriend’s father and friends have probably heard me say things I wouldn’t want a soul on Earth to hear, I guess I’ll have to get used to it for a bit until all of this dies down. “That’s true. So, are we still on for the game?”

“Actually, I had to turn in the box tickets to get the day off,” Jacob admits, “but we’ve got one more home game before the playoffs. It’s going to be chilly, and I’ll be honest, you’ll have to share the box with some other player’s guests, but it’s a big box. What do you say?”

“I say this old man will be ready for it, but only if you quit hovering about. Go on, you all get out of here,” Daniel says chuckling. “Leave me to heal and rest. And Jacob? Make damn sure you get into the playoffs.”

“You heard the man,” Derrick says, taking my hand. “Dad, we’ll come by sometime tomorrow.”

We leave, and at the elevator Jacob wraps his arms around me, nearly crushing me in a bear hug. “I’m happy for you. Take care of him, okay?”

“I will,” I groan, trying to hug him back but nowhere able to get my arms around his enormous torso. Still, I pound him on the back as best I can, touched that for such a fearsome football gladiator, he’s a big teddy bear inside.

CHAPTER 27

DERRICK

My hands are trembling with excitement as I turn my key in the lock to my place, letting me lead Kat inside. "Kat . . ."

She turns to me, placing a finger over my lips and looking at me saucily. "Derrick, fuck me. Make love to me. That's all I need." And she walks inside, heading for my bedroom. "Make me feel like the woman that you've reminded me I am."

I can't really argue, so I just watch in utter fascination as she sways her way across my living room, an utter sex goddess in oversized sweatpants. But it's not the clothes, it's the aura of sensuality that just seems to exude from every pore in her body. She's the total package, the one I've always known was out there for me somewhere—sexy, intelligent, sweet, and overall, an amazing woman. Maybe I sensed all that way back on our first phone conversation on the air somehow and just didn't realize what it meant yet. But I do now.

"Wait," I say, locking my door behind me. "Not the bedroom."

"Oh?" Kat asks, turning to me. "Why not?"

"Because I'm pretty funky . . . I was thinking the shower?" I ask in reply. "That is . . . if you don't mind me washing you down so I can dirty you up?"

"Well, I had a shower just before coming to the studio . . ." she teases lightly, before continuing with a bit of promise, "but my hair could use a good washing. By your hands, of course."

The idea of running my fingers through Kat's honey tresses suddenly has my cock aching, and I hurry to follow her into the bathroom. It's one of the benefits of me not being a sports reporter anymore, I've been able to upgrade to an apartment with one sweet bathroom that has a large glass

shower stall lined in black marble. Kat's been here before, of course, but she takes a moment to admire the room as she reaches for the hem of her shirt. "Nice choice."

"For what?" I ask, regaining some of my control and pulling her toward me.

Kat teases, reaching down and cupping my cock through my jeans again, and the response is immediate, my body already warmed up from before. "I was thinking this is a nice choice for the first place I want you to really fuck me. Fill me with that big cock and come inside me."

I swallow, looking into her eyes. "Kat, before this all happened, I was thinking about . . .."

"The same thing I was thinking about. And when the time's right, we'll get there. My answer's going to be the same as before all of this. Yes."

Her words are all I need as I crush her lips in a searing kiss, tearing at her clothes as we undress each other. I say a silent prayer of thanks for sweatpants, they're so easy to peel off as I kneel in front of her, kissing at the soft skin of her belly just above the line of her panties, tugging them down to look at her beautiful pussy.

I see her sweet clit start to pulse in time with her heartbeat, needy for attention. "Tell me, Kat."

She eases her legs a little further apart, giving me more of peek at her sexy center, but still not saying what I need to hear.

Kat runs her fingers through my hair, pulling the strands back and making me growl. I inhale her, memorizing every nuance to her natural perfume before lifting my eyes toward her without moving away from her sexy cunt. There's a warning in my voice. "Kat . . ."

She smirks, but the quiver in her thighs under my hands belies her flirty tone. "I think I like being in charge a little."

"And you can be from time to time," I joke, kissing lower, deciding that if she wants to tease me by not letting me have my way with her dripping pussy, that I can torment her right back and make it impossible for her to deny me.

I nip at her stomach, and she gasps, relenting with a moan. "Eat my pussy, Derrick. Do it for me . . ."

Permission granted, I stroke my tongue between her slick pussy lips, the soft and silky folds parting under my tongue. I shiver as I eat her slowly, relishing every sweet drop of her arousal.

“Oh fuck, Derrick, that’s it. You make me feel so good, don’t stop . . . please. Suck my clit . . . hard.”

I want to give her everything--what she asks for, what she needs, and what she doesn’t even know she needs. I’ll give her all that I am, all that I have, knowing that she’ll do the same for me. So I cup her ass, bringing her in close to lick up and down her slit, circling her clit slowly before drawing it in. I suck her hard nub and thrash my tongue across it at the same time, giving her no mercy. Kat’s hips shiver and her thighs clench under my hands. “Derrick, fuck, I’m gonna--”

“Come for me, my love,” I rasp, looking up at her with devotion. “Come all over my face.”

I dive back in, hungry to taste her orgasm. She cries out as a gush of wetness covers my face and chin, and I feel reborn, connected in way that we’ve never been before. Kat pulls on my hair, pushing me in deeper and deeper until her orgasm finally ebbs.

“That’s the warm up?” Kat asks shakily as she steps back, stepping the rest of the way out of her clothes. She pulls her shirt off while I quickly strip out of my clothes, getting into the shower and starting the water. Kat watches, her naked body glowing under the lights, smirking. “Warm enough?”

“I’ll make sure it is,” I promise her, holding open the glass door for her. As soon as she’s in, I consume her, kissing her hard and pressing her lush body against the cool glass. My cock is throbbing, mashed between our bodies as the steamy air fills the shower.

Nibbling down Kat’s neck, I bring my hand up, massaging and pinching her nipple as she moans in my ear. “Mmm, your turn to be in charge now?”

“You know damn well it is,” I growl, loving the look in her eyes. It’s the look of the future, the rest of my life, and I can’t wait for it. Love, intense and overflowing . . . taking turns ‘being in charge’ while the whole time things are really a team effort. “You’re my woman. Forever.”

“Forever,” Kat repeats, reaching down and grasping my rock-hard cock in her soft hand. The water sprays over my back and shoulders as we kiss, her hand slowly stroking my shaft while I run my thumb over her nipple, teasing and pinching it until it’s diamond hard. Kat’s whimpers tell me how good it feels and I turn her around, massaging her breasts while lavishing her neck with kisses. “Mmm . . . that’s wonderful.”

“Just getting started,” I rasp in her ear, running my left hand down to cup her pussy. She’s already recovered, her pussy clenching around my two fingers as I slide them in, pumping them in and out slowly. Finally, I withdraw them and line myself up. “You ready?”

“Make me yours forever,” Kat moans. I spread my legs, lowering myself enough that I can slide the head of my cock between her legs. With one long, slow thrust, I slide inside her, both of us groaning as every inch of my cock stretches her. Once I’m balls-deep, I still to let her adjust, enjoying the sensation of her wet heat wrapped around my bare cock, nothing coming between the love and trust we share. Kat’s deep gasp comes from the depths of her soul and I feel the same way as I join with her . . . the last woman I’ll ever join with.

I push in deeper, bottoming out inside her, both of us gasping again as her pussy squeezes me tightly, massaging my shaft. Kat turns her head to look into my eyes, her open mouth trembling. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” I answer. The pleasure is too much and instinct takes over. I pull back and thrust deep into her again, grinning. “Forever.”

Kat nods and we let our bodies tell us what to do. My cock strokes in and out as my hands roam her body, memorizing every inch of her soft skin. “Your sweet pussy feels so good around me. God Kat, I want to be inside you all the time.” Her soft mewls echo in the shower, encouraging me.

I can’t go too fast, the open legged stance I have to take keeping me from jackhammering her, but that’s okay. I pound into her, watching her ass shake from the force of each driving plunge. “You like that, Kat?”

She nods, and I do it again and again, grabbing handfuls of her hips for leverage. “Me too. I’m gonna pound your pussy and remind you that you’re mine.” The warm water cascades down our bodies, the slap of my hips against Kat’s ass beating in time with our rising heartrates as we caress each other.

Kat presses her hands against the glass wall, urging me on, and I lift her onto her tiptoes, my fingers digging into the soft flesh of her hips to keep her there. “Yes . . . fuck me Derrick, give it all to me. Fill me up . . ..”

I speed up, her voice sending me into overdrive. My pulse hammers in my veins, and my eyes fix at the beautiful, sexy sight of my cock pumping in and out of Kat’s pussy, squeezed and caressed. My nerves are on fire, and her pussy’s clenching around me with every hard stroke, begging me to stay

inside while at the same time begging for release. I go faster, as hard as I dare until I feel it. “Take it all!”

My orgasm hits me like an uppercut to the chin. Stars shoot across my vision and I explode, filling Kat with everything that I have.

My arms tremble and in the dim recesses of my mind I hear Kat cry out too, her pussy clamping down on me as we stay frozen. I think we’d be there forever if it wasn’t for the sudden cramp in my hamstring that pulls me back from this eternity, and I pull out, panting and laughing at the same time.

“What is it?” Kat asks, turning around herself to see me bending over, stretching my leg.

“Cramp,” I hiss, my cock slowly wilting as the now cool water splashes down my back and ass to drip off my balls. “We need to put a step in here if this is going to be a regular thing.”

Kat blinks, then chuckles as she raises an eyebrow. “Is that your way of saying I’m short?”

I laugh lightly, pulling her in to me, our bodies slippery and slick against each other. “Of course not, you’re not short, you’re just fun-sized. You just need a little lift so I can *really* give it to you like I want.”

“Is that your way of inviting me to move in?” She’s smiling, but I can see the smallest hint of uncertainty in the depths of her eyes.

“As soon as you can break your lease,” I reply. “I want to go to sleep with you in my arms, wake up with you in our bed, and spend every day together. I’m ready when you are.”

CHAPTER 28

KAT

The box is busy, but Jacob had warned us of that. The team's facing their last home game, and it's a must-win situation according to Derrick, so a lot of the players used their allotments for this game, resulting in a box filled with a dozen or more people. Thankfully, all of them are family of Jacob's teammates. It makes things . . . interesting.

"So you're the one who wrote that app?" one of them, a bubbly, curly-haired woman named Rachel asks. "I just downloaded that last week. Girl, let me tell you, that has been a godsend. I've been able to do so much more, and Jerry's been happier too! He's been able to see that I'm not just wasting time being some WAG. Now, let me ask you . . . think you can write a day trading app?"

I chuckle, sipping the flute of champagne that comes with the box seats. "I could, but I doubt it'd be better than what's out there. Why?"

"A deal Jerry and I have. Each season, we take one game check each and we get to invest it the way we want. He does it in real estate, and he's made some good deals. But I do day trading. I'd like to squeeze out another three percent."

"Why's that?" I ask, trying not to let on that her blithely playing with thousands of dollars makes me a little twitchy. I mean, my job doesn't have me scraping to pay the bills anymore . . . but it's not like I can drop money like this on a whim.

"Whoever gets a bigger return . . . gets to be in charge of our anniversary celebration," Rachel says, giggling. "Last year, I won, and I think Jerry liked it. So this year I want to go whole hog. Leather, chains . . . he might be a football stud, but if I can get that three percent, he's gonna be my little bitch."

I gawk, then laugh. “You should talk to my boyfriend, Derrick. He’ll-”

“Oh, we all know Derrick,” Rachel whispers. “Half the players and wives listen in . . . congrats. That was one hell of an interview, girl! Now come on, game’s about to start.”

We sit down, me in between Derrick and Daniel, who insists that I call him Dad. He’s still recovering from his heart attack, but he looks a lot stronger in just a few weeks, and we make up for his lack of strength with our own cheering.

“You still don’t have any clue what’s going on, do you?” Derrick whispers as he leans over during one of the timeouts. “Didn’t get to read that book?”

“I tried, but I’ve been kinda busy,” I deadpan. We both chuckle, although it’s not too dark a chuckle.

It hasn’t been very easy, dealing with the aftermath. So far, Susannah’s trying to cover her ass, being as ‘cooperative’ as possible in the hopes that Derrick and I don’t go after her with a civil suit. But that’s not the hard part. While the Monday show after our getting back together had plenty of respectful, supportive callers and guests, Derrick’s had to deal with a little backlash from some of his female fans.

There were a few emails from pearl-clutchers who didn’t appreciate that he called me his ‘dirty slut’ in our phone sex recordings, but he handled it with his usual aplomb that what consenting adults do and say in the privacy of their own sex lives isn’t up for judgement by folks who aren’t involved. I cringed a little when he reminded everyone that he hadn’t invited them into his dirty talk, but it seemed to shut the critics up.

The other backlash was related to his appeal, at least partially, being because of his apparent ‘availability’ and he shattered quite a few fantasies when his girlfriend came on the air and we publicly said we love each other and were moving in together.

We’ve both been a little bitter about people feeling entitled to an opinion about something that’s none of their business, and we’ve both dealt with trolls and perverts who’ve sent in daily requests to ‘see the Kitty Kat,’ along with their ‘suggestions’ as to what they’d do with me.

Quincy, Derrick’s manager, has been pretty supportive. He worked with Derrick to make sure that the new producer, a married woman named Janet, is totally professional, and he’s done a good job of screening out the assholes and opportunists who’ve applied to be the new co-host.

“Hey,” Derrick asks, leaning over, “you okay? Looked lost in thought? They still giving you problems at work?”

I shake my head, smiling. “No. A few slimy comments, but nothing I can’t handle. If anything, your show’s become a big hit around the office actually.”

Derrick laughs, our laughter being drowned out as a massive roar goes through the stadium. I look out, and most of the cheering fans are for the away team, so I guess it was bad for us. “Uh, what happened?”

“Big punt return,” Daniel says, his eyes fixed on the field. “I’d say we’re going to give up at least a field goal, they’ve got first and ten on the twelve yard line.”

I nod, half of what ‘Dad’ just said going straight over my head but I can see the position on the field, and I make sure to watch as the defense lines up. I memorized Jacob’s number, and jump out of my seat cheering as number ninety-two bum rushes through and tackles the quarterback for a big loss. “Go Jacob!”

“Big sack!” Dad cheers, grinning. “That’s the way to collapse the pocket!”

“Huh?” I ask, glancing at Derrick. “Uhm, I’m just glad I remembered who the quarterback was.”

Derrick grins, leaning in. “I think after my lesson you can at least remember that much.”

I blush, my body tingling as I think of our last minute ‘football lesson’ that turned into sex after Derrick had me bend over as the ‘center,’ and he got behind me for the snap. He gave my right cheek a swift smack and then smoothed it over with a grabbing caress, and feeling his strong hands on my ass triggered a need for something more than football knowledge. Apparently it was the same thing for him because we almost ended up late to pick up Daniel after finishing up our ‘lesson’. “I hope the real center and quarterback don’t end up like that.”

“Who knows?” Derrick chuckles. “Come on, let’s keep watching.”

The game’s first half goes well, and when halftime comes, it’s still close. “Time for some snacks,” Daniel says, getting up. Because of his heart attack, his diet is much stricter than it used to be, and he’s not allowed alcohol or fatty foods, but today he said he was taking a very rare exception and splurged on a small plateful of buffalo wings already. “I’m gonna grab some bites from the veggie tray. You guys want anything?”

“They got any nachos back there?” Derrick asks. “Feeling like cheese.”

Daniel nods and walks off slowly. I watch him go, then turn back to Derrick. “You sure he’s okay getting two plates?”

“He’s fine, it’s just right over there and it’ll let him feel more independent. Besides, I had something else I wanted.”

“Oh?” I ask, reading the low rumble in his voice. “What’s that?”

“Like maybe I should have taken Jacob up on that cheerleader outfit offer,” he whispers in my ear. “Minus the panties.”

My throat goes dry, and I look into Derrick’s eyes. “Behave yourself . . . and we’ll see what happens when we get home. For now though, I need a drink.”

I get up and head to the back of the box, where Daniel is piling tortilla chips onto a big plate. “Here, let me help.”

He looks over, then nods. “Is Derrick behaving himself?”

“As much as he normally does,” I reply with a chuckle. “You know how he is.”

“I do,” he says, glancing back. “It’s funny, but I guess he’s always been meant for that show of his. He’s always had a way with words, even when he was younger and wouldn’t say much unless he really knew you. He’s a little old-fashioned still though in some ways, hopefully that was me and his mom’s doing. He just needed a very special woman to complete him. I’m glad he’s found her now.”

I blink, touched. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. I wish his mother could’ve been here to see it. Vanessa would have liked you a lot.”

I look up, wiping at my eyes. No raccoon eyes, no raccoon eyes . . . “I wish I could’ve met her,” I finally say, not trusting my emotions, “let’s get the rest of the grub, go enjoy the second half, and you can tell me what kind of woman she was.”

The rest of the game goes well, and ends on a happy note as Jacob’s team gets a close win. “Nice . . . home playoff game next week,” Derrick says as we leave the stadium. “He’ll enjoy that.”

I smile, putting my arm around his waist. I don’t know what exactly that means, but I loved being by Derrick’s side and knowing that he’s there for

me just like I was there for him today. We've been tested, and though it wasn't pretty, we withstood the potential hellfire.

"You two go on, I'll be fine," Dad says when we reach the car. "I think after a game like that, I'm going to just go relax, and I'm sure for you two the evening is just starting. I'll grab a taxi home and catch you later."

He flags down a taxi as if it were nothing, and we watch him get in, leaving Derrick and I holding each other in the chilly wind. "So . . . how was your first football game?"

I chuckle, and hug him. "I enjoyed our little practice game more, but it was fun just being there with you guys. So what are we going to do?"

"I say we hit up Jacob's after party," he says. "I could use some adult supervision."

I laugh, and we get in his car, driving to a nearby nightclub. Walking in, I'm surprised to see a familiar face. "Elise?"

She looks like a million bucks in a sparkly, tight-fitting club dress, and when she turns around, a huge grin breaks across her face. "Hey babe, why didn't you tell me you were coming!?"

"Kind of spur of the moment . . . but what are you doing here?" I ask. Derrick gives a nod to Elise, but before he can say anything, someone calls his name from across the room and he turns. "Go," I tell him. "I'll catch up in a minute. Tell Jacob good game for me."

"I will," he says, kissing me on the cheek.

Derrick leaves with a wave, and Elise turns back to me. "So what are you doing in town?" I ask as she leads me over to a table where another woman is sitting. "Hi."

"Hi," the woman, who honestly I would never expect to be sitting with Elise, says. She immediately ignores me though, gushing to Elise. "Check it, babe! I was talking with some of the girls, and you'd never believe what Christian K is up to."

"What?" Elise asks, and I suddenly get it without her explaining. She's in town working. Guess a gossip columnist has to follow the gossip.

The woman looks over at me and smiles, then back at Elise. "You sure your friend here is up to hear about it?"

Elise sighs, and grimaces. "With that, I'm not sure even *I* want to know," Elise says. "Why do the handsome ones have to be so fucked up?"

Her friend laughs, sipping at her drink. "Well, if you don't want to hear that, I've got an even better story to tell you."

The music's starting to heat up, and we have to lean in close to hear. "What?"

"You're never gonna believe it."

Elise grabs her drink, downing half of it in a single gulp. "Okay, I'm ready. Spill it!"

"Okay, well, check out across the room," the girl says, gesturing. "See him?"

I turn with Elise, seeing nothing until I recognize the guy at the bar. I almost missed it because his infamous hat is missing and the lights are landing on his bald head at all angles. "Is that?"

"Yep," the girl says. "Keith Perkins. You know, the country star?"

Elise hums, nodding. "The one who's been gathering the award? What's he doing in a club like this?"

"Who knows? He seems to be going incognito without the hat, and maybe there's a little more to him than his public image says," gossip girl quips. "Anyway . . . watch him."

We do, and while I only see a man who's out having a good time, he seems to ignore all the women who hit on him, all of them beautiful. "Get my point?" the woman says.

Elise nods. "Yeah . . . players gon' play, but this one ain't playin' . . . interesting. Gotcha. Two more rounds on me."

"I think I'll go see Derrick," I whisper in Elise's ear. "I'll let you work, find your next scoop. Come see us with Jacob up in VIP when you get the chance?"

"You got it," Elise says, giving me a kiss on the cheek. "Have fun, babe. And congrats on the win."

I go find Derrick, who's toasting with Jacob. "To the future . . . well, I'm not gonna jinx you yet."

"Good, because I don't need any jinxing," Jacob says, chuckling. He clinks glasses with Derrick, then sees me. "Hey Kat. Enjoy the game?"

"Had a ball," I quip. "But I think it's time to party."

And party we do. While we can't go overboard, Jacob's still got at least one more game and we have to drive home, we still enjoy ourselves. Jacob spends most of his time upstairs chatting with nearly every pretty woman who comes his way, but he's still gentlemanly with them.

I can see why Derrick likes him.

“Hey, wanna dance?” Derrick asks me as his ears perk up. “I love this song.”

I nod my head, taking his hand and swaying with him down the stairs as the DJ plays a remix of Rhianna’s *Only Girl*, and find a space on the dance floor. We’re dressed nowhere near as fancy as some of the club goers, where undone buttons and high hemlines seem to be the norm . . . but I don’t care as I sway with Derrick.

Turning around, I grind against him, humming happily as I feel something start to swell. “Is that for me?”

Derrick growls, lowering his lips to my ear. “I need you. Alone.”

“Well,” I reply, reaching back and cupping his cheek, “tell Jacob bye and let’s get out of here.”

The fresh air outside is brisk, but after the heat of the club, it’s refreshing. Walking back to the car, we pass a park, stopping to take in the lights and the large, full moon that’s peering down at us from over the trees. Suddenly, a fountain starts up, spraying into the air and underlit by deep red and blue lights, like something out of a Disney movie. “Wow,” I whisper, hugging against Derrick in the cold air, “it’s beautiful.”

“It is,” Derrick agrees, hugging me tightly, his front pressing into my back. “Kat . . . thank you. For everything.”

“Thank *you*,” I reply softly, looking up to see him with a faraway look on his face. “Derrick? Penny for your thoughts?”

“Hmm?” he asks. I giggle and snuggle against him, feeling his still stiff cock at my back. “Mmm this is such a romantic setup . . . you and me, alone, with the gorgeous fountain, but all I can think are dirty thoughts. I can’t help it, that’s what you do to me.”

“Oh really?” I ask, giggling a little. I look back into his eyes, which are glowing red and blue, reflecting the fountain’s lights. “Tell me. I wanna hear every filthy thing.”

Derrick lowers his voice to that sexy purr he knows drives me wild, a small smile dancing on his lips. “Like I want to get you back home, rip these clothes off you, and worship your body and fill your pussy so full you can’t walk right tomorrow.”

I grin, turning around and pressing my breasts against his body. “You want to fill my pussy so full of what . . . your . . .long . . . thick . . . throbbing . . . cock?” I ask, drawing out the final word in that way that I know drives him crazy and reminds us both of just how far we’ve come. I

reach down, running my hand over his bulging jeans, humming. “Seems that’s exactly what you want to do.”

Derrick gasps and nods. “Then let’s go home. I think I owe you a nice, long massage tonight.”

EPILOGUE

DERRICK

The church looks beautiful, and the spring time air is warm, the scent of flowers wafting in from the trees outside. I feel a little cooped up in my suit, but that's okay. Today isn't about me.

It's not really about Kat either, although it's a very big deal for her. With her sister happily married and our own relationship being on track, today's sort of the capstone to her own circle of trust.

It's one more sign that fairy tales can happen. One night, after we made love, we laid in the dark and she explained a theory about happiness being an island in a sea of misery, comparing love to a small Styrofoam cup. I hadn't really understood the whole significance of her theory, but I promised to make our island the biggest, happiest one I could and she smiled as she fell asleep in my arms. I decided that meant I was doing good. It's a growing process for us both.

Her whole life, she's been betrayed by every man who she's ever given her heart to. And while I've not been perfect, I don't think any man is, the worst I've done over the past few months was forget to pick up Chinese takeout for dinner one night when she asked me to. Thankfully, the local spot down on the corner delivers in ten minutes flat.

Still, she's had a lifetime of insecurities and fears to get over, and we've conquered them together. I finally knew she was totally over it when she unpacked her last bag and turned in her key for her old place. No need to worry about a place to go, or needing to leave because I've hurt her. Since then . . .

"Hey," Kat teases, looking so beautiful in her dress that I have a hard time taking my eyes off her. "You're daydreaming."

“Can you blame me?” I ask, taking in her peach colored curves. We’re in the back, there’s still time before the ceremony starts, and I’m helping her with last-minute adjustments. “This sort of thing . . . let’s face it, I get off on this sort of stuff.”

Kat smiles, and turns to snuggle against me. She’s not perfect, she’s flawed and there’s always going to be those little dark places in her heart. But they’re fading day by day in the light of our love, pure and never-ending. “You big softie.”

“Hey, I did my cardio last night.” I tease back with a wink. “At least, you didn’t complain then.”

Kat chuckles and hugs me tighter. “Okay, time to get ready. You’re sitting up front, right?”

“Right,” I reply, giving her another squeeze. “In fact, if I want that prime seat . . . tell your mom to have fun today. And tell Jess that you’re a far hotter bridesmaid than she is.”

Kat smiles, and pats my chest. “Go on, no need to kiss my . . . well, not right now at least.”

I laugh and head into the sanctuary, settling into a seat in the second row on the bride’s side. I’ve come to know most of Kat’s family, and I’m sure I’d be accepted in the front row if I asked, but I guess I’m still sort of old-fashioned that way. Front row is for family only.

The church fills up, and when the music starts I stand along with everyone else to turn and watch the procession. When Kat comes down the aisle my mouth goes dry she’s so stunning, even though I just saw her earlier. The sunlight streams through the high stained glass window behind her, making her hair glow with inner health and beauty, truly my angel.

Watching her, the peach fades, replaced with white and lace, and I imagine her walking toward me. Yeah, according to stereotypes women are supposed to be the ones who fantasize about weddings . . . but I’m fine being a romantic at heart. Maybe that’s why I’m so good at being the Love Whisperer. In fact, that makes me more than fine with being romantic, I’m damn proud of it.

During the whole ceremony, I know that Kat’s mom and her man say things, but my eyes never leave Kat, even after Jessie catches me staring and smirks, elbowing her little sister.

At the reception, as soon as I can I have Kat in my arms on the dance floor, swaying to a slow song from back in the day. I’m not downing it, hell,

I've played a little Vanessa Williams on *The Love Whisperer* from time to time myself

"You know . . . you're the most beautiful woman in the room," I tell her as we move to the music.

"Thank you," Kat replies. "Although you should occasionally blink. It'll help with those love goggles you've got on."

I laugh lightly, and pull her in tight, lowering my voice intentionally, adding a little growl of gravel to the velvety smoothness so that it vibrates against her ear. "And that dress is something else. Makes me wonder what you've got on underneath it."

Kat casually shimmies in my arms, winking. "Is that a question? Remember that red set with the cami and boy shorts?"

My eyes glaze over as I think of that special set. Sure, we've bought other, sexier sets together, but that first set we played together with, the way I'd slipped the strap off her honeyed skin with my teeth . . . it's special. My cock thickens in my pants, and I nod softly.

Kat sees I'm in la-la land and chuckles. "Well, this dress is way too strappy and low-cut for that . . . or any bra at all. But those boy shorts, the ones you love because they show the bottom curve on the outside of my cheeks and are so sheer you can see every bit of my pussy? I've got on those . . . and nothing else."

"Fuck, Kitty Kat," I groan, pulling her closer. "Every damn day, you know just how to drive me wild. Your mom and Bob better cut the damn cake or I'm sneaking you out of here early for another peek and nibble of that delectable ass."

"Well, I suppose you could have some frosting . . . before your dessert," she purrs. "But I'm thinking the same thing as you."

Kat

"So everyone, that wraps up another evening. I'd like to thank everyone for joining me, Derrick King, for The Love Whisperer. I'll be taking a few days off, but don't worry, I've got plenty of stuff recorded for you. Tomorrow's show is a special episode on weddings: the good, the bad, the Bridezillas. So, until I'm back, love yourself and each other. Goodnight."

The song starts, and I reach over, flicking off my radio and putting my stuff away. The office is almost totally deserted, but that's fine, I enjoy having these hours with just Derrick in my ear as I do my work. I guess going two for two on number one rated apps across multiple platforms and

another expected hit with our new game gets me a few extra benefits, and one of them is I get to pick my own hours now . . . except for meetings.

I'm going to keep riding this for a while longer. I'm motivated, and taking a risk in doing another solo app after we wrap the game, but that's okay. A simple, easy to use standalone program that helps you lockdown your devices and prevent spyware is something that's been in the PC market for a while, but keeps being ignored in the mobile market. No longer, not when I'm done.

It's a high-profile project because while the inspiration came from our incident, the potential implementations could be amazing in securing governmental agency phones from tapping. I told Derrick that we could be the first beta-testers because since the big deal with Susannah, we haven't been as bold in phone conversations or FaceTime. We save our real dirty talk for the bedroom when it's just the two of us, with the phones in the other room. Still, we both miss the little thrill that comes from showing off for each other.

Getting behind the wheel of my car, I catch the end of the outro music for *The Love Whisperer,* then change the channel. The new show format has been awesome, simpler and more conversational with just Derrick. He's still got a producer, I talked with her once when I called in, but they decided to skip the co-host role and now the on-air is all Derrick.

People seem even more responsive now that they know he's happily in a relationship. It was rocky there at first when he lost the 'available' appeal, but people have come around, and he says it adds believability to his advice, even though he's always been pretty spot-on. According to Derrick, after the initial short-term dip, his ratings are stronger than ever. So much so that the bigwigs have been talking to him and Quincy about going the syndication route, and he even got invited to LA to be a guest panel member for some TV show. He hasn't decided about either opportunity yet though, saying he's happy with what he's got at work and at home.

I get home and change quickly, missing the sensation of having him here. We've both been working so hard the last few weeks, getting the programming just right on a difficult segment of coding, and Derrick's been tied up with recording his extra shows so he can do some extra project that he's been really secretive on. A few months ago, I would have been worried, distrustful . . . but that was then. Now, love and trust are together, and I've never doubted his intentions for a moment.

“Besides,” I murmur as I quickly change clothes, “the good mornings and even better nights are that much sweeter when we spend every spare moment wrapped up in each other’s arms, whispering dirty things in each other’s ears.”

I’m just slipping on my sexiest heels, not for height reasons but just because I know Derrick likes my legs in these, when he comes in from work. “Hey babe. Good show. Loved the caller who wanted advice on self toys.”

Derrick comes over and gives me a kiss on the cheek, hugging me from behind. “Thanks,” he growls, nibbling at my ear and sending tingles down my spine. “Fuck, you’re so damn gorgeous, Kitty Kat. Those heels make me want to bend you over and lick down the line of your legs before flipping you onto your back and making them become ‘in the air’ shoes.

I raise an eyebrow, moaning lightly as he licks at the curve of my earlobe and traces a single fingertip along my upper thigh. “Why aren’t we doing that, then? Let’s stay home, order in and change into something more . . . comfortable while you get a taste of my pussy and I get a sip of *your* cream. Then we can eat to regain our strength, and fuck again . . . all night long.”

Derrick moans and kisses my neck again before releasing me and stepping back. “I wanted to do this differently, more . . . something, but I can’t wait anymore.”

Reaching into his jacket, Derrick takes out a plain black jewelry box. It’s narrow, but I don’t care about the box . . . I care about the look in his eyes and the love in his heart as he opens the box to reveal a beautiful diamond ring. It’s not gaudy, it’s classic, a simple platinum band with a single square cut diamond in the middle. “Derrick . . ..”

He takes my hand, kissing my knuckles softly. “Kat, you thought you didn’t deserve a fairytale, that it was rare. And while it’s true it is rare, you most definitely deserve the happy ever after and I hope that you’ll choose to spend it with me, as my wife.”

There’s no other answer I can give, except a choked nod, and a small squeal of excitement. “Yes . . . with all my heart, yes.”

Derrick slips the ring on my finger before sweeping me up in his arms, spinning me around. “That’s my Kitty Kat. Thank you for giving me my dream.”

I hug him tightly, kissing his lips hard. “No . . . thank you. Thank you for showing me that I didn’t need a fairy tale fantasy, what I needed was real love from a real man. After that, the dream will happen on it’s on.”

Our kiss deepens, my silky dress letting me slide down Derrick’s body as our joy quickly mixes with intense heat. I can feel his cock already hardening for me, and my nipples are stiff and electric against the slick fabric. Getting on my knees, I look up at him. “Now, I think I want to start our celebration. You can call the delivery guy while I have a suck of your big-”

“Don’t say it . . . unless you want me to be too distracted to order,” Derrick chuckles. “Mmm . . . sexy, smart, loving, mine, and oh so dirty in a good way. My Kitty Kat.”

I reach for his waistband, undoing his belt while I grin. “I want General Tso’s chicken. And as for you being distracted . . . well, just think, after our food you can bend me over the couch and fuck me any way you want. But first I’m going to enjoy a taste of this amazing cock.”

I draw the word out the way I always do for him, knowing that it’s driven him crazy since day one, still does today, and hopefully will for many more happy years of dirty talk.

His cock pops free, and I look up at him. He grins down at me, telling me what he knows I want to hear. “Go on, Kitty Kat. Suck my cock down your pretty little throat like my naughty girl.”

My mouth waters, and I immediately swallow him whole. Dirty? Maybe, but nothing could be better.

We’ll have to call the family to tell them the news . . . later.

Thank you for reading. Continue for the bonus read, Motorhead, Book 7 in the Irresistible Bachelor Series. However each book is a different couple and can be read on its own.

MOTORHEAD

BY LAUREN LANDISH

Jerk. Angry bastard. That's how people describe me. Everyone in this small town knows to steer clear of me.

Thing is, they don't know me. They don't know what I've seen, what I've done. So I've learned to put up a shield to protect both me and them. When everything gets to be too much, I escape on my beloved Harley, the wind in my face calming my soul.

But my new neighbor hasn't gotten the memo about me. She's a walking, talking firecracker, and I can't help but imagine what that feistiness is like in bed. She's full of dangerous curves and a smart mouth that draws me to her like nothing I've ever felt.

We couldn't be more different. I'm a grumpy asshole and she's a sassy princess, but somehow, she sees through me and our spark is undeniable.

The question is… will we light up like pretty fireworks or a devastating explosion?

I should warn her that's she's not safe with me, but I'm tempted to take her for a ride.

A ride neither of us will ever forget.

CHAPTER 1

MCKAYLA

Looking up at the neon sign that dominates the sunset sky, I whistle softly. Only one thought goes through my mind. *Ho-lee Shit! I can't believe I did it! Well,* ***we*** *did it.*

I'm standing in front of the Triple B Salon, in awe of the magic that Brad and I have been able to work in such a short period of time. When we took over this place, it had been sitting empty for almost a decade. The problem was that nobody really knew what to do with a former drive-in hamburger restaurant that someone stuck on the county register of historic landmarks because John Wayne used to be part-owner. You can't make a lot of changes to a place like that.

Then there's just the pure insanity of our idea. Most folks in the beauty industry flock to Hollywood, eager to work on celebrities and have their names in the rolling credits of a TV show. If you don't go there, you want to make it in New York, where the celebrities are just as numerous, but you also have a possibility at fashion industry fame. Getting your scissors on the locks of a supermodel is a lifetime achievement for some stylists.

Brad, my business partner and the funniest bitch I've ever known, and I both did that for years. We hooked up soon after he came to LA, our styles and personality just clicking fabulously. Brad mostly handled makeup, but he can snip a bang too. Meanwhile, I was the follicle genius, turning rat-nested, hungover A-list sluts into red carpet stunners. We worked the Hollywood scene doing movies, TV shows, awards shows, and more. I've had my fingers on more heads than a porn star gets her fingers around cocks. Name me a star who lives in Los Angeles, and I can probably tell you their hair care secrets—who's got gray hair, who needs some extra highlighting, and whose hair isn't even theirs. For quite a few years, I kept Hollywood's secrets and dealt with their bullshit quite nicely.

But last year, after a few things happened on a reality TV show that just left us feeling too creepy-crawly, the bug to settle and have something to call our own got its claws in us, and now, here we are. I was surprised when Brad agreed to come with me, actually. I thought that, coming from a rather hoity-toity East Coast background, he'd found heaven in Los Angeles. But here we are.

After some research, we couldn't really decide, so fate intervened. After a call from my friend Emily, who ironically triggered my sudden urge to get the fuck out of the California, we ran away from LA to Great Falls, a picturesque little town she'd told me about. It was where she and her now fiancé, Hayden, went the weekend after he asked her to marry him, and it's just north of where she lives now. It's a beautiful town, with a length of Main Street straight out of the 1950s, a brand-new luxury resort associated with the nearby ski area, and a vibrant arts scene that's been famous since Norman Rockwell was painting.

Ironically, we won't be giving up all of our Hollywood connections. The state has been doing a lot to try and get filmmakers to bring production to the state, and not just cable dramas or B-movie action flicks. There's been a ton of movies filmed out there over the past few years. Chances are, if you've seen a small town scene that was going for that American sense of nostalgia over the past few years, it was filmed somewhere in or around Great Falls. It's enough to give some people what my grandmother liked to call 'airs'. Still, there's a certain small town charm to Great Falls, and most people actually say hello to other locals they pass.

Talk about a change of pace! And that's why Brad and I chose this storefront. Sure, there were a ton of challenges with the historic landmark issue, but it's right in the middle of the main road leading up to the resort, where we can serve both the upper-crust tourists and the middle-class townies. And the landlord's been a sweet man, who told us, "As long as the county landmark people don't shit themselves, you're free to do whatever you want to fancy up the place."

When the landlord said that, I was a little terrified about what Brad would do. After all, I've seen some of his date photos. But I shouldn't have worried. Brad's always been artistic, even before he started focusing on makeup, and I have to admit that the result of his interior design vision is spectacular.

From the street, the big sign streetside has only been modified. The classic cowboy that has been there for fifty years now holds a pair of scissors instead of a Winchester, and the neon underneath reads *Triple B Salon* instead of *Duke's Drive In*. We've kept the old-fashioned pull-in spaces as parking, while the kitchen and sit-down diner area were gutted. Three black- and white-striped awnings catch your eye, drawing your eyes through the huge plate-glass windows to see the crisp white salon chairs and bubblegum-pink walls. The pink was my only demand . . . well, request, because demanding things with Brad is a surefire way to start a riot. And he fights dirty, too. He's not above taking a can of Aqua Net and using it like the LAPD uses pepper spray.

So pink had to be a suggestion. But it's my current favorite color, and the girliness of it contrasts perfectly with Brad's preppier style, giving the impression of chic extravagance. Besides, it gives the whole thing a sort of throwback vibe too. Clear out the salon chairs, and I could see someone doing a classic sock hop instead. We're just missing a baby-blue Chevy Bel-Air parked out front. I thought about it, but Brad and I both decided we weren't *that* throwback.

With a happy sigh, I look up and down the street for Brad, who was supposed to meet me here ten minutes ago. My best guess is that he's still working on making his eyebrows perfect. The man's got one flaw to him and that's eyebrows that would make Hepburn herself go running for a razor. But we've got to do our last walk-through to be ready for the grand opening this weekend. Getting the business license was harder than dealing with the historic landmark people. And we've still got some work to do, fucked up eyebrows or no fucked up eyebrows. It's why I'm dressed down right now in jeans and a t-shirt instead of my normal fabulousness. I've got fucking work to do.

As I scan, I spot a beautiful motorcycle parked outside the mechanic shop across the street. I know jack shit about bikes, but I know a work of art when I see one and have a momentary daydream about riding down the highway with that bad boy humming between my legs. Actually, the idea of any bad boy humming between my legs has me smirking a little. It's been too long since that's been a reality for me unless you count my favorite vibrator. Still, riding a bike like that, holding onto a warm hunk while the vibrations send ripples through my pussy, and wrapping my arms around his six-pack abs . . . sign me up!

My fantasy is cut short when I hear a little *ahem* behind me. Turning, I spot Brad, who looks like a walking fashion show, as always, with his slim khaki pants, plaid button-down shirt rolled to his elbows, and polka dot bowtie. And his eyebrows. Yep, I knew it. Freshly done behind his stylish bold black frames. “Glad to see you made it.”

“Me? I wasn’t the one spacing out!” Brad says with a laugh. He catches sight of the bike across the street and whistles. “I’d love to ride that hog!”

“The bike or the owner?” I ask, and Brad gives a smirk. “Gotcha. Doesn’t make a difference. You’ll just pick the hotter one.”

“Damn right. So, honey, you ready for this? We’re T minus forty-eight hours till the grand opening. I almost can’t believe it! Who’d have thought we’d be out of Hollywood, in a little town, doing bridal hair and prom makeup again? Or more importantly, that we’d be so happy about it?”

I look at him carefully, evaluating because that sounded a little tight. Brad’s always sarcastic, snarky, and hilarious, but that’s a bit over-the-top even for him. “You okay? We’ve been planning this and busting our asses for months and you’ve been a hundred percent with me the whole time. You having last-minute second thoughts?”

Brad sighs as his eyes settle on the storefront’s embossed nameplate that we put right next to the front door. “No, not second thoughts, just nerves I think. We’re on our own, you know? It’s always been someone else’s risk and we just cash the checks. I’m a magician with a makeup brush, and you’ve definitely got a flair with hair, but business owners? I’m lucky if I remember to pay my own damn bills, and now we’ve got this too? Knowing my luck, we’re going to be prepping some double-booked wedding because one of us brain farted, and that’ll be the exact time that the power company cuts the damn juice just as we’ve got three harpy bitches with chemicals in their hair. Just . . . it’s a lot of pressure and I want us to do well.”

I have to hold back a smile at Brad’s language. His flamboyancy isn’t a put-upon act . . . well, most of it. Harpy bitches? Who else besides Brad would come up with that? Instead of smiling, I give him a light punch in the middle of his well-defined if skinny as hell chest.

“Do well? Fuck ‘well’, honey buns. We’re going to *rock* this shit. We’ll hire an office helper to do the bookings and pay the bills so we can do what we do best. If we do well enough, we can even make sure the office help is six foot two, styled like a mofo, with an eight-pack of abs and a big package for you to drool over. It’s gonna be epic, Brad. You’ll see.”

“Oh, great,” Brad mock-complains as I give him a huge smile, wrapping him up in a hug. I can feel the tension leave him, and he takes a big breath, hugging me back. “You’re going to get us a lawsuit for sexual harassment.”

“It’s only harassment if it’s unwanted,” I joke back. “He’s gonna love me, no doubt about it. You? We’ll just have to wait and see.”

Brad laughs, letting go of me and looking inside at the salon. He nods as if to himself and pats me on the back. “All right, let’s check everything out so we’re good to go for Saturday.”

Unlocking and opening the door with a dramatic ‘ta-da’ from Brad, we step inside . . . and it’s perfect. Even though we’ve been here off and on through the renovation process, it feels different to see it cleaned up and devoid of workers and realize just how fabulous of a job Brad has done. “So, what do you think?”

“I think if makeup ever falls through on you, you’ve got something hot waiting in interior design,” I reply honestly. Walking through the reception area with throne-like hot pink leather chairs, I see that there are already magazines fanned out on the sleek metal tables. Further in, the black floor gleams under the spinning white chairs that face ornate mirrors that light up from behind, creating a shadow of lace on the pink walls. The hair wash station is set up with all of my favorite products, the same ones lined up perfectly on the shelves in reception to sell to customers. A lot of people would be surprised how much product sales can add to a salon’s bottom line.

Brad’s makeup station has quilted leather drawers to organize all of his products, with more hidden in cleverly disguised drawers around the station because he has so many doodads that he’d never find a way to look sleek if it were all visible. As I do a spin in the middle of the floor, I feel like I should be wearing a full skirt instead of jeans, letting it all twirl out and around like a Disney princess.

I’m so giddy that I squeal in delight. “Brad, it’s so, so gorgeous and fancy and amazing and . . .” I’m rambling, trying to think of more adjectives, when I realize that he’s staring at a wall in the reception area. Actually, as I freeze my spins, I see that he’s ping-ponging his eyes from one wall to the opposite one, tapping a finger against his lips. “What’s wrong?”

“Babycakes, we have a problem,” he says, running a hand through his hair. “We need art. Here and here,” he says as he points to one wall, then the

other. I walk back toward him, eyes flicking back and forth like his did. The walls are bare, but I don't mind the minimalist nature of the reception area. I've done too many haircuts in crowded trailers or chaotic backstage areas with shit going off everywhere. A little minimalism sort of works for me.

"I think it's fine, but we can rush order some if you want. Just remember, we can't cover up the plaque from the county."

Brad hums, glancing over at the plaque, which we installed to note the historic nature of the salon building. "No problem, and I want. I definitely want. It'd be great if we could do black-and-white portrait shots of us, just a little mark of our style to give it a little personality."

I laugh, gesturing around me. "Uh, Brad, personality is in full effect here. But yeah, I'm never opposed to a little photo shoot." I fluff my big, juicy curls a bit, putting on a model's accent. "Just tell me where to stand and where to smile at the camera and we're good. But we probably can't get anything done for this weekend unless we did pictures right now. One thing, though."

"What?"

"This pink is too damn good to be kept black and white. I want the hair colorized."

Our eyes meet for a beat as our faces break into huge grins, and without a word, we both run for our stations to get prepped. Touching up my curls and adding a fresh pop of color to my lips and eyes, I ask, "Whatcha thinking for the shots?"

Brad looks thoughtful, then says, "I'm gonna grab a vest from my apartment first, but we'll need to head out to the woods. I want a nature shot, maybe take a stool to perch on, and get the sun behind me. You got any ideas what you want?"

With a flash in my brain like a lightning bolt being hurled into my head from Zeus himself, I know what I want. That motorcycle across the way is perfect, and in black and white, it would be all sexy curves, just like me. We could even colorize the chrome. It'd go with my hair in a great way. Grabbing the camera we use for before and after shots, we head outside into the bright morning light and walk across the street.

Brad sees the resting machine and agrees it's perfect. I knock on the door to the shop to see who the owner is, but there's no answer. Great. Find my dream, and nobody's home. Kind of like most of my dating life, actually.

I look over at Brad, who's admiring the curves but staying well away. To hell with it. I untuck my t-shirt and tie it tight under my boobs. I'll make this good. "All right, so I just won't touch it. I'll stand in front of it and the owner will be none the wiser. You good?"

Brad gives me a dip of his head, but I can tell he's not comfortable with this. "I'm not saying yes so that I can keep plausible deniability if the owner sees the pic and throws a shit fit, but you should definitely stand over there for the shot." He gestures toward the motorcycle, and I can't help it, I get into it. I've seen plenty of other women make love to the camera, and I decide to hell with it, I'm gonna do while the doing's good. I smile and begin posing, popping a hip out to face the camera full-on, turning and leaning forward to stick my ass out.

As I pose, I get caught up and lay one gentle hand on the handlebars and the other on the seat. Brad continues clicking away, getting into his inner fashion photographer himself.

"Yesss, girl. Look here" —*click*— "and off toward the front tire" —*click*— "arch your back . . . that's it, now caress that chrome like it was the perfect cock."

I reach out, biting my lip and looking over my shoulder when suddenly, I hear a deep, sexy, but still furious growl. "What the fuck are you doing to my motorcycle?"

CHAPTER 2

EVAN

I rub at my temples, washing down the second of the damn horse pills the VA gave me for bad times with a swig of coffee and wincing. It's already been a shitty day, and it's only eleven A.M. Even on good days, I'm getting no more than four hours of sleep a night, and I know my caffeine habit is getting the best of me. But I didn't sleep at all last night, not that that's anything new since I got back from my last tour and the nightmares started.

Well, nightmares might be putting it lightly since the dreams that plague me are more like sleeping reenactments of the worst moments of my life. I see them all the time, the ghostly images that I know are supposed to just be in my head but sometimes seem so damn real at two in the morning. I rolled out of bed at seven simply because I couldn't stand to lie around anymore. I felt like an extra in *The Walking Dead,* but I sucked it up and drove on, as we used to say. I took a shower, skipping the shave today because fuck it, and got ready to hit the day because that's what you do when you're responsible for helping out at a family business that provides both a needed distraction and the funds to survive.

What you don't do is what too many of my buddies have—fall into drinking, drugs, and for some of them, eating the end of a pistol barrel. I can't call them pussies. Some of those guys were the hardest-core motherfuckers any man could hope to meet. But that's not me. I'm not looking for congratulations, but damn if I couldn't use a little slack today.

Not that I've gotten any. As soon as I walked into the shop, my brother TJ started giving me shit about not pulling my weight when I drag-ass in an hour late and run off potential clients with my lack of customer service skills. "You can't just get by with being good with a wrench, goddammit!" he yelled at me. "You have to actually talk to people!"

He’s probably right, but the last thing I need is my little brother telling me how to live, especially when he’s had a cushy life here at home, never having to battle a damn thing other than some nerves when he asked his flavor of the week out for a drink or a fuck, her choice.

So I’m already near my boiling point when I walk outside to grab another coffee and a cigarette to clear my head so I can tackle the engine rebuild on my schedule today. It’s not a bad one. Old GM small blocks are pieces of cake compared to European builds, but I want to be able to focus, and that means coffee. I just step out the door when I see some chick damn near lying on my bike.

Before I can even think, all of my anger from the morning boils over as I charge forward like a raging bull, exploding from deep in my chest. “What the fuck are you doing to my motorcycle?”

I see her jerk back, startled by the noise. Who does she think she is? Hands off my baby. I built this cycle from the frame up, and nobody, not even my brother, gets to touch it without my say-so.

The woman turns to face me, a placating smile already on her red-painted lips. “I’m so sorry! It’s just such a gorgeous machine, I couldn’t help myself.” She dips her chin and pulls up one side of her smile a bit more, her head tilted slightly, and I can tell she’s used the practiced pose to get her way more than once. Considering the smooth, creamy skin she’s showing off under the tied-up t-shirt she’s wearing, she probably doesn’t have to ask twice either.

I huff, but that act isn’t going to work on me. “It is gorgeous. Know what else it is?” I wait a half-beat, but before she can even open her mouth, I answer my own question. “Mine. Back. The. Fuck. Up.”

She’s taken aback by my vehemence, her eyes going wide as her full lips round, taking in a gasp of air. She is hot, not like most chicks I see around here. I mean, she’s rocking metallic pink hair like it’s nobody’s business, and the jeans she’s wearing do look natural on a bike like mine, but that’s only if invited first. She stutters and swings off my bike, letting me see the rest of her, and she’s no less hot in that tight t-shirt that shows off a front side nearly as curvy as her backside. “Again, I’m sorry. I knocked on the door to ask but nobody answered—”

“So you knew that it wasn’t right but went ahead and touched my bike anyway? Yeah, you sound really sorry, Princess.”

I can see the switch flip in her eyes instantly as she goes from nicely trying to apologize to nuclear. Guess she's got a button to push.

"I'm not a damn princess, asshole," she fires back, turning and jabbing a finger at me. "I just wanted to take a picture with your bike for our new salon. I'm sorry I touched it. Obviously, that's my bad. But you don't have to be so fucking rude."

As she rants, I'm suddenly struck by how the fire crackles in her wild eyes and the flush moves down her cheeks. She's gesturing all around with her hands like some caricature, pointing at me, the bike, and vaguely across the street. She's *cute* when she's pissed.

I can't help but laugh, but it's a snarky dark chuckle that she takes as my still being rude, though it wasn't really my intention. She plants her balled-up fists on her hips while the guy, who's looking like he wants to be anywhere *but* here, shakes in his overly tight khakis, holding his camera like a shield.

My eyes are mostly filled with the pixie in front of me that's about to go apeshit on me. "What? What the fuck are you laughing at?"

I can't help it, her boldness makes me laugh even harder. "Did you really just try to tell me that you're not a Princess? Have you seen yourself? Pink nails flicking all about, and makeup done like you're in a damn movie? And that hair? You look like a Powerpuff Girl or something. You're a walking, talking Pink Barbie Princess, honey."

Her voice drops to a throaty growl, and I know for sure that she doesn't appreciate being called Princess. A part of me that isn't pissed off and caught up in my throbbing headache sort of wonders why. "Don't call me Princess. If you want to address me, my name is McKayla, but I think we'd be better off if you just didn't call me anything, ever again. Sorry for touching your precious bike, asshole."

With a hair flip, McKayla pivots in her heels and stomps away. She's obviously pissed as fuck, flipping me off as she talks faintly to herself about what a jerk I am. But with every stomp, her ass bounces and sways, creating a sexy image if I ever saw one.

I cross my arms and watch her for a moment, one corner of my lips sneaking up just a bit until I feel eyes on me. I realize that the guy is still there, his polka-dot bowtie somehow adding that touch of absolute ridiculous unreality that makes me know for sure this isn't some waking

nightmare. I'd never imagine this. He's watching me watch her, and I raise an eyebrow at him, not saying a word.

"So. That's McKayla and I'm Brad," he says in a lispy voice that certainly advertises which team he swings for. "We're the owners of the new Triple B Salon across the street. And who did we have the pleasure of meeting today?"

I nearly gape in disbelief. Shit. They're literally my new fucking neighbors. Of course they are, because that's how fucked up my life is. TJ's gonna kill me. With a hearty sigh, I look up to the sky, silently cursing whatever joke fate is trying to play on me.

Looking back at Brad, I relent and offer a hand. He shakes, and despite his effeminate aura, he's got a good grip to him. "I'm Evan Hardwick. My brother TJ and I own this garage. Looks like we're neighbors. Welcome to the neighborhood. But don't touch my bike."

Brad nods, taking his hand back. "Understood. Loud and clear. FYI, I'm the nice one. You've heard the expression 'a bark worse than the bite'?"

I nod, thinking I know where this is headed. "She's feisty but a little playful puppy inside?"

Brad shakes his head, surprising me. "McKayla's got a hell of a bark, but her bite is even worse."With a hum of disapproval, he gives me a look and then offers a little finger wave and sashays across the street toward the new storefront. I watch him walk in the door and then hop on my bike. I light it up with a grumble of the engine, the aggressive snarl mirroring my mood perfectly. I pull away from the shop, gunning it as I turn a half-circle and double-shift as I pass the salon window, the engine going from a howl to a full scream. Hidden behind sunglasses, I cut my eyes over to the salon. As I pass, I tell myself that I won that little battle of the day as I fly out to the highway, needing the wind in my face to let go of the shitty morning.

CHAPTER 3

MCKAYLA

Brad and I stand in front of the small crowd, and when I say small, I mean like ten people and we're two of them. It's disappointing, to say the least, and I feel slightly ridiculous in my sexiest dress, petticoat, and heels. I spent at least an hour getting ready for this, and I've seen bigger crowds for a junior high school girls' volleyball game.

At least the guy from the newspaper is here. He said that we'll make tomorrow's weekly edition if I can give him a few good quotes. He's sort of cute, in a nerdy way, but he seriously needs some work on his hair. From the looks of it around here, dog clippers are considered a viable tool for hacking everything down to a quarter-inch buzz cut . . . but I can't do that.

Still, it's our grand opening, and Councilman Jaxson Kennedy, the suited representative from the city council, stands next to us as I thank everyone for coming and welcoming us to their town. "When Brad and I first decided on Great Falls, the first thing some of our friends said was 'Where?' But over the past few months, we've found ourselves welcomed warmly by this beautiful town, and I can say I understand why they call this place the friendliest town in the US. Thank you, and I hope everyone enjoys the Triple B!"

There's a round of light applause like it's a golf tournament, and then Jaxson hands us a laughably large pair of fake scissors. We pose for the local newspaper reporter to take a picture, and I remind myself that I need to deliver some better quotes than what my welcoming speech apparently was. Brad and I cut through the large ribbon in front of us, and we're officially open for business.

I take a moment as we step inside, deciding that ten people is enough. We've done it. I look over at Brad, and he's feeling the same way. Our

smiles are huge, stretching across our faces in amazement at what we've already accomplished, so excited to get rolling with our new lives and new business in our new town. Setting the giant scissors behind the counter, I invite everyone into the salon and begin to mingle with the few folks present, introducing myself to what could be our first customers.

I approach a stunning blonde woman whose highlights make me wonder who I'm up against in town. She's seen someone with some good skills. Still, I know I can do better. I only hope that the people around Great Falls can tell the difference and be willing to pay for it too. I offer my hand and an introduction. "Hi! I'm McKayla, the Queen of Coifs, as my partner, Brad, calls me when he's in a good mood. Nice to meet you."

She shakes back, a polite smile warming her face. "Nice to meet you, McKayla. I'm Rose, your neighbor from a few doors down. I own the Mountain Rose Boutique store. Welcome to the 'hood!"

"Thanks for the warm welcome. I'll have to stop in to your store and see what you have. Admittedly, I get most of my stuff online, but it'd be great to get some things locally too."

"I'd love to have you come by. So, Brad's your partner?"

I laugh, glancing over my shoulder at Brad, who's being himself and already has a woman in his makeup chair doing a demonstration of his skills. "Trust me, it's not *that* kind of partnership. Brad's not into women."

Rose chuckles. "So what does he call you when he's *not* in a good mood?"

I grin. "Let's just say that Triple B has different meanings. I like to say it stands for *Beautiful Badass Bitches*. When Brad's in a bad mood, the first two B's can change to *Basic Bossy Bitches*, which is funny because we're both anything *but* basic."

Rose giggles, and I feel that click that tells me I've made a friend. She smiles, and it's smooth conversation, putting me right at ease that I've done the right thing moving here and setting up shop, especially since her highlights are apparently natural. Not too many people are that lucky, that's for damn sure, and I'm doubly lucky that I don't have to worry about competition.

I shake hands with just about everyone, making sure I give the newspaper reporter plenty of good quotes. It's easier than I thought. Talking with Rose has relaxed me, and I'm able to be more of myself. I try to avoid

namedropping too much, but let's face it, I'm trying to bring a little bit of Hollywood glamor, so I just try to be humble about it.

After the newspaper guy finishes up, snapping a pair picture with me and Brad, Jaxson comes over offering a pleased smile. "Well, Councilman," I say, grinning, "what do you think? Think we'll add something to Great Falls?"

"I'd say things look like they're going very well—maybe even get you some new business right off the bat. And please remember, just call me Jaxson. Maybe I can be your first customer."

I nod politely, feeling like he's being nice but getting a little tingle like he's flirting a bit with me too. Normally, I don't have a problem with it, but he just doesn't do it for me. "Sure thing, Jaxson. Don't want to steal you away from your current hairdresser, but I'd be happy to give you a cut and let you decide from there. I appreciate the city council welcoming us to town."

"I don't think my current barber would be too upset since he cuts the hair of most of the guys in town," he says. Jaxson smiles, and again, there's something in that smile that ticks a little circuit in my brain. "But he's not nearly as pretty as you are, so I think I'd likely choose you even if you shaved me bald." He leans in to whisper conspiratorially, "But please don't."

Yep, he's definitely flirting with me now. I heard the compliment, but even as it's an ego boost to be noticed, he just doesn't light me up inside. No butterflies for the clean-cut guys. It's one of the first things I learned about myself in high school when all the other girls were swooning over jocks and big-man-on-campus types. Those guys don't do it for me.

Nope, I might be silly and I might be weird, but give me a rebel with—or without—a cause, a hellion, the brooding misfit who never walked the straight and narrow. Yeah, that's the guy who'll get me going, even when I know from experience that it's a bad fucking idea and only leads to heartbreak. But it gets me every time. At least they're usually honest about their fucked-uppedness.

My brain flips back to the asshole on the bike across the street. My eyes track over to the shop Brad told me he co-owns, but it's closed. I can see the lights are on inside, so they must be open for business, but the big bay doors are pulled down. Yeah, that's more my type of guy. Obviously, he's got issues, including a huge one about nobody touching his damn bike.

If only he weren't an asshole. I have a moment of disappointment, but before I can analyze it too much, I realize Jaxson is still talking. " . . . been on the council here for years, grew up down in the community college area, but came north after I graduated, and I never left. I'm hoping I can use my business degree and council experience for advantage and become mayor, then who knows? Maybe go bigger for a state rep seat."

I smile and nod, knowing that to most people, a sweet guy with ambition like Jaxson is a dream come true. He should be the type of guy every woman wants. He's a respectable adult and all, but even tuning out for half of his speech, I'm already a teensy bit bored, if I'm honest with myself. All I can think of is the fact that any haircut I give this guy is going to be over styled, totally conservative, and as boring as watching what little grass there is underneath the front windows grow. It'll be the kissing babies and shaking hands haircut, offensive to nobody except me and Brad.

Still, I want to be polite, and a customer is a customer. "That's quite a life plan you've got there, Jaxson. Sounds like you've got it all figured out."

Jaxson gives me another grin. "Yep, a one, five, and ten-year plan. Got to have both short-term and long-term goals and chase them with focused drive, sheer will, and hard work. It's all part of the secret, you know? You have to ask, then visualize and believe, and you'll receive it. Law of attraction and all, you know?"

I distractedly fidget with my necklace, knowing I've stepped in the deep end now. I realize I've made a mistake when Jaxson's eyes zoom in on the beads, just inches away from my cleavage. Shit, didn't mean to do that. I lower my hand, regretting my accidental signal. I get it. I've got some legit boobs . . . but not everyone gets to see them.

"How about lunch after everyone filters out?" Jaxson asks. I'm just about to apologize and say no when he continues. "We can go to the diner and I can introduce you to most everyone in town. It's a busy place for Saturday's lunch rush."

I so don't want to do this. I'd rather be in the salon, trying to make my impression the old-fashioned way, giving haircuts that'll leave people stunned and customer service that'll leave them wanting more. But looking around, I see no one waiting, and I know Brad can handle anything that happens. I sigh inside, knowing that I need to do this for the business connections.

I don’t want to lead Jaxson on, but I do need to get out and get my face known. Suddenly, I’m struck with genius. To hell with it. We can officially open tomorrow. “You now what, Jaxson? That’d be great. Brad and I would really appreciate your introducing us to everyone. You really take your council role as welcome wagon seriously!”

Before he can correct me, I turn, hollering to Brad. “Hey, honeybuns!” I draw out the word to emphasize the endearment on purpose. “Jaxson offered to introduce us to some folks over lunch. Isn’t that nice of him?”

Brad looks at me, immediately hearing our code word for “rescue me” that has come in handy more than once at a club when a guy wouldn’t take the subtle hint and go away. It’s a desperate plan, but hey, whatever works.

Brad straightens up, adding a little bit of bass to his voice. “Why yes, dear. That is rather nice.” He looks at me with a shit-eating grin and I know he got the message.

I also know that once he and I get to hang out alone again, I’m so going to hear about this.

CHAPTER 4

EVAN

It's mid-morning and I'm deep under an old Cadillac, checking every hose for a sneaky leak that keeps setting off the *Check Engine* light on Ms. Barnes's car. She doesn't drive it much, mostly just back and forth to tennis at the club, so it should be all right, but about every two months, she brings it in with a little noise or a check she wants done after reading some shit on the Internet.

But this Caddy is older than I am, which means it's got more than a few demons of its own lurking under the hood. Thankfully, these old Caddies also have some elbow room in their frames and I'm not having to disentangle a damn Gordian knot in order to change an oil filter like I do with some of the newer Japanese and Korean cars.

Whatever, it's money in my pocket, and I really don't want the woman stranded, even if I'm beginning to suspect she's doing something to the car herself to set the light off. Is there such a thing as Munchausen by proxy to a car? Like, is she pouring sugar in the gas tank at night or chucking sand into the fan belts before she brings it in?

I'm elbow deep, following a hose that I suspect has picked up a crack somewhere, when there's a knock on the hood, scaring the shit outta me and making me jerk, damn near busting my forehead against the drive shaft.

Dropping back to the creeper beneath me, I roll out from under the car, already pissed. "What the fuck? Could have busted my damn head since I'm working here, dumbass . . ."

I stop as I realize it's not TJ giving me shit but Old Earl from down the street, who's already smiling at me, barely containing his laughter as he shoves his hands in the pockets of the overalls that are stretched across his big beer belly. Earl's sort of the shop's edition of the grapevine. He's always good for a little bit of rumor, and he's usually more reliable than the local

news. Years ago, he used to be into cars too, but now he runs the family agricultural supply business . . . or at least pretends to. “Ooh, that was a good ‘un. Gotcha good, Mr. Evan.”

I slide out from under the Caddy and get to my feet, resisting the urge to rub his shiny bald head. “Earl, we’ve talked about this. Evan, just Evan. You’re forty years older than me. You don’t need to call me mister.”

He shakes his head in that country boy way of his, like what I said was half in a foreign language or just total silliness. “Ain’t nothing but a thing, son. I call everyone Mister or Missus or Miss—just how my momma raised me—and you ain’t gonna change it now. Whatcha doing?”

I look at him like he’s crazy, because according to most folks, he really might be half-crazy. Then again, considering he took his father’s two-bit feed and grain and somehow turned it into the biggest agricultural supply dealer in the northern half of the state, maybe crazy like a fox would be a better description. I gesture back to the car, patting the curved fender like it’s an old friend. “Working on this Caddy for Ms. Barnes.”

“Oh, that old bat?” he asks, and I’m not sure if he’s talking about the Caddy or Ms. Barnes. “She always seems to be leaking from both ends. What’s wrong this time?”

I shrug and play it safe to assume he’s talking about the car. “Think she’s got a seal or hose that’s got a crack in it. Hey, shouldn’t you be at the store? It’s Monday morning, Earl . . . don’t you have shit to do?”

Earl grins that same grin that used to adorn all the ads for his store, the one that kind of makes him look like a cross between a Gerber baby and a naughty garden gnome. “Best Monday ever, Mr. Evan. My youngest son opened today for the first time, and I’ve got the whole day off till I go in this afternoon for the closing shift.”

Huh, that’s new. Earl’s the third generation of his family to run the store, but all three of his kids have reaped the benefits of having a multimillion-dollar company in the family without being at all interested in keeping it going. Then again, if half my job were selling seed and feed, I’d enjoy a different job too. Not that I’d choose an office job. That’s not me, but some of Earl’s supply just . . . smells. “So Bennie is working for you now? Well, congrats and all, but I’ve gotta get back to it here.”

I’m hoping he hears the dismissal and leaves me to it. I don’t need to hear about Bennie. I’ve met the man when Earl brought him around to show him off like a prized pony. I think Earl thought I’d connect with Bennie

because he did a couple of tours in the early years of Iraq so we have some shared ghosts. Earl does too, but his are older echoes from Vietnam, and he made peace with them long ago, enough to try to swap war stories a time or two, but I wasn't interested.

I just don't want to go back there, not physically and definitely not mentally. Let the ghosts lie dormant and quiet as much as I can is my motto. Not that they stay quiet all the time.

Earl doesn't seem ready to leave, though. "I didn't stop by for my health, boy. It's shitty enough as it is. I stopped by to ask you a question."

I tilt my head at him and sigh. You never know what he's going to come up with, so I try to wait patiently and see where he's going, but I fail. "What'd you wanna ask? Because no, I don't want to go to a meeting at the Elk Lodge for the fucking hundredth time."

Earl smiles again, somewhat sadly. "But one day, I'll ask and you'll say yes. So I'll keep asking, Son. They helped Bennie too. There's men there from my generation who saw service in 'Nam, but also a new generation, your generation, who've seen other things. There's men there that can help you, help with those demons you wear like shields to keep everyone and everything out."

He pauses meaningfully, staring into my eyes, then visibly lightens. "But that ain't what I'm talking about right now. I came to ask you about the new folks across the street. You met 'em yet? I heard it's a man and a woman, but not a couple, judging by the gossip I hear."

The gossip he hears is everything—like I said, he's our neighborhood's own 'Ms. Kravitz' that keeps an eye on everyone and everything. Nothing happens around here without Earl knowing about it, so I know he's well aware I already had a run-in with the salon owners.

"Cut the crap, Earl," I reply, grabbing a rag and wiping the mess off my hands. It's one of those little things I picked up in the service. I have no problem getting dirty, but once that's over, I'm a freak about clean hands. "You know I already met them, blew up, and ran her off too. Princess Pink Hair messed with my bike and then flipped me off like it was my fault."

Earl's smile changes, like he's just gotten a tasty morsel. Considering the size of his gut, he's had his fair share. "Ahh, now see? That I didn't know. I heard about the commotion but not what started it. So now I know . . . she touched your bike and you went nuclear. Seems like an overreaction, but what do I know? I never had no bike before."

I can feel the immediate tightness in my chest when he says I overreacted. I didn't. My anger was totally justified, and even though she apologized, she expected it to just magically be okay like she didn't just mess with the one thing keeping me sane right now.

I silently fume, and Earl stares at me, appraising me like he often has before, and I know he can see the darkness that surrounds me like smoke.

Smoke—that's what I need. Goddammit, I hate this habit, but I can't help it. When the caffeine doesn't work, nicotine often will.

I walk past him to the open bay door, grabbing a pack of Marlboro Reds and a lighter off the work table as I go. I lean against the door frame, covering the tip as I light the cigarette that is both killing me slowly and making some moments more manageable.

Earl walks over, and I offer him one out of the pack, holding the lighter up as he inhales. He looks at me with a cocked eyebrow for a moment before speaking. "You know, Son, I'm not one to judge. My generation, we grew up thinking these things were actually good for you. You ain't hooked, I can tell that. What gives?"

After a few puffs, I give in. "I need them. They help me focus, the routine of breathe in, hold it, breathe out. Like it's fucking meditative or some shit. When a cig isn't enough, I ride. It's the only way I can outrun what's inside sometimes. And I figure it's a lot better than hard drinking or getting into fights."

Earl nods sagely. "For Bennie, he goes down to the community college area three times a week to some gym where he rolls around in pajamas and chokes people or something. A man needs a way to be free from the demons. Sometimes, it's best to run. But eventually, you gotta turn around and fight them, beat them into submission. That's what Bennie says, and I'll gladly take credit for teaching him that one."

Earl's probably got a point. He may have never had a motorcycle, but he's got his demons and he's battled and fought them for a lot of days. There are reasons all of his children except Bennie don't want to go into the family business and why he's been divorced three times. So I grunt an acknowledgement, and he takes that as progress for the day.

I swear Earl thinks I'm his pet project or something, but he hasn't recognized that I'm broken far worse than he knows and I'm not fixable. Each man who comes back broken is broken differently, and I'm not Bennie. This Humpty-Dumpty is shattered from the inside out, and

nobody's gonna put me back together again. Best thing I can hope for is to keep going day by day, and when I do explode or go over the edge, I do it in a way that doesn't hurt anyone else.

Earl is willing to let it go for now. "So, back to the original topic at hand. The new salon folks? Seems after their ribbon cutting ceremony, Jaxson took them down to the diner and showed them off like prize-winning hogs, introducing them around."

The fact that he doesn't use 'mister' for Jaxson isn't lost on me, as Earl has repeatedly said that Jaxson sets his Spidey senses on alert. I've met the man too, the last time when he brought his car in for some work on the air conditioner, and he just seems like a political huckster type, a little too polished to be legitimate. His smile, his laugh, and his handshake all seem just a little too practiced, like he works at it in the mirror at home until it's just right.

"Yeah, so?" I grunt. Personal qualms about Jaxson aside, his taking them around and introducing them is just his sort of schtick.

Earl looks like he's about to give me a Christmas morning puppy. He's so excited for some reason. "Word is, he asked Miss McKayla for just the two of them . . . almost like he was trying for a date, and she accepted, but for her and Mr. Brad. Whoo-boy, I like her already."

The thought of her side-stepping a date with that slick welcome wagon suit gives me a little jolt of happiness, although I'm not quite sure if it's because I'm happy he didn't get his way or because she didn't go out with some douchebag. Sure, she was a spoiled bitchy Princess, but a damn hot one too. Something about the way her clothes, her body, and most of all, that hair . . . they all seemed to work together. She's too much woman for a schmuck like Jaxson to handle, although the thought of the smackdown she'd give him if he tried makes me laugh inside a bit.

I look toward the salon. My mind's all sorts of fucked up, but my eyes are perfect. The big plate glass windows let me see inside where she is standing behind a brunette, eyes laser focused on the section of hair she's cutting. She's talking as she works, her bright red lips forming shapes, and I wish I could hear what she's saying.

My gaze moves around, and I realize Brad is standing at the front desk, phone cradled to his ear with his shoulder, and his eyes are locked on me. He raises one eyebrow and gently shakes his head at me.

I exhale the breath I didn’t know I was holding and look back to Earl. “Thanks for the gossip, Earl. But I gotta get back to work.”

He drops his cig, grinding it under his heel. “Sure thing, Son. You let me know if you need a ride to the meeting on Wednesday at the lodge.”

I give him a death-stare, but inside, I kinda grin. Man, that guy is like a dog with a bone . . . won’t give it up for anything.

Earl leaves, sort of waddling down the sidewalk at a deceptive speed. You don’t think the man’s moving, but next thing you know, he’s half a block away. After watching him go, I look back across the street. Brad’s still playing guard dog at the front desk as I get myself another eyeful of McKayla, but when I see him again, he grins and gives me a wink.

Sorry, buddy, that’s not my game, but you’re also not going to throw me off mine. Besides, I’ve got a leaky Caddy to chase down.

If only I were as easy to fix as this old thing.

CHAPTER 5

MCKAYLA

"We're rocking, we're rolling," I chant as I do a little dance around the shop. I just looked at the receipts on the computer, and there's a reason to dance. Roughly four thousand reasons.

Brad looks on with a huge grin, but he doesn't join my victory celebration. He's too busy making himself look beautiful. "I just can't believe it. One week, and I'm already thinking we need to hire another pair of hands."

I laugh, coming over and tugging on his arm. I'm too damn happy to just let him primp in front of the mirror. "I feel like ever since that newspaper article and going over to the diner with Jaxson, we've already seen half the town, so must be the other half coming in over the next two weeks because our schedule is full."

Brad gives in to my persistent tugging and gets up to grab my hand, spinning me in a little circle and pulling me in for a crazy little swaying dance, even though there's no music. He dips me down, one high-heeled shoe sticking up toward the ceiling, before he pulls me back to my feet. I keep forgetting that the man can seriously dance.

"Yep," he says, agreeing with me as he does a little half-dance of his own that shows off a few more of his moves. "Half already love us and the other half will in a minute." He twirls, dropping down faster than a man really should in pants that tight before bouncing up and popping a hip into one of the empty chairs, spinning it around. "Between all the hair services you're doing and all the facials and eyebrows I'm doing, we're on the cusp of being the premiere beauty salon in the state. I feel it."

As he says the last part, he spreads his hands wide like he's seeing our salon name in lights across a big marquee.

I laugh, glad at his projection but a little realistic too. “Well, maybe not the state. We should probably conquer this little town first, but we’re sure as fuck doing better than I’d ever hoped. ”

With big smiles, we do our special high-five combo with a mix of fist-bumps, waving fingers, and the piece de resistance hip wiggle with an ass smack. Brad might not have much of an ass, but I’ve got enough to make up for the both of us.

Brad rubs his bony hip, grinning as he heads for the register. “Done and done. I’m finished closing out the cash drawer and receipts for the day, so I’m gonna head out and do the bank run on the way home. There’s a couch and a cabernet calling my name. Need anything else?”

I’m pleased to hear Brad talking so positively about his new rental house. It was one of the things that had worried me the most about moving to smaller city, the slower pace of life. Brad had been a total denizen of the Hollywood night scene, stylin’ and profilin’ his happy little ass anywhere there was a dance club and a rainbow. Now he rents a two-bedroom house on the corner of town, and from what I can tell, the wildest it gets around here would bore most of the Hollywood party crowd.

“Nah, I’m good. Thank you though. I’m going to finish sweeping up and mop my way out the back to the stairs. I’ve got leftover Chinese food calling my name and a long bubble bath soak on the agenda. I’ll see you tomorrow, bright and early.”

Despite appearances, I’ve got a homebody streak in me that likes the new setup, living right above the salon. The building has an apartment upstairs, and we’d talked extensively about sharing it since it has two bedrooms, but realistically, if we worked together all day and lived together, I think one of us would end up dead. There’d be glitter, hair dye, and blood everywhere.

I love Brad like the brother I never had, and he feels the same about me, but with both of us having such big personalities, a little life balance is in order for us to do our best work. Besides, the way he somehow finds men who are open to his advances from outta nowhere makes me jealous.

And since work is the priority, we decided having separate homes was the right choice to keep us clicking properly. Jealousy doesn’t make for a good work environment.

Plus, that means we each get multiple closets since he has just as many, if not more, clothes as I do, and the vision of our sharing a bathroom makes

me shudder a bit. Friends, yes. Knowing each other's toilet habits, no thank you.

With an airy kiss in my direction, he grabs the bank bag and heads out the door. The little bell over the door tinkles, and I decide to get back to actually wrapping up work. There may not be a cabernet upstairs for me, but I do have a couple of bottles of a local craft brew IPA that I could easily enjoy with the Chinese food.

I'm head-down, focused on the floor and sweeping all the stray hairs I missed throughout the day, when I hear the tinkling of the bell above the door. "Sorry, we're closed . . ." I start as I look up to see Jaxson stepping in with a smile, his hand raised in a wave. "Jaxson."

His smile grows as he sees I've remembered his name. "Hey, McKayla, hope I'm not interrupting. Just wanted to stop by and see how it's going . . ." He tapers off like there's more he wants to say, but he just looks at me. When I don't reply, his smile slips a little before recovering. "So, how're you doing?"

"I don't think we could've dreamed of a better first week than the one we actually had. It's going great, better than we'd even hoped. Just cleaning up for the night." I gesture vaguely around the salon and he looks around.

Jaxson nods, looking semi-impressed at least. "I have to tell you, this place looks amazing. I don't know anything about fancy salons out in LA, but you guys seem to know what you're doing."

I smile politely, then realize something. "Hey, how'd you know we're from LA? I don't think I mentioned that before." I see a flicker cross his eyes, but it's so fast, I think maybe I imagined it.

"I thought you did, or maybe I heard folks talking about it at the grand opening last week. That's right, isn't it? I've been telling everyone about our town's new famous Hollywood dynamic duo." He says it with such a big smile that I can't help but smile back.

I try and think back. Maybe I did mention it. I mean, if I didn't, I'm sure Brad did. It is sort of our calling card, bringing legit Hollywood skills. I just haven't said much because I didn't want to come off as arrogant to the locals. "Yep, that's us. Started in two different places, hooked up in Hollywood, and now ready to rock on our own. I guess that makes us movers and shakers."

I laugh a little at my own joke and then remember I need to finish cleaning up. Looking at the floor, I wiggle my broom a bit. "Sorry, Jaxson,

but I really need to finish cleaning up for the night. Thanks for—”

I’m just about to give him the polite brush-off, broom pun intended, when he interrupts me. “Oh, let me help. You’re not exactly dressed for cleaning.”

I look down at my slim leopard print pencil skirt, puffy shoulder black top, and red patent platform heels. I bite back a little, not taking kindly to having my style questioned. Sure, it’s a little over-the-top, but it’s typical me for damn sure. I’m out there and fucking fabulous, and the rest of the world can like it or go fuck themselves. “Well, this is how I always dress and how I always clean, so it seems to work just fine.”

Jaxson seems to get the point because he steps back, giving me a bashful look. “Oh, I didn’t mean that to sound bad. Sorry, I meant it as a compliment. Most women around here wear yoga pants and t-shirts to clean, jeans if you’re really getting fancy. But you’re like a walking, talking pin-up from the 1950s, Bettie Page reincarnated. You take care of your appearance. I dig it.”

Cringing inside at my immediate jump to thinking he was insulting me, I try to backpedal a bit. I mean, he’s not my type, but he’s not being an asshole either. “It’s all right. I’m used to guys not really knowing what to think about my wardrobe, and usually, when people think ‘different’, they think ‘bad’ for some reason, so I’m a little defensive. Ever heard of Dita von Teese?”

He steps over and takes the broom from my hand, bending down to sweep up a little pile of hair. He looks up from the floor in front of me and I’m struck by the intimacy of the position even if he is a foot away. If my skirt were just a little higher, he’d be able to see quite a bit more than I normally show men I’m not interested in. “Never heard of her. Tell me.”

I hear a little bit of command in his voice and I’m surprised. Well, well, well. Maybe Mr. Politico-Nice Guy has a little fire after all. It’s probably wrong that it makes me like him just a smidgen more, but honestly, it does.

“Well, you said Bettie Page, right? Think of Dita like the woman who sort of picked up Bettie’s ball and ran with it. She’s a fashion icon, known for her vintage style, mostly 30s and 40s. She models, designs, and dances too. I’ve always been inspired by her flair for classic drama, but I have to mix a bit of rockabilly in for myself too. I’m too wild to be that traditional.”

Jaxson laughs. “Did you just say you’re a hillbilly? No offense, but we’ve got some pretty country folk around here. No hillbillies though.”

I laugh back. “No, rockabilly, kinda rock-n-roll with a little country mixed in. Think 50s Pink Ladies meets sexy-sass and given a twenty-first-century twist.”

Jaxson smiles, tilting his head as he leans on the broom and looks me up and down, obvious in his appraisal.

I freeze and can’t decide if I feel good or bad about his attentions. I should be able to tell, but I just can’t get a read on him and that makes me nervous. While I normally go for rougher types, there’s a little something in his overall vibe that leaves me questioning just how vanilla he really is.

Jaxson breaks the tension after a moment, pursing his lips and humming. “Well, whatever you call it, it works for you.” His face stays serious for a moment, waiting for my reaction, but I stay quiet for a change. Talking is the easiest way to drag this out, and I just want to turn in.

Brad would be fucking proud of me for keeping my big mouth shut because that’s a rare reaction for me. I’ve got a bad habit of talking my way into problems and sometimes not being able to back out without shit going down. Actually, one of the first times Brad and I worked together, that was the case.

Jaxson, not hearing the ‘thank you’ he’s expecting, changes tack and smiles again. “Hey, you had dinner yet? We could grab something to eat?”

He looks like an earnest little boy, and I’m about to snatch his new favorite toy away . . . me. But I’m not the kind to be treated as anyone’s little plaything. That’s probably part of the reason I have such a problem with the bad boys. I can get on for the ride, but eventually, I want to take the wheel sometimes too. Jaxson strikes me as the type to want a sweet little woman who does what he says, definitely not the kind to let me run full-throttle on occasion, and that more than anything makes up my mind for me. “Thanks, Jaxson. But I’m beat. I just need a little down time to recover from the crazy week and get ready to do it all again.”

His face falls in disappointment, but with a breath, he rallies. “Sure, I understand. Maybe some other time?”

I hum noncommittally and walk him toward the door, a clear indication that I’m dismissing him. He relents and follows me, stepping outside as I pull the door open. He pauses, looking down at me just as we’re nearly pressed against each other while he slides his way through the door. Suddenly, I’m aware of how much bigger than me he is. I’m not a tiny woman—well, not *that* tiny—but even in my five-inch platforms, he’s got

at least six inches of height on me. But where I'm curvy and full-chested, he's slender and wiry.

As I look up, I don't want to back up. I don't want to give him the impression that he's got rights in my own store, but I do lean back in an attempt to get some personal space. *This is my bubble, and that is your bubble, dude.*

His eyes are flickering, but I don't feel heat. His eyes are stone cold as he looks at me, not like a man looks at a woman, not even like a human being looks at another human being, but like someone would look at a bug, or maybe a bauble in the store that you want to buy only to throw away later.

I feel the decrease in space on a visceral level as he leans in, turning my face away as he kisses my cheek. His lips are dry, papery thin as he holds them against my cheek for a split second that feels like an eternity.

I press against his chest, cringing away, desperate to get him the fuck out of here. "Look, uh . . . Jaxson, one of my faults is I'm blunt as fuck, so I'm just gonna say this. I'm new to town and not looking for anything romantic. Friends, sure, but nothing more. I appreciate your help with the city council stuff, but that's it."

Jaxson smiles at me. "Sure, I get it. But you won't be new to town forever. Just trying to get to know the new girl in town."

It sounds reasonable but makes me narrow my eyes at him anyway. I may not be new in town forever, but after what I just felt, if hell froze over and Satan himself knocked on the door asking for a date, I might be more interested in the Prince of Darkness than this man. "I understand. Please, I need to get cleaned up."

He steps further out and begins to walk away, turning to offer a two-finger wave. "I'll see you later, McKayla."

I watch as he gets further away. Nothing he just said was off, but still, there's something about him that gives me pause. I look up and down the dark sidewalk, noting how alone we are.

I still haven't gotten used to how things are so quiet around here. Except for certain nights, it's one of those towns that rolls up the sidewalks when the sun goes down, a hell of a long way from LA with a quiet time of three thirty in the morning . . . sometimes.

If Jaxson had nefarious intentions, he damn sure would've had an opportunity.

With a sigh, I shake my head, telling myself that I'm not in LA, and every nice guy that chats me up isn't a boogieman I need to be wary of. Right before I turn inside, a red light twinkles across the street and I squint to get a better view.

The red cherry of a cigarette. Evan. Yeah, Evan's his name.

CHAPTER 6

EVAN

I'm a watcher. I can't help it. Ever since I got back from my last deployment, where I spent days in hiding, frozen in mountainside caves or rooftops or wherever the fuck they sent me, staring at the world around me through a scope, I have kept the same habits.

Don't engage, don't draw attention, just lie low and observe and you'll know more about everyone and everything than you thought possible. I've relaxed a bit in the time since I've been home, made a few friends who can put up with me running hot and cold, and bought a big ass bike that draws attention but turns people off from the dirty biker, but I still watch.

Mostly, though, I watch because I still don't feel like I *belong*. Sure, TJ puts up with my ass and old Earl holds out hope for me, but when I walk around town or when I go to the supermarket, the people I pass just don't seem like the same species as me. They're smiling in that sort of pleasant smartphone-induced haze that's filled with Facebook updates, manufactured outrage over some people you don't really give two shits about, and kitten pictures.

Part of me remembers the time I was about the same. Just a softer, carefree kid coming home to a working-class house with parents too busy to pay any attention to me and TJ unless the school was calling again. I just kinda skated by, passed my classes, hung out with buddies, and just coasted through days without much thought.

Quiet and shadowed against the front of my building, I've downed two Monsters while peering into the salon across from me, still caught in my reflections. Why did I join the Army? It wasn't out of any great desire to wrap myself in the flag and go play soldier boy. I remember that. I'd seen the JROTC crew sweating it out in the parking lot, twirling their rifles and

shining their helmets while my friends and I sat on tailgates in the school lot, just goofing off. I thought they looked like idiots.

So why did I join? I guess the answer's simple—it was something to do to get me out of here and grow up. I saw friends getting more and more lost, trying drugs and working dead-end jobs, and at some point, I realized I wanted more than that. I figured the military might make a man out of me. How was I supposed to anticipate spending most of my time outside of basic training in a godforsaken desert? How could I have known what I would see . . . what I would have to do?

I watch Brad leave, and my eyes tick back to McKayla, who is sweeping up, bending over in a skirt that hugs her every curve like it was custom-made for her. She may be a Pretty Pink Princess, but she's built like a pin-up queen.

Hell, I don't know. She's a Hollywood girl. Maybe it was made for her curvy measurements. She hasn't made a big deal of her background. I think she's left that in Brad's hands, but the rumors have gotten around, and a few people have Googled her. Supposedly, she's done some pretty famous shit, not that they advertise who cuts the hair on summer blockbusters.

I'm about to go inside for the evening when I see that prick, Jaxson, striding down the sidewalk, and I shrink even farther into the shadows so he won't see me. I stand there, hidden except for the wisps of smoke from the cigarette I'm just holding as a cover while I stand there not moving, watching for twenty minutes while he chats up McKayla, obviously trying to lay the mac down on her. He even tries sweeping like a dutiful servant before she ushers him out the front door. I have to smirk . . . I may not know a lot about McKayla, but it's not the way to impress *that* woman. She's the kind who I bet loves to get treated like a queen, but only from a man strong enough.

My fist tightens against my thigh when I see him lean in to kiss her, but I damn near guffaw out loud when I see her bob and duck away from his advance. Damn, last time I saw moves like that was when Ali was making people look like fools in a boxing ring on *YouTube*.

Good girl. Smart girl, I think. *You don't want to let him in even an inch.*

He walks away, turning back for one more wave, but she stays outside, glancing along the street for a moment. I predict when her gaze will hit the front of the garage and take my first drag on my cancer stick, lighting up

the cherry, and like a moth to a flame, I feel it when her eyes latch on to my location.

It's not what I should do, intentionally drawing her attention like that, and honestly, I don't even know why I do it. I just want her to know I'm here. She squints for a moment, making sure her eyes aren't playing tricks on her. I toss my can to the side, where it rattles as it makes its way into the trash barrel that TJ insists on keeping right outside the office door . . . probably because of my damn cans.

I'm smiling, knowing McKayla's about to hairflip away again and stomp inside. I'm already focused on her hips, ready for the quick view of her ass in that leopard skirt, when I realize that she's not turning to go inside and instead, those curvy hips are getting closer as she struts across the street toward me. As she gets close, I look her up and down. "So, wanting to see the bike again?"

She's not amused. "Hey, asshole, you just perving out over here now? Get an eyeful?"

I smile, but it's a small consolation. "Evan."

Her thunder stolen, she stares at me, confused. "Huh?"

I raise an eyebrow, "You called me asshole. My name's Evan." Patting my chest in a mocking thump, then pointing at her, "Me Evan, You Princess. Just thought you'd want to know who you're bitching at. Continue." I wave my hand in a come on gesture, since while I know I've knocked her back a little, she's not the kind to stay that way for long.

She smirks, continuing. "I said . . . Evan, a.k.a. Pervy McPerverson, maybe you should take a picture. It'd last longer." She eyes me like saying my name is asking her to chug a lima bean juice frappe.

I smile, and it's a real one, a rare occurrence these days, as I'm struck with a thought. Curious, I ask her, "Maybe one of you trespassing on my bike? How'd that turn out, anyway? Get what you needed?"

It's the longest string of speech I've offered her yet, and judging by the shock on her face, she realizes that too. Her sails deflate, and while it takes a little bit out of the fiery sexiness she's got, it also makes her cuter in a lot of ways. "Yeah, about that. I really am sorry. I did try to ask, and when nobody answered, I meant to just stand in front of it and not touch. I got carried away. I'd say it won't happen again, but that'd be a lie. My whole life is pretty much me getting carried away by crazy ideas and wild adventures."

I huff out a laugh at her honest admission. “So tell me, what’s the craziest idea, the wildest adventure you’ve ever been carried away on?”

She looks up to the sky like there’s an answer written in the sparks of the stars, humming as she searches her memory. Considering how long it’s taking, either she’s going to lie her ass off or she actually has gotten into some crazy shit. I’m kinda hoping it’s the second.

Finally, looking me in the eye, she starts. “Well, I’d say the time I dared to touch a guy’s bike without permission, but maybe that’s not so crazy after all. How about ditching Hollywood and moving to a new town to start a new business when I only know one person in the whole town? Meh, you know that too. Let’s see . . .”

She taps her lips with black painted nails that glitter in the street lights, and I feel a long forgotten tingle in my jeans. It’s not that the equipment doesn’t work, but usually, the demons are running around too much for me to do anything about it. “Well?” I ask, trying not to laugh. “Let me guess, you went to a club and Leonardo DiCaprio walked in . . . and walked out ten minutes later with you and every other woman in the club in tow.”

“Leo?” she asks. “Gimme some credit, it’d take him more than five minutes for me alone. Six, at least. Anyway, ah . . . yep, craziest adventure. I once hitchhiked across the state line to Nevada, just a backpack of snacks and a hundred bucks to my name. Rode with a truck driver on the way there and a group of bikers on the way back. In hindsight, they might’ve been a motorcycle club, but I didn’t care at the time. They were just going in the right direction.”

My eyes go wide. That’s a bit wilder than I’d thought. Maybe even bordering on stupid. “What was in Nevada? Hitting the slots with that hundred?”

McKayla leans in to whisper like she doesn’t want anyone to hear, even though we’re alone on the darkened street. “I went to a Prince concert.”

I realize how close she is and my heartbeat picks up as I look at her. “All that for a concert? Must’ve been some show.”

She leans back, eyes meeting mine, and grins. “That’s not the crazy part. The crazy part is that I hitchhiked with a trucker and a biker gang to Vegas and back for a Prince concert alone . . .” She pauses for dramatic effect. “when I was sixteen. And lived to tell the tale. It was fun and I was damn lucky.”

All right, not bordering on stupid, but about three days past the line of stupid. At least she seems to recognize how insane it was. “That’s a dangerous adventure. Hope you’re a little smarter about your escapades now.”

She smirks at me, tilting her head in a way that sends another tingle down my spine. “Sometimes yes, sometimes no. You only live once, so I’m going for it, balls to the wall. Speaking of, come on.” She grabs at my hand like she’s ready to lead me somewhere, lifting her chin toward her salon. “Let me show you something.”

I’m a little stunned. Nobody willingly touches me these days. Everyone’s too scared of the growling, ticking time bomb that I am to even approach me. I’m surprised some people don’t ask to see my rabies tag.

But she just takes my hand like it’s no big deal. Crazy and wild, indeed. I’m curious what she’s up to, so I follow, prowling across the street with her. She pulls open the salon doors, leading me inside, and walks up to a wall in the reception area. “Well, you wanted to see it. There you go.”

I can’t really see this angle from my shop-front, so I look around and see what she’s talking about. The photo of her posed leaning over my bike looks like something that you’d find on one of those old motorcycle calendars, Miss July because she’s so damn hot. But whoever did the filtering and printing did a lot to up the class level a notch, making it classy and not trashy. The black and white coloring gives it a vintage feel, highlighting the curves of her body and my bike.

I instantly memorize it because it’s probably the hottest thing I’ve ever seen and I know I’ll be jacking off to that image later tonight.

I turn toward McKayla, giving her a low whistle. “I don’t wanna sound rude, but you look sexy as fuck in this picture. Maybe I should’ve let you take a few more with my bike before running you off.”

If I thought she’d be turned off by my lack of finesse, I’m dead wrong because she moves in close, rising up to her tiptoes in those damn high heels to press her lips to mine.

It’s sultry and heated, even as her lips simply move against mine, not begging entry, just enjoying the moment. She breaks contact, leaving my lips burning, and looks into my eyes. “Well, Evan? You going to be rude some more?”

Before I know what I’m doing, I grab her around the waist, kissing her back forcefully, pulling her body in tight to press against mine, her glorious

mix of soft curves and firm flats making my heart race. My cock lets loose a battle cry that I haven't felt in a long time, raging to full hardness in my jeans as I reach down to knead her ass.

She lets out a whimpering sigh of delight, and I take advantage, slipping my tongue in to tangle with hers. It feels like sparks are flicking against my skin everywhere we touch as our lips work at each other. She slips a hand up to my hair, threading the strands through her fingers and gently pulling me even deeper.

Her other hand claws at my back, those manicured nails scratching my shoulder blade deeply. The flash of pain wakes me up, and I pull back, resting my forehead against hers, my breath coming in pants as I try to recover. McKayla's breathing is even heavier, her eyes wild. "What's wrong?"

I take her arms in my hands and nudge her away to look her in the eye. "You don't want to do this. Crazy and wild adventures might be your thing, but I'm not an adventure you want to try out. You'll just get yourself hurt. I'm a damn nosediving plane, just trying to stay steady and praying I don't pancake when I hit rock bottom. And fucking the new chick across the street damn sure isn't gonna make my life any easier."

I step back, still trying to shake off the effect she's had on me. My body is crying out, no part of it louder than my cock, which is screaming at me to turn the fuck around and go back. It's forgotten what a real woman feels like.

I ignore it, using the last little scrap of decency left in me to keep my feet pointing in the right direction. Walking out the door, I hear her behind me. "Bye . . . Evan."

CHAPTER 7

MCKAYLA

"And so anyway, John was like, I saw this on *Netflix* when I was thinking the whole time, 'uh-huh. You've just been watching porn again.' So I turned to him and said if you think I'm gonna put my mouth anywhere near—"

I tune out the chatter, trying desperately not to focus as another one of my customers seems to want to treat a haircut like a chance to engage in some free sex counseling or something. Maybe it's our image. The cheesecake shot of me on the motorcycle probably doesn't help, even if it is fucking awesome. But with Brad and me being a little more . . . out there than the average person around here, paired with our natural flirtatious natures, people think we're sex experts or something.

I wish. Right now, the only thing going through my mind is *fuck me running*. Or standing, or lying down, or sitting. Or basically any damn way that doesn't involve the police. Since kissing Evan a few days ago, riding that man to oblivion is all I can think about. Come to think of it, maybe I am a little more sexpert than most because my mind is coming up with some pretty inspired ideas right now. Straddling him as we race down a deserted road probably isn't the best idea though.

I've gotten through the days, seeing customers virtually back-to-back all day. I really haven't had time to count my lucky stars, but Brad was right last week. We might need to look at hiring another pair of hands around here. Front desk, clean up, even another stylist. I remind myself of that again as Mrs. Alameda in front of me keeps going on about her husband.

While the hustle has helped keep me from going nuts, more than once, Brad has caught me daydreaming as I stare out the window across the street. I haven't told him why yet, but he's smart. He knows. He just hasn't

said anything yet, but he knows I like men like Evan. And motorcycles. And bad boys on motorcycles.

Speaking of, I glance up to stare out the window and across the street, straight into his garage. It didn't take me long to figure out that by putting my clients in the first chair on the left side, I could keep track of the big doors on the shop. And it only took me about five minutes after they opened Monday morning to realize we have a clear shot to see inside as they work on cars. Can I get an amen for beautiful weather?

I finish up with Mrs. Alameda and swipe her card before standing behind the counter and looking out across the street during the ten minutes I've got open in my schedule, taking advantage of the free shot I'm getting. And I'll admit that maybe, just maybe, I'm watching like the pervert I accused Evan of being. But right now, he's working on a truck, his muscular arms flexing as he turns some sort of wrench while taking the rear tires off. I don't care if it makes me a pervert or not. My eyes are locked onto him, memorizing every detail.

I hear Brad *tsk* behind me. "Girl, are you at it again?"

I smile, turning just my head to answer. "Hell to the yes, I am. Hey, I see there's another guy over there working on a car. Who do you think he is?"

Brad sighs, looking to the heavens as he comes over from his station, probably praying for strength to not wring my neck. He looks out the window for a moment, then shrugs. "Considering your boy told me he owns the shop with his brother, and that guy is a younger, sweeter looking version of your asshole boy toy obsession, I'd lay bets that he's the brother. I'm brilliant at deduction like that. Just call me Shercock fucking Holmes."

I laugh, shaking my head. "You know I read somewhere that Holmes and Watson probably did the dirty in Arthur Conan Doyle's private notebooks?"

"It ain't dirty. Well, not too dirty, unless that's your kink," Brad says with a smirk. "So, about your boyfriend—"

I glower at Brad, elbowing him in the side. "He's not my boyfriend. But he's damn sure gonna take me for a ride. On that bike or otherwise."

A timer chimes softly, and I walk back toward my second favorite chair, where I can still get a view of Evan at work, but not as good a view. I've got another client in it, chilling out with her earbuds in while a heat activated conditioner soaks into her blonde locks. I pat her shoulder, and

she opens an eye, popping out an earbud. “Hey, Rose, your conditioning treatment is done. Ready to wash up?”

Rose sighs, taking out the other earbud, looking disappointed. “Already time? Damn, my audiobook was just getting to the good stuff.”

“Good stuff like *good* stuff? Well, don’t let me stop you. Just let it play out loud while I rinse your hair and maybe we’ll all enjoy the good stuff for a minute. Lord knows, I’m not getting any otherwise.”

Rose, who’s a little older than me and totally the good girl with a deep-seated naughty streak that will rock some guy’s world some day, laughs, popping the earbud jack out of her tablet to let the audiobook play. “. . . *throwing her onto the bed, the pirate captain growls as he rips her bodice clean up the front, leaving her breasts heaving into the chilled air. Diving in, he suckles her nipple, her wanton body writhing in need for the long, hard sword she felt pressing against her through his tight breeches. ‘Please, Captain . . . please . . .’ she begs. ‘Give it to me.’*

‘Aye,’ the captain says, leering at her. ‘I’ll make you shiver on me timber.’”

I bust out in raucous laughter, unable to take any more. “What the hell are you listening to, Rose? Some pirate porn shit? It’s literally a bodice ripper!”

She’s laughing now too, and Brad just stares at us like we’re from an alien species before he gripes. “Is that really what women read? Long, hard sword. Shiver on me timber. Seriously? It’s not that difficult.”

“Oh?” Rose asks, grinning at Brad. “And what does it take then, oh expert on all things concerning male seduction?”

Brad shrugs. “Girls, take it from me. Just tell the man you want his cock, and he’ll be ready to go nine times out of ten. Hell, they’ll be breaking down your door.”

“Yeah, well, gotta worry about our reputations,” Rose counters, making Brad shrug, unconcerned. “What?”

“You know what a reputation is? It’s what you use to console yourself when you’re using a vibrator instead of the real thing.” He presses his lips together as he snaps his fingers and hums his agreement with his own statement. “And on that sage advice, I’m outtie for lunch. You bitches want me to grab you anything from the diner?”

He points at each of us, waiting for us to shake our head before swooshing out the door. Brad’s relaxed more, being his fabulous self more

in public, and I'm glad. For now, though, Rose and I look at each other and dissolve into giggles again. I wipe a tear from my eye, "So . . . pirate porn, huh? Wouldn't have pegged you as the type. Get it . . . *pegged*?"

She groans and rolls her eyes at my bad pun but sobers up. "Yeah, well, I've been so busy with the boutique, starting it on my own and working the B shift—I'll *be* there when it opens, and I'll *be* there when it closes—that I haven't really had time to date or have a personal life at all."

"Hire some help," I comment, but Rose shakes her head. "Why not?"

"The boutique isn't quite as popular as this place. And while I'm not worried about living the high life, I'd like to be able to afford to eat more than ramen noodles and box mac 'n' cheese."

"Good point," I joke. "All that MSG and shit'll kill you."

Rose sighs, looking a little forlorn. "I'm probably gonna end up the cat lady who yells at customers to close the door when they try to come in and shop so my horde of cats doesn't escape."

I start with the obvious, wanting to cheer her up. She's the closest thing I've made to a new friend in this town, and I hate seeing her looking this way. "If you have so many cats that they're gonna escape, your store is gonna close in a hot flash of a minute, Spinster Rose. So there, then you'll have time to date. Problem solved." I give her a pointed look. "Or, you know, you could date now and bypass the cat scratch fever and Fancy Feast."

Rose nods her agreement. "I know. It's just hard, even in a town this size and with tourists coming through. I thought I'd be a successful entrepreneur with a husband and a kid or two by now. But that's just not in the cards, so my boutique is my baby, and I'm so hard up that I listen to pirate porn instead of dating a decent guy with an actual cock. And no, I won't let you look at my browser history."

I chuckle and start rinsing out her conditioner. "It's okay, honey. Maybe your ship will come in. Hell, maybe he'll be the one who likes pegging."

"Huh?"

I shake my head, remembering that I'm not in Hollywood anymore and things aren't quite as adventurous. "Never mind. Just one word of caution, Rose. If that boat's named *Titanic*, don't get on the damn thing."

She giggles at me, finally relaxing some again. "How about you? New in town—anybody caught your attention?"

I sigh dreamily and resist the urge to look through the front window again. “Maybe. Do you know Evan Hardwick, across the street at the garage?”

She recoils in horror, jerking so hard she nearly bonks her head on the porcelain edge of the rinse sink, but I manage to catch her with quick hands. “The asshole who barely speaks, just grunts at people and revs his death machine motorcycle up and down the street at all hours of the night? *That* Evan Hardwick?”

I nod, feeling a light blush creep up my neck. “That’s the one. What can I say? I’ve got good taste in men. You gotta admit, it’s a hopeful last name.” I purse my lips as I turn her head and get more of the conditioner. “And it’s not a death machine. It’s a pretty sweet bike.”

Rose sighs. “Have you actually talked to him? I think the boutique was open for almost a year before he said one word to me, and that was only because I took my car in for service and TJ wasn’t working that day. I told him what I needed and he grunted, said ‘three o’clock’ and walked off. Customer service at its finest.”

I shrug. She’s dead on even to the way she drops her voice to make it rumble a little. “Sounds about right. First thing he ever said to me was at volume ten as he charged me like a damn bull . . .” I lower my voice into an imitation of Evan, growling. “What the fuck are you doing?”

Rose’s eyes widen and her jaw drops, and she sits up, gaping at me while I work on drying her hair. “And then what?”

I smile, working the towel through her hair before squeezing it out. I spin her chair around and pick up my scissors, knowing Rose doesn’t need much, but I do want to even her out in the back. “Well, after that great introduction, we had a big screaming match in the middle of Main Street. And a week later, I kissed the shit out of him before he ran. But he won’t be scared for long. He’ll be back.”

“How do you know?”

I grin, catching Rose’s eyes in the mirror. “Because now I’m a fear he has to conquer.” I kiss the air, smacking my lips, certain I know how this is going to play out. “And he might find that in conquering me . . . well, I like to conquer myself.”

Rose chuckles. “Is that so?”

“Shiver me timbers.”

CHAPTER 8

EVAN

Lunchtime in the shop is always a bit awkward as TJ and I try to make conversation like I'm not a bastard thorn in his side. We don't even eat the same things. He's all about the burgers and enjoying his food while I seem to take bitter comfort in eating shit that would make more sense as field rations.

So here we sit, day after day unless he escapes to the diner, making small talk about the various cars we're working on or flipping through the car magazines scattered across the table. I don't even think we're keeping track of what we're saying. I know at least twice a week, one of us will go to the other about something we just talked about at lunch and it devolves into a shouting match because we've already discussed it, but we keep doing it. I guess it's what brothers do. Or at least it's what we do . . . now

I'm damn grateful he's willing to even work with me, but that doesn't make it any less uncomfortable to chit-chat with a guy who knew me before I was fucked in the head with an alphabet diagnosis of PTSD that basically just warns folks that I'm always a breath away from losing it.

I can see it in TJ's face too sometimes. He remembers when we'd spend hours tinkering with our dad's car or with the bikes and cars our friends brought us. Hell, our wrench skills are how we paid for the most epic Spring Break trip ever, a four-day trip to Lake Havasu in Arizona. I don't think TJ and I slept in the same bed twice those whole four days, and I know for damn sure that I never woke up with the same bedmate I did the night before. Thank God for condoms and Lady Luck favoring the young and foolish.

Maybe that's what TJ is looking for, the big brother who was fun-loving and maybe a bit crazy but was the rock who helped him out when our parents died soon afterward. TJ was ready to give up his dream for this shop

and just get a regular job when I, on leave before my first deployment, pulled him aside and told him that in no way, shape, or form was I going to let him do that. Instead, I made him sign up at tech college so he'd have the business skills to go with being a grease monkey, and then I sent him a big chunk of my paycheck each month to make sure he was taken care of.

He doesn't know where that guy's gone, or why. Sometimes, I wonder too. Lots of guys from my unit are doing well, settled stateside with wives and kids, and I always wonder if they're stronger than me for being able to handle the shit we saw overseas better than I can. Or maybe they're less affected because there's something wrong with them and I'm the normal one.

I don't know. I just know that there's always a little kernel of something black at my core, and it swirls, rising and falling outside my control sometimes, no matter how many stupid fucking breathing exercises I try from the VA doc. Maybe it's just what the one guy told me—there are people who are made for war and people who aren't. Sometimes, the people who aren't are forced into war, and it changes them or it breaks them.

I feel eyes on me and look up from the new bike magazine spread out in front of my microwaved tray of Salisbury steak, grainy mashed potatoes, and dark greenish shit that's supposed to be either spinach or beans, I'm not sure which. I look up to see TJ giving me a look. My mouth's full, so I just grunt. "What?"

He leans over from his lunch of a club sandwich on whole wheat to slap me on the shoulder. Guess he's trying to clean up for some reason he's not telling me. "How you doin', brother?"

I give him a *what the fuck* look. Normally, if TJ has something he wants to ask me or to offer me, he just comes out and says it. This is something new, and new tends to make me put my guard up. New hurts or at least has the potential to hurt more than the old. "Same as always, just eating my damn lunch."

I don't ask what he's up to. Like I said, I really don't want to know. But he is in full-on fairy flew up his ass mode, so he keeps going. "Well, I'm doing well. Very well, in fact. Thanks for asking." He gives me a shit-eating grin, and I growl lightly. Great, fairy dust and unicorn rainbows. Someone get him a My Little Pony. "Ask me why."

I set my spoon down, wiping my greasy fingers on my jeans, and rock the chair back on two legs as I look at him, trying to see if there's

something different I'm missing. Not seeing anything, I decide the easiest way to get through this is to just let him talk. "All right, fucker, why are you doing so damn well today?"

I see the excitement behind his eyes and I flash back again to when we were boys, both whole and happy and full of life. He still looks the same, a wholesome innocence grown into a man who is solid, a brother in every sense of the word. For him, danger is the spice of life, like chili salsa on top of your tacos. You decide how much you get.

I, on the other hand, lost that shine a long time ago. I know that sometimes, the world will pry your jaws open, jam a funnel in between your lips, and pour fiery hot habanero salsa down your throat and there isn't a damn thing you can do about it. I don't want to piss on his parade, though, and let him enjoy his innocence.

He claps his hands once, nice and loud, the grin on his face spreading. "I met the one, man. Remember that car I delivered up to the resort for that tourist? Well, I'm sitting in the lobby waiting for him to come down for his keys and pay the bill when a vision walks in front of me. Her name's Alice and she works at the resort."

"Why haven't you seen her before?"

"She's not a local," TJ explains. "She just wrapped up a degree in hotel and hospitality management and moved up here. The resort's nice enough to let her stay there. She said she's got an apartment."

"She said, huh? So she actually talked to your ugly ass?" I ask, feeling a hint of amusement. "Does she happen to be blind?"

"Fuck you, man." TJ laughs. "We got to talking, I waited for her break time, we got coffee, and I asked her out. She said yes, and we're going to dinner this weekend. That's it, I'm done for, Bro."

He flops back in his chair, a fascinated, dreamy look on his face as he stares at the ceiling. Yep, I can see the kittens, unicorns, and rainbows falling out of his ears.

I laugh a little, full of sarcasm. I'm not trying to be an asshole here, but still, I think TJ needs a reality check. "Lemme get this straight. You met this chick, had coffee for a few minutes, and you're already planning the wedding? Yeah, sounds serious." I snort through my nose, picking up my spoon again. "And everyone says *I'm* the crazy one."

TJ gives me a dirty look, and I swear he's about to stick his tongue out at me like we're six years old again, but he reels it in. "Nah, man, when you

know, you know. And this one, I just know. She's it. You'll see."

He goes on, telling me practically verbatim every word they said while they drank coffee, and I can feel his excitement and joy at the happy road spread out before him. As he does, I'm torn between darkness and light, which just makes me more miserable.

I'm happy for my kid brother. Truly, I am. He's a good guy, and while I harass him about it, he's not ugly or anything. He keeps his shit together. But somewhere deep inside, in a place I don't want to admit even exists, I'm fucking jealous.

How come he gets the happily ever after and I'm stuck in purgatory, paying for sins I committed long ago on someone else's orders? How come he gets to smile and sleep through the night and look out on the morning with hope, while I only look at the sunrise and wonder if it's the last one I'll see before I go over the edge and get myself killed?

I'd love for just a minute of the peace he feels, but that's not my path. I'm never gonna have a happily ever after. There's no woman who would put up with my shit, and I know why. It's hard to love a monster like me, and honestly, I don't want to inflict my damage on anyone else. I just need to keep the lid on the Pandora's Box inside me and hope that motherfucker stays shut tight.

I push back from the table, offering a hand to TJ as I school my face into a smile I know is only mildly reminiscent of my real one.

"I'm happy for you. Make sure you invite me to the wedding. I'm uh . . . I'm gonna go for a ride. I'll be back later this afternoon, but I'll finish that brake realignment before I head out tonight."

I keep the smile just long enough for him to inspect me, make sure I'm okay and not about to crumble. I hate it when he does that. He makes me feel like he's just waiting for the moment I can't take it anymore.

Finally, he nods. "Sure, Bro. It's a beautiful day, and they said they wouldn't be back to pick it up until Wednesday anyway. Get out there and ride a few miles for me too."

I know he's full of shit now. He's never ridden a motorcycle in his life. It's another one of the differences between us. I've always been the one who pushed the line from the time we were kids. He was the one who kept his bicycle on the sidewalk while I was the one seeing if that rocky hill was really as dangerous as the other kids said it was. When I built my bike, I

offered TJ a ride. His comment was that he had no need to strap himself to a death trap.

But maybe that's exactly why I do it. I'm not the suicidal type, but maybe there's a part of me that wants to be taken out of this whole equation that is the world. Tempt fate a little bit, dare the Grim Reaper to catch me. After all, if he does it, I didn't really do anything wrong.

I stalk out to my bike, throwing a leg over the seat and settling my old combat boots on the ground on either side, straddling the machine as I start her up and listen to the grumbling purr. It's another one of the things I can't let go of. I always wear combat boots for work or riding.

I look left and right, pulling a big turn across Main Street and pointing my bike toward the mountains. Right as I'm about to twist the throttle and blare out of town, I hear a piercing, loud-ass whistle. I jerk my head around, looking for the source, and see McKayla standing outside the salon, her eyes locked on me.

I pull over to the curb, pissed at myself for doing it like I'm some damn taxi she just beckoned with that eardrum-busting shrillness. Still, I've heard Drill Sergeants who were quieter than that whistle. That's impressive.

She pops a hip out, one hand shading her eyes from the afternoon sun. "Where you heading, cowboy?"

I don't know why, but I answer her. "Out. Away. I don't know. Just away from here."

She gives me a sassy grin and raises an eyebrow. "Well, which is it? You going out or running away? Ah, I know. Maybe it's a little bit of both." She nods like she has me all figured out.

I relent. Maybe she has an angle on me here. "Maybe so."

"Need a chaperone to make sure you do something stupid?" she asks. "I've busted my ass six days a week since getting here, and I'm taking an afternoon off."

I chuckle, leaning back on my bike. "Isn't a chaperone to make sure you *don't* do something stupid?"

She gives me a smirk and runs a hand seductively over my handlebar mirror. "I think we've established that I'm not that kind of chaperone. Besides, I can see you need to break some rules right now. So come on, Evan. Let's go on an adventure."

She waits, and I realize that she's willing to go after what she wants, but only so far. She's not throwing herself at me with no self-esteem. Instead,

she’s somehow offering to share her excitement at the things life can offer, even if just for a moment. It’s different from the few women I’ve actually spent time with since getting home. This one is wild but has standards. Sassy, but classy too.

I think back to TJ and how happy he was about his new girl and look at the one in front of me. Yeah, this is a bad fucking idea, but the darkness inside me needs it, needs just a little spark of her light to quell the shadows for a little bit. I’ll never be a happily ever after guy like TJ, but for a minute, it’d be nice to pretend.

Resigned, I turn and pop open my saddlebag, where I keep the helmet I never wear. “Safety first.”

“But you—”

“Helmet up, or no ride.” Holding it out, I can’t help but lighten the growl in my voice as she takes the brain bucket and pulls it onto her pink head. “Now get on.”

CHAPTER 9

MCKAYLA

Fucking Hell! He doesn't have to tell me twice. I don't know what changed today to make him open to a bit of crazy, but I'm not gonna question it. I snatch the half-helmet from his hands, pulling the silk scarf from around my neck and tying it around my hair bandana-style to lessen the mess this damn thing is sure to bring. I'm slightly surprised he's got a helmet at all. I'd rather just go without, but Mr. Grumpy insists. I slide onto the bike, noticing that he looks so fucking sexy right now in just his sweaty, grease-streaked tank top, jeans, and sunglasses that I can practically feel my pussy quivering.

It only takes a momentary look down at my mini-skirt to overcome any worries I might have about looking like a tramp. Fuck it. I hike the damn thing up a little higher than is decent to straddle the seat behind him. I adjust to make sure I'm not flashing anyone, but before I get really settled, he twists the throttle, startling me. "What—whoa!"

Evan glances over his shoulder, a sexy taunting smirk on his lips. "Good? Got your helmet on?"

"Go!" I holler as I grab around his waist right as he takes off, offering a huge grin to Brad as I see him glaring open-mouthed at me through the salon window.

Sorry, Brad, but when an opportunity like this presents itself, I gotta roll with it. I know I said I'd answer phones while you see clients, but you'll understand!

Besides, I wouldn't hold it against him if he ditched me for a little fun. Well . . . not too much, at least, and I know I'd get over it! So, oopsie, babe. He'll forgive me, though, because a hot guy on a bike is always a priority.

We thunder down Main Street, passing by Rose's boutique, a ranch supply store with an older white-haired guy sitting outside in a rocking

chair, and several other little storefronts. Once you hit the northern part of town, there's a lot of tourist trap-looking little places that try and soak up as many tourist dollars from the resort hotel people as they can.

We pass a casino that marks the boundary between the Native American reservation land and the town. Evan twists the throttle as we head up into the mountains.

We ride for what seems to be hours, and I can feel the tension leave his body incrementally, the same way it does mine as we go higher into the forested peaks surrounding the town. I feel at one with the bike and with Evan as we lean into turns, our bodies synchronized with the curves of the road.

Even though we're probably going a lot faster than the speed limit, I never feel a moment of fear as I tightly squeeze Evan's muscular waist. As my sheer excitement of being behind him settles into a calmness at the freedom of flying down the road, the vibrations between my legs get impossible to ignore. The beastly engine between our legs sends trembles through his seat and the thin layer of my panties, adding to the powerful scent of Evan filling my nostrils. I press my nose closer to his broadly muscled back, barely concealed by his tank top and the jeans that stretch across his powerful thighs.

I lean forward more, pressing my chest to his back to feel his warmth and his muscles rippling as he rides, the back of his dirty blonde hair whipping back beside me and caressing my cheek.

Yep, this might just be the hottest thing I've ever done . . . so far. I arch my back a little, changing the angle of the vibrations between my legs so that the rumbling purr hits right on my clit, and I feel it throughout my pussy, knowing I've soaked my panties and that I'm probably going to leave a spot on his seat.

I have a twinge of embarrassment at the thought but then decide I rather like marking my territory, even if it's just for a passing moment. We keep riding, far out of town into the mountains that line the landscape, and he pulls over in a gravel parking lot. Looking around, the first thing I notice is that this place looks like an abandoned gas station, one of those old-time country stops that probably closed up when people started taking the Interstate everywhere.

The second thing that hits me is the immense beauty of where we are. I can't hear anything except the twitter of birds, the soft rush of mountain

breezes, and far away, maybe somewhere below us . . . water. “Where are we?”

“Come on,” Evan says, getting off the bike and stomping away. “I’ll show you what sometimes keeps me from going insane.”

I gawk as he just walks off, and I debate for a moment whether I should follow him. I’m glad I’m not wearing the highest of my high heels, but still, I wouldn’t be surprised if there’s snakes in that overgrown path he’s headed toward.

“Come on,” Evan calls back. “It’s not far. Just about a hundred feet.”

Fuck it. I follow him, carefully watching each step. Sure, snakes may not like dealing with jeans and combat boots like Evan’s wearing, but high heels and stockings? Yeah, zero fucks given there. If I get bitten, I’m kicking his ass.

We make our way through the line of trees, and all of my worries disappear as we step into what I can only describe as a slice of paradise. We’re on the edge of a small clearing, maybe fifty feet across and less than twenty deep, the other side ending in a cliff face that drops off vertically. I have a spectacular view of a valley below us, with a lake at the bottom. The water I hear is a hydroelectric dam creating an artificial waterfall that drops off out of my sight to the right.

Evan is just sitting in the grass, quietly taking in the sight. “What is this place?” I ask.

He’s silent, and for a second, I think he’s not gonna answer. “My escape,” he finally murmurs, keeping his eyes on the water far below. “When I really need to, I come up here. It keeps me sane.”

I sit down next to him, just taking it all in. Within a few minutes, I can see the tenseness inside him let loose, making me relax. We stay there, and as the sun begins to dip lower into the afternoon sky, there’s a warm orange glow surrounding us. I lay my cheek against his shoulder, taking in the lovely view with a hum of appreciation.

After a moment, he growls, shrugging. “Get off.”

I’m flustered, the hardness of his voice unexpected in the peaceful moment, but I do as he says, half-wondering if he’s going to just leave me here. I still haven’t heard anything but the rush of water below us or the twitter of the birds.

Evan gets up and storms out of the clearing, and I follow him as best I can. “Evan, come on. If I break a heel, I swear I’m going to—”

Evan gets to his bike and leans against it sideways, his thick arms crossed over his chest. He looks like a fucking sex god in the afternoon light, and I stop, my heart speeding up and my still tingling pussy screaming at me *THIS! NOW!*

His eyes are full of fire, and his voice is gravelly as he says, “C’mere.”

I step forward before my mind even registers the command. I just know that there’s nothing I want more than to run my hands over the muscles straining against the thin cotton of his tank top or to taste the sweat glistening on his skin.

He pins me with his eyes, snarling as I get close enough that he pulls me against him. “What are you doing, Princess? You think I couldn’t feel you rubbing your nipples into my back, moaning as you ground your sweet little pussy against the seat behind me? How many times did you come, Princess?”

I flush, catching the nickname that irks me, but I’m still embarrassed. I didn’t come, but damn if I don’t want to.

He moves a hand to the strap of my top, slowly watching as he slides it off my shoulder. I’m not wearing a bra underneath. It’s one of those clingy tops that they say doesn’t need a bra. I think he’s giving me time to say no, but that’s sure as fuck not happening.

Or maybe he’s trying to stop himself. With that thought in mind, I arch, lifting my tits up in offering to tease him. “They’re even softer once you take them the rest of the way out.”

He grabs me roughly around my waist, pulling me to him, and just before he touches me, he looks into my eyes. “You sure you want this? I ain’t offering anything but right now. You know that, right?”

I thread my fingers through his hair, pulling him to my breast. He needs this. Fuck, *I* need this. “Evan, quit thinking. Let’s just have an adventure.”

Like a match to a fire, my words ignite him. With a rough jerk that I’m sure is going to ruin this top, he pulls it the rest of the way down, freeing my breasts. He licks his lips once before diving in, sucking my nipple deep into his mouth.

His tongue twists and tugs at my stiff nub while his left hand squeezes my other breast. It’s heaven, and my head falls back as I moan my pleasure to a fiery sky. Sure, we’re on the side of the road, and if anyone does happen to come up here, they can see my goodies displayed for the whole world, but I don’t fucking care. If anything, it adds to the thrill.

Evan runs a hand down my side to my thigh, pulling my leg up. “Put the ball of your shoe on my seat, but don’t touch the leather with that spiky heel or I’m gonna be pissed.”

I do as he orders, feeling my skirt hike up my thigh almost to my waist as my knee nears my shoulder, exposing my panties to him. He slides a rough, calloused hand up my inner thigh, pausing to play at the lacy edge. I whimper, bucking my hips against his finger, trying to get what my body craves.

With a snarl, he grabs the delicate fabric and rips them from my body, draping them over the handlebars of his bike with a feral smile. “Let me feel how wet your pussy is from riding with me. You never told me if you came on my bike. Did you come already?”

He’s running his fingers through my lips, spreading the moisture from my clit to my asshole, and I’m barely coherent. “No.” I groan, my head swimming. “But I need it.”

“Good,” he says, bringing his fingers through my lips again. “It’s all mine then.”

Before I can even think of a reply, he thrusts two fingers deep into my pussy without warning, immediately curling them forward to press toward my front wall as his thumb swipes across my clit.

I cry out in pleasure, and he does it again, trapping me helplessly between what my body wants and keeping my balance. I’m a prisoner of desire and physics, unable to move as he finger fucks me hard and rough. I grab his head, pulling him back to my breasts in a desperate attempt to feel more, and he takes my nipple back into his mouth with little bites. I’m lost to the pleasure, screaming out disjointedly. “Fuck, Evan . . . yesss . . . God . . . please.”

His lips never leave my chest as he orders me, “Come for me, Princess. All over my hand, right here on my bike. Come. Now.”

I fall off the edge into the abyss, screaming out his name as I’m overtaken with shudders of pleasure. It’s been too long, and Evan’s playing me like a guitar, knowing just what I need to get the maximum release.

As I come back to reality, I catch him staring at me, a smile across his face, and I feel like that smile is just as much a gift as the amazing orgasm he just gave me. Well, maybe not *as* good, but damn close.

I move back, setting both feet on the ground before starting to bend down, my hands going to the button on his jeans.

Before I can kneel, he grabs my arms. “No, you’re not getting yourself all dirty, Princess.”

My hands not leaving his waist, I can already see the outline of his cock, feel the ridge of it of against my hand. I give him my best pouty face, which considering my plump lips and smeared makeup, is probably dripping with sex. “But what about you? Hand job?”

He smirks and adjusts himself, pulling his leg back and over his motorcycle. “This was just about you. Get back on.”

I look at him for a moment, disappointed I’m not getting to pleasure him but still too high from my own orgasm to question it. If a man like him wants to make me come without reciprocation . . . well, I’m not going to complain. Part of my mind knows this will take time, but it’ll be worth it.

I reach for my panties, intending to put the ripped lace inside the stretched remains of my top, but he stops me. “Oh, no, Princess. Those are staying right there. Souvenir of our adventure and all. Get on. I’ll take you home.”

I laugh, thinking *sure, why the hell not?* and climb on the back of his motorcycle, pulling my helmet on and squeezing his hips with my thighs as I scoot as close to him as I can, knowing that he can feel my already stiff nipples against his back again.

He yells back to tell me to hang on, and we’re off again, heading back to town. Main Street is quiet by the time we get back, most of the businesses closed and everyone gone home for the night.

He pulls up in front of the salon, shutting off the bike, and I’m shocked by the sudden eerie silence. I climb off, adjusting my skirt to cover myself, and he smirks, patting the red lace on the bars.

A thought occurs to me. “Hey, how’d you know this is home too?”

I see a flash across his eyes. “I do a lot of my best work at night. Nobody’s around to fuck with me. Sometimes, I even sleep here. There’s a bed up on the second floor that I use when I don’t feel like going home. I see everyone coming and going along the street. Maybe not as much as Old Earl, but watching what’s happening around me is deeply ingrained in me. I know you barely drive your car, so I figured you must be living in an apartment above the salon.”

I feel a warmth inside, even if it is silly. “You’ve been watching me?” He thinks I’m judging him, nervous at his surveillance, but he nods his head once. “Good. That makes me feel safe. Thanks for looking out for me. And

uh, Evan? Trust me, I'm well aware that I can look directly into your garage and watch you working up a sweat. My best day this week was when you were working on that Camaro and took your shirt off. I damn near missed the timer alarm I set for a client's highlights because I was staring out the window at you."

He grins, leaning against his handlebars. "You've been watching *me*?"

I nod, biting my lip to contain my laughter. He cups my face, leaning in for a soft kiss. It's different from the kisses we've had before. There's not fire but tenderness . . . and the thrilling promise that no matter what Evan said in that dirt parking lot, this isn't over.

When it's over, he leans back, whispering into my hair. "You pervy stalker. Take a picture. It'll last longer."

My laughter escapes, Evan even letting out a chortle, which I'm taking as major progress for the stoic man. "Yeah, well, you already got your trophy. I'm just gonna have to get my own sometime."

"We'll see," Evan says, giving me a kiss on the cheek. "Goodnight, Princess."

"Goodnight, Evan."

I turn, walking into the salon. He waits while I lock the door, then he pats the lacy handlebars one more time without looking at me, and I think maybe he doesn't even know he did it, but he fires up the bike, shooting across the lanes of traffic and into the garage.

I head upstairs to sleep, excited that he's just mere steps away.

CHAPTER 10

EVAN

"Stop the presses. What in the actual fuck is happening here?"

I stop work on the wiring job I'm doing on the Range Rover I'm working on as I hear TJ talking to me. I glance down my body and see his scuffed work boots standing by the rear hitch, the cause of all the problems. Fucking amateurs thought they could install a trailer hitch and wiring by themselves. Not on a Range Rover. The Brits love making their wiring harnesses difficult.

I roll out, giving him a questioning look. "What's up, man? Just checking out the turn signals on this tea slurping son of a bitch."

TJ looks me up and down as I get to my feet, raising an eyebrow. "You have the same hair, you rode in on that same bike . . . but I'm not sure if you're really my brother. You sick? Win the lottery? Get laid?"

Confused, I stare back at him. "Huh?"

"Well, the 'fuck off, world' look you normally wear is gone, I haven't smelled you light up one of those damn Marlboros all day, and when I checked the trash, I didn't see a single can. The coffee pot's still full. What gives?"

"Nothing," I reply, trying to growl but for some reason, just not able to find myself able to. TJ's just trying to be cool. "It's just one of those days."

TJ scoffs, rolling his eyes. "Bullshit, Evan. You were whistling. Not a song, or hell, even a tune, but you were damn sure whistling while you worked. That's new, not just a 'good day'. What's up?"

Was I? If I was, I didn't realize it. I was just focused on the job at hand, but now that he mentions it, my brain has been a little quieter this morning. I mean, I slept halfway decently, and when I got to work today, instead of

seeming stupid or infuriating, I just found this job to be a puzzle to solve. “I dunno. Like I said, nice weather today.”

TJ gives me a look I used to get in the Army, the one that senior sergeants would give when they knew I was full of shit but wasn’t quite going over the line yet. “Nice weather, huh? My money’s on your getting laid. Finally. It’s been forever, man. Gotta grease the pipes every once in awhile or you get rusty, Tin Man.” He laughs, then shakes his head.

Without warning, white heat sparks in my core, singing out through my body as my fists clench. I grab his coveralls, jerking him to his tiptoes before pushing him away, pain lancing through my head. “Fuck you, TJ. I was doing all right this morning, but thanks for fucking that up.”

He leans back, but he’s used to my outbursts and just shakes his head softly. “Bro, I was just teasing you. Chill out.”

I sigh, still wound tightly, and turn away to snatch a cigarette, realizing he was right. I hadn’t grabbed one of these today.

Standing in the doorway as I start to puff away, I hear TJ talking behind me. “Sorry for hitting a sore spot. I was just glad to hear the noise. In other news, I went on a date with Alice again.”

I side-eye him, my brows furrowing together as I rack my brain but come up short. Maybe I really do need some caffeine. “Who?”

TJ leans against the side of the shop, upwind of me, as always, and looks across the street with me as I take a deep drag, the swimmy feeling rushing up to my brain like it always does even as the disgusting taste floods my mouth, reminding me of other smoke I’ve breathed and making me want to gag.

“The girl I told you about, asshole. From the hotel? We went to dinner last night, had a couple of drinks, and then I dropped her back home.”

I can’t help but egg him on a little. He’s my baby brother, after all. “That’s it? You didn’t fuck her?”

He growls a little bit, glaring at me. “Don’t talk about her like that. No, I didn’t. It was a damn first date, and she’s not like that. We just kissed on the little porch when I dropped her off.”

I flashback to my date with McKayla. Well, I don’t even know if it qualifies as a date when you go for a ride and finger bang her before dropping her off curbside, but as I didn’t blow my load until later that night, I guess you can’t call it a booty call either. TJ definitely wouldn’t call that a date, but McKayla didn’t seem to mind.

But maybe she should.

TJ's chick, Alice, probably liked being picked up for a proper date with a decent guy. From everything he's told me about her, now that I think about it, she's probably the kind of girl any guy would like. Smart, I guess cute, and TJ is obviously over the moon about her. She's probably what a lot of guys would call 'marriage material'. She's the sort of girl you treat right, take her out to dinner, pick her up at her doorstep, and maybe even shave most of the time beforehand.

McKayla should have that too. Too fucking bad that's not me though. I'm far from decent. I shave two, maybe three times a week, and I can't remember the last time I dressed 'nice'.

I puff away as TJ tells me every little damn detail about his date, and I stare across the street into the salon in order to distract myself a little, watching McKayla tell a very animated story to a lady in her chair.

As I'm watching, I see that weasel Jaxson pull up and park his gleaming BMW at the curb, blocking half my sightline of the salon interior. He walks in, and from far away, I hear TJ. "What's wrong?"

I look over at him, fury coursing through my veins and my fingers crushing the last remnants of my cig so completely that I don't even feel the burn of the ember as it's snuffed against my palm. "What?"

TJ looks startled, holding up his hands in a placating gesture. "You're snarling. What's wrong? Flashback?"

I sigh. He can be a pain in the ass, but most of the time, he's always there for me, and he's tried to understand. "Nah, just saw that city council shit going in the salon."

TJ glances over, recognizing the car. "Jaxson? Don't really know him, but he seemed all right when I opened up the garage. Came by, shook hands, wished me luck. It even sounded half genuine."

I think over my answer. Like TJ, I first met Jaxson soon after I came back to town just after my discharge, full of anger, clothed in my winter riding leathers, and barely able to sleep at night without screaming myself awake.

He'd come by the diner along with one of the local cops on my third day back, I guess after figuring out that I wasn't just some transient biker. The discussion had been full of veiled comments, some snide remarks about a former service member looking like I did, and the implied threat that I'd better watch my ass.

Not that I'm going to tell TJ about that. He might try to understand, but he wouldn't really. It's like John Rambo said, *Over there, I was in charge of million-dollar equipment. Here, I can barely hold down a job parking cars*. "He's trying to get McKayla to go out with him and he's a slimy little shit."

TJ stares at me in total disbelief for a solid minute before figuring out what to say. "Yeah, she could really do worse than a stable, employed guy who wants to take her out on a date. Maybe you'd rather she go out with you? Because lord knows, you could offer her so much joy and happiness with your aura of rainbows and fucking glitter."

He huffs and stomps back into the office, shutting the door a little hard, but the hydraulic keeps it from slamming.

What the hell's wrong with him? I just said I didn't like the guy . . . the guy who wants to date McKayla. It wasn't like I told him every reason I hate the fucker.

I lean back against the garage again, maintaining my study of the scene across the street. The sad part is, I know that TJ is right. McKayla deserves someone nice who'd treat her right and take her on dinner dates and carry on a conversation beyond grunts. She deserves a guy who'll give her everything she wants and then some. Not someone haunted like me. Someone whole, who's not half-soulless with a void filled with demons.

I don't have any right to inflict myself on her. I need to maintain the status quo and minimize my impact by keeping to myself. Nobody needs to know just how fucked in the head I really am, and if I don't talk to them, they won't know. Just stay quiet, and if it gets too bad . . . I move on. The advantage of a motorcycle and a military background is that I can pretty much go wherever I want and get along just fine with what I can fit in my saddlebags and the duffle I still have at the house. Between that and my check from the military that says I'm partially disabled, I'll get by.

Decision made, I dust the last crumbles of tobacco off my hands, rubbing them together before scrubbing them on my jeans. I give one last glance across the street, where I take a small measure of comfort in seeing Jaxson marching out the door, rounding the front bumper of his car as he dangerously tightens his already straight tie. *Denied!*

He looks up toward the garage, and I swear I can see a familiar coldness in his eyes when he sees me standing outside watching him. I'm doubtful he's ever going to stop seeing me as the possible biker gang member who rolled into his town and is eventually going to cause trouble. He yanks open

his car door to get in and then fires up the engine before pulling back into traffic, once again the perfect city council member as he accelerates at just the right speed up the street. It's another thing I don't like about the man. When you're pissed, you're allowed a half-second to gun your fucking engine if you're in the clear. In fact, maybe that's the real reason. Maybe there's nothing slimy about him and he's just too much of a goody-two-shoes.

My eyes tick back to the salon, and McKayla and Brad are talking like nothing happened. Brad's waving his makeup brushes around and twirling, making McKayla laugh uproariously before her eyes glance across the street and she sees me. Before she can do anything, I turn and go back inside. That wiring harness isn't going to fix itself.

Whatever. Maybe he just needed a cut and she couldn't fit him in. Not my business and I don't care.

I keep telling myself that as I head back inside and climb back under the Range Rover.

CHAPTER 11

MCKAYLA

Sweet moonrise over the mountains . . . it's the perfect end to a busy week as I sit with Brad and Rose at the Grand Waterways Hotel bar and peer out over the distance.

When Rose invited me, I'll admit I had a snobby moment thinking a hotel bar didn't sound all that appealing. But she insisted they have good drinks, delicious food, and the best jukebox in town. "Don't worry, they totally revamped when the new place opened up in the mountains," she said. "They wanted to differentiate themselves from the snow set tourists, so while it still has the luxury look, they've expanded the food spread a bit. No way you won't find something you like."

So why the hell not? I decided. I haven't had a chance to just kick back and see the town, and I could use a night out. And what do you know? *She was right*, I think to myself as I try to delicately grab my fourth piece of Toro sushi.

I glance over at Brad, the epitome of a fashionable male in his open-neck paisley shirt with the cuffs rolled up, jeans that are tight but not too tight, and boots. I happen to know that his ensemble took him thirty minutes to put on and get just right, and by now, his feet have to be killing him. I've never seen him in those boots before.

But I won't give him too much hell because I took at least that long to curl and pin my pink hair into victory rolls, and that was before I slipped fishnets and a halter circle dress on. Brad may not be country, but I'm a helluva lot of rock 'n' roll.

If I'm going on a night out, I'm doing it my style. With Rose completing our ragtag group in a sleek modern body-hugging sheath and a chic updo that I did for her today, we look like three folks who would never fit together, but somehow, our friendship works.

Taking a sip of my scotch—no frou-frou drinks here . . . that's Brad's poison—I listen to Rose talk about the town as she sips at her 'Michelada,' a Mexican import that's one part beer, one part tomato juice. It's all hers. No, thank you. "I've been here for five years now, and I'm creeping up on my thirties. Business is finally starting to gain a foothold, I've been featured in the town paper twice, and have made some great friends. Really, all of us along Tourist Trap Drag are doing pretty well with the ski resort bringing in tourists. It's far enough away that we stay pretty small but close enough that we get traffic down here to help keep businesses going."

Brad raises his drink in the air. "To successful ventures, five-star service, and happy lives." We toast, and he tips back some light blue thing, draining half of it before he continues. "Rose, you said this place is struggling. Why?"

Rose giggles and downs half a Michelada. "Basically, some corporation sank a ton into building this place a long time back, but the university didn't grow the way they thought it would or something. Hell, I dunno. But for a long time, this place was the biggest eyesore in the county. Then a retired football guy invested in it, and when he did it up, he did it up right. It's the fancy-schmancy bourgie place around here now."

"Fuck it," I mumble. "The food's good."

"That it is," Brad agrees. "Hey, McKayla, what about that Jaxson guy who came in the other day? What's the story there, chickadee?"

I groan, rolling my eyes. "Ugh, he's just so, so . . . nice," I say with look of disgust. "I bet he's a deacon in church or something."

Brad leans over to stage-whisper to Rose. "Nice is bad to McKayla. That means he's a no-go."

Rose laughs, maybe a little loudly, but who gives a damn? We'll get home safely somehow. "Nice is a bad thing? I don't get it."

I take a big inhale, trying to settle my thoughts so I can explain without sounding half drunk. "I don't know. He's just polite and mannered and boring. Just so nice, not my type at all. The first time he tried to ask me out, I dodged and he took Brad and me to the diner for introductions. But he came back and asked me to dinner and kissed my cheek. I was blunt and told him I'm not looking for romance, but we could be friends. Should be a done deal, yeah? Nope, he was back again a few days later, saying he knew I was settled into town now and he was ready for that date. It was so

awkward. He doesn't seem to be taking the hint, and I've damn sure not been subtle. It's not in my nature."

"So, he really likes you, is a nice guy, and wants to take you out. I guess I'm not seeing the issue because I'd be all over that like white on rice if I could find the mythical creature known as 'The Nice Guy'."

I laugh, shaking my head. "I know it's stupid, but there's just no spark. Take-charge, I like, but there's something with Jaxson that's just the *opposite* of spark. It's like a fire extinguisher instead. And sparks are the first ticket to McKayla Land."

Brad, who's heard my complaints about Jaxson before, chuckles. "Speaking of sparks, what about our across the street bad boy biker neighbor with an oh, so delicious last name, Evan Hardwick? What's the story there? Because there's like a whole case of fireworks going on but I'm a little concerned about the blast zone, if you catch my drift. He always seems like an angry dude."

I laugh, knowing Brad's got nothing to worry about from Evan, before I sigh happily. "Well, y'all know I'm not one to kiss and tell . . ."

Brad coughs, the sound suspiciously coming out like "Bullshit!" before he waves me to continue, and I laugh.

"Okay, who am I kidding? Of course I am. We went for a ride the other day and it was heaven. Things got a little hot and heavy, but I haven't heard from him in a couple of days. Just casual for now. We'll see, I guess."

Brad and Rose meet eyes, an echo of a conversation they've obviously already had about this topic singing out loud and clear. I've gotta admit, I'm a little jealous. It took me a long time to get that sort of telepathy with Brad, and more than a few scratch fights.

Finally, Brad drains the rest of his drink and sets it down, looking me in the eyes. "Just be careful. I know you like the bad boys, but that one's a little beyond your usual repertoire. From what I've heard about him, he's got issues. He isn't some wannabe rebel with a sneer and a trust fund backing him up."

I roll my eyes. That was just once. But Rose seems to have the same thing on her mind. "He seems like an asshole to me, but if that's your thing, have fun, I guess."

I raise my glass in a toast, not upset at all. Fuck it. I'm a big girl, and I'm gonna take care of business. "To fun, in all its types and positions."

Brad and Rose clink glasses with me again, and we all dissolve into laughter. Still giggling and smiling, I'm caught unaware when there's a hand on my shoulder from behind. I look back, already halfway into bitch mode for the space invasion, when I see it's Jaxson. He's grinning, and I feel the awkwardness drop over the table like a wet blanket. *I was having a good night too.*

Jaxson doesn't seem to notice, completely at ease in his khakis and dress shirt with no tie. "Hey, guys. Let me buy a round."

Before anyone can say anything, he plops down on the bench beside me like he was invited, throwing an arm around the back of the bench. Not quite on my shoulders, but still obviously marking his territory. The waitress comes up and my moment of rebuttal is sidetracked by her smiling request for orders.

What the hell, I was gonna drink another one anyway. "I'll have another double Scotch on the rocks." I peel off a ten-dollar bill from my small money roll, dropping it on the waitress's tray before Jaxson can do anything about it. I still can't quite tell him to piss off. The salon can't handle that sort of blow, but I can send some pretty clear signals.

There's a tight tension at the table now, the jovial mood from moments before gone.

"Hi, Jaxson," I finally greet him. "Thanks for the offer, but I've got a strict cash and carry policy, so I'm good for the drink."

Jaxson smiles at me, but it feels like it doesn't quite reach his eyes. It's like in the salon. He's smiling, but there's nobody home upstairs. "No problem, just wanted to say hi and that there's no hard feelings. You're new in town, and if you're looking for friends, then you've got one right here."

He pats his chest with his palm with a strange little double-thump, making it clear that he's referring to himself. "So what are we talking about?"

Rose looks at me, uncertain, but she's the kind that's too polite to just tell him to fuck off. "We were just, uh, toasting to new successful ventures."

Jaxson gives a huge smile, and I inwardly moan. Shit, of course he's going to eat that up, being on the city council. "Good to hear. Have you heard about the rezoning going on down on the south end? There's a lot of people who think that it's really going to take off. The business environment is . . ." And he's off, blending in discussions of tax structures with culture, and more to the point, that it's a total mishmash. I tune him

out, sipping on the new Scotch the waitress dropped off a few minutes into Jaxson's diatribe. It's total political half-baked bullshit. I heard enough of it in Hollywood to smell it a mile away. There's no way that he knows what's going to happen twenty years down the road.

I'm having one of those best friend conversations with Brad, no words, just lots of eye contact and mind reading.

This guy's a tool.

I know. Why do you think I turned him down?

He's a disrespect to the word tool even. I like tools.

You like a certain tool. He's got one, you know.

Not interested.

I'm about to reply when I see Brad glance down with a raised eyebrow. I look down at the table and see Jaxson running his finger along the rim of my drink glass. Uh, no. I snatch my glass away, truly pissed off for the first time. "Don't touch my drink."

Jaxson looks startled at the steel in my voice, even though I worked to keep it quiet and calm. He blinks, then gives me that politician's smile again. "Oh, sorry, just fidgeting."

I realize I sound a little bit Neanderthal, like Evan did with his bike, and the irony is not lost on me. But I don't give a fuck. There are rules, and some of them are totally unbendable. "I'm from LA. When guys mess with your drink, it's a pretty surefire sign you're about to get roofied. Don't touch my drink."

I push it to the edge of the table. I don't think he did anything, but I can't even consider putting my lips where his fingers were just rubbing. Jaxson stutters, then nods. "Sorry."

"Uh-huh," I reply before realizing this night's done. Fuck it, I'm done. I fake a yawn and stand up. "Sorry, guys, I think I'm out for the evening. Gonna head on home."

I grab my purse, and Jaxson stands up, totally in my bubble again. I step back, putting space between us and a palm out toward him to show the invasion is unwelcome. "Excuse me, Jaxson."

He merely smiles. "Come on. Let me give you a ride home. I wouldn't want you to get pulled over by the cops."

"No, thanks," I reply with no flexibility in my voice. "I'll be fine."

The front desk of the hotel runs a shuttle bus from the hotel to downtown, so I catch a ride. The driver drops me off a few blocks from the

salon, and I relish the chance to walk in the relative coolness. The sidewalk is quiet, letting me calm down more. I don't think it was just the alcohol that had me snap at Jaxson. I just don't like him.

As I get closer to the salon and home, I glance across the street and see a light on in the windows above the garage. Evan mentioned he sometimes would stay there. I wonder if he's home.

A delicious little tingle runs through me as I think of him up there, watching me. I bet he loves the way my tits are pressed up and together in this halter, and I hope he likes fishnets, because these stockings are meant to turn his engine over for sure. I pause and consider the window for a moment, thinking maybe a little part two of our bike ride adventure is just what this night needs.

There's a flash of shadow at the window, and before I can change my mind, I start walking over. Fifteen seconds later, I'm knocking on the door that leads to an upstairs area.

There's no answer for a moment, and I'm about to give up and head back across the street. Maybe I was just seeing shit or maybe the Scotch was a little stronger than I thought. I start to turn away when I hear heavy footsteps coming down the stairs inside.

Evan opens the door, and two thoughts run through my head. One, he looks haunted . . . but two, he looks so fucking sexy I'm glad this skirt has scandalously easy access. "McKayla?" he asks.

I decide to run with thought number two and give him a smile. "Hey! I saw the light on and thought I'd see what you're doing. Can I come up?"

I can see the 'no' on his face before he even speaks, but with a sigh, he agrees, stepping back. "Yeah, sure."

He opens the door further, gesturing me inside. He closes and locks the door, then heads up the stairs, leading me into an apartment. I'm struck with curiosity about what his sometimes crash pad will look like. "So, I wasn't expecting company. Place is kind of a mess."

Despite my wonderings just moments before, I decide to play it chill. "Just coming to see you, not to judge your bathroom cleanliness."

He opens the door at the top of the stairs, and I'll admit I'm a little shocked. It's not messy. If anything, the place is neater than most hotel rooms I've been in, but that's because there's barely anything in here at all. There's a metal-frame bed that looks more like a cot against one wall, two milk crates with a piece of plywood laid over top of them, and against the

wall opposite the cot is a small flat panel TV, a strictly discount store job that someone probably bought at a Christmas sale for fifty bucks or something.

The walls are a bare white, no decoration or even marks on them to say that someone stays here. Everything just looks disposable, and I only see one other door, which I presume leads to a bathroom.

On second thought, I see one discrepancy underneath the ‘table’ that Evan’s set up. Books. I don’t know how many, but the table is longer than his bed, at least ten feet long and low to the ground, but the space underneath is filled with books. They’re all lined up neatly, spines flush with each other and arranged in height order except for a few on the end, which I guess are too tall for the short space under the table. It’s impressive. Meanwhile, I’m a little ashamed to admit that other than style books and school books, I haven’t read this much in my entire life.

I smile at him, trying to find some sort of balance in this stark, Spartan area. “So, minimalist chic, huh? Very late nineties dot-com style.”

He looks around like he’s never seen the place, then shrugs. “Yeah, it’s not much, but it’s mine. Just the basics I need when I don’t want to go home. Probably not like your fancy, cushy place.”

It feels like there’s some venom in the words, and I don’t know why. I don’t want to shoot back that my place isn’t exactly filled with Versace either, but instead, I decide to try again. “What were you up to tonight? Movies, video games, reading?”

Evan leans against the wall, shaking his head. “Nothing much, just lying down to try to catch some sleep. I gotta be up early to finish rebuilding a Ford with a cracked engine block, so I decided to stay here.”

My hands go up to my face, and I can feel the heat creeping up my cheeks. “Oh, God, I totally woke you up, didn’t I? Sorry.”

“It’s fine. I just try to catch some Zs when I can because sleep is hard to come by.”

There’s a prolonged silence, drawing out like a blade in the quiet of the night. It’s worse than pulling teeth to get him to talk, and I don’t know why there’s this awkwardness because it hasn’t been there before. But I can certainly feel a *fuck off* vibe coming from him. Maybe he’s regretting what happened the other day? One surefire way to know.

”So, I was thinking about the other day, thought maybe we could finish what we started?”

What can I say? I'm a forward woman.

Evan looks at me and blinks. I can see thoughts swirling through his mind but the emotions flicker across his face too fast for me to read.

He runs a calloused hand across his scruffy jaw and looks at me with shadowed eyes, his hair swept back from his face, but still, there's nearly nothing I can read about him. "Yeah, um, sorry . . . tonight's just not a good night."

He doesn't offer a raincheck, no softness of *maybe some other time*, so I guess that answers that. Damn it. Guess it's time for that maneuver that everyone has to do at some time or another, even if we don't like it—the retreat while maintaining dignity. "No worries. I'll talk to you later, maybe."

I move toward the door, and he doesn't stop me, just follows me down the steps and out the door. He doesn't even stand in the doorway to watch me go across the street, closing the door and clicking the lock almost as soon as I'm through.

I sigh and look both ways—even though the street is deserted at this hour—and walk to the Triple B. I walk to a little door beside the salon's main entrance that leads to my apartment's private stairs, and I'm tempted to go back and drag Evan's ass over to show him the reality of my living space too. About the only difference is that my bed actually has a box spring and mattress, and I've got a poster of Dita Von Teese on the wall, all curves and corset and sexiness. She understands, I bet.

As I bend down to undo the lock at the bottom of the door, I feel eyes on me and a cold shiver runs through my body. I hold my head high and pop my ass out just a little more. If the asshole wants to look but not even talk to me, well . . . get a damn eyeful. Because I'm gonna go upstairs and I'm gonna be just fine, Mr. Evan Hotness On A Fucking Motorcycle Hardwick.

Just fine.

Asshole.

CHAPTER 12

EVAN

It's been a few days since McKayla's late-night visit when I gave her the brushoff for her own good. I try to remind myself of that as my brain loops on the disappointment in her eyes when I turned her down and watched her go.

But that was a bad night. I'd lied when I told her that I had a job to do the next morning, I was up there because of a major flashback. It started simply enough. Someone brought in their old pickup truck to the garage. The area is filled with these old beaters, cars and trucks that were built before I was born and are only still street legal because people seem to give zero fucks about car inspections around here.

So when John Englebert brought his seventy-seven Ford in, I should have been ready, but I was underneath another car when he put the truck in neutral. It backfired three times quickly.

Three backfires, so similar to a three-shot burst from an AK-47 that I nearly lost it right there. John, of course, was laughing about his old truck having gas and telling TJ that he needed to give the thing some damn prunes, but one glance at me and TJ sent me upstairs.

It was hours later that McKayla came by, and it was for her own good that I sent her away. The room is sparse because I made it that way on purpose. In that room, there's not much I can smash or *use* to smash things with beyond an extra-thick copy of *Children of Dune*. I wanted to talk to her, but I could feel it coming on again, so I sent her away.

No, it's for her own good and she can do better. I'll just tarnish her shine, and lord knows, she's fucking sparkly outside, but more importantly, on the inside. She tries to pretend that she isn't, but I can see it. She's the sort of woman that comes around once in a man's life, a woman so good that you're left in awe when she looks at you.

She’s that sort of good. And maybe once upon a time, I was that sort of guy. I’d like to think I was better than the average schlep working a nine to five. But I’m definitely not now. Now I’m just full of mud and filth and scars that go straight to my very core. I need to remember that when I catch myself staring across into the salon, trying to catch a peek of her.

I don’t even know why I torture myself with looking over at her any longer. I gave up standing at the bay door to watch her when I realized that everyone up and down that side of the street could see me staring. Earl thought it was damn funny that every time he came up the street from his store, he could see me, watching me as I watched her. He told me I looked like I wanted to kill her or fuck her, and he ‘wasn’t right sure which one.’

I had raised one eyebrow as I looked back at him, and he broke out in laughter. “Oh, boy, you’re done gone for that girl. Fuck her or marry her because that’s about all you can do when it hits you like that.”

There was always a third option. Run away. But I’m not one for that, not yet, anyway. I’d moved inside to watch instead, even though TJ bitched about the smoke in the office when I lit up. Fuck it, that’s what exhaust fans are for.

Once, I’d been in the shop leaned over an engine, and when I stood up, I caught her watching me. In that moment, a tiny piece of me wanted to puff up my chest and show off a bit for her, but I held back. Instead of entertaining the stupid fantasy, I just growled and shut the bay door.

Even I get the symbolism there, cutting her off like that. But it’s for her own good, even if she’s stubborn as an old mule about her interest in me. I gotta shut myself away. The more I repeat it to myself, the easier it’ll become. That’s what I’m going to believe.

Fucked up pep talk complete, I get off my bike and walk into the diner to grab lunch for TJ and myself, a little apology for his having to put up with my extra grouchy self lately. The bell chimes as I push through the door, beelining for the counter to order. I lean against the cold Formica and scan, a habit I can’t help as I count exits and look for customers that seem out of place, even if I have yet to ever see one here.

I see a few of the town regulars, those good old boys who think that since they served in ‘Nam or maybe Desert Storm that they’re the only ones who understand what war is like. They can kiss my ass, and if they want to bitch about my haircut . . . fuck them. I continue scanning, cataloging moms

with sugar-high kids bouncing in their chairs and an old couple sharing a slice of pie, when I see her.

McKayla is sitting at a booth, right up front, with a burger and fries in front of her that's barely been touched. I stare, taking her in. She's like a full-on Technicolor painting in a room full of bland black and white. Her hair's been teased up into some poufy beehive looking hairstyle today with a yellow bandana tied around it and dangling cherry earrings hugging her lobes.

All I can think is that she's made it easy for me to kiss her neck and lick the curve of her ear. My eyes track down to her top, little puffs at the shoulders and a sexy line of cleavage. I'm so struck that it takes me a moment to realize that she looks a bit frustrated, tension clearly evident in the scrunch of her brow, and I follow her attention across the table to . . . Jaxson. The son of a bitch is sitting on the other side of the booth, proud as a motherfucker in his work suit, grinning like he's the king of the fucking city.

Inside, I growl. Hell, maybe it's out loud, I don't know. But I see him talking to her, what's probably supposed to be a nice smile on his face. But I've been reading people for a lot of years, and that smile he's got going on right now is just a practiced façade, not genuine. I saw the same smile on his face that first day I came to town and he gave me the 'welcome to town, now when the fuck are you leaving?' talk.

So while I don't like him, he's mostly ignored me the way I have him the past few years. I figured most of my recent bad thoughts about the man were honestly more about his flirting with McKayla. Maybe Earl is right, though, and he's a little worse than just a sleaze.

I keep an eye on them, wondering if I should stick my nose in and part of me not wanting to.

"Hey, Evan, what's the order?" the waitress asks me.

Without even taking my eyes off McKayla and Jaxson, I half turn my head. "Double burger with onion rings, TJ style. Turkey club sandwich, double cheese and double turkey," I toss over my shoulder without even looking at her.

She's used to my rudeness and it probably doesn't even hit on her radar that I'm a bit more rude than usual. "You want something with that club?"

I peek back and lower my voice, trying to be nice. "Hey, how long have they been here?" I nod over to McKayla and Jaxson.

I see her eyes dart over, and she shrugs. “McKayla? She came in about fifteen minutes ago. Then the suit came in and sat down. Didn’t seem like she was expecting him.”

I harrumph, looking back over my shoulder. “Someone should teach that fucker some manners.”

I look back and realize that the waitress is still there, a scared look on her face. “Is that all, Evan?”

I take a deep breath. I didn’t mean to scare the shit outta the poor girl. “Yeah, yeah, thanks. To go. Please.”

I add the last bit a beat late, but it’s more manners than I usually have, so score one for me. I slide a step over and try to tune in to McKayla and Jaxson, trying to hear what they’re saying without looking like I’m obviously eavesdropping.

Jaxson’s got that wheedling yet somehow bullying tone in his voice I’ve heard before, the one that says *hey, come on, buddy, do what I want . . . or else.* “Let me show you the town. You’ll have a great time, I promise. I know all the best-kept secret spots around here . . .”

He trails off, and I’m pleased to hear McKayla shoot back with more than a hint of steel in her voice, “Thanks again, Jaxson. But I’m just settling in, and I told you before, I’m not looking to date.” She’s abrupt, blunt but not rude, just to the point, and it sounds like she’s getting tired of telling him the same thing over and over.

Maybe that’s his shtick, wear her down until she says yes. I’ve heard he’s the same way on the city council. He’ll grind down his opponents until they give him what he wants just to shut him the fuck up.

I have a moment of good-heartedness, thinking maybe I can help her with this at least. I strut over to the table, her eyes going wide and her mouth opening in surprise as she sees my imposing form appear over Jaxson’s shoulder. Jaxson sees her reaction and half turns just as I step past and sit down beside her, one arm going around her shoulders and reaching for a fry with my other hand.

I place a quick kiss on her cheek, taking a moment to savor her scent. She even smells sexy. “Hey, Princess. Didn’t know you were lunching here today. Could’ve saved one of us a trip and ordered together. We could have split the load back.”

Her mouth is still open in shock, and I wink as I place the fry in her mouth and she starts chewing automatically. Watching her lips wrapping

around the fry for a split second before it disappears, I regret, for what's probably the ten thousandth time since she offered, not accepting the blowjob she wanted to give me.

I pull my eyes away to look across at Jaxson, a cold smile on my face. *I see you, motherfucker*. He's glaring at me in fury, that same tight smile on his face while his eyes are screaming bloody murder. I swear he's acting like someone just took away his favorite toy.

I offer a hand across the table, giving his hand a tight squeeze as we shake. You can tell a lot about a man by his handshake, and Jaxson attempts to use a paralyzing grip. Too bad he's run into someone who isn't going to wilt. When he tries to crush me, I crush right back, my forearm powered by a lot of hard, real work.

Taking control of the situation, I drop my voice. "Jaxson, a pleasure to see you here. What brings you to the diner?"

He doesn't even flinch, which surprises me. I have always taken Jaxson to be a bully, but maybe he has just a little bit of steel in his spine. "Just grabbing lunch, but saw McKayla sitting here all alone and thought I'd be gracious enough to show her around town."

I eyeball him. Last time, I backed down a little because I didn't want to start shit for my brother. But McKayla isn't TJ, and she can't protect herself the way he can. "Sounds nice. Gotta tell you, though, I showed her a fair amount of town the other day, didn't I, McKayla?"

McKayla's head is ping-ponging between the two of us, the tension palpable. I'm not normally the type to go all hound dog, pissing on what isn't my territory, but while I might not be good for McKayla, Jaxson damn sure isn't either.

His voice is tight with strain when he finally replies, looking not at me but at McKayla with a slight sneer in his voice. "Really? McKayla was just telling me that she isn't looking to date quite yet."

That wakes her up like a fire alarm shock, and she puts both of her hands flat on the table, not quite smacking but damn near. "You're right, I did say that. And I'm not dating. Anyone."

She's looking at Jaxson, but her words are for me and I know it. Dammit. Sure, I shouldn't, but I do want her. And I didn't want to hurt her. I fucked it up pretty badly with her, but since we're not going any further than this savior moment, it won't matter in the long run, I guess.

Jaxson slides out of the booth, leaning forward along the edge, almost draping himself across the table to get closer to McKayla. As he does, his voice is smooth and silky like it always is. “I’ll see you around, McKayla.”

He smirks as his eyes trail from her eyes down to her cleavage. My hand curls into a fist against the cold tabletop, and McKayla lays a gentle hand on my thigh. It’s intimate, and as she intended, it stops me instantly, giving me something much better to focus on.

Jaxson sees the gesture too and his jaw clenches. Wordlessly, he stands tall, but his eyes speak plenty. I’ll be seeing him around town, and I’d better watch my ass. I go twenty-six in a twenty-five and the police are going to be pulling me over.

Nobody in the diner seems to move for a second, then McKayla and I watch as Jaxson buttons his suit coat before walking out the door and into the parking lot. I see him pause by my bike, and for split second, I think he’s gonna fuck with it. I follow his sight line and realize he’s staring at my left handlebar, with McKayla’s red panties still wrapped around it.

Technically, they could be anyone’s, but I can tell by the rage on his face that he knows exactly who they belong to. The instant he pulls out of the lot, Mckayla scoots away from me, putting a foot of space between us. “What the fuck was that? Next time, we’ll just pull out a damn tape measure so y’all can compare dicks.”

I shrug, getting out of the booth. “I was just trying to help. Seemed like he wouldn’t leave you alone.”

McKayla rolls her eyes and I can see it. She knows he’s a fuckhead, but she doesn’t realize just how *big* of a fuckhead he is. “He’s definitely overly persistent, but I’m not some shrinking wallflower that needs a big, strong stud to save her. I was just trying to be nice about it since I still have to live here after I crush his hope that I’ll eventually say yes.”

I huff, replying just a bit too forcefully. “You are definitely no wallflower. You’re a whole damn bouquet of fucking wildflowers.”

I say it without even thinking about how it sounds as it tumbles out of my mouth, but her gasp is instantaneous. Her lip quivers, and her eyes shine as she reaches out, grabbing my wrist. “That is probably the nicest thing anyone’s ever said to me, but you make it sound like an insult.”

The corners of my lips turn up. I had meant it as a compliment. “You’re too good for that asshat and way too good for a fucker like me.”

Before she can respond, the waitress calls my name for my order. McKayla looks like she's going to say something else, but I need to get out of here before I do something I'll regret, like ask her to go for another ride. And not on my bike this time. *It's for her own good*, I remind myself again like a record on repeat. I drop a kiss to McKayla's forehead, memorizing the floral spiciness of her shampoo. Jesus, she smells good. "Bye, Princess."

CHAPTER 13

MCKAYLA

That's it! I can't handle this shit anymore!

I swear I'm going on a man freeze. For the next few decades, the only boyfriend I'm going to have is made by Hitachi and has five speeds.

Since the showdown at the diner, the guy I don't like keeps doggedly pursing me, sending me a *Good Morning, Beautiful* text almost every day, and the one I do like has some issues and hasn't spoken to me since rolling out of the parking lot like Sir Fucking Lancelot on a chromed-out steed.

It's enough to make a girl crazy. Which is exactly how I'm feeling after another long day at work, where I got to glance out the window at one point to blissfully observe Evan push an SUV into the garage from the street. Watching those broad back and shoulder muscles glisten in the sun while his ass flexed in his tight jeans as he pushed and grunted his way up the slight incline to the garage left my pulse racing.

Thank God my vibrator is as reliable as the sunrise and sunset because that's about as often as I've been using it these days. Invariably during these long, body shaking sessions, my mind wanders to that bike ride with Evan and how he slipped his fingers inside me, nipping at my breasts. It's probably not the wildest thing I've ever done, but with him, it was damn sure the hottest.

Lying on my sofa after stripping out of my blouse and skirt, I replay the two scenes in my mind as my fingers caress my body, sliding across my collarbones to dip down and around my breasts. My nipples harden, ready for more, and I arch into my own touch as my palms graze the sensitive tips. I've already stripped off my panties. They've been damn-near soaked since seeing Evan today . . . and now the tingle is turning into a flame.

I run a hand down my belly, through the trimmed tuft at the juncture of my legs to cup my needy, puffy pussy lips. Reaching over, I grab the vibrator from its place on my coffee table and spread my bent legs wide. After that show today, I could shatter myself if I don't take it slow, and I've spent enough nights over the past week vibrating myself into a temporary coma.

I turn the vibe on low and immediately gasp, my back bowing at the sensation. Fuck, it's gonna be fast this time, and I can't help it. I find a rhythm, pressing the pulsing vibrator inside, then retreating to do a loop higher across my clit and back down to start again. It's driving me quickly insane as the fantasy of Evan finger fucking me plays out in my mind. Instead of the side of the road, though, it'd be in the garage, a dark, sexy streak of dirt gleaming oily as he shows the whole fucking world how hot he makes me. I'm helpless, clutching at his shoulders while he growls in my ear, *'You're a whole damn bouquet of fucking wildflowers'* as I buck, my hips lifting off the couch to crash down again and again. I flip the vibe all the way up for a second as in my mind, I beg him to fuck me. With a naughty grin, in my vision, Evan smiles. *"When I want you . . . I'm going to make you mine."*

Unable to resist the truth, I come, my orgasm throbbing in pulses as I thrash on my sofa, glad that I don't share a wall with anyone.

Brad and I step out of my car as the valet holds the door open. I hand him my keys with a distracted 'thank you' because my focus is entirely taken up by the scene in front of me. The huge double doors to the new Mountain Spirit Resort Hotel lobby open wide, letting people move through. Most of them are smiling and relaxed and looking every bit the wealthy tourists this place is becoming known for. In winter, it'll be slightly different as more snow bunnies show up. But for now, they're here to enjoy the views and the weather.

I squeal a little bit, reaching out to grab Brad's hand as we walk inside. Stepping up to the front desk, I give my name to the receptionist, explaining that we have a meeting with Brianna Adams. While she's not *the* most famous person in the area, it's one of those names that still commands respect and gets people to give you just that extra bit of ass kissing.

As we wait, Brad and I sink into the luxurious chairs sprinkled throughout the lobby in little groups. “This place is quite the sight, isn’t it?” Brad asks, relaxing into the leather seat. “Kinda reminds me of being back home, one of those posh type places that we didn’t get invited to all that often.”

I laugh, nodding. Being a hairdresser to the stars meant that I got to see a lot of the backstage and got to nab some pretty damn fine catering from time to time, but when it came to the VIP after parties . . . yeah, no getting past the velvet rope for me. “It is. Getting this contract with the resort’s event planning services will be a huge deal for us.” I hold my pinkie finger up toward Brad, leaning forward. “All right, we’re promising here . . . we are going to do whatever it takes to get this contract.”

He smiles, linking his pinky with mine. “Obviously. But relax, I know this woman. Well, kind of. So no pinkie promise needed. Save that for the secret shit. This is a for-sure, make us or break us gig, and we’re to do whatever they need. Within reason.”

He smirks, and we giggle a bit, both of us knowing that he’s the one with reason and I’m the one who will just go full-throttle if it’s something I want to do, regardless of the deal. That’s why we work so well together. I make him take risks and he makes me plan things out. He’s the Yin to my Yang, not to mention that we can dish about guys 24/7/365. Actually, although I’d never admit it, he’s pulled more hot guys than I ever have.

I see a gorgeous woman crossing the lobby, headed directly for us. Maybe ten years older than me, she’s got long, luxurious brown hair that makes the stylist in me want to weep. It’s so fucking perfect for just about anything, and she has a body that’s perhaps curvier than mine. I’ve never seen her before, but something tells me she’s our woman. “Heads up, incoming.”

Brianna Adams gives us a big smile as she comes up, exchanging hugs with Brad as if they were long lost friends. “Brad, it’s been too damn long.”

“I know, I’m missed by all who have even touched my divine presence,” Brad jokes. “How’s Mindy? I haven’t had a chance to even go down to her place since getting to town.”

“For which she owes you a butt kicking,” Brianna jokes. “But I get it. And you must be McKayla.”

“It’s a pleasure. Brad’s told me . . . stuff.”

Brianna chuckles, shaking her head. “I’m just the quiet one of the group. Right now, my husband and I are co-owners of this resort, and I’m taking on the task of being the events manager as well. Let’s say it’s our chance to try and make a family business.” She offers her hand as she speaks, and we each shake with her.

“I see when you say family business, you swing for the fences,” I quip, looking around. “Most people would start . . . smaller.”

“Gavin and I never do things small,” Brianna says with a little smile that makes Brad chuckle. I’m confused, but I’ll get the story later, I’m sure. “I’ve heard about your new salon in town. I’m glad you called. Let’s head back to my office.”

We reach the office and settle onto the couches in the gorgeous space. It’s almost like a hotel room in itself, and I can understand why in all the TV shows they just have the characters live at the hotel. I wish I could live in a space like this.

“Okay,” Brianna says, offering us two coffees that are divine. “Let’s get to the good stuff! Can I see your portfolios?” Brad reaches into his bag and pulls out our ‘dick stroker’ book, as he calls it. Brianna flips through, oohing and ahhing over details about my hair work and Brad’s makeup work.

After several minutes of scanning, she looks up, grinning. “Very nice. So, I’ve got two things. One, I’d love to contract with the Triple B Salon to be our go-to service providers for our events. We have our own spa and space that you can use if you’d like, but our spa employees are already stretched thin, and when we have large wedding parties come in, it can be a bit overloaded. It doesn’t make business sense to staff continuously for the events when they’re a few days here and there on the calendar. And let’s be honest, if a bride is getting married here and there are Hollywood stylists in town, she’s gonna book you two. So this will just make it a smoother offering that is automatically available. We do quite a few events, typically one every week, but not all of those are hair- and makeup-type things. Some are conferences and such. But the weddings? Just go ahead and block your entire May, June, and July for them because we’re going to be slammed. You can determine your own fee schedule rates, and the hotel will add a ten percent fee to the top for our take. What do you think?”

Brad and I look at each other, trying not to squeal like the little bitches we currently are. This will be it for us. Our ticket to making sure we *make*

it. Yes, we'll need regular clients in town to stay busy, but having this contract and volume of work will keep us floating throughout the year, happy as larks. Well, if larks got paid!

Brad finally stops grinning enough to make words. "I think that sounds perfect. The only thing I'd say we should consider is that having us take over your spa space that frequently might be an issue for your appointments there."

Brianna nods, tapping her well-manicured finger on the desktop. "You're right. Okay, we'll see how that works. McKayla, you haven't said anything yet. Any input?"

I'm still smiling like a loon and just shake my head. "Oh, I'm totally in. I was just wondering how many extra hands Brad and I are going to have to hire if things keep going like this. So I'm in like sin! Sounds like a great deal for both of us, and I'm excited to work with you. My only question is, you said you had two things and that was one. What's the other?"

Brianna laughs lightly, teasing her long locks. "Oh yes, the other thing is, I'm gonna need you to do my hair! I've never had a real Hollywood stylist doll me up. My anniversary is coming up, so I want to really go all out, so you two can do my hair and makeup. Gavin won't know what hit him!"

As if her talking about him triggered his appearance, there's a knock on the door. "Bri, you in here?"

A mountain of a man in a custom-made suit comes strutting into the room. I know it's custom-made because I've never seen a suit with that extreme a taper from the shoulders to the waist before. Well, I take that back. One time, I saw one of the Venice Beach bodybuilder guys in a suit in Beverly Hills . . . but this man's a lot more handsome. He walks straight up to Brianna, picking her up in a bear hug as he plants a big kiss on her lips.

The kiss goes on for a beat longer than is comfortable for us to witness, and I turn to grin at Brad. Brianna and the man, who I'm hoping is her husband after that hot kiss, separate and turn toward us.

"Sorry. I'd say we got carried away, but we're always like this. McKayla, this is my husband. Honey, this is McKayla, the stylist who opened up a salon in town. And you know Brad, right?"

"Sure do," Gavin says. "How can I forget the worst dancer at your best friend's wedding?"

Brad blushes, then glowers at Gavin as they shake hands. “You know, *Anaconda*, if it wasn’t for the fact that I know you’re lying . . . I’d be tempted to show off a little.”

Gavin laughs before offering a handshake. I think he might squeeze my hand hard enough to accidentally break bones, but he’s surprisingly gentle for his size. “Gavin Adams. It’s a pleasure. I really don’t mean to run out on you guys, but I have to go pick up our son from practice. Takes after his dad, and I gotta admit I’m enjoying it. Honey, you want us to nab anything on the way home?” he says, turning to Brianna.

“No, it’s okay,” Brianna says, giving her husband another hug and a kiss on the cheek. “See you at home.”

Gavin leaves, and a few minutes later, Brad and I leave Brianna after jotting down a few more details. As we walk out, I elbow Brad in the ribs. “Okay, spill it. What’s with the name Anaconda? What, does he hug like one?”

“Hug? No . . . you’re missing a letter in there,” Brad says with a chuckle. We get to my car and get in. “That was Gavin ‘Anaconda’ Adams. He used to be a football star. I haven’t seen a lick of that man playing, but everyone’s seen his accidental wardrobe malfunction. I’ll just put it this way. If there were ever a snake that I wanted to pet, it’s his.”

CHAPTER 14

EVAN

"Come on, you son of a bitch," I grunt as I try to get the spark plug to seat properly in the engine of 'Fast' Eddie Ambrose's customized Mustang. I gotta admit, he's done a great job of turning the kit job classic 'Stang and making it bust out of its pony car seams . . . but that means that underneath the hood, there's not a spare goddamn inch, and sometimes, the arrangement is difficult. Which is why I only work on Eddie's car at night or in the early morning, when nobody's around to piss me off.

I finally get my plug socket seated on the head properly when I hear a scream from across the street. It pierces the darkness of near-midnight and makes me drop my wrench, forgotten instantaneously. My heart pounds in my chest as I forget everything, running across the street.

I see McKayla in front of the Triple B, dressed in just a denim skirt and a t-shirt and looking like she's ready for a late-night run to the supermarket.

I jump the curb, approaching McKayla, who's wiping her hands on her skirt like she's got something burning on her palms. "What is it?" I ask, grabbing her hands. "What the fuck is going on?"

McKayla is staring at her hands, her eyes wide and her skin pale, only two big spots of intense color in her cheeks. "Oh, my God, oh, my God!" she yells, looking like she's about ready to puke. "Eww!"

"McKayla, calm down!" I say firmly as I hold her cheeks in my hands, trying to get her to snap out of whatever the fuck she's going through. Her eyes focus on me, and I lower my voice, almost dropping to a whisper. "Tell me what's going on so I can understand you."

McKayla takes a deep breath and closes her eyes for a moment before speaking again in a shaky voice. "I was coming out to get in the car. I was feenin' for a burger and . . ." Mckayla pauses mid-sentence, her control

wavering as she points at the car, her chest hitching. “I found that. Look at that shit!”

I let go of her hands to peer at the black handle of her car, noticing the thick, slightly pale liquid glopped on it. My stomach curls. I know jiz when I see it.

Anger burns through me. What sort of sick fuck does something like this? My hands tremble in rage as I turn and take her hands again. She’s pissed, but also scared, and I totally agree with both. “When did you last see your car?”

“I . . .” she says, still staring at her car, but I lead her away, toward the door of the salon. Away from the disgusting display, she calms a little. “I made a bank run at the end of the night at the salon. That was about eight or so. It’s a short drive. I mean, the bank’s just up the street. Today was a lot of cash, so I didn’t want to walk it up there.”

“Did you see anyone around the car before or when you got back?” I ask. McKayla shakes her head, and I nod. McKayla’s smart. She wouldn’t have let anyone near her car like that. “What about the cops?”

“No,” McKayla says with a strong finality. “I don’t want the local cops getting involved. They’d call it some kid’s prank or something. I’ve already seen the way a couple of them look at me and Brad, like we’re new in town and they don’t really care for us.”

I’d like to disagree with her, but she might be right. I’ve noticed that some people around here seem a little jealous they’ve come into town and hit it off right away. “Okay, we’ll handle it ourselves,” I say. “Gimme your keys.”

“What?” McKayla asks, instantly concerned. “Why?”

“I’m going to get this cleaned up. We’ve got a steam clean unit over at the shop,” I explain.

McKayla nods absently, a tiny smile tipping her mouth up. “Can you drive a car? I’ve only ever seen you on a bike.”

“Cars are easy,” I reply with a easy smirk. “Tanks . . . now those fuckers were hard.”

McKayla gives me a raised eyebrow, seeing whether I’m joking, but hands me her keys. I go around to her car, peeling off my sweaty t-shirt to grab the handle and opening it before sliding behind the wheel and opening the passenger side. “Hop in!”

McKayla gets in and shuts her door, and I quickly drive us into the bay, pulling into the slot closest to the pressure washer. I get out and go around to open her door and help her out. “It’ll take a few minutes for the steam to build up in the washer,” I tell her, flipping the switch. “You want some coffee?”

“No, thanks. God it sounds ridiculous, but I still want that fucking burger,” McKayla says with a dark chuckle. “Think you might be willing to split an order of fries?”

“As tempting as it sounds, I don’t think I’d make a very good date,” I reply. McKayla crosses her arms across her chest and leans against the workbench near her, looking so hot I’m not so sure the steam cleaner needs that much more time to get to pressure.

“What is it with you?” McKayla asks me. “You’ve got this rep around town for being this gigantic asshole. But you’re not. You even try to pretend to be one, but I know assholes. Remember where I’m from. Some people say Hollywood is the asshole of America.”

“They might be right, but I’ve put in my time in the asshole of the world,” I reply, shaking my head. “McKayla, it’s not that I didn’t try to go back to normal after the Army. I just can’t. And I won’t inflict my damage on someone else.”

“What happened?” McKayla asks. “Not over there. I don’t think I’ve earned that right yet, even if I am curious. But what happened when you came back?”

I blink. I think it’s the first time someone’s asked me that question. Lots of people want to know what it’s like ‘in the sandbox’, as some people call it. Like Iraq and Afghanistan are somehow the same place.

But nobody’s ever asked me what it was like coming back. “I couldn’t even sleep the first week I got back, took sleeping pills just to get some rest,” I admit quietly. “But I tried acting normal. I mean, I went out on a few dates. Plenty of girls liked how I looked with a crew cut, and that’s what you do when you get home. But . . .”

“But what?”

I shrug, not wanting to explain just how hard it was dealing with a thousand and one stupid questions or the girls who wanted to show me off like some sort of trophy. Worst of all were the ones who thought they could use me to get their exes jealous and the ones who tried to start shit because of it.

“They couldn’t handle the dark side,” I finally reply. “Definitely not the bad nights. Slowly, I came to figure out that nobody really should be asked to put up with it.”

“So you hide your good side behind a giant layer of *fuck off*,” McKayla replies. “You know, Evan, not everyone’s looking to just get the benefits. Although you’ve got a lot of them.”

“Yeah, well . . .” I say, going over to the now pressurized washer and grabbing the thick rubber gloves we use to keep down the burns along with the wand for spraying. “I know what you’re asking for, McKayla. I’m flattered, I really am. You’re the most beautiful woman who’s ever shown interest in me. But that’s the exact reason I know you deserve better than me.”

Before she can answer, I hit the trigger on the power washer, spraying the driver side of McKayla’s car with two hundred PSI of hot water and sanitizing chemicals that could clean surgical instruments if we wanted. It doesn’t take long. I have the wand set in wide fan mode so I don’t break her window, but it still raises enough mist that I can’t see shit except for the side of her car when I let go of the trigger and the noise stops.

“There you go,” I reply, inhaling the steam and loving the feeling. “Let me just grab a towel—”

“Fuck the towel,” McKayla says behind me. I turn, surprised she was able to sneak up on me, and I’m even more surprised when I realize she’s pulled off her t-shirt and bra and is wearing just her denim skirt.

“McKayla—”

“Shut the fuck up,” McKayla says, pressing her body against me and grabbing my hair. “We both need this. I’m a big girl. I’m not afraid of the dark.”

She pulls my head down, and at the first touch of our lips, all my resistance melts away. If this woman wants to feel me, all of me, then she’s going to get it. She’s been warned.

I spin her, pressing McKayla’s body up against the warm side of her car as I reach down, running my hand underneath the hem of her skirt to grab her ass and squeeze it tightly. Oh, my God, she’s wearing a thong. Of course she is, my naughty little girl.

I groan into her mouth as I work her skirt up, and McKayla runs her fingernails down my back hard, delicious pain mixing with the heat as she reaches around and cups my cock. There’s no holding back this time, and I

pick her up, carrying her to the hood of her car and setting her curvy ass right on the fender. “lie back.”

She does as I command, her eyes going wide as I reach down and undo the button on my jeans, pushing them down. I’m not wearing any underwear. I go commando pretty much everywhere except when I exercise. My cock immediately pops out. McKayla’s eyes go wide, and she unconsciously licks her lips as I spread her legs, pushing her skirt up more.

The sight of her, legs spread nearly into a split and her denim skirt hiked to her waist as her breasts curve naturally and beautifully up and to the side, leaves me breathless. I blink and push her knees up higher, bending down. “What are you doing?”

“What I’ve wanted to do since I first licked your come off my fingers,” I growl as I bend down and kiss her panty-covered pussy. McKayla jumps like I just sent an electric shock through her body, encouraging me to nibble and suck on her pussy through her panties.

I want to rip her panties off like I did her other pair, but I restrain myself. She does need to have *something* to work.

Instead, I tug her panties to the side and lick her wet folds with my tongue, slipping between them as I let my hunger drive my mouth to consume her pussy. I scoop her juices out with my tongue over and over before pulling out to tease her clit with just the tip of my tongue.

“Fuck . . . oh my fucking . . .” McKayla groans as she reaches down and grabs my head, twisting up a fistful of my hair and grinding her pussy against my face. I lick and suck harder, bringing my hand up to slide two fingers deep inside her and rubbing her deep spot as she cries out. Her cries and shrieks of pleasure guide me as I draw her body all the way up to the point where she’s trembling on the edge of coming before keeping her there, suspended on a tightrope above the canyon, waiting for a single word. “Evan . . .”

“Say please,” I growl against her clit. I lick around her clit, her soaked hairs catching in my stubble and pulling, and I know I’m torturing her, but I need to hear it. “Be good.”

“Please,” McKayla says, her voice rising higher and higher as before she can even get the word out, I suck hard on her clit, sending her crashing over the edge into an orgasm that shakes her from the top of her head all the way to her toes. I feel her heels drum against my back as I clamp my mouth

around her pussy and she fills my mouth with her juices, a nectar that's sweeter than anything I've ever tasted before.

I stand up, my cock raging harder than ever at the feast I just enjoyed, and pull McKayla's nearly limp body toward me, rubbing the head of my cock through her folds. "You ready?" I ask before letting go. "Just a second."

"What?" McKayla asks fearfully, relaxing when I reach into my back pocket and pull out my wallet. It's been there at least a year, but old habits die hard, and my condom's still there. "Hmm . . . not so bad a boy after all."

"Shut the fuck up," I growl, but I'm amused as I roll the condom down my cock. Really, it's just as much for my pleasure as it is for protection. I haven't been inside a woman in a long time and I'm afraid I'm going to bust a nut in thirty seconds if I don't have something to dim the fire just a tad. "You're going to get fucked harder than you've ever been fucked before."

"Good," McKayla says, wrapping her legs around my waist. I line the head of my cock up and push forward. Her pussy seems to flow around my cock in a perfect velvety, clingy, tight embrace that takes my breath away before I stop.

I look down, seeing the pain in her eyes, but she's not complaining about the feeling of my cock filling her. Still, I pause, grinding against her and letting her adjust while I lean down to kiss her stiff nipple, sucking on it and feasting on her body again until I feel her relax, running her hands through my hair again. Pulling back, I thrust again, filling her all the way until I feel my balls press against the warm curve of her ass.

"You're fucking tight," I growl around her nipple as I look up into her beautiful face, all big eyes and pink hair and sexy tremble to her lips. "You ready?"

She nods, her voice yanked from her throat as I pull back and thrust again. Even if I'm wearing a condom, I'm not able to hold back, and I fuck her hard, slamming my cock deep into her with every stroke. Each one is fabulous, and fucking McKayla is like nothing I've ever experienced with a woman before. It feels like her body was made just for me as my hips smack against hers and I kiss up to her mouth again, pounding her against the hood of her car until she's gasping for breath. "Oh, fuck, Evan, you make me . . ."

I cry out, biting her lip as I come and push her over again, her fingernails digging harder than ever into my back. I can feel a delicious pain as she breaks my skin, and part of me is happy about it, loving the pain as I fill the condom with jets of my thick seed.

McKayla clutches me to her as she rides her own orgasmic rollercoaster, and when it's all over, she strokes my face once, smirking. "Damn . . . that was better than I've dreamed about all week."

"McKayla, this doesn't mean—"

"Yeah, yeah, I know," she says, still smiling. "You're an asshole, this can't be a relationship, yada, yada, yada. I get it. But still . . . that was one amazing fuck. And from what I see in your eyes, you're thinking the same thing right now."

She's right, and I shrug. "Well . . . your car's clean."

"'Ish," McKayla says. "How much do I owe you?"

I just smile, withdrawing and cleaning myself up. "If that sort of shit ever happens again, gimme a call."

"Don't know your number, and I've got a terrible post-sex memory. You need to come across the street and write it down for me."

I know what she's doing, but fuck it. I get myself buttoned back up and even grab a semi-clean t-shirt from the office while McKayla gets her things back on, and I climb into the passenger seat as she drives back across the street. In the glove box, I find a pen and a piece of paper, where I write down my number. "Here you go. Don't lose it."

McKayla gives me a show of folding up the number and tucking it inside the cup of her bra, grinning. "Don't worry, I'll program it into my phone as soon as I get upstairs. Walk me to the door?"

I get out and walk McKayla the short distance to the front door of the salon. Unlocking the door, she sighs. "Thanks, Evan. Really. Not for the fuck, though that was great. But for everything before that too."

"You're welcome." I lean in for some unknown reason and give McKayla a kiss on the cheek. "Don't worry about the sick fucking prank. You'll be fine."

McKayla gives me a smile and gives me a kiss back on my cheek before opening the door and going inside, locking it behind her. From the digital clock on the counter, I see it's nearly one in the morning, but I don't feel sleepy at all as I watch her disappear into the back of the shop, a light turning on for a moment in a stairwell before she closes the door.

I turn to head back to the garage, and just as I step into the street, there's a roar of a powerful engine. Bright lights flare, blinding me as I quickly jump back. A big sedan narrowly misses me as it goes roaring down the street toward downtown.

"What the fuck?" I start to yell before stopping myself. I still can't see much. My vision's still a little dazzled by the lights, and the car's too far away now, but there's a disquieting feeling in my stomach that whatever this 'prank' against McKayla was, it's a lot more than some kid doing something stupid.

I wait for my eyes to clear before crossing the street again, going back inside the shop and rolling the doors down. I look through the narrow plastic window in the door at the Triple B and make a decision.

Until I'm sure McKayla's safe . . . I think I might sleep here every night. Just to be sure.

CHAPTER 15

MCKAYLA

"Earth to McKayla . . . come in, bitch. Can you hear me?" Brad asks, all giggles as he catches me drifting off once again.

I'm trying to focus. Data entry isn't my strong suit to start with, but these bills have to get paid. I love feeling the twenties and occasional hundreds between my fingers, but that doesn't mean I like dealing with the paperwork. It's why we spent the money for a totally integrated point of sales system, but it doesn't do everything. So I try and focus, but even as my nails, blood red today, clickity-clack on the keyboard, my mind wanders.

For the last few days, I've popped between virtually euphoric at the amazing sex with Evan, dreaming about how he put me up on the hood of my car and pounded into me like an animal unleashed, and feeling creepy-crawlies down my spine at what was done to my car.

Evan tried to make me feel better, cleaning it up and then opening up to me more than I thought he ever would, and he's tried to assure me that it was probably just a stupid prank. But I haven't overlooked the fact that he's more or less moved full-time into the apartment above the garage since the gross incident, almost like he's protecting me. While that helps me feel safer, it also means that every night, I have to fight the urge to call him or go over there to see if maybe he can give me a little bit more assurance, if you know what I mean.

Brad sighs with a laugh and brings me fully back to the moment.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm here. Just daydreaming for a minute."

Brad sets his makeup brush back in his case, shaking his head. "Girl, those aren't called 'daydreams', they're called fantasies. And yours were

written all over your flushed face. Although with the way you were walking the other day, I'd say you were more likely replaying memories."

I reach a hand up to my cheeks and blush even further. I didn't tell Brad about anything that happened, and I can't get a read on him whether I actually was walking a little weird or if he's just fishing. We've joked about it before—we call it the 'Drought Breaker,' although I'd say my wide-hipped mosey isn't as funny as Brad's waddle. "I wasn't—"

"Aha, caught you!" Brad crows with a triumphant little clap. "I was kidding, but your reaction says I'm damn close to the bullseye. Just what devious things are you imagining doing with your greased up biker across the street?"

We both swivel our heads to look out the windows and into the bay doors of the garage across the way. It's past sunset, but the lights are on inside, giving us a great view.

Evan and TJ are walking around a car, appraising it as they point and talk. Evan leans over to get under the hood and my eyes lock on his ass, covered in tight denim with a big grease swipe where I've seen him wipe his hands countless times in the last few weeks. It's just about the same place where I want to dig my nails into the dimples of his ass as he pounds into me.

Brad, I can tell, probably knows what I'm thinking. "Mmm, damn, boy. Yeah, I can see why you're cooking up some afternoon delight dreams about that yummy goodness. Jesus, I didn't think you could get something that nicely fitting without being stretch jeans."

I sigh dreamily, leaning forward and resting my elbows on the counter. "It's even better without the jeans. Best ass I've ever had my hands on."

I hear Brad's gasp and realize I said that out loud, not in my head as I'd intended. *Shit*.

Brad's eyes bore into me, his voice demanding as he plants his elbows right across the counter from me, lowering himself to stare into my face. "Spill it, bitch. Don't even try to back out of it now."

Before I can say anything, there's a honk from across the street. We both look up and see Evan rubbing the back of his head, glaring at his brother. TJ looks across the street, trying not to laugh as he points and says something that makes Evan flip him the bird before stomping into the garage. TJ raises two fingers in a wave, and I return the greeting with a smile, thankful for the delay before I tell Brad what happened.

Brad offers a little finger waggle to TJ too, watching him disappear before hitting me with his full attention. “Well?”

“Well what?” I try in a last-ditch effort to not have to spill it.

Brad’s not having it. “Bitch, don’t make me turn you from Marilyn Monroe to Marilyn Manson.”

“I think I’m more Shirley Manson, don’t you?”

Brad growls, and I laugh, throwing up my hands. “Okay, okay. Chill. So, the other day after we got back, I was really feenin’ for a burger around midnight. So, I pulled on some clothes and came down to make a drive-through run. When I came downstairs, I unlocked the car and grabbed the handle to open the door and there was something all over the handle, door, and window, but I didn’t notice at first. It was . . . oh, God, this makes me wanna hurl even thinking about it, but it was semen. I screamed, and then I got mad and started stomping around. Evan came over to check on me because he heard the commotion.”

Brad interrupts me, his eyes wide in shock. “I thought this was a story about your seeing his ass. Now I’m fucking freaked out. Are you saying Evan jacked off on your car?”

I look at him, wondering if he’s had hearing loss recently, then realize I have been sort of babbling and going fast. I probably sound like a lunatic. “No, of course not. I’m getting there, but you need the whole story. So I was just totally freaked and grossed out. I mean seriously, it’s creepy as fuck to find your car door turned into a frosted fucking donut. Evan calmed me down but offered to call the cops. I said no, figuring they’d just blow it off like some damn teenage prank. Then he offered to use the power washer in the garage to clean it off. We got to talking . . .”

I realize that I don’t want to tell Brad the things Evan shared with me. They feel private, like he gave me a little more than he does most folks, and I hold that dear. Brad seems to understand, though. “And? About the hands on his ass part.”

Giving my friend a grateful smile, I wrap up my abbreviated tale. “Well, one thing led to another, and we had sex on the hood of my car. Kinda reclaiming it from the bad memory with a good one . . . a *really* good one.”

Brad looks me up and down, then he stands up, rubbing at his cheek. He’s still a little playful, but there’s a side of him that’s serious right now, too, and both are present in his eyes. “We’ll get back to the other stuff, but first of all, how good are we talkin’ here?”

I chuckle, squeezing my thighs together as a memory tingle starts up between my legs. “Legitimately, the best I’ve ever had. Even Mr. Hitachi upstairs can’t keep up.”

Brad snaps his fingers, whistling in admiration. “Well, all right then. What’s next?”

I shake my head. “There is no next. He’s been clear he’s not looking for anything serious, and I’m not exactly a ‘wait for him’ kind of girl. I guess we’re just going on as usual, and if something happens, it happens.”

Brad looks shocked for a moment, his mouth hanging open, then he bursts out into laughter, bending to put his hands on his knees as the tremors of laughter shake his whole body.

Through his fits, I can barely make him out, his voice dripping with sarcasm. “*Wait for him* . . . if something happens, it happens.”

I slap his shoulder, not amused. “Quit laughing. This is serious.”

Brad tries to reel it in, taking some big breaths, but his shoulders are still bouncing with suppressed laughter. “Okay, so serious. Got it. Let’s get one thing straight. You are not some Sit-Around Suzy who’s gonna wait for him to ask you out on a dinner and movie date. You’re a shot caller. You get shit done on your terms. Yeah, so you’ve picked a fucking vertical uphill battle this time, but that’s on your heart . . . and your nether regions. The pussy wants what the pussy wants, I guess.”

I grin. Brad’s right. After all, I went after what I wanted last time too. Now that Evan’s had a taste . . . I bet he’s already thinking about wanting another round, even if his damaged side says he can’t. “This is why you’re my best friend, Brad. And if you ever repeat that, I’ll tell everyone your man-scaping secrets.”

“Meow, retract those claws. I’ve got you, babe.” He stops laughing, his face going serious again. “But listen, I know you’re a big girl and can handle your own shit, but if anything like the deal with the car happens again, tell me so I can have your back. And if there’s no future with Evan, just watch yourself and don’t let it go too far. Shit can get too deep quickly if you’re not careful.”

I nod and give Brad a hug. “I promise. Don’t worry, Evan made me promise the same thing.”

“Oh, really?” Brad asks, hugging me back as he looks over my shoulder across the street. “Maybe Mr. Bad Boy Biker has some redeeming qualities besides a nice ass.”

“And a big wrench.”

Brad growls. “Bitch, don’t make me choke you.”

“How do you know I wouldn’t like that?” In a fake sultry voice, I moan out, “Choke me, Daddy.”

Brad shakes his head, the horrified laugh barely held back. “This is why I date men. Women are weird as fuck.” He walks back to his station, and I hear him mumbling about pirate porn and near-death experiences just to get off.

Not able to resist one more twist of the knot in his knickers, I sing-song after him, “Don’t knock it ‘till you’ve tried it.”

CHAPTER 16

EVAN

I'm staring upward, my shoulders aching and sweat trickling down my spine, face and arms reaching deep into an engine when I hear my brother mutter '*oh, shit*' under his breath. I'm still fucking with Fast Eddie's Mustang, currently working on pulling his transmission so I can tweak his gear ratios. Eddie wants to shave a tenth of a second off his quarter-mile time next month and is willing to pay for it. Beats doing oil changes on Corollas any day of the week.

My voice echoes in the metal around me. As I set my tools aside, I'm glad he didn't slap the hood like he sometimes does. I'd have cut myself up pretty bad if he did. "What's wrong?"

TJ's voice has a note of wonder and a note of amusement as he replies. "You'll see. You just need to get straight, right the fuck now. Incoming, coming in fucking hot."

Wiping my hands on my work jeans, I turn from the lift to look at TJ, wondering what the hell's gotten into his head. I see him staring out the bay door and follow his sightline. I'll be damned. Coming in fucking hot is right. McKayla is strutting across the street, obviously beelining right for the garage with steel in her eyes, carrying a white box.

I drink her in, my eyes taking in every detail from her curled hair and long lashes to her halter-style top that pushes her tits out on display, to her high-waisted shorts that stop high on the long tanned length of her legs, down to the little lacy socks and platform heels she's wearing.

I feel my pants get tighter around my thickening cock and reach down to adjust myself without even thinking about it. It's only after I do that I realize that I've probably left a huge grease stain on the crotch of my jeans. *Busted*.

McKayla doesn’t miss a thing, her eyes tracking my hand with a little smirk of victory. Walking into the garage, she stops and gives us both a megawatt smile, not quite showing off her figure but still making herself the sexiest thing to walk through the bay doors since . . . well, since the last time she was in here.

“Hey, TJ . . . Evan.” She says my name like it’s got a couple of extra syllables, and even I hear the huskiness, and my cock responds, standing even taller as I remember her moaning my name on the hood of her car as I rammed into her.

Goddammit. I’m right back in that moment, and by the look in her eyes, she knows it. It makes me angry that she’s trying to tease me when she knows that can’t happen again. It shouldn’t have happened last time, but that night was so fucked up, and the way she pressed her tits against my bare chest . . . fuck, I’m still a man!

I stand with my legs wide, hoping for some relief, and cross my arms over my chest. Part of me wants to run over to the sink and grab a handful of Gojo, the obnoxious hand cleaner every mechanic knows . . . just to clean up a little.

I fight that thought down, knowing it’s the weak side of me that I can’t let her see. “What?”

My voice is ice, obviously rude and dismissive. I see her flinch, just a tightening in the corners of her eyes, but it still stings.

TJ’s head snaps to me, and he gives me an incredulous look. “What the fuck, man?” He turns back to McKayla, ever the well-mannered brother and business owner. “Sorry. I’m sure what he meant to say was, ‘Hi, McKayla, how are you today?’ but he’s damn-near incapable of anything more than grunts sometimes. You’ve probably figured that out for yourself already though.”

McKayla answers, but her eyes don’t leave mine. “Don’t worry, TJ. I’ve gotten used to your brother’s grunting. I’m actually quite adept at decoding grunts and reading between the lines of a single-word response.”

I’m not sure if that’s supposed to be a threat, a tease at the grunts I made as I fucked her, or a promise, but it makes me a little uncomfortable that maybe she can see right through me.

If I’m honest with myself, it also makes me a little happy that maybe she’s made of tougher stuff than I give her credit for because most women would’ve already jumped and run away from my grumpy ass. She’s stuck

around, and that's something that means more to me than it does to most people.

McKayla gives TJ a flirtatious smile and I have a flash of jealousy, wanting her eyes on me and me only. "For example, in Evan's case, 'what' means 'I wasn't expecting you, what are you doing here?, and what do you want?' all rolled up into one word. And since it was more grunt than growl, it means he's happy to see me, even if he doesn't want to be happy about it."

As she talks, I see a look of shocked humor form on TJ's face. "Damn, Bro, I think she's got you damn-near pinned. I guess I'll uh . . . leave you two to it."

He walks back into the office, closing the door behind him and leaving us alone. I grab a rag from my toolbox, wiping off the worst of the grime on my hands as McKayla watches me, an amused little smirk on her luscious lips. "How'd I do? Am I fluent in Evanese?"

I don't want to admit that she's pretty much spot-on, so I turn and go back to the car, leaning over it and peering inside like it'll tell me what to do here. It's a little scary, actually, how much she can read me like a book. No matter what I try and do, she's just able to break through my defenses like they're tissue paper.

McKayla sighs and sets down the container she's been holding on top of my toolbox, shaking her head. "I just wanted to say thank you again for the other night."

I grin, but it's intentionally feral, a last-ditch attempt to try and push her away. It's a habit that's hard to break. "You're thanking me for giving you a good fuck with baked goods? That's a new one."

I expect her to be turned off by my crudeness. Hell, I'm hoping for it, but she grins back. Her eyes are sparkling as she runs a finger over the box, a slight show of nervousness that I haven't seen from her before. "Nope, these are for the carwash. If I was thanking you for the fuck, I'd have to buy a whole damn truckload of cookies. But I think I rocked your world just as much as you did mine. Or am I wrong?"

I chuckle, surprised at her response once again. No matter what I try to say to get her to leave me the fuck alone, she just takes it in stride and shoots it right back at me like I verbally lobbed it at her. In some ways, it's sexier than her taste in clothing, and I'm about ready to see if she'd look good doggy-style over Fast Eddie's Mustang as it is. "Point taken."

McKayla opens the box before I can get myself in trouble, knowing she's made her point. "What's your poison? I didn't know so I got a variety."

I walk over to look inside the box and see that she's right, there's like ten different kinds of cookies in here. There's a great little cafe called Mindy's Place down by the university, not a place I often go, but they supposedly get a lot of good reviews. I reach for one with a bit of chocolate icing on top and she smacks my hand. My eyes snap to hers as I feel the fire of anger spark inside my belly.

McKayla, though, isn't deterred one bit. "Your hands are filthy. Go wash up. Or if you want, just open up and I'll feed it to you."

I hear the challenge in her words, but she did give me a choice, letting me be in charge even as she orders me around. Smart woman.

I resume my 'fuck off' stance, crossing my arms over my chest and glaring at her to show my displeasure, but I do as she asks, opening my mouth. I fucking open my jaw and let her slip the cookie into my mouth. I bite down, making sure I just nip the edge of her thumb. She doesn't react, letting her thumb rest against my lips until I start chewing, tasting her along with the cookie. I know for damn sure that it's the best cookie ever.

As I chew, she pops the other half of the cookie into her mouth, making sure to lick the tender spot on her thumb, her eyes never leaving mine. My cock, which hasn't softened one bit, makes a warning twitch, and I know pretty soon that I'm going to have a drop of precum drying in my denim as much as she's turning me on. "Mmm, pretty good. Rose told me about this place that she said was the best in the county. Guess she was right."

She grabs another cookie, a smaller one with powdered sugar, and eats it in one bite, but it leaves a bit of white dust all over her pink lips. Fuck, I want to lick it off her lips. That's it. I'm going to have to start wearing underwear just to make sure I'm ready for her.

I watch as her tongue peeks out, licking her lips to clean them. I don't stand a fucking chance. She knows exactly what she's doing to me. "I wanted that one."

She looks up at me from under her lashes, daring me to take what we both know I really want. "Well, I already ate it, but if you want a taste . . ." She lifts her chin toward me, offering her lips in a challenge. "There might be a little bit left."

With a growl, I pounce on her, pressing her back against the nearby bench with my body and caging her in with arms on either side, to cover her lips with mine, tasting the sweet sugar as I lick the seam of her lips.

She opens, and I dive inside her, our tongues tangling as we fight for control of the kiss. I won't let her have it, but she's not gonna give it to me either. I'm going to have to earn it with this woman, which just turns me on all the more. She's got fire and steel in her center, probably the reason she's able to put up with my shit and fire right back at me.

I feel her hands trace down my chest, following and scratching the lines of my abs down to my jeans. I know she can feel my throbbing hardness against her body, and while I know what she wants to do, I'm unable to stop her.

Without breaking our kiss, she unbuckles my belt and unbuttons my jeans, sliding a hand inside. I try and pull back in a desperate attempt to stop this before we spin totally out of control, but when her soft hand wraps around my rock-hard cock, all thought flies out of my brain, and I groan, lost in the sensation as she moves up and down my length.

I'm already slick with precum, and McKayla moans as she pumps my shaft. "Mmm, Evan . . . you don't know just how much I've missed this fucking monster. And now is how I really repay you for giving me the fucking of a lifetime the other night."

She keeps pumping my cock until I'm moving too, pushing myself into her tight fist as she works me, rubbing across the head every few strokes to spread the precum down my shaft. I can't last long, but we don't have a lot of time anyway. TJ could be back any second . . . and it is still business hours, after all.

McKayla moves down to kneel, her hand never pausing its rhythm. I look down at the sexiest sight I think I've ever seen, this strong woman on her knees for me, and warn her desperately. "Princess . . ."

McKayla shakes her head, missing my point as she looks up into my eyes. "Do yourself a favor and just shut up. I want this." She lowers her voice, licking her lips. "And admit it—you want it too."

I have half a thought to argue, but before I can speak, she swirls around my head with the flat of her tongue and all argument turns into a long moan.

She takes more and more of my cock in, one excruciating inch at a time, drawing out my pleasure, making me wait even though I want to just shove my cock deep in her throat and see how she likes that. I grip the edge of the

bench, my fingers digging into the rolled steel and praying I get a chance to finish this before someone breaks us up.

After too many bobs to count, she's finally got my entire cock sucked deep into her mouth, her nose nestled in the short curls at the base, and she hums.

I jerk, almost instantly going over the edge, but she grabs my hips and holds me there, not letting me go. She gets into a new rhythm, sucking up to the head with a swirl as she looks up at me, then back down deep for a hum.

It's all I can do to not grab her hair, but I don't want to get grease all over those sexy pink curls with my dirty hands, so I squeeze the workbench so tightly my knuckles are white.

After minutes of her glorious torture, she pulls back and looks up at me. "Evan, fuck my face. Come down my throat."

I adjust my feet, giving me a better angle, and she takes me back into the hot wetness of her mouth. "Fuck, Princess. Are you sure?" I ask.

She gives a noise of agreement—well, I hope it's agreement, but it does me in. I lose control, using my leverage on the table to pound into her mouth with all the power I have.

She meets me stroke for stroke, swallowing me down her throat. I watch my cock disappear into her mouth, her eyes looking up to watch me from the shadows, totally giving in to me.

I'm so focused, I almost miss it when her hands move, one to cup and massage my balls. But the other one, she slips into her shorts, and I feel her hum of satisfaction as she finds her pussy, and judging by her motions, starts rubbing her clit.

I grin, knowing I can hold out a little longer and wanting to please this sexy minx at my feet. "Are you wet, Princess? Does letting me fuck your face turn you on?" She nods, never losing pace. "You don't come till I do, okay? When I come down your pretty little throat, you come with me, but not before."

She looks at me with challenge in her eyes and her hand movements get a little faster. *Holy fuck, McKayla, you are perfect.* "Fuck." I hammer into her for a few strokes and I'm a goner. "Now, Princess. Swallow me down. Come for me. Now."

I explode down her throat, and while she gags a little at the forceful stream, she keeps swallowing, only losing a dribble down her chin. At the same time, her hips buck against her hand as she rides out her own orgasm.

With a sigh, she sits back onto her heels, taking her hand out of her shorts. “Well, I came here hoping to get one up on you, and there you go making me come again.”

I grin, seeing the glistening on her fingers, a sudden thirst parching my throat. “I want to taste you.”

I expect her to reach her juicy hand up to me, but I should’ve known better with McKayla.

She takes her fingers to her own mouth, licking them clean as I stare at her in amazement. She reaches out for me, and I offer her my hand, helping her stand up.

Once she’s standing back in the cage of my arms, she kisses me, and I can taste her musky sweetness on her tongue. Goddamn, this woman. She ducks out of my arms and walks a few steps away before turning. “So, thanks again for the car wash. I’m ready to go for another ride whenever you are. I’ll give you a call later and we can plan on when.”

She steps out of the garage into the sunshine. I stand slack-jawed and confused about what the fuck just happened for a split second before I get my jeans adjusted properly.

Damned if I’ll be standing here with my cock out in broad daylight, regardless of what just happened.

TJ steps back out of the office as I do up the last button with a smirk. “Hey, bro, maybe it’s your thing, but you might want to close the garage door next time. I’m sure half of Main Street just saw your little cookie snack.”

I cut my eyes at him, a momentary flash of pissed off sparking through me, but then I realize that would probably be some fucked up shit if someone did see, and he’s right. Besides, he did just let me get my rocks off during business hours, and he waited inside the office long enough to give me enough ‘privacy’ to finish up. “Yeah, yeah . . . whatever you say, ‘boss’.”

We both laugh as we look across the street, seeing McKayla almost to the salon. I spot the greasy dark mark along her arm where I helped her stand up.

I’m afraid there might be some symbolism there, something deep about me leaving my dirty stain on something so clean and pristine, ruining her, but before I can give it too much thought, I turn and get back to work.

CHAPTER 17

MCKAYLA

It worked, I think as I lean against my work station, sipping a glass of wine and sighing happily. It fucking worked like a charm.

"Brad, you're a fucking genius, even though I'll never tell you as much," I say as I give an invisible toast to the man, who's gone over to the resort today to handle some paperwork with Brianna and to take a look at their spa facilities. He told me yesterday to just do a little seduction routine, give Evan a cookie trail to follow. But of course, I amped it up just a bit. I can't help it. If I see something I want, I go after it.

It was so good. So fucking good. Even better than the cookies, and when sex is better than chocolate . . . I've been smiling all afternoon, remembering with a buzz of excitement just how powerful I felt as he fucked my mouth.

I know some women don't like that, but I've always found it to be the biggest rush to drive a guy so crazy that they lose control. In that moment, even though I'm the one on my knees getting face fucked, I'm also the one with the power to drive him to that brink.

And the kiss afterward? Holy hell, it took all I had to walk away with just a pull on the fishing line, just enough to tease. I dropped him a text afterward, so now it's his turn to chase. My fingers are crossed that he takes the bait like a champ. I left what happens next in his hands when I told him I was ready to ride whenever he was.

I'm sure my customers were wondering what was up today, but they didn't say anything as I practically floated through the last two appointments of the afternoon along with a walk-in cut.

Now, I'm virtually dancing by myself as I clean up the salon, almost ready for closing time for the day.

Behind me, I hear the door chimes as someone enters. I turn with a big smile. “Welcome to the Triple B Salon—”

My greeting is cut short, and my smile falters when I see it’s Jaxson, but I try to keep a friendly face on. “Hello, Jaxson.”

He smiles, coming inside, grinning ear to ear. “Hey, McKayla! I came by to see how everything’s going, but that smile says it all. Business must be booming, I take it?”

I’m cool but trying to be professional. “Yeah, it’s going great, Jaxson. Just checking in?”

I’m hoping he says yes, that he’s here in some city council role and not his usual. An invitation to a council meeting. Keys to the city. Hell, I’m late on paying the sewer bill . . . I just want him out of the salon ASAP. Why does he keep coming in at closing? I wish I could just bluntly tell him to get out. Maybe if I start humming that song about closing time, he’d get the message . . . *you don’t have to go home but you can’t stay here*.

No fucking dice. He runs a hand through his hair, standing tall as he walks over, shrugging off his suit jacket. “Thought I’d take you up on that offer of a haircut . . . if you have time?”

It crosses my mind to tell him no, that I don’t have time to do it today and we’re just too close to closing time to give him the attention he deserves. The honest truth is, I just don’t want to. But I glance around the empty salon, knowing that it’s all clean and I’m done for the day, and recognize that it’ll be awkward if I say no. He’s got power in this town, at least the kind that can make life difficult for me.

Giving in to the inevitable, I relent, gesturing to the chair closest to me. “Sure. I’ve got just enough time before the end of the day. Come on back and I’ll wash everything out before I cut it.”

I turn to lead the way to the salon chair, and giving him my back makes me feel vulnerable somehow. I pick up the pace to the hair washing station just a little faster than normal. I try to dismiss it and get myself under control. I’m not sure if it’s that I’m a bit jaded from years of living in LA with its associated craziness or having a gross fucking prank pulled on me. But Jaxson hasn’t done anything that could have me feeling this way.

I turn around the shampoo chair, and he lowers into it, his eyes quickly dipping to my cleavage but immediately coming back to meet mine as he sits. I turn him back around and lean him back, spreading the cape that I use for men’s cuts over his upper body.

I move behind him to the bowl, out of his sightline as I take the sprayer, adjusting the water temperature before I start to get his hair wet. “How’s that?”

“Perfect,” he says, his voice a little raspy, and I quickly wrap up wetting him down before reaching over and grabbing the organic coconut oil-based shampoo we use and massaging it into his scalp. The squelching noise of the suds is the only sound as I lightly massage his hair and scalp like I always do, just trying to get through all the shit he’s got in his hair. Spray, gel, wax . . . I’m not sure, could be plaster. But Jaxson’s the sort of guy who makes sure that at work, his hair is fucking sculpted.

He fidgets a little. “That feels great. I like the way the shampoo smells too.”

It’s nothing I haven’t heard before when shampooing, but a little awkward from a guy who’s asked me out at least twice already. Still, I try to be cool. “We’ve gotten some good feedback from people who have bought it for home. I love it myself. It’s good on all types of hair.”

“I bet,” Jaxson says as I start to rinse out the bubbles. “So how’re you liking town?”

“It’s definitely different from LA, but I’m finding that this place has a lot of charm,” I admit, not saying that the thing I find most charming is probably under the hood of a car across the street.

“Business going well?” Jaxson asks as I towel his hair dry and sit him up.

“I’m meeting a lot of folks around town,” I reply, relaxing at his casual tone. It’s just normal small talk and it starts to feel more comfortable, less strained. “We’ve got a good start, not quite there yet . . . but I’m feeling good about things.”

“That’s great,” Jaxson says. It sounds like he’s genuinely happy about our good start, and I mentally chastise myself for being so harsh on him. Yeah, so he asked me out a few times, but at least one was poor timing and the drink thing was probably an overreaction on my part. This is Small Town, USA, not Hollyweird.

Besides, when I think about it, Jaxson’s definitely done less chasing than I’ve been doing with Evan. I can’t really fault him for a swing and a miss when the only thing he’s really done wrong is be a nice guy who might be a little awkward in asking me out. He can’t help that I’m just not into

nice guys, and that can throw a lot of guys off. At least he had the guts to try.

Squeezing out the last of the dampness with a hand towel that I wrap around his neck, I guide him over to my salon chair, fixing the long cape over him and adjusting it to include the towel.

Satisfied with his setup, I pick up my shears and comb, looking at him in mirror. “All right, just a trim or something more? What are we doing today?”

Jaxson looks me in the eye in the mirror, giving me a smile. “That feels like a loaded question. Look . . .” He turns from the mirror and meets my eyes face to face. “Just wanted to make sure there’s no awkwardness between us. You’re a great woman and I wanted to welcome you to town. No harm, no foul. I hope we can be friends at least.”

I scan his face and realize that despite my misgivings, he’s right. He hasn’t tried to do anything more than offer a friendly face in a new town, and goodness knows I can relate to pursuing someone who interests you a bit. I doubt Jaxson’s put on hot pants and drawn anyone into a blowjob recently, though.

I decide . . . yeah, he’ll get one more chance. “I’d like that. You can never have too many friends. Brad and I are pretty much it for each other right now. He’s my brother from another mother, so we’ve always depended on friends to round out our group. But we’re both pretty damn hard to take in big doses, and when we’re together, it takes a special kind of person to put up with both of us at once.” I laugh because it’s the God’s honest truth.

Jaxson laughs along with me. “Well, I’ll have to keep that in mind. I’ll just need to be on my A-game for you two.”

The tension from before has faded, and I finish Jaxson’s haircut as we talk. He makes me laugh with stories of the cast of characters in this part of town, which seems to attract some of the more off the wall folks.

I roll at his impersonation of Earl who runs the agricultural supply store even though I haven’t met him yet, talk about the new sporting goods store that’s hoping to take advantage of the uptick in tourists heading out toward the resort, and I blush a bit when he asks if I’ve had the cookies from Mindy’s Place. “The city council’s made a cookie run from time to time for our meetings.”

“No way!”

Jaxson laughs. “Yeah, shh. It’s an interesting place. I still can’t get past the fact it used to be a Chinese restaurant, but they are damn good cookies.”

Interesting. Yep, those cookies sure can lead to some interesting experiences. “Most delicious cookies I’ve ever had,” I say without elaborating. “When I have free time, I might check out the rest of their menu, even if they are on the other end of town.”

It would be great to have someone like Jaxson to grease the skids with some of the other places around town, someone who knows the good old boys and is willing to put in a good word with the right people. But more than that, it’s just a happier feeling at my core as we settle into our new home town.

CHAPTER 18

EVAN

It's late, probably close to one in the morning, and I can't sleep. I lie in bed for a long time, tossing and turning, drifting off for a moment only to startle awake seconds later by voices I know aren't real but still whisper to me about my sins. Even using one of the other refugees from my Army days, an old, rough blanket that stretched over quite a few beds a lot like this one, can't help.

Giving up, I pace the floor, dropping every few laps to pump out pushups in a failed attempt to center my mind. *I'm home. I'm safe. There is no threat.* I play the mantra on repeat in my mind, over and over, trying to get it to sink in and feel true.

But no matter how much my brain tries to believe it, my body fights it. Outside the window, I can see the night. Out there is my enemy, and my enemy wants my blood, the voices say. I can't see them because they always know how to blend in like mythical ninjas out of a movie. Every person could be the one who has a bomb around their waist or an AK behind their back.

My heart racing, sweat on my brow, and a coiled spring of aggression ready in my belly, I give up. I need to get out, get away. Just like always, I know what I need to do. I pull on some jeans, dirty from the floor but I don't care, and grab a black t-shirt from the top of the clean pile.

Pulling on my boots, I tie them quickly before heading down the backstairs to the garage. The grinding of the door rollers over the sand that invariably gets in the track is loud, but my bike will be even louder. The neighbors will be pissed but there's nothing I can do about that because I have to ride . . . now.

I thumb the ignition on my Harley before tweaking the throttle up to a growling roar, then I let it drop down to a relatively gentle purr and pull

forward slowly, just getting out the door. I press the button to lower and lock the garage, ready to ride. Zipping up my jacket, I turn onto Main Street toward the mountains.

I see McKayla's light turn on above the salon, bright in the dark sky, and the blinds move. I can't hear her knock on the glass, but I see her wave and then she holds up one finger. I'm tempted to roll out anyway, but something makes me hang a hard right and pull into the Triple B's parking lot and wait.

I don't have to wait long. In what seems like a second after she waved, she's coming out the front door of the salon, pulling on boots with her romper pajamas. She's bare-faced, her hair wild with sleep, wearing what basically equates to a sweet onesie and combat boots.

It should be ridiculous. I should be laughing my ass off, but to me, she's never looked more beautiful. Without a word, she climbs on the back and wraps her arms around me and we're off like a shot. How does she do it? I wasn't going out for her tonight. I just needed to clear my head, but there she was, ready to ride with me without a moment's notice or even a word spoken. This time, though, I turn toward the highway, avoiding the high elevation of the mountains for her sake. It's chilly enough. Up in the mountains, it'll get frigid. Fun for me to see what that could do to her nipples, but not so fun what'll it'd do to the rest of her.

We ride for what seems like hours, no destination in mind, just letting the asphalt stretch out under the wheels. The moon rides with us in the clear black velvet sky, rising to its peak before cresting and starting to descend.

As McKayla holds onto me, peace settles into my bones from her touch. She's an easy rider, an extension of the bike and my body, just leaning and riding without fighting the flow. And it feels good to have her hands wrapped around me, her body pressed to my back, grounding me to the here and now, helping me fight back the demons' hold on my night.

Somewhere over an hour west of town, I pull over at an all-night truck stop for gas.

As soon as I turn off the bike, she hops off. Doing a little squirmy dance, she announces, "Gotta pee, need anything inside?"

I laugh out loud, just unable to wrap my head around the fact that after hours of riding, what she says is *gotta pee, need anything?* This woman amazes me.

"Nope," I say after a moment. "I'm good."

With a smirk and a saucy little salute, she turns, strutting inside like she's not wearing pink pajamas in the middle of the night with a biker in the sticks of God knows where.

While she's inside, I swipe my card and fill up my bike, letting the tank guzzle the high-test goodness. I know, I know, the engine runs just fine on regular . . . but I like to baby my bike. When the pump clicks off, I put the nozzle away before mounting my bike and leaning back, letting the welcome but unfamiliar sensation that McKayla seems to create sweep through me. Perched on my bike, I stare up to the stars and let the cool air filter through my lungs.

It's hard to believe that these are the same stars, the same sky I saw as a kid when TJ and I would sleep outside in our tree house. Back then, it was all so easy. We'd spend hours pretending we were pirates, using the bright lights to navigate to our riches. We always found the riches too, considering Mom would pack a midnight snack for us every time and leave it in the treehouse before she went to bed herself. Fuck gold, fuck diamonds . . . back then, give me a grilled peanut butter and banana sandwich any day.

I sigh wistfully, remembering back to the happy, innocent days before another memory creeps up. Looking up at these same stars, I recall as I stood guard in some windswept village that might have had just as many enemies inside the perimeter as outside, and night movements where we had to navigate to targets instead of treasure, although the Army pretty much considered them one and the same. Back then, the stars were a bitter comfort, a normalcy of home in a place that was far from it.

I always preferred the night for the nasty missions. It's just a little easier on the soul to do ugly things under cover of night than in the bright lights and scrutiny of the sunshine.

I shake my head, letting the past slip away as McKayla walks out of the store. With the light surrounding her, I can see her better, and I realize that the romper is likely all she has on, her nipples peaked up beneath the thin top and not a panty line in sight below.

Is it bad that I want to order her to do a spin for me, show me a little jiggle of her unrestrained ass? Probably, but fuck it, she knows I've got a bad side to me. "Turn around."

McKayla stops, her head tilting like she didn't hear me. "You'll have to be a little more specific. Turn around and go back inside the store? Turn

around and do a fucking pirouette? Do I look a damn ballerina in this getup? Turn around . . .”

She trails off and I realize that for all her sass, she really doesn’t know what I want. If anything, it turns me on more, giving her an innocence that has my cock throbbing in my jeans. “Turn around and let me see your ass.”

McKayla’s eyes sparkle as her lips twitch in a sex-laced smirk that just makes this whole scene in front of me surreal and at the same time, arousing as hell. “Well, why didn’t you say so?”

She turns around, leaning forward a little to stick her ass out, her head turned back, watching my every move. Shaking her hips back and forth, I can see the outline of her pussy lips against the fabric of her pajamas. She gasps in arousal as she spanks the bottom of her ass with her palm, a nice smack sounding out in the quiet parking lot.

I can’t stand it anymore. I have to satisfy my curiosity . . . and maybe something else. “Princess, you got anything on underneath that jumper?”

McKayla turns back, a fake innocent act all over her face. “Oh, this thing? What’s underneath this thin little pink romper? Well, nothing, I guess. Just me. All me.”

She drives me fucking crazy.

“Get over here,” I growl, reaching out a hand. When she’s close enough, I realize just how tiny she is without her usual sky-high heels. I grab her, picking her up and setting her down in front of me, straddling me and the bike but backward, her legs lying on top of mine. I can feel the warmth of her body through the thin cotton of her pajamas and the curve of her ass as my bike pushes it up into my palms.

She hugs me, arms on my shoulders to keep from falling, but I’ve got her. She’s not going anywhere. Knowing that a gas pump is not the place for this, I fire up my bike only long enough to pull over into the far edge of the parking lot, where the lights are low and we’ll have a bit of privacy at least.

I grab her shoulders from behind, laying her back over the gas tank and handlebars, and she looks up at me, the stars reflecting in her eyes. This might be my favorite view of the sky ever, but I don’t tell her that.

McKayla runs a hand down my chest before reaching over and tweaking my left nipple hard. “I’m not fucking you in a truck stop parking lot. I’m not a lot lizard.”

I laugh despite the pain, pulling her up to press her luscious body against me again, grinning. “How does a girl like you even know what that is?”

She smirks and kisses the tip of my nose. “I’m not one to kiss and tell, but remember . . . Prince, Vegas, teenage years?”

I chuckle and kiss her lips again. “You’re right. But let’s get one thing straight. If I wanted to fuck you right here in this parking lot, I damn sure fucking would.” I pause, looking at her fiercely, daring her to disagree, but she stays silent. Instead, she looks at me with a type of brave vulnerable intensity that says she’s serious, she doesn’t want to, but at the same time, she won’t tell me no. It decides it for me. She’s better than a parking lot. “But I’m not . . . this time.”

McKayla smiles, relaxing at my acquiescence and laying back out over the gas tank, her head resting against the handlebars. I begin mindlessly tracing my fingertips up her legs, from her ankle, to her knee bent over my thigh, and up her inner thigh just shy of her pussy, where I tease her, knowing she wants more.

I do it over and over again, and finally, she breaks the silence. “What happened tonight?”

I’m silent for a minute, not sure if I’m going to answer, but something compels me to. “Just a bad night. Sometimes, I can’t sleep and the memories get to me. I hate sleeping pills, so I tried to work out, tried to relax, but sometimes, riding is the only thing that works.”

She nods her head, thinking for a minute. “Stuff from when you were in the military? Those kinds of bad memories?”

I don’t want to talk about it. It only dredges it all up again, so I distract myself with the sensation of her soft skin under my fingertips. “Yeah, missions and stuff. I did some fucked up shit in the name of following orders and protecting my country. It’s hard to deal with that. It’s just dirty and ugly on my soul. I’m FUBARed from the inside out.”

My fingers trace up her legs again, dipping into her loose shorts to find the wet, warm edge of her pussy. I stroke her puffy lips slowly, moving up to loop gentle circles around her clit.

She gasps, trying to writhe, but I stop her with a press of my hands. “Be still or we’ll fall over. I’ve got you, but don’t move.”

I go back to rubbing, slipping a finger into her pussy and rubbing her clit with my thumb, smearing her juices around her pleasure center in light

circles.

She's unfocused on the conversation, lost in pleasure, but she tries to continue, her eyes widening as I curl my fingers and rub her G-spot. "I don't think you're FUBARed. Fucked up, maybe. But not beyond all repair."

I speed my fingers up, and she moans lightly, her hands clutching at my shoulders as I study her beautiful face. "It's nice you think that way, but make no mistake, Princess. I'm dark inside, barely keeping a lock on my damage to function around all the civilians."

McKayla arches her back a little, bringing her cotton covered nipples closer to the dark sky as she tries to keep herself under control. "I think I like you just the way you are."

I laugh harshly, but it's not in humor. It's because I know she's wrong despite being innocent inside. I stroke her G-spot a little harder and flick her clit with my thumb, knowing that if I were really a decent man, I wouldn't be making her break her word about not fucking me in a parking lot right now. I may not be balls deep in her, but I'm certain her earlier declaration has been blown to bits with my fingers plunging in and out of her tight pussy.

She cries out in pleasure and I lick my lips before rasping, "You like me a little dangerous, Princess? You think you're safe with me, safe from my damage? Think again."

With no warning, I shove a third finger into her pussy, curling it forward to her front wall, making her come instantly and violently.

I hold the bike steady by locking my legs on either side as her whole body tenses and shudders and she groans my name.

I keep teasing that spot until she fights back, begging for mercy. What makes me stop isn't her words, though, but seeing the trickle of tears down her cheeks because she's lost so much control. I know they're tears of pleasure . . . but I can't stand to see McKayla cry, so I withdraw them, licking them clean before holding her close and letting her know she's okay.

After she settles back down, she looks up at me with a wild light in her eyes, relieving any worries I may have. It makes me fucking proud that I did that to her, brought out her own little touch of wildness, even if that's just another sign that I'm fucked up.

"Hey . . . you ever seen a shrink for that?" she asks in a light, casually airy voice.

I growl, instantly pissed off because countless fuckers have told me to see a shrink, but I had enough of Army shrinks. Besides, I'm not a fucking pussy. "No, I don't fucking need to see a shrink. You think I'm crazy now too?"

She grabs my hand, pressing it against her chest where I can feel her heart beating, and it makes me feel like shit. "Evan, I'm from LA. Everyone has a shrink. It's no big deal. You need help, you get help. Around there, it was the people not seeing a shrink you had to watch because you knew they were fucked up and weren't getting help."

Her casualness about it swirls inside me. I thought she understood, at least a little bit. But no, she's just like everyone else. She thinks I'm some pet project that can be fixed with a little jabber-jawing.

How can I explain how it feels to be the cause of an innocent civilian losing their life, or to hear your friends screaming for their mothers as their lifeblood bled out to someone who has never put themselves any closer to danger than maybe going jet skiing one time during their honeymoon in the Keys, probably while wearing a helmet, wetsuit, and life vest? No, shrinks can't help me.

I know I'm fucked up, but talking about it sure isn't gonna fix the shit I did or the stains on my soul.

I don't answer, the walls that had cracked mere minutes ago going solid once again. I help her get back on the bike behind me and head home. It's gonna be a long ass ride if we're going to get her home by sunrise.

CHAPTER 19

MCKAYLA

Mental note, I think to myself as I hold onto Evan while we thunder down the highway, *Evan is fucking mental about shrinks.*

I don't get it. I wasn't bullshitting Evan when I said almost everyone I knew in LA had seen a shrink at one time or another. Hell, even I did back when I had a rough patch after a breakup where I'd started having some . . . aftereffects.

But I'm damn sure not telling Evan about that now. I can feel the tension through his body, and it makes me sad because he feels just as wound up as when we started this ride, not like the relaxed guy he'd been when we pulled up at the truck stop.

I was hopeful that it was the ride with *me*, not just the ride, that had helped him chill. It was why I climbed on the bike even as I knew I was naked under my pajamas.

We were making so much progress. He was being playful and being commanding and everything I could ever think Evan can be, but I should've known it wouldn't be *that* easy. Every conversation is like a damn minefield, never quite knowing where to step and what's going to set him off.

If I'm honest with myself, and my long ago-shrink demanded that I always try to be, the drama is a little exciting. Not that I pissed him off—I feel bad about that—but that I'm still learning his triggers.

It's kind of like a dance, really. I don't want to always be the one to push his buttons, but the process of learning them, so I know how to traverse the path to his heart without getting hit by shrapnel, sounds like a pretty damn sweet reward.

He thinks he’s a big scary man, too much for little old me, and used to girls running off at the first sign of trouble. Maybe that’s what happened in the past. But with me, he’s got another thing coming. I like his growling, rude asshole ways because they make the sweet things he sometimes says and the nice things he sometimes does all the better because they’re rare. Not to mention that it seems he really only does and says those things with me, which feels pretty damn special.

It’s a long ride back, but I try to relax into the twists and turns of the road, enjoying the time on the powerful beast beneath me with the monster in front of me. My pussy is aching with a need for more than Evan’s fingers, but I know it’s not going to happen tonight.

It’s got to be close to four in the morning when we roar up in front of the salon. Evan pulls in, letting me climb off after he turns the Harley off. The sky is still pitch black, and now the street is still and silent. Still, I can sense that dawn’s going to be coming soon. There’s the same tense silence that seems to fall when the night owls have gone to bed and the early birds aren’t quite up yet.

He throws a leg over and stands, reaching into his chest pocket for a cigarette and lighter. I’m quiet, still deciding how to roll with this. I don’t like the smoking, but it’s the least of the issues he’s got to deal with.

With a grin, I decide balls to wall is the right play, or at least I hope it is. “You’re an asshole, you know that, Evan?”

One corner of his lips tilts up, maybe a snarl, maybe a smile . . . it’s too early to tell yet. But so far, it seems like a good opening move. “You sound surprised. But I never said otherwise, Princess.”

He called me Princess. That means I’m making progress. He only does that when he’s trying to playfully piss me off. My inner bitch starts jumping up and down and clapping, and it’s time to push the line just a little more.

“But it’s a front. Did you know that?” I smile at him like I have it all figured out. Maybe I do, at least a little. “Once upon a time, you were a nice guy, then some shitty things happened to you and you did some shitty things to other people. It hurt, and it’s still hurting you. So you, in all of your infinite self-awareness—in case you couldn’t tell, that was sarcasm—you somehow decided that the best way to keep from hurting was to shut down and close yourself off. That way, you wouldn’t be hurt anymore and you wouldn’t hurt anyone else. No risk. But do you know the problem with that?”

I pause and I can see the fire in his eyes as he listens to my rant. When I see he's not trying to come back at me, I continue. "The problem with that is that it doesn't work! You know what happens with no risk? No reward. And guess what, genius? You're still hurting and you're still hurting other people. By being an asshole, you're hurting your brother, who just wants to talk to you again without fear that something he says will set you off. You're hurting people around town, who just want to be your friends. And you're hurting *me*. You think I'm some weak little woman who would be scared by what's inside you. Newsflash, I'm not little and I'm damn sure not weak. And what you need . . ." I take a big breath. This is gonna go spectacularly. Well, either spectacularly like sparkly fireworks or spectacularly like a racing forest fire. "What you need is a woman who is strong enough to put up with your shit and call you on it when need be, but be a soft place for you to land when you need that. And I don't see a line of women with those attributes asking you to make them yours, so you'd better figure it out really damn fast what you're hoping for here."

My chest is heaving as my heart races. I'm definitely taking a risk here so I hope there's a reward in it for me. There's barely a second of question in the air before he covers my mouth with his, demanding entry and taking over my world with his kiss. I instantly melt into him, kissing him back and letting him know I'm just what I said I was. I'll call him on his shit, but I'll also be soft when he needs me to be.

Evan lets go of me but brings his face down even with mine, growling at me, threatening. "You think you can handle me?"

I nod, biting my lip as I turn and unlock the door. It swings open and he shoves me inside, closing and locking it behind him. In the darkness of the salon, he's outlined by the streetlamp outside as he shrugs off his jacket, his eyes glowing greenish red in the faint glow from the LEDs on my computer and phone.

He stalks me toward a bench near the makeup area, giving orders this time and not taking disobedience for an answer. "Hands and knees, Princess. You think I'm fucked in the head, but you can take it? I'm gonna show you how fucked up I am, and you're gonna scream my name, either to get away from me or because maybe you can handle me. Guess we'll see, won't we?"

I hear the challenge, and I'm up for it, knowing that I'm good for whatever he can dish out.

I have a momentary flash of apology to Brad, who I'm sure never intended for his fancy white tufted leather bench to be used in quite this way, but I quickly climb up on all fours.

He's already unbuckling his jeans, eyes locked on my ass on display for him through the thin cotton of my romper.

He rips the fabric wide open, the cool salon air making me gasp. In mock protest, I look over my shoulder, glaring at him. "Hey, I liked this nightie!"

He huffs out a breath and smacks my pale, curvy ass. "Get another one. Because I liked it too."

Without any further prelude, he thrusts into me balls-deep in one stroke. It doesn't matter because I'm soaked and ready for him. After coming once tonight and then feeling the vibrations of his cycle, I'm practically insane with hormones. He hammers into me, hands wrapped around my hips to pull me back at the same time. He's raw this time, and I fucking love it.

The result of his savage penetration is that he presses so deeply into me, and it hovers right on the edge of pleasure and pain every time he bottoms out in my pussy. I might be wild, but I'm not a fucking porn star, and I can feel things in my core getting touched that have never been touched before. He's gone, primal in his need, and it's glorious.

Evan thinks this will break me, make me run in fear, but it's broken me in another way. I'm ruined for anyone else because it'll never be like this. Only with him can I have this feeling of being overwhelmed and safe all at once. He presses my chest to the bench, keeping me there with a splayed hand between my shoulders as his panting voice sings sweet symphonies to my cock-addled brain. "You like this, Princess? You want me to fuck you so hard that you don't come, you just shatter apart into a million pieces?"

I can barely speak, but I manage to grunt and push back into him with as much strength as I can muster. "Yes . . . yes . . . give it to me!"

He roars, and I don't know if that was the right answer or the wrong one, but right now, I can't care. He slows down, thrusting hard and then grinding *there*, against the deepest part of me, and I come apart.

"Evan-Evan-Evan!" I scream it like it's a chant, and I know in my heart that it's because I *can* handle him.

Challenge accepted, and challenge conquered.

The flutters in my pussy go on, squeezing and massaging his cock until it triggers his orgasm and he thunders, "Princess!"

I feel him fill my pussy with jet after jet, leaving me feeling absolutely devastated, wrung out, and blissfully complete. That's right, Evan. I'm *your* woman, and you are *my* man.

When he refocuses, I see him look at me, confusion written all over his face and a run of emotions in his eyes that flashes too fast for me to decipher them. He pulls out, fastens his jeans back up, and helps me stand.

"McKayla . . . I, uh, I don't know what to say. Sorry . . ." He turns and walks out the door, but I can't let him leave like that, so I scramble after him, grabbing his arm and turning him toward me. I stand up on my tippy toes, bringing my lips to his, trying to tell him that everything is okay.

I'm lost in the kiss, in him, when I feel him tense. Pushing me away, I see his eyes go darker, intense in a different way as he growls into my ear, "Go to the door. Don't move."

At first, I think we're back on track here, growly and dominant, but the last few minutes proved that I'm more than okay with that. But as I step back toward the salon door, Evan takes off, running around the corner of the building.

What the fuck? Did he really just bail on me? I hear scuffling and a grunt, and I step forward to try to hear what's going on.

"Evan? You okay?" I try to focus in the darkness, looking the direction he disappeared but not seeing anything.

Out of the black night, I see a dark figure coming straight at me, and I freeze. It gets closer, and the shadow knocks me to the ground with an oomph. Evan comes barreling around the corner a second later, chasing the shadow, but when he sees me, he stops to help me up and the shadow gets away.

"What the fuck just happened?"

Evan lets out a big sigh but takes my arm, guiding me toward the door again. "Let's get inside."

Evan seems to almost cover me the short walk back into the salon, locking the door behind us, and we walk up the back stairs to my apartment, locking that door as well.

Finally in my apartment, I find the strength to question him. "Again, what the fuck was that?"

Evan checks the small window overlooking the street, then turns away to look at me. "I heard a clicking sound when we were kissing. Took me a split second to place it, but I realized it was a camera shutter clicking. I took

off around the corner and that guy was there, a camera around his neck. I tried to get the camera, to knock him out for the police, but he's a wily little fucker and he got away. You okay?"

I'm in shock. That's gotta be what this feeling is. "Um, I think so. He just knocked me down, and I've got plenty of cushion back there, so I'm fine. But why would someone be taking pictures of us?"

Evan shakes his head, looking out the window again. "Princess, I don't think he was here to take pictures of *us*. I think he was taking pictures of . . . *you*."

Someone creeping on me at the salon too? I mean . . . this is my place. My safe place. And someone was perving on me *here?*

CHAPTER 20

EVAN

My life hasn't been this complicated since my time in the Army. I hate to admit it, but part of me hasn't felt so alive since then either. I don't know what to think. My mind has been swirling for two days after the mess I made with McKayla.

I keep replaying the ride, the things she said and how scarily on target she really was in the truck parking lot. Riding back, her ranting tirade, and the angry sex that didn't prove the point I thought it would. If anything, it had the opposite effect and pulled us somehow closer together. I've never abandoned myself to such utter animalistic, passionate fucking, and I've never felt anything like McKayla pushing back and giving it as good as she was taking. I'm never going to be able to top that.

And of course, the guy with the camera. Immediately afterward, McKayla tried to downplay it, refusing my desire to call the police. She does have a point. There's not much they can do other than agree to keep a watch on the place since I didn't catch the guy. I think there's more to it, though. She's the new girl in town and doesn't want to cause any drama. But if this keeps up, sooner or later, the police are going to need to be involved.

In the end, I agreed with her so she would quit arguing with me, not because she was right but because I don't need the police to keep watch on her when I can do that myself. Besides, the cops in this town aren't exactly the FBI. They're more like . . . well, I don't trust them further than I can throw most of them. Then again, maybe I'm just biased from all the side-eyes I've gotten.

Either way, I can't do it alone. I know just the person who knows everything about everyone on Main Street and who knows a lot of people

around this town . . . including the people some others might not want to know about.

Closing the hood on the van that I've been working on, I call out to TJ, who's changing the tires on a Honda. "Need anything from Earl's? Gotta go talk to him for a tick."

TJ raises an eyebrow at me, the question evident, but he doesn't ask out loud. I haven't told him much, even why I'm living above the garage full-time now. I've only been back home over the past two weeks to clean out my fridge, grab showers, and to check the mail.

But he hasn't even attempted to ask me. Fuck, maybe McKayla was right about his walking on eggshells around me. I guess I've always known it, of course, but I liked to pretend it was for his own good. Don't go fucking with a grenade unless you're willing to deal with an explosion. Now, though, I wonder . . . is all of my shit just a selfish ploy to keep myself from being vulnerable?

TJ finally answers, shaking his head. "Nope. Tell Earl I said hi though."

I toss TJ a wave and leave the shop, walking down the street. There's a part of me that notes that today is especially beautiful, with a bright blue sky, fluffy clouds that give a little bit of shade but don't threaten rain, and a little breeze that makes me glad I grabbed my jacket instead of just walking down in a t-shirt. It's the sort of day that shouldn't be spent working, but out at a lake eating a turkey sandwich.

But instead, I'm scanning left and right, up and down. Most folks who look for danger look left and right, just on their level. It didn't take me long in the deployed zone to learn to scan in all directions, and after a particularly nasty incident where my platoon ended up short a lieutenant, I learned to look into the drainage holes cut into curbs too as they're a perfect place to hide an IED since most folks don't look down.

Even with my eagle eyes, I don't spot anything out of the ordinary, and for the most part, I enjoy the half-mile walk to Earl's store. As I get closer, I see him out front, haggling over what looks like a load of manure with Paul Tannen, a local farmer who could probably fertilize his crops on his own with the amount of bullshit that comes out of his mouth. Earl sees me out of the corner of his eye as I get closer, and while he doesn't stop talking to Paul, I can tell he's keeping me in his sights too. That man's training never went away and he's never gotten sloppy.

Hell, if I asked him, I bet he could tell me the threat potential for every car that's passing us, along with a half-dozen ways to turn Paul's load of manure into all sorts of nasty things. Then again, I can too, so maybe that's just normal for guys like us.

I climb on the old-fashioned 'country store' porch he's got and drop down into the rocking chair, waiting for them to finish up. When Earl does, he comes over and leans against a post, not saying anything, just giving me a raised eyebrow. After a few minutes of silent rocking, I give in. "You gonna say hi like you usually do?"

Earl leans over, hawking a gob of spit into the dusty asphalt of his parking lot before speaking. "Well, Mr. Evan, I'm thinking you came all the way down here to talk to me. You're not the kind to just walk up the street for a social spell like I am. I like to give a man the time he needs to say his piece. So whenever you're ready, I'm ready."

I smile. Earl's a smart man. And he's right, the last time I came to his store was to drop off a tractor attachment he'd shopped out to us. "Earl, it's like this . . . McKayla had a little incident a week or so ago. Her car got marked up a bit—male territorial stuff, if you catch my meaning."

He nods. "Been keeping my eye on our pretty little hairstylist too. But I ain't seen nothing that I could do anything about."

For some reason, I'm touched that Earl would be looking out for McKayla too, so I continue. "And I caught a guy snapping pictures over at McKayla's a couple of days ago. Early in the morning, pitch black outside still, and he was wearing all black including a balaclava so I didn't get a good look at him. Tall, lean, but muscled judging by the feel of him, but that's all I got."

Earl hums and comes over, settling his weight on an old powerline spindle that's been turned on its side to act as a sort of table. "What'd the police say? They know of anyone to look out for?"

"Well, that's the thing. I heard the camera, wrestled with him, but he got away from me. He knocked McKayla down in the process, so I helped her and he disappeared. We didn't call the cops."

Earl grunts, then gives me a knowing smirk. "Got away from you? Must've been a slippery little fucker then. Okay, Mr. Evan . . . I's got two questions for you. One, what're you doing with Miss McKayla? And two, who do you think this cameraman was?"

His eyes squint a little, and while to a casual observer we just look like two blue collar guys sitting out front having a jaw before going inside to sip at an RC Cola . . . I swear he's looking into my damn soul.

"Well, for the first, I don't fucking know. And two, I don't fucking know. How's that?"

Earl bursts out into laughter, his big belly jiggling below his overalls as he stomps his foot and slaps at his knee. Leaning back, he looks up at the sky like he's talking to the clouds or something. "He don't fucking know . . . that's damn sure what he said, he don't fucking know."

Right about now, I'm thinking maybe Earl is a little crazier than I've ever thought and this might've been a bad idea. Maybe he tried a few too many pharmaceuticals during his time back in 'Nam or something.

But before I can get up, he sobers, turning back to me. "All right, one thing at a time. I don't rightly know who your cameraman is either. But I'll keep an eye out. You know I will. And between the two of us, we'll keep Miss McKayla safe. I done noticed that you're living above the garage full-time now yourself. Now, on to more important matters . . ."

I interrupt Earl before he can start going on about the Elk Lodge or the price of manure or whatever. "Earl, a fucking stalker taking pictures is the important matter."

He glares at me. "And on to more important matters . . . you and Miss McKayla. You got something going with her?"

I dip my chin once. Earl doesn't need details. "Is it mutual?"

I nod again. He grins, and this time it's a genuine smile. "Well, there you go. Congratulations, Mr. Evan."

I look at him, hovering somewhere between anger and confusion. "Congratulations on what? It's not like we're dating, we're just . . ."

He laughs a little and pats his belly like it's his dog or something. "You're just what, sleeping together? I might be old, but I remember that game too. The whole 'stay pure until married' shit went right out the door with my generation."

I'm not one to kiss and tell, but I need some damn help here, so I just stare back, willing him to see my answer in my eyes. Earl gets the point. "Mmmhmm, that's what I thought. I gotta hand it to you, Mr. Evan. Back in my youth, not too many of my peers would have been able to avoid bragging about getting with a girl like that. You got yourself some class, so congrats there too. I've seen you out riding with her behind you on the

motorcycle and I know you ain't never done that before with any woman. You eat dinner with her, talk to her?"

I start to nod and realize something. "Actually, no. We've never been out to dinner, but yeah, we talk, and she brought me cookies, so I guess we ate those."

My mind flashes back to her licking the sugar off her lips. And then something else, and my cock stirs in my jeans. Thankfully, not too much.

Earl sighs and looks at me like I'm the biggest fool in the world. "Boy, I said my generation ditched purity, not manners. You got to take a woman out to eat before you sleep with her. Rule number one, my daddy told me, and it's the damned honest truth. Feed her, show some damn respect, Son. Now, you can't go back in time and change that, but you can do better from here on out."

I shrug, thinking that maybe going out to dinner with McKayla wouldn't be too bad of an idea. That is, as long as I don't have to dress up. Earl notices and nods sagely. "So, where was we? Oh yeah, you talk. Tell me, you talk to her about your demons? Your time in the military, the dreams and whatnot?"

Suddenly, I see it. He's been baby-stepping me there, but I get it now. I slump back in the rocker with a jolt. "Some. Not much, but some. Probably more than I've said about it to anyone else since I got back."

Earl chuckles and leans forward, heaving himself to his feet. "Whew, that was fun to watch. You listen here, Mr. Evan. You been walking around like a damn zombie for years, keeping that poison locked up tight inside your soul. And Miss McKayla, she's doing something right, whatever it is, because you're coming back to life."

I nod because I know he's right. She is doing something to me. I can feel it deep inside. Those shadows are maybe a shade lighter, the anger coiled just a little looser, more situational than the constant anger I've lived with for years. It's not healthy, but it's a damn bit better for me.

But that's just it.

"Earl, I get it. She is helping me. I hate to admit it, but she is. But at what cost? You say I've got poison locked in my soul, but if I let it out, let it go, she's gonna take the brunt of that. She might help me, but I'm gonna ruin her. And she doesn't deserve that. Nobody does, but especially not her. I tried to scare her off right before the camera guy thing. Tried to get her to see how fucked up I am, make her give up and run."

Earl squares his shoulders, pointing at me with steel in his voice. “Mr. Evan, did you hurt Miss McKayla?”

I’ve never been scared of Earl before, knowing I’ve got him beat in age, size, and skills, but in that moment, I see the stone-cold soldier he once was and know that he could do some damage if he had half a mind to do so.

“What? No, I didn’t hurt her. I meant more . . . verbally. We got a little rough, but it was . . . uh . . . she was into it. I felt bad. I tried to scare her that way, but she just rolled with it.” I watch Earl visibly lighten and I’m enthralled by the way he can turn it on and off like that, let his demons out and then poof . . . gone.

“Well hell, Son, making the bedframe shake a little bit ain’t no thang. I’ve been meaning for years to tell you about this sweet little half-French, half-Vietnamese girl I knew in Saigon. She and I got up to thangs too. Now, I done married three times, and I’ll admit that in each of them, there’s always been someone else in my mind. Probably what ended it, too.”

I’m surprised. I’ve never heard about this part of Earl’s past. “You never looked for her?”

“She died in a VC suicide bombing,” Earl says softly, shaking his head. “Ah well, we all carry our ghosts. As for your girl, it sounds to me like she passed your little test. She’s helping you and doesn’t seem traumatized by the whole thing. I told you that eventually, you’d have to stop running away and turn and fight. You’ve never struck me as a coward, just more of a tactical man. Well, it’s time, Son. Let her in, let her keep your six while you finally turn around and fight those demons into submission. It sure enough ain’t an easy thing, but if a man has the right motivation, it’s a miracle what he can do.”

Having said his piece, Earl sticks his hand out and offers a handshake. I stand up and shake with him. “I’ll see what I can do. Thank you, Earl, for agreeing to keep an eye on McKayla.”

Earl shakes while waving off my thanks with his other hand. “Ain’t no thang but a chicken wing, like we used to say. You’ll do the right thing when the time’s right. But make sure you’re ready so you don’t hurt that girl. And I’ll keep a watch out for anything hinky. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to talk with my son about how to keep our biggest fertilizer customer happy.”

He walks inside, but I don’t move. Instead, I sink back into the rocker, considering his words. I sit and think, think and sit, rocking on Earl’s porch

chair while the fluffy clouds creep across the sky.

CHAPTER 21

MCKAYLA

"Wakey, wakey, eggs and bakey!" Brad chirps, opening my bedroom door like there's nothing wrong with a man barging into a woman's bedroom when she's sleeping. Then again, Brad is a guy I could prance around the room half naked with and not be worried about him getting inappropriate. He's stayed over the last two nights, helping me not freak out about the camera guy, and it's helped.

Still, I was up late and slept like shit. "Fuck off, Brad!"

He slips in, eyes covered with one hand but with his fingers so wide apart I can easily see the blue of his eyes. "You decent, bitch? Well, other than the obvious that you're totally indecent, but you got your girly bits covered? I do not want to see your meow-meow this morning. Or ever."

I laugh a bit. I can't help it. He's so weird, and it's exactly what I need to lighten this fog that's surrounding me. His other hand carries a steaming cup of coffee and he offers it to me with a smirk. Instead of throwing my pillow at him, I sit up and take the cup. "How is it?" I nod at the steaming cup.

"Just the way you like it . . . sweet as candy and as dark as your soul," Brad says, handing it over to me. I sip the dark brew, moaning my appreciation that he fixed it just the way I like. "Damn, last time I made someone moan like that, I was naked and covered in sweat. So was he."

"Yeah, well . . . the coffee's worth a moan," I reply, setting my cup aside long enough to stretch. "Fuck, I'm gonna need about another five of those today with the way I feel."

Brad yanks my blanket away from my legs without warning, making me squeal as he shakes his head. "Don't matter how bad you slept, girl. We've

got a busy day today so chop, chop . . . up and at ‘em and all that jazz. Basically, get that jiggly ass of yours out of bed and do it now.”

I flop back to the pillows, careful not to spill my precious coffee. “Just for calling my ass jiggly . . . I don’t wanna. I’m just gonna stay here, curled up in bed, safe and sound and watch trashy TV. I heard they were doing a rerun marathon of *Matchmaker.* So you and your overly bony ass can do my appointments.”

Brad reaches out and takes the coffee from my hands, setting it gently down on the nightstand. Not sure what he’s doing, I’m surprised when he grabs my shoulders and shakes me. “I. Don’t. Do. Hair!” he mock growls before giving me a sparkling grin. “And you damn well know it. We’ve got a VIP coming in today and it’s all hands on deck. In case you didn’t get the corporate memo, all hands is me and you. We haven’t hired our new assistant yet, you know.”

I perk up a bit. This is news to me. “A VIP? Who’s coming in?”

Brad gives me a grin and sits down on the edge of my bed. “Well, I got a call yesterday. Remember my old friend Roxy I’ve told you about?”

Yeah, the famous rock star you supposedly know but suspiciously haven’t introduced me to?” I point out. “What about her?”

“What can I say, she’s a busy girl. Anyway, you met her sister, Mindy, when we did Emily’s wedding. Anyway, not important. Back to the VIP. Their grandmother is coming in to see the great-grandkids for a birthday party. Picturesque, no?”

“Cute as a bunch of toddlers going apeshit all over a Chuck E. Cheese’s,” I reply, even though the idea of having a toddler doesn’t seem *that* bad to me recently.

“Yeah, well, this grandma, she’s a bit . . . hell, that lady’s *way* over the top. And when Mindy called me about this, she said they want to treat her to a bit of a spa getaway, give everyone some breathing room.”

I get the feeling grandma’s a ‘small doses’ kinda broad, but most people see me as that kind too. “Okay, I get it. So what’s the deal?”

“She’s coming in at ten for the works—scalp massage, shampoo, deep conditioner, cut, color, and curl for you, and facial, brows, mani, pedi, and makeup for me. She’s the only client we have all day since I moved the other appointments we had for this one. Trust me, they made it well worth clearing house for this lady.”

Going along with Brad, I get out of bed, taking my sweet damn time showering and washing some wakefulness into my eyes before heading downstairs to a granola bar at nine thirty, just early enough to get my station ready. Right at ten, the door dings and I see Mindy holding the door open for an older lady who seems to still have plenty of spunk in her.

"At least you chose a good place to ditch me!" she says as she spies the historical committee plaque. "John Wayne, huh? Let me tell you, back in the day, I'd have given good money to give ol' Duke a ride!"

Brad comes forward, giving both women a huge grin. "Hi, Mindy. And Ivy Jo, it's been too long!"

Mindy, who obviously has had enough of her grandmother for the next few moments, is glad for the distraction. She gives Brad a hug, patting his back. "Brad, you're looking fabulous, as usual."

Brad laughs. "Flattery ain't gonna get you a discount. I know how much money you have. Ivy Jo here is getting full service, and you're gonna just have to pay for full service."

"Full service?" Ivy Jo asks, grinning. "I don't see no hunky muscular men around here, so unless you've switched teams, you can't give me full service!"

Brad gives her a hug, careful as the old woman's got a cane. "Here, let me introduce you. And Mindy, I'll give you a call when she's ready to be picked up."

Mindy gives Brad a grateful nod and a smile to me as she gives her grandmother a kiss on the cheek. "Be good, Grandma."

"Hey, now, I'm always good," she says. "It's—"

"When she's bad, you gotta worry," I finish for her, causing Ivy Jo to turn and give me an amused look and a smile. "Hi, I'm McKayla. I'll be doing your hair today."

She grins, pointing a finger at my hair. "You going to make me look like that?"

I pat my hair, which I've slicked down from my normal big curls into something chic and sleek. "Sorry, this sort of fabulousness is reserved for me only. But I can make you the hottest thing at your next family reunion."

"Considering my family, that's quite a tall order, but I'll take you up on that challenge," Ivy Jo says. "But no crazy colors. People already give me dirty looks when I start talking with the great grandbabies like I'm going to ruin then. I just want to hug and cuddle them. What's so wrong with that?"

“Not a damn thing,” I reply. “Come on, let’s get you settled into a chair and you can tell me all about your visit.”

Ivy Jo settles in, adjusting herself for a few moments, and soon, we get her leaning back, shampoo worked into her hair.

“So tell me about you, Pinky,” Ivy Jo says. “You been around town long?”

“Just a little while,” I admit. “Moved here because I wanted to get out of the Hollywood game. It’s a good place.”

“That it is,” Ivy Jo agrees. “Now, if I weren’t living in a good old folks’ complex near my other granddaughter, I’d be settling around here myself. So you get settled in, got yourself a man yet?”

“Whoa, slow down, Ivy Jo,” Brad says. I glance up at him and he gives me a roll of his eyes. “This one . . . she’ll get the claws out in a minute, know what I mean?”

I’m not sure if Brad’s speaking to me or to Ivy Jo, but I’m sort of glad he’s interjecting. Ivy Jo, of course, thinks he’s talking to her. “Damn, boy, you get cattier than my granddaughters!”

Brad gives a remarkable imitation of a cat yowling before hissing twice and scratching at the air. “Yeah, well, just for that, I’m going to eat all the chocolate scones Mindy brought. As long as nobody tells my trainer.”

“Boy, please, you know my Mindy makes the best in town!” she says. “But go ahead, let us girls do our thing. You know a grandma always wants to feed her kids, so go eat your scone and mine too.”

“You’re so good to me, Ivy Jo,” Brad replies as he walks up front and plops down at the desk, digging into the box.

Once she sees Brad occupied, she looks up, grinning. “So? Entertain an old lady on her deathbed. Besides, I’ve been around the block a time or two. Maybe I can even teach you this trick I do with my tongue?”

I can’t help it. My fingers are covered in suds, and I start laughing so hard I cover my mouth, inhaling a bunch of bubbles until I cough, having to walk away for a moment. “No . . . I think I’m good there.”

“Well, you see, what you do is . . .” Ivy Jo threatens, and I laugh hard, holding my hand up.

“Okay, okay! Fine, I’ll spill it. It’s, well, I’ve got my eye on a guy named Evan.”

“Accountant?” Ivy Jo asks sarcastically as I get back to washing. “You strike me as the accountant type.”

“Yeah, right. More like mechanic who’s a growly, grumpy asshole who just turns me on like no other, especially when he actually does and says nice things . . . but only for me.”

“Sounds like my husband,” Ivy Jo says wistfully. “When I first had my eye on him, he was that man in town nobody wanted to look wrong at, else he might just be tempted to rearrange that look. But I got past that. Why’s he that way?”

“He’s former service, had some bad times,” I explain as best I can. “I don’t know all of it, but he thinks he’s damaged and by putting up this mean fuck off façade, he won’t hurt anyone.”

“Mmm, I know the type. My generation don’t like talking about it, but my husband served in Korea. When he came back, he wasn’t the same man. Oh, he was still a good man, but I could see it in his eyes. It made him kinder though. I think he was lucky in that he saw that life was precious so he was more open to me. Not all men are so lucky though.”

“Yeah,” I whisper, getting the spray nozzle to start rinsing her hair. “Evan’s hot and cold, pulls me in and then pushes me away. I’m not the type that gives up easily though.”

Ivy Jo grins, nodding. “Good on you. So what about the sex? I’m guessing it’s off the charts good?”

Damn, I like this woman. “Best ever. He’s aggressive in a good way but can be soft and teasing too. We’ve been all over the place . . . parking lots, his garage, the salon.”

Brad, who’s on his second scone already, looks up and interrupts. “Oh, hell no, bitch, you didn’t just say the salon? Oh em gee, please tell me you disinfected whatever it was you got your groove on? In fact, never mind, I’m nope-ing the fuck outta here, burning the place down, and we’ll start over with the insurance money. Just tell me this, can I sit in my chair? The lobby?”

I smirk, giving Ivy Jo a wink, and purse my lips, zipping them shut as Brad throws his hands up and picks up a third scone. It’s mine, but at this point, I think it’s safer to just let him have it.

I turn my attention back to Ivy Jo, who’s chuckling. “So yeah, the sex is definitely off the charts good.”

She laughs as I sit her up. “Whoo-whee, girl, you are gone for this man. He likes you too, I can tell by what you said. Ain’t no man gonna pull you back after pushing you away unless he’s got something invested.”

“Yeah well, not sure it matters. I’ve basically thrown myself at him, and he’s caught me, but then he retreats back to his corner and shuts me out again with a wall around him. I’m trying to make him see he doesn’t need to worry about breaking me, but damn if he’s not stubborn.”

“Don’t you worry, just keep tapping that wall,” Ivy Jo says. “It won’t come down all at once, but the cracks will spread like spider webs, little weak spots all over until . . . boom, it comes crumbling down. Ooh, that reminds me, that’s an old Mellencamp tune. Lord, that man was hot back in his day, but then again, so was I. Anyway, when that wall falls, he’s gonna be scared to death, so you’d better be right there for him. But listen and listen close. You deserve to be loved right. I don’t mean sex, I mean in your soul. You need to be loved right, and he does too. Maybe you’re willing, ready, and able to love him right, and do it now. But if he isn’t ready, if he isn’t capable of doing right by you, don’t you wait around too long for him to get it straight. Every day is precious and you don’t want to spend it waiting around for him to figure out that you’re a damn good thing.”

I don’t really know what to say, so I sort of agree and change the subject. “You’re right, and I just hope it works out. So tell me about your great-grandbabies.”

Ivy Jo grins and gets the point, and as I finish with her hair, she goes on and on about her family. The cut and color is just like she asked, and while the old lady curl set isn’t something I’ve done in years, it’s just like a bicycle. You don’t forget how.

“Okay, Ivy Jo, just a minute now.” I turn her to the mirror and she shrieks in horror.

“Oh my gosh, child! You made me look like a damned drowned poodle!” She fluffs her hair with light fingers, her eyes horrified. “Someone call my damned lawyer!”

I’m shocked. Maybe the curl set wasn’t as easy as I thought. “I’m really—”

She catches my eye with a smirk, almost giggling. “Gotcha!” A huge wave of relief sweeps over me, and she cackles while leaning back, wiping at her eyes. “Oh, that was fun. You should’ve seen your face. An old lady’s got to get her laughs in where she can, and that was too easy to not take advantage. ”

I sigh and laugh along. It feels good, this woman’s crazy energy infusing me with some needed lightness in the midst of my swirling drama.

“Good point. Okay, let’s get you turned over to Brad.”

She moves over to Brad’s chair, and I think for a minute about asking her advice about the car drama and the camera guy.

But before I start, I realize she’s talking to Brad about the cute trainer down at his gym and whether he should ask him out or not. I decide that maybe it’s his turn for a little Grandma wisdom and let it go, just enjoying the moment.

I turn to look out the window, seeing the big bay doors open at the garage. There are legs sticking out from under a car, but even from here, I can tell it’s TJ and not Evan. I sigh, hoping that Grandma is right and it’s just a matter of sticking it out until Evan’s walls crumble down.

CHAPTER 22

EVAN

I watch McKayla look across the street as she carries in a load of groceries, and I can read her look as our eyes briefly meet as I finish off a cup of coffee outside.

I don't know how I'm going to get through to her. I've tried everything I can to push her away, and it didn't work. I've thought about what Earl said, and even though I know he's right, I'm not sure I can be what McKayla needs.

She needs a safer kind of bad boy. The sort of guy who'll be happy to go rolling on a Harley with her or go skydiving or any other crazy damned thing she has pop into her head, but who isn't a ticking time bomb. She needs someone who can still be a rock, a foundation she can build her life upon.

There's a part of me that would like to be, but I know I'm not. Not now, and maybe not ever. But she isn't getting it. Instead, she's looking at me with that same mix of half exasperation, half confidence that tells me she still has her sights set on me and is only frustrated I haven't accepted that yet.

I at least owe her an apology, that I know for sure. But how do I apologize basically for my entire personality—my asshole tendencies, the way the darkness just spews forth sometimes beyond my control, and that I'm not even sure I can be some dinner date nice guy who treats her like the Princess I always call her.

I haven't had a good night's sleep since it all went down. I've told TJ about the stalker, leaving out the sex beforehand, and that Earl and I are keeping a watch on McKayla, but he doesn't understand. To TJ, 'keeping an eye out' means glancing over and not going out of your way, because bad shit just doesn't happen to good people in his world.

I know differently. I know that the only reason good people are able to sleep safely at night is because there are bad people like me who are willing to do bad shit to the other bad guys. So that means, in my case, I've taken the night shift so my last few nights have been spent in the pitch black, peering through the blinds, a set of binoculars at my side as my mind whirls and replays every moment with McKayla and the quick seconds with the stalker. Hopefully, the sneaky fucker I'm hunting shows his face soon. I want this to be over with.

With nights spent frozen in waiting, I've had to bail on TJ a bit during the day, grabbing naps while Earl has found daily reasons to come walking by the street, chatting up folks as he always does. To someone who didn't know better, you'd think he was just being his Nosy Nancy old self while maybe getting a little extra exercise, but I know he's patrolling and I appreciate his diligence.

TJ's at least been cool about letting me head up for a few hours of shuteye in the late afternoon after we get most of the work done. At least, he's been cool about it until today.

"You watch her again last night?"

I pause at the door to the stairs and look at him with a raised eyebrow. "Of course. We haven't caught the fucker yet."

TJ shakes his head, looking around the shop at the three jobs we've got stacked up right now. Fast Eddie cracked a steering rod at the track, the Pedersens have their minivan in for an oil flush and tune-up, and Earl himself brought in his old truck for a balance job on the rear axle. "Listen . . . have you talked to her? Maybe she knows something new or talked to the cops."

I'm silent. I don't know how to tell him that after getting her up to her apartment and the two of us calmed down, I'd just held her for the few hours 'till the sun rose. We'd started talking about who it could've been, what it might mean, and about how it was likely related to the incident with her car.

I was ready to kick some ass and take some names. I had my immediate gut suspicions, including our all too friendly city councilman . . . but McKayla kept minimizing it. Maybe it was punk kids messing with her car, maybe the guy was taking pictures of the moon, just some big misunderstanding. Hopefully, that's all it is, but my gut says that ain't it.

I wanted to give her something else to focus on, a distraction from the seriousness I suspected was coming, so I had shifted the conversation to talking about her.

We chuckled through her stories about working in LA on a scandalous TV show, how Brad has a sort of second-level connection to some pretty famous people in town, and how she and Brad had decided to become their own bosses in a new place.

It gave me a new understanding for just how big of a life upheaval they made together and made me appreciate that she has such a good friend in him.

He's more than just his prancing prissy act, though, and I respect that. He's a risk-taker, living life on his own terms, anyone else be damned, and I fucking love that about McKayla too.

I wish I were that gutsy. But I'm not.

"Tell me about what scarred you," McKayla says, leaning against me and nestling her head against my chest. "Because it must have been a lot to get past that basic bedrock of decency that I sense in you."

I consider telling her to fuck off, that she hasn't got the right to ask about what's fucked me up, but instead, I take a deep breath and start to answer her. "There was a lot . . . but the final straw was my second tour, this time to Afghanistan."

I close my eyes, and in my head, I can smell the odor of the camp. "Our base camp was in some backwater village. I could barely mumble the damn name. The Taliban had been getting up to their typical bullshit in the area, so the brigade commander thought it'd be a good place to send my company. We had to go in the old-fashioned way, humping our damn rucks and most of our supplies carried in by the three armored Humvees that were also supposedly our 'heavy weapons platforms'.

That village, it was so poor that most of the people heated their houses by burning the dung of their goats. They cooked their breakfasts over fires of burning goat shit. I've never smelled anything so bad in all my life, and by the third day, I barely noticed it. It was sunk in everywhere.

Things were quiet for a while. The Taliban were keeping their heads down, but we knew what they were doing. They've been doing the same trick for fifteen years, and before us, the older guys were playing the same fucking game with the Soviets. New unit comes into town full of piss and vinegar, lay low. Let us get worn down by the grind, by the homesickness

and the bad rations and the once-a-week showers. Let us get worn down by seeing the starving kids who bugged us constantly for something from our MREs. We couldn't give them a thing, though, because we knew if we gave one morsel to a kid, we'd have twenty more on our asses like ants to honey, and soon enough, some adult would get their ass in a twist saying we'd given them unclean food.

So the Taliban waited, and even if we didn't mean to, we started to relax. We let things slip, let things go slack . . . and that's when they hit us.

I'd been tasked with four other guys to take two of the Hummers to Battalion Headquarters on a supply run. Mail, more rations, ammo even though we'd hardly used any, shit like that.

I was in the back of the lead Hummer when they hit. I got lucky, I guess. The rear Hummer was hit by a Taliban RPG full on, taking out the gas tank and turning our mail and most of our ammo into a ball of fire. But whoever was supposed to shoot at us was a little off. He hit near the right front tire. Perkins, the driver, jerked the wheel and got us off the road, where I jumped to save my ass . . ."

I pause, and I open my eyes to feel McKayla stroking my face. "Evan, it's okay."

I shake my head, kissing the tips of her fingers. "They went over the side. We were halfway up a mountain and there was no real guardrail. Some nights, I can still hear Perkins scream when he realized what he'd done. I turned my attention to the other Hummer, spraying up the hill toward where I guessed the attackers were. I had two hundred rounds and I used them. But there wasn't much I could do. The other guys never had a chance. I tried, Princess . . . I tried so hard."

"What happened?"

"I had a radio," I rasp, thinking back. "And I was lucky. The Air Force had a couple of birds in the area. They dropped napalm and tore up the mountainside with those big fucking guns of theirs in a couple of passes. They sent in an evac for me, and somehow, I got a cut on my cheek that needed three stitches. So I've got a Combat Infantry Badge, one barely deserved Purple Heart, and the rest of them . . . their families got a flag and a letter signed by the President. That's it. But at nights, I can still see them."

expected her to pity me. I've seen those looks before, but like she always does, she surprised me.

Instead, McKayla stroked my face again before hugging me even as I stayed stiff in her arms, running her fingers through my hair. "You served well," she said quietly. "Those ghosts, they'll be with you, but they aren't mad at you for surviving. They want you to live, Evan. To live well, to honor them by living well."

Her words shook me to my core, and now, looking across the garage at my brother, who'd taken my lost feelings and my laundry lists of mental issues with a simple decision that I was working in the garage with him, and that was that . . . I just don't have the energy to deal with him right now.

"She didn't go to the cops. Doesn't want to make a big deal. I'm thinking me and Earl can handle it anyway." I give him a pointed look and hope he keeps his big mouth shut.

TJ, who went to the cops last year when he found some wannabe gang graffiti on the rolling door, shrugs in that way he has that says he doesn't understand but doesn't really care. "Fine, whatever. Besides the camera guy, don't you want to talk to her about other stuff? Like, you know, you and McKayla? What's going on there?"

My eyes dip down to my boots, and I really wish TJ would just get to the part where he says he wants me to get one of the jobs done tonight while I'm watching the salon. "Earl says I need to take her to dinner. But I'm not exactly the guy who picks a girl up with flowers to go to some fancy restaurant in a four-door sedan."

TJ grins wolfishly, laughing softly. "Well damn, you don't say? I'd have never known that, asshole. Bet she doesn't either. She probably thinks you're some sweetheart who's gonna wine and dine her, romance her like a chick flick. That's totally the vibe you give off. You're all *The Notebook*, you know."

I grin in slightly shocked surprise—TJ getting one over on me is rare—and laugh at the image of me in some twisted rom-com movie as the anti-hero type, and give him a push on the shoulder. "Fuck you, man."

We end up wrestling back and forth like when we were boys, goofing and pushing and laughing. I finally wrap his head with my arm in a loose chokehold, rubbing my knuckles through his hair. After it's standing up with static, I release him, our laughing breaths echoing loudly in the garage.

He smooths his hair back and hops up on a big drum of solvent that we use for cleaning tools. “Man, you may not be some wine and dine type, but everybody eats. Get your scaredy-cat ass over there and invite the woman to dinner. I don’t care if it’s a fucking pizza. Take her on a date. Hell, you can double with me and Alice if you want—wait, on second thought, scratch that. You’d probably scare the shit out of her. Maybe I can introduce you to her in stages. One minute here, ten minutes there . . . it’ll probably take a few months to build up to an entire dinner with your grumpy ass.”

I laugh out loud, and I see TJ’s moment of hesitation as he wonders if he took it too far before he relaxes and laughs fully along with me. It hurts when I realize I did that to him. He has to think about every word he says to me and is always waiting for the other shoe to drop at the most unexpected time. McKayla was right. I gotta fix that. That’s not the guy I want to be.

TJ’s been the one hanging with me through some dark days and even darker nights, and he deserves to have a brother who’s there for him too. Hell, just two minutes ago, I was ready to get defensive and accuse him of being an asshole. Instead, maybe I need to open up to him too.

“Hey . . .” TJ looks up at me, a question in his eyes, and I don’t even know what I was gonna say, so I don’t think about it. I just grab him in a hug, patting harshly on his back a few times.

“Thanks, Bro.”

He squeezes me back, and when he answers, his voice is a little raspy. “Hey, Bro, it’s good. You okay?”

I step back, nodding. “Guess I need to go see a girl about dinner. Wish me luck, because I damn sure fucking need it.”

He nods as I turn, wishing me good luck behind my back as I start heading for the street. My eyes are laser focused on the salon door, but I swear I see a reflection in my periphery of TJ wiping a single stray tear from his eye.

CHAPTER 23

MCKAYLA

My heart goes into thundering pitty-pats when I look up from my tea to see Evan coming across the street, his eyes on fire. He's walking with a purpose and I can't decide if it's a good one or not.

Maybe he's coming over to tell me to leave him alone, that I'm too much trouble. He did ghost me the other day, after all. I agreed to go grab some breakfast with him down at the diner, and when I saw Brad, I went over to talk to him for a second. I turn around, and Evan had pulled a ninja act worthy of a Batman movie. And he's been totally radio-silent for days now.

Hell, I never know with him, so maybe he's coming over to ask me on another ride. I certainly could go for one. Today's dragged on like nobody's business.

I smooth the nonexistent wrinkles in my jeans and press my lips together to make sure my lipstick is perfect as Evan mounts the curb and strides across the parking lot, trying to calm the tremble in my fingers. I can't help it, even if he does piss me off. There's something about Evan that's just . . . I need him.

So whatever the reason, I'm gonna look good while Evan says his piece. Maybe then I'll get to say mine too. I'll get to explain to him that I don't care about his being broken. That I don't care about the attitude or his fears. That I understand his biggest fear—he blames himself for surviving when so many others died. But all I care about is how he makes me feel when I'm in his arms.

He pulls the door open, steps inside, and all conversation stops. Hell, the whole world might as well have stopped turning. Brad, who's giving

Rose a facial with some sample product our supplier wants us to try, snaps his jaw shut so fast I swear he's chipped one of his tooth caps.

I see Evan's eyes light on me, then over to Brad and Rose. Rose, whose face is covered in cerulean blue 'vita-mud' from supposedly Arctic Canada, just stares at him open-mouthed like he's the last person she expected to walk in.

"Hey . . . guys."

"Guess you didn't tell him what the third B stands for in the name," Rose says to Brad, who giggles. Evan flushes, and his lips thin out to nearly knife-edge lines. Rose quickly fills in the gap. "Brad said that Triple B stands for Beautiful Badass Bitches, so you've gotta greet us that way."

I decide to help Evan out before he can spin on his heel and storm back across the street. I don't know what's brought him over here, but something's got his short hairs up and I don't want to pass this up. "Ignore them, Evan. What's up?"

He clears his throat, locking eyes with me, and I feel my heart stop at the desire and fear burning within them. Coming across the street has to be the most courageous thing he's ever done, I bet. "Wanna get dinner tonight?"

I can't help it. The grin that spreads across my face is a clear answer of what I want to say, but before the word comes out, Brad interrupts. "Erk . . . back that bus up, Johnny Motorcycle. Nice try, sweet even for you, but try again. I think McKayla here deserves a little more than 'hey, wanna get dinner tonight?' delivered in a sexy but slightly caveman grumble. Hint, start further back in the story."

I glare at Brad, who'd better be glad that I'm nowhere near my station or else he might find out just how far I can jam a curling iron up his ass, but Brad isn't going to be discouraged. "Look here, Evan, you think we don't know about the growly sex, the cameraman, and then how you snuck out? Girls share, especially when it's the best they've ever had."

"Brad!" I shriek in embarrassment. "I didn't say that!"

Brad just looks at me, then back at Evan. "I think you missed a step here, bucko."

Evan nods and steps closer to me, almost towering over me, daring me to step away. But I can't. I'm pulled toward him with an inexorable draw, like a moth to the flame. I swallow my fear and stare back up at him, letting him know I'm stronger than he realizes.

Evan clears his throat, finally nodding. “Princess . . . I’m sorry. For being too rough, for not protecting you, for bailing. You deserve better and I damn well know it. I don’t know if I can give you better or more than what I currently am, but I’m fucking trying to be that guy. Will you go to dinner with me?”

I analyze him and can see the unease as I pretend to decide whether to give him another chance, as if I wouldn’t. Finally, I decide to let him a bit off the hook. “So this is your attempt at playing nice? To ask me out to dinner like some regular Joe?”

He barely dips his chin in answer, as if that’s all I get out of him. Oh, hell no.

“Fucking hell, Evan!” I yell, shoving him in the chest. “Have you been paying attention at all? Did I ever say I wanted some dinner and a movie date? Do I seem like that girl any more than you’re that guy? I appreciate the apology, because you damn sure owed me one. But only for that fucking ninja act. The rest? You had no way of knowing that guy was there, and as soon as you did, you jumped into action. And I wasn’t complaining about some angry sex! Lovey dovey works, angry works, hard and rough works, soft and sweet works . . . variety is the spice of life, and I’m open to trying every damn flavor you’ve got. You got some duct tape. I’ve got some ideas I’d be willing to try. Understood?”

He’s speechless, struck stupid by my rant. Rose suddenly breaks into giggles, and I look over to see her, tears rolling down her face, leaving tracks in the blue mud as she looks at Brad. “Did she just say duct tape?”

“She said duct tape,” Brad confirms. “But shh . . . I think McKayla’s about to get all My Little Pony Lovey Dovey.”

“So yeah,” I continue, trying not to think about how much I want to kick Brad’s ass, “let’s eat. But you’d better bring your bike.”

He seems shocked I’m actually doing it, giving him another shot. His control snaps, and he roughly grabs my waist to yank me toward him, covering my mouth in a deep kiss as he leans me back a bit.

He thrusts his tongue in, and I taste him, that combination of mint and the tang of his caffeine habit that makes me moan, the vibration rolling through my throat. I notice the cigarette smell is gone . . . and part of me says that’s because of me.

He pulls back, grabbing my hand to drag me toward the door. Over my shoulder, I call out to Brad. “Bye, bitch. Early dinner, apparently.”

I think Rose squeals in delight at the whole scene, but that could just be the door needing oil. In moments, we're on his bike, flying down Main Street and heading west toward the open, sparsely populated areas in that direction.

We ride for a while, the wind the only sound as we lean and sway with the road. It's a beautiful dance and relaxes both of us. My hair whips around my face, but I don't care. I have Evan, I feel better, and as the sunset turns the sky blood red . . . I feel good.

We pull over at a Mexican food place and settle into a booth, Evan beside me, blocking me in. I douse the chips in salt as per usual, Evan practically gasping at me. "What the hell are you doing? How can you eat them with all that salt?"

I grip a chip daintily between two fingers and dip it into the salsa. "Just made them more delicious." With a hearty chomp down on the chip, I enjoy the treat, sneaking my tongue out to lick the crystal remains from my fingers.

The salsa isn't that great, way too mild for a girl who grew up eating real habanero salsa, but I don't care. What I care about is how Evan groans at the sight of me sucking my fingers, and I smirk, knowing exactly what I'm doing to him and rather enjoying it.

I let Evan order pork enchiladas for both of us, and as we eat our meals, I swear the man blushes. "This is the first date I've been on since before I enlisted."

"No shit?" I ask. "Well, I hope I'm a good re-introduction to dating life then. So . . . I already know all the basic shit. Tell me about work."

"It's good. I enjoy the challenge, even Fast Eddie's 'Stang."

"Fast Eddie?" I ask as I try the enchilada. Damn, that's pretty good.

"The town's local gearhead," Evan says with a laugh. "He calls himself a racer, but he's not very good. With the amount of money he sinks into that 'Stang, he should be doing a lot better. He's just . . . well, he likes that 'Stang at least, and he'll admit that it's not the car, it's the driver. So, what's it like at the salon?"

I'm careful as I talk about the salon's future, walking on eggshells to keep from putting pressure or expectations on Evan. "I'd like to see us get a solid reputation," I admit, "but also I really want to get to the point where I'm not having to do all the cutting myself. Not saying I don't like cutting

hair, but I'd like to turn the regular cuts over to someone who doesn't have my experience."

"I can get that," Evan admits. "I don't know if I'm insane, but I'd like to grow past where I am too. I'd like to think . . . well, you help me see a future that I didn't think was available for me."

"If you mean a future with days like this, we can keep discussing things," I tease, making him smile. We continue, and it seems I'm front and center in just about everything he says. We relax, joking and making me feel at home with him. Like a real couple. My heart melts and fires up all at the same time to think that this powerful monster of a man wants me, and I know that as long as he does, I'm his.

The ride home blinks by in a rush, and as he pulls the bike into the garage and closes the door, I think for a second that he's going to walk me home like some nice guy and settle for a sweet kiss goodnight. "So, I had a nice time."

Instead, Evan steps closer, taking my hand. "Me too. But I don't want it to be over."

I laugh, stepping closer. "Me either. Wanna know what I'm thinking? Well, first off . . . crazy idea here, but why don't we try a bed? And I know it's cliché, but perhaps slow and soft is just what we need."

He growls, scooping me into his arms and heading for the stairs. "I can do a bed," he says as he kicks open the door. "I don't know about soft and slow though."

"Why's that?"

His voice thick with desire, he growls deeply, "I need to kiss and worship every inch of your fucking perfect sexy body, Princess."

We reach the bedroom up top, which looks more lived in than the last time I was here. There's a footlocker with clothes piled neatly on top of it in the corner. He sets me down in the middle of his bed, his eyes roving over me, making me squirm in anticipation. "Stop," he commands. "Be still."

"What are you doing?"

Evan steps back, then nods to himself. "I'm taking a mental snapshot of you right now. The way your hair fans out like a halo of cotton candy, the sweet smile on your lips, your chest heaving with need. It's something I'll remember forever."

He leans over me, resting some of his weight onto me carefully, pinning me down. He traces a fingertip along my jawline, following it with little

nibbling kisses. I gasp, pulling at his t-shirt to trace his muscles and scratch his skin lightly, making him nip my skin and adding to my cries. “Yesss . . .”

He continues, outlining the contours of my collarbone and the line of my cleavage peeking out the top of my shirt. His fingers work to undo every button as I untie the knot at my waist, and when he pulls the shirt open, exposing me to his eyes, my skin instantly covers in raised bumps. “Every time . . . flawless.”

I reach down, undoing the clasp on my bra and opening myself to him. “You deserve every inch.”

Diving in, Evan covers the upper curve of my breasts with sucking kisses and nips until I arch toward him, silently begging for more. Teasing me, he moves around, under and over the soft mounds, never touching my nipple but occasionally teasing the peaked nub with his warm breath, making me whimper. “Fuck, Evan . . . I thought you said you couldn’t go slow?”

“I wanted to do the best I could,” he says softly before bending down and capturing my right nipple with his tongue and teeth, pulling back until my breast is tugged and delicious pain mixes with the electric pleasure of his touch and I cry out, arching my back.

My cries seem to ignite him and he lets go long enough to rip my jeans and panties off and strip himself, laying back onto me so that we are skin to skin. The feeling of him pressed against me is better than anything, and when he reaches down to cup my pussy, I’m ready for him. “Please, Evan.”

He brushes my hair back from my forehead, not moving his other hand but not entering me as he looks into my eyes. “Slow down, my Princess. We’re trying new flavors, remember?”

I can’t. I’m already on edge just from his cock being so close to filling me. But the way he said ‘my Princess’ gives me the strength, and I nod slightly, panting as he smiles down at me.

“Speaking of flavors,” he continues, “I want to taste you.”

I cry out in argument as he moves away from me, feeling cold without his body covering mine, but the instant his tongue touches my pussy, fire runs through my veins. I reach down, grabbing the backs of my knees and offering myself wantonly to him, giving him total and complete access.

He licks my clit in broad circles with his tongue, using his fingers to massage my pussy lips, tormenting me till, with a scream, I shatter. “Evan!”

As I come back to reality, he leaves love bites along my inner thighs, and the thought of him marking me excites me. He moves back up my body, stopping to kiss my hips and dip his tongue into my belly button, which makes me giggle, and finally, gather my hands into his, our fingers interwoven as he presses them to the bed above my head.

“I don’t know what you see in me, but let me in, Princess.”

“I know exactly what I see,” I say as obey him. The feeling of his cock sliding into me with slippery ease to fill me so full of cock is so overwhelming, I tense up in pleasure. “Oh, fuck, Evan . . . I’m yours.”

Slowly and steadily, he moves in and out, staring into my eyes and letting me see what I’ve only had hints of before, the man he *could* be. “Don’t move. Let me fuck you so sweetly, Princess. I can feel every inch of your tight pussy sucking me in, squeezing me tightly. Just. Don’t. Move.”

I do my best, trying to be still for him, but it’s so hard. Every stroke of his cock sets my body on fire again, and I’m glad that I’ve already come once, or else I’d be on the edge again already. I’m rewarded for my efforts when I hear his breathing change, short, harsh pants escaping with a little hiss as he works to maintain his torturous pace.

I want to give him as good as I’m getting, so I pulse the muscles deep in my pelvis in time with his thrusts, wanting to own his orgasm, begging him to fill me with his seed. His voice drops deeper, and his eyes flare with fire as his hips speed up even more. “Yes. Take it. Take it all.”

I wrap my legs around him, crying out when I feel the jets of his hot seed pouring into me, claiming my body, and if I’m honest with myself, claiming my heart as well.

We collapse, curling up in the bed together in a tangle of overlapping arms and legs with sweat and stickiness all over, but I don’t care. We stay just like that . . . and as I feel sleep grab me, I’m ready to stay all night.

CHAPTER 24

EVAN

After McKayla leaves in the pre-dawn grayness, I get right to work, knowing that I've got a lot of slack to catch up on. Normally, I wouldn't give a shit, but I'm feeling an urge to make it up to TJ if I can.

There's something different about the day. I don't feel the need for energy drinks or cigarettes, and when I glance across the street after getting the first job done, I feel an unfamiliar sensation on my face. It takes me a moment to realize what it is. I'm actually smiling.

Sure, it's not all sunshine and unicorns. McKayla and Brad are out of the salon all day today, off to the resort for a wedding trial run. I'd laughed when she told me that over coffee shared downstairs in the salon while she packed up her 'travel kit'.

"Who fixes their hair and makeup just to see how it looks, then washes it all off?" I asked, making her laugh. "I mean, really, a test drive of a hairstyle?"

"Trust me, it's totally a thing," she says. "They just want to see different looks . . . make sure everything is perfect for the big day."

I grin to myself as I work, wondering what McKayla will do to her hair on her wedding day. I decide that it should be big, bouncy pink curls, just like the first time I saw her as a little reminder of how she'd been so fiery and sassy that day in response to my anger. And underneath the dress . . . no panties. For damn sure, no panties as she gives me a naughty grin while the band plays.

"Oh, shit . . ." I whisper as I realize I really just thought about McKayla walking down an aisle toward me. Me, the guy who I swore two weeks ago would never find anyone, and now I'm thinking about weddings? This is big. This should be freaking me right the fuck out.

But strangely, I'm not. I'm steady and maybe even a little excited about the idea that she might actually take vows to put up with me. It's like the sudden lack of need for caffeine and nicotine. Maybe McKayla's magic or something.

I laugh to myself, climbing underneath Fast Eddie's 'Stang. Damn steering rod . . . I swear, if this fucker ever learns to drive a groove, he'd be the best racer in the state. Instead, I'm making money.

I mutter to myself as I work. "Yeah, I know . . . you're a badass machine now, too fucked up for your own good, but deep down in your engine, most of these parts are top of the line. Little care, little bit better handling, and you'll be showing off what you can do."

I catch the irony in what I told the car as I hear laughter behind me. I stick my head out to find TJ caught up in a full-blown case of giggles. "Well good morning, brother of mine. What's so funny?"

Through his laughter, TJ hears the smile in my voice and shakes his head. "You're talking to cars now? Serious question—has it talked back yet?"

I wad up a filthy rag I've got on my toolbox and chuck it at him, a grease spot appearing on his face where I tagged him.

I laugh, feeling lighter than air for the first time since . . . well, to be honest, since before that last tour in Afghanistan. "No, fucker, they don't talk back. Maybe that's why I talk to them. They don't bug the fuck outta me like little brothers."

I mean it to be funny, and TJ laughs too, but maybe there's a kernel of truth in that. I've kept myself cut off from the world because, other than Earl, and then only in small doses, I didn't want to hear what the hell the rest of the world had to tell me.

That was, until McKayla draped herself all over my bike and changed my life forever, it seems. Since that day, I've done better, little by little. Sure, to most people, it's been unnoticeable, and I've scared myself more than once with my realizations, but McKayla's never given up.

Now I can't, either. Instead, TJ and I talk as we work, and it's nice. It feels like old times, back in the days when we'd bullshit, talking about girls and cars while we tossed a football back and forth.

He was the one to take auto shop at school and enjoy the dirty magic of getting a mechanical beast to purr and run, following all the proper dos and don'ts, and while I learned a bit, it was through trial and error by playing

with buddies' cars. I picked up a little in the military's vehicle check system, but TJ was the one who took all that and refined it, taught me how to apply that knowledge in the real world as a way of bringing me back to life, giving me a focus. It's all I had for so long, and I appreciate that.

Mid-morning, we decide to take a break. "So, triple coffee?" TJ asks.

"Nah, don't need it today," I admit. "I actually slept well last night."

"Just put a necktie on the door to upstairs if you want to sleep well again," TJ jokes. I start to laugh when the last face I want to fucking see steps in my garage. Jaxson.

I'm instantly on edge, crossing my arms over my chest, my inner asshole not so deeply buried it can't pop out in a half second when needed. "What?" I ask him.

Jaxson acts as if he's accustomed to my behavior and just gives us a casual smile, tucking a hand inside the pocket of his suit pants. "Hey, Evan . . . TJ. Just wondered if you'd seen McKayla around today?"

I raise an eyebrow, obviously not in the mood. I'm not insecure, but he's not understanding that she's just not interested in him. She's *my* Princess, not his. "Why?"

TJ gives me a glance. Still, I haven't threatened the man with a beatdown, so he's not going to say anything. "Oh, it's been a few weeks since she cut my hair. Was just hoping she could fit me in."

There's no change in his tone, no hint that he meant anything other than exactly what he said, but something about the look in his eyes tells me that he isn't just curious if she could '*fit him in'* for a haircut.

So I'm silent, a growing tension filling the space as I stare Jaxson down. Surprisingly, he doesn't even flinch. I'm not sure whether to be impressed, because I know I've broken lesser men with just a hard look, or to be worried that he isn't affected.

TJ decides to step in before the tension can ratchet up another few notches to the point things could get difficult for him and for me, too. "She and Brad are out at the resort today. Salon's closed until tomorrow."

Jaxson smiles triumphantly, his eyes never leaving mine. "Thanks, TJ. I guess I'll just have to see her tomorrow."

He turns to walk away, a swagger in his walk. He climbs back into that egotistical dickmobile of his and pulls back into traffic, big as life and twice as much a pain in the ass.

As soon as his car's out of sight, I round on TJ. "What the fuck, man? Just say you don't know. You don't tell people's business to every Tom, Dick, and Harry."

As soon as I say it, I know TJ won't understand, and looking in his eyes, I'm right. He grins, giving me a half shrug. "Relax, man. He wants a haircut. Don't mess with her business, especially with a city council dick. He might not be your favorite guy, but he could help, or hurt, her business." He says the latter part with a pointed look.

I disagree, but nothing can be done about it now, and I don't want to ruin the vibe we've finally got again, so I try to let it go. "Fine, fine. Let's just get back to work."

CHAPTER 25

MCKAYLA

I wipe my forehead, glad that I went light on the makeup today. It's been a long day of hair and makeup at the resort, but I know it's been worth it. The bride-to-be was awesome, sweet, and excited to get to play with different looks. She's the kind of client that makes my job fun sometimes.

It was the mother of the bride that was the problem, a full Momzilla. To start, she wouldn't accept one of the technological tricks that I use, a tablet that uses a picture of the client and some digital magic to give them a preview. Nope, according to Momzilla, I had to do *every* hairdo.

She kept saying she wanted her daughter to look exotic on her wedding day and didn't take it well when I told her that her daughter is the picture-perfect blonde, blue-eyed, corn-fed in Iowa type. Though Brad is a genius with makeup, I had to make it known that a cat-eye liner wasn't gonna make her look like a Kardashian, but that she was gorgeous as-is. Instead, she ended up critiquing and criticizing every little curl and every hint of eye shadow.

After the back and forth, I'm exhausted and Brad barely says a word on our way back. I know he took the worst of it, but he was a total pro.

"Hey, honey, you want company again tonight?" Brad asks as he gets out. "I can grab some stuff for tomorrow."

I shake my head, feeling silly. Nothing's happened, and I wave him off. "Grab some sleep. You earned it. Besides, if I get the heebie-jeebies, I think I know someone who can help me."

Brad grins and starts pumping two fingers through his other fist. "Yeah, yeah, just remember, sweet buns, that I've got an advantage over you."

"What? Because you could have a watertight ass and not steal Evan from me," I tease back. "He likes some cushion for his pushin', not a

skeleton. And I don’t think he’s on your team.”

“Yeah, but I’ll have you know I can suck a golf ball through a garden hose. And sometimes, that’s enough for a switch-hitter. Top that, bitch,” Brad sassily replies. We look at the each other, matching twinkles in each of our eyes before we laugh.

“That was a good one. Ooh, I really needed that after today. Thanks, honey. Take care and I’ll see you in the morning.”

I give him a wave and pull out. It’s true. I’m hoping to have Evan over tonight, so Brad would be a third wheel. A happy to watch third wheel, but I’m not sharing an inch of what Evan’s packing . . . all for me. After all, I wouldn’t want Brad to get *too* jealous.

I get back to the salon and park right in front of the door, peeking at the garage to check if I see Evan in the dark or at least the light of the cherry on a cigarette, but it’s completely dark across the street.

Oh, well, I could use a shower after today, so I’ll clean up and then give him a call to see if he wants to come over for a late dinner. I know for damn sure I could use some creamy dessert. I walk into my dark apartment, dropping my keys in the bowl beside the door and flipping on the light.

“Surprise!”

A deep voice scares the shit out of me, making me yell and spin, jumping halfway into the air and stumbling against the doorframe, knocking my head a good one.

For a split second, I think it’s Evan, but then the voice registers and I turn to see Jaxson sitting at my dining table, a fancy spread of crystal and linen surrounding fine white china and a large arrangement of roses.

He’s dressed to the nines, too, a crisp black suit and white shirt undone at the neck, almost as if someone called central casting and asked for ‘Rich Romantic Alpha-Male’. He reclines in my chair, a tumbler of something amber in his hand. He doesn’t break into apartments often, but when he does, he drinks well, apparently.

My jaw hangs open in shock, and my head rings so much I don’t think to just get the fuck outta here. “Jaxson, what are you doing here? How’d you get in?”

He smirks, sipping his drink and setting it aside. “I’m a man of many talents. Please sit down and we can discuss some of them over dinner. I brought your favorite . . . lasagna.”

He stands, pulling out the chair for me like a gentleman. I'm confused by how calm he seems, like this is actually a normal date.

I brace my hand against the wall, trying to keep the rising notes of panic out of my voice as my brain uselessly latches on to minor details out of fear. "What? I don't like lasagna. You need to leave, Jaxson. Now."

I harden my voice and my face, hooking a thumb toward the door. Fear's really starting to make my knees tremble, and I'm suddenly aware of just how far it is from my hand to my phone.

He looks thoughtful for a moment, then shrugs, unconcerned. "Ah, perhaps it's my favorite then, definitely something you should try though. Sit."

His voice turns dangerously cold, something robotic sounding around the edges of it as if it's simply a recording, no emotions.

Something is terribly wrong here. I'd been thinking Jaxson was just extraordinarily persistent, but breaking into my apartment to surprise me with dinner takes things from persistent into criminally psycho territory.

Jaxson smiles again, and I see something darker and more terrifying lurking beneath his spit-shined façade than I ever imagined. Underneath this façade covering the face isn't a nice guy but a truly sick mind. I just missed it because, well, I don't know why. But Jaxson isn't weird . . . he's evil.

Jaxson interrupts my epiphany, his voice cracking like a steel whip. His eyes spark dangerously, and his hand clenches around the chair back until he's white-knuckled. "McKayla. Sit."

I take a big breath, my mind racing on how to get out of this. I'm alone in my apartment, the door downstairs is locked and a bitch to get open, Brad is home, and Evan and I didn't actually have plans tonight, so nobody knows to come look for me.

I'm on my own.

I need a plan. I know I can't get out of here, downstairs, and outside without him catching me. So I need to play for time, try to find an opening to subdue him somehow. For now, I don't want to anger him, so I do as he says and move to sit in the dining chair. I look over my shoulder at him as he tries to push my chair in like we're actually going to sit here and have a romantic dinner date. I glance at the table setting, but the knife he's laid out is good for nothing more than pissing someone off.

Tentatively, I try talking to him. "Jaxson, look . . . this is all lovely, but I've been honest with you from the start. I just want to be friends, nothing

more. You need to go."

His calmness evaporates, instantly replaced with anger, and he pushes my chair the rest of the way in, my ribs smacking the table a little too hard. "You think you've been honest? You said you didn't want to date anyone and then you go and let that asshole fuck you like some slut, right in front of the windows where anyone could see. Now tell me, how honest is that?"

I push away from the table as much as I can, leaning back to be able to grab a breath, but an instant later, it clicks. He knows about Evan and me having sex on the salon bench because he was there . . . with a camera. "You . . . you're the cameraman."

He ignores me and continues, talking more to the room than to me as he comes from around the back of the chair to loom over me, one hand on the table and one on the chair back as he looks down at me. "Why would you want a guy like that? He treats you like shit, just giving a little tug on the hook he has in you, and you go running off to him like a damn trained puppy. I wanted to treat you right, like a lady, take you to dinner and get to know you. But if you want a rough bastard who just takes what he wants, fine. I can be that." My eyes widen in terror as I realize what he's saying, and I try to push the chair back more to get away.

Without preamble, he roughly grabs my arms and jerks me up from the chair, hauling me to him as he brings his lips to mine.

He's got a fierce hold on my arms, keeping me still, but I turn my head to get away and yell, "No! Jaxson. Stop. Let me go!"

My struggles give me a little more room, and I manage to get my hands up to his chest, pushing against him with everything I have, but that's it. In the space between us, I get hysterical, flailing to try to get away from his grip and yelling 'NO' over and over again.

He releases one arm, and I twist, thinking for a split-second that I have a chance. I whirl away from him, but it seems to be exactly what he wants as he yanks me back. I don't see it coming when he backhands me, stars instantly blooming in front of my eyes.

I'm stunned, and he takes advantage, pressing me back against the blind-covered window as he lifts a hand to my throat. My toes barely graze the floor, and the air's cut off almost instantly, my limbs paralyzing in fear.

"You want it rough, McKayla?" he snarls in my ear, leaning it. "You let him fuck you hard in front of a window. Guess it's my turn now, but I'm a bit more brutal than he was. I think a slut like you is gonna like it though."

I hear him undoing his belt and make one last effort, clawing at his neck, but my nails just slide over his suit jacket, one of them snapping off. I gurgle, trying to fight the black roses that are blooming in my vision. “No . . .”

Right before the dark can take over, I have one last thought of Evan. I’m so sorry for not listening because this is gonna be impossible for him to come back from.

It’s not paranoia when they’re actually out to get you.

CHAPTER 26

EVAN

Knowing McKayla should be home soon, I step outside to stretch, smell the air, and wait for her. It's strange. Today's been amazing, no cigs at all and only one energy drink at two thirty during that lull time when everyone gets drifty at work.

Today was awesome too. I haven't gotten this much work done since my uniformed days, and other than a crick in my shoulder that I plan on stretching outside before finishing up a last job, I'm feeling great.

When I step out, I see that her car's already parked. I must have missed her as I was washing up, and I decide to give her some more time. It's only a few seconds when I look up and see her light click on, the window glowing from within. I know she's exhausted, but I need to see her tonight.

Hell, after last night, I need to see her every day and every night. I know I've replaced one fix, tobacco, with another, her. Somewhere deep within, I realize that should freak me out, and I know there's some shrink who'd be worried too. But the idea of needing McKayla . . . it's just natural and good. I think McKayla's as addicted to me as I am to her, and it's one of those addictions that makes people stronger, not weaker.

I finish my stretching, doing a few jumping jacks to shake out the tension in my lower back and hips, deciding. I'll let her settle home and maybe put on a little nightie, thinking she's going to bed alone, before I go over. That woman makes sleepwear look better than fine fashion no matter what she's wearing. I'm lost in the memory of her stomping around in nothing but a romper and boots for a moment when I see the blinds move.

There's a large shadow against the window, and it seems odd that McKayla would lean against the window like that, but I can see her outline

clearly. I mean, who just leans against their damn blinds with their back pressing the slats against the window?

Something's wrong, and like a switch flipping in my head, I feel my training kick in. Fear is there, but it's in a separate part of me, a place that isn't going to get in the way of doing what needs to be done.

Not again. I won't lose someone again!

I yell out to TJ, who's wrapping up some paperwork in the office, "Call 911! And get Earl!"

"Huh?"

"Get 911 on the goddamn phone!" I yell, that long familiar 'command voice' coming from deep within my chest. "Get Earl!"

I hear him vaguely behind me asking, "What's wrong? Evan?" but I don't have time. I see another shape up there, hazy against the sharp outline of McKayla, and more alarms start dinging in my head.

I don't even bother checking the front door. Instead, I bring my right boot up and piston it out below the lock, just like they taught us in the Army. The glass shatters before me, and I go through, my eyes scanning the dark salon, looking for hostiles. I don't stop moving, though, thundering up the stairs and lowering my shoulder. There's no room for another kick.

What greets my eyes when I finish bursting through is like a stab in my very heart, Jaxson crouched over McKayla's body on the floor.

Everything falls into slow motion and the sound seems to drop to a muffled whisper as I fly across the room, tackling Jaxson. We roll, pulling him off of McKayla as I punch him, over and over.

We're chest to chest, and big punches go out the window to be replaced with elbows, forearms, and knees. He fights back, getting a good shot to my left cheek, popping the skin open as blood leaks down. It only fuels me more, and I head-butt him savagely, feeling his nose crunch.

Jaxson crumples back and I sit up. I start to rain blows to his face, his head, his chest until he's given up on fighting back now, just trying to get his arms up to defend against my fury. I can't stop. My vision is just a red haze.

I hear someone come up the stairs, but before I can do anything, I hear, "Police! Hands up!"

I stop, raising my arms as I try to stand, their words piercing my anger and making me desperate to get help to McKayla.

In moving, I trip slightly over Jaxson, and before I know it, I'm on the floor, where one of the cops decides to plant a knee in my shoulder blade. The cop is yelling instructions in a scream that tells me he has no idea what he's doing. I'm not surprised. The local law is mostly tasked with running speed traps for unsuspecting tourists. They don't have to deal with anything serious very often and he's probably shocked.

"Stop resisting! Stop resisting! Get your hands behind your back! Stop resisting!" he keeps repeating. I want to tell him that I'd love to get my hands behind my back if he'd fucking let me.

Grunting between clenched teeth, I try to nod toward McKayla. She's most important right now. "McKayla," I grit as my left hand is made to touch my spine between my shoulder blades. "Help her."

I watch as another officer touches light fingers to her neck, and when he nods, I sag in relief. The officer moves on, helping Jaxson to his feet. Before I can tell them what's going on, Jaxson says in a nasal, blood-choked voice, "My girlfriend and I were having a romantic evening and this asshole just bursts in. I did what I could to help her, but he's an animal."

The cops turn toward me, still trying to figure out what to do. Still, he's been taught to put on a tough-guy act, even if it's tissue paper thin and I can see right through it. "It's okay, Mr. Kennedy. We've got this handled. We'll get you and your girlfriend some help. Everything's going to be fine."

I twist my head, looking up as best I can from the floor to the officers. "That's a damn lie. He's not her boyfriend. I am. *He* did that to her!"

The officer helping Jaxson steps closer to me, squatting down to be closer to my face. "Look at you, Mr. Town Rambo. Who do you think I'm gonna believe? The greasy scuzz or the upstanding city councilman?" He looks at the other officer, jerking with his thumb. "Get him out of here so the paramedics have room."

His partner yanks hard on my left arm. I don't think he's been trained properly, and I feel a tearing sensation and immediate pain. "Hey, watch it, man!"

"Wh–whatever," the freaked out cop stutters. "Downstairs."

I struggle, yelling because I want McKayla to get help. "McKayla . . . keep that bastard away from her!"

Outside, the cop tries to lead me through the parking lot, acting like he's controlling me with a forceful grip, but his hand is wimpy around my bicep. He makes a show out of tossing me against the cruiser for a half-assed pat

down and then shoves me down to sit on the curb with what I think is supposed to be a mean scowl. I don't care, I just want McKayla to get help, and I don't even notice when people come outside from the apartments above the stores lining the street.

In the chaotic flashing lights of the cruisers outside, I hear McKayla's voice. She's yelling my name. I have to get to her and I go to stand. The cop freaks out, pulling his gun and waving it around in a totally ridiculous panic. "What the hell are you doing? You're under arrest!"

Before I can even breathe, McKayla runs out of the building, eyes wide. "Stop!" she screams, scaring the cop. His gun goes off, and I can feel the whine in my ear where the round bounces off the pavement next to my head, everyone stopping as the cop realizes what nearly just happened. "He's not the guy! He saved me!"

"He's under arrest, miss," he says sternly.

"No." McKayla lets go of the cop's arm but plants her body squarely between the cop and me. The steel in her voice moves me, and I turn over, watching her standing over me like a guardian angel, a warrior princess ready to take a bullet for me, her hands balled into tiny fists at her hips. "Listen to me. Your partner is going to bring Jaxson downstairs in about five seconds because *he's* the one who did this!"

Her voice carries over the assembling group, and the cop looks like he'd rather be doing anything than this right now. "What?"

"You have the wrong man," McKayla repeats. "Jaxson broke into my apartment. Evan saved me."

The cop still looks absolutely perplexed, but before he can say anything, his partner brings Jaxson out of the salon, handcuffed. The cop goes to help his partner, and McKayla turns around, kneeling to straddle me on the ground. We both ignore my cuffed hands as she covers me with kisses.

The bumbling officer comes back, still looking unsure. "Ma'am? Ma'am, let go. You're safe."

She rears up, and I see that fire in her eyes that I love so much as she starts gesturing wildly with her hands. "Why won't you listen to me, asshole?"

Before the cop can react to being called an asshole, I hear Earl's voice. He hauled ass faster than I would've thought down the street.

"Hey, Mr. Dwight. What seems to be happening here tonight?"

The officer smiles at Earl, still trying to keep his image as being in control of the situation. “Well, you know I can’t rightly say, Earl. Seems the lady got in some trouble and there’s some issue over who the perp is.”

Earl’s voice goes into that mocking tone that I’ve only heard from him a few times. That tone that says *boy, I ain’t calling you stupid, but your IQ and my boot size are about the same right now.* “Well, I don’t know what all happened here, but I know who the good guy is. It’s Evan, whom you’ve got here in cuffs. Miss McKayla has had a little issue with a stalker, and we’ve been keeping an eye on it for days. I’m thinking we done caught our guy.”

McKayla nods. “That’s what I’ve been trying to fucking tell him!”

The crowd’s getting large enough that there’s another rumble of discontent. This isn’t the sort of town where heroes get handcuffed, beaten, and shot at. Officer Dwight releases my cuffs, telling me to sit tight, and presses the button on the walkie talkie on his shoulder, saying some coded instructions.

“Careful,” I groan as McKayla grabs me under the left arm to help me to my feet. “I think it’s dislocated.”

Earl scoffs at Officer Dwight. “You’d better hope, boy, that Evan ain’t hurt bad. Chief Redfern ain’t gonna like if I tell him one of his boys hurt a hero at the next Elk’s Lodge meeting.”

Dwight’s face turns the color of cottage cheese as Earl’s threat sinks in, and Earl helps me up under my right arm. “Think I might make that visit you keep bugging me about,” I whisper as he steadies me.

“I like that idea. Come on, you don’t need a meat wagon,” Earl decides. He looks over at McKayla, giving a respectful nod. “Miss McKayla, mind if I give you a ride to the hospital too?”

“I’d like that,” McKayla says. “As long as I get to stay with Evan.”

We head toward the sidewalk, passing by the cruiser where Jaxson is still struggling, yelling out desperately, “Do you know who I am? I’m on the city council, for God’s sake. Let me go.”

“I’m starting a goddamn recall petition,” Earl yells back. We get to the sidewalk, where I see TJ’s already pulled up Earl’s truck. Guess I know how the old man got here so quickly. We climb in, and I wrap an arm around McKayla’s shoulders, bringing her in close to me and burying my face in her hair as I inhale her sweet scent.

My voice choking, I whisper against her skin. “I thought I’d lost you. When I busted in there and saw you on the floor, I thought I’d lost you.”

She shushes me as she lays her head on my shoulder. “Shh, it’s okay. I’m okay. And I’m not leaving you.”

We rock back and forth for a second, just letting TJ drive. Finally, I speak what’s in my heart. “Princess, when you came running out the building, fire flashing and fury rolling off you in wild waves, I think that was the happiest moment of my life so far. You’re a fucking force of nature, you know that?”

She chuckles and scratches my chest. “What about you? You saved me tonight, Evan. I’ll never be able to thank you enough for that. You’re my hero.”

I shake my head, swallowing my sudden tears. “I’m just some washed-up soldier. You know what I thought when I realized you were being attacked? I thought, *not again. I won’t lose someone again.* You see, all this time, I’ve blamed myself for that ambush. But I’m glad I got there tonight for you.”

“You’re so much more to me than that,” McKayla says, lifting her eyes to meet mine. “I love you, Evan.”

Those four simple words, words I never thought I would hear anyone say to me, pierce through the last of my defenses, and I feel a shroud drop from my heart. *Perkins, all of you guys . . . goodbye. Rest in peace, but I have to live. I’ll never forget you, but I have to live too.* I lean in and touch my nose to McKayla’s, preparing to kiss her. “I love you too, Princess.”

The kiss is gentle, soft but full of passion, and in my mind, I see a future that I never anticipated before. Our moment is interrupted by a phone ringing, and McKayla looks down to her pocket.

“Well, are you going to answer it?” TJ asks from up front. “I mean, it could be the cops.”

“Nope, it’s Brad,” McKayla says with a soft laugh. “I’ll put him on speaker. Go, bitch.”

“Excuse me?” Brad’s outraged voice comes from the phone. “I get woken up in the middle of my beauty sleep to find out you’ve been attacked. I haul ass down to the salon with Trey, both of us looking nowhere near fabulous, only to find you gone already, and the best you can say is *go, bitch*? I take it that means you’re okay?”

I laugh, looking down at the phone. “She’s fine, Brad. We’re just on our way to the hospital. For me, that is. You sort of interrupted the *I love you* kiss.”

There’s silence on the other end of the line, then Brad sighs. “You told her you love her?”

“I told him I love him too,” McKayla says.

There’s a mysterious sound that I guess is Brad before he speaks again. “You’ve gotta be kidding me. All the great, well-groomed, handsome men in the world, and you fall in love with *him*? Great.”

“What can I say? I’ve got good taste,” McKayla says, her eyes glowing as she smiles at me. “And if you don’t like it, well, just remember I’m the one who cuts your hair.”

There’s light grumbling on the line, then someone says something unintelligible. Brad argues with them for a second then sighs dramatically again. “Trey says I’m being a prissy protective bitch.”

“You’re being her brother from another mother,” I tell him. “And I’m glad for that. You’re a good man, Brad.”

There’s silence for a moment, then Brad comes back on, his voice raspy and thick. “Thank you, Evan. Trey is going to stay his perfect ass here and hold down the fort. I’m right behind you. Talk to you soon.”

We wrap up a call, but not before McKayla demands that Brad spill the beans on Trey as soon as he gets to the hospital. Earl clears his throat as she hangs up. “You guys, we’ll be there soon. Miss McKayla, you seem fine, but we really do need to get you checked out.”

I pull back, checking her over. “What’s wrong?”

Earl looks back, smiling. “Nothing, Son. Just they’ll want pics to nail that bastard Jaxson to the wall. And Evan?”

“Yeah?”

“You’re right. Come down to the Lodge. You’re not the only one who blames himself for surviving when his buddies died. Trust me there.”

McKayla nods, hugging me. “But you did right this time. Well, except for one thing. You should have ridden down the door on your Harley. Now that woulda been badass.”

“Next time,” I promise her.

“And when will you let me ride that thing?”

I give her a raised eyebrow, smirking. “Don’t push it. Love is one thing. Harleys are another.”

“So next week then?” McKayla asks. I sigh, and she giggles. “Okay, two weeks.”

TJ laughs from up front. “Ain’t love grand?”

CHAPTER 27

MCKAYLA

Brad and I stand back, watching from a vantage point behind the reception guests as the newly wed Mr. and Mrs. Van Ness get into their limo. We give a polite wave goodbye along with everyone else, and Brad puts his arm around my shoulder, pulling me tight. The tail lights disappear, and I lower my arm, sagging even as I smile. *Finally*.

Brad smiles widely. “We did it! Triple B action in full effect.” We celebrate with our usual special handshake, complete with finger waggles and bootie smacks. We keep it small and tasteful, though, considering the guests are still meandering back inside to wrap up the reception.

I sigh happily. “We did. Bridal prime time season one . . . successfully in the books.”

Brad raises an eyebrow at me, replying sassily, “Successfully in the books? I’d say we’ve been more than successful. We’ve been ground-breaking, awesome, epic, and . . . and . . .”

I giggle as he searches for more adjectives to describe the season we’ve had. “You’re right, we’ve been all that, plus a bag of chips.”

The summer wedding season officially ended with those fading tail lights, and after months of pampering bride after bride at the resort, Brad and I are exhausted, happy . . . and a lot better off financially than we were.

We’ve got a large clientele of regular customers at the salon now, and between weekday clients and weekend brides, it’s been a booming success. We’ve even hired not just one, but two helpers . . . a girl who covers the walk-in cuts on the busy weekends, and a guy who runs the front desk reception and scheduling. Brad campaigned heartily for a cutie there, but ultimately, we hired the best person for the spot. Too bad for Brad that he’s super straight.

The trial for Jaxson is over too, and while he didn’t get as much time as we’d hoped, I’m confident that after his years of incarceration, he’ll never be welcome in this town again. His trial was the biggest thing to hit this place since the resort opened, to the point that people were actually lining up outside the courthouse early in hopes of getting a front-row seat for the trial. Because of the lookie-loos and the subsequent gossip, everyone got to see just how psycho he really is. I had to go testify for several days, and he'd looked longingly at me the whole time. So beyond the time I had to attend, I'd avoided the whole thing as much as possible. I didn’t want to give Jaxson any more thought than I had to, didn't want to let him have power over me ever again.

Right after his arrest, the police searched his house. He had pictures of me pinned up all over a wall in his bedroom, a diary with romantic poetry about me, and detailed reports of every interaction we had and my actions when he’d been watching me. It was seriously creepy, some scary shit, and I’ve spent more than a few nights curled up wondering about how I overlooked the signs. I don’t think I’m the only one either. A few people around town have given me creepy stories about Jaxson, stuff they overlooked at the time.

It was all too much, and a month ago, I realized that to process everything, I needed to see a therapist. I didn’t tell Evan at first, unsure how he’d react with his last blowup. But after my first visit, I knew I needed to trust him.

He was tentatively accepting, and once he saw the progress and insights I was getting with my doctor, he shocked the hell out of me by asking if he could meet the ‘voodoo headshrinker’.

It’s where I’m going now, jumping into my car after hurriedly changing to drive through town. Dr. Jackson’s great as he’s the only counselor in town who works on Saturday afternoons, which is convenient for us.

I pull up in front of the unassuming two-story house, pulling around back to find Evan’s Harley. Parking, I go inside, hearing muffled voices coming not from the living room but the kitchen. “Hello?”

“Oh, hey, Princess,” Evan says, sticking his head out. “Doc said that I could stick around since we knew you wanted to come by after the wedding. How were the nuptials?”

“Just fine,” I reply, giving him a hug and a kiss. “How was your session?”

“Evan was remarkably open and honest,” Dr. Jackson says, the most he can say, I know. “Although I think he’s full of shit on his football opinions.”

“Not my fault you don’t like hard nose football,” Evan says with a laugh before sobering. He takes my hand and leads me over to the sofa, pulling me down to sit next to him. “Really, though, I’ve talked over a lot of my demons. I know it’ll be a long road, but you and the doc are helping.”

“Well, you have been less growly at people, maybe not exactly nice, but I don’t know if I’d want you being nice to everyone. It’d be like the Twilight Zone or something, and your sweet side is kinda just for me and me alone,” I tease lightly. “Really, though, you’re still you, gruff and growly and rough around the edges. You’ve been shaped by your past, but you’re choosing your future. I love you, but more importantly, I love who you are. I’d even let you hang out in the salon if you let me wash your hair. Doc, you know the worst part of Evan? All this wonderful hair, and he washes the whole mess with a bar of Irish Spring. Honestly, that’s just blasphemy.”

Both of the guys laugh, and Evan hugs me lightly. “I love you too, and you like the smell, Princess. Admit it.”

“Well . . . maybe.”

“McKayla, I agreed to let Evan ask you in here because he told me you two have recently begun living together,” Dr. Jackson says. “Nothing wrong with that, but realize that Evan’s right, this is a long process of progress and retreat, and there are going to be times where things won’t be so easy.”

“It’s fine by me,” I agree. “There are going to be nights that’ll be long, and maybe we’ll have to spend all night sitting up talking or taking the occasional midnight bike ride. I’m down with that.”

“Also at the lodge with Earl,” Evan admits. “No offense, Princess, but there are some things that old man’s got insight on that I have trouble talking about with other people.”

“A lot of us have those same ghosts,” Dr. Jackson admits, and I remember that he’s an Elk too. I nod, knowing it’ll be good for Evan to see guys with some of the same ghosts, especially since they’re doing all right, living happy, full lives.

We leave Dr. Jackson’s, and outside, Evan pulls me in for a kiss. The new minty Evan is different than when we first kissed, but I’ll take this over Marlboro Evan any day. “Hey, Princess . . . coffee?”

“You buying?”

“Damn right,” he says with a chuckle. “Meet me at the diner?”

I take a look at him in his jeans and light summertime riding jacket, purring. “If I didn’t have to take my car with me, I’d want to ride the Harley.”

Evan surprises the hell out of me when he reaches into his jeans pocket and tosses me the keys. “Meet you there.”

Without another word, he climbs into my car, grabbing my spare set from the console, and pulls out. I’m in so much shock it takes me a good two minutes to recover and climb on. He’s only let me ride the Harley in carefully controlled situations, and as I ride back into town . . . it’s like I can feel everyone’s eyes on me as I head up Main Street toward the diner. I can see old Earl give a double-take before nodding, rubbing his big belly while I fly by. When I get to the diner, Evan’s waiting for me, a grin on his sensuous lips.

“How was it?”

I grab him around the neck, kissing him hard. “I think,” I purr, pressing my body against his, “that I need more than coffee tonight.”

“Oh, really?” he says, running a hand down my back to the jeans I changed into after the wedding, cupping my ass and squeezing. “And what would that be?”

“I think you know, stud.”

Evan growls and nibbles my ear. “Then fuck the coffee. You’ve got ten seconds to get anything you need out of the car before we roll.”

“Ten seconds, huh?” I tease, scratching his chest. “Think you can last that long when we get some privacy?”

“Nine . . . eight . . .” Evan teases. “Better hurry, Princess, or else I might just give Brad a ride on my hog.”

I can’t help but laugh as I run to my car. Evan’s gotten so comfortable joking and throwing entendre at Brad that it’s natural. I toss most of my purse inside, knowing the car will be safe overnight, and stick my wallet and keys in my pocket. Slamming the door, I give a little wave to Rose, who’s giving me a shake of her head from a booth inside. Running back to Evan, I swing my leg over and climb behind him just as he finishes his countdown.

“I’m ready. Let’s roll.”

Climbing on the bike, we fly out of the parking lot and out of town. I’m right where I should be . . . on the back of Evan’s bike, my thighs straddling

the frame, free and full-throttle into a future undetermined and wild.

One big adventure.

EPILOGUE

EVAN - ONE YEAR LATER . . .

Bucking tradition and daring bad luck, we stayed together last night. With the dawn light barely breaking through the light fog covering the ground outside the house, I'm going to risk bad luck again, waking McKayla up in a very special way one last time before she's my wife. I know Brad will be here soon enough to start getting McKayla prepped for our big day, and I want to make sure we both get our chance to enjoy ourselves.

Carefully, I pull the covers down her body, not wanting to disturb her yet, and assume my position, low on her body. Easing her legs apart, I take a moment to marvel at the sight in front of me, the smooth, silky lips of her pussy peeking out from the cleft between her legs.

Grinning to myself, I keep my eyes on her face, gently touching my tongue to her pussy, licking it slowly from bottom to top, spreading my tongue to cover as much area as I can. The first couple of strokes don't wake her. She's a remarkably deep sleeper, although she moans a bit and her hips move in response.

I feel her tight inhale of breath when she does rouse, and she reaches down, running her fingers through my now shorter and soon-to-be styled hair. "Mmm, good morning to you too."

She grabs my hair, pulling me to her harder as her hips find the rhythm she wants. I eagerly comply, my cock growing rock hard against the mattress as McKayla fucks my face and takes control the way we've become comfortable with. I growl, the vibrations low in my throat as I slide my hands under her ass, cupping the voluptuous cheeks and helping her move even as I bury my tongue deeper inside her.

"Oh, fuck . . ." she moans as I slurp, drinking in her essence until she's grinding her pussy against my lips. I pull back slightly to focus my tongue

on her clit, little flicks as fast as I can until she convulses, the spasms rocking her whole body as she comes. “Oh, God. Evan!”

Before she’s even done shaking, I flip us, bringing her over to straddle my hips the same way she straddles my bike when we ride. McKayla giggles, reaching down and taking my cock in her hand. “I get to ride the *hog*, huh?”

I thrust my hips up, plunging my cock inside her to feel the flutters still wracking her tight pussy. “You’re damn right, Princess. Ride me. Fuck, ride me.”

She sinks down, and I know that even though I demanded it of her, I can’t hold back and let her do it alone. My hips buck wildly beneath her, driving my cock up into her body and meeting her stroke for stroke. I pull her chest down to mine, lightly tugging her hair back so she looks up at me, and I cover her lips with a deep kiss.

McKayla slithers her body against me, our nipples rubbing together as our tongues swirl and duel, my hands running lovingly through her freshly pink hair, our hips falling into that perfect harmony that we have with each other.

Holding her tight to me, I tremble, knowing I can’t last any longer. “Fuck, Princess, I love you.”

She falls over the edge with me, gasping out. “I love you too,” she cries as her pussy clamps around my cock and I fill her with my seed. We ride out the moment, matching smiles on our faces. “Hmm . . . that’s a great way to wake up. Do you know what I dreamed of last night?”

“Waking up to exactly this?” I tease, and McKayla shakes her head, her eyes serious. “What, love?”

“That this . . . that I’d have a baby in my stomach soon. Brad could tease me about getting fat, and I could try out all sorts of stretch pants. Silly, I know, but . . .”

“But exactly what I want too,” I murmur, kissing her lips again. “Soon, my love. For now, though, I think we need to go get ready. If we’re late, you know Brad’s going to go nuclear.”

“He did tell me that a sleepover the night before the wedding was a surefire way to be late. I don’t care if we’re late or not, though. It’s not like they can start without us.”

I watch the sway of her ass as she disappears into the bathroom, my cock stirring even if it was just where it wants to be. But that ass,

though . . .

Before she can shut the door, I hop up to stand in the doorway. “I need a shower too. Together would be faster.”

I love her laugh, but damned if she doesn’t shut the door in my face anyway. “No way, mister. We’ll get sidetracked and never get ready.”

“And tell me why that’s a problem?”

She opens the door a tiny bit, one eye visible through the crack. “I need to get ready so I can strut down that aisle and become your wife, asshole. Besides, Brad would kick in the door and drop dead of a jealousy-induced heart attack seeing what I’ve got for the rest of my life. Now leave me be.”

Best reason I’ve ever heard, so I slap the doorframe, agreeing with her, giving a playful growl. “Then hurry it up because I’m ready for a fucking suit too! I gotta shave . . . my balls!”

“Don’t you dare!”

“You okay?” TJ asks quietly as the organist plays. “You look like you’re about to pass out. Thank God that thing is tie-less.”

“Yeah, well . . .” I mumble for the hundredth time. My brother’s getting a kick out of this, I can tell. This whole thing is just so us. Sure, we’ve got an organist, but for most of the music, we’ve also got an electric guitar player, and other than me, nobody’s wearing a suit, with TJ even borrowing a motorcycle jacket from me. Earl’s somehow squeezed himself into his old dress uniform, although I’m wondering if he’s going to pop one of those buttons and put someone’s eye out with the damn thing.

“Just relax, Bro, she ain’t going anywhere,” TJ reminds me as the organist finishes. The guitar player takes over with *The Wedding March*, and the doors to the church open.

The first thing everyone sees is Brad, who insisted on being the ‘flower bitch’ and looks like only Brad can with his hair styled into some swooping shape that looks like it came straight out of a cartoon and wearing a white . . . I’m gonna be generous and call it a kilt . . . with a pink silk shirt. He prances, tossing handfuls of rose petals in the air. “Fabulous, fabulous, I’m so glad to see you all.”

Rose follows him, dressed a lot more like you’d expect a bridesmaid, and McKayla appears a moment later like a pinup fantasy vision at the back of the sanctuary. Everyone gasps at the stylized satin poured over her

curves, dipping low in the front and skating tightly to below her knees where it flares out into a wide pool of light pink on the floor around her. It's daring, it's sexier than anything this church normally has, and it's totally my Princess.

She walks toward me, her eyes never leaving mine. She looks at my suit and her eyes say all I'll ever need to know as every dirty thought she has races across her face. I doubt that she's going to let me wear this thing ten seconds after we get into the limo.

I spread my feet a little wider, crossing my arms in front of me, knowing that I look imposing and that she loves it. I can see her breathing pick up, her tits rising dangerously close to the neckline as she comes to stand beside me.

I can barely keep track of the ceremony, vaguely noticing that the priest keeps darting glances at McKayla's cleavage. I'm not upset. I'm amused. Someone's going to need a little extra prayer before they deliver the sermon tomorrow.

I take McKayla's hands when it's time for the vows. We go the traditional route, simply because we both agreed that what we really want to promise can't be said in a church. After we say *'I do'*, I lift McKayla's veil. "Well, Princess, you ready?"

"You're damn right," she says, yanking me close for a deeper kiss than I think anyone's ever done at a wedding. "My man."

"Princess . . ." I murmur, my voice deep and growly with emotion as I tilt her chin up toward me and kiss her again, ignoring the polite cough from the priest and TJ's low laughter, because I know that McKayla's saved me.

Maybe I saved her once from some mental jerk, but in the big picture of life . . . she's the one who saved me. She's the one who let me emerge from my long night, the one who's held me when the ghosts still want to talk, or stays up when I have to pace the floor until they're now gone.

And I'm so fucking glad. Because I'm ready.

I'm ready for whatever wild adventures my Princess has in store for me . . . right after the reception when we head out for our honeymoon on my bike that I know TJ and Earl are going to tie a shitload of tin cans on ribbons to. I can't stop them from that.

But nobody's going to stop us from taking the honeymoon we want. The one we decided not to plan, just to pack a few things and go wherever the

road takes us.

We'll be back. Eventually.

Want to read about Rose? Continue on!

EXCERPT: BABY DADDY

BY LAUREN LANDISH

A single night changes everything.

I go from town to town, never staying in one place for long. I’m always chasing the next deal, the next adrenaline rush and thriving in the great outdoors.

Until one fateful trip, one chance encounter. When I meet her... my beautiful Rose.

It was only supposed to be one night. No strings attached. Our chemistry was off the charts and we didn’t fight it.

But ever since then, she's all I think about. Replaying the perfect night over and over and thinking about what could've been.

Now I'm back in her town, and it could be my one chance to claim what should have been mine forever and not for just one night.

I've got it all figured out. But as soon as I see her, I come to a screeching halt. What's with the anger in her eyes? And whose baby is she carrying?

Am I too late to make her mine?

ROSE

I flip through the rack of dresses, looking for the sparkly black one I know will be perfect. My boutique has a lot of things, but one item that I do better than anyone in town is dresses. Proms, weddings, engagements, whatever . . . you want something unique for that special day, I'm the woman you see.

The problem is, I think to myself as I go through the next rack, *I'm running out of space to keep everything on the floor*. Prom dresses aren't exactly like selling lingerie. They take up a lot of space.

Just when I'm about to grunt in frustration, I see it. I've got a sorting system for all of my dresses . . . I just have a problem remembering what, exactly, that system is at times. "A-ha!"

"Find it, dear?" asks my customer, a lovely middle-aged woman who's been trying on dresses for an hour now in preparation for her twentieth anniversary. She wants something special, and as I pull out the hanger, I know she's going to be happy. Slinky but not skintight, with a spray of jewels on the left side of the top, it's perfect for a woman who wants to look sexy without showing too much skin.

"Found it, Mrs. Alameda! You'll have to pick your husband's jaw up off the floor if you wear this on your night out."

I slip the dress past the dressing room curtain, a smile taking over my face as I hear her gasp in delight. It's a good dress, one I picked up online for a lot less than it should have been from a designer who sells one-of-a-kind pieces on Etsy. I'm not one to care about names, but if the dress looks great, I'll snatch it up for myself or for the store.

"It's perfect! Thanks, Rose!"

She comes out of the dressing room, and I'm impressed. She's rocking that dress like nobody's business. "Whoo-whee, you wear that and you're going to be getting the attention of more than your husband. Hope you know you're going to be causing whiplash."

Mrs. Alameda blushes, running her hand through her long, thick black hair, and she shrugs a little. "Well, as long as John enjoys it . . . but I feel like—"

"Like we need some accessories," I finish for her before she can start the negative self-talk. Sure, retail therapy isn't as good as a shrink, but I try my best without screwing my customers. "I know just what'll go with this."

A little more rummaging around, and I find a long necklace with pearl accents that goes great with the dress, and a pair of peep-toe booties too. “What do you think?”

“I think,” she says, grinning, “that I’m going to have a really good anniversary.”

Ten minutes later, Mrs. Alameda is on her way to knock her man’s socks off, or maybe his shorts, if things go according to plan.

“Another happy customer,” I say to myself, warm with the satisfaction of a job well done as I lock the door behind her to close for the day. Totaling out the register for the day, I’m thrilled to see the daily receipts match the running sum I always keep in my head.

I quickly export the info into my accounting software and do a little wiggling shake of celebration as I realize my sales are on track to make this my best month yet.

At least I’m a rousing success in this area of my life. I’ve worked incredibly hard since graduating college with both business and marketing degrees, making my dream of owning my own boutique a reality.

I hadn’t known a single person when I moved to Great Falls, a sleepy little suburb nestled in the shadow of the surrounding mountains. With a university just to the south and the promise of a growing ski and mountain resort trend, all things had pointed to it being an up-and-coming destination spot. What sealed the deal for me was the throwback Main Street vibe to keep that small-town feel for visiting tourists.

It was perfect for me and my new venture, the Mountain Rose boutique. I don’t know if it’s magic or not, but since the new Mountain Spirit Resort went in and my friends McKayla and Brad opened their salon down the street from me, my customer base has definitely grown. I’ve turned the corner, and I’m kicking ass and taking names.

Every day, I help people create fashionable looks that represent who they are, or sometimes who they *want* to be. I scour fashion magazines and decide which trends will sell to my demographic, and I order thoughtfully to make sure the profit margin stays well into the positives.

I think my main strength is that I give each customer what I think is best for them and work to make sure they walk out looking their most awesome, whether it’s tight pants, long or short cuffs, high waists, low waists, whatever.

So yeah, I'm a Boss Bitch. I love every facet of owning my own business . . . the people, the clothes, the marketing, the strategy, all of it.

It's definitely a good thing I love it so much, because it's basically all I have. The boutique's been my whole focus for years now, taking up every minute of my days and nights, overwhelming my mind with swirling ideas and requiring every drop of my spirit. At first, it was because I couldn't afford to do it any other way. I had plenty of weeks where I ate cheap ramen noodles for dinner because that was all I could afford. I'm not quite at the level of eating filet mignon or fresh Atlantic salmon nightly, but that's okay. It's been worth it. Until now.

Something about achieving a level of success I'd barely dared to dream of has me thinking, *now what?*. I'm satisfied with my life, I guess, but I really thought by now I'd have a husband, a couple of kids, and a white picket fence. Hell, maybe even a dog or a cat.

But none of that has happened. Seriously, who gives a damn if I've sold a ton of dresses that made women look fabulous? I don't want my headstone to read *Here Lies Rose Samuelson. She Really Knew How to Make a Bitch Look Her Best.*

I'd like to have more than that, but no man has walked into my women's clothing boutique to sweep me off my feet. The closest I've gotten is Brad, who co-owns the salon down the street with my friend McKayla. And while he's basically my new bestie, he's definitely not the type to sweep me off my feet. More likely, Brad would swish about until his boyfriend Trey swept him off his feet, and neither would even notice me with all of my girliness.

So no Mr. Right for me yet. Which is understandable. He'd have to come in here because it's basically the only place I go besides home. And if he's looking for women's clothing, he's probably either married or a cross-dresser.

And while there's nothing wrong with cross-dressing, I really don't share my clothes well, so that's out, and a married guy is definitely on the no-go list. I've joked about getting a cat, something to keep me company at home and curl up under the desk at the boutique, but Brad says that's a surefire way to run off customers.

"Especially with the amount of silky fabrics you have here, honey," he'd said the last time the conversation came up two months ago, fingering

a slip set I had on display. “The claws and fur would turn this into a tufted ball of fuzz in two days.”

I’d laughed when he’d fake-hissed and scratched the air like a bitchy kitty, but I realized he was right. A cat in a clothing store does sound like a match made in hell.

“Great,” I grumbled as he did a full Z-snap of victory when I admitted he was right. “But you know my biological clock is ticking. *Tick-tock-tick-tock*. Besides, it’s not the cat I really want. It’s the husband and kids.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not gonna string you along. You’re my bitch and all, but even as cute as you are, I just can’t help you with that little issue,” he says with a grimace as he gestures to my crotch. “I don’t swing that way for any woman. Trey would kick my ass, and not in the fun way like at the gym where I get treats afterward.”

I laugh now at the memory as I finish sweeping the floor. But the laughter seems forced. My biological clock never seems to stop its annoying little song deep in my core. I’m only thirty, but it’s so damn loud sometimes. I’ll see women walking along Main Street with squishy little babies bundled up tight in soft blankets, all cozy in their strollers. The ones that really pierce my heart like an arrow are the moms kissing their baby’s heads as they bounce along in a sling across the mom’s body, heart to heart with each other.

That sight is always a bittersweet moment for me . . . so sweet and so not me. I sometimes wonder what my baby might look like. I imagine fluffy tufts of hair the color of silk like my blonde locks, maybe even blue eyes?

Somehow, the dad’s coloring never plays into my fantasy since he’s an unknown and it’s my dream. I mean, when I’ve had fantasies, they’ve run the gamut, and are all equally impossible. Jason Momoa hasn’t walked into my store anytime recently, and neither has Ryan Phillippe. I’d take either one. I’m not choosy. Shaking my head to let the imaginary baby drift away, I gather up my things and head home. To my empty house. Again.

ROSE

Curled up on the couch, halfway through my takeout fettuccine Alfredo, I sigh. There’s a rerun of some old sitcom on, although I have no clue what it is or even what the episode’s about. One of the dangers of cable, I guess.

You can easily veg out, and the box isn't going to stop pumping sound and video into your living room.

"What the . . .?" I wonder, setting down my fork. The fettuccine is cold. I'll probably have to nuke the stuff to make it halfway palatable again, but that's not what's roused me from my stupor. Looking around my small living room, I blink for a moment before there's another knock at the door. "Oh . . . just a second!"

I climb off the couch and hurry over, opening up to find Brad leaning against the frame. Before I can say anything, he looks me up and down and starts *tsk*ing me. "Girl, you own the premier fashion institute in town. The one and only person I trust to find me accessories, yet currently, you look homeless, and not in the distressed chic scissor-slashed way."

After completing his head-to-toe summary of my disheveled appearance, he sashays in, not bothering to wait for an invitation.

The brassy bitch. I stare after him, knowing that if anyone else barged in on my downtime, I'd be pissed. But Brad is allowed certain privileges since he's my nearest and dearest in Great Falls. But that doesn't mean he gets a free walk. "It's called comfort home wear, Brad. You should try it sometime. Unclench your nuts from those skinny pants."

"Mmm-hmm . . ." he says, not disturbed at all. "Trust me, honey, I get plenty of chances to free-ball in my free time."

I groan, closing my door as Brad heads to the kitchen. "Well, then I get plenty of dress-up time too. And now it's my dress-down time . . . but please, no free-ballin' now."

"Touché. Fine, I'll stay dressed appropriately and you can stay . . . like that." I can hear the smirk in his voice as he roots around in the cabinets. As his head pops up, he lifts a green bottle. "All right, I hereby call this night to order. Initiate wine and dinner. I brought chicken and feta salads, but I see you've jumped the gun and started in on the pasta. Thankfully, this Chardonnay goes well with both."

I laugh at how comfortable he is, taking over the evening without so much as a second thought. "Fine," I reply, elbowing my way past his thin frame to head over to my cabinet. I grab him a plate and pull down two wine glasses. "I brought home enough pasta for us to split if we share the salad too."

Shaking his head sadly, Brad starts putting salad on one plate, leaving a good chunk of it in the bowl he brought it in. "No pasta for me. Trey has me

counting my carbs, and pasta in cream sauce would be my allowance for days. Salad only."

Looking back down at my previously delicious plate with a frown, I sigh and stick the rest of it in the fridge. "Yeah, going over to Casa de Rosseti is probably not the best choice, but it was fresh and hot, and the best part . . . I didn't have to cook it."

Brad laughs and uncorks the bottle. "I know just what you mean, girl. And if I could, I would, but considering my trainer also sees me naked, it serves me well to follow his nutrition plan. Otherwise, I hear it from both my trainer and my boyfriend. Hell no on that."

Grinning, I think of Brad's boyfriend. They met at the gym. Where else, I guess. What started out as a 'free trial trainer consultation' progressed to Brad asking Trey out a few days later. They hit it off pretty quickly and have been inseparable and adorable ever since. Yeah . . . I'm a little jealous. "Where is Trey tonight? Figured y'all would be out?"

Brad shrugs and does little air quotes with his fingers. "He had a 'work emergency' down at the gym."

"He's a personal trainer," I note, confused. "How the hell does he have a work emergency at nine on a Friday night?"

Brad sighs and takes a sip of his wine before he continues. "It's fine. One of his high-paying clients had a schedule change this week, so their regular time had to move too."

I look down my nose at Brad for a moment, considering what he said for a moment before airing my worries. "Does that, uh . . . concern you? *Late-night impromptu training session* sounds like a cover if ever I heard one. No offense, Brad, but Trey is hot as fuck and you two did hook up at the gym."

Brad smirks, draining about half of his glass before getting a refill. "Not in the least. His client is a cougar . . . of the human female variety. She's a professor at the university who's got a conference in Italy next week, and I think she wants to sample more than the local cannoli. So I'm thinking my hottie is just fine. Maybe not as fine as me," he says as he pops his ass out in his signature move, "but for reals, have you seen his ass? My man is fi-i-ine. Mmmhmm."

I bust out laughing because while Brad might be over the top, he is right about Trey. He's a good-looking guy, all muscle and skin so smooth I might

consider killing for it. And a bubble butt that no man should ever, ever have naturally.

Settling on the couch with our plates and glasses of wine, we catch up on work. “So, how’s the Triple B?”

“Oh, salon’s going well. We’re rollin’ for the winter formal season. I bet that’s a good time for you too.”

“Not too bad,” I admit. “Most of the stuff for the next few months is rentals. High school kids can’t afford to buy, but that still means a lot of good money in the register. And let’s face it, being able to dry clean and then sell some of those dresses later is sweet.”

“I remember my prom,” Brad says, giggling. “I ended up giving the captain of the football team a blowjob in the locker room. Ten minutes later, he and his girlfriend were elected King and Queen. What about you?”

“Me?” I reply with a small sigh. “I’ve actually never been to a dance. Like, ever. I went to a high school that thought proms were too old-fashioned for modern times. So, no dance, no King and Queen. Although they did have *Student Leaders* take a lap around the track at the homecoming football game. The winners my senior year were two girls who were the farthest thing from leaders as you could get unless you wanted to be led to the liquor aisle at the Pick ‘n Go. After high school, I buckled down in college, just studied and never went to a single party. And now, in the blink of an eye, here I am. Never been danced, although I’ve definitely been kissed.” I laugh at my own bad joke, but it’s halfhearted.

Brad catches a hint of wistfulness in my tone and sets his glass down, leaning forward. “What’s wrong?”

I shrug and drain my first glass of wine before holding it out for a refill. “Same as always, nothing to get your panties in a twist. I’m thrilled with everything I’ve accomplished at the boutique, but there’s just a big void where I thought my personal life would be by now. All I do is work, work, work, and while I love that song, as a description of my life, it sucks.”

Brad hums and refills my glass. “All right, so you want the whole hubby and two point five kids deal? Hit Tinder, hit eHarmony. Find a guy who’s after the same things and go for it. They can’t be that hard to find.”

If only. “Ugh . . . blind dates, swiping left and right, and matching all just sound like heartbreak. Finding a guy is the hard part! You know what I sort of miss, Brad?”

“You mean besides a man?” he asks, and I nod. “What?”

“I’ve never done anything really out there. I mean, I was serious in high school, even more serious in college, and then I jumped into the boutique and I’ve been basically living there ever since. I’ve accomplished my to-do list, but maybe I didn’t realize that I should’ve had things like do something wild, meet Mr. Wrong *and* Mr. Right, get married, and have babies on the list too.” As I list things out, I make checkmarks in the air.

Brad shakes his head, sipping his wine again. “So do something crazy! You don’t need a guy to have a baby. Tackle both goals at once. Have a whole ‘I am woman . . . hear me roar’ moment and do it the turkey baster way. You’d be a great mom.”

My jaw drops in shock, and I double-check my glass just to make sure I have downed only one. “Turkey baster way? What the hell are you talking about? Like get inseminated? I don’t think I could do that.”

Brad lifts an eyebrow and drains his first glass. “Of course you can. Single moms are all the rage now . . . well, really, I think they’ve always been a thing, considering my mom raised me alone, and look how fabulous I turned out. But there’s no stigma these days, just one of many ways families are made. You could totally do it.”

Brad judges my reaction, his grin widening. “You’re thinking about it! You are! Where’s your laptop . . . give it to me, bitch!”

“Well . . . I guess there’s no harm in just looking. But that’s all it is, okay? I don’t think wine and artificial insemination mix.”

“Nope,” Brad says while doing a quick Google search. “Wine tends to help with the natural way though. That’s been going on for thousands of years.”

The dry humor helps, and in moments, we’re on a website full of the dos and don’ts of artificial insemination. It’s not trashy or desperate, as I thought it could be, and Brad nods.

A few more clicks and he’s in a database of sperm donors, all available for purchase for artificial insemination. “Okay, hocus pocus, tell me your dream baby daddy and we’ll cook him up right here.”

There’s a series of drop-down fields, and I answer them in turn. “Tall, over six foot for sure . . . dark hair, brown or black. I don’t care about his eyes. Teeth . . . well, I don’t want anyone snaggletoothed, I guess, but I mean, who cares, right?”

“You’d be surprised,” Brad says, clicking away. “Education level?”

I think, but it's really not that hard. "I don't care if he's a doctor or anything, but I want him to be smart."

Brad nods and clicks a few times. "And here . . . we . . . go."

Admittedly, I'm shocked when multiple options come back for my criteria. I mean seriously, where are all these tall, dark, handsome, smart guys in my life? There *have* to be some around here if I actually got out a little, but here I am, looking at a website full of men who match all of my boxes. We click around at the different listings, some with pictures and some anonymous.

As we start going through the profiles, Brad chuckles. "What about Tyler here? Says he makes soap."

"Does not!" I giggle. "It says he's a plastic surgeon."

"Which means those dimples for damn sure aren't natural." Brad laughs. "Hmm . . . Michael?"

"Looks like he'd be a lumberjack," I protest. "Beards might be in fashion with some guys, but he most certainly needs a trim."

"Good point. What about Rex?"

I pretend to gag, shaking my head. "Oh, hell to the no. He looks like Pee Wee Herman!"

Brad throws up a hand and gives me a look. "Fine, you tell me. Who's your type here?"

I look up and down the list and point out one with piercing green eyes and a clean-shaven jaw that looks strong enough to slice through steel. "Here's one. Whoa, that Superman could save me any day!"

Brad hums, nodding as we pull up the profile. "Six-four, two twenty-five? Too bad for me he's straight."

"How can you tell?" I ask. "It's just a picture."

"Trust me," Brad says. "I've got an eye for it. Now Don, here . . . just no," Brad hisses, shaking his head with distaste. "Jesus, girl, he looks like Jeffrey Dahmer and Charles Manson had a baby!"

"Lord have mercy," I say with a laugh, almost thinking the same thing as I see one scary-looking dude with a mullet.

Brad lets out a harrumph, turning the picture to the side. "Well . . . I don't know, girl, from this angle he does look kinda cute . . ."

"Don't even start," I say dangerously, cutting my eyes.

We both stare at each other for a moment before erupting into gales of laughter.

After an hour of looking and the rest of the bottle of wine, Brad leaves, but not before one last parting shot. “Figure out what you really want and go get it. If it’s a man, you’ve gotta get out there. But if it’s the baby, just get yourself some baby batter and call it done.”

I know he’s right, but I’m not really sure which of those options is what I want. Instead, I crawl into bed, not even bothering to clean up the dishes or brush my teeth.

It can wait.

ROSE

“Psst!”

I look up from my laptop to see Hillary Youngman, one of my youngest customers even if she’s normally just in for costume jewelry, giving me huge eyes.

“Yeah, Hillary?” I ask, minimizing my browser where I’m shopping for some new dresses to stock. “Why are you whispering?”

“Is that . . . you know?” she says, tilting her head slightly to her left. I glance over to the tall, leggy raven-haired woman who’s currently looking through racks of coats. “From *Westworld*?”

I nod. “She’s staying up at the resort,” I comment. “Just taking a break from filming.”

“You mean,” Hillary says, her eyes going wild, “she *talked* to you?”

My celebrity customer glances over at Hillary, whose voice went up a bit too high at the last comment, and smirks. I get it. I’ve had enough celebrity customers in the boutique over the past six months that I’ve gotten used to it. Some want to *live* the celebrity lifestyle. They want their asses kissed, but only in the ways they want them kissed.

Thankfully, most of *those* avoid my boutique. I get the others, who are either normal people who work a rather unique job, or better yet, those who understand that their public persona means people might go nuts like Hillary is and are happy to interact with fans.

In this case, my customer is the best kind. “Excuse me,” she says in that lilting British accent that I find charming, “I could use some help.”

“I’d be happy to,” I reply, but I see her shake her head slightly. I get the message. “But . . . Hillary, would you mind helping me out? I think you

might understand what she needs more than I do."

Hillary goes over, and I know I should be excited. She's going to have a great story to tell, and probably a little bit of gossip to share later. Win-win for the boutique. Instead, my brain has swirled on Brad's parting words last night over and over, and I've been perusing the sperm donor site every time there's a lull in the shop. Thank God for multiple tabs in a browser.

I've been looking at it so much that I'm actually starting to think it might be a good idea.

God help me.

I've picked out a couple, but one is really the front-runner. The guy that Brad and I both agreed looked like Superman just keeps popping up in my mind, and I checked the website. They'll deliver nationwide. During lunch today, I even went down the rabbit hole of a few recipient forums where they talk about the whole process.

"Hey, Rose?" Hillary calls, submerging herself fully into her role as 'assistant'. "What's the price on this one? The tag fell off."

I glance over to see her holding up a faux leather jacket that I think is way too thin for when we get into deep winter, but right now, it should look chic and sexy up at the resort in the evenings. "Hundred and seventy-five, but it's faux leather."

"Perfect for me. I'll take it. And that should be all for now."

Hillary brings up the jacket, and I ring up the total—nine hundred dollars. I offered to give a discount because she volunteered to take a selfie with me and Hillary to post on her Instagram and Facebook pages, but she wasn't having it.

After they leave, I go back to my browsing, biting my bottom lip. *Time to fish or cut bait,* I think.

Closing my eyes as I take a big breath, I make my choice. I'm doing this. I'm really going to do this. Tick-tock away, you bastard clock. I'm taking the bull by the horns, controlling my own destiny, and fate had better watch the fuck out because I'm in charge.

I go to the front door of the boutique, flipping a sign to say *Back in Ten Minutes* and grab my phone, dialing my doctor. "Dr. Eldrich's office," the nurse, Melina, greets me. "How can I help you?"

"Melina, it's Rose Samuelson. How're you doing?"

"Oh, it's a good day, Rose. How's the boutique? Got anything especially cute in?"

“Check my Facebook later and you’ll see a great selfie I just took,” I reply. “But in the meantime, think Dr. Eldrich can fit me in for a checkup?”

“Just a checkup?” Melina asks, and I feel a flutter of nervousness. Dammit, Melina, it’s not your business! If I want to do a checkup because I want to do mail-order baby making, that’s my business.

I swallow back my biting reply, knowing she’s just doing her job. “Yeah, if you don’t mind.”

Melina hums, and I tap my foot impatiently. A few seconds later, though, she comes back. “Okay, Rose. I looked through Dr. Eldrich’s schedule, but he’s going on vacation next week, so for just a checkup, it might be a little bit. But we’ll see you soon and I can call you if he has any cancellations.”

“That’s fine,” I reply, knowing that I could sweet talk Brad into covering for me last-minute if they do get a cancellation. “I’ll see you in a few weeks, and if I get a cute outfit in that I think you’ll like, I’ll show you some pics.”

I hang up, feeling a new lightness. Step one of *Project Have My Baby* complete.

This calls for a celebration. To hell with it. The Mountain Rose is closing a bit early today.

Knowing that Brad and Trey are probably going to be busy making up for their missed date last night, I decide to celebrate on my own. A toast, if you will, to single motherhood.

Grabbing one of my just-in sexy new dresses off the rack—and enjoying the hell out the employee discount—I slip into the dressing room and change. A glance in the mirror tells me all I need to know. My spun-silk hair hangs sleekly down my back, my not too bad curves are banging in this slim-fitting dress, and my eyes are alight with joy. Sure, I might look a little better with some of Brad’s makeup artistry on my face, but I think I could turn a head or two tonight.

Grabbing my purse from under the counter, I’m ready to celebrate. I head out to my car, and twenty minutes later, I pull up in front of the Mountain Spirit Resort Hotel, the biggest key in the success of my boutique. Really, I didn’t plan the similarities in our names, and the management here is totally cool with it, especially considering I’d been here for a couple of years before they even laid the resort’s foundation.

A single woman walking into the bar at the local resort would usually seem like the start to a tasteless joke, but this place is really a gathering spot for locals and tourists alike. Besides, it's got the best views of the whole valley and great music. While the old Grand Waterways south of us might have a better spread of buffet food, I'm not looking to stuff my face. I'm here to celebrate.

I perch on a barstool near the wall, ordering a Michelada with an extra twist of lime. Sure, beer and bloody Mary mix might be weird to some people, but it's good shit and it's my 'thing'. When the bartender delivers, I lift it up slightly, closing my eyes momentarily in a silent toast to my future.

Relaxing as the spicy goodness creeps down my throat, I sigh happily. The music's just right, real bluesy rock that isn't quite roadhouse but certainly isn't pop-rock. Just right for getting my damn groove on, and after finishing off half my drink, I wonder which should come first, dancing or food.

My question is quickly answered a moment later as a guy approaches and pulls out the stool beside me, resting on the edge of it but facing me.

"Hey, gorgeous, how're you doing tonight?" he asks, all swagger and cockiness in his designer jeans and shirt that's a clear Ralph Lauren knock-off. He's not too bad, but all of my switches are saying *nope*.

"Doing okay," I reply politely, trying to say with body language that I'm not interested.

"So . . . you lookin' for some company? Because I gotta tell you, I would love to see if our companies could merge for the night."

Ugh. Really? That's like nerdy and creepy at the same time. Still, I shake my head and don't throw my glass at his chest. "Sorry, I'm here to celebrate myself tonight. But thanks for the offer."

Luckily, he takes the hint and meanders off, leaving me to enjoy the rest of my drink.

I'm debating whether to get a second glass when I see a man among men walk around me toward the bar. Tall, dark, and handsome . . . check to the check. He turns, glancing to the side, and I nearly have a heart attack when I see that he's got a jawline that makes Mr. Superman Sperm Donor look like a total softie.

He's been sitting a bit behind me, in my blind spot, so I hadn't noticed him, but I'm sure noticing him now. I surreptitiously try to look him over more thoroughly, but it's difficult in the 'mood lighting' of the bar. Dark

waves flop down over his light olive complexion, just in line with my eyesight, so I can't even see much more than his fine aquiline nose. But I can see his broad shoulders and a swell to his chest that nearly leaps off his torso in thick slabs of muscle. He's gotta be ripped as tight as that waistline looks. I can even see the ripple of muscle under his thermal shirt.

He must feel my eyes on him because he drops his hand after ordering a drink and turns, his eyes meeting mine as soon as he turns. They widen just slightly, and I get to see his face completely.

He's even got piercing eyes, a dramatic golden hazel that glimmers in the light. I smile at him, a little flirty but not too forward, and I'm rewarded by a flash of white teeth and a set of dimples deep enough to swim in. I watch, enthralled as he picks up his beer and a yellow tablet from the bar and strides toward me.

I follow him with my eyes until he's standing right beside me. His deep voice is smooth as silk as he asks, "Mind if I sit down?"

My tongue feels thick in my mouth and I'm not sure I can speak just yet, so I make an offering motion with my open hand, my smile growing wider. To hell with it. Celebrating by myself is lame. I can certainly celebrate with a fine looking man like this without any problems.

He offers a hand, and as soon as I take it, I feel a spark shoot from my hand through my whole body. "I'm Nicolas Broadmoor, Nic for short. And you are . . .?"

"Rose," I say, my heart hammering in my chest. I feel like I've just dropped into a movie where there should be music playing in the background to tell everyone watching, '*Hey, big shit's going down!'* "Rose Samuelson."

Nic smiles and sits down. "I would love to say 'a beautiful name for a beautiful lady' but I know that sounds like a pretty lame pickup line. It's not. It's just the truth."

He shrugs as if I'll never believe him, but he wanted to say it anyway. I laugh a little, caught off-guard that this gorgeous man could possibly be calling me beautiful.

I mean, I'm pretty enough, I guess. I even thought that about myself when I put on this dress back at the boutique. But it's not something I hear from a man often, if at all, especially not one like this fine specimen here. Something about the way he calls me beautiful feels like the best compliment I'll ever receive.

I decide right here and now to order another drink and see where this goes. “Well, Nic, I suppose everyone’s allowed one bit of corn in a first conversation,” I reply. “So, what brings you to the resort?”

“Work and pleasure,” Nic admits. “I’m a Vice President of Sales for ADRENALIN Sports.”

“ADRENALIN?” I ask. They’re not the biggest sporting goods name in our part of the country, but they’re up there, and I’ve checked out their site a time or two. “Thinking of opening a store in town?”

“No. I handle direct sales,” Nic says. “We don’t have too many traditional stores. They’re a remnant of a merger we did a while back. The resort’s looking at stocking some stuff they’d rent to guests.”

I nod, impressed. “You must be into sports yourself.”

Nic grins, looking boyish as well as handsome as hell. “I’ve done outdoor sports for a long time. Hiking, mountain biking, skiing, kayaking, ATVs. Hell, if I could do it outside, I’ve done it. Of course, they don’t make a lot of college scholarships for being able to do Spartan Races, so I got my MBA and turned my passion into my job. So far, it’s worked out. How about you? What do you do?”

I blush. I hate trying to talk about myself, but I know it’s part of the dance. “I have a boutique in town. It’s a small place, but I get to be my own boss, which is nice.”

“That’s very true,” Nic admits. “Except you don’t have anyone to bitch to when the boss makes you work overtime.”

I laugh, nodding. “I haven’t really thought about it that way.”

Nic laughs. “So what do you like to do besides work?”

“I wouldn’t know,” I admit with a laugh. “I mean, years ago, I liked doing outdoor stuff, but I’ve been spending almost all of my time indoors. I’m just glad the local gym downtown is open until midnight and has a good set of rowing machines.”

Nic hums, looking me over again and making my skin tingle. “I’d say your gym deserves credit then. You too.”

I feel my heart start hammering again. The way he’s looking at me makes me feel like I haven’t felt in a very long time. “So, how did the meeting go?”

Nic chuckles ruefully and sips his drink. “Not as good as I’d hoped. Let’s just say that I need to talk with the head office to make sure this isn’t just a great tax write-off trip.”

I laugh. He's not cocky but confident. "So, drowning your sorrows?"

"Nope, not that kind of guy," Nic admits. "I'm going to step back, reformulate my plans, and meet again with the general manager tomorrow afternoon. This time, I'm not going to walk out without a handshake at the least."

His go-getter attitude and willingness to use his brain impress me. He's the kind who knows what he's going after and is going to get it. "Sounds like a good plan."

"Do you do business with the resort here?" he asks.

"I offer dress rentals, but they've got their own shop," I admit. "When they need something new and hot, they check in with me. To be honest, though, it's after work, and I promised myself this would be a relax and let loose night. How long are you going to be in town?"

Nic smiles. He catches the point, but a hint of regret touches his sparkling eyes. "If you'd asked me this morning, I'd have said until tomorrow and been glad about it. Now . . . well, *regretfully*, tomorrow."

His answer disappoints me. I just met him and he's leaving town in just twenty-four hours? Just my fucking luck. I meet the first guy in a long time who's not only hot as hell but he clicks with me. "I'm sorry to hear that."

He reaches out, laying a fingertip on the back of my hand, moving it in little circles that leaves me biting my lip. I can easily imagine him circling my clit the same way, and by the look in his eye, that's exactly what he's thinking. "You know," he says in a deep, commanding voice, "there's nothing wrong with making the most of every moment."

Inside, I'm mentally telling myself to go for it. *Do it*, the little devil who sounds remarkably like Brad on my shoulder says. *Fuck him. Suck that huge cock you know he's got and get him begging to fuck you. Why the hell not?*

I've never had a one-night stand before.

And? Everyone's got a first time for everything. Maybe I'll mark 'do something crazy' off my to-do list after all.

Before I can answer, Nic leans forward, taking the decision out of my hands. There's a half-second of anticipation as he hesitates a breath's width away before our lips meet, and I know exactly what's going to happen.

The blood rushes in my ears as Nic's lips caress mine. Damn, he's an awesome kisser. I wonder what else he's good at. Hell, I'm going to find out, one way or another.

Maybe a little different than planned, but I’m celebrating big tonight. One last hurrah before I happily tie myself down with a baby from Donor X377A.

NICOLAS

I feel half-hypnotized following Rose down the hallway to my room. My mind is focused on the sway of her ass in front of me, teasing me along like the Pied Piper of booty. I know I should be focused on how logically, this makes no damn sense, and I should be doing anything *but* bringing her to my room. But I can’t deny that I want her, and I can’t deny this amazing, almost instant connection we have.

When I left the General Manager’s office here at the resort, I certainly hadn’t planned on meeting anyone tonight. I’d gone back up to my room, changed out of my suit and into some exercise clothes, and ran a four-mile trail run just because I needed to get my damn head right to think of my next strategy. Nothing gets my brain working better than the smell of fresh pine, and by the time I got back and showered up, I threw on a t-shirt and jeans to work in the bar over a few relaxing drinks.

I mean, what’s wrong with a nice highball before dinner? I never thought I’d meet a fucking angel in a dress that sends my hormones into overdrive and my brain into spasms of laughter.

But Rose has kept me engaged, laughing, and enjoying myself as we talked through work and life and nothing at all. It’s like talking to her has been as soothing as a long, hot shower and as exciting as white water kayaking. She’s smart and funny with a quick, warm laugh that sends tingles down my spine.

Still, regardless of how perfect she is, I never dreamed of getting laid. I’m not going to be in town past tomorrow afternoon. As it is, I’m going to have to squeeze in the meeting with the GM before catching the redeye back home. One-night stands? Totally not my style. Whether I’ve been in a relationship at the time or not, I’m not the sort to take ‘road comfort’. I get the feeling it’s not hers either, so what the fuck is it about tonight that’s making both of us go a little wild?

Maybe it’s a full moon? I remember seeing the moon just crest over the mountains as I ran, but I can’t remember if it was full. All I can remember

right now is the flush on Rose's cheeks.

Whatever it is, I'm damn thankful because I think we're about to rock each other's world. I can feel it when she glances over her shoulder and in the magnetic tension between our bodies when I walked her up the stairs, my hand resting just on the upper curve of her hip.

We get to my room, and I wasn't lying in that the company paid well for the tax write-off. My bosses thought that by renting a suite rather than a single room, it'd make that sort of unconscious good impression that could help me seal the deal. Whatever. I'm doubly glad for it as Rose stands aside and lets me insert the key card, the glow of the green light seeming to signal both the opening of the door and that we're actually doing this. Not a word passes our lips as I turn the handle and push it open, holding it open for her.

We step into the still darkness, and as the door slowly closes on its pneumatic arm, there's a breath where I think she's changed her mind. Hell, maybe I've changed my mind. The part of me that puts on a tie Monday through Friday says this could be the worst decision of my life. I mean, I don't know this woman. She could be carrying everything between her legs under the damn sun. But I know that's not true the moment our eyes meet and I can see the heated need in her big blue eyes.

She's like me, someone who's worked to make their mark in the world. Someone who's sacrificed hours and hours, sacrificed relationships, maybe even sacrificed a part of ourselves that we didn't even realize was missing until we woke up one morning, looked in the mirror, and wondered *what the fuck is going on?*

No, Rose is pure and clean . . . and like me, she needs this. So I move closer, slowly so as not to startle her, and lift a hand up to cup her cheek. She turns into my touch, a soft sigh escaping as her lips part. "Nic . . ."

"I know," I whisper as the need to taste her sweet lips overtakes me. I cover her mouth with mine, kissing her softly at first. But the sparks ignite, and quickly, our kisses are passionate, her tongue dipping in to tangle with mine.

Moaning deep in my chest at the velvety feeling of her mouth against mine, I nibble at her bottom lip, pulling her body flush with mine and wrapping my arms tightly around her waist to hold her to me. Rose lets out a little whimper and tilts her head back, and I take the invitation, kissing down her neck to the line of cleavage pressed upward by her tight-fitting

dress. She even tastes good, her skin lightly spicy and smelling almost like cinnamon as I bury my nose in the dark valley of her cleavage.

She pulls away from me, sliding along the wall to gain a little separation from me, and I'm disappointed for a moment, thinking she's changed her mind about . . . whatever craziness this is.

But instead, she turns in front of me, giving me her back. "My zipper?"

My heart and my cock leap, one pushing only slightly more painfully within its restraints, and with surprisingly steady hands, I reach up and slide the zipper down, exposing more and more of her back with every inch. Her skin is flawless, and as I ease the dress over her shoulders, my fingertips whisper that they've found perfection and no woman could ever compare to what they're feeling. The interplay of soft skin and an undeniable feminine essence combines to weave a magic spell that captures part of me that'll never be the same again.

My cock pulses achingly in my pants, heavy and nearly oozing precum already, and we've barely started. Desperate for another taste of the angel in front of me, I lean forward to press a soft kiss to her bare shoulder, grinding against her ass a little. "Do you feel that, sweet Rose? That's what you do to me. And tonight, it's all yours."

She presses back, humming in appreciation as she swirls her hips against me. Her ass presses against my cock with a deep cleft that awakens a desire within me. Could she be truly perfect for me? I reach around, pulling her tighter, and she whimpers. "Mmm . . . is that what you like?"

"Maybe," I rumble in her ear. "You think you could take me?"

"I'd try," she says in a voice that tells me while she might have fantasies of what I'm talking about, she has no idea what the reality's like. I loosen my grip, letting her spin back around to lower the top of her dress. She smiles, reaching behind her to undo the clasp, dropping her bra away.

"Perfection," I rasp as everything but her panties falls toward the floor. Her nipples are already hard, and they're calling to me. With a soft growl, I bend my knees and cup her tits in my hands, burying my head so low that my words are almost lost in her chest. "Rose, fuck, you're gorgeous. I want to lick these little pink nipples, suck them deep into my mouth, bite them till they stay hard for me. Tell me you want that, Rose."

Her eyes sparkle with desire as I tell her what I want, and she arches, hissing out a breathy "Yes."

Needing no more invitation, I dive in, layering kisses with long, swirling licks around her breasts before focusing on what we both want. I tease and suckle on her nipples, flicking them with the tip of my tongue until they're hard, like twin pencil erasers chewing between my teeth.

Rose wraps her fingers through my hair, holding me to her, and I add a slight pinch to her other nipple, making her gasp in delight. "Nic . . . oh, fuck, yes . . . more . . . don't stop."

Eager to bring this beautiful angel to ultimate satisfaction, I drop to my knees, kissing down her belly while tracing her curves with my hands to reach the remnant of her dress that's clinging to her right hip, caught between her natural curves and the wall behind her. Pushing it down, I offer Rose my hand, and she takes it, another spark jumping between us as she daintily steps out of the dress. I look up at her, my breath hot on her soaked panties, and she bites her lip in invitation, spreading her thighs as best she can without moving her feet.

I kiss just on the edge of her panties and run my hands up from her ankles to her hips, learning her amazing legs. The feel of her ass under my hands is amazing, and I stroke a slow fingertip up and down her crack, making her gasp and tremble. Yes, my sweet angel, you've got a dirty side . . . but not this time. I need something else tonight.

Reaching around, I encourage her to spread her legs a little more so I can cup her pussy. Resting my palm against the hot, damp silk, my throat goes parched, and I look up into her huge blue eyes. "Mmm, Rose, you're so wet for me," I murmur, smiling. "I need to taste you."

"Please," she whispers desperately. "I need you."

She trembles at my words until she's nearly like a plucked guitar string, and I help slip her panties down to her knees, leaving them there to lock her legs a little bit as she leans back against the wall to give me unfettered access.

My eyes lock onto the coral pink lips of her succulent pussy, bare and shining. Cupping her ass, I lean forward and dip the tip of my tongue to her clit, making small circles around it. She shudders, unintelligible soft sounds of pleasure erupting from between her lips with every stroke.

Wrapping my arms around her, I hold her still, keeping her upright, and I start licking and sucking her pussy with one mission in mind. "Do you like that, Rose? Fuck, I know I do. You taste so sweet, I could eat you all night. I want to taste your honey on my tongue."

I flicker my tongue over her clit, teasing it with feather-light licks that make her shake from head to toe. Rose reaches down, clutching at my hair and pulling me in tighter, giving herself over to the dangerous desire pounding through our veins. “Oh, fuck . . . Nico—”

Before she even gets my full name out, she shatters in my hands, her orgasm overtaking her and making her grind her pussy against my hungry lips, filling my mouth and coating me from my nose to my chin in shiny deliciousness. Before her legs give way, I prop her up, lifting her with my hands on her ass, never stopping the delightful torture to her hard little clit.

“Nic, please, I—” Rose begs, and I pull back, looking up at her eyes, her pupils so dilated they barely show any of her baby blues. She’s shattered, rocked to her very core, and I know that any more would take her from pleasure to pain.

That’s not what I want, so I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand, nodding reassuringly. I stand up and pull her close, covering her mouth with mine, kissing her deeply and letting her taste herself on my tongue. “See how sweet you are?”

She nods shyly, and I lead her toward the bed, her panties falling off as she follows my lead. Her knees hit the edge of the bed, and I ease her back, the soft bedding catching her fall as she rests on her elbows.

I virtually rip my shirt off, the clingy fabric peeling from my skin so quickly I feel static crackling in the light hairs on my chest. My pants join my shirt just as fast, and I suspect that I’ve popped a button on my fly from the sound. To hell with it. I don’t need them anymore. I pause before I drop my boxer briefs, feeling her eyes roving my body appreciatively.

“Like what you see?”

She nods in awe, her eyes tracing every muscle. Her eyes lock onto my groin as she holds her breath in anticipation. I smirk, hooking my thumbs into the waistband of my underpants and pushing them down, letting her see what she’s getting tonight. Before they even hit the ground, a smile breaks out across her face. “Holy shit, Nic. That is . . . wow.”

I notice she called me Nic again, and somehow, from her, I like it. Most people in my life are colleagues or casual acquaintances, and they insist on calling me by my full name. She’s not a colleague. She’s something different, something special.

“In my purse, I’ve got a condom,” she says. I reach for her purse, handing it to her to retrieve the condom. I learned a long time and a

puncture wound ago to never, *ever* go digging around in a woman's purse. You don't know what might be lurking in those clasped depths.

She pulls the square package out triumphantly and rips it open with her teeth, sliding the tight rubber over my length. My head falls back, a moan escaping my chest as I feel her light touch along my cock, giving me a few strokes.

I growl and pull her up, taking a second to make sure the condom is all the way down before kissing her again. She strokes me lightly and nibbles at my throat. "Nic, please . . . fuck me."

I feel that same strange sense of destiny, of never having this opportunity again take over, and I nod. I climb over her, caging her in with an arm on either side as I cover her with my body. We kiss, our bodies pressing together, warm in the cool room's air, as I stroke her skin, feeling her legs rub against my hips. She shifts, and I feel the hot length of my stiff cock slide over her lips, the underside rubbing against her clit and making her moan thickly into my mouth.

"Put me inside you, Rose," I growl into her ear. "You want it this way? Then take my cock in your soft hands and guide me in."

I feel her reach down, the silky whisper of her fingers lightly grasping my cock, adding a couple more strokes down my shaft and rubbing my tip along her lips and clit a few times. She's so wet I know she doesn't need it, but there's something in her eyes that says she's feeling the same way I do. This is perfection, and perfection only comes once in your lifetime unless you're incredibly lucky. She's going to enjoy this as much as she can. Eventually, she lines me up, the head of my cock pressed against her entrance, and she lets go, giving me total control.

I can feel her already pulsing with need, her pussy trying to draw me in, and I brace my hands on each side of her head, looking into her eyes. I see my need mirrored in her eyes, and slowly and steadily, I press inside. She's tight, vibrating with need, to the point that I can feel her heartbeat through my cock as she squeezes me. I can see fear in her eyes, and I reach up, stroking a wisp of hair out of her eyes. "Relax, I've got you."

She nods, taking a deep breath as I pull back a bit, thrusting in a little farther in the next moment, giving her slow strokes to let her adjust to me. I take my time, relishing the nearly virginal feeling of her body underneath me. This will be a fuck we'll both remember for the rest of our lives.

It feels like an eternity of delicious torment until I'm fully engulfed in her hot, slick pussy, and I pause just a moment to memorize the feeling of being completely inside her. Our eyes meet and she nods. The time for slow is over. Time to see how much we can explode.

Passion takes over, and we pound into each other, hips driving harder and faster as I lift her up off the bed with every hammering thrust.

Rose reaches down to grab my ass, pulling me into her, wanting more. I push her legs up higher, nearly rolling her in half as my hips slap into hers, my cock hammering her body into total ecstasy. She gives it back, squeezing me each time I thrust and clutching at my arms.

Needing to feel more of her, I let her legs down to the bed, driving into her as I press her into the bed with the weight of my body. I bury my face in her neck, her hair splayed all over me, but I don't care because I want to be surrounded by her in every way and I want to engulf her with my body.

I grab her hands, entwining our fingers and pressing them to the bed above her head as I continue pumping into her. Our lips meet in a searing kiss that seems to join our very souls, and I tighten my grip, desperate in this instant to get a lifetime's worth of memories from our moment of passion.

Her cries get louder, and I know she's on the edge, right there alongside me. Pulling back, I press my forehead to hers, panting. "Come with me, Rose. Fuck, come with me."

Rose gasps something in reply, and I feel all the tension shoot out of my body, coming fiercely as I pump into her until I can't anymore, wishing I could have this feeling for the rest of my life.

In the same instant, Rose screams out, falling into her own release. "Nic . . . oh, God!"

I hold deep inside her through her orgasm before my arms lose all strength, and I collapse onto her, shifting my weight off to the side a bit so I don't squash her. Rose cuddles against me, kissing my chin playfully. "Mmm . . . that was amazing."

I cover her with kisses as I agree, humming as she giggles. "Amazing."

We lie there for several minutes, and I pull her close, wondering if we could enjoy the full evening like this. "Rose . . . you want to stay the night?"

She turns, pressing her ass against my cock and humming. "Think you can take care of business one more time before we both need sleep?"

I kiss the back of her neck and reach around, cupping her soft breast and tugging lightly at an already hardening nipple. “I’m pretty sure.”

Rose uses her toes to tug a blanket halfway up our legs, giggling lightly. “Good. Because I’m not ready to be done with you yet.”

I smile against the soft cloud of hair and wiggle my cock against her ass. “Neither am I.”

ROSE - TWO MONTHS LATER . . .

Walking up to the table late, I relish the heat from the diner’s heater compared to the cold outside. Winter’s really set her damn teeth in, and I’m bundled up pretty tightly.

I pull down my hood to see that Brad and Trey are already seated along one side of the booth, and Trey’s little sister, Ana, is sitting on the other side. I smile. It’s good to see the girl again. I’ve hung out with Ana a few times as we’re both third wheels for Brad and Trey’s dates.

Yeah, I know if there’s two of us, we’re not technically third wheels, but I definitely get that awkward ‘I shouldn’t be here while these two are thirty seconds from going at it’ feeling at times. Still, we put up with it because Brad and Trey are always adorable. Somehow, Trey is just this calm, stabilizing normalcy for Brad’s crazy, drama-filled life.

I sit down beside Ana, giving her a side hug as I apologize. “Sorry for being late, as usual. These silver-hair special early dinners are just a little early for me with closing time at the boutique.”

Ana waves it off. “No worries. We ordered you a drink and a salad. I knew that much and figured you could order the rest when you got here.”

“Thanks!” I reply happily, pulling off my scarf. Ana is always sweet like that, thinking of other people first and herself last, but she’s got a touch of spitfire in her too. She’s just sweet and sassy, virtually unflappable like Trey, whose blood pressure never ticks up a single point in response to Brad’s melodrama. “It has to be sub-zero out there. I swear I’m about to feel my fingernails freeze and drop off.”

“Not with that mani I gave you last week,” Brad says tartly. “You drop your fingernails, I’m going to have to put on some gel extensions, and if I do that, I’m going full fab.”

“Oh, hell no, not with Valentine’s shopping coming up,” I protest. “You know how much lingerie I’d get snagged on one of your full fab sets? I saw the last one you did . . . didn’t know you could put actual sequins on someone’s nails.”

I sip my water with lemon, realizing as it washes down that I was parched. I need to keep better habits or Trey will have me on the same macro diet deal he’s got Brad on. No, thank you. I like having comfort food once in awhile, and frankly, for the past two months, Ben and Jerry have been my best boyfriends.

I drain my water and raise the glass for the waitress to come around and refill, turning to Ana. “How’s the job? New place?”

Ana moved to town a month ago, following her big brother after wrapping up her nursing degree at the nearby university. She recently started a new job in the local hospital’s ER as a trauma nurse and got a new apartment close to the hospital so that she can easily commute for her odd hours, which I’m sure helps. After four years of dorm life, I’m thinking solo apartment life is heaven for her.

Ana grins and adjusts the sleeve of her scrubs. She’s the sort of girl who looks great in the casual hygienic outfits, and I’m sure more than one doctor has wondered if she’s a ‘naughty nurse’. “Everything's going great! You know me, saving lives everyday.”

She says it jokingly, but it's pretty close to the truth. She’s already helped on two life-saving resuscitations, and from some of the tales she tells, I’m glad I live closer to the resort side of town. Down around the university has some shady areas.

The waitress comes, and in deference to Trey, I order a grilled chicken and veggie plate, knowing full well that I’m gonna scarf down the pint of Truffle Kerfluffle I’ve got sitting in my freezer back home.

Everything in moderation, I guess. Besides, recently, my appetite’s been through the roof, and while I’ve been working hard and still hitting the gym, I’m just rolling with it. Hell, body positivity and all. Not everyone needs to have a six-pack.

We’re chatting, unwinding after a long day of work, and Brad has us all roaring with laughter about a bridezilla he did makeup for last weekend. “So I get one eye done when suddenly, she decides that cerulean blue isn’t the color she wants. Instead, she starts throwing a damn tantrum that she wants ice blue.”

“There’s a difference?” Ana asks.

“Hardly, and considering it was the third damn change, I just told her I could take care of it,” Brad says. “Turned around, did a little bit of hocus-pocus with my hands, pretending I was making an adjustment, and went right back to work with the same stuff I had before. She lies back, I do a light dusting of glitter on top of what I’d already done, and she’s happy.”

“Happy?” I ask, and Brad snickers.

“Well, she didn’t try to claw anyone’s eyes out and she said I did an ‘okay’ job,” Brad admits. “Her poor overstressed daddy slipped me an extra fifty on the credit card tip for the trouble.”

“I’ll drink to that—” I start to reply before a buzzing in my purse alerts me that I’ve got a phone call. I pull it out to silence it but freeze at the number on the display. “Sorry, guys, it’s my doctor. I need to take this real quick.”

They all quiet down, using the opportunity to stuff their faces with dinner while I answer. For someone who talks about macros and ‘staying shredded’, Trey sure can get down and devour food like a starving Rottweiler sometimes. “Hello?”

“Rose, this is Dr. Eldrich,” the warm but concerned voice on the other end of the line says. I’ve been going to him since I got to town, and he’s the definition of country doc in terms of his patient interaction, but with a twenty-first-century level of care. “I wanted to check in with you about your bloodwork. I just got the results back.”

“Okaaaay . . .” the word is drawn out because while what he’s saying sounds reasonable, I can hear an inflection in his voice that’s setting me on edge. Besides, who the hell calls at early-bird special time?

“If I’m remembering correctly,” Dr. Eldrich continues, “we did a full physical and bloodwork in preparation for you to begin a donor insemination cycle.”

“That’s right, sir. I kind of have a donor in mind. I just wanted to make sure I’m healthy,” I reply. “I was thinking of coordinating with your office about that as soon as everything gets signed off. I figured on taking my time getting prepped for the cycle.”

At my quiet words, the table is totally silent, every eye on me. All three of them know about my plans and have been super supportive, but still . . . one simply doesn’t talk about sperm donations in the middle of a diner.

But my friends all know. Once I finally decided, Brad even joked that he might consider using a donor womb one day to have a mini-Brad, so it was kinda the same thing. It's really not, but I appreciated his support.

I shake my head, my memories interrupted by Dr. Eldrich's comment. "I figured you wanted to make sure, Rose. Well, your blood counts all came back good—cholesterol and blood pressure are healthy. There's just one thing."

In an instant of almost precognition, my life flashes before my eyes. Something's wrong. I've got bad hormones, cysts inside me, or just flat out can't have a baby. My dream crashes in the span of a heartbeat.

Holding my breath, I bury my chin in my chest, trying to hide from the world. "What's wrong?"

I feel Ana place a friendly hand on my thigh, grounding me for whatever I'm about to hear. Dr. Eldrich replies quickly. I guess he heard the worry in my voice. "Rose, part of the standard workup is that we run a pregnancy test. And good news—you're already pregnant. So it looks like you won't need the insemination cycle after all."

What? Did he just say what I think he did? I'm stunned, my jaw hanging slack and my eyes wide, as I stumble over his words, trying to make sense of what Doc just said. "Pregnant? Already . . . pregnant?"

Vaguely, I hear him telling me to schedule another appointment and congratulations. He hangs up, and I drop the phone to my lap in shock, my eyes scanning the expectant faces around me. "I'm uh . . . pregnant."

With an overwhelming roar, time starts moving again and everyone's faces light up, nobody's brighter than Brad's. Trey throws his hands in the air, fists pumping. "Congratulations!"

"Oh, my gosh!" Ana adds, throwing her arms around me and squeezing so tightly I think I feel my ribs start to rub together. I guess all that nursing work makes you stronger than you look.

"I think I'll be Auntie Brad," Brad says, signaling for the waitress. "And in the meantime, get this woman a chicken fried steak!"

As they all start to celebrate, talking fast and animated, it takes them a minute to recognize I haven't said anything. I feel frozen, the world rushing past me without my even being able to interact with it as realization crashes over me. "It's not . . . I didn't . . ."

"Didn't what, honey?" Brad asks.

Finally breaking through my paralysis, I grit out between clenched teeth, “I didn’t do the cycle yet. It’s not a donor. It’s . . . it’s . . . Nic’s.”

That gets through to Brad, who whistles slowly. I’d told him about my celebration night and how it was quite a bit hotter than my usual two-drink and home alone party. He teased me for days about getting my freak on and high-fived me when I told him about the little devil Brad telling me to go for it, claiming sagely that it totally sounded like him. “Rose, that’s so you that I can’t even begin to wrap my pretty little head around it. Only you could have a one-night stand to celebrate deciding to get inseminated and end up pregnant. I thought you were safe?”

“Well,” I say, “we were safe. But we were so into it, I don’t know, maybe it slipped off a little or tore.”

“Lucky bitch,” Ana mutters under her breath before jerking as Trey kicks her under the table. “What? An orgasm and a dream baby in one night? That’s gotta be fate—”

Trey interrupts. “Wait, so the one-night stand guy? You’re really sure the baby is his? I mean, I don’t want to say you might be mistaken but . . . are you sure?”

I glare at him. I know he’s not trying to say I’ve been slutting it up, but still, it’s hard not to read that between the lines. “Yes, I’m sure. He’s the only man I’ve been with in longer than I care to admit.”

Ana looks at me, takes my hand, and gives me a determined nod. “Okay, then. Well, you wanted a baby, you’ve got a baby. Maybe the old-fashioned way, but the result is the same. And you saved yourself baby batter fees? Congrats, girl!”

Brad looks serious and sips at his water. “So, you gonna tell your baby daddy about the little one?”

I groan, putting my head to my arms on the table. “Guys . . . I don’t even remember his last name. First name, the company he works for, and the fact that he’s in sales. That’s it.”

Brad hums, tapping his lips with his index finger. “Hmm, maybe we can do a little check-around, but you were prepared to be a single mom. So if you can’t find him, are you going to sweat it? You’ve got family right here, and we’re gonna support you and the little one. Safest, most spoiled rotten wee tyke in the whole country.”

His simple words reassure me, and I place my hands on my belly, a huge smile taking over my face. Brad’s right. I need to take joy in this. “I’m

going to be a mom. I’m pregnant.”

Just like that, almost all of my dreams come true. I’ve got the business, I’ve got a great circle of friends, and now I’m having my baby.

So what if I’m missing the husband piece of the puzzle? I’m so damn grateful for what I do have.

NICOLAS

“Sorry Nicolas,” Wesley, my friend and boss, says as I sit across the desk from him. “They’re still a no-go, but I appreciate your going above and beyond. I’ll remember that, and so will they.”

“What’s the problem?” I ask, wondering what happened. It was a pretty standard meeting with a sporting goods manufacturer. “The distribution network?”

Wesley nods. “They said our online network’s fine, but with Dick’s, Big 5, and a bunch of others out there being so much bigger with brick and mortar shopfronts, they can’t handcuff themselves to an exclusive contract.”

Shit. This sucks.

I was so certain that my proposal additions would get that manufacturer to choose ADRENALIN Sports. I’d been unsuccessful in person, sure, but I left the company headquarters with a handshake and a smile. I was certain the supplementary information should’ve had them choosing us. They are new on the market, and our company is tailored toward the outdoors ‘extreme’ sportsman.

Apparently, our market overlap doesn’t matter though. Thinking back to the initial vendor meeting, I wonder about the rough two-month streak I’ve been running on. My contract negotiations have gone to shit since that resort declined to sign with ADRENALIN, and my brain side-tracks to the night with Rose. I’d run into her that very night in the hotel bar, my brain initially focused on fixing the contract issue because that’s what I do. But we’d had amazing chemistry from the get-go and she’d been a welcome distraction from my fruitless strategizing.

We spent a fantastically hot night together, but when I woke in the soft morning light, it was to cold sheets and a *Thank You* note on the bedside table written on hotel stationery.

Not what I was expecting, honestly. I mean, I wasn't expecting breakfast and warm goodbye kisses while Whitney Houston sings her ass off in the background, but then again, I'm not sure what I was expecting considering she lived in that area. I barely live anywhere since I'm always traveling, and we both have jobs that are time consuming.

Still, from that moment, I've run into bad luck after bad luck. I know half of it is my fault. I'm not focused. Rose was an angel, something never to be enjoyed again . . . and it's tearing me up.

Wesley clears his throat, and I realize he's waiting for a reply to his comment. Blinking, I try to quickly refocus. "Thanks, Wesley. I wish we'd landed that contract, but I'll check in with the guys in the bullpen and see what else is on the horizon."

Wesley waves it off, sliding a piece of paper across his desk to me. "No, I think we need to get you to clear your head some, break the bad luck you seem to have picked up. So I've got a mission for you. There's a new upstart out in Oregon that's doing well, especially considering there are so many adventure tour services there. It's pretty far out, but that's their niche . . . totally off-grid. They take their customers out, and the only way you know they fucking survive is when they come back. I'd love for you to go up and be our initial contact, see what we can place in their hands to get our name on their tours because they're getting some hot publicity. The official supplier for these guys? That's the sort of shit ADRENALIN can use right now. Ironic that an off-grid company is buzzing all over social media, but that's the nature of the beast, I guess, and it's getting customers to them in droves."

I lean back, thinking that Wes's idea is exactly what I need, away from the norm. "Sounds interesting. I might even take a day or two off-grid myself, see what exactly they do, pitch it to them as a way to make sure we can tailor our stuff to meet their needs."

Honestly, I'm just spouting bullshit because I just want to get out for a while. But this project sounds like my idea of heaven. While I usually have to wear a suit and tie for work, my heart lies outdoors in the woods, in the wild, roughing it up and living off the land. My favorite fantasy would be to head out with a good knife, a bow, and a tiny backpack of supplies. All I need for a week of utter bliss.

Wesley smiles and raps his knuckles on his desk. "I'd say that's why you've always been my best sales guy, but I know you're not doing it out of

the goodness of your heart for the company. You're out for a nature walkabout, aren't you?"

I shrug, grinning sheepishly. "Yeah, a little time outdoors always does the spirit good. And you're right, I'll be able to shake off this bad luck. I've just been a little off my game since that meeting with the people at the ski resort."

Wesley smirks. "I still think it's because you can't shake the girl."

I feel heat creep up my neck, but I don't really have a sharp comeback for him. The week after coming back, I told him about my night with Rose—not all of the dirty details of course, but that I met someone sexy and brilliant and talking through the proposal with her had actually resulted in a few of the additions I'd made.

The contract for the Mountain Spirit resort might not have gone through, but her input was invaluable to me, and Rose has been on my mind ever since.

Trying to brush off his comment, I give Wes the finger. "Fuck you, man. Yeah, that was a good night, but you know how life is. Still, not everyday I meet a woman that smart and gorgeous."

Wesley, who married his college sweetheart and has been happy about it every day since, shrugs. "Maybe your walkabout can give you a few ideas for your upcoming vacation? Hell, you could head out there for a repeat performance."

I smile, shaking my head. "While that could be fun, I'm not sure I want to risk ruining a great memory when she obviously left the next morning with no intention of seeing me again. It's just that sort of night that you can never, ever live up to again. It was just that, a night to remember forever."

Wesley shakes his head. For a man who's an executive, I swear he's a lot more idealistic than I am. "Then maybe you'll meet some little Earth-loving lady out in the wilds on your trip. Can I give you a hint?"

I look at him expectantly, ready for the joke because I know him and that's where this is going. When ideas don't work, resort to humor, usually the closer to frat house humor, the better. He's just lucky everyone working directly for him is a guy who isn't going to get offended at his occasional comments. "What?"

"If she doesn't shave her pits, there's no lady garden tending either. Full 70s bush, guaranteed."

There’s a half-beat of silence and then we both burst out laughing. “Thanks for the tip, man. But I’m not looking for anything right now, bare or hair. Just some work, some relaxation, and then I’ll be back, hopefully with a new deal with our off-grid tour company.”

ROSE

I don’t know if I’ve ever felt this vulnerable before, sitting in the doctor’s office waiting for my first prenatal exam. I’m wearing a barely-there sanitary gown that peekaboos my ass no matter how many times I wrap and rewrap it around myself. To top it off, the cold is making my nipples ache they’re so goddamn tight, and my ass and thighs seem to be coated in superglue as much as they’re sticking to this paper-lined bed. Examination? More like the goddamn Spanish Inquisition.

Finally, there’s a soft knock and Dr. Stevens walks in. While Dr. Eldritch is going to monitor me and still be my main physician, he referred me to his friend for the baby itself. He’s young, and I wonder how someone his age could have finished all of his training already. He looks like he should barely be old enough to shave, and if it wasn’t that the hair’s way too light, he’d be a perfect stand-in for Sheldon Cooper. “Uh, Dr. Stevens? How old are you?”

He chuckles as he sets his clipboard aside. “I’m thirty-four. I know, I know. My mother kept getting carded for drinks up until I was in junior high school. Even now, she gets men half her age giving her compliments. Hope I get that when I’m sixty.”

I nod, relaxing a micrometer. “Okay. Sorry if I offended you.”

“Not at all. Now let me go get Julie, and you get yourself arranged for the exam.” He leaves, returning a moment later with one of the nurses I saw up front, a pleasant motherly-looking woman who puts me at ease with her seen-it-all demeanor. “All right, Rose. Let’s check you out, see how everything’s going.”

I scoot down, letting my ass hang off the table, and lift my heels to the stirrups for the exam. Dr. Stevens wants to do a full workup, make sure I don’t have anything brewing downstairs that might give rise to complications later. I feel the chilly air between my legs and shiver. *Okay, I*

was wrong . . . forget five minutes ago. This is the most vulnerable I've ever felt.

"Relax," Dr. Stevens says as he pulls on rubber gloves. "This part only takes about two minutes . . . and then we can do the ultrasound to see if we can get a view of your baby."

At the mention of the sonogram, my heart starts pounding, excited to see the baby. My baby. I'm still in shock, have been since I got the phone call a few weeks ago, but the reality is starting to sink in. "O–okay."

"So have you started following the advice Dr. Eldrich gave you?" Stevens asks as he swabs me. I know what he's doing, trying to distract me, but it still helps.

"I went right to the store and started the vitamins he suggested, and I'm getting forty-five minutes of exercise in every day," I reply, shifting my butt a little. "How much can you tell on the ultrasound?"

"Depends on your date of conception," he replies in between giving orders to Julie the nurse. "If you're more than six or seven weeks pregnant, we might be able to detect a heartbeat. We'll see what we can see."

I relax as best I can as Dr. Stevens begins the sonogram and starts scanning for my baby.

My eyes lock on the monitor screen as Dr. Stevens takes measurements, but all I see are swatches of grey static and an occasional black orb. He makes a few comments to Julie, but nothing I can understand. "Uhh . . . doctor?" I ask nervously. "So does everything look okay?"

Dr. Stevens smiles and looks me in the eye. "Yep, perfectly fine. I'd make an estimate that from the size of your baby and some of the other things I'm seeing, you're about two months along now. Now let's see if I can get an audio for you on the heartbeat."

He clicks a few buttons on the machine, maneuvering his sensor around some more, and a few moments later, I hear the most glorious music I've ever heard as the sound of my baby's heartbeat fills the room. My eyes fill with tears of joy, overflowing down my cheeks as I sniffle. Just like that, in a simple pulsing sound that sounds like an electronic bass drum beat, it's real.

I'm a mom, just like I wanted.

Maybe not how I'd planned, but Ana was right, the result is the same. "Okay, Rose, I'll leave you to it to clean up and get dressed. Meanwhile, I'm going to get you some printouts of the pictures we took."

Five minutes later, I'm cleaned up with my casual clothes back on, and Dr. Stevens hands me a few tiny pictures. I can feel the smile overwhelming my face as I look at the pictures in one hand and rub my belly with the other. "Wow."

Dr. Stevens nods in appreciation. "Congratulations again, Rose. Your blood levels look great and sonogram looks great, so we'll get your labs done and set up all your routine appointments for the next few months. If you need to wait to check your schedule or the father's schedule for the appointments, that's fine, of course. We just want to get them on the books ASAP."

At his mention of '*the father'*, my smile falters a bit. Julie catches it and looks like she's about to say something when I take the bull by the horns. "Uhm, Dr. Stevens . . . this is kinda embarrassing to say, but does it matter if I don't know who the father is? Does that make a difference in the tests you need to run? I had an encounter and we used protection, but—"

His face doesn't even flinch. He's a consummate professional and I'm suddenly glad that Dr. Eldrich referred me to him. "But stuff happens and very few things in life are 100%. Unknown father . . . okay. Just in case, we'll add some extra screenings to your labs, but it shouldn't matter medically. Dr. Eldrich already ran a full screen with the blood he took when you found out you were pregnant, and you're clear. If you can get some health information from the dad, that'd be helpful but not really necessary."

"Okay," I stammer, my mind whirling at 'helpful but not really necessary'. What the hell sort of 'helpful but not really necessary' information could he be thinking of? "I just wanted to make sure. I mean, I know who the father is. I just don't know him all that well. You know?"

Dr. Stevens smiles at me and makes a note on his clipboard. "Rose, it's fine. While I might look like I just stepped off the high school cross-country team, I've been running a practice on my own for going on six years, and you're not the first single mom who doesn't want the father notified. My job is to keep you and the baby safe and healthy. No judgment here whatsoever."

I sigh with relief, just now realizing that I'm kinda nervous about what people will think about a single mother who got knocked up from a one-night stand.

But he's right, people shouldn't judge, and I'm just so excited to be a mother. Seems like fate stepped in to help me out with my dream, and I'm

not going to question that for even a second. I've got good friends and what seems like a good doctor. I'll be fine. Who needs a baby daddy when my baby's gonna have a whole crew supporting him or her?

Walking outside, I lift my face to the sun, letting it wash over me. I'm already floating with happiness and it feels like even the world around me is celebrating as the birds sing and the wind blows softly around me.

Now that I know everything is okay with the pregnancy, I really should make an attempt to let Nic know. I really should. I don't actually want anything from him because he certainly didn't ask for or expect this, but he deserves to know.

What if he thinks I did this on purpose? While I certainly wanted a baby, I didn't mean for it to happen like this.

What if he gets mad? That's definitely possible, but if he's a jerk about it, he can just leave us alone. That wouldn't change anything for me.

What if he wants to be involved? That actually gives me pause, because I don't really know Nic. Maybe he'd be an awful father? I dismiss that thought, knowing that he was so sweet with me that surely, if he chose to be an active parent, he'd be that good with a baby.

My thoughts keep swirling, question after question. But the result is the same. I need to let him know and see how the cards fall.

I sit in my car, pulling up a Google search on my phone. Typing into the search bar, I put in what I know. Sales. Nicolas. ADRENALIN. I get pages of results back and also realize that there's like four different ways to spell Nicolas and I don't know how he spelled it since we didn't write anything down besides my *Thank You* note.

I click and search for almost an hour before I find the right number.

There . . . just ten little numbers and I can tell Nicolas that, well, I've got a memento of our night of passion that lasts a hell of a lot longer than a left behind handkerchief or pair of panties. I take a big breath, looking skyward for a moment searching for strength, and dial the number.

The phone rings three times before a crisp female voice answers. "ADRENALIN Sports, Nicolas Broadmoor's office. How can I help you?"

I gulp. Shit's hit the fan now. "Yes, can I please speak to Nic . . . I mean, Nicolas?"

"May I ask who's calling?"

"My name is Rose Samuelson. I met Nicolas on his trip to the Mountain Spirit resort recently. I wanted to follow up about our meeting."

My words are stilted, trying to make a hook-up sound like a professional encounter. God, I'm such a terrible liar. I'm sure this woman is seeing straight through my bullshit.

"I'm so sorry, Ms. Samuelson. Mr. Broadmoor is out of state right now, but I'd be happy to pass along a message."

I feel the disappointment flood through me. I was ready to get this over with, but I don't really have a choice.

"Sure. Rose Samuelson. My number is 324-952-8156, regarding our meeting." There, that sounds reasonable and not suspect at all. She repeats the number back to me with another promise of passing the message along, and I hang up. My car's suddenly way too warm, and I crank the engine, lowering a window to let in a drift of cool air.

Well, I might not have gotten to tell him, but this will at least be a barometer of whether he wants to talk to me again. If he doesn't call, I guess I'll know that he doesn't want anything to do with me, and he certainly wouldn't want anything to do with a baby.

NICOLAS

The sound of birds singing wakes me up, and I roll over in my sleeping bag, feeling the long-missed tingle of cool air on the tip of my nose and the freshness of sleeping outside again. Taking a big breath of crisp air, I slide out of my tent and stretch my arms high and wide.

Looking around, I'm stunned as I look around at the scenery. I'm deep in the forest, surrounded by tall redwoods that rise toward the sky all around me. It's both grand and knocks you down a peg. There's no way to think you mean all that much in the world when you're surrounded by thousands of trees that were standing tall and proud a hundred years before your family even came to this country.

I zip up my tent, heading up the narrow trail that winds through the trees toward the headquarters of this little camp that I'm staying in tonight. Reaching my rental ATV, one of the few vehicles that can reach this place, I quickly brush my teeth with peroxide before spitting into the dirt. That done, I approach the little cabin nestled in a small clearing just as the front door opens.

A huge, grizzly looking guy comes out, unkempt beard hanging wildly down to his round gut that's covered with a classic lumberjack plaid flannel. I don't think I've ever seen a more obvious stereotype of a 'mountain man' in my life.

There's a moment where I hope that he remembers we have an appointment because I have no doubt that he could easily kill me with an axe and hide my body somewhere out here, and I'd never be seen again. There are good and bad things about making a sales pitch fifty miles from the nearest town . . . axe-wielding maniacs definitely fall into the bad things category.

My initial fears immediately soften when he smiles, lightly yellowed buck teeth peeking out through the unruly facial hair, and offers me his callused working man's hand. "My boys said you checked in last night. How was your sleep?"

"Best I've had in weeks," I admit honestly. "Thank you for letting me pitch a tent on your land."

"Not a problem," the big man says. "By the way, I'm Sam Sampson, owner-operator of this outfit. Come on in the house. I'm sure my wife Susan will have a glass of tea ready for you. If I'm lucky, maybe she'll let me have one too." He says it with a wink, so I smile back.

"Yes sir, Mr. Sampson. I'm Nicolas Broadmoor of ADRENALIN Sports. Looking forward to seeing if we can be of assistance with your equipment needs out here," I reply, following him. I know I should feel strange about doing a sales pitch out here dressed in rags . . . but hell, I'd feel stranger wearing a suit right now.

"Just call me Sam. Everybody does," he says. "Not sure if that's short for Samuel or Sampson, but that's what they call me."

As we walk in the house, I hear a laughing voice, mocking Sam's deep speech. "I don't know what my ma was thinking when she called me Samuel Sampson, but story goes she lost a bet to my dad."

A petite grey-haired woman comes out of the kitchen carrying a tray with a pitcher of tea and two glasses. I can't help but smile as her twinkling eyes take in her husband and she sets the two glasses down on the rough-hewn wooden table. I vaguely wonder if they're for me and Sam or me and her. "Sorry, Sam, but I hear that same damn line every time you meet someone new. You need new material."

He laughs and growls at her, waiting for her set the tray down before grabbing her in a big bear hug and shaking her silly as her giggles bubble out like champagne. It's cute . . . adorable, really. I mean, both of these people are well into their sixties. They might even be in their seventies. But it's totally obvious they're both still crazy in love for one another.

There's a twinge in my heart, a quiet hope that I'll have a love like that someday. I have a momentary flashback to Rose but dismiss it just as fast considering we barely knew each other. But damn, I wish I'd gotten to know her a little better. Just a chance, an exchange of phone numbers, something . . . but now all I have are memories.

Smirking at my own internal monologue, I tune back in. The tiny woman offers her hand, and while she looks like a strong wind might blow her over, her hand is work-worn and her handshake solid. "Welcome to our place. I'm Susan Sampson, charged with keeping this old coot in line. And let me tell you, that's a full-time job. Sit down and let me pour you two boys a glass of tea."

I catch Sam giving me another wink that he got a glass after all as he takes it from Susan with a hearty smack on her cheek. "Thanks, honey. You know I love it when you give me some sugar . . . in my tea."

She shakes her head, but there's a slight flush in her cheeks when she slaps him lightly on the shoulder. "Behave."

She leaves, and Sam turns to me. "So, Nic, what exactly do you think ADRENALIN Sports can do for me and mine? No offense, I know you're a good man by the way you came out of those woods feeling right at home . . . but military surplus has done right by me for a while now. What can you guys do different?"

"Well, let me break it down tour by tour that you offer. First, your adventure tours. I know ADRENALIN sounds like we're all extreme sports, and there's a kernel of truth to that. We got started with extreme outdoor sports. But we cover all forms of outdoor sports. Right now, the big buzz about you guys is your ATV and hiking trips, everything loaded onto backpacks."

"That's my son's gig," Sam admits. "While I got no problem riding an ATV anywhere, the idea of walking up the side of a mountain anymore just gets my knees aching something terrible. Then again, half the folks who come here end up aching too."

“Sure, and I know that a lot of those folks show up . . . less than prepared,” I reply. “And you rent out equipment to them, which I think is a smart idea. No worries about fussing around with replacement parts, no problem with substandard equipment. And surplus, it’s usually good stuff, I’m not gonna put it down. But I can guarantee you that ADRENALIN can provide you with equipment that’s been tested from the Rockies to the summit of Everest. You need clothes, packs, boots, whatever, we can get it for you. What about your other programs?”

“Well, I like to take folks to do some fly fishing when the season is right, and occasional hunting trips for recommended guests,” Sam says. “I gotta admit, that’s the trickiest. I don’t just take any old Joe out hunting around here. I’ve gotta know you’re good with a gun, safe and able, because I’m not running a lesson range out there. Most of the folks I do allow, they bring their own kits, although I will provide ammo if they need it.”

I nod, laughing lightly. “Makes sense. Personally, I can’t imagine that teaching someone to shoot on sight is going to result in a satisfied customer with a big game trophy. And professionally, there’s reasonable risk and there’s stupid. Good to know that you know the difference.”

He gives me a nod. “Come on, let me show you the garage.”

Sam takes me out back to their garage, which is more like a good-sized country barn filled with ATVs and snowmobiles where there used to be horse stalls. Along the other side, arranged with all the neatness and efficiency of a good storeroom, is the rest. Fishing gear, snowshoes, cross-country skis, packs, tents, and all the needed accessories, all neatly arranged and obviously well-cared for.

“My shooting bench, along with equipment and my lending gun safe, is in the back corner,” Sam says, flipping a switch. Another light switches on, and I see two military-style weapons racks with locks. “They’re not as good as my old Winchester I keep in the house, but I keep them all in good condition. Also in the locker there, I’ve got the archery equipment, not too much since most of my bow hunters treat their bows better than most men treat their women. But I got the accessories if they need it.”

“Very nice,” I reply, making a mental note to add archery to my proposal. Knowing that our primary placement is going to be the larger pieces of equipment, I head directly to the ATVs, which are maintained and seem to be in great working condition, but they’re dated, and well, not ours.

“Let’s get a start here, if you don’t mind. Now, it’s very obvious you take pride in caring for your gear, but I think we can do better.”

We spend the next two days going through our catalog item by item, and the contract line by line. I have to give and play some, but I use a sales tactic that I’d picked up long ago. By giving some more in the ‘big’ items, like the price of an ATV, I can gain ground in other areas. A six months’ supply of gunpowder, primers, and rifle cleaning materials runs quite a pretty penny, and ultimately, Sam can pass that along to his customers as a convenience fee for onsite supplies. Win-win for everyone.

In the end, all the office sales time isn’t the same as the real deal, so we decide a test drive is in order. I call the head office after the first night, and that weekend, a trailer pulls up in town, delivering a couple of ATVs for us to take out on one of their usual adventure tour tracks, along with all the accessories we’d pack. Sam and one of his sons even agree to take along a ‘customer pack’ for comparison.

Side by side with their older models, the difference is immediately obvious. The ADRENALIN packs are lighter and easier to carry, and by the first night of our tour, it’s just a matter of getting names on papers and setting it aside for lawyers. That lets us spend the bulk of our time enjoying some time outdoors with no pressure, and Sam offers to sidetrack to show me his favorite fishing spot. He has a passion for living off the land, being outdoors, and I can appreciate that.

Over the next few days, I thoroughly enjoy rising with the sun and exploring the forest all day as we hike, fish for our dinner, and camp under a canopy of stars. I brought along one of our bows, one that works for both fishing and hunting with minimal adjustments, and I’m thrilled when Sam seems impressed with my prowess and the equipment.

On our last night deep in the forest, Sam stares into the small fire we’d started to cook the trout we’d caught. It’s after dinner, the trout eaten, and we’re just enjoying the last of the warmth. “So tell me about your life back home, Nicolas.”

I lean back, enjoying the warmth of the flames as the night chill starts to come on. “Well, not much to tell, I guess. I grew up loving the outdoors, but at the time, I didn’t think it’d pay well. So, I went to school for business, did sales after graduation. But I kept up doing a lot of outdoor adventure stuff as much as I could. Every weekend, every holiday, every vacation I get, I’m going somewhere and seeing new things, experiencing a different

world, learning something. Hiking, skiing, parasailing, hang-gliding, bungee jumping, skydiving, you name it, I've done it. If there's a rush involved and it's outside, I'm in. But I also love the rush of seeing the world in an uncommon way and the peace I get in the quiet, far from the city where I mostly work. Started working with the guy who owns ADRENALIN as a sales rep and worked my way up. What about you? How did you and Susan decide to start doing adventure tours?"

Sam pokes around in the fire to distribute the coals before answering. "This has been my family land for generations, but Susan and I used to only come here for weekend getaways. We lived in town when the kids were little, but when they'd all grown and gone, we just felt empty. They send us pictures of them in the mail, and everyone came out for Christmas—made Susan so damn happy. Anyway, we all came out to the cabin for Christmas one year, and after the kids went home, we stayed to clean up the house, do a few projects, and ended up snowed in for a couple of weeks. By the time we could get out, we didn't want to leave. Sounds crazy, but locked up in a cabin with that woman for two weeks is my idea of heaven and we just didn't want to go back. So we didn't. One of my boys had a friend who wanted to go hiking so he asked if I'd show him around a bit, so I did. I guess he posted some stuff on the Internet and all the sudden, I'm getting letters asking if I'd take them out too."

"That's quite a story you have there," I reply honestly, feeling slightly jealous.

Sam nods. "We get to stay busy, be alone when we want to be, and share this beautiful Earth with folks who recognize they need a little time with Mother Nature."

"I definitely needed this recharge myself. I haven't been getting out as much as I'd like with the busy work of business taking me here and there. I travel—hell, all I do is travel, it seems, but it's all work, no play."

Sam hums knowingly. "You know what they say about that? Makes Nicolas a dull boy. Hell, before this, I was like you. Worked a job just like you . . . then I realized something. All a man really needs is a woman he loves and some time in the sunshine. That's all we could ask for."

He smiles, lifting his face up to the night sky speckled with bright stars as if they're the sunshine he's talking about. "Think I'll turn in. Gonna see my Susan in the morning, and she's gonna have missed me something fierce

these last few days, if you catch my drift. I'm gonna need my Zs to keep up with her."

Laughing, I lie back, staring at the stars too, catching a flash of light streak across the sky.

I have a moment of childhood innocence and make a wish on the shooting star. "A good woman and sunshine . . . sounds like a great life if you can make that happen."

With a smile, I head over to my sleeping bag, curl up, and nod off.

ROSE

Juggling my bag, my coffee, and my keys, I try to get the door to the Mountain Rose open. It's a lot harder than it was three months ago when my tummy was flat-ish, I wasn't having weird food cravings, and I didn't spend half of my mornings chucking into the toilet.

That's okay, I'm halfway through my pregnancy, and despite the difficulties, every day is a new adventure and I'm looking forward more and more to what's to come. Still . . . "Goddamn lock," I mutter, hissing.

Finally, it clicks, and I push the door open, setting everything on the counter and hustling back to flip the lights on and the sign to *Open*. Hustling is getting to be a little bit relative since I've already started to get a little waddle to my gait even though I'm barely showing. What with winter still in full effect, when I wear loose, warm clothes, almost nobody notices unless I tell them.

Brad says my little baby bump looks like maybe I just had a big lunch, just a little food baby. But at five months along, this is definitely not just some burritos, although I could go for some breakfast burritos right about now. Mmm . . . warm eggs with some spicy sausage, cheese, and maybe some rice in there . . . yeah, baby, that's what I want.

I've been fortunate that while I've had some morning sickness, I've been able to eat just fine. Actually, I think Brad's a little jealous. Every time I stop by the salon, he's drinking something that looks like it was mixed up for the Toxic Crusader while I'm rocking something covered in cheese.

I grab my morning coffee from the K-Cup machine, a birthday gift from Ana last year that I've come to love. I inhale deeply, breathing in its steamy goodness as I boot up the computer and check emails. "Enjoy it while it

lasts," I remind myself. "These eight ounces of liquid sanity are a precious commodity."

Everything electronic looks good today, just some spam, a few bills that I click *Pay* on immediately before I forget, and then my weekly pregnancy newsletter. These are my favorites, reading about how big my little Jelly Bean is, what's developing, and what I'm likely to be experiencing.

That one is tough because while some women are already feeling movement, I'm one of the few who haven't yet. It worries me, even as I tell myself that everything is fine.

The range is 16–25 weeks, and I'm smack in the middle at 20 but just ridiculously impatient for what I think will be a monumental moment in my pregnancy.

I've tried a few of the 'recommendations' to trigger squirming like drinking orange juice, and last weekend, Brad gently poked my belly to see if that'd get some movement going. But no luck so far. He's declared me defective, though he was only kidding. I still threatened to not let him be an auntie, so he's piped down after that. But I'm still trying to feel something, anything.

Sighing, I close down my emails and get the store ready for customers. About five minutes later, the door opens and my new assistant walks in. "Devon, so great to see you this morning."

Knowing that I was going to need some help as the pregnancy progressed and for some maternity leave, I hired help. Today's her first day, and I'm excited that the Mountain Rose and I have reached the level where I can hire some help, and Devon seems like a really sweet girl, ready to learn and happy to help.

"Thanks, Rose! Great to see you too. Where do you want me and what can I do?"

Good start, girl. Very good start. "Let's unload the new order that arrived yesterday afternoon, get it all hung and set out. I'll show you the system and how I like to tag things. Then I'll go over the register with you."

Without another word, she's off and running, going into the back of the store and grabbing the box and moving it closer to the rack. We get to work, and within twenty minutes, I'm already in love with this girl. It would've been impossible for me to move that box and I would've spent too much time and energy walking the clothes back and forth from the box to the

rack. But Devon's got wiry strength and energy for days, and we get the racking going in half the time it would normally take.

We move over to the register, and I quickly go through ringing up a sale, making change, and doing a return or exchange as we see customers all morning. It's not too busy, but enough that Devon is able to train.

"You're a fast learner," I tell her during a small lull in foot traffic. "You're going to do fine."

Devon smiles and gives me a thumbs up. "Thanks, Rose. It's not too different from the other registers I've worked so it's an easy pickup. And this is a lot more glamorous than doing shifts down at the supermarket."

"Glamorous?" I laugh. "Oh, hell, Brad's gonna love you! He's a friend from down the street, part-owner of the salon. He stops in from time to time. You don't mind being called bitch, I hope? It's said in love, I promise."

Suddenly, my tummy lets out a loud rumble and we both freeze for a second before bursting into laughter. "Well, apparently, that's my alarm clock for lunch. Did you bring something?"

Devon shakes her head. "No, I figured I could grab something from the diner if we weren't too busy, or later if we were. I mean, I could afford to skip a meal or two."

I don't know if it's the soon-to-be mother in me or just hearing that sort of bullshit too often, but I grab her hand. "No. Get rid of that thinking right now. You're gorgeous, Devon . . . and the diner sounds great. So here's the deal. Your boss is buying and you're it picking up. Have any idea what you want?"

She's already nodding, grabbing a notepad off the desk to write down the order, when I change my mind. "Actually, this would be a great test. I'll go grab our lunch—the walk will do me good—and you stay here. There shouldn't be too many customers coming in right now, but if they do, you know how to ring them up. Call me if you need anything. I'll be right back."

I rip the top sheet off the notepad and head out with a wave. Outside, I check what she wrote down. A garden salad? Hell no, this girl's getting at least a turkey sandwich to go with it. Stepping into the sunshine, I tilt my chin up and close my eyes, appreciating the bracing chill that rolls through my body after being in the heat all morning. My cardigan is just right for

the chilled air considering my Jelly Bean has my body temperature rolling a little warmer than usual with the bonus insulation and hormones.

As I walk, I'm mentally debating if it's a cheeseburger day or a club sandwich day, finally negotiating myself into a compromise of a burger with extra lettuce and tomato. That's basically a salad, right?

Vaguely, behind me, I hear someone calling out my name. Thinking for a moment that maybe Devon had a question after all, I look back and see the last person I expected to ever see again. Nicolas, my baby daddy, is jogging toward me, a wide smile on his face as he waves.

I turn and he screeches to a halt, his eyes tracking from my face to my obviously rounded belly, then locking onto my eyes.

I see the confusion, the questions written all over his face.

Want to read the rest? Grab Baby Daddy here for only $0.99 or Read it FREE with Kindle Unlimited!

Also check out all the books in this Irresistible Bachelor series. There are 8 books, but each book consists of a different couple with their own happily ever after. It's all set in the same world and you do get to hear from past characters here and there if you read them all!

EXCERPT: MR. FIXIT

BY LAUREN LANDISH

Prologue
Cassie

"You sure about this?" Nathan asks me in his distinct Bronx accent as the muted sounds of the club preparing to open surround us. In the six months I've worked here at Club Jasmine, he's been my boss, a mentor of sorts, and an ear to bend when I need it. He's crude and he's foul-mouthed, but he's honest.

"I'm sure," I reply, tugging at the collar on my work outfit. Tonight is supposed to be 'upscale night', which for the patrons means suits and dresses that hit at least the mid-thigh, and if you have a collar, you'd better be rocking a tie. For me and the rest of the staff, it means a tailored blouse that highlights what boobs I do have, although since it buttons up most of the way to my neck, I can get a little bit extra out of my Wonderbra. "It's time for me to move on."

Nathan sips his drink, a horrible neon blue concoction called a *Little Mermaid* that he can't get enough of. To me, it smells too much like fake fruity wannabe tropical stuff, and I've had the real thing. There's no substitution. "I can respect that," he says after a moment. "We all knew this was just a temporary gig until you figured out what you wanted to do. I didn't expect you to change your mind and make a career here."

I laugh, nodding. "You're right, but it was fun while it lasted."

"We're going to miss you around here. You're popular with the customers. You've got a natural charm about you," Nathan admits. He once asked me out for a drink after work, and while he's an interesting fella, I don't date my boss. I'm not going to hate on anyone who does, but it's not

how I want to make my way. Luckily, he took it well and it's never been awkward, just totally cool since then. "So, what are you looking at doing?"

"Similar to what I was doing before, in real estate, but not some corporate setting. A more close-knit group that my friend, Hannah's, husband set up. It's his brother's business."

"Oliver? We've met. He's a good man. I can respect that," Nathan says. He stands up, offering me his hand. "Tell you what—you do me a favor tonight, and I'll even give you a goodbye present, an extra week's pay to get you moved and started."

I raise an eyebrow. Nathan's nice, but he's about as tightfisted as Ebenezer Scrooge. "What's that?"

"Roxy's grandmother is coming in tonight," Nathan says, and I have to both laugh and wince at the same time. Ivy Jo is . . . unique. "Yeah, well, she insists that she can see her great grandbabies and enjoy a night on the town too, and Jake don't wanna listen to it no more. I can dig it. So, she's coming in early bird."

"How long, and what time?" I ask Nathan, who shrugs.

"Jake told me he'd try to get her out of here by nine, but last time she came in, she threatened to take her cane to my head if I pressured her toward the door one more time," Nathan says defensively. "But Jake and Roxy both say she liked you. As Roxy's getting ready for her set, and Jake's at home playing proud papa, I figure you can make sure she doesn't get into too much trouble tonight?"

I laugh again, nodding. "I'll make sure she doesn't get too out of control."

Two hours later, Ivy Jo comes in, escorted by one of the security guys. "Miss White, Ivy Jo—"

"Oh hell no, that Nathan didn't give me no chaperone, did he?" Ivy Jo protests, decked out in an outfit that . . . well, I think it was popular during the disco era. "I said I wanted a night out, not a night being handheld!"

"Ivy Jo, I'm not your chaperone," I protest, giving her just a little bit of sass. It keeps her on her toes. "I'm here to protect all the men from you. I know how you are, remember?"

"I remember. I remember your being almost as much fun as I was at your age," she says. "Okay, I guess."

I get her a drink, a watered down Rob Roy that she sips at, sighing happily. "Get yourself a drink, girl!"

“Sorry, can’t while on the clock,” I tell her, “but if you don’t mind, I’ll go for something virgin.”

“I’d like a virgin too, but at my age, I’ll take any damn thing I can get,” Ivy Jo cackles, and I have to snicker. I get myself a Moscow Mule mocktail and sit down next to her as the early clubgoers start to come in and the DJ starts spinning tunes. “So, talked with Mindy the other day. She said you’re going to work for Oliver?”

“Yep,” I agree, sipping my mule and wishing it had just a bit more ginger flavor. “Oli’s got a place for me. And I’m gonna earn it too. I plan on working my ass off.”

“No doubt,” Ivy Jo says. “Hey, what about that tall drink of sexy you were teasing all over the damn place when we all went out to Hawaii? What’s his name—Calvin?”

“Caleb!” I say with a laugh. Caleb Strong is many things, but I could never, ever imagine him being named Calvin. “What about him?”

“Doesn’t he work for Oliver too?” Ivy Jo says with a twinkle in her eye. “You two looked like you got along well.”

“We got along like cats and dogs, but we had fun. That’s about it though,” I reply, not admitting to her that yeah, I’ve sometimes thought about having a different kind of fun with Caleb. “He still kind of works for Oliver, but he started his own thing, Strong Services, although he’s mostly known as ‘Mr. Fix-It’ to his customers.”

“Handy, huh? I used to be a girl who was very much into handys,” Ivy Jo says, making me half choke on my drink. “You sure that drink is virgin?”

“I’m sure,” I say with a laugh. “But no, there’s nothing there. I haven’t seen him since the wedding, and we mostly just send each other inappropriate jokes and memes these days. We’re just friends.”

“Uh-huh,” Ivy Jo says, unconvinced. “Honey, in all my years, I ain’t saying that men and women can’t be *just friends*. But I saw the sparks between you two, and two people who start off in the friend zone with those sparks either hate each other eventually or . . .”

“Or what?”

Ivy Jo finishes off her Rob Roy, grinning. “I won’t ruin it for you. Hell, maybe I’m wrong. Let’s go find me a man a third my age to shake my hips with. Left one’s brand new. Gotta get some use outta it before the rest of me breaks down!”

CALEB

Sweat stings my eyes as I reach down into the hole, working by feel. I could have dug something wider. I know quite a few of the contractors around town who damn near rip up an entire back yard for a job like this, but that's not me. I take a lot of pride in my work, and that includes creating as little collateral damage as I can.

"Come on, you stupid son of a—" I grunt, twisting the connector to the right. I've only got a tiny window, and I have to reset after just a moment, evaluating my progress as I do. Not bad. A few more and I'll have it done.

I reach down again, but just as I do, my earbud works itself loose and I curse under my breath. Sitting up, I use the opportunity to wipe my forehead, but it's just too hot. To hell with it. I take my other earbud out and pull my t-shirt off, whipping it around my head in a quick do-rag-like getup that looks stupid as hell, but at least it keeps my eyes clear. I readjust my earbuds and the thrilling, driving voice of Roxy Stone fills my ears. It's not a CD yet—she's still working on the final arrangements—but I've been able to listen to all of her covers as she works on them. Advantages of being a friend of the family, and her version of *Hallelujah* fucking rocks.

My adjustments complete, I reach down and twist the wrench again, then again. Grabbing my flashlight, I look the whole thing over, from the pipe tape I used on the threads right down the pipe itself. "That oughta hold you," I mutter, getting to my knees. I go over to the side of the house, turning the water back on, and head back to the ditch, squatting down and staring intently at my repair. The pipe's good, no leaks at all, and I quickly finish up, filling in the dirt and tamping it down before putting the turf back on top as best I can. Packing my bag, I look over the whole job, nodding in approval. "Nice," I tell the afternoon cicadas as I take off my earbuds and put them in the pocket of my work jeans. "Mrs. Barnes is going to have no problems with water leaks or her petunias for the rest of the summer at least."

I dust off my hands and pick up my tool bag before heading to the back door of the small but trim cottage house that I've been working outside of for the past four hours. Knocking on the frame next to the screen, I take a moment to admire the blue house with white trim, while at the same time noting that a lot of the trim on the north side of the house is looking sun-faded. It might need to be redone soon. "Mrs. Barnes? I just finished up!"

There’s the sound of sandals flapping, and a soft voice calls from inside. “Come on in, Caleb!”

“I dunno, Mrs.—”

“Don’t worry about the dirt. I insist!” Mrs. Barnes says. She’s a widow. Her husband died two years ago, and this is the third job I’ve done around her place. She just never picked up any do-it-yourself skills beyond the basics. “My husband never worried about it, and I’m mopping the kitchen this evening after dinner anyway!”

Shrugging, I put my bag down just outside the door and step inside. I find Mrs. Barnes on the other side of the kitchen, wearing a tennis skirt outfit. For a woman who’s probably in her sixties, she definitely stays active. Maybe she’s on her way out to play. “Looks like your petunias are safe for the rest of the summer, Mrs. Barnes,” I say after carefully wiping my feet. “That new PVC pipe is going to last you for years.”

“Thank you, Caleb,” she says. I notice that she’s touched up her blonde hair and makeup too as she turns, holding out a big glass of lemonade and a plate of cookies for me. “You looked like you were working like a total draft horse out there. How about a few cookies?”

I smile shyly. I can’t help it. I know what she’s doing, and it’s really beginning to embarrass me. I take the glass and drink. The woman does make a pretty kick-ass glass of lemonade, with real lemon juice that she squeezes by hand and a few other secret tricks that she says she won’t tell me, just that it’s ‘something men wouldn’t understand’. It’s nearly ice cold too, tart and sweet and singing as it rolls down my throat. I have to be careful. It’s so cold that I know if I chug like I want, I’m going to end up with a splitting headache, and I don’t want that. Setting the glass down, I take one of her homemade peanut butter cookies and take a bite. “Thank you, Mrs. Barnes.”

“You’re so very welcome, Caleb,” she says, setting the plate down. “Oh dear, I do hope this wasn’t a good shirt?”

She reaches out, putting a well-manicured hand on my arm, and I see the small tear in my t-shirt. It’s new, probably from when I tied the thing around my head, but I shrug, feeling weird. I don’t want to be rude, and I don’t want to upset a nice lady who’s a good customer, but I’m not interested in her ‘features’. Also, not to put too strange a point on it, you just don’t seduce a man like me with lemonade and peanut butter cookies. It’s the sort of thing she’d give her son if the son of a bitch didn’t live in

Bend, Oregon, and work as a regional coordinator for FedEx. He didn't even come home for his father's funeral.

Doesn't make it any less weird, and I chew my cookie quickly, trying to keep things professional. "Mrs. Barnes, if you'd like, I'll mail you the invoice for the work today—"

"Nonsense, Caleb, you just rest yourself right there and I'll go get my checkbook. You do take checks, right?" she asks, even though she already knows the answer, but I nod anyway. With most of my customers being from an earlier generation, I've gotten used to taking checks more than cash or credit cards. "I really do have to thank Janice for recommending your services. You are quite the Mr. Fix-It." She emphasizes each word like she has something besides irrigation pipes for me to fix . . .

I chuckle. I don't mind my nickname. "Thanks."

While she fills out the check, I eat another cookie, getting the balance just right. Eat too many, and she's going to insist that I stay longer and have some more because apparently, I need the calories. Eat too few, and I offend her. I swear, I learned more about how to do customer relations in the social hour after church than I ever did in college. When Mrs. Barnes comes back, she glances at the plate of cookies and mostly empty glass of lemonade, giving me another smile and a pat on the chest. "Really, Caleb, you are a godsend. I didn't know what to do when I suddenly started gaining a new swamp out in the back yard. And coming over on your Saturday? I appreciate it. You must have some young lady that you're standing up to take care of me."

I shake my head, smirking. "No, Mrs. Barnes. I was only planning on catching Mindy's new frappe and listening to some new music. I was able to do the music, and I'll grab the frappe later."

"Well, I'll certainly tell all of my friends about you," she says. "Mr. Fix-It is going to be in high demand around here."

I smile, backing away and heading out the door. I don't want to run, even though the hungry look in her eye tells me I probably should. Giving her a little wave, I grab my tool bag and walk around the side of her house to my work truck, a ten-year-old Silverado that I just got a new paint job for. I hate looking like a 'handyman', even if it is my job, and I make sure my truck looks good. When Mrs. Barnes taps on the front window and gives me another wave, I break into what I can only call a power walk, half throwing my tool bag into my cargo box before jumping behind the wheel

and backing out as fast as I safely can. “That’s it,” I mutter to myself as I narrowly avoid her mailbox. “I’m backing into everyone’s driveway from here on out.”

I drive away, chuckling to myself as I reach the stop sign and turn right, heading for the gas station. Really, scared of an old lady who was just feeling a little ‘autumn heat’? Getting out, I top off the tank—I never let my truck get below a half tank after running out of gas in high school—and lean back, laughing to myself. I guess I’m more tired than I thought. Or maybe the lemonade was a little harder than normal?

Nah, that’s not Mrs. Barnes’s style. Like a lot of my clients, she’s pretty sweet. I didn’t think she’d be one of the flirty ones at first, but I’ve gotten my fair share of customers who want to put a little spice in their lives by calling me over to do work around their houses. I didn’t expect that, but it’s okay.

It still sometimes feel like I stumbled into this line of work by lucky accident. When my best friend, Tony Steele’s, mother had us do some work for her, I was glad to help Tony out. After he left town to take over a new family venture in Hawaii, I was asked by his big brother, Oliver, to join him at Steele Solutions. While I’m more than happy to help Oliver out in town and around the area, I’m no real estate tycoon type. I like working with my hands and my brain at the same time. Rewiring a house, repairing plumbing, all sorts of things like that are more interesting to me than just running numbers on a computer screen.

Not that I don’t give Oliver his respect. The man works hard, and he’s hardly the kind to sit on his ass. His business, his family, his wife’s cafe . . . the man works hard, and he can use his hands as much as his brain when he wants. But for me, I get as much satisfaction out of fixing a roof as I do cashing the check I get for the job. Oliver just likes to separate the two is all.

“That way, he doesn’t get hit on by his customers,” I chuckle as I put the nozzle away. “But I gotta remember to thank him and his mom.”

It’s true. Janice Steele’s word, and her circle of friends, have made it possible for me to be an independent handyman. Starting with working around her place, then Oliver’s properties in town, I’ve grown to the point that I’m booked out sometimes two weeks in advance, unless it’s an emergency job like Mrs. Barnes’s garden. Most of my customers, other than Oli, who’s more than willing to jump in and swing a hammer with me if he

can, are either widowed or have husbands who are getting up there in age, and they aren't quite up to some of the challenges of keeping up a house. That's where I come in.

I climb back into my truck, heading for home. It's not a big place, a fixer-upper that I bought with the 'finder's fee' check that Oli cut me for the Hawaii property he's made huge bank on, but I've got it in good shape after a year. Either way, I've got the rest of the weekend to chill out, then Monday, it'll be back to work. "Ah, it's not all bad," I tell myself as I head out, plugging my music player into the dash of my truck and letting Roxy's voice accompany me home. "Eight hours a day, five days a week, and I'm my own boss. TLC for Oli's properties, repair jobs, and cashing checks. Can't really beat that."

"Well, there's one way I could beat it," I think as Roxy switches to one of her love ballads. "But that's not for me."

CASSIE

"And boom!" I cheer myself as, with a bump of my hip, I close the filing cabinet drawer, signaling another project complete. "Headshot!" I hit the button on my computer's media player, and a karaoke version of the old DMX song *X Gon' Give It To Ya* starts playing, with me singing my own version instead. "Cass gon' give it to ya, fuck doin' deals on your own, Cass gon' deliver to ya . . ."

I know my little celebration is trite, and I really shouldn't be yelling out *Headshot* complete with my own choreographed song and dance every time I complete a deal, but I've busted my butt on this. Besides, I'm alone on the second floor of the Flaming Dragon building, and nobody's around to see my silly moves or hear my stupid lyrics. And if Tom Cruise can dance to Ludacris in *Tropic Thunder*, then by God, I'll do what I want when no one can see me.

I'm just hitting the final lines when I turn around and find my boss, Martha, standing inside the door, laughing silently at my antics. I freeze, both hands thrown up in finger pistols, and she laughs harder as the music stops. "Don't worry about me. I'm just investigating the sound of howling strangled cats they were talking about down in the coffee shop."

“You scared the shit out of me!” I hurriedly protest, wiggling and patting my ass. “I might need to do an undie check! You know how dangerous that was?”

“Oh, yeah, you’re the most gangster hundred-and-ten-pound girl in the entire state,” Martha says with a chuckle. She’s dressed as she always is, in a fashionable blouse and slacks combo that, while nowhere near as formal as the clothing I wore when I worked at Aurora, still broadcasts a sense of professional competence that’s more than backed up by what she does. The company might be called Steele Solutions, but Martha’s as vital to Oliver’s success as his own smarts. “What in the world are you doing?”

“Cel-a-brate-ing! The McCormick deal is officially in the books as a win!” I reply, twirling and blowing off my ‘guns’ before holstering them in their invisible holsters next to my skirt. I still like to wear my sexy office clothes when I can, and Oliver doesn’t mind as long as I’m willing to get dirty and throw on a pair of jeans when I need to. And he knows from his own brother’s word that I can get my hands as dirty as anyone. “I got the last of the paperwork from the county clerk today, and it’s all ours! Well, Oliver’s, or, well . . .”

Martha laughs again. “I know what you mean. Great job, Cassie. That was a complex project. I’m proud of you for getting it done on time and on budget. Listen, Oliver’s at home for the day. I heard one of the kids is sick. So how about you take off early, relax, and maybe go out to celebrate tonight?”

She finishes her comment with a raised eyebrow and a smirk. I’m happy to get the praise. And the fact is, I’ve been busting my butt for a long time, trying to make an impact with the company. Really, it’s been hard to maintain my reputation as a ditzy party girl when I haven’t been out shaking my ass on the dance floor in ages. But since I started working for Oliver six months ago, I feel like I’ve grown a lot. Best of all, Oliver’s noticed it too. The last two projects, he let me, more or less, run completely solo after he signed off on my plans. Sure, Martha was there as a safety net, but I managed all the contractors, sales listing, and price negotiations, and now it was sold, baby, sold!

And Martha’s right. The McCormick deal was a complex project. Originally bought by Tony during Tony’s ‘funk phase’, as he calls it, the original plans had Steele Solutions sitting with that turkey of a property around our necks for the next decade. Instead, by finding the right investors

—namely, a Chinese company that wanted to gain an American headquarters and needed a big enough property to get the tax breaks—I was able to take advantage of an opening. By setting up the right contractors for them, I was able to flip the property for not just a profit, but a good profit at that.

"Well, I suppose I could use a little bit of relaxation and reward," I reply, leaning against my desk. "Hmmm . . . what should I get with my sales bonus? Shoes. Definitely those new peep-toe wedges with the ankle-strap ties. Completely impractical, especially in blush pink, but completely gorgeous and well worth the treat as a reward."

"Shoes?" Martha asks, smirking and shaking her head. "I swear, all the smarts you have in that head of yours, and you blow your bonus on shoes?"

"Not just shoes," I reply, biting my lip. "Maybe I'll stop by Victoria's Secret too. The wrapping is sometimes just as important as the present in the box."

"Yes, well, I don't need to know anything about your box," Martha says mock-primly. While she's no prude, she had to deal with both Oliver's and Tony's overactive single libidos for so long, she's had enough. I don't mind. I've been running a pretty epic dry spell anyway. I like to think I can keep things professional. I can still be a ditz—in fact, a lot of people assume I am just from my personality—and I've even used that to my benefit occasionally. But Martha sees through it so she keeps things at a relaxed professional level in the office. Not that I don't miss joking around with Hannah sometimes. "Go on, get out of here before I find some files to shred or something."

"This is Steele Solutions, not the White House," I tease, grabbing my purse. "Thanks, Martha. See you tomorrow."

I head downstairs, grabbing a frappe and a to-go salad from Mindy's Place before heading back to my apartment. It's not much, a one-bedroom half of a duplex, but compared to what I was living in before, it's a damn mansion. I've actually got my own bedroom and living room that are separated by a real wall and not just a folding divider cutting the space in half. Oh, and a bathtub. Oh my God, the luxury of being able to stretch out in my own bathtub whenever I want . . . it's heaven on earth sometimes.

I pop my salad in the fridge and decide that a bath is just what I need. I can do shoe shopping online anyway. None of the shops in town carry the really good brands. Manolos? Try Mano-nolos around this town. Still, I

don’t mind. It’s a small and safe little town. Besides, Amazon is my buddy. So I pour in some bath oil, a gift from Hannah who sent it from Hawaii, the smell instantly relaxing me as I’m reminded of the forest we had to walk through on a constant basis.

In the year since coming back from Hannah and Tony’s wedding, I’ve missed her, even as we’ve grown closer as friends. Still, she’s nearly five thousand miles and six time zones away, which sort of sucks. But the bath oil is nice, and I’m just about to close my eyes when my phone rings. “Well, speak of the devil and she shall appear,” I answer, seeing that it’s Hannah. “How’s life in paradise?”

“Good,” Hannah replies, giggling. “But am I really the devil?”

“Only as much as I’m an angel,” I tease in reply. “What’s going on?”

“Not much,” Hannah says before filling me in on the goings on in Hawaii. In addition to her pregnancy, she and Tony are working at adding some rental cottages to the massive property. While the project’s still in the initial stages, it’s exciting to think about. “Studmuffin told me you closed the McCormick deal. He wanted to say thanks for pulling that albatross off his neck.”

“He can reward me with a first-class plane ticket and two weeks in one of those bungalows, and can you please stop calling your husband Studmuffin all the time?” I joke. “Oh, I love the bath oil. Hawaii smells different from any other place in the world. I guess that’s why it’s a vacation paradise.”

Hannah makes a surprised sound. “You’re calling me when you’re naked in the bathtub?”

“Nope. I’m answering *your* call while I’m naked in the bathtub,” I retort. “A small but important difference. Oh, and tell Tony that when I get there, I expect to have two attendants to see to my every need.”

“Tell you what, you get out here, and I’ll make sure to find some guy you can order around and tease constantly. Speaking of which, how is Caleb?”

“He’s been doing okay. Tony’s mom has gotten her friends to give him quite a few jobs over the past few months,” I tell her, shaking my head. “We go on our weekend runs usually, but he’s been so busy with his handyman work that he has to skip it sometimes. Not to mention, it seems like I’m always out doing something for Oliver anyway. You know, real estate investment is more than sitting on your ass behind a computer.”

“Says the woman whom I taught everything she knows,” Hannah laughs. “If it weren’t for me, you’d still be running around Aurora and taking weekend trips to the sex toy shop to replace your most recently worn out toy, Elmer.”

“Shh,” I reply, putting on a dopey accent. “Be vewwy vewwy qwiet. I’m hunting wabbits.”

“Yeah, well, I hope you’re not needing one anymore,” Hannah says, but when I don’t answer, she hums. “How long has it been?”

“A bit,” I admit. “But come on, Han, it’s not *that* bad. I’ve just not had the time. I’m enjoying working for Oliver, and I want to learn everything I can from him. You know, opportunities like that don’t just fall from the sky.”

“Yeah, well, you just remember that good men don’t fall from the sky either. You gotta go out there and find them,” Hannah says.

We finish up the call and I lean back in the water, letting the scent and the warmth wash away days of tension. The fact is, despite coming across as flirty with the opposite sex sometimes, I’ve been trying to be more low-key since moving to work with Oliver. I want more out of life than a latex toy, that’s for damn sure, and while I’m not a saint, I’m not the girl who was using yoni eggs and packing a silver vibrator in her bag anymore either. Even Hannah senses it, I think, and our comments are more for fun than anything else.

Getting out of the bath, I evaluate myself in the mirror. I’ve let my hair grow longer. It’s almost halfway down my back now, and I think it looks good on me, even if it does make me look a little shorter somehow. I change into some lounge around the house-worthy short shorts and a tank top, letting the boobies dangle free. I’m not built like a pinup model, but I make up for it in other ways.

I get my salad and plop down to my one not-so-secret guilty pleasure, reality shows. Whether it’s *Real Housewives*, bachelors and bachelorettes looking for love in all the wrong places, or even people wanting to get totally ridiculous motorcycles built, I love them. Tonight, it’s *Wedding Dress Hunters*, and while I eat my salad, I smile as the girl on-screen says yes to a poufy princess monstrosity that looks like it came out of a cheap sci-fi movie or something. Whatever floats her boat, I guess.

Finishing my dinner, I pull my laptop into my lap and start searching for potential properties. It was one of the first things that helped Oliver start to

place trust in me. I'm always looking for the next deal, and I routinely find potential properties for him. But my next goal is to do a flip from start to finish . . . find the property, research it, renovate it, and sell it on my own. It'll be my little jump forward on Oliver's trusting me to be independent.

I get lost in the listings, and before I know it, it's almost midnight. I click *Save* on a few of the listings that I want to drive by this weekend and crash into bed, happily exhausted. Maybe it's not a night on the town, but I feel like I've accomplished something.

CALEB

"Ugh," I mutter involuntarily with a wince, holding my hand over my mouth. It doesn't help much. I still feel like the stench is a physical blanket that's assaulting my mouth, nose, and eyes to the point I've got tears running down my cheeks. I've got a pretty strong stomach. I've choked down plenty of disgusting stuff in my time, and I have no problem going elbows deep in a clogged toilet if I have to . . . but this is pushing the limits.

The house is a mess—trash in the corners, holes in the walls, a decided slope to the floor from the front of the house to the back, and a wretched putrid smell that seems to be soaked into every square inch of the walls. When the listing said the house was a 'fixer-upper', I think they were being generous. No wonder Oliver got it so cheap.

I pull out my phone, dialing Oliver. He wanted me to give him a call as soon as I could give him a work estimate. While I wait for him to pick up, I try the window next to me, but it's jammed. Gagging, I head to the back door, but the metal screen door is stuck until I put my boot on the lock and break it off. Fuck it, that's the least of the concerns for this place.

"Hey, Caleb, how's it going?" Oliver greets me. In the background, I can hear the lively conversation in the coffee shop & deli that is Mindy's Place. It's a weird thing about Oliver. He has a perfectly good office upstairs that he could use, but he spends most of his creative time either in the basement taking up a corner of the metal table the pizza chefs use for rolling dough, or a seat in the shop if things aren't too busy. "You're quick on the call. You have an estimate for me already?"

"Hey, Oli, and yeah. How's the restaurant today?"

“Good,” he says. “Mindy had the idea of running a panini lunch buffet, and she’s got a line out the door. So the grill guys are going nuts. How’s the house?”

“Man, how big is your bank account?” I ask, gulping down the sweet clean air of the backyard. It’s a total mess too, but at least the smell isn’t so bad. “Actually, check that. I know you could afford it. But if you want my best advice, get a couple of Molotov cocktails because this house needs to be burned down and rebuilt. It’d be faster and cheaper than trying to fix it.”

“That bad, huh?”

A squeaking noise behind me reminds me of another thing, and I’m glad that I always wear some old military surplus combat boots when I go into places like this. “I’m not even joking about how bad this place is structurally. And it’s got rats, not mice, fucking Lower East Side sewer-size rats in the kitchen. You owe me for this one. I’m gonna need two showers to wash the stench off. And I’m thinking of burning this shirt.”

I can hear the wheels whirring in his mind. It’s what I respect about Oliver. Some people, they’d be pissed off that the house is so much worse than advertised. He isn’t. He knows how to make a profit on this deal no matter what. “You up for lunch? If I smell another panini being grilled right now, I’m gonna lose it. Meet me at the taco stand over by the hotel in ten so we can stay outside. And I’ll stay upwind of you.”

I laugh. “Hey, at least you can see what a real man smells like instead of that fancy cologne shit Mindy has you wearing. But I’ll take the tacos. See ya in ten.”

Oliver laughs, and we hang up. Walking around the house to avoid upsetting the local rodents, I peel off my shirt and toss it into my tool carrier. I was serious about ditching the damn thing. I grab the bottle of antiseptic gel I keep in my glove box for emergencies and squirt my entire chest and arms. It’ll dry out my skin some, but it’ll at least cut the smell and make sure I don’t get some funky ass fungal growth. I get my upper body as best I can before discreetly getting my balls and deciding that’s enough. Pulling on my spare t-shirt, an old high school football shirt that’s seen better days but still keeps a sentimental place in my rotation, I drive over to the taco truck that’s a mainstay in the downtown area near the Grand Waterways Hotel and Park. Oli’s there a few minutes later, pulling up in his new car, a Lexus GX in silver gray.

“I see you’re driving the soccer mom-mobile,” I greet him, slapping hands with him. “What, Mindy’s got the Ferrari?”

He’s never had a Ferrari. He wouldn’t blow his money on something like that, but he laughs. “Yeah, well, it’s still stylin’. Come on, the tacos are on me.”

The taco truck’s famous around town for their fried shrimp tacos, and we get two each. Finding a spot on a nearby planter to sit down, I take a moment to inhale the aroma and to just enjoy the warm day. Now it’s time to eat.

“So tell me about the place,” Oliver says after we’ve both stuffed our faces. “I mean, I get your point. Firebombing the place would be easiest, but that’s not exactly what I can put in an email without having the police knock on the door.”

I fill Oliver in, and he winces. “Trust me, man, best thing to do would be to raze the place and start over. I’d bet even the foundation’s screwed up.”

“Okay,” Oliver says casually. When I don’t reply, he laughs. “Caleb, I know it’s not because you’re bullshitting me or being lazy. If you say it can’t be renovated as is without being massively expensive, then that’s what the deal is. Okay, it’s settled. When I go back, I’ll call the heavy equipment guys. You got another job lined up this afternoon?” Oliver asks, and I smirk. “Figured you were getting busy.”

“It’s not bad once you get past your mom’s friends trying to get a little extra sugar to go with their repair work,” I reply before telling him about Mrs. Barnes trying to seduce me with lemonade and cookies. “But other than that . . . business is booming.”

Oliver chuckles. “Good, good, but what else you got going on, man? Every time we talk, you’re about work. Rewiring this, tiling that, painting the other. What else is going on? You too busy working to get out?”

If there’s anything about Oli that’s a pain in the ass, it’s his insistence on being a big brother to me. I get it. With Tony gone and Oli being a father now, he’s got that instinct going strong in him, but damn, he can get a little nosy sometimes. “I literally just told you I’m getting propositions left and right, even with snacks! What about you and Mindy? Are the kids keeping y’all up all night still?”

Oli drops it. He can see I’m not in the mood, and besides, he can’t pass up the chance to gush about the kids. “They’re doing great, man. You gotta

see them with their Grandma when she visits. It's pure comedy. It seems weird to think that we've got one starting preschool soon, though. Man, I'm telling you, you need to get one of your own. They're a hoot!"

Oliver stops, seeing the expression on my face, and I know he's seeing the warning flash in my eyes before he covers his faux pas with a smile. I let it go and give him a grin back. "Kids aren't in my future, or at least, no time soon. That's why I love to spoil yours rotten . . . and then send them back. I'm fun Uncle Caleb who lets them eat cake for breakfast, stay up all night, and jump on the couch!"

Oliver's eyebrows shoot to his forehead, and he half chokes on his *limonada* that we're having with our tacos. "You . . . let my kids eat cake for breakfast? Now I know why they came back last time begging to go spend the night at your place. Best keep that between us and not let Mindy know."

"What can I say? Your daughter gives me those big puppy dog eyes of hers and I can't do anything except turn on the cartoons and go get some cake."

Oliver laughs, nodding. "Yeah, she's good at that. Okay, we'll keep it between us because if Mindy finds out, you won't get a chance to babysit again, and I happen to like being able to take my wife out on the town every once in awhile. If you ever find a woman you want to marry, don't forget to do date nights. Keeps things solid, sane, and spicy."

"Sounds like a recipe for a good taco too," I wisecrack, and Oliver shakes his head. He knows I'm not listening, and he knows why.

"Okay, well thanks for checking on the house this morning. I'll have Martha get in touch with the heavy equipment contractors, see what we can get out there. As soon as I know, I'll get in touch with you on another property. Sure you won't do more scouting for me?"

I shake my head, offering him my hand. "No dice, Oliver. Besides, I heard Cassie's been doing well for you guys on that. She even skipped our run last weekend because she was, and I quote, 'gonna impress that man if it's the last thing I do.' Apparently, you're *that man*. Lucky bastard." I laugh.

Oliver nods. "Yeah, well, you should find the time for more than sharing a coffee downstairs. Seriously, both of you have momentum now. You can let off the gas a little bit and hang out for a change."

“You trying to play matchmaker with me?” I ask, and Oliver laughs. “What?”

“Caleb, I would be a horrible matchmaker. No, that’s just general advice, and I know you two are friendly, that’s all. Find the time when you can and hang out a bit. Be good for both of your mental health.”

I think about it and nod. “If I find the time, sounds good. She’s fun to joke with—you know how she is. Thousand and one laughs, and then I want to kill her.”

“Yeah, I know someone just like that,” Oliver says, meaning his wife, and I roll my eyes. “Anyway, take care, and don’t eat too many of those cookies. You never know if one of my mom’s friends has slipped something into the mix. You might find yourself tied up in someone’s basement.”

I laugh. “Sounds more like something Mindy or Roxy would do. Should I check your basement sometime for ropes, whips, and handcuffs?”

Oliver growls mockingly, shaking his head. “Think I gotta get back to work. See you later, Caleb.”

CASSIE

“Hey, Martha, it’s Cassie,” I say into my phone as I check that I’ve got everything I need. I’m quite the packer. Even going to the grocery store involves a packing list for me. And airports? The security guys there hate me with a passion. “Listen, I’ll be out of the office today. I’ve got my eyes on three different properties that might be good purchases.”

It’s not a total lie. I do plan on spending most of the day working, but if I get done early, I still have some shoes to buy. I tell Martha a few details just in case she needs to get ahold of me, then I hang up and plug my phone into my dash dock where it’ll work as my navigation if I need it. I’m terrible with driving directions. I don’t think I could get myself from the office downstairs to the cafe if I didn’t have it sometimes. Thankfully, I already input the three addresses for today’s journey, and I check my other supplies. Laptop in case I need to send a serious email or something—check. Frappe from Mindy’s Place for my morning caffeine buzz—check. Shoulder bag with my camera, wallet, and of course, all the other stuff I need to make sure I look good if I happen to run into Tom Hardy while I’m out—check. *Always gotta be prepared*. That’s my motto.

I fire up my engine, and Roxy's cover of *Hallelujah* starts up. Damn, that girl can sing, and while she's not my entire playlist, it's a great way to start the morning. I cruise, letting my body relax as I get ready for a day in the 'mobile office'. I've always enjoyed this part of my job, working outside the office. Investigating new properties is fun. I always feel like I'm part *Sherlock Holmes*, part *Storage Wars*, and part *True Detective*. *House Hunters?* Please. I'm serious with this. I'm not going to be worrying if the kitchen has granite countertops or not. I'm looking for the deal.

It's probably the most fun part of my job. Most people, when they go looking for a house, they want the good stuff. They're looking for new carpets, fresh paint, all the bells and whistles. We're not. I want to find the worst house in the best part of town, pick it up at a steal, sink fifteen thousand into it, and either rent it out or flip it for twenty percent profit. In fact, the best way to get Steele Solutions to cut a check for your property is to make sure the carpet needs to be replaced.

It takes me about fifteen minutes to get to the first house, a two-bedroom for sale by a couple that's moving up and out. It's adorable and I love the all-brick construction, but as I get out of my car, I make sure to lock the doors. Our small town is nowhere near as bad as some of the nearby big cities, but every town's got 'that area', the part of town where the folks who just don't fit in live. Unfortunately for this couple, their house is right on the edge of 'the tracks', as we call it. On the edge, and looking around at the other houses, not in a good way either.

It's a shame too, because looking at the house itself, it'd be a place I'd love to live and start a family when the time's right. There's even a fireplace, and to me, nothing is more romantic than cuddling up in front of a real fire on a winter's night. But no amount of renovation to the house will make up for the decidedly unsafe street it resides on.

Hurrying back to my car, because Mama didn't raise no fool, I'm off to property two. Pulling up out front, I feel a little tingle of excitement. The house has got hidden appeal, as it's almost completely covered by a huge shaggy tree in the front that drapes down to meet the overgrown weeds standing as tall as I am. And while I'm on the shorter side, that's for a woman, not for a weed!

I get out of my car, checking my notes on my tablet before I try and fight my way through the jungle that is the yard. The house is in a good-ish neighborhood. It was just caught up in a court battle for years. An old man

died, and his two sons fought over the family home. Finally, the probate court said fuck it, and the property's up for sale.

I walk up to the house, trying my best to keep to the cracked walkway. It's a shame, really. The two sons could have gotten a lot higher value for this place if they'd just agreed to split the sale or to just have one of them sell it. Fuck, flip a coin. Don't let a house get like this! Thank God for jeans that make my ass look good and light hiking boots.

My initial excitement fades as I get inside. While the pictures that the website displayed showed the good side, they certainly hid the bad. All of the plumbing fixtures are corroded. The whole place will have to be repiped, and I bet from looking at the outlets, it'll have to be rewired too. I didn't think anyone even *had* outlets like that in their houses anymore.

As I make my way upstairs, I'm tallying a list of projects for the house, and even before I get to the spare bedroom that has no ceiling because a leaky roof collapsed inward, I realize it's not a money-making option. There's light damage that can be replaced and repaired economically, and then there are total renovations that cost more than they're worth. This house is definitely part of the second group. Damn it. Zero for two today. Off to the third on the list . . . and it's nearly an hour out of town, just over the county line.

I get on the Interstate and start to cruise. As I do, I realize that I'm not that far from the town where I lived as a little kid. I didn't always live near the big city. In fact, for the first ten years of my life, I was a country girl. I spent my summers swimming in the river, riding my bike like a crazy person, and camping in the backyard of what was the best house ever. Two stories, it was an old farmhouse that my parents had bought and renovated before I was born. While the farm itself wasn't ours, we still had a full acre to ourselves, a big garage, and a playset that gave me some of the best memories I could imagine. I haven't stopped by since moving back to work with Oliver. The memories are a little too painful to think about. Still, I'm pulled toward checking it out.

On a whim, I decide to get off the highway and head over to my old place. I haven't been back here in over fifteen years, not since my mom got a new job and we had to move, but the turns are familiar to me. The street curves. A few of the houses have changed, but I can still identify some of them.

When I see 614 Douglas, I'm slow driving, just sort of intending to do a drive-by of the old home. I'm certainly not intending to spend much more time than that. I have to get out to this third property for Oliver before the afternoon wears on any longer. But as I see the property, I hit my brakes, stunned. The house looks just like it did before, with the wide front and almost Alpine-steep roof that's broken up by two jutting outcroppings. I've always thought they looked like eyes over the long porch that wraps around the whole front. The railing is just like it always was, a sort of off-white that made me think the house was a smiling face.

But what causes me to smack my brakes isn't the house, but the sign out front. I blink, rubbing my eyes, but when I open them, it's still there, just like it was before.

For Sale by Owner.

Holy shit. My childhood home's for sale.

CASSIE

I stare at the house from the curb, my brain swept away on a flood of memories, some good, some bad. Here, twenty feet away from me, is the oak tree that Mama didn't want me playing in, but I still did every chance I got since the trunk was split. She said it was because of storm damage when she was pregnant with me, but whatever the reason, thick branches started not that far off the ground, and to a little girl who loved to climb, it looked like a ladder to the sky. I scrambled up that ladder so often I knew every twist, nook, and cranny in the branches. At least, I thought I did until I was eight and slipped and fell. I'm lucky I got away with nothing but a small scar under my chin. In fact, it's still visible if you know where to look.

I step up onto the same sidewalk that I used to hopscotch down for hours, using chalk that I'd gotten from anywhere I could. I don't know why I was such a hopscotch nut. All of my friends outgrew the game by third grade, but I'd stay out until the streetlights came on and Mama would holler out at me from the kitchen that it was time to come inside for dinner. There's nothing drawn on it now, but to me, I can still see the ghostly outlines in pink, yellow, blue, and green and feel the bounce of my ponytail as I hopped along.

I shake my head—that girl hasn't been around for over a decade—and cross the yard. It needs some maintenance. The sign on the house is dusty, and clearly, the place has been up for sale for a while. Stepping closer, I can start to see why. While the rails on the porch have a relatively fresh coat of paint, the floorboards themselves are listing a little. I remember sometimes, right at the end before Mama and I moved, sneaking out to avoid the sounds coming from her bedroom as she and her latest boyfriend did things I didn't quite understand at the time. This was during the bad years, after Dad left, and Mama . . . well, she needed men like some people need water.

So I used to sneak out, sometimes to sleep in the treehouse I had in the backyard, sometimes just to walk around and smell the night air. I remember that the board just to the left of the window used to always squeak, no matter how hard we'd nail it down. Now, though, there's no way I'd trust myself to the porch. Half of the boards look dry rotted, and the whole thing is listing slightly to the back. Knowing my luck, if I take one step on that thing, I'd fall right through and end up with a splinter the size of a ballpoint pen in my ass.

I walk around the side, down the dirt driveway to the parking area in the back, what people in this area call a 'dooryard'. The garage is gone, just a concrete slab now, but other than that, little's changed. I can almost see Mama standing in the sagging screen door, calling my name. My eyes start to prickle with tears. I can almost feel a whisper of her there, but she's not. She's been gone for a couple of years now. While Dad and I are on polite terms, his life's not around here anymore. He probably hasn't been back here in twenty years.

But this . . . this is where I see Mama. It's in the buzz of the cicadas, the humidity, and the sunsets where the air hangs thick like sap around you. A place where your skin glistens five minutes after you dry off from the warmth, and every meal is accompanied by a glass of iced tea or lemonade just to get that cool kiss before diving into something spicy and most likely fried.

I check the back door. It's locked, of course, but the windows are just high enough that I can look around. The kitchen looks a mess, but the trained evaluator in me sees that it's surface mess.

Going around, I see the same thing repeated time after time. Most of the damage in the house is superficial, although there's some that's due to age.

When I get to the corner room, where my old bedroom used to be, I know. This is my next project, the first one from find to finish, all mine.

I'll talk it over with Oliver, of course, mainly because I'll need the time to do all of this, but that's okay. I'm going to make this house all the things I wanted as a little girl. There were so many things that Mama said she'd fix but never did. The reason we could never fix anything was the same. "We don't have the money right now, honey," Mama would say, and while it was true, she spent more than enough money chasing after her boyfriends, usually on clothes to attract them or some other man.

But this house . . . I know what I need to do. Going around front, I take a few pictures of the property, then make sure I get the number on the *For Sale* sign down before I get in my car. I start up my engine and give 614 Douglas another look before pulling away. I've got one more house to look at for Oliver, and then I need to get home.

I've got research to do, and shopping for shoes online can wait.

CALEB

"*My name is Sue! HOW DO YOU DO?"* my radio blares as I pull up in front of Mindy's Place. Finally, after a few years of its being open, a lot of the people around town aren't calling it the Flaming Dragon building anymore, but the old nickname still sticks around.

Shutting off my truck's engine, I look inside, trying to decide whether I want to sit down and enjoy the atmosphere or if I want to grab 'n' go. It's not that I don't like the cafe, but at seven thirty in the morning, I'm in no mood to put up with pretentious bullshit, and sometimes, the local bankers like to turn Mindy's Place into Mini Wall Street. My jeans and work boots do *not* fit in with that crowd.

But they seem to still be asleep, and I remember that banks don't open until I'm already working today. I yawn, rubbing my eyes and feeling the intense need for caffeine. Getting out, I check my watch and decide I've got a few minutes to actually enjoy the cafe. Maybe I've even got time to enjoy a bagel. Not much more. I've got three jobs today, and unless I want to be roofing a garage by starlight, I need to get a move on.

Walking in, I see Mindy behind the counter, grinning a smile that's way too bright for this time in the morning. She must be sipping some of her

own goods. I give her a wave as I walk up. “Hey, Beautiful, does your husband know you’re here to see me every day?”

Mindy laughs. She and I have done this dance for at least the past year and a half, since I started helping out Oliver. “Pretty sure he knows you come in here to see me. In fact, he said if you stare at my ass anymore, he’s gonna kick yours so hard you’ll have a second crack. Steele lines it up . . . it’s good!” she jokes, making a field goal sign with her arms.

I laugh. It’s what I love about Mindy. Successful business owner, sure. But she’s still approachable, and she knows I’m just messing around. Oliver does too, but I still gotta get my jabs in. “Any day he wants to try, but don’t be sad when you have to take care of his broken body. I float like a butterfly, sting like a bee, and kick like a mule.”

Mindy shivers and starts giving a phantom massage while gyrating her hips. “Do your worst, Caleb. I’ll take care of my man’s body anyway, anyhow, anytime.”

I cringe and give up, laughing. “Ok, you win . . . I don’t want a mental image of that. Ever. Can I get the usual?”

Mindy rolls her eyes. “For here or to go?”

“I have time to drink it here, but pack it to go anyway. And can you throw in a bagel with cream cheese? Gonna need the energy today.”

“One of those days, huh?” Mindy asks, and I nod. She reaches down and pulls out ‘my’ cup, a fifty-ounce insulated cup with a built-in straw. Mindy twirls it on her finger and sets it down. “One Caleb-sized full-caff, sweet as my sister, roughly the thickness of motor oil coming right up.”

I wander over to the far side of the counter and take a seat. It’s my favorite. From here, I can watch everyone coming in and out of the door and still get to talk with the staff.

There’s a rattle from the back, and I see Oli coming up the stairs from the basement kitchen. After a quick kiss on Mindy’s cheek, he walks over, a mock scowl on his face.

“You here harassing my wife again?”

“Just for a minute. Gotta get my daily fix before heading out today.”

He nods, taking the seat next to me. “Got anything interesting today?”

“Three jobs. The first two aren’t much. Mrs. Henderson needs a bush yanked out of her yard—and no comments from you, Mindy. I realize I set myself up as soon as I said it!” I add offhandedly, getting a laugh from them

both. “Then I’ll do some painting for the Portnoys, and then the afternoon’s going to be patching Kelly Roberts’s garage roof.”

Oliver nods. “You got time to go over a couple of things really quickly upstairs?”

“Yeah, of course, anything for you. You know that.” The assistant who’s been watching my coffee brings over my huge cup and bagel, which I pick up and make a quick sandwich of. I raise my cup to Mindy. “Thanks, Mindy!”

“Anytime, Number Three!” Mindy calls, and I have to laugh. It’s a joke between the two of us. Oliver, of course, is Number One. I’m not even sure who Number Two is. But I’m Number Three on her list of guys. I’m good with that.

Following Oliver upstairs, I take a quick sip of my coffee, which they iced down just like I like in the summertime. I like hot coffee like any good handyman, but right now, it’s damn near ninety degrees by ten in the morning, and I can use anything to cool me off.

Closing the door to save the cool air and give us some privacy, Oliver walks around to the other side, grabbing a stack of folders. “So I was thinking—” he begins, but stops. “Caleb, how backed out are you on your handyman stuff?”

“Right now?” I ask, pulling out my phone and checking my schedule. “If you’re talking Monday to Friday, I’m booked through to next Thursday. If it’s an emergency, I can bump people around, work on weekends. Why, what’s up?”

“Nothing that’s an emergency, but we just closed a few deals and I want to get them into rental shape before the summer’s out,” he said. “At least three of them are in the University District, and you know that with the school year coming up . . .”

“You want them looking good for all the new tenants before classes start,” I finish for him. “What’re you looking at?”

“Two houses—nothing big—but also a sixplex that’ll need a good amount of sprucing up,” Oliver said. “I’m sure I could hire other people to go over them, but I trust you to do the job right and not fuck me over on hours either.”

I nod, grateful for the straight talk. Oli’s right, a lot of handymen and contractors around here charge guys like Oliver based not on how much the job’s worth, but how much they think they can get away with. Not my style.

Oliver continues. “So what I was thinking, if you can, start the work on the sixplex as soon as possible, mainly just clearing the smell at first. You know how college kids are. Then move on from there. You’re doing a roofing job today, so you’ve got a lot of the materials still, I take it?”

“Of course. What else?”

We go over the plans, and I’m glad to see that Oliver’s right. Other than maybe jumping on the defunking of the sixplex, nothing is an immediate job.

“I think I can get this cleared out soon,” I tell him and raise an eyebrow as he picks up another folder. “You must want to buy me a new truck.”

“Not quite,” Oliver says with a smirk. “This next one, we haven’t made an offer on yet. I wanted to see if you can add a gable to the front to make it symmetrical. That one might need a drive-by and to check the codes.”

“I can take a look on Sat—” I start, but before I can finish, the office door bangs open and Cassie comes in. Seeing her come into the office with her boundless energy lifts my mood. I never really admitted it before, but she’s *stunning*.

She isn’t dressed for success like she normally is, just in a t-shirt and jeans. What makes her stunning, though, is the light in her eyes, the fierce look of determination that I’ve seen before. When she’s like this, the higher the Cassie volume is, the prettier she gets. And right now, she’s cranked up all the way.

I’m looking at a five-foot-one hurricane of energy, moving so fiercely that I’m surprised her hair isn’t flying out in all directions, her face lit up with a smile that could power Washington if it stretched just an inch wider.

“I found it!” she declares, jabbing a fist in the air. “I found the one!”

“The one what?” Oliver asks, amusement in his voice as I sit there, still too flabbergasted to talk. “And good morning, by the way.”

“Yeah, yeah, good morning, guys,” Cassie says before her sparkling eyes light up again. “I found my first project!”

CASSIE

Slurping, I spoon the last of my Corn Pops into my mouth. I blink, wishing I had my morning coffee already, but I can’t make coffee to save my damn life. At least, not compared to what Mindy makes, and it’s like

being exposed to real beef after eating nothing but tofu all your life—there just ain't no going back. I've tried bribing her to learn her secret, but she's not talking. So I only drink home brew if I'm in a pinch.

I was up all night last night looking at the property information on 614 Douglas, using all the websites I've got at my disposal for research. I did comparatives on the neighborhood, got in contact with the owner and got title information, pictures of the inside, and more.

By the time I lay down at four in the morning, I knew my initial feelings were right. The house is definitely going to be my first project. I just have to convince Oliver.

I still didn't get much sleep. The problem was, the numbers just weren't golden. It isn't a shoe-in, as the comps really show that the profit margin is tight, at best, but I know I can do it. And more importantly, I *need* to do it. The house deserves it after surviving my wild youth. It's the home of some of my best memories, and it was the house that waited patiently while Mama and I kept promising to bring it back to its former glory . . . and we never delivered. I tossed and turned all night, mentally prepping my speech to get Oli to agree.

But I've only been working for Oliver for less than a year. Sure, I got the McCormick property off his back, but taking one albatross off only to put another one on isn't in his plans at all. But I've got faith. Still, I was so frenetic with energy, I had to resort to my trusty Mr. Rabbit because post-orgasm sleep is the best sleep. Even after the quickie session, though, I barely did much more than doze.

I get in my car and drive to the Flaming Dragon building, walking in the front door to see Mindy smiling and joking with the morning customers. The professional crowd is just starting to come in, and for the first time, I feel a bit out of place in the same jeans I wore yesterday. I was just so addled when my alarm went off that I was barely able to brush my teeth and pull on fresh undies and a decent t-shirt.

"Hey, Sexy Star," Mindy greets me, her normal big smile helping a little. She gives everyone in her 'family' nicknames, and I'm Sexy Star. I appreciate the gesture, really. "No offense, but you look like wired hell."

"Thanks," I reply, feeling a shot of adrenaline as I remember why I'm here. "I've been up all night, so could I get a triple 'spresso with a shot of whatever you got that'll have me perky?"

“On it,” Mindy says, grinning and heading over to the machine. “What had you up all night? New man?”

“Ha!” I say with a laugh. “No, I found something better. I found my first project. I need to talk with Oliver about it.”

Mindy stops and gives me a warm look. “Good for you! If that’s the case, I’ll throw in some extra perkiness.”

I slam my triple espresso, trying to build on the excitement and momentum that Mindy’s words light inside me. Licking the last drops of dark, sweet liquid out of the glass, I take a deep breath and steel myself. “Okay, I’m off.”

“Drop it like it’s hot,” Mindy says in farewell, and I chuckle, popping my hip into the door upstairs in reply. With every step up to the second floor, I can feel the excitement build in me, and by the time I reach the first landing, I’m almost running up the stairs. I hit the door, my prepared speech flying out the window as soon as I burst in, seeing Oliver at his desk.

“I found it!” I yell, fist pumping like a madwoman from the Jersey shore. “I found the one!”

“The one what?” Oliver asks, smirking. “And good morning, by the way.”

“Yeah, yeah, good morning, guys,” I reply, realizing that Caleb’s there too. “I found my first project!”

“Your first project? Surely, some guy didn’t ask you to marry him since I saw you last?” Caleb jokes. “How much of a loser did he have to be that not only did he ask you, but you’re calling him a *project* too?”

I stick out my tongue, blowing Caleb a raspberry. He’s as handsome as ever, looking dressed for work, obviously, in his boots and t-shirt, with what looks like a nearly a pony keg of something in front of him on the desk, his personal drink holder that he takes coffee to work sites in. “No, smart ass. As if I want to get locked down into sandwich making for some dad bod who only surfs the couch. The house . . . I found *THE HOUSE*.”

It’s pretty clear by the tone of voice I used that I’m saying it all in capital letters, and Oliver’s eyebrows lift by a good half inch even as he leans back in his chair. “What house? Whatcha got?”

I take a deep breath and walk around Oliver’s desk, opening up my bag to hand him a flash card and some of the stuff I printed out last night. “It’s all on the sheet, but here’s the basics. It’s a three-bedroom converted farmhouse on a quiet street, two and a half baths. It could become a four-

bedroom, but one of the rooms has been used as a home office and walk-in closet. It's on a full acre of land, and there's a huge tree out front begging to have a tire swing on it, and a front porch. It's not quite a starter home. It's a step up from that, but it's the sort of home a young couple could raise a family in for the next twenty or thirty years if they wanted."

Caleb whistles softly. "Sounds idyllic. What's wrong with it?"

I glare at him. *Way to cockblock me there, buddy. I'm so going to take it out on you if I get the chance*. "Shush, I'm trying to create a mood here." I look back at Oli, who's giving me the same look, and I know I've got to get it together. I try to remember what the hell I was going to say with my speech and take a moment, opening my laptop and pulling up the pictures. "Here's the house. I know it's going to need some work—"

Oliver snorts as he scrolls through the shots. "Yeah, that's not the house you just described. Other than the obvious, what's it need?"

"It's a For Sale by Owner. I talked with the owner last night, and he was really helpful. He emailed me an inspection he got when he moved out. First things first, the porch will have to be totally replaced. Apparently, the guy tried to use trailer jacks on it and screwed up. The interior needs to be cosmetically gutted. The paint's at least eight years old, the kitchen lino over a decade."

"Looks like a refugee from the seventies," Caleb comments. "Lime green? Fuck, that's horrible."

"The whole place will need new flooring, but there's a hidden jewel underneath," I say. "I know for a fact that underneath the bad carpet in the rest of the house is real black walnut flooring. Sand it down and refinish it, and boom!"

"Black walnut flooring covered with carpet?" Oliver says wonderingly. "If it's still good, that could be helpful. Still, what are the costs involved?"

I give him a rundown of the costs, showing him the Excel spreadsheet I worked up. Of course I don't have exact numbers, but it's a start. "Given the recent sale prices of properties in the area, I'd say the top price we could get on the sale is maybe three hundred thousand if we get an upswing in the area."

Oliver nods and looks over the spreadsheet some more before sitting back and tapping at his lip thoughtfully. "I'm going to be honest with you, Cassie. I admire the enthusiasm, and you know I appreciate your eye for visualizing what this house could be. And it could be beautiful. I see the

outside of the house and I see what you mean. But look at the numbers. That's pretty tight profits. I'm not sure it's something I want to take on right now when we have higher-percentage investments on the books."

I shake my head, fire burning deep in my heart as I click back to the pictures. "I knew you'd be looking for higher-margin investments, and I have another we can talk later about too. But I can do this. I found it, researched it, and have outlined the project. I want to do it all, start to finish, and show you what I'm capable of. I obviously can't afford it on my own, but I do have enough for the down payment, so I'll have a stake in it. Just give me a chance, please?"

Caleb laughs lightly. "Think you're ready to fly solo, baby bird? I could push you out of the nest myself if you want." He gets up and reaches out with his long muscular arm to push me in the shoulder, but I hop to the side. He goes to follow but freezes when he sees the look in my eyes. "You're serious about this, aren't you? What's got you so fired up about this place in particular? By the time you get your profit, you'd probably have made more slinging frappes downstairs considering the number of hours it's going to require."

Oliver nods in agreement. "I don't think so, Cassie. You might be ready, and I'm willing to let you try. But it's not this project. Don't you want a sure thing your first time out?"

I shake my head, crossing my arms over my chest and putting on what I hope is my most stubborn look, although I've been told it looks pouty. I can't help it. I have a natural worry line that looks cute, dammit! "Nope, I want this one." I look from Oliver to Caleb and back, both of whom look less than impressed. "Look, it's *my* house. The one I grew up in. I want to fix it up, make it pretty and functional so it gets the family it always deserved. Right now, it's going to rot. I *need* to do this. I know that puts me starting off on the wrong foot. I know I'm using my emotions more than my brain on this, but that house deserves better than what's happening to it now. I'll put in work myself, elbow grease and sweat and blood and whatever else it needs. Please."

Oli looks at Caleb, who looks back. Both of them are definitely surprised by the vehemence in my voice. I know I'm sounding a little whacked over this, and yeah, I'm breaking rule number one of property investment, which is you make decisions with your calculator, not with your heart. I'm normally a perky upbeat smartass, so I'm sure this is a

shock. But seeing 614 Douglas, I have to do this. Because there's more than just good memories there. There are bad ones too, bad memories that aren't the house's fault, and I want to exorcise those demons from the house and from my soul. I want to sweep them away, leaving behind just the little seedling that's in the bottom of my heart.

Oliver looks at Caleb again, then at me. "Caleb? How much time can you clear over the next two months on your schedule?"

CALEB

At Oliver's question, I knew the inevitability of the situation. It was like watching fate at work. After Cassie's pleading, he had to give in. I got the call while I was at the Portnoys', cleaning up from painting their fence before heading over to the Roberts house to take care of her garage roof, where her son had somehow put a croquet ball through the roof.

Of course Oliver had his misgivings, he told me. He still made it clear that it was a risky investment, but he'd do it for her if she got it at the right price. And since I'm the handyman he trusts, he wants me to at least give her a heads-up on what all this place needs. So here I am, driving to meet her at her childhood home.

Normally, I'd be calling it a day and heading home by this point, two fat checks and a nice wad of cash in my pocket and nothing on my mind but grabbing a shower. Instead, I'm driving all the way into the next county to meet Cassie and the homeowner to do a quick walkthrough.

Pulling up, I can see the sun setting behind the house and it does look nice. Of course, that's probably because it's mostly in shadow and you can't see the porch hanging on by a thread that was readily obvious in the pictures this morning. Cassie's memories are seriously giving her rose-tinted goggles on this, I suspect, but I'll do my best to help her out.

I pull around back to the dooryard and see a backyard that's half jungle, half fire ant hill, and I cringe some more. The pecan trees are nice, though. I can see Cassie and an older man standing inside. Parking my truck, I walk to the door, carefully stepping over the suspicious-looking steps on the way up. It looks like more than the front porch will have to be replaced.

Opening the screen, I step inside. Cassie stops mid-sentence and stares at me, her mouth half hanging open in surprise. I realize that I might be a

little unsightly after a day of work. I'm sure my hair is messy from running my fingers through it, my shirt has been wet then dried multiple times today—and it probably smells like a locker room—and my hands are still dirty from the roofing patch. Figuring I'd better start off on the right foot since she's with the owner, I hold my smartass comment about rendering her speechless and put an embarrassed smile on my face. Besides, he knows why I'm here. I don't need to be freshly shaven and wearing a suit.

"Hey, Cassie, sorry I'm late. Just finished up for the day and got here as fast as I could." To the man, who doesn't look that put-out at all, I give a respectful nod. "I'd offer my hand, sir, but you probably don't want it. I'm Caleb Strong. I contract with Steele Solutions."

Cassie still hasn't said a word, and I wonder for an instant if I've somehow offended her by showing up not smelling like Head & Shoulders. The man notices it, too, and breaks the silence. "Hello, I'm Frank Wannamaker. And don't worry, I've heard about you. I have a church friend who's mentioned you—Rebecca Miller?"

"Mrs. Miller?" I say, then smile. She's one of my favorite clients, friendly and professional with no funny business. The four days I was repairing her wall, I got lunch and ice cold tea almost every hour. "I hope her wall's doing well. Laying stone is an interesting challenge compared to brick."

Finally, after an awkward moment, Cassie shakes her head and returns to her speech. She's apparently discussing comp values and the sales price he's asking. I can quickly tell that Mr. Wannamaker is slightly overwhelmed but charmed at the same time. "Miss White, let's sit down," he finally says. "This wasn't really my house, but my brother's. When he decided to move down to Costa Rica to join some retirement community, I bought it off him to make sure he was taken care of. So I just want to get my money out of it."

Reassured that Cassie's got Frank well under control, I raise my voice. "Excuse me, Cassie. Do you mind if I look around a bit while y'all talk? Let me get an idea of what needs done?"

When she nods, I wander off, walking through to the kitchen. I can still hear Cassie talking and laugh to myself. She's gonna get this house at a great price and he's not gonna know what hit him. She's in full-blown Cassie Charmer mode. Yeah, that's what she calls it when she's in the zone. She's mixing in giggles, little jokes, and business talk in this casual,

overwhelming mix of hilarity that leaves people thinking she's an airhead. I saw her do the same thing when I helped her out when she first moved to town and took her car shopping. She ended up driving off the lot in a car that left the salesman looking slightly stunned, and I'm sure, upset later over how much he'd let Cassie get away with.

Somehow, though, she never makes people too mad at her about her charm. She's just too bubbly, nice, and supposedly airheaded to ever catch blame for it. I've teased her about it . . . multiple times, but damn if she's not good. She could sell ice to an Eskimo and he'd walk away feeling like he won. As I check out one of the smaller bedrooms, she walks in smiling from ear to ear. "Cass, I pulled up some of the carpet, and you're right, the floors can be refinished, but—"

"DONE!" Cassie says before starting to twirl and sing off-key. She's cute as hell, but she can't sing to save her life. "Cass gon' give it to ya—"

"What?" I interrupt her, throwing up my hands in a futile attempt at stopping her. "You already agreed on a price? Don't you want to know what the reno will cost or run it by Oliver first?"

Cassie doesn't stop her dancing, shaking her ass in a way that has me looking at her hips, but she stops singing at least. "Nope, doesn't matter. It's low enough that there's no way he'll turn it down. I told him I grew up here with my mama and I wanted to fix it up right. Showed him the corner of the fireplace where I chipped my front tooth and the faint little lines on the doorway to the kitchen where my height is marked. He said that was 'right nice' and agreed to my low-ball starting offer! Already gave me the keys and said we can finish the paperwork tomorrow, but he was good with a handshake offer!"

She continues her little celebration, grabbing my hands to try to make me dance. I'm not much of a dancer, at least not without having music, but I try my best, figuring if I don't, she's going to start singing again. And I can't have that. "Watch it, I'm still dirty from working all day. I'll get you dirty."

Cassie laughs, undeterred. "I don't care. Celebrate with me!"

"Figures you'd like to get a little dirty, wouldn't you? Just how dirty do you like it?" I reply with a raised eyebrow and a deep voice. But it's a joke, it's always a joke. This is what we've done from the first time we met. We make crude comments, double entendres, and tease each other mercilessly. It's been the cornerstone of our relationship. I don't think we've ever really

said anything serious to each other, and when we have, I'm not sure if we're telling the truth or just joking again.

Cassie stops, her eyes gleaming in the dim overhead light, a seductive smile on her lips that has me feeling shaky. Maybe we've always joked, but right this minute, with that sultry look in her eyes, I wonder if I've been going about this all wrong. "You don't know the half of it. And my toys will never tell," she says cheekily. "They're sooo good to me."

The sudden image of Cassie playing with a sex toy sends another tingle through my body, and when I reply, my voice is huskier, deeper, more demanding. This time, though, I'm not joking, even if she is. "Toys? Oh, hell, you'll have to tell me those stories . . . slowly and in detail. Come on, I'll even buy you a celebratory dinner."

CALEB

We walk outside and decide to take my truck to grab dinner. I open the door for her, because my mom raised me right, and then close her in before heading to the driver side. I open up, but as I do, the wind shifts, and I realize I've forgotten something. Reaching into my back bench, I grab my little 'clean bag' and unzip it. "At least let me put on a clean shirt."

"Great, I'm going to dinner with Sasquatch," Cassie jokes. "You know, I've got some perfume in my purse, if you want."

"Not in a million years," I say, reaching behind my neck and pulling my tee over my head. I use it to do a little wipe down over my abs and back, and then I do my pits last before grabbing a small bottle of hand sanitizer, rubbing it up my forearms and over my hands. I look up and realize that Cassie is staring at me, jaw hanging wide open. "See something you like?"

Cassie shakes herself, seemingly mentally and physically, and grabs my shirt, tossing it at my face. "You wish. Just daydreaming about the house. Now drive!"

I let her off the hook because she wasn't thinking about the house. She was thinking about me. I could see it in her eyes. It makes me smile, even if I know she doesn't really mean anything by it. We've been friends for a while now, to the point where we once went on a double date. That was a disaster, though, because my date instantly got jealous of my jokes with Cassie and didn't get that we just tease each other like that. But seriously,

it’s not a big deal. Slipping my clean shirt on, I throw the sweaty one at her as I climb into the truck. She squeals, as expected, and threatens to throw it out her window before tossing it behind her into the back.

“The usual?” I ask as I crank the engine. The music starts up, and Cassie nods in approval as *Disturbed* comes on. It’s another thing that I like about Cassie. We both like a lot of different kinds of music so it’s easy to find something we both enjoy. She can appreciate good rock, and I’ve even seen her humming along the few times she’s heard country in my truck.

“As if there’s any question. Now floor it. I’m getting hungry!” And with that, we head off to her favorite burger joint, a converted train boxcar with outdoor seating that’s about halfway back to town called *The Little Diner That Could*. Cheesy name, and thankfully, even cheesier burgers. As we pull up out front, she clucks her tongue. “You realize it’s been awhile since we’ve hit this place up?”

“You’re the one burning the midnight oil on work stuff,” I tease.

“And you’re the one getting hit on by women old enough to be your mom with cookies and milk,” she says, and I swear I’m going to kill Mindy or Oliver. How many other people know about my customers doing that?

“Actually, recently, it’s been lemonade.”

“Lemonade and chocolate chip cookies? Revolting!”

“Peanut butter,” I protest, grimacing. Yeah, chocolate and lemonade are not a good mix at all. “Come on, let’s eat.”

I’m glad Cassie likes her burgers because I’m fucking starving. She can put away a burger almost as fast as I can. Her only bad habit is that she dips her fries in a chocolate milkshake. Disgusting, but it’s her favorite so I just don’t watch.

Walking into the diner, we grab our usual table in the corner where the breeze is at its strongest and wave at the waitress. A few minutes later, as we pick up our big, juicy burgers, I pause, holding it up like a drink. “And a toast—to Miss Cassie White . . . on a deal closed, on a project to be completed, on a first gig all to herself. You’re gonna kill it!”

“And to my grunting caveman, whom I know I’m going to bug the shit out of as I get the place redone,” Cassie says, raising her burger. We bump burgers in a slight mash of bacon, cheese, bread, and beef, but that’s us. So what if it’s not champagne? I ain’t a champagne kinda guy. Burger toasts seem just about right for us.

“So, what do you think?” Cassie says before she takes a huge bite of her burger. She’s somehow able to fit more food in her mouth than a girl her size should even attempt.

“Your manners are still horrible,” I tease, taking advantage of the fact that she’s got so much food in her mouth she can neither blow a raspberry nor stick her tongue out at me. “If you mean the house, I think I know some ways to shave a little off the repair bill.”

“Really?” Cassie half mumbles before swallowing. “Caleb, I appreciate that, but I don’t want to shortchange the house.”

“It’s not shortchanging,” I say around a half mouthful of my own burger. “But there are still ways we can get better profits without hurting the renovations. I was thinking . . . you mentioned in your spiel this morning that the place will probably need new appliances, right?”

“Yeah,” Cassie says, dipping a fry and noshing on it open-mouthed, smiling. If her lips weren’t so damn cute, I’d be upset. As it is, I’m still disturbed. “What, you know a guy who knows a guy?”

“Actually, we both know the guy,” I tell her. “I had to pull a water heater from one of Oliver’s properties two weeks ago. Nothing wrong with the thing. It was brand new when the old owners sold the property, but it just wasn’t big enough for a duplex. Oliver had me yank it, and I’ve got it at my place, waiting for the scrap guy. But . . .”

“Caleb, you keep this up and I’m gonna kiss you,” Cassie says before blushing. “I mean, I’ll let you give me a back massage.”

“Uh-huh,” I say, hiding my surprise at her choice of words. “Oh, one thing, though, and this is non-negotiable.”

“What’s that?” Cassie asks warily, taking another bite of burger. “I’m glad to pay.”

“No, not that. If I’m going to keep my other customers happy, Oliver happy, and somehow get that house done before you’re ready to retire, it’s going to mean working weekends. And not farting around for a few hours Saturday morning and then cutting out to go shopping type of work. I mean getting down and dirty for eight hours a day on weekends. But I want you there helping, either as my assistant or as my gopher.”

“Gopher?” Cassie asks. “Hey, I’ll have you know that the braces cured that very well!”

I shake my head, laughing. “That’s not what I mean. I mean if there’s something you can’t really help me with, you can be ready to get me any

tools I need."

Cassie nods. "I know what you meant. This is my first solo project, and I have money riding on this just like Oliver does. What do you think I'm going to do, sit at home while you do everything? But are you sure about working weekends? Don't you have plans?"

"Don't have much going on right now," I admit.

Cassie looks at me in surprise. "What about that brunette you picked up at the grocery store? She looked very interested in you."

I laugh ruefully. "Susannah? We went out twice. Then she bought me a candle. Patchouli, with a picture of a kitten on the thing. Noped the fuck outta that quick, fast, and in a hurry."

Cassie bursts out laughing. "Over a candle? You ditched her over a candle? I mean, it's a pretty horrible idea for a candle, but to break up with her over it?"

I chuckle, shrugging. "It's a power move. She's trying to girly up my place so that when someone else comes over, she's marked her territory. I am not getting tied up like that."

"Not tied up like that, but how about other ways? I might have some pink fluffy handcuffs just your size. And I damn sure know how to use silk ropes," she says as she licks her straw. "You'd be sure to enjoy it."

I smirk. That's the Cassie I've come to know and appreciate. I just have to make sure I don't end up with milkshake on my head. Instead, I give her a wink. "Now that, I might consider. Depends on what you're gonna do if I were at your mercy?"

Cassie looks me in the eye with a glint of mischievousness and takes a long draw of her shake, hollowing her cheeks. She swallows with an audible gulp and then licks her lips to catch a tiny drop left in the center of her top lip. I can't help it. My eyes widen and I feel my cock swell in my jeans, and I know I'm in trouble. I mean, I've always known Cassie was cute, but now . . . goddammit, I'm in trouble if she's just joking.

Cassie waits just a beat and then speaks up "Game. Set. Match. Winner, Cassie White. And the crowd goes wild." She mimics a crowd cheering. Dammit, I should have known she was still being a wiseass.

Want to read the rest? Grab Mr. Fixit here!

EXCERPT: ANACONDA

BY LAUREN LANDISH

They say size doesn't matter...

Football star and internet sensation Gavin "Anaconda" Adams is the biggest celebrity our little town has ever seen.

But I had no idea who he was when I accidentally walked in on him naked.

I was shocked, seeing all of him, a cocky grin on his face. I didn't know what to do.

So I **ran.**

Now I'm in a world of trouble. No matter what I do, I can't get that image out of my head. **His strong muscular thighs. His washboard abs. His big, throbbing, toe-curling… Jesus!**

To make matters worse, Gavin wants a date with me. He's seen the lust in my eyes, and he's not taking no for an answer. I should tell him to get lost. He's nothing but trouble, and he's only here for a week.

But with one look, I go weak in the knees. And whenever I hear his deep, rich voice, I feel my defenses crumbling.

It's only one night. What could it hurt?

Chapter 1
Brianna

"This is fucking disgusting," I mutter with revulsion, looking around the hotel room and barely able to hold back the nausea twisting my stomach from the foul stench. I clamp a hand over my nose, trying not to breathe the acrid air in through my mouth and shaking my head at the horror before me.

Actually, disgusting is an understatement. The room looks like a frat house after a night of binge drinking and wild orgies. There are pizza boxes, crushed beer cans, and dark stains everywhere.

Jesus Christ.

No wonder the smell is so bad. These guys are pigs. My eyes continue to roam and I spot at least one smashed bottle of vodka before…

"Oh, hell no!" I croak, almost dry heaving and turning away from the revolting sight of several used condoms. I can even see something white and sticky nearby. I grab the top of my uniform and pull it up over my nose, no longer able to bear the stench. "They don't pay me enough for this shit!" Holding my breath, I beeline for the door. I gasp as I exit the room and enter the hallway, letting go of my shirt and sucking down a lungful of air. I normally can't stand the air in the smoking section of the guest rooms, but right now, this air is sweeter than a double-fudge chocolate chip sundae.

After a few grateful breaths, I pull out my walkie talkie from my side pocket and shake my head as I press the microphone button. "Maintenance, this is Housecleaning."

"*Whatcha need, Bri?*" asks a familiar scratchy voice, and I sigh, relaxing. It's Jimmy, an older man who still wears corduroy and thinks he's in the 70s. But besides his penchant for living in the past, he's pretty cool and will empathize with my pain. This isn't the first wrecked room that I've walked in on, and it certainly won't be my last.

"We have a problem," I tell him, letting the direness I feel seep into my voice. "A *big*, big problem."

"Is it that bad?" Jimmy asks. There's a slight note of hope in his voice. I know what he's thinking. He's hoping that maybe it's nothing a little bleach and elbow grease won't fix.

I feel sorry for him. And to think I didn't even step foot into the bathroom.

I shudder at the gross images that flash in my mind as I reply, “Yes! Your boys will have their hands full. Room 333. Bring steam cleaners, a sandblaster . . . and maybe a hazmat suit.”

Jimmy groans over the radio. I hear him inhale as if he wants to say something, but the transmission cuts. He knows that he can’t say much about it. Our radios aren’t monitored like the police scanners, but they can still be listened to. And with what’s going on, we can’t take chances. A crackling sound pops my ears.

“If you guys get it done, I’ll worry about the towels and sheets,” I add.

“*Grand Waterways Hotel . . .*” Jimmy says forlornly. “*Grand Water Sewer Way would be a more apt name.*”

I huff out a chuckle at that. Jimmy shouldn’t have said that over the line, but it’s the damn truth. “Can’t argue with that,” I say wholeheartedly. To the hotel’s credit, though, it can’t help what guests like a team of pro and collegiate ballers do to its rooms when they’re hosting drunken parties. I’ve heard that they stay here instead of in the city to keep the players ‘out of trouble’. But they still have their parties.

“*I’ll handle it, Bri. We’ll be up in a half hour. Maybe you can catch the rest on the back half of your shift?*”

A feeling of relief washes over me. The man is a lifesaver. There’s no way I could handle these types of situations without him.

“Thanks, Jimmy.”

“*No worries. Maintenance out.*”

“Poor man,” I mutter, tucking my walkie talkie back into my pocket.

Grateful to be free of that disaster, I make my way to the elevator, press the down button, and wait for the doors to open. Once inside, I mull over which floor I should go to, but my watch beeps, reminding me that I need a break.

I jam the button for the basement, leaning against the wall as the carriage starts to go down. My back aches, my feet ache, and I’m pretty sure that my skin needs to be scrubbed with something stronger than soap and water after just walking into that filthy room. The image of the used condoms on the floor flashes in my mind and my skin crawls.

I can’t wait until I finish my degree and never have to step foot into this place again, I think with disgust.

I definitely don’t feel like working the rest of my shift after that. I’m aching and sore all over. I’m seriously overworked, and I don’t think I can

take any more surprises.

But at least I'm mostly finished, and I've got the next thirty minutes to chill out, try to get myself back together, and maybe pop a Tylenol or two before I do the last set of regular rooms, the suites, and then the floor that I normally hate most because I never know what to expect, the penthouse suites. They can range from sparkly clean to a pigsty as bad as the room I just left… depending on who's been staying there. Sometimes, the ballers are too damn cheap and just trash a regular room.

The ding sound and opening doors pull me out of my reverie. I walk out of the elevator and head to the maintenance room. I wash my hands using rubbing alcohol and some germicidal stuff from the medicine cabinet in the staffroom before I apply two coats of lotion, praying that maybe this time I won't be bleeding from between my fingers like the last time I had to do this.

I look up in the mirror and sigh, shaking my head at the reflection that looks back at me. Bra-length, dark brown hair, tired eyes, and a grumpy countenance. I look like I haven't had a decent night's sleep in over a week.

I don't need this shit, I say to myself. *I can't wait to get out of this place. Hell, I'll take just about any job with benefits over this.*

But more than benefits, I need money. Doing twenty-nine hours of maid work in a hotel just doesn't cut it when you're like me—Master's degree student with no family, no credit cards, and about two thousand dollars left from a student loan. Somehow, I have to stretch this small amount of money to cover the gap in my living expenses for the rest of the year.

I shake my head again as I think about how close I'd been to that internship.

One computer error. That's all that kept me from landing a paid internship. One idiot at school who typed in my GPA wrong, saying I had a 1.8 instead of a 3.8. By the time I got it all sorted out, it was too late. All of the internships were already snatched up.

"Face it, girlie," I grumble to myself, "if this keeps up, you'll be going down to the food bank for canned goods by Christmas." I rub the last of the lotion into my hands. The sound of heels clicking against the tiled floor causes me to turn around, and I see my best friend, Mindy, holding a mocha latte in one hand and a cup of green tea in the other. She wiggles the latte at me.

I take it from her, feeling grateful for her thoughtfulness. “Tell me you put cinnamon in it,” I say.

Mindy steps back to survey me, shaking her head, her dark brown hair that’s cut into a side bob glinting under the lights and her large brown eyes flashing with a mischievousness that almost makes me smile. I have to say, she looks hot as hell in her uniform—a white dress shirt, open at the front, a short black skirt, an apron, and stockings, her feet adorned with black glossy heels.

“You bet your sweet ass I did,” Mindy chirps before going over to the free table in the staff break room and kicking out a chair with her foot before sitting down. “Double cream, double sugar, double cinnamon, basically double everything I could get my hands on. Come on, I know your schedule as well as you do. It’s the least I can do.”

“You’re a lifesaver,” I tell her, raising the cup to my lips and taking a sip. I close my eyes as the warm liquid hits my tastebuds and I let out a groan. It really is sweet.

“You know, you keep moaning like that, and people are going to think you’re up to no good during your coffee breaks,” Mindy jokes, sipping her green tea. “I mean, I get it. You skipped breakfast like you always do, but damn, girl, should I leave you and the latte alone with a necktie hanging on the door?”

“You keep making drinks like this and bringing me scones, and you may just have to,” I joke. “But how’d you know?”

“What? That you’d be tired?” Mindy asks, laughing. “Uh, in case you forgot, for the past two weeks, we’ve all been wiped out. I’m sure that V-man loves the money, but he’s not the one busting his ass” —Mindy glances down at her thighs critically— “or in this case, big ass.”

“Oh, come on, you’re a size two!” I protest.

Mindy scowls. “A *big* size two.”

“There’s no such thing!” I scoff.

“Want to see my ass?” she offers.

“I’ll pass.” I chuckle. Mindy always does this, complaining about her weight when there’s nothing to complain about. I just argue with her to get kicks. I take another sip of my heavenly latte before adding, “And if Mr. Vandenburgh hears you call him V-man again, you know he’s going to blow his stack.”

Mindy laughs and screws up her face, looking remarkably like John Cleese as she pitches her voice perfectly to match the hotel manager's. "Ahh . . . yes, Miss Sayles, we've noticed that you're taking your job far too seriously, and I'm going to need to make sure you don't have a broom handle lost inside your buttocks. Please bend over and spread your cheeks for me."

I laugh, barely holding onto the coffee in my mouth as I set my cup down, trying not to cough. I can't help it. Mr. Vandenburgh does look a lot like a very short but chubby John Cleese, and Mindy's got the voice down to a tee. Mindy lets up, and I swallow before sitting back, wiping at my eyes. "Girl, thank you. I *so* needed that. You don't even want to know what I had to deal with today."

"What, the production monkeys aren't appreciative of the fine rooms we've made available to them?" Mindy asks. For the past two weeks, The Grand Waterways has been rented out by a Hollywood studio that's producing a film in town. While the production team staying at the hotel haven't exactly been the cleanest guests, they've been a hell of a lot better than the sports team that just trashed that room.

"No, actually, it was that rowdy ball team." I shake my head. "And you don't even want to know what I saw in their room," I say, pinching my face into a disgusted scowl.

"Sure I do," Mindy says, her eyes flashing.

"No. You don't," I say firmly. "Trust me."

"Tell me!"

"No."

"You suck."

"Let me just put it this way. I had to call Jimmy and his team to handle it."

Mindy makes a face. "Oh, it was one of those, huh?"

"Yeah. One of *those*."

"I bet it smelled like toe jam and ass crack." Mindy grins.

"Actually, it was worse." I laugh, remembering the acrid stench that made my eyes water. "There were like stains . . . everywhere. It was so gross!" I don't even think about bringing up the used condoms.

Mindy grimaces. "Good lord, what the hell were they doing in there? Having a golden showers competition?"

I snort, nearly gagging on my coffee, and then I start coughing so hard I nearly choke.

Mindy stares at me with concern, half-rising out of her seat. “Jesus, you okay, Bri?”

I motion her to sit back down. “Don’t do that!” I gasp when I’m able to recover.

“Do what?” Mindy asks innocently.

I wipe at my eyes. “Make me laugh when I’m drinking coffee. I nearly gagged to death.”

Mindy grins impishly. “Wouldn’t be the first thing you gagged on.”

I scowl at her. “You’re disgusting, you know that?”

“Oh c’mon, Bri, don’t be such a prude.” She pauses, nodding at the supply room. “So, what’s left on your schedule?”

“Too much,” I reply. “But at least the penthouses should be easy. One of the suites is being used by some film crew, so they don’t want us in there. One is empty until a guest arrives tonight. So, that leaves just one.”

“Then perhaps, Miss Sayles,” a stern voice says from behind me, “you should look at making sure you have that room prepared for our VIP guest.” I turn to see Mr. Vandenburgh, all five foot four inches and about two hundred plus pounds of him, standing in the doorway. He’s in his tailored suit, of course, looking like a thousand bucks from the neck down while looking like a grumpy ass disorderly from the neck up. “That is, unless you want to pay for that coffee you’re holding.”

Oh, God, please save me.

I shake my head. “No, you’re right, Mr. Vandenburgh.” I glance over at Mindy, who is barely hiding a smirk.

“Well then, get on with your duties,” he says acidly, his scowl hard enough to curdle milk.

Please let me find another job so I don’t have to deal with this shit anymore.

Seriously, after that bullshit upstairs, I’d almost be ready to tender my resignation if I were offered a job at McDonald’s sweeping the floors. I’m just so over this.

Vandenburgh opens his mouth as if to scold me further, but I hold up a finger as I drain the rest of my coffee.

“I’m going!”

I give Mindy a thankful nod as I pitch my empty cup into the trash. She flashes me a sympathetic look as I turn and walk out, making my way to the service elevators. I really can't stand Mr. Vandenburgh's presence for more than a minute, and I just want to knock out the rest of my shift and go home.

As I head up the hall, I can hear Mr. Van start in on Mindy.

"What the hell did you do to the machines, young lady? I got complaints about the coffee this morning . . ."

I crack a smile as I imagine the look of consternation on Mindy's face.

By the time I finish the regular rooms, I'm nearly about to pass out as I push my supply cart toward the service elevator.

"Just a little while longer," I tell myself, "and I'm free."

By some miracle, a lot of the rooms on the next floor aren't that bad. In fact, I'm feeling like salvation is near when I make it to the penthouse suites. My first stop is room 601. It's reserved so I skip it.

Room 602 is occupied, with the 'do not disturb' sign on the doorknob.

So, that leaves Room 603, which should also be empty. The guest isn't checking in until this evening. Before I step inside, I check the guest list. It just has '**ANACONDA**' scribbled on the sheet. I frown at the name as I stare at the big bold letters. What the hell kind of name is Anaconda?

Shaking my head, I open the door and hold back a jealous grumble at the sight before me. Seriously, the living room of this penthouse is bigger than my entire apartment. Two thousand square feet, a master bedroom and a smaller bedroom-slash-office, and a sitting room. The damn thing even has a chef's kitchen.

My grumble turns into a hiss of anger when I see that someone's been up here, and it sure as shit wasn't Goldilocks.

"None of this should be here," I mutter as I take in the mess, frowning at a jacket that's been thrown over the Italian leather sofa and a bag that looks like it was carelessly tossed into a chair and knocked it over.

Puzzled, I check my sheet again. Nope. No one's supposed to be here. I step into the room, leaving my cart outside.

"Housekeeping?" I call tentatively. "Anyone here?"

Silence is my only answer.

"Hello?" I dare again. When I get no response, I walk over to pick up the chair that's been knocked over. I figure that maybe someone has

checked in ahead of the guest and left in a hurry. I'll straighten things up and just leave.

A sound behind me causes me to spin around, and my breath stills in my lungs.

Holy fuck!

My heart skips a beat as my eyes take in the naked . . . *god* standing before me. Well, ok, he's not totally naked. He's got a towel over his head and he's drying his hair.

But the way he's built . . . sweet Jesus. He looks like he's chiseled out of granite, with big muscular arms, breathtaking broad shoulders, a proud chest, an eight pack, and . . .

"Anaconda . . ." I whisper as I see what's hanging between his legs, my pulse pounding in my ears. He's got to be at least seven inches long already and he's not even hard. My skin prickles as I gaze at his thick cock, my nipples hardening, my breath coming out in short pants.

The man freezes when his eyes fall on me, and I feel like I'm going to melt into a puddle on the floor. I have no words for how hot this man is. He's not just hung like a horse. He's *fucking gorgeous* too. Shaggy blond hair hangs down over his forehead, with startling blue eyes that seem to glow from the inside and a face that would make artists drool. He's staring at me, his mouth, with full, sexy lips, hanging slack, the towel dropping from his hand to the floor.

Neither of us says anything for what seems like an eternity but has to be just a few seconds before he recovers and grins, his eyes boring into me with an intensity that makes me weak at the knees. "Hi, I'm Gavin," he says easily, as if he's not standing in front of me with a monster-sized dick dangling between his legs.

He's not doing anything to cover it up either. Given what he's packing, I understand why. It's like he's proud of it as he stares at me with a confidence that borders on gross arrogance.

Heat rises in my chest as he steps forward, a cocky smirk turning the corner of his lips, and I take a half-step back, my pussy clenching around nothing. It's an effort to keep my eyes on his face as my heart hammers in my chest and my cheeks burn with embarrassment.

"You all right?" he asks. Even his *voice* is sexy, a low baritone that causes my pussy to clench again.

I open my mouth to reply, but my eyes stray back to *it*, and my heart skips another beat. *Shit. Shit. Shit.* I can't deal with this right now. I tear my gaze away from it, my eyes darting this way and that, looking for a way out as he closes in on me.

I want to run away. But I can't move. It's like my legs have filled with stone. Against my will, my eyes flicker back to *it*.

Sweet Jesus! It's swaying with each step, swinging back and forth like a giant pendulum, almost putting me into a hypnotic trance.

When he gets close enough to touch me, I'm suddenly free of my paralysis. Heart pounding, I spring forward, nearly tripping on my way to the door. I'm only able to mumble, "Sorry," as I run from the room with a flaming red face, trying my damnedest to not glance back for one last look.

Chapter 2

Gavin - 2 Years Ago . . .

"Anaconda! Anaconda!" the reporters yell in my face after a particularly rough game, jamming microphones and cameras at me. "Do you have anything to say about what happened?"

God, I hate that fucking nickname.

I blink several times as rapid flashes of lights go off in my eyes, fighting down the exasperation that flares inside me. They're herding me like a fucking zoo animal, each one of them fighting one another to stick a mic in my face.

A fraudulent smile spreads across my chiseled jawline as I wink into the cameras and prepare to formulate an answer. I'm trying to appear unruffled by the question, though I want nothing more than to tell them all to get the fuck out of my way. I know how they'll spin it if I do. And I can already see the headlines now.

Gavin Adams Flies into a Rage after a Bad Game Because of Scandal.

I know I should ignore the trolls, who are only looking for a rise out of me or a soundbite to try and get another five minutes of story out of what was a total mistake. But after dealing with the team, the league, and all the drama that ensued, I'm pissed off. Losing 20-0 against our biggest rival isn't helping much either.

"Mr. Adams has nothing to say," Miranda, my agent who doubles as my PR rep, says loudly over the ungodly clamor of shouting voices and

clicking cameras, beating me to the punch. My eyes are drawn to her. She's dressed sharply, as usual, in her red designer dress that fits her shapely frame like a glove, the epitome of a middle-aged professional woman who's still getting some mileage out of her body as well as her brains. "So, if you all would just excuse us. He has more important things to attend to."

"Hold up, Miranda," I interrupt her, maintaining my fake smile. I figure I can use my charm to defuse this situation and be on my merry way. I raise my voice and politely say, "I'm sure everyone's heard about my little incident, but I want to let you all know it was just an accident. And that's it."

"There was nothing *little* about it!" a female reporter shouts, and then giggles ensue. I ignore her and the rest.

"So, you don't have anything to say about the footage of you circulating on the internet?" asks one of the other reporters.

I scowl at him. *That will teach you to stop for a photo op and try to smooth things over.* "What footage?" I ask flatly, knowing exactly what he's talking about.

He smiles, his freckles spreading across the bridge of his nose. "The one of you dropping your towel in front of Sara Jameson on live TV."

I hold in a groan, irritation flaring. These people are acting like I whipped it out and gave Ms. Jameson a lap dance. All I did was bump into her in the men's locker room after a game. It wasn't *'live TV'*, and she shouldn't have been back there in first damn place. It wasn't my fault the fucking towel fell off. But as soon as it did, I apologized to the wide-eyed Sara and put it back on.

I thought we were cool after that. She even told me the cameras hadn't caught my mistake and I had nothing to worry about. Until the cameraman with her, or someone at the network, decided to leak the unedited video dubbed *Anaconda* out to the internet. It's spreading like wildfire now along with my new nickname.

This whole thing has been a goddamn PR nightmare too. Miranda has spent a week of sleepless nights sending DMCAs to various websites to get the footage taken down. It's been an endless battle. When one goes down, another one pops up. Still, it's fewer of them than when this all started.

I just wish I hadn't been so careless.

"It's unfortunate," I say, keeping the smile on my face with massive effort, "but really, it was an accident. Now if you guys would please move

out of our way, I have to get to—”

“What does your mother think about you flashing millions of people?” the same guy cuts in again, taking delight in my irritation.

Miranda winces next to me as I grit my teeth, no longer able to control my anger.

“Are you fucking deaf? I just said it was an accident!” I snap. Miranda is going to be pissed I lost my cool, but I can’t stand any more of this shit. “Now, if none of you have a question that’s actually related to my game, don’t waste my fucking time!”

“Okay, that’s enough! No more questions!” Miranda shouts, taking me by the arm and dragging me toward the exit. Miranda hisses out of the side of her mouth, “Dammit, Gavin, you know better than that! Now that little soundbite is gonna be all over the evening news.”

She’s right. I knew the second it left my lips. But I’m not going to admit that to her. I’m too fucking pissed right now.

We reach the door at the end of the hall and I practically kick it open, muttering, “Whatever. You try stepping in my shoes and tell me you wouldn’t have reacted the same way.”

Miranda wisely chooses not to answer.

Present Day

“What a shithole,” I mutter as I gaze out the window. We’re passing by rows of shops that look like they belong in some backwater town of a Midwest state. Fields, fields, a John Deere tractor, some barn that looks like it should be torn down, and a place called Stuckey’s. The town’s still up ahead, but for fuck’s sake, I can see the water tower with the town name on the side. It looks like it came out of an old music video.

Then again, the place is clean. I can see kids playing in the front yards, and there isn’t a hint of smog in the sky. And the streets aren’t jammed with traffic.

Still . . . “They really want us to film here?” I ask.

Miranda nods. “It’s the ideal location.”

I would argue against that, but I decide not to. I just came from yet another press event teeming with hungry reporters and I’m drained from all the bullshit. “As long as I don’t have to deal with any more paparazzi, I’ll consider myself lucky.”

“You shouldn’t,” Miranda says. “I’ve called ahead and made arrangements. No one should know that you’re checking in.”

“Good,” I growl, rubbing at my eyes. “Because they bring up that fucking video every time.” It’s been two years. And still, this shit is all anyone ever wants to talk about. It takes everything inside me to not go off on them.

That’s why I’m trying my hand at acting during the off season. Miranda thought it might go a long way in helping my image and getting people’s minds off my . . .

“Please don’t,” Miranda begs. She’s been through the wire these past couple of seasons, doing her best to temper my edge whenever I’m close to exploding. I have to admire her tenacity. If I were her, I would’ve quit on me ages ago. “I don’t want any more surprises. We’ll get you to the hotel and you can put your feet up until shooting starts tomorrow.”

I relax back in my seat at her words. A shower and a soft bed sound nice. And maybe a kitten to share my bed with. I shift in my seat, not feeling the excitement that usually comes with such a thought. Normally, I’d be turned on by the thought of hooking up with a local honey, but now…

“Earth to Gavin,” Miranda says, shaking me from my thoughts. “You all there?”

I turn back, tugging at my Italian designer t-shirt and blazer, nodding. “Yeah, just wishing I could wear something comfortable. What is it with Italians and skinny sleeves?”

“Makes your biceps look bigger,” Miranda says with a cheeky smile, pulling her phone out of her purse. “Even with the blazer.”

I shake my head as she gets on the line with the hotel. There’s always an angle with her.

“Yes, this is Miranda Price, personal assistant for Gavin Adams. You don’t . . . oh, for fuck’s sake, check under Anaconda!” she snaps, a scowl that can shatter glass spreading across her face. “Yes, Mr. Adams will be coming in this afternoon, and I want to make sure that the room is perfect for him. Huh? What do you mean, why? He’s the second-highest ranked star in the movie, that’s why!”

I sigh, wishing that Miranda wouldn’t play it up so much. I get it, she thinks that my going a little more ‘High Roller’ will get me more endorsements, more media attention, more of everything. I mean, I don’t

play in New York or Los Angeles, so I'm not near the media centers. Then again, considering how terrible LA is football-wise, I think I'm glad I don't play for them.

But Miranda's taken that idea and run way over the top with it. "Yes, he's supposed to have the Egyptian cotton sheets on his bed that I sent ahead, the minibar is only to be stocked with the glacial water and the exact liquor list that I emailed you . . .?"

"Oh, for fuck's sake, I drink tap water," I mutter.

Miranda reaches over, slapping my knee. I let her get away with it, though she's testing me with her antics. After all, she's been in the publicity game for athletes for a long time. She got me some of the endorsement TV spots I've done, so she knows her job. I just think she's taking my plunge into Hollywood a bit too seriously.

"Fine, fine, that'll be acceptable in the short-term," Miranda says into her phone, grinning. She's getting off on this, I swear. "And yes, there are to be two Toblerone chocolates on the kitchen counter. No, not those, one's supposed to be fruit and nut, the other crunchy salted almond. Well, I suppose you'll just have to find one, won't you?"

"Cut them a break, Miranda," I growl, but she's going with it. I mean, I get it. Ever since I showed that I'm in that upper one half of a percent of football players, things have been thrown at me. Money. Cars. Contracts. And women? Hell, I've never had to ask for one. They always ask for me.

But there's a difference between being a cocky football player and being a dickhead. Miranda's pushing that line, and finally, I reach over, taking the phone from her. "This is Gavin Adams. The room's clean?"

"Why yes, of course it is, Mr. Adams," says a snobby voice that grates my teeth. "This is Mr. Vandenburgh. I was just telling Ms. Price that while we have the confectionaries you requested, we were unable to find the specific Toblerone that you—"

"I don't care about that," I say, cutting him off. "Just make sure the room's nice, and we can worry about the rest later. See you soon."

I hang up the phone and toss it back to Miranda, who's glaring at me now. "There," I say. "Problem dealt with."

Miranda shakes her head as she slips her phone back in her purse. "You know, you're not letting me do my job, *Anaconda*," she says half-jokingly.

"Your job is to make sure I look good in the press, not to bully hotel managers," I growl. She knows I hate the name Anaconda. Sure, she's tried

to spin it as if it's a good thing, that I always find a way to 'snake through the defenses'. But everyone and their fucking grandmother knows why it's my nickname. It's been on the internet in 1080p for two years now.

"My job is to make sure you look the part," Miranda says pointedly. She reaches into her bag, pulling out her iPad and turning it on. "By the way, you made the press again." She tosses the iPad over into my lap.

I try not to groan as I look at the webpage she's pulled up, another of those half tabloid, half sports page sites that she likes to track for mentions about me in the offseason.

Anaconda Snakes Another One! the headline blares, showing me walking with a girl. She's got her knees splayed out and a **pained** look on her face, the caption reading, *Anaconda Adams earns his nickname again with yet another young lady as the star running back and soon-to-be actor leaves a hotel in New York the night after appearing on a radio show.*

I read a few more lines and sigh in disgust and turn the tablet off, throwing it back over to Miranda instead of chucking it out the window like I want to. "That site is a fucking disgrace. They're saying I barebacked her with no lube."

"You didn't?" Miranda asks, her smile disappearing when I glare at her. "What, Gavin? You know your reputation says that you've got a groupie in all thirty-two cities you've played in. And it's funny. I thought you'd laugh after the rest of the problems you've been dealing with."

"Maybe that had a little truth to it in my rookie year, but that was then," I grumble, shaking my head. Sure, I went out with the girl, but I didn't fuck her. I just wasn't feeling it. I have no fucking clue why she looks in pain in the photo. They probably snapped until they finally got one with a weird-looking expression on her face. Fucking scoundrels is what they are.

"Whatever the case may be, any press is good press," Miranda says, putting her tablet away. "Just relax."

"Relax, she says," I mutter sullenly, watching as the limo hangs a right and a hotel that actually looks like it belongs in a ritzy section of Vegas comes into view down the street. Grand Waterways Hotel. "Relax for what?"

"Because you need to be calm, cool, and collected for your upcoming interviews," Miranda says as the limo starts to slow down. "You can't start getting annoyed and chewing out the reporters on camera just because they ask you about your anacon . . . umm, romance life."

“The hell I can’t,” I growl. “My personal life is no one’s business.”

“These are different times, Gavin,” Miranda says softly. “The days where people only want to hear about your talent are over. They want to hear about what you’re wearing, who you’re dating, who you’re thinking about sleeping with. And considering that there’s a . . .” her words trail off, but I catch her meaning.

The video. It always comes back to that goddamn video.

“It’s bullshit.”

Miranda shrugs. “It’s just what it is.”

I sigh, leaning back and unbuttoning the blazer. “The next time a reporter asks me about my sex life or my dick, I’m walking off. I don’t care if it’s on the red carpet of the fucking Oscars. It’ll be better than giving them another sound bite. At least during football season, they ask about the game first sometimes.”

“You’d better not,” Miranda warns.

I clench my jaw, wanting to reprimand her for scolding me like a child, but I resist the urge.

“Tell me again why they picked this place?” I ask, changing the subject.

“Because it’s a little podunk city,” Miranda says. “Remember, you’re supposed to be this badass who plays around with the main heroine for some of the movie. You two have known each other since you were kids, and they’ve got to get some background scenes.”

“Oh yeah. The big dying scene,” I say with a grunt, remembering the script. At least my character goes out with a bang—literally. A hit squad rattling my car with machinegun fire before they blow it up with a rocket? Guess I’m tough to kill. Too bad I won’t do much for it. It’s all stuntmen. “When are they filming that?”

“Umm, I’m not exactly sure,” Miranda says. “But you’ll have time to practice and get your lines down at least.”

I grunt noncommittally and then ask, “How detailed are these love scenes supposed to be?” I know I’m supposed to have at least one bedroom scene with the leading lady of the movie, Leslie Hart.

“It’ll be shot in darkness with blue light, according to what I saw from the studio,” Miranda says. “Don’t worry, the Anaconda isn’t going to be making his big screen debut. Who knows? They might use body doubles for a lot of it.”

I shake my head in disgust as we come up on the hotel. “Fuck,” I mutter, seeing the paparazzi parked outside, irritation causing me to clench my jaw. “Figures. I can’t go anywhere without these vultures showing up.”

“Pull around the side!” I yell to the limo driver, who’s kept his mouth shut the whole time we’ve been bickering. The guy’s a pro. I’d have jumped out several stop lights ago if I had to sit there and listen to us.

He just nods and waves, pulling around the corner and driving a bit farther before pulling over. I grab a hooded coat, pull it on, and throw the hood over my head. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Miranda,” I tell her, flashing a wink.

I slam the limo door and slap the roof before Miranda can reply, and I walk away, ignoring the people on the sidewalk. I’m through a side entrance within two minutes, easily evading the vultures with cameras waiting at the entrance.

I head up to the front desk, keeping my sunglasses and hat on. Thankfully, the manager’s on duty, and while he trips over his tongue a few times, probably still worried about the chocolates, I slip off to the elevators and up to the top floor. Room 603.

I unlock the door and head inside, yanking my coat off before throwing it at the sofa. I don’t even pause to take in the opulence of the room or the breathtaking view of the skyline through the floor to ceiling windows. It’s nice and all, but I’ve stayed in plenty of five-star penthouse suites and I’m used to luxury.

There are several bags waiting for me on the floor. Miranda must have sent them ahead.

I pick up one of them to see what’s so important inside, and when I do, I see a dress and some stilettos. Someone sent up the wrong bag.

Annoyed, I sling the bag at the table and into one of the chairs, not caring when the chair falls over onto the floor.

I check one of the other bags. This one has my clothes. I set an outfit out on the bed, dark slacks and a white dress shirt. I’m supposed to be having dinner in a few hours with Miranda and a big movie exec to go over a few things before shooting. And I can’t go to the meeting if I smell like cigarettes and musk.

After I’ve made sure I’ve picked my most dapper attire, I walk into the bathroom, slide out of my clothes, and enter the shower stall for a quick rinse. As the cool water hits me, my mind wanders to the possibility of

picking up some ass tonight. I could see myself easily picking up some chick from the event I'm heading to. Hell, maybe even someone from the hotel lobby. But once again, I'm unable to get excited at the prospect of sharing my bed.

I shake my head as water runs down my forehead and into my eyes. What the fuck is wrong with me? There was a time where I'd been happy to share my bed with one or even two. But the thought just doesn't excite me anymore.

I guess I'm getting tired of sex that doesn't mean a damn thing.

My mood sour, I finish rinsing off and step out of the stall. I'm in the middle of drying off when I realize I left my pants on the bed. I walk into the room while rubbing the towel against my head.

"Anaconda," I swear I hear a sweet voice say as I'm about to pull the towel from my eyes.

Goddamn, I think, seeing the sight in front of me, then my inner voice groans. *Oh, no. Not again.*

The towel slips from my fingers as I see a woman dressed in a maid uniform, her eyes as wide as a doe's as she gazes at me. Fuck. She's beautiful. Rich brown hair frames big, brown, soulful eyes, a slightly upturned button nose, and ruby pink lips that are soft and plump. The sort of lips that I'd love to have wrapped around my cock.

My dick twitches as I look over the rest of her. Her uniform has a French maid vibe to it, showcasing her figure and legs that stretch on for days.

I'm used to seeing beautiful women, but there's something about this girl that makes my blood heat in a way it hasn't in a long time.

"Hi, I'm Gavin," I say, stepping forward and then stopping. I feel stupid as fuck introducing myself while I'm butt naked. But it can't be helped. The snake is already out of the bag. There's no use covering him up now.

The girl doesn't reply, her eyes as wide as saucers, her legs trembling. Jesus, she looks like she'll need a respirator, her chest heaving as her eyes flit to my face, back between my legs, and then back to my face again.

Her mouth works for a moment as her eyes play ping pong, and I can't help but grin at the effect I'm having on her. I don't know why I'm enjoying this, but I am.

I boldly take a step forward, though I know I shouldn't. She's fucking petrified. "You all right?"

Her cheeks burning red, I hear her mumble, “I’m sorry,” before she turns and runs from the room without looking back.

For a moment, I’m tempted to go after her, but I don’t. After all, I *am* naked, and I don’t know where the fucking bathrobe is. But I’m pissed I didn’t get her name. She was gorgeous. And I could see the way she looked at me. I know *that* look.

And the image of her looking up at me with those eyes while I push into her body is going to be in my dreams until I make it a reality.

But she ran from me. I clench my jaw as I think about her plump, pouty lips and her wide eyes as she took in my naked body. My cock twitches again as I remember the lust that flashed in her eyes.

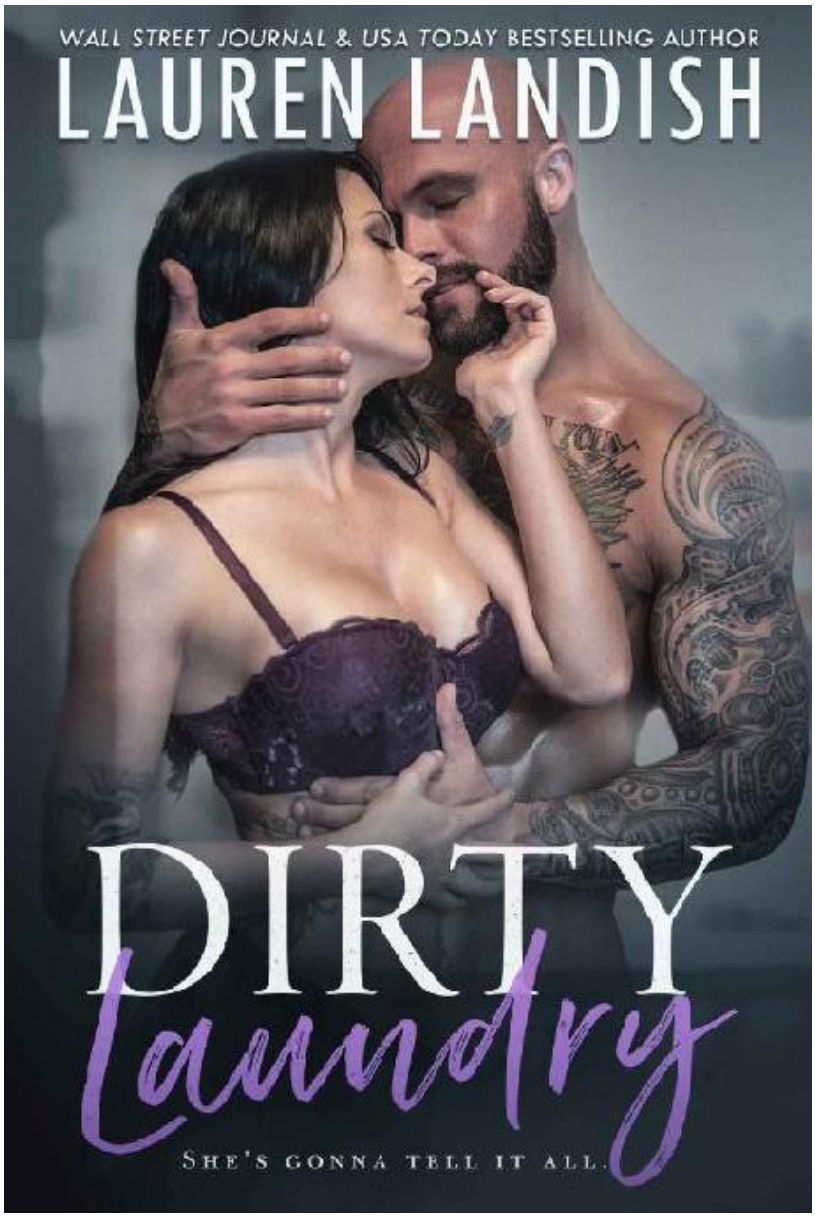
I decide right then and there that I’m gonna find her. And when I do, I’ll have those sweet lips wrapped around my cock in no time.

If it’s the last thing I do.

Want to read the rest? Get Anaconda HERE.

DIRTY LAUNDRY: COMING SOON!

Each book in the “Get Dirty” series will be a different couple. Here is a special sneak peek at the cover Dirty Laundry, book 2! It’ll hopefully give you clues as to who the next book is about. Join my reader group and let me know who you think it is!



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