WALL STREET JOURNAL & USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LAUREN LANDISH

DIRTY Deeds

It's so wrong, but feels so right.

DIRTY DEEDS

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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 Deeds
Prologue
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
Mr. Fiancé
Heartstopper
Excerpt: Dirty Laundry
Coming Soon!
About the Author

DIRTY DEEDS

BY LAUREN LANDISH

Join my mailing list (www.laurenlandish.com) and receive 2 FREE ebooks! You'll also be the first to know of new releases, sales, and giveaways. If you're on Facebook, come join my Reader Group!

Other books in the *Get Dirty* Series (Interconnecting standalones):
Dirty Talk
Dirty Laundry

For months, I've watched her. I know she's off-limits, but she's so sweet, so innocent… and so sexy that she haunts my dreams.

Maggie doesn't belong in this world, this seedy underbelly of the city. But there she is, my Angel with her wide eyes behind her nerdy glasses. So, when she needs help, I'm the only one who can protect her.

It didn't even take a single kiss for me to fall in love with her. I know I shouldn't—a man like me doesn't deserve an Angel. I'll hurt her, break her… **ruin** her. Still, I can't help myself.

She's going to regret this later, regret me and probably even hate me. But I'm a selfish man, and if she wants this now, I'll give it to her. I'll give her **everything**.

**For a limited time, this title includes bonus content.

PROLOGUE

SHANE

I lean back, keeping an eye on the club from my position near the wall. On the far side of the club, Marco the bartender is mixing up a pitcher of margaritas for one of the tables while looking cool as a cucumber in his dress shirt and vest, the sleeves on his cranberry-colored shirt rolled up to just below his elbows. Seeing me, he gives a little salute with two fingers. I return it, knowing that within a few minutes, I'll have some refreshment myself.

"Hey, Shane, you want to switch?" Nick, the guy I have working the door right now, asks. "I gotta piss."

"Yeah, I'll cover the door for a bit. Just hurry. I want to do a walk-around."

"No sweat," Nick says, heading toward the back. I take over the door, leaning back in the stance that allows me to keep an eye on the floor while still keeping the door under control.

Nick takes his time. He always does, which is one of the reasons I'm the bouncer in charge here, but I'm not upset as I see a tight, petite blond make her way toward me. "Hey, Shane," she says, handing me a big beer mug filled with Coca Cola. "Marco said you were looking thirsty."

"Thanks, Meghan. You doing okay?" I ask, taking a moment to appreciate the wide-eyed cuteness that is Meghan. She's only been here about a week, but there's something about her that draws my eyes to her again and again, and not because I'm doing my security job. "No troubles with the tables?"

"Of course not," Meghan says, giving me that shy, sweet-girl smile that I've started looking forward to. "Actually, I've got a friend coming in later. Uhm, if a tall knockout chick comes in asking for me, you mind pointing her my way?"

“Sure enough,” I promise her, an unfamiliar smile crossing my face. I almost never smile at work, but Meghan seems to pull them out of me without even trying. “You two gonna discuss cookie baking or something?”

For a split second, I see the most beautiful shade of pink as her cheeks blush, but then she ducks her head shyly. “No, she’s just having a tough time with a guy she’s seeing and wants my advice. I think she mostly needs girl talk, you know?”

“Sure,” I lie through my teeth. “I’ll keep an eye out. Be safe out there.”

Meghan nods, sashaying away. She tosses her hair back over her shoulder, her hips hypnotizing me with each swing left and right. On her, the sexy moves seem unintentional, not a practiced performance like the other girls here. Nick comes back and I drain my Coke before patrolling the floor. It’s not really needed, but letting the customers have a silent warning helps stop about ninety percent of the shit that can happen around here before it even starts.

As I move around the floor, my eyes tick back to Meghan as she works her tables. It’s almost like I’m circling her, edging ever so closer, tempting fire and keeping the best view of her that I can. Her uniform miniskirt hugs her tight ass like it was painted on her, and as she bends down to put a pitcher of beer on a table for six, I swear she’s showing off especially for me, popping her ass out in a fantasy-come-to-life move.

Maybe it’s just me, or maybe it’s Meghan’s natural charm, but I can’t help watching every move she makes. The way she licks a thumb when she splashes something on it, the way she shows her cleavage as she moves in her uniform bustier corset . . . it’s all so damn seductive, and the contrast between the shy girl she is around me and the sex kitten she acts like while working makes me wonder which is more real.

Meghan straightens up, turning and looking over her shoulder at me, adjusting those thick-framed ‘nerdy’ glasses that push her from cute to hot as fuck. She seems surprised to find me watching, her eyebrows lifting behind the frames, but I catch her biting her lip to hide the little smirk tugging at her mouth. She’s fucking with me, she’s got to be. I have to hold back a growl as she goes over to her next customer, striking a pose beside the table as she takes their order.

I’d never let any of the fucknuts who frequent this place lay a hand on one of the girls, but I keep a special eye on Meghan. It makes some of the long shifts a bit easier, and stocks my spank bank with plenty of imaginary

material . . . Meghan bent over the bar as I take her from behind. Or maybe twirling around a pole in one of the private rooms just for me. The dangerous fantasies are the ones where I picture her in my bed . . . hair a mess with flushed cheeks, wearing nothing but the smile I just put on her full lips.

I alternate door duty with Nick, letting him do the next floor sweep per protocol. A static position sometimes makes me antsy. But for right now, I lean against the doorframe, appreciating the best view of Meghan in the house.

I continue my scan of the room, checking customers, the bar, and the stage, but my eyes always return to the tiny, sweet blonde that is slowly driving me insane. “God damn, what I would do to you if I had a chance,” I whisper to myself, knowing the heavy rock music will obliterate the words before anyone can hear them. Still, as if by some form of ESP, Meghan taunts me, crouching down with her ass near her heels to hear a guy’s order. He’s looking straight down her bustier at her tits and I have to hold myself back from beating the shit out of him just for looking at her. My restraint is rewarded as she rises back up, shifting her skirt back into place and giving me a bigger peek at the curve of her ass. She heads towards the bar to turn in the order, but I see the way she peeks over to check if I’m watching.

Two can play that game, little girl. I casually reach down and adjust my cock, my face hard and stoic as I give her a disapproving look. She squeaks I think. I can’t hear it, but the way she jumps a bit and her mouth flies open, I imagine the shocked sound coming from her throat. I laugh to myself, but I’m not sure if she won that round or I did.

Still, I keep my cool, keeping myself under control as the night wears on. Meghan’s friend shows up right before closing time, and the two have a long sit-down talk while Marco and I finish up the cleaning.

“Thanks, Shane,” Meghan says as they get ready to head out the door. Her friend’s gone off to use the ladies’ room, and it’s just us for a moment. “I always feel . . . good when you’re around.”

“I just want to make sure you stay safe,” I reply, looking down into her adorable face. “After all, this is a gentlemen’s club.”

Meghan chuckles and looks around. “Not too many gentlemen in this club. But I’m glad there’s at least one. Thanks again, Shane.”

My name on her lips is a tease that makes me want to taste her mouth as she says it again. But her friend comes out, and the two of them leave. Meghan gives me a little finger wave as the door closes. Oh, my sweet little

innocent one . . . if only I were a gentleman.

If only.

I’m anything but, which is why it’s safer if you stay away from me.

CHAPTER 1

MAGGIE

"Hey, Marco! Can I get a pitcher of Miller Lite for table fifteen, please?" I yell over the throbbing bass of the music in the club . . . and get ignored again. "MARCO!"

He looks over and gives me a half-understanding nod before grabbing one of the plastic pitchers and filling it with . . . well, fudge it, it's beer at least. I roll my eyes, frustrated that I have to drag the bartender's eyes away from the stage. He's been here for years, and you'd think he'd be immune to this after seeing dancers for hours five nights a week.

But he isn't. Obviously, as evidenced by the way he's staring at the stage. He moves a hand, and I think he's going to adjust his crotch, but instead, his hand lifts to his head and he slicks his already meticulously coifed hair into place. In my head, I nag him. Adjust whatever you need to, your crotch or your hair or your suave designer clothes. Just do your dang job so I can do mine. Not too much to ask, is it?

"Here you go, Meghan," he says, sliding the pitcher the last few inches to me. I notice that he doesn't apologize that he's ignored the order I placed on the bar five minutes ago, nor that the delay will likely affect my tip, not his. His eyes still haven't left the show onstage either. Such a butt-nugget.

With a sigh, I turn to see what's got Marco so blasted distracted at the moment. I know from the music that it's Allie's turn on stage. Besides being one of the people I can call a friend around here, she's an amazing dancer, definitely too good to be stripping in a place like this. I watch as she spins around the pole, her legs splayed wide in the splits for several rotations as she flips her head around, making eyes at a guy in the front row.

In a flash, she pulls her legs in smoothly, locking them around the pole and lying back in a death-defying backbend move that puts her eye-level with her prey, although she's upside-down and his eyes are locked on her boobs,

not her face. I see her smirk and then kick her legs over, rising to stand tall in her high-heeled red stilettos. It's impressive, even from just an athletic point of view, although I'm sure most of Allie's fans aren't really interested in how much she's had to train and work for her unworldly strength, balance, and flexibility.

The guy picks up a green bill from the stack in front of him, and Allie slithers down to take it, blowing the guy a kiss with her plump, heavily lipsticked lips, knowing she'll have the whole pile before her time onstage is up.

I clap loudly, cheering her on, knowing that the cash will help her out with her debt situation. She's a nice girl, my best friend in this club, and still way too good for this joint.

Still clapping, I don't hear Marco approach. "She's something else, isn't she? Even you can't keep your eyes off her. Can you blame me? Unless . . . that's your thing?"

I laugh, glancing over at him to see a questioning look in his dark eyes. He seems more excited about the idea than I would've expected because he knows me better than that. I shake my head. "You know I don't swing that way, but I can appreciate talent and hard work. Especially in my friends."

"Calm down, Little Miss Goody-Two-Shoes. You know I'm not going near that chick with a ten-foot pole. I like my dick where it is, thank you very much."

I narrow my eyes at him, attempting to appear threatening, but we both know it's not the threat of my tiny little librarian-looking self that has him shaking in his Italian loafers. It's that our boss has taken a rather obvious interest in Allie lately. And no one dares go against Dominick if he's even considering marking some of that territory for himself.

"If you're still interested, your Miller Lite is getting piss-warm and table fifteen is looking mighty thirsty," he says, smirking. "I guess they're not into Allie. They seem to be paying more attention to their beers and their MIA waitress."

Shishkabob! My tip is definitely going to take a hit on this table if I can't turn it around with a little extra sugar. Hoping that maybe they like nerdy girl-next-door types instead of out of this world exotic beauties like Allie, I fluff my girls up in the black bustier that serves as the top half of my uniform and grab the pitcher to walk it over.

"Here you go, fellas. Didn't want to interrupt your view of Allie's special

talents," I say, going heavy with the flirty innuendo as I lean over, confident that while my full cleavage is on display, they're locked solidly in the cups and won't spill out for an unintended nip slip.

Not that anyone would mind. Except me, of course. Petals from Heaven may be the sort of club where the female persuasion exposes their body parts to the spotlights, and my uniform is decidedly sexier than I would choose myself, but I've never felt like I was expected to do more than deliver drinks. Unless I wanted to, which I definitely don't.

The guys' eyes all lock to my chest, same as always, and their eyebrows lift. Gotcha, boys. So Allie isn't their cup of tea, but I am. Well, it takes all types, and it's sort of encouraging to know that a girl like me can be compared to a goddess like Allie and sometimes get the nod. Maybe my tip won't be so bad, after all.

I take a moment to pour each of the four guys a mug, feigning a lack of skill that makes the suds at the top spill over the lip and down my hand, the white foam looking decidedly like something more seductive than beer. I might be kinda innocent, but I'm not as schoolgirl innocent as I look, and I know how to tease.

I give the last guy his drink and then casually lick the bubbles from my fingers, letting my pink tongue curl out before sucking a tip into my mouth. All four guys' jaws drop at my innocent display before the one closest to me grabs my hand.

His blue eyes flick up to me as he holds my hand in a near-crushing grip, grinning drunkenly. "Let me help you with that."

Before I can say yes or no, he moves forward, his blond hair falling into his face as he quickly swipes his tongue against my finger and sucks it into his mouth. *Fudge! Danger, Will Robinson. Need to back this play up without causing a scene.* One of the hallmark rules of working in a club—don't cause a scene unless you really, really need help.

Instead of freaking out, I give my best girly giggle, jerking my hand back and squealing. "Ooh, that tickles!" I laugh as I shake my hand loose. "You shouldn't be so naughty!"

"Honey," Blondie says, half getting up, "if you want to see naughty—"

Out of nowhere, Shane appears behind me. He's part of Petals' security team and the star of too many of my midnight fantasies to admit. I can't see him, but I can feel his presence like a physical force pressing against my body. It's comforting, a little scary, and also frustrating. I can't help it,

Shane's just . . . well, he's as sexy as chocolate cake, and probably just as dangerous for my health.

Shane growls, his voice low and dangerous. There's no weakness, no compromising with that voice. Fact is, Shane's not afraid of anyone or anything. He might be the only person in the club not afraid of Dominick. "No touching. Or I'll be the one touching you."

The threat is apparent, and the guy's face shows his fear that Shane will kick his ass. Shane's words have the opposite effect on me, though, and my mind is filled with an image of him touching me, his strong, thick fingers tracing lines along my private silky areas, teasing and tantalizing me before taking me roughly.

Back in reality, finger-sucking guy has his hands up wide, backing down immediately. "No problem, man. Sorry, won't happen again."

Shane lets out one more growl before stalking off. I never even made eye contact with him, but under the slip of dark denim they call my miniskirt, my panties are soaked from being that close to him, having his voice wash over me, and that flash of fantasy.

Needing to save the tip, though, I smile at the forward guy, and he does at least offer an apology to me, a rarity in this place. "No problem, honey. Security is just really protective of us. I'm sure you understand."

"I can certainly understand why," he says as his eyes float down my body, taking an extra moment on my chest, my crotch, and the length of my legs sticking out of the skirt before tracing back up again. Despite my petite height, this slip of a skirt combined with my heels make my legs look a mile long, and it feels like it takes him forever to uncomfortably peruse every inch. "We're good for now, but keep the pitchers coming all night."

He says the last part in a filthy little cadence, emphasizing every word, and I can hear the obvious double-entendre. I nod and giggle, reverting to my innocent girl shtick as I promise to keep them coming.

I walk away, smiling as I hear the guys start loudly talking to each other. Two can play that game, and we're both hoping to get lucky, just not in the same way. Tip me, tip the stage girls, and get out so I can get some fresh meat at my table with another full wallet.

It sounds crass, even to myself, but it's the reality. No one is coming to Petals from Heaven strip club to find love, and really, no one is coming to find sex. Well, I guess some of the guys do come in with the fantasy of having an amazing night with a woman who ticks all their mental boxes, but

the odds of that are worse than winning the Powerball.

I don't really get it. Guys crowd in with their other guy friends, pay fart-tons of money for cover, drinks, and tips, then go home to flog their bishop? Why the game? Just watch some porn or something and take care of business.

Unless the guy is paying for a private show, where they're not supposed to whip it out, but according to my dancer friends, they pretty much know they've got a fifty-fifty chance that they're going to be dancing while the patron gets down to business.

Ew. Just gross.

I make another round of my tables, getting refills, flirting, dropping off checks, flirting, collecting cash . . . and more flirting.

As I work, I keep an eye out for any patrons who might be . . . somebody. That's my real job, scouting for celebrities, major or minor, politicians, CEO bigwigs, Instagram-famous people, or anyone else who might be interesting and tends to frequent this particular club.

On one hand, they're usually the best tippers. On the other, they're why I'm really here, working as Meghan, a cocktail waitress at a strip club, undercover for the tabloid gossip rag I work for. Neither job is my dream come true, but since no one is knocking on my door to write for *The New York Times*, online trash talking pays my bills.

I got the assignment to get a second job at Petals two months ago, and to my surprise, they hired me right away. Petals is known for being exclusive and VIP-preferred, so I'd been nervous about their hiring plain Jane me. But I'd been hired as a waitress on the spot based on my resume and my other . . . ahem . . . assets. So far, the undercover gig has paid off in a couple of smaller celebrity-sighting stories, but I feel like there's something bigger here. I just don't know what it is yet.

But Petals from Heaven is sort of the place to go if you're a celebrity who wants a taste of the salacious life but you don't want to get caught out on the town because of your wife, your girlfriend, or just your reputation. There's a sense of discretion at Petals, and Dominick fosters that, making sure the A-listers get what they want, whether it's private rooms or flashy top-notch service. Plus, Petals employs some of the most beautiful dancers I've ever seen in my life. It's almost artistic, just nearly naked too. With this combination, something gossip-worthy has to happen eventually, and I want to be here to report on it.

Ironically, this undercover gig is pretty sweet and is paying more than

half my bills now anyway. It was an odd realization that the writing and research I love to do and went to school for are actually less financially rewarding than playing airhead and slinging drinks.

Not sure what that says about our society, but it's not anything complimentary.

I hear the DJ talking loudly over the mic, adding some hype to our last performer of the night and telling everyone in the club to get their last drink and get the fudge out. He doesn't use those words, of course, but I censor them in my head like I sometimes do.

I drop one last pitcher and the check at Finger-Sucking-Guy's table and he clears his throat. "Uhm, hey, so I don't wanna piss off the bouncer or nothing, but what are you doing tonight? Wanna party?"

I forcefully contain my eye roll, choosing to twirl my hair around my finger and kicking my voice up an octave. I deal with this at least once a week. Can't get the dancer, go for the waitress. "Oh, no. Sorry, honey, I can't. I've got school in the morning, so I'd better be a good girl and get home."

The reality is, I've been out of school for over three years, but they always believe this excuse because I look a lot younger than my twenty-five years. I still get carded when I buy wine.

Luckily, he takes the refusal gracefully, or maybe he's worried about Shane showing up again. "Mmm. Yes, you should be a good girl. Get right to bed."

It's still flirty and slightly sleazy, but at least he's not arguing with me. I give a wink and turn, flouncing off to close out my other tables.

Once everyone's gone and the club is cleaned up, I head backstage to change. Pulling on sweats and a long-sleeve T-shirt, I'm thinking of only a few things. Mainly getting home, taking a good long shower to get the leftover smell of the club off me, and then collapsing into bed. After all, I've got to be ready for work at ten . . . and my boss hates it if I'm late.

CHAPTER 2

SHANE

Reaching down, I wrap my hand around the handles of each keg, lifting one with each arm. Marco needs the help restocking or else he's going to be here until sunrise, so I normally help him out by carrying the kegs up from downstairs while he brings up the bottles he needs and sends in our orders for the suppliers.

My arms are a little tired by the time I get the two kegs up the stairs, and it's with a grunt of relief that I set them down. Marco's working the register, checking his money against the Point of Sale system. "You have a good night tonight?"

Marco nods, smirking a little. "Yeah, pretty solid. Decent tips, and with the eye candy from Allie's new routine, I can't really complain."

He waggles his eyes at me, like he expects to chatter on about Allie's tits or something. It feels like a test. I'm just not sure if it's a bro one or seeing if I'm aware that Dominick has marked her as off-limits.

Doesn't really matter either way. I'm a fucking professional and I know that I *do not* get involved with any of the girls here, whether they've been tabbed by Dominick or not. So Marco's going to be disappointed in my answer. "Yeah, she's good. She's been working hard and it's paying off."

A couple of the girls come into the club from backstage, and I'm thankful for the break from Marco's slick vibe. Time to do my actual job and not just help out. "Ladies, let me walk you out."

They murmur their thanks but basically ignore me, especially Tina, who's already gabbing away on her phone, telling her babysitter that she's on the way home. I get it. They've got men talking to them all fucking night, and ninety-nine percent of it more or less leads to 'I wanna fuck.' They just tune it all out. It's a survival instinct.

I don't mind. Walking the girls out is one of my usual duties and the one I

take the most seriously. There's always a chance that some 'fan' might not be able to check their fantasy at the heavy door, and I'm here to ensure that doesn't become a problem. I make sure they get in their cars safely and then watch from the doorway to make sure they pull out alone.

It's a little sad, really. I can't imagine any of them as little girls thinking, 'Hey, when I grow up, I wanna be a stripper.' But life sometimes doesn't go according to plan, and we do what we need to so we can get by. So when these girls are under my supervision, they deserve respect and safety, and I'm gonna give that to them, even if no one else in their lives does.

After the girls are gone, I head back inside, seeing Meghan swinging through the saloon-style doors from backstage. She looks young, even more so than usual in her sweats and oversized T-shirt. She could pass as a college freshman on any campus in the US.

She's 'just' a waitress, but in my opinion—not that anyone asks me. I'm not paid to have an opinion—she's the best-looking girl working here. She's absolutely gorgeous when she's done up for a shift, all poufy blonde hair, big doe eyes with fake lashes, puffy, kissable pink lips, and a sexy rack atop a tiny body. She usually favors a sort of 'naughty innocent' look, and there's a reason she's getting more tips than any other waitress.

But my favorite is her 'after shift' style, when she's fresh-faced with her hair pulled up, wearing her big owlish glasses and jeans or sweats. She looks cute and sweet, and small enough I could pick her up and put her in my pocket . . . or over my shoulder. She's almost shy, walking into the main room like she's making sure she's allowed to come in before committing to the movement. She sees me and smiles, walking with more confidence.

That smile feels like a secret view not many people get, like it's a lazy morning at home with a lover look, even though it's damn near three in the morning and we're at a strip club. It makes me . . . Shaking my head to let that train of thought go, I call out to her. "Meg, you ready to go?"

She nods, giving me a little wave and a thumbs-up. "Yep. G'night, Marco. See you tomorrow night."

I have the urge to stick my elbow out for her, gentleman style, but the no-touching rule extends to staff. Unless asked, don't. And I'm the enforcer of the rules, so there's no way in hell I'm going to let myself break them. So I clamp down on that urge and have to be satisfied with opening the door for her. Still, I do let myself take a moment to admire her pert ass as she walks through. I can't help it.

Outside, I ask her the same generic question I asked Marco, but I hope for a better answer from Meghan. “You have a good night tonight?”

Meghan gives me a nod, adjusting her glasses and giving me a tired smile. “It was okay. Good tips, even from that one table,” she says, and we both know exactly what she’s talking about. “Thank you for that, by the way. I didn’t even have a chance to react before you swooped right in.”

I shrug, not letting Meg know that when she’s on shift, I always keep an extra eye out for her. She’s just so . . . innocent. “That’s my job. Already had my eye on that table anyway. They were giving bad vibes.”

She nods in understanding. She’s been here long enough to get those gut feelings too. “Well, I appreciate your being the bad guy so I could be the good girl.”

I tease her, knowing it’s a bad idea but unable to stop myself. “And *are* you a good girl?”

My voice has dropped a little, low and gravelly. Meg always makes me feel this way, like a caveman on the verge of dragging her off to have my way with her. She makes me yearn to control the situation, control her, but I have to settle for controlling myself.

She giggles, but it’s not the false one she gives guys in the club. She sounds nervous and . . . flirty, maybe? “I try to be, but sometimes, it’s hard to be good.”

There’s a hint of sex to her voice, but it feels like there’s more truth to what she said than a casual coy response. It’s maddening, the way we seem to dance around each other, half innuendos and comments that just toe the line between ‘playful banter’ and ‘outright suggestion,’ but I can’t go further. It’s too dangerous, and not because of her.

Before I can think on it too much, we reach her car and the silence of the early morning dark is broken. “Hey, honey! You ready to go?”

I’m instantly on alert, shoving Meghan behind me as I turn to see the finger sucking asshole who was putting the moves on her earlier. Considering that it’s now a good hour after the last patron was out the damn door, we’re way, way past the bounds of appropriate behavior.

He’s leaning up against the car next to hers like he’s waiting for her. While it’s against the official rules, some of the girls will do date-nights with patrons on the side, almost sugar daddy style. But Meghan isn’t the kind to do that sort of thing, and I don’t consider for a second that she told him anything but a polite version of “fuck off”.

Even if she did, I'm not letting her leave with him. Not her. Not with a guy like him.

Instead, I shift my left foot forward while covering Meghan with my body. "You need to leave, asshole. The no-touching policy extends to when we're closed too. So get in your car and take a fucking hike."

Blondie pushes off the car, facing me fully, and I do a quick assessment. He's big, at least six feet, but I've got a few inches on him, and though he looks muscled, it's in a gym rat way. Not the look of someone who's surprisingly strong because of real manual labor.

Most importantly, he doesn't have that air of 'I'll fuck you up.' He seems on the verge of drunk and a bit prissy, like he's used to getting his way.

Well, not tonight. Instead, Blondie talks about Meghan like she's not even here, and as she almost shivers behind me, I know that if a line needs to be crossed, I'm going to cross it. "We're partying tonight. She told me to wait for her."

"No," I declare, bringing my right hand slightly up while tilting my hips to protect against a bitch move kick to the balls. "Leave now."

I see the fire flash in Blondie's eyes as he steps closer, and Meghan steps forward a bit too, leaning around me and setting me on edge because she's too close to this jerk.

"I can't," she says sweetly, trying to de-escalate things before I put this asshole on the ground right here in the parking lot. "I've got early school tomorrow, remember? Sorry, baby."

I tense just a little as I hear the code word all the girls have for trouble. They'll call patrons just about anything—honey, daddy, sugar, sweetie—but the rule at Petals is that 'baby' is the safe word that'll get security on a patron like white on rice.

I already knew he was full of shit, but Meghan just let me know for certain. I shift a little more, knowing that the beating is about to commence. I just have to make sure Meg's safely out of the way before I start.

Blondie's either too drunk, or probably too stupid, to notice. "C'mon, baby. Just a quickie. We don't even have to leave. I've got some goodies in my car so we can party right here. Big Guy won't mind, right? I can slip him a few bills."

He reaches for Meghan's wrist and it's automatic from there. In a move that's so fast that most people don't even realize what's happening, I deflect his hand, directing it down and back while grabbing his wrist in a sweeping

motion as I twist it up behind his back. In less than half a second, he's fully hammer locked, and in the next half second, he's pivoted away from Meg and toward his own car.

I slam him face down on the hood, lifting his wrist while twisting his hand to maximize the controlling pressure on his shoulder, finding that edge where the pain is balancing on the razor's edge right before his arm dislocates. "She said no, asshole."

Blondie yells out in alarm, struggling from pure instinct. "Hey! Hey! Ow! Fuck, man."

I press him into his hood some more, using my booted foot to kick his legs out from under him, holding him in place easily even as he struggles.

"Meghan?" I chance a quick glance behind me to see she's frozen, her face a mask of shock. I raise my voice a bit, knowing she needs a bit of command. "Meghan."

She shakes her head, her vision clearing as her eyes meet mine, wider than usual behind her frames. "Yeah . . . yeah?"

My voice is clipped, all business. Right now, I don't have time for emotions. "Get his wallet out of his pocket. Read his license for me."

She's shaking but does as I order, coming close and with delicate fingers, reaching into Blondie's back pocket and withdrawing a brown leather wallet.

"What the fuck, dude? You're robbing me now? I just wanted to talk to her."

He has another burst of energy and thrashes underneath me, making Meghan jump back. I grab his neck with my free hand, thumping him head first into his hood, not hard enough that he can't drive out of here . . . yet. "Shut up, asshole. Meg?"

She opens the wallet, finding his license inside, and starts to read out loud. "Miles Jacobson, 3654 Sidewinder Trail. He lives here in East Robinsville."

I nod, giving her a professional smile. "Good girl. Now put it back, carefully. And Miles, if you so much as fucking move, I'm going to break your arm."

I emphasize my point with a little yank on his shoulder, encouraging him to be still while Meg puts his wallet back.

Waiting until Meghan's stepped back and is safe, I yank him off the car to growl in his ear. "Miles Jacobson of 3654 Sidewinder Trail, you are banned from Petals from Heaven. If I ever see you even close to this block again, I'll

take special care of you. It won't be over quickly, and you will not enjoy it, I promise you."

"But—"

"*If* you ever see my girl here anywhere at all," I interrupt him, "you'd best run the other fucking way because if you so much as lay an eye on her, I'll fuck you up so badly, your own mother won't be able to identify the body. *If* they find it. Clear?"

He nods jerkily, weeping softly and sober as a judge at the turn of events. I don't feel sorry for him at all. He probably thought a little more forceful asking in the deserted parking lot would lead to Meghan partying with him, willingly or not.

Fucking pricks like him, thinking they're entitled to whatever they want just because they want it.

Still, I don't have time for a philosophy lesson. "Meghan, open the car door."

She moves from behind me, and I keep an eye on her movements, making sure no other threats pop out of hiding in the dark lot. I pull up a bit on Miles's arm, the pressure forcing him to stand in front of me. I prisoner-walk him to the side of the car and push him in, where he clumsily falls into the driver's seat, yelping as his shoulder gives him a warning twinge at the release of the hammerlock. "Fuck, man, I'm gonna—"

I lean down, keeping eye contact as I cage him in with one hand on the roof and one hand on the door. "Think about your next words and where you're making your threat. Goodbye, Miles Jacobson. I don't want to ever see you again."

I give him a hard stare, memorizing every detail of his face and his car, down to the company parking garage badge hanging from the rearview mirror.

Stepping back carefully, I slam his door and then give it a swift and solid back-kick with my hard-soled boots, denting the panel. It's not enough. I'd rather break his jaw or the glass out of every window of his fancy car, but it'll have to do.

I stand, stoic and solid, still threatening as Meghan hides behind me again. He peels out of the lot, but I catch the 'Fuck you!' he yells out the open window.

Not worrying about his need for the last word, I turn to Meghan, gently putting my hands on her shoulders. She's trembling for real this time, and so

tiny I have to be careful not to accidentally hurt or scare her with my roughness. It's more difficult than I thought. I'm still on edge, and this is the first time I've touched Meg other than to shake her hand the first night we met.

"Are you okay?" I ask. "It's all over now."

Her eyes are glassy, but she nods, biting her lip. My thumbs are tracing circles on her arms, soothing her and soothing me too. This could've been bad, really bad, and I'm glad I was here to keep her safe.

"You're okay. He's gone, and you're safe," I murmur softly. "I'll always do my best to keep you safe."

She suddenly collapses forward, all the energy keeping her upright whooshing out as she falls against me, shaking and rambling. "Holy fracking . . . he could've . . . fluffernutter . . ."

She says some of the words like she's cussing, even though she's decidedly not, and even in the midst of the insanity, it makes the corners of my lips tilt up. I've noticed it before, and in some ways, Meg sounds a lot like someone's churchgoing cousin.

She's sweet, an innocent little darling who doesn't belong in a rough life like this. She's way too much of a good girl for someone like me. I gather her closer, wrapping one arm around her shoulders, and lead her back inside the club.

"Marco. Hey, man!" I call out as the door closes. "Get your ass out here!"

Marco pops up from below the bar after a few seconds, already teasing. "Took you long enough. I need your help grabbing another case of—"

His words cut off when he sees Meghan, and he rushes out to get on the other side of her. Despite his player tendencies, he's got a decent heart and knows a girl in need when he sees one.

I squeeze off the growl of 'Don't Touch' that threatens to pass my lips when he grabs her hand, but together, we get her sitting at the bar.

"You got a pen and paper?" I ask as Meghan shivers, putting her head in her hands.

Marco rushes behind the bar again, grabbing a tumbler and filling it with ice and water before setting it in front of Meghan. "Yeah, yeah. Here you go." He grabs a notepad and pen from beside the register, and I write down Miles's information and description, along with his vehicle description and license plate.

I push it back toward Marco, who looks the information over. "This guy.

He’s banned from the club, from the whole damn block, and definitely from Meghan. Pass the word.”

Marco reads the note and nods, knowing that my request isn’t directly to him, but to Dominick. His club, his rules, but for something like this, Dominick will definitely agree with my assessment of the appropriate response.

Pocketing my note, Marco turns to Meghan. “You okay, sweetheart? You look pale. Need something a little more than just ice water?”

She shakes her head, then seems to reconsider. “Can I have a scotch? Just a little sip to settle my nerves?”

It’s part of Meghan’s magic. Here she is, scared out of her mind, and I swear she sounds like little girl who’s asking to have a sip and not get in trouble for it. Marco smirks, turning to grab a shot glass that he fills to the brim with the amber liquid before setting it in front of her.

“Don’t sip it. Just shoot it down so it can work its magic, warm you back up.”

She picks the shot up with delicate fingers, and for a moment, I wonder if this girl has ever even done a shot. If not, she’s about to be in for a rude awakening.

But she tilts it back, opening her throat and swallowing it down with ease before slamming it back to the bar top. Wiping her lips, she offers Marco a hint of a smile. “Thanks. I needed that.”

All on its own, my cock jumps right to attention in my pants, wondering if she’d swallow something of mine down her pretty little throat, and if I could put a bigger smile on her face than what the scotch has.

Fuck, I’ve gotta get my head on straight. Now is definitely not the time for me to be thinking dirty thoughts. Hell, there’s never going to be a time for me to think that about Meghan. Even if she wasn’t too damn good for someone like me, I’d break a sweet little thing like her.

Still, I can’t help but put my arm around her, mindlessly patting and rubbing her back, even though I’m treading dangerous territory for us both. “You gonna be okay? We can hang out here as long as you need,” I reassure her. “Whenever you’re ready, I’ll walk you out to your car again. Make sure you’re safe. ‘Kay?”

She sighs, looking up at me, her pupils black and large behind her glasses. “Actually, do you think you could drive me home? I’m not much of a drinker, and I have a feeling that scotch is going to knock me out in three,

two, one . . .”

She smiles a tiny smile, but it sounds like she’s telling the truth. This is a girl who can sling drinks like a certified pro, but one shot knocks her out for the rest of the night. And no, my dirty fucking thoughts don’t avoid the innuendo there either.

“Yeah, I can do that,” I reply, even as part of me says this is a bad move. I’ve wanted her for weeks, and my instincts are going apeshit. *Bad move, Shane. Bad move*.

Doesn’t matter. The smile she gives me is more than enough to overcome whatever my mind is saying. I turn to Marco, who’s cleaning the shot glass carefully. “Will you let Dominick know I’m leaving my truck here overnight? I’ll drive Meghan’s car to her house and cab it home.”

Marco gives me an evaluating look, and I again appreciate that for all his slick player persona, he’s actually a pretty solid guy and is making sure that I’m not running some game on Meghan when she’s shaken up.

I must have passed his test because he nods and sets the glass aside. “Yeah, I’ll let the boss know. Take care of her.”

With a nod, I help Meghan up. I walk her back outside, head on a swivel as I look for any threats, any sign that Miles Jacobson got a shock of courage and came back, but all seems to be quiet and dark. We make it to her car, a nondescript little thing that looks like it sort of hangs together by sheer force of will.

Meghan digs in her bag for her keys and hands them to me. I do a slight double-take as I see her keyring has a fucking pompom on it. A puffy fluff of soft fur that’s white like a rabbit’s tail. It suits her.

I hold the passenger door for her and make sure she’s buckled in before I go around. “You ready?”

“Yeah. And thanks, Shane,” she says, giving me a smile that could melt Ebenezer Scrooge’s heart. I pull out, still keeping watch for anyone who might be following us, and head away from the club, toward the main road.

“Where to?” I ask, and Meghan gives me directions to her apartment from there. As we drive, I have to admit I’m interested to see where she lives.

A tiny piece of me is disappointed when I pull up outside a regular apartment complex, just one like a hundred others around town and not some special, secret hideaway with unicorns in the driveway befitting the fairy-princess sparkle of this girl. I walk her to her door, planning to get her safely inside and then call a cab . . . from the parking lot, not wanting her to feel

weird about being alone in her apartment with the huge, scary guy from work.

Hey, I know what I look like, and yeah, I use it around work to my advantage. I'm surprised when I turn to go and she calls out, "Shane!"

I turn, hearing the fear returning to her voice. "Yeah?"

She's clutching the door, the toe of her Ugg boot digging in the carpet, looking for all intents and purposes like the scared little girl she is. My heart melts even as another side of me growls possessively, wanting to claim her as mine.

She takes a deep breath, biting her lip, but her voice is surprisingly strong when she speaks again. "Do you want to come in? Have a cup of coffee or something?"

I pause, most of me wanting to say no. This has bad idea written all over it. We're pushing four in the morning, I'm with a girl who's had a scare and might be slightly drunk, and for the past two months, she's jumped to the top of my fantasy list as she ticks boxes on my mental fuck list I didn't even know I had.

But I can man up, be the security she needs, and not let on that she's slowly driving me insane every time she looks up at me in those glasses. That half of me wants to comfort and soothe her, to tell her she'll never be hurt . . . while the other half of me wants to rip her clothes off and make her hurt so damn good she screams in blissful agony before I empty my balls deep inside her body.

"Are you sure?" I ask, keeping my voice calm. "You're home, and you're safe. I can just call a cab."

She doesn't answer, just gestures with her hand into the apartment, inviting me in. I walk past her, careful not to touch her or crowd her so she doesn't spook again. Keeping my steps casual, I feel dirty as my heavy boots cross the threshold into her apartment, and I feel an intense, sudden need to just take them off and not pollute her space.

Her apartment is cute, just like her. Her living room is full of soft furniture, with fuzzy blankets thrown over the arm of an old, overstuffed sofa and a floral coffee mug sitting on the table. The room is white and beige and all the other shades of . . . white. With a few highlights of pink.

I'm nervous to sit on her furniture. I think of the places my pants have been, and I'm afraid I'll sully it up just with my presence. But she motions for me to sit, so I do. "Uhm . . . thanks. It's a nice place you've got here."

“Thanks. Just hold on a moment, would ya?” she asks, bustling off to the kitchen. Moments later, she’s making coffee, by the sound of the clinks I hear.

I look around and see a huge bookcase filled with books. I don’t recognize any of the titles, but whatever type of books she reads, she’s got a shitton of them. “You’re a reader, huh? Lots of books in here.”

Her laugh from the kitchen is slightly self-conscious, and I hear the click-thunk of a knob being turned through the open doorway. “Yeah, I read . . . a lot. Little bit of everything. Non-fiction, like historical stuff and biographies, and fiction too, romance, drama, mystery. You read much?”

I grin, even though she can’t see me. Romance, drama, and mystery? *God, you’re fucking perfect, Meghan.* “No, can’t say I’m much of a reader,” I reply. “I’m more of a dumb jock type.”

A minute later, she appears with a tray, holding two cups of steamy coffee and the fixings. “I wasn’t sure how you take it.”

She sets the tray down, and I lean forward to grab a cup. “Black is fine. Sugar at this time of night gets me jittery.”

She scrunches her nose and adjusts her glasses again. “Ew, too bitter for me. I like lots and lots of cream.”

Oh, for fuck’s sake, she’s really testing me here. If it were any other girl, I’d think it was intentional. But Meghan seems completely oblivious to the effect she’s having on me.

She sits down next to me, and I watch as she adds enough creamer and sugar to her cup to make it basically coffee-flavored ice cream before taking a sip and sighing happily. I sip my own coffee, and I have to add another mark on this girl’s list of accomplishments. I haven’t had coffee this good since a vacation to Chile two years ago.

There’s a comfortable silence as we both sip before she breaks it, looking at me earnestly. “Shane, thanks again. That was some scary intense stuff tonight. I’m glad you were there.”

I nod, setting my cup down on the tray. “It was no problem, Meghan. I’m glad I was there too.”

She flinches a little, and I’m afraid she’s having a bit of a flashback, so I slip my arm across the back of the couch, not touching her, but she scoots closer, curling into my side, so I place a light hand on her shoulder. “I usually think of myself as capable of handling whatever comes my way, and I’ve dealt with some handsy customers, but if I’d been alone in that parking lot

tonight . . .”

Her voice trails off, and I know she’s imagining all the ugly things that could’ve happened. “It’s okay,” I reassure her. “You’re safe now.”

CHAPTER 3

MAGGIE

I wake slowly, feeling warm and fuzzy-headed and safe. It's funny, because normally, I have to be yanked out of sleep by the harsh braying of my alarm clock just to make sure that I can get to work on time. But a quick glance to my left confirms that it's only eight o'clock, and I've got time. So I curl tighter into a ball before stopping because my pillow feels harder than usual.

The thought makes me stop and actually wakes me up, because I'm not in my bed. I'm on my couch underneath one of my throw blankets, the clock I saw was my microwave, and I'm curling up to a hard body . . . the very hard body of Shane.

His breathing is even and slow, still asleep, so I take stock. He's lying half reclined on one end, his boots hanging off my couch and his muscular left arm lying across the back of the couch in a protective position, like he wanted to hold me but didn't. Meanwhile, I've got my cheek pressed against one nearly iron-hard but delightfully warm pectoral and my left leg's half draped over his like the world's biggest body pillow. It feels . . . good. Safe.

I hum softly, and Shane stretches slightly in his sleep, his muscled arm descending slowly to lie on top of the blanket, almost instinctively cupping my butt.

I have a momentary freakout as my body thrills and *fully* wakes up in a lot more ways than just shaking off the last cobwebs of sleep. Did we? No, no. We're both fully dressed, and I'd definitely remember that. I have no doubt that having sex with Shane would be something a girl would never forget. Considering I've had a few fantasies about him over the past two months . . . yeah, I wouldn't forget it.

At that thought, my core fills with warmth, making me squirm slightly. The leg I have thrown over his lifts, and I feel the hard fullness of his dick.

Sweet mama's fairy tales, he's . . . I don't think I could even fantasize about someone this amazingly put together.

Shane moans lightly in his sleep from my pressure, pulling me to him and grinding against me ever so slightly, and I gasp as electricity shoots through me. Unfortunately, the sound seems to wake him and he stirs beneath me. He rubs my butt, pressing into me again as he stretches and groans. The sound alone turns me on, and I bite my lip, lifting my head to look at his face.

Shane blinks and smiles sleepily back at me before I get a close-up view of the second his face goes from smiling 'good morning, sweetheart' to frowning 'oh, shit.'

Sigh. I never should've even pretended he'd be happy to wake up here with me, even if we didn't do anything. I mean, I'm just a nerdy girl next door, and he's so far out of my league it's not even funny. He's the sort of guy who has girls like Allie and the other dancers drooling over him.

It's only because Shane's so nice, and that I basically begged him to stay like a little girl last night, that he's here. But I was truly scared after the parking lot incident.

I can feel the blush rushing across my cheeks, and I do my best to try and smooth all this over before I die of embarrassment. "G'morning. Guess we fell asleep?"

Smooth one there, Maggie. State the dang obvious, why don't ya?

Shane smiles back softly, though, lifting an eyebrow. "Guess so." Suddenly, he notices his hand on my ass and maybe the feeling of his morning wood against my thigh, and his smile disappears in an instant. "Oh, uh . . . sorry."

He lifts his hand off my butt, and I lift up, trying to disentangle myself from our compromising position before my heart fails. "Thanks for staying last night. I was pretty freaked out after everything. Think that guy will stay away?"

Shane's face hardens, and it's reassuring to see absolutely no doubt in his eyes. "He'll stay away, or he'll wish he had. But you're safe, okay?"

I dip my chin, feeling silly that he's still reassuring me, and deciding I need to act a bit more blasé about the whole thing, put it in my past and move forward. I'm supposed to be a tough girl, not a scaredy cat.

Decision made, I stand and straighten my back, rolling my shoulders back to look as tall as I can, which isn't much considering my petite five-foot-nothing self. "Let me put on a fresh pot of coffee—"

Shane interrupts, straightening up himself. “Thanks, but I’d better get going. Need to get my truck before tonight’s shift starts.”

A tough ball of disappointment forms in my gut, but I plaster a fake smile on my face anyway. I mean, I was pathetic enough to almost beg him to stay last night. I shouldn’t keep the streak going. “Sure, of course. Want me to give you a ride back to the club?”

“No, thanks, I’ll grab a cab. I’m sure you’ve got plans today,” Shane says, getting up. I do have plans. I mean, I have to go to my other job, but he doesn’t know that. And there’s something about the way he says it that sounds like a dismissal, not like he’s fishing for me to hang out with him.

“Yeah, busy.” He folds the blanket and lays it on the arm of the couch, and something about that strikes me as so domestic, so tame considering he’s a wild beast of man who didn’t hesitate to put the beat-down on that guy last night.

The contrast makes me feel dizzy, or maybe that’s just him and how he makes me feel inside. I walk him to door, one hand on the doorknob as I turn and look at him again. “Thanks for last night.”

Shit, that sounds like I mean something else, something decidedly more vulgar, and I can feel the blush warming my cheeks. Even Shane smiles a little, and I quickly try to get myself out of this quicksand I’ve stuck myself in. “I mean with the guy at the club. And bringing me home.”

I know I look like a total fool, and Shane seems amused by my awkwardness. He gives me a little grin that leaves my heart hammering even more in my chest and chuckles. “You’re welcome. Just doing my job. Well, mostly,” he says with a pointed look at the couch. “But I’m glad I was here.”

I think he’s trying to make me blush more, and to be honest, he’s succeeding. “Uh . . . me too.”

Shane clears his throat, and I have a half-second to wonder if he’s serious that he liked being here. “I’ll see you tonight?”

I nod, thinking that I wouldn’t miss a shift at Petals for the world right now. “Yeah, I’m working dinner to close tonight, so I’ll see you later.”

There’s a moment where it seems neither of us knows what to do, so I finally lean in for a hug.

I mean, heck. I slept draped over the guy like he was a body pillow last night. A hug doesn’t seem all that intimate, right? And we’re colleagues, work buddies even. And work buddies will sometimes give each other a hug.

Except when I reach up and wrap my arms around him and press my

chest toward his, all I can think about is how good he feels. My breasts tingle as they smoosh against his hard chest muscles, and my body feels every bit of his hand splayed on my back. I can almost read the way his fingers adjust their pressures, his thumb pressing against one of my ‘dimples’ for a moment before his fingers take over, alternating like he’s playing a piano before he pulls me tighter and his musky-manly scent fills my senses. I have to bite back the moan in my throat.

“You be good,” Shane says with a tantalizing ghost of huskiness in his voice that makes me think maybe he liked the hug as much as me. With one last full, white smile and a little two-finger wave, he steps out. “And take it easy.”

As soon as he’s gone, I melt back to the couch, a wistful sigh mixing with the floomp of my cushions as I flop.

“Damn, that man is hot with a capital *Oh, yeah*!” I sigh, knowing that he’s also incredibly off-limits, for so many reasons. First, there’s my waitress job where the no fraternizing rule is strictly enforced.

Second, there’s the fact that I’m undercover for the tabloid and he doesn’t even know my real name. He thinks I’m Meghan, not Maggie. Major buzzkill to be mid-flagrante delicto and for him to cry out your name, except it’s not yours but rather the alias you gave him.

I won’t even touch on the third reason, considering that contemplating how out of my league he is won’t do my self-esteem any favors. I know I’m a catch, and I’m picky because I can be, but Shane is in a whole other dimension of gorgeousness.

Shaking my head, I rally and grab a cup of last night’s coffee, nuking it in the microwave and dropping in three sugars and a lot of milk, just the way I like. The caffeine and sugar are just what I need to get dressed and into the office for my check-in and assignment update.

Yeah, big plans, that’s me. Get off work and go to work. If I’m lucky, I might be able to squeeze in a workout at the gym to try and keep up my girlish figure.

Living the dream, baby.

THE BIG OPEN ‘BULLPEN’ OF *THE DAILY SPOT* IS HUMMING WHEN I GET IN. Of course it is. A lot of my coworkers have been here for a couple of hours already, trying to make the noon update deadline. We may be a gossip rag, but that doesn’t mean we don’t have a schedule. Seven in the morning for the

pre-work and water cooler crowd, noon to catch the lunch-timers, and then at six to give everyone a late-night update.

As soon as I log into the computer, my instant messenger box opens in the corner of the screen. It's my new boss, Jeanine. *Hi, Maggie! Come to my office ASAP.*

Shoot, wonder what she wants. She's definitely better than my old boss, who was a skeevy jerk. Actually, he was worse than that, but he went out in a blaze of glory . . . publicly. *The Daily Spot*'s reputation took a hit, but at the same time, website traffic is up. I guess it's true—controversy creates cash.

Jeanine's been here a little over a month now, but I don't have a good read on her yet. She always seems serious and cold, and she communicates in snippets of sentences rather than in full, embellished diatribes. I'd bet money she's never so much as cracked the spine of a book of poetry. No time for that prosaic nonsense.

So a tabloid full of gossipy blurbs is probably right up her alley. Actually, I read her biography when she took the editor's job, and she's worked in some legit journalism too, but still, the woman communicates by the five Ws—who, what, when, where, and why—almost exclusively. She doesn't even bother with how. That's my job, I guess.

I don't waste her time by responding to the message. I just lock my computer and head her way as quickly as possible. Knocking on her doorframe, Jeanine doesn't even look away from her computer, although she does wave me in with a quick little flutter of her fingers.

Ah, well. I sit in one of the chairs, waiting for her to finish whatever she's working on and speak first.

Jeanine hits her *Enter* key with a flourish that's sure to break her keyboard before too much longer and looks up, giving me a professional smile. "Maggie, how are things? What have you got for me?"

I swallow, knowing she won't like my answer. "Honestly, not a lot right now. There hasn't been even a pseudo-celeb in the club in over a week. I wrote that one up for last Saturday's edition, remember? The headline was *Bad Boy of Soaps Gets Glitter Bombed*."

Jeanine is silent, but she nods so I think she at least remembers the story. I'll admit, it wasn't that big of a story. I mean, sure, the guy's made a few housewives fan themselves, but ever since he came over from New Zealand, he's been getting himself in so much trouble the biggest story is whether the INS is going to let him renew his work visa.

Jeanine's grey eyes narrow at me as she purses her blood-red lips, her expression making her look even harsher than usual. "Glitter. Oh, yes."

She says it with a sneer, like the sparkly confetti is unwelcome contagious merriment. But that's what it was, if you count getting smacked in the face with a dancer's glitter-covered hiney a 'bomb.' But he's single, not dating anyone, and most fans don't really mind if a guy like that gets up to no good.

With a shake of the head, she continues. "I've received word that a certain All-Star basketball player will be clubbing sans the missus at a rather high-end venue tonight. I need you to go in, look the part, and see if he's up to anything devious. If so, get pics and write up his delinquency. If he's being a good boy, take pics of the sketchiest thing you see and write it up as supposition for why he's out alone. Trouble in paradise type story. Got it?"

I fidget and tug at the sleeve of my blouse. "I'd love to, but I'm already working tonight. I can probably get someone to cover the later part of my shift and catch up with him after the liquor kicks in though. He'd be more likely to behave badly then, anyway."

I've agreed, but only partially, and Jeanine definitely catches the difference. Her face goes hard, a mask of iron determination. "Maggie, my dear. Are you a waitress or are you a reporter? Because it sounds as though you're turning down a sure-bet reporting assignment to sling beer to drool-mouthed drunks. If you'd rather wait tables, by all means, feel free to do so. However, if you'd like to be a reporter, I'll need you at Club Noir all night in case Jimmy Keys shows up."

The threat is obvious, and while I only took the waitressing job as a means to get sordid stories, it is a big part of my life now. I have friends who work there, and the money is great. Dominick is tough, but he's a good boss, and I won't lose the waitressing job for calling out on one shift.

But missing this assignment from Jeanine will definitely cost me the reporting gig, so with a sigh of resolve, I plaster a saccharine-sweet smile on my face. "Of course, I want to be a reporter, Jeanine," I reply, while inwardly wondering if working for this gossip rag can really be called reporting. "I'll get my shift covered so I can be at the club well before the target arrives and will have a story submitted by tomorrow."

Jeanine doesn't compliment me, just smiles shrewdly, knowing her intimidation worked and I'm solidly ensconced in my place once again. '*My place,*' of course is at least one notch lower than her, as everyone in the office has quickly learned that Jeanine carries her job with a superiority like a cape

that swishes along behind her like a pissed off queen. And everyone knows that in her right hand is her scepter, which she'll beat over your head if you push her far enough.

She doesn't even bother answering as she turns back to her computer, just waving me off as her attention goes back to whatever it is that she's focusing on now that her favorite little petite social wallflower knows what to do.

Summarily dismissed, I head out to my desk, digging my phone out of my purse. I think and text one of the other girls at the club. She's a dancer, but considering she's new and nowhere near as good as Allie, her paychecks could use the help.

Hey, Sarah, can you cover my shift tonight, please? Last-minute thing came up.

She replies quickly, happy to cover.

Sure! I'd love a bonus Friday shift.

Thanks! I owe you one. Anytime you need me.

With a sigh, I set my phone back down and get to work, scanning Instagram accounts for celeb news, checking Twitter feeds for vague posts, and although Jeanine would never admit it, searching other tabloid sites for their stories to see if we can do a story better justice. Twice, that's hit for me, being able to read between the lines and get a juicy tidbit that someone else left behind.

It's a hard knock life for me.

CHAPTER 4

SHANE

I know it's not quite professional as I scan the room, but when eight o'clock comes and goes and I don't see the petite figure of Meghan working the tables, I get worried. I've been looking forward to seeing her all day, ever since waking up with her snuggled against me, and to not see her . . . well, it just feels weird.

Especially after we both said we'd see each other tonight. Marco won't know anything. He sleeps most of the day, and if it wasn't for his slight tan, I'd swear he's a vampire, and most of the dancers are the same. Instead, I find Sarah, a newbie dancer who's wearing a lot more clothing than normal as she carries a pitcher of margaritas through the club. "Hey, where's Meghan?"

Sarah delivers her pitcher, earning her 'tip' with a little flirt and a shake of her curvy hip before giving me a smile. "Oh, I'm covering her shift. She texted saying something came up."

"I see. What happened?"

Sarah shrugs, already walking away as another table waves for her attention. "I don't know what though. Sorry."

I grit my teeth, knowing Meghan was fine when I left this morning. I thought she was even looking forward to seeing me when she came to work, and I'll admit that I've spent a decent amount of time today with some extra pep in my step at the thought. Sure, something innocent could've come up, but after the incident last night, I hope she's okay.

But the question, the doubt creates a tension in my gut that twists and gnaws at me. What's worse is that I can't even do anything about it. I've got a job to do here, and it's not like Sarah could cover *my* job.

"Hey, Shane."

I look over from my perch by the door to see Marco waving at me. We're

in between dances, so he doesn't have to yell or use the walkie-talkie system we have. Getting up, I walk over, still keeping my eyes on the patrons. "Yo, Marco."

"That was Dominick on the phone," he says. "Asked to see you in the office."

I nod, walking over to Logan, the other guy working security tonight, and ask him to cover the door for a minute while I talk to the boss. Logan's a MMA fighter who works here part-time to help cover costs. With his bald head and trimmed goatee, he's intimidating enough that I don't have to worry.

Comfortable the floor is secure, I head upstairs to Dominick's office and give two quick raps on the door. A moment later, a deep voice inside calls out. "Enter."

Even though I was invited in, I open the door slowly, both to give anyone inside time to get decent and so that I can make sure some goon isn't going to grab me as I enter.

Dominick isn't a guy you mess with, and while I never have, I don't want to be caught unaware. But all seems chill as I enter, Dominick sitting behind his large mirrored desk.

The whole room is done in contemporary modern lines, mirrors here, low-slung leather chairs there, all surrounded by sleek black shiny walls. Of course, those are one-way mirrors that look onto the dance floor and audience area downstairs, but they're good quality so the noise in here is barely noticeable unless Dom turns on the speakers. Dominick is watching, always watching what happens in Petals since it's his club, his territory.

I sit in one of the white leather chairs, although I don't dare get comfortable and familiar in his office, not with the Desert Eagle I know he keeps under his desktop. Instead, I lean forward, appearing poised and ready for anything. "What can I do for you, sir?"

Dom's the only man I call sir, and while I don't like it, it makes my life a lot easier. He drums his fingers on the top of his desk, looking at me with those perceptive eyes of his. If I ever needed a reminder that my life is perilous, those eyes are a perfect one. "Shane, Marco tells me there was trouble last night. Explain."

It's an order, and one I know to obey. I give Dominick the full-detailed version of last night's incident, knowing withholding anything would be seen as a betrayal, finishing with Miles's name and information being posted

behind the bar for Marco and shared with the rest of the security team.

As I speak, Dominick spins the gold pinky ring he wears. It's filigreed but has been passed down in his family for a long time, so the decorations are nearly worn as smooth as a new wedding ring. It should look stupid, my upbringing telling me that real men don't wear rings, especially pinky rings. But Dominick pulls it off with style, the ring fitting in perfectly with his custom-made deep navy suit and silver tie.

He radiates wealth and power, and though he's a few years older than me and about twenty pounds lighter, I'm pretty sure that if he and I ever threw down, it'd be one hell of a scrap. And that doesn't count if Dom fought dirty, in which case all bets are off.

Dom knows my evaluation of him, and in some ways, that helps me. He knows that I view him not with fear but with the respect of one warrior to another, and because of that, he gives me respect back. He nods and folds his fingers together. "And after the incident?"

I nod, knowing what he's talking about and that honesty is the best policy here. Marco would have told him that I left my truck here and drove Meghan home, and that I didn't come back to pick up my truck at all.

Better he hears the story from me than find out later from someone else, and he will find out because he has an uncanny way of always knowing things.

"Meghan was in shock, asked me to drive her home, which I did. I offered to call a cab from the porch, but she asked me to come in for coffee. We talked, and she calmed down. At some point, we fell asleep on her couch. I left her apartment this morning and she seemed fine."

Dominick's fingers tighten a little before he unlaces them, setting them almost casually on the arms of his office chair. I'd be fooled too if it wasn't that I know his right hand's about six inches from that Desert Eagle of his. "You slept with her?"

I nod, speaking quickly but calmly. "I feel like that's a trick question, asking one thing but meaning another. We slept on the couch, fully clothed. If you're asking if I had sex with her, the answer is no."

Dominick nods, his hands relaxing and going back to turning his ring. "Well answered. I do feel the need to remind you of our no-dating policy, both the dancers and waitresses being strictly off limits."

"I'm aware."

Dom nods, smiling tightly. "Beyond my policy and its enforcement,

although I don't know Meghan well, I sense that a man like you would break a girl like her. And then I would be called upon to break you for the misstep. Am I clear?"

Like that exact thought hasn't been running through my head since I felt the flawless curve of her ass in my hand and the soft pressure of her thigh against my cock this morning. I tilt my chin in deference, blinking once. "Crystal clear," I answer. "No worries."

I pause, taking a moment to let Dom know that I'm not just spouting some fear-inspired bullshit, then continue. "Well, actually, I am concerned. But not about that. It's Meghan."

"What about Meghan?" Dom asks. "Do you feel she is under threat still?"

I shrug, tenting my fingers in my lap. "Not sure. When I left, she seemed fine, even said she'd see me tonight because she was scheduled to work dinner to close. But she got Sarah to cover her shift. I'm sure it's nothing, but I wanted you to be aware."

Dominick's eyes flick to the black walls, seeing through them to the dance floor below where the familiar but faint bass beat is telling me Allie is on stage. "I'll have Allie call Meghan," Dom finally says. "They're close, so she can see what's up and why she ditched her shift. Tell Allie to come up after her performance, please."

Hearing the dismissal, I rise and walk out of Dominick's office, feeling like I just received a pardon from the firing squad. Even knowing I'd done nothing wrong, Dominick is one of the few men I legitimately fear. Even now, leaving his office, there's one percent of my brain that expects to hear the *snick* of him drawing the hammer back on his pistol.

The fact is, Dominick is ice-cold and all business, willing to do whatever is necessary, regardless of where the law or public opinion lies on his actions. This time, though, I'm safe, and I get downstairs to wait behind the curtain backstage for Allie to finish her set.

As she comes though, her costume is wadded up in her hands, and she jumps slightly, not expecting me to be standing there, and she squeaks a little. "Jesus fuck, Shane! You scared the hell out of me!"

"Sorry, didn't mean to startle you. Dominick wants to see you for a second."

She bites her lip, and I can see she's nervous, but there's something else in her eyes too, but it's gone too fast for me to identify it.

She lays her costume down, grabbing a towel and patting herself off so

she removes the beads of sweat without disturbing the waterproof makeup and glitter too much. She's got a couple more dances coming up tonight, and Allie's a girl who absolutely hates to do touch-up work once she's got her 'costume' on. It's interesting the things you learn working in a strip club. Girls' makeup habits being one of them.

Thinking of girls' makeup makes my brain flash to Meghan and the way she can go from sultry to fresh-faced in a flash, and in my jeans, my cock twitches. Thankfully, I prepared for tonight, and I'm wearing my tighter compression briefs, and my semi-chub goes unnoticed.

"Thanks, I'll head up now."

I hold the back-stairwell door open for her, giving her a nod as she walks by before I head back out to the floor to resume my door duty. Yeah, Dominick might have Allie call her, but I'm going to have to check on Meghan tonight to satisfy my own questions.

I just need to make sure she's okay after last night's incident, and maybe moreso after this morning's awkward wakeup.

CHAPTER 5

MAGGIE

"What a freakin' waste of time," I mutter to myself as I look around the club, wishing I wasn't here. As ordered, I've gotten dolled up, paid the rip-off twenty-dollar cover charge to get into the fancy-schmancy Club Noir, supposedly the hottest night club this side of New York. I've sat here at a table, nursing two weak girly drinks for the past four hours, tipping the waitress generously as she gives me looks.

I've spent since eight o'clock tonight looking like the world's biggest club loser, hanging onto my seat and turning down the guys who have approached simply because this chair has the best view of the door, the dance floor, and the stairs up to the VIP section.

And did Mr. Basketball Star, Jimmy Keys, make an appearance in said VIP section? Did his twenty points and eleven rebounds a game ass even show up?

Of course not. The closest thing I've seen is a guy who's about six four and looks like he might make a good basketball player.

So now, as people start to pair off and head out to continue the night in private, I'm almost fifty bucks in the hole for the night. I have no story, and based on my last text to Jeanine, my boss is somehow pissed off at me for the whole thing.

Not to mention that by giving up my shift, I've lost out on a couple of hundred dollars in tips. Grabbing my purse, I head home and flop into bed, growling the whole time.

THE MORNING ISN'T MUCH BETTER, AND I SPEND MOST OF THE DAY Saturday just stewing and trying to get Jeanine to unclench her sphincter.

Pulling up in front of Petals, I'm just hoping that we've got a big crowd. The parking lot looks good, so Hello, Dolly! I've got a shot of not ending the week on a bad note . . . if I'm lucky.

I slip through the door without anyone noticing me, a plain-ish girl in oversized sweats and a hoodie that hides my face, helping me be invisible. Except to Logan, who's on door security and does his job, giving me a quick once-over to make sure I'm allowed entry. I give him a small smile, but he returns his attention to the door, dismissing me without a word.

Backstage, I change, putting the last touches on my makeup and giving my hair and my girls one last poof as I cross my fingers for a good night. "Here's to hoping we've got high-rollers who like fifties over fives."

Looking over, I see Allie slipping into lingerie for her performance tonight and giving me a cockeyed grin. If you'd told me a few months ago that hanging around a bunch of half-naked, or sometimes fully naked, women wouldn't make me bat an eye, I'd have laughed my butt off. I'm no prude, but it's not like my real life has offered many opportunities for in-depth analysis of panty styles, grooming habits, and ways to highlight your best assets.

But these girls, the ones I call friends, are real and open. They've given me a lot of insight into men, some good and some bad, and most will be the first to give you a Cosmo-worthy tip when you have an unfortunate pimple or need a hair plucked from a spot you can't quite reach.

"Hey, Allie, sorry I missed your call last night," I reply, glad I get to wear real underwear as Allie fiddles with her four ounces of 'stage costume.' "Everything okay?"

"Yeah, I heard about what happened Thursday night from Dominick," Allie says, straightening up. "I just wanted to make sure you were okay. You are, aren't you?"

She looks at me, her brown eyes warm with concern, and I blush, nodding. "Yeah, totally fine. Just had to take care of something unexpectedly for a friend, so Sarah covered for me. I think it's almost time for her next school loan payment, so she seemed glad to get the weekend shift."

I feel guilty for not being completely honest, but I can't exactly explain that I was working my other job as a reporter, no matter how good of friends we are. Allie's too close to Dominick, and I've got to keep that screen between us. It sucks too, because honestly, I'd count Allie as one of my closest girlfriends. And she doesn't even know my real name.

“Marco said Shane took you home.”

It’s a statement, not a question, but I treat it as one anyway. “Yeah, I was pretty shook up, so he drove me home. It was nice of him.”

I purposefully leave out that he spent the night and the awkward morning departure. Allie grins, shaking her bouncy curls and boobs at the same time. “Nice? I’m sure Shane would love to hear you describe him as nice. Because trust me, there isn’t a single nice thing about that man. He is bad . . . in the best way.”

Her voice goes all breathy at the end, and I’m struck with a twinge of jealousy. I cover that with a smirk and zing her back. “Hmm, sounds like someone has a crush. Better not let Dominick hear you talking like that.”

Allie flushes instantly, stammering and shaking her head. “No, no, no. Listen, Shane’s got the whole bad boy persona going on. Hard body, tattoos, you know.”

“He’s got tats?” I ask, surprised. I mean, I’m not that surprised, but I’ve never seen Shane in anything but his normal long-sleeved shirt. It makes me wonder when Allie saw him.

“Yeah, and before you ask, there was a night right before you started where Shane had to deal with three drunken frat boys. One of them got a handful of Shane’s shirt, and we all got an eyeful of some pretty impressive eye candy. Actually, that was the only damage Shane took.”

My pulse is hammering in my chest and I can’t help it. “Wish I could have seen that.”

Allie grins. “But you also know Shane. He’s a badass, to be sure, but he’s got that golden core to him. There’s a deep-seated decent streak about him. Dominick’s a different creature altogether. It’s not a façade with him. He actually is a bad guy.”

She says ‘bad guy’ like most folks say yummy cake, and I wonder exactly what is going on between the two of them. Part of me hopes it’s not what I think. Allie’s the kind to let her heart get broken in a futile quest to redeem the bad guy.

Before I can question her further, she gives her boobs a little shake and blows me an air kiss. “Anyway, off for my first set. Make sure you clap for my back walk-over move.”

I smile. “You know I will. It’s really a brilliant hook for your routine. I’ve seen guys’ eyes just about bug out of their heads when you do it. Well done!”

She gives me a high-five and sashays out to wait backstage for her music

cue. I quickly join her out on the floor while she's just getting her hips rolling for the crowd, immediately realizing that my section is already nearing capacity. Tossing a quick wave to Marco, I hustle over, jumping into the routine of getting orders and drinks.

As I work, I scan the room, sensing a vibe of tension for some reason. Usually by now, there's an ambiance of wicked abandon, wild chaos barely restrained. Too many guys are looking around the room too, ignoring Allie even as she hits her sexiest moves.

But instead, everyone is on edge, sitting up and looking over to the right, even as Allie comes off stage and the new girl takes over. Her approach is a different style from Allie's elegant grace, but the confidence and sex appeal are all there and should be garnering the crowd's attention.

Hmm, something's got to be up. I wonder what's over there? I try to look surreptitiously, especially since it's not my section and I don't want to be seen as a table poacher, but I just have to know.

Holy Mama Llama! That's Jimmy Keys, all six-foot-eight inches of millionaire himself, here at Petals, not at Club Noir like he was rumored to be last night. He's sitting back, two girls already hanging out with him, a bottle of very expensive bubbly sitting on the table.

The devil on my shoulder wants to tell Jeanine to suck it because this waitressing cover just might pan out after all. Mr. Basketball getting his drink and dance on at a regular club without his wife is one thing. Getting his jollies off at a strip club with a table full of what totally looks like his boys is another.

I can definitely use this for a story in *The Daily Spot*, but I need pictures as proof. I move to the far end of the bar, calling out an order to Marco and staying back to wait while he makes my drinks.

I pull out my phone, which is against the rules, but I need to take the risk. Acting like I'm checking my messages on my phone—*yep, nothing to see here, folks*—I quickly pull up my camera and fire off a burst of pics rapid-fire style. Score! Knowing when to cut and run, I don't even check the pics before shoving my phone back in my apron pocket. If they're fuzzy, well, it's not the first time we've run with unfocused photos, and these aren't even of UFOs or Bigfoot.

I'm just in time as Marco sets my drinks down. "One JB on the rocks and one draft beer for table nine," he says, grinning. "Good times tonight, huh?"

"I'm guessing you mean the bar tab?" I ask, and Marco nods. "Yeah.

Good times.”

I deliver my drinks and check in with my tables, my eyes flashing back to Jimmy every few minutes. I hear some guys cheering and laughing and look over to see his boys all riled up as Jimmy stands from his seat. He’s grinning but not seeing a damn thing as his eyes read one thing and one thing only. Lust.

I can easily see why as Sasha, a stunning blonde from Russia, takes his hand and leads him straight into the back hallway where the private rooms are.

Not just a score, this could be a jackpot! Family man basketball star getting a private lap dance. I can see the headline now.

Once upon a time, I’d have been ashamed of peddling gossip like this. I would have been even more ashamed that a public person like this is acting so . . . dishonorably, but after a few years of tabloid work, you get numb. It feels like there’s a sense of justice to it sometimes, at least. Jimmy trades and exploits his image as a family man, banking millions on his mantra of ‘being a real man who treats his woman like a queen,’ with endorsements, speaking fees . . . heck, the man spoke in front of a ten-thousand-seat church once. But something tells me his wife won’t be too happy with her husband getting a private, one-on-one show from another woman.

Before I can even question more deeply, I follow them down the hallway, staying back and acting casual so no one suspects anything. They go to the big room that is used for private lap dances, and Jimmy sprawls out while Sasha saunters over to pick out whatever music she’s going to use, temporarily leaving the door open.

I pause, leaning against the hallway wall, and take out my phone, clicking on the screen as though I’m texting but silently taking shot after shot. You can only see a bit of Jimmy from the side, but with the shots I got earlier being of his face, the clothing and his height instantly identify the faceless image as Jimmy.

I slip my phone back into my apron again before Sasha turns to close the door, knowing this will be a job well done and a hit story. I’m about to turn back onto the floor when I hear an angry voice behind me. “What the fuck are you doing, Meghan?”

I jump, startled and fearful as I look around. Shane steps forward from the end of the hallway, where he was standing in a dark corner. Considering he’s wearing black pants and a smoke gray silk shirt, he’s damn near a ninja.

His face is hard, his jaw clenched as he grabs my hand and drags me over to his hideaway corner, standing in front of me to block me in. “Shane, I—”

He shakes his head, looking down at me with iron-hard eyes. “Spill it.”

Thinking fast, I pull out my airhead act, letting my voice rise girlishly. “Oh my gosh, Shane. You scared the poop outta me. Are you just skulking over here in the dark?”

Put the attention back on him. Good job, Maggie. I can play young, dumb, and broke all night long. But he’s not having it at all. “One more time, Meg. What the fuck are you doing back here?”

I look into his dark eyes, which are boring into mine, and I can’t help it, my gaze drops to the floor submissively. I try to work my way back up, letting my eyes trace the multitude of tattoos visible on his forearms where his sleeves are rolled up. I’ve never seen them before, and they’re fascinating.

As I get higher, I follow where the tanned skin peeks out, and I can’t help but wonder how much of his shirt I’d need to unbutton in order to see the tats on his chest.

But my gaze stops at his mouth, not able to meet his eyes again.

Deciding that a speck of truth will work better than my airhead act, especially since he’s seen it with patrons before, I swallow my fear and let out a whisper. “Look, I’m a huge fan, okay? I just wanted to get a better look at him.”

Shane grins, cocky and obviously holding back his laughter. “You’re a basketball fan?”

I manage to look him in the eye, seeing his disbelief. “Well, maybe more of a Jimmy Keys fan than the whole sport. I always liked his wholesome family guy image. Seems that’s not real, though, considering he’s got Sasha grinding in his lap right this second. I just . . . I wanted to know for sure.”

Shane tilts his head. “I’ve been around here longer than you. Even good guys are bad sometimes, and bad guys are good sometimes. No one is a simple character all the time. People are more complex than that.”

I swallow, more of a gulp, honestly, and my eyes dip down again, intent on studying the buttons of his shirt and wondering about what’s underneath the thin, dark fabric in front of my eyes. “So, which one are you, a good guy or a bad guy?”

From my peripheral vision, I see Shane’s hand move, but I still freeze when he cups my chin, tilting my head back and forcing me to look up at him. There’s heat in his eyes, a tension in his body as he leans forward,

basically looming over me due to our height differences.

"Weren't you listening, Angel? I'm both good and bad. I suspect you are too."

The throaty, deep challenging purr of his voice drives the breath from my lungs as my pussy clenches, moisture almost immediately wetting the cotton of the good girl undies I'm wearing. Yeah, I am a good girl . . . but I so want to be naughty with him.

I suddenly realize my jaw is hanging open in his hand, and I force my mouth shut, my teeth clacking together. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Shane's thumb traces along my jawline, sending another thrill down my spine to stoke the heat inside me. "Pity," Shane softly growls, looking both amused and disappointed. "You looked so pretty with your mouth wide-open and waiting. Waiting for something . . . to suck on."

A shudder racks through my body, unbidden and uncontrollable at the image that brings to mind, and it takes every ounce of willpower I have to stay standing and not drop to my knees to immerse myself in obedience just to feel the intensity of what he's promising.

There's a moment of tense quiet where I think he's waiting to see what I'll do, and I wonder if he actually thinks I'll give him a blowjob right here in the hallway.

While the thought might be hot, it's definitely not something I'd actually do, even though my body's saying something very, very different.

Finally, he stands to his full imposing height, no longer angling over me, and he crosses his arms, his feet splayed wide. The mood has changed, seemingly at his whim, going from heated sexiness to all-business in a flash.

His chin dips as he lowers his gaze to look me in the eyes again, and his voice loses the growl, becoming softer but at the same time less intimate. "I was worried about you last night when you gave your shift away. Everything okay?"

I get the sense he was disappointed, and maybe a bit worried I wasn't here, either because now he thinks I'm some wilted flower who can't handle a jerk customer or maybe because he just wanted to see me.

Maybe both, to some degree? my mind asks, the hope mixed with the arousal that is pulsing its way through my body. I try not to let that hope plant too deeply and tell my hormones to calm the fudge down.

"Everything's fine," I finally reply. "Something just came up with a

friend and she needed my help."

That's true, or as close as I can get to it. Jeanine isn't exactly a friend, but she did require my help.

Shane doesn't look convinced, his eyebrows lifting as he studies me closely. "A friend needed help? That's . . . vague."

Dang it, every time I try to play him, even a little bit, he calls me on it. He's giving me a little wiggle room here, maybe because he wants to find out more or maybe because he's just being nice, but he knows something's up.

Stuck, I shrug, hoping to play the one trump card most women have. "She thought her guy was stepping out on her, so she wanted me to do a little recon, see if he was being honest about where he was. He actually no-showed, so I gave up my shift to slowly drink in another bar for no good reason. I'm a bit bitter about the loss of tips, honestly. I'm out fifty bucks for the night."

It's just enough of the truth that it rings honest, and Shane's eyes soften as he accepts the expanded version of my story. Giving me a slight nod, he smiles, his white teeth flashing in the dim light. "Okay, just wanted to make sure you didn't have a freakout after I left. And next time, before you go drinking alone at some random club, call me and I'll be your cover story so you don't get caught spying on some friend's dude."

I nod, too stunned at his casual offer to say anything. Is he serious? If he were drinking at a club with me, watching my surroundings would be the last thing on my mind as I got lost in his brown eyes and powerful presence. Although last night would have been a lot more fun if I could have taken Shane out on the dance floor and shown him that I might not be on Allie's level, but I can work it myself a little . . . with the right guy.

"I'd better get back to my tables, see if they need anything," I say, clearing my throat and my mind. "Gotta make up for yesterday to pay the bills."

Shane chuckles. "Sure. And stay out of the private room area, Meghan. It's no place for a good girl like you."

I almost tease him about being a bit bad too, throwing his own words back at him, but something about his calling me a good girl feels nice, and instead, I just bask in the compliment as I hit the floor again.

CHAPTER 6

SHANE

For the next week, I keep an extra eye out on Meghan. It's not that hard, honestly. I keep an eye on the entire club anyway, and I've been paying attention to Meghan for at least the past month regardless. She's just so tempting that I can't help myself.

But now I find myself making sure that her area is even better behaved, that nobody gives her any grief even as I keep my distance physically. My attention never wavers from her tiny body as she swishes around the tables, leaning over provocatively to flash the fullness of her lush tits as she flirts harmlessly, giggling her little girl laugh and playing her airhead act every night. The guys love it, and the few girls who come in love it too. They just see her as the totally relatable girl next door.

Every flirt, every move, every time she makes eyes with a customer, it feels like she's taunting me. But deep down, I know it's her usual schtick as a waitress.

Every girl has one, dancer or waitress alike. They have to in order to survive in a place like this. They find a mask, a mantle of fakeness they put on like a Halloween costume when they hit the floor. For some, they become sweet or sarcastic, and for some it's femme fatale flirty or bitchy snippy. They find the personality type that attracts the customers, and the best girls know how to read their customers and behave accordingly to get the big tips.

For Meghan, that's her natural innocent bubbliness. It's disarming, enchanting, and very effective camouflage. I've watched her for long enough to see how smart she really is, and that while she's innocent and maybe even naturally flirty, she's no airhead despite her act. It's in the flow of her words, the way she shoots guys down even as she compliments them, and how she can subtly manipulate every table into falling in love with her. She's quickly

gotten a small group of regulars who come not to see the dancers, but to get their beer and liquor with a side of her sweetness.

They see her as the girl they always wanted in high school, the good girl whose sparkling eyes and smile say she'll be honest and pure . . . but that underneath is a kitten waiting to be unlocked if she can find someone able to teach her.

Although, I'm not entirely sure that part is an act. I remember the way she blushed at my tawdry comments, her eyes dropping even as her breathing quickened, and her awkwardness the morning after we'd slept on her couch.

I don't think the innocence is all that fake, and though it shouldn't, that just ramps up my interest in my little angel Meghan all the more. Because I know, deep down in my guts where the good and bad sides of me swirl in constant tension, that I could unlock that sex kitten.

All I'd need is one opportunity. Much like the thought I had in her apartment about sullying her white couch with my griminess, I can picture dirtying Meghan up—lipstick smeared across her face by my lips, long blonde hair a mess from my hands tugging and pulling her at my will, my cum all over her tits in her black bustier uniform as she sags, spent from spasming helplessly around my cock before I marked her as mine.

Suppressing a groan, I shake my head, trying to clear it. Meghan's taken up so much real estate in my damn mind, I'm having to wear my compression shorts every time she's on shift, or else I walk around with a tent in my trousers.

Needing something more, I head over to the bar for a cold drink. No booze. That's unprofessional . . . but the bar has more than liquor. "Hey, Marco. Can I get a Coke when you get a chance?"

Marco doesn't look my way, too far in the weeds with orders to talk, but he flashes me a thumbs-up so I know he heard me. While I wait, I lean against the bar, surveying the room. Meghan and two other waitresses are hustling about, Sasha is on stage crawling on all fours toward a front-row guy in a nice suit who looks like he's going to have a stroke with as red as his face is getting, and every table is full. Best of all, the patrons are behaving themselves. It's a good, easy night at Petals.

My eyes are drawn back to Meghan, and before I know it, Marco clears his throat from right beside me. Shit. I never even heard him approach. And in my job, letting myself get that distracted is dangerous.

"How's she doing?" Marco asks as he hands me a Coke, no ice, just like I

always have it when I'm on duty. "Any problems after the parking lot guy?"

I shake my head, taking a swig of the cold Coke. "No, she's been fine. Seems to have moved on."

Marco wipes the bar beside me with his towel, even though it's already spotless. He's a neat freak and compulsive in keeping up appearances both on the bar and in his personal habits, so I know it's not just for show. I wait, knowing he'll speak when he's ready.

"So if she's all good after the incident," he says, flipping his towel over in a quick quarter-fold before tucking it in the strings of his work apron, "why are you staring at her like you expect her to need you to run in like a knight in shiny fucking armor to slay the dragon?"

"Maybe because some people attract the dragons?" I ask. "She's different, you know? The other girls in here, they're more experienced and harder than she is. They can handle their shit and not blink twice about it. But Meghan has a softness to her. Dragons are attracted to that and would burn her to ash without a second thought just to ruin her tenderness."

Marco laughs a big belly laugh, his smile flashy. "That was some fucking panty-dropping poetry, man. Hold on, I gotta write that down."

He actually grabs a pen and paper from behind the bar, scribbling chicken scratch notes that only he can read. That's Marco, a dapper, fastidious dresser, a decent bartender with a neat freak fetish, but his handwriting is so messy I doubt even an expert can decipher what he puts down.

Marco tucks the paper away and looks up at me. "Shane, you said she attracts these types that can burn her up, right?"

"Yeah."

Marco nods. "One question then. What color dragon are you?" His laugh is gone, his tone serious and his eyes intense, reminding me that behind the affable exterior, there's the soul of an alpha male. "Oh, make that two. Who's protecting her from you?"

It's a question I've asked myself for the past week, but instead of answering, I take a drink from my Coke and lift it in salute to Marco. "Thanks for the drink. Better get back to the door."

I give Thomas, one of my fellow security guys, a nod, which he acknowledges, and we rotate positions. I resume my relaxed but ready, arms crossed front door stance, scanning the room.

As I do, something catches my eye. There's a patron at a side table, far from the stage, in a hoodie with a ball cap on. Not too unusual, since not

everyone wants to be recognized at Petals, but something about him sets me on edge, like he's trying to not be noticed or seen. Every time the waitress in his zone comes by, he slinks down, turning his face even farther away from her.

I press the button in my ear, triggering the walkie talkie. "Hey, did you catch a sight of the hoodie guy at table twenty-eight coming in? I don't like the way he looks."

Thomas's voice comes back in my ear, and I see he's on the other side of the club, easing his way over. "He came in while you were taking a break. Had sunglasses on but took them off once he sat down. No clear visual, but no red flags."

Thomas is okay. He knows how to handle himself, but he's not the best at faces or at spotting fake IDs. Twice, I've cleaned up behind him when he's let in underage kids. "Thomas, man . . . sorry, but can you come back and cover the door for a second? I wanna get a closer look."

Thomas is quick on the reply, which I appreciate. "Sure, no problem. On my way."

I see Thomas coming and then look back at the hoodie guy to see Meghan has approached the table. Twenty-eight is just on the edge of her zone, and obviously, the girl working that area has given up on Mr. Hoodie.

Meg seems fine, her usual smile on her face as she greets him to take his order, but then I see her face fall as she steps back. Before I can even take two steps, the guy's hand shoots out to grab her wrist, and I'm reacting, sprinting for her.

I sweep between them, my hip forcing the guy's hand free as I use my left arm to sweep Meghan behind me, and I'm struck with déjà vu as I realize hoodie guy is actually the parking lot fucker.

"Miles Jacobson," I growl, my right fist clenching, "I told you that you were banned. In fact, I told you that your own mother wouldn't even be able to recognize your body if you showed up here, but yet, here you are."

He looks at me, clear-eyed and sober and spoiling for a fight after the beatdown I gave him. "I just wanted to apologize, but this stuck-up bitch wouldn't even let me."

He leans to the side, trying to make eye contact with Meghan, spitting out words quickly. "Sorry I scared you the other day. I was drunk. Just didn't want to be banned. I bring clients here, you know."

He sounds like that should mean something. It's almost comical. I resist

the temptation to bend down to his level—it would compromise both Meghan's security and mine—and instead grab him by the front of his hoodie, pulling him to his feet. "Correction. You *used* to bring clients here."

Before he can react, I twist his arm up behind his back at the same time I shove him belly-first into his table, bending him over and knocking the wind out of him. "Agh!"

"Exactly," I growl as I yank him up, applying a half-nelson to his other arm to walk him toward the back. I'm trying to not make a scene on the floor, but a few people are applauding already, and I just have to trust that Thomas will have already activated our standard protocol for unruly guests. I know I'm right when Logan meets me by the door to the back.

"Boss will be down any second. What's the plan?"

I don't bother answering him, knowing I'll have to explain again when Dominick arrives. Speak of the devil. Just as I push Miles through the doors, Dom emerges from the private staircase he has to his office.

"Shane, what seems to be the problem with our guest?"

Meghan, who's been nearly glued to my back, answers before I can even open my mouth. "It's him. The parking lot guy."

Dominick looks to me for confirmation, and I nod, jerking Miles's head up to face Dominick. "You fucking assholes! I'm going to call my lawyer!"

Wrong fucking answer. Instead of laughing, Dominick's voice drops to a silky, amused tone, his cadence slow and clear. If you don't know any better, he sounds civilized, maybe even casual. But if you pay attention, you can hear the coldness, the lack of fucks he gives about whatever shit Miles is spouting "Ah, Mr. Jacobson. Yes, I do know your name, as well as your address and vehicle information. Since I don't take my girls being accosted in the parking lot of my place of business lightly, I took it upon myself to get to know your business too. By the way, how is your hedge fund going? You seem to have hit a rough patch, isn't that right? It'd be a shame if your whole deck of cards came falling . . . falling . . . down."

Dominick's creepy menace permeates the room, and I can feel Miles's skin getting clammy under my hold as he begins to realize just who and what he's messing with. He stammers, and I swear he sounds like he's on the edge of crying. "Look, I'm sorry. I just wanted to apologize and hoped to not be banned because of a misunderstanding. I can see that was a mistake. I'll just go."

Dominick strokes his chin, but there's no doubt or softness in his eyes.

“Yes, I do think we should go . . . out the back, perhaps?”

Dominick’s eyes meet mine with his judgment and sentencing of Miles complete. I nod, understanding, but gesture behind me with a lift of my chin. We’ve got company, and he doesn’t want to say more.

Dominick follows my gesture, his face softening instantly as he spies Meg’s blonde locks. “Oh, Meghan, I’m afraid Shane casts such a huge shadow I lost sight of you for a moment. Are you okay, honey?”

She seems more angry than fearful, her voice tight. “Fine. Thank you.”

Dom smiles, charming as ever as he comes around, taking her hand and patting her on the shoulder. “Very well, then head back to the floor and resume covering your tables. We’ll escort Mr. Jacobson out.”

Her eyes dip to the floor, but she lifts them instantly. “Uhm, Dominick? Can I ask you a favor?”

He’s a dangerous man to ask that question, but I’m curious what she’s going to ask. He inclines his head, the curiosity on his face too. “You may ask.”

“Can I have a word with Mr. Jacobson before you throw him out?”

I can see the smile on Dominick’s face as he motions with a wide sweep of his hand for her to proceed. She steps in front of Miles, all five foot nothing of her puffed up and standing tall. Curious to see what she’ll say, I lean my head to the side, making sure that my grip is still strong. She meets Miles’s eyes with no problem, and I’m damn proud of her.

“I wish I’d had the chance to do this before,” she says before her right fist flashes out pretty damn quickly in a straight punch that smashes perfectly into Miles’s nose. I might be able to dodge it, but most people would have no chance, especially since no one would see it coming from an angel like Meghan. The crack is unmistakable as Miles squirms in my arms, cursing a blue streak as blood streams from his ruined nostrils. “Fucking bitch. You’ll pay for that. Let me go!”

Dominick puts a gentle arm around Meghan’s shoulders, guiding her again toward the door to the club. “Well done, I must say. And quite surprising, which is a rare occurrence for me. We’ll take it from here.”

She nods, shaking her hand a little as she heads back to the floor. As soon as the door swings closed, Dominick turns back to me, all the polite softness gone from his face. “Now, shall we go outside? I hate to get blood on the tile back here. The cleaning staff tends to gets rather upset.”

Logan opens the door, and we scan for any cars in the dark rear parking

area, knowing that there won't be any but always checking to be safe.

I heave Miles through the doorway and out into the dirty backlot. It's closed in on three sides between the building and two sides of chain link fence. It's perfect for what I need to do, especially when Logan stands sentry at the backlot entrance, ensuring our privacy.

"Now. I was polite inside," Dominick says as he unbuttons his jacket, "but let's be clear now. You're not going to forget this fucking lesson. You will not come here. You will not come to this neighborhood. Shane, make sure those lessons stick."

I step forward, my boot flicking out to catch Miles just above the kneecap. His leg hyperextends, and he gasps in pain, dropping his hands so that I can punch him in the temple.

"How dare you fucking touch her? You're not good enough to even lick the floor she walks on, asshole," I growl as I follow up with a big uppercut that catches Miles right in the teeth. I feel my knuckle split, but I don't give a shit as he rockets nearly straight, his hands blindly flying out.

"Excuse me, Shane," Dominick says as he steps forward. He's rolled up his sleeves, his sinewy forearms rippling as he grabs Miles by the ears and drives him backward. Dominick's not as formally schooled as I am. He learned his techniques from the streets, and he fights dirty.

"Shane's nice," Dominick says as he knees Miles in the balls. "Sometimes, too nice. So let me continue. If I hear that you've been within a half-mile of this club, or within a half-mile of Meghan, this is going to seem like a walk in the fucking park. *If* I decide to let you live, you won't leave the hospital for a long fucking time. Do you understand me?"

By this point, Miles is sobbing. "Y–y–yes," he blubbers, tears mixing with his blood. "Please."

I'm disgusted by this piece of shit. Begging for what? Mercy? Like he would've given any to Meghan if he'd gotten her alone in his car? He's weak, preying on a woman when she's defenseless. Although, after that jab to Miles's nose, maybe she wouldn't have been quite the meek mouse he expected. The thought gives me a hint of satisfaction.

Miles continues to cry, his pleas to stop peppered with threats of lawsuits, still not understanding that we don't handle things like that at Petals. Dominick looks offended at Miles's breakdown and winds up, kicking him in the stomach hard enough that I'm pretty sure Dom missed his calling as a field goal kicker. "Shane, before Miles leaves us, make sure he'll be jacking

off left-handed for the next two to three months."

"Certainly, sir," I reply, stepping forward again. Miles tries to fend me off weakly, but I grab his right hand without a problem, goose necking it before punching him in the ribs just for fun. "This way, asshole."

It's harder to lead Miles out to his car, mainly because he's taken so much of a beating his legs can't really support him. It takes both me and Logan to get him across the lot.

Finally, we reach his car, and I twist Miles's wrist a little more, making him whimper. "Keys."

Using his right hand, Miles finds his keys, holding them out to me. "Unlock your door."

He pushes a button, and I open the door, looking into his teary, fear-streaked eyes. "I'm not a bad guy," he whines. "I just wanted to say sorry."

"I'm sure. But you know what?" I ask, lowering my voice. "Now you understand fear. Now you understand what she felt when you grabbed her wrist tonight. How she felt when you came at her in this parking lot. Now you understand that for all your macho bullshit, you're just five seconds away from being someone's little bitch. Put your hand in the door."

The realization of what's about to happen clears away some of the haze in his eyes, and he starts shaking his head, a whine coming from deep in his chest. "No! Please, no—"

I force his arm out, slamming the door on his fist. There's a crack, and he cries out, dropping to his knees. "My hand!"

"You have until I count to twenty to be out of the parking lot . . . or else, your neck is next," I say, picking him up and heaving him into the driver's seat of his car. "One. Two. Three."

I'm bluffing about the neck part, but it does the job. He leaves as quickly as he can, running over the curb as he pulls out just as I reach twenty.

Turning, I head around to the back door of the club to report to Dominick. As I walk, I know that on some level, I should be bothered by what I did tonight.

A two-on-one beating that left a man broken, bleeding, and with only fate to decide if he lives through the night should give me pause.

But the fucker deserved it for what he did to Meghan the first time. And the fact that he showed back up to intimidate her again?

A part of me hopes he does die, all snug in his fucking bed tonight, choking on his own blood. And if he doesn't die, he spends the next week

pissing dark brown and looking like he picked a fight with a steamroller, because if he shows his face near the club again, I will kill the son of a bitch. Consequences be damned.

Whatever it takes, because Meghan deserves to be treated with respect.

CHAPTER 7

MAGGIE

Stretching on my sofa, I lean back, sighing. Thank goodness I'm off today from *both* of my jobs. After last night's craziness, I need a day to recover, unwind, and settle my mind. My hand is sore from where I punched Miles, and typing this afternoon might be a bit of a challenge, but I'm not the least bit sorry.

The light throb is a reminder that I'm a strong beast of girl who can put those killer cardio-kickboxing class and elementary school Tae Kwon Do moves to good use when needed. Getting up, I doctor a cup of coffee and plop back down on the couch, turning on old gameshow reruns as background noise as I curl up with my laptop. For some reason, listening to Richard Dawson asking what the survey said gets my creative juices flowing.

I click around, checking my emails, Instagram, and Twitter to see if there's anything I can cull into a story for the tabloid. There isn't much. An Instagram girl famous for her booty seems to be stiffing her video editor, both literally and financially. I also cobble together a quick hundred-word blurb about a celebutante dining at the fanciest restaurant in town with her brother, noting that they're rarely seen together in public. It isn't much, but it'll keep Jeanine happy enough to not bug me on my day off.

Nothing's really smashing ground-breaking journalism, but it's what I've got. Fortunately, I'm still riding high on the Jimmy Keys expose story I was able to write based on his appearance in the club. Jeanine ate that up like candy, just like I knew she would.

I'd even written a couple of follow-up pieces about the fallout when his wife found out, and then when he admitted to having a sex addiction and was seeking treatment.

I think his reaction's a bit overblown and probably more to save his reputation, considering he was just getting a lap dance. There's no need for

the melodrama, but the cynical side of me wasn't surprised to see the pedestal-living pseudo-hero fall to Earth with a crash.

After a few more minutes of clicking around, I find myself staring at the TV screen mindlessly rather than digging for more juicy stories. Sure, it's a waste of time, but it feels good to laugh as a bunch of pseudo-celebrities swap one-liners and give double-entendres for answers to ridiculous questions. It's light and bright. Nothing they're saying really matters, but that's what makes it fun.

Setting my laptop aside, I give in to the draw of the show, but after a few minutes, my phone rings. I mute Charles Nelson Reilly, circa 1978, to grab it, seeing it's Allie.

"Hey, Allie. What's kickin'?"

"Are you serious right now?" Allie asks, sounding outraged and amused at the same time. "You punch an asshole customer out last night, and today, you're all casual, 'Hey, Allie, what's kickin'?' Bitch, you'd better start spilling the story."

I grin, loving how she's blunt and straight to the point. She also shows that she cares that way. The more direct she gets, the more she likes you. "It wasn't that big of a deal."

Allie guffaws. "Actually, pause right there because I need to see your face when you tell this story. I gotta see how much of your bullshit you actually believe. What are you doing right now?"

I look around my apartment, at the muted show I'm watching, the nest of blankets wrapped around me on my couch, and me still in my pajamas. "Literally, nothing. Why?"

"Perfect. I'm picking you up in fifteen minutes and we're going for mani-pedis so I can hear it all. Okay?"

"That sounds great, actually," I admit, grinning. When Allie makes me offers like this, she always insists on picking up the tab. "I'll be ready."

We hang up, and I hurry to get ready, pulling on shorts, a T-shirt, and flip flops before retying my ponytail and swiping some mascara and lipgloss on. It's not fancy, but it's what I've got on short notice. I'm just making sure my mouthwash is doing its job when I hear a knock, and I know I'm out of time.

Of course, when I open the door, Allie looks like a million bucks. Her chocolate hair is hanging straight down her back, her makeup is impeccable but perfect for daytime, and while she's also wearing shorts and a T-shirt, she manages to look like a Pinterest pin while I look like a fashion don't list

victim.

"Are you planning on handing out heart attacks today?" I ask, and Allie grins.

"Nope, that's your job. You look gorgeous," she says.

I smooth the wrinkles out of my T-shirt and laugh. "You must be high! Come on, let's go. Who's driving?"

"Like you have to ask," Allie says, dangling her keys. "Come on, I'll drive."

Forty minutes later, we're sitting in matching pedicure chairs, my feet already feeling softer as they soak in eucalyptus-scented water. "Mmm . . . nice."

"So, what color do you think?" Allie says, flipping through the color guide. "I'm thinking dark navy blue, something that'll stand out."

"Yeah . . . I don't think so," I reply, flipping through my own copy. "Hey, what do you think?"

I hold up my card, a pinkish light lavender that just caught my attention. Allie grins, giving me a thumbs-up. "Totally you. It's so sweet I need to check myself for diabetes."

I stick out my tongue, and Allie laughs. A few minutes later, our technicians take our choices and get to work, buffing and smoothing our feet until they tingle.

As the ladies really get into their work, Allie looks over at me, leaning back in her chair. "Okay, now spill it."

"Well, I was working the floor," I begin before giving her an edited play-by-play of last night's events. Of course, I have to leave out names. We're in public, and I know that name dropping could bring unwanted attention. "So, anyway, I socked him in the nose."

"You caught that motherfucker in the nose?" Allie asks, barely containing a fist pump. "How'd the boys react?"

I think back to the shocked looks on Dominick and Shane's faces, and I grin. "I surprised them pretty good, I think. I'm sure they thought I didn't have it in me. Honestly, I didn't think I had it in me either, but watching the way he was trying to weasel, I just knew I had to fight back. Or else."

"Or else what?"

"Or else I was going to be afraid of jerks like that my whole life," I reply. "And you know what? It felt really good to stand up to him that way. I think the guys probably scared the bejesus out of him more though. Hopefully, he

won’t try coming around again.”

Allie gives me an odd look, like I must be having the sillies or something. “Uhm, he definitely won’t come around again if he knows what’s good for him. I’m sure they beat the shit out of him. Did you see the guys again last night?”

I think back, then shake my head. “No, Bossman came in and told me I could take off early, considering everything. He even comped me the missed tips—reached into his pocket and slipped two Bennies in my hand like it was nothing. I was so surprised, I went straight home and slept like the dead till late this morning. Why?”

Allie seems uncertain if she should say more but finally hums to herself and makes a decision. “Well, I saw the boss’s hands later. He had a few scrapes, and his right shoe was scuffed. And I’m thinking your knight had more of an axe to grind.”

“How so?”

Allie bites her lip before replying. “Later, when he was walking us out, I noticed that one of his hands was bandaged. I asked, and he said he was fine, but . . . if I could give you a guess, I’d say your knight laid a major asswhipping on your motherfucker.”

I let that sink in.

Dom and Shane beat Miles up . . . for me. I should be horrified at the caveman-like behavior, disgusted that they sank that low instead of . . . what? Using their words? Not saying pretty please and calling the cops?

I scoff at my own line of thinking. It’s not like this is kindergarten, and I know Dominick protects the club and his girls fiercely. They used brute force because they’re able to and that’s what the situation called for, especially after Shane gave Miles a threatening talk the first time around.

I mean, even I got a shot in, so their beating him up isn’t all that different from what I did, right? Maybe more aggressive, taken further, but I know that deep inside, I’m not upset at what they did.

I’m thankful they defended me that way, made me and all the other women Miles has likely tried to intimidate safer with their actions.

“Well, I’m glad then. If I never see that poohead again, it’ll be too soon.”

Allie chuckles, shaking her head. “Poohead. I swear the universe missed out on one of the greatest jokes in history when you weren’t named Pollyanna. Then again, you don’t seem upset by the news.”

“I’m not, honestly. It was . . . I guess you could say it was noble. From a

certain point of view."

Story complete, our conversation turns to other matters. Allie chats about what she's been up to, mostly sticking to some new clothes she picked up online the other day before grinning. "And guess what?" she says, not even giving me a chance to guess before she rattles on excitedly, "I got another job!"

She's giddy, almost dancing in her seat, making the lady working on her nails look at her sharply. "Miss, I cannot do the contours correctly if you keep moving."

"Sorry," Allie apologizes, turning back to me. "So, yeah, new job!"

"Oh, my gosh, are you quitting?" I ask, worried. Allie's my best friend. I couldn't imagine what work at Petals would be like without her.

She laughs, shaking her head. "Of course not. Nothing pays like the club. But this is a shot at some classical ballet. Two classes a week to adults who want to stretch and tone and feel graceful. It's not much, but it's a start, and I can use my training for more than splits and spins on a pole."

"That's so awesome, Allie," I reply honestly, grinning. "If I could hug you or high-five you right now, I so would!"

Even though we don't move, the nail tech by Allie gives us a shrewd look. It's just that I know Allie's been busting her butt to make some sort of inroad on her dream of working in the ballet world. She trained for years, even to the point of injuring herself to try and get more turn-out on her feet before an eating disorder put her in the hospital.

Even just her dancing in a strip club is a step for her. I think it shows that she's at least a little confident in her body again. Sure, she's got bills a mile high, but in almost every other way, I think she's almost a role model for me.

Finally, when our nails are done, I'm able to give Allie a congratulatory hug, both of us keeping our nails away from each other in a weird forearm patting embrace.

I'm truly happy for her to get this job because I know she misses ballet. She has an empty room in her apartment lined with mirrors so she can dance and improve. I'd teased her about her voyeuristic sexcapades the first time I'd seen the mirrors, but when she turned on some music and began swaying and leaping through the small space, I knew exactly what that room was for her.

It's her sanctuary. I guess we all need one.

"Come on, let me buy you a cupcake to congratulate you on your new gig!"

Allie grins but refuses. “Thank you, and maybe later, but I should get going. I work tonight and need to get ready. You working?”

I glance at my watch, surprised at how late it is already. “Yeah, I’m only doing a partial shift tonight though. I’ll be in at ten ‘till close. But come on, one cupcake? I’ll make it double-fudge red velvet.”

Allie glowers at me, then grins. “You’re buying.”

CHAPTER 8

SHANE

"Room check," I say quietly into my ear mic, notifying Nick, the guy working the door. It's just another Sunday night at Petals. You'd think Sunday would be the lightest night of the week. I mean, East Robinsville has a lot more churches than strip clubs, but it's not. It's not quite as busy as Saturday night, but Sundays aren't slack either.

There are quite a few patrons. Maybe it's a carryover from their Sunday morning activities, or maybe it's the fact that they're not looking forward to Monday, but the customers seem pretty chill.

But tonight just doesn't seem the same. Instead of the shitload of things I should be watching for, including but not limited to making sure the customers behave, that the dancers are comfortable, and that Marco's not getting stiffed at the bar, I find myself waiting for Meghan. I even know her schedule, and she's not supposed to be in for a little bit, but that's not stopping me from anticipating her arrival.

Trying to rein my attentions in, I scan the floor. The new girl on stage seems to be doing all right, although I can't remember her name. Candy? Caramel? Something with a C that's definitely fake.

Most of the patrons are watching her with rapt attention, except for the bachelor party that seems more intent on roasting the groom-to-be, leading to some raucous laughter from their table. They haven't gotten to their lap dances yet, but from what I see, I'd say the bride-to-be has nothing to worry about. Her beau's got a look on his face that says he's enjoying himself, but he's just putting up with his buddies' antics and he's going to behave.

Still, I scan each face for a moment, making sure it's just good ol' boy fun and not going to be an issue before continuing my threat assessment of the room. It's a normal Sunday crowd, with guys in just about every age

bracket, wealth bracket, and confidence bracket . . . and three girls, two of whom are having ‘nights out’ with their guy friends.

Petals is a decent place, more high-class than most country clubs, so we don’t get too many low-life types. Still, there’s always a mix of folks to keep an eye on, especially in Dominick’s place where he rules with an iron fist. The inherent combination of guys full of liquid courage and sexy women flirting with them is a dangerous equation, like sparks near dynamite . . . unless the rules are strictly followed.

So I keep my eyes open. From my perch, I can angle to the side and see behind the curtains on the far side of the stage. I see when the backdoor opens and Meghan walks in, a backpack thrown over her shoulder, her sweats and tank outfit in place but with full fuck-me hair and makeup going, probably done at her apartment. It’s an oddly endearing combination, the sweet and the sexy all mixed up.

Giving Nick a nod to keep an eye, I step away from my station, needing to make sure Meghan is okay after the shitstorm last night. I’d driven by her apartment after I got off shift, hours after Dominick let her go home early, and I barely managed to keep from banging on her door.

But the single glowing light in the living room told me she was home, and I let that be enough to soothe the beast inside me. Besides, my hand was still pretty busted up, and it would have freaked her out to see my knuckles that way.

Backstage, I lean against the doorframe and watch for a second like the pervert that I am, enjoying the way she gently moves to the music pumping through her earphones as she touches up her makeup in front of the big light-up mirror. Her eyes meet mine in the glass, and she smiles, turning around to face me.

“Let me see it.”

For a heart-stuttering moment, my filthy mind thinks she wants to see my cock, and it instantly hardens, liking that idea a lot. But as she walks toward me, it’s not my crotch she grabs, it’s my hand, lifting it to see the bruises and scrapes along my knuckles.

“I’m fine, nothing that won’t heal in a day or two,” I reply softly. Thankfully, I patched up my hand last night—hydrogen peroxide to clean it out, and then NuSkin does a lot to cover the damage.

She runs a feather-light fingertip over the roughly crinkled skin, her voice soft. “You did this for me?”

In my pants, my cock surges again, and my compression shorts are not up to the job this time. Instead, I'm resisting the urge to take her hand and press it into the wall above her head before taking her mouth in a strong kiss. "Of course. Asshole had it coming. That's no way to treat a lady, especially not you."

She blushes a bit, her cheeks pink with pleasure. "Thank you. That's sweet."

Before I can reply, she bends down, laying little butterfly presses of her lips along my knuckles, like she can kiss my injuries away. "Meg—"

"I'm nothing special, just . . . me," she says, looking up at me with emotion in her eyes that makes me want her all the more. "And no one has ever done anything like that for me before. Thank you."

I growl, wrapping a hand around the back of her neck as I step closer to her, our bodies a mere whisper away from touching. "Don't say that. You are beautiful. You can haunt a man's dreams, his fantasies, filled with your laughter, your sighs . . . and your screaming his name in pleasure. You're special, Meghan."

A small whimper escapes her lips as she looks up at me, her lips parting, almost begging for me to take them in a kiss. I shouldn't. I can't . . . for so many reasons.

But she's irresistible. I need to know what she tastes like. I have to experience the taste of her skin, whether it's the sparkle vanilla cupcakes she makes me think of, all sugar and sweetness. Or if there's the musky undertone that has haunted my dreams, the sexual essence of a woman that I sense burning just beneath the surface.

Instead of tasting her lips the way I want to, I trace my free hand down her arm, slowly and steadily to take hold of her hand. Bringing it up, I inspect her knuckles too, noting that they're looking a little bruised even in the dim light of the hallway. "Are you okay? That was quite a punch you landed."

She nods, her eyes so wide as I kiss her knuckles, one by one, letting my tongue slip out to lick at her as I caress her skin. She's even more thrilling than I thought, electric vanilla fireworks that make my head spin.

As I heal her not-at-all-injured hand with my ministrations, I look up to meet her eyes. "Not sure any of us saw that coming from such a sweet, innocent thing."

She smirks, a fire sparking deep in her eyes as she gathers herself for a sassy reply. "Who says I'm sweet and innocent?"

I chuckle, flipping her hand to kiss her fingertips and palm. They're silky soft, and in my mind, I can imagine this hand holding my cock in front of her open mouth for me to fill. "Angel, everything about you says sweet and innocent. That's what's so fucking dangerous. You don't know what you're playing with. You make me want to dirty you up, shock you with the filthy things I want to do your body, and tease at that sweetness until I can drink up every drop of you like candy."

My words galvanize Meghan's body, leaving her panting, her breath smelling like sugar with a faint hint of coffee, making me want to sip the flavor from her lips. I don't think she means to say it out loud, but a soft hiss escapes her pink lips unbidden anyway. "Yesss."

I cup her jaw in both hands, forcing her eyes to meet mine and lock. The next words are the hardest words I've ever spoken, tearing from the depths of my stomach like coughing up nails. "But we can't. You know the rules. Dominick would kill me. Literally, most likely. And you deserve better than me. You see me as a dangerous thrill, but I'd ruin you. A night with me would leave your pretty pink pussy in tatters from fucking you so rough because I'm not a gentle lover. I'd take you hard, wringing your orgasms out of you until you passed out in exhaustion. I'd give you so much cum, your pussy couldn't even hold it all and it would run down your legs."

Her eyes are dilated, wide and soft as if I'm whispering sweet nothings in her ear. I thought she'd be shocked, maybe even offended by my crude words. Some of me hoped she would be, that she'd be repelled and maybe we could end this dance between us. But it seems this angel has a bit more devil in her body than I thought.

Every bit of me wants to make good on my words, toss her on the chair in the corner and earn the first cries of her orgasm with my tongue between her legs. With the way her skin tasted, death by Dominick's hand might be worth it.

As much as I don't want to, I have to tell her the rest, leaning in to smell her hair before whispering in her ear. "As much as that excites you—and yes, my cock is throbbing at the idea too—I'll break your heart, Angel. I'll take what I need, make you a dirty mess, and leave. It's what I do. I'm a bastard, a motherfucker who only hurts those who let me in. You deserve better than me."

I pull back from her ear, letting her see the truth of my words in my eyes, on my face, knowing that even if I wanted to, I can't keep her. That's not

who I am. It's . . . impossible.

The spell is broken, my words sinking into her head, her heart. I can see the moment her desire and arousal turn to hurt, then anger. She pulls back, putting space between us, and I hate it instantly, missing the feel of her so close.

"I see," she says, turning on a heel and heading toward the lockers. I want to chase her, push her to the ground, and take her like the predator I am. I want to bury myself inside her, feel her spasm as I stake my claim on her body, mind, and soul. *Mine*.

But this is the right thing to do. Let her push me away for her own sanity and safety. I can take it, even if it hurts. And right now, it does hurt, both in my gut and in my balls.

Just before reaching the curtain to the changing area, Meghan turns back, her eyes flashing dangerously. "You say I deserve more. That's for me to decide. Don't act like you get to make decisions for me. Is this just a game to you? Get me all riled up and then squash me with some lame justification that sounds more like a carrot on a stick enticement than a real warning? Well, fu–forget you."

She pushes the curtain aside, and I feel like I just got punched in the gut. She almost cursed at me. If I needed any more proof, that tells me how hurt she really is. Fucking hell. That was the last thing I wanted to do. I just couldn't help myself. She calls to me without even meaning to, and I'm barely holding back, for her sake.

She leaves the curtain open, stomping her little body over to her locker and ripping her scrap of a miniskirt out. She glares at me over her shoulder and then pulls it on over her sweats, only dropping them once she has the scrap in place.

I don't bother telling her that when she bends over to grab the sweats from the floor, I can see the bottom of her ass cheeks, so grabbable and biteable. And the peek of her good girl panties, white with lace trim against her tan flesh, does more for my fantasies than any fancy lingerie ever has.

She snatches her black lace bustier off the hook, holding it to her front like a shield even though she still has her tank top on.

She makes a shooing motion with her hand, swatting the air at me like I'm an annoyance. "Weren't you just saying you would leave me? Well, go ahead. I've got to get ready for my shift."

I should, I absolutely should. But I can't walk away when she's so mad at

me. Instead, I assume my security guard stance, my feet planted firmly on the floor with my arms crossed over my chest, eyes daring her to test me. With a huff, she turns back to face her locker and rips her tank over her head.

The expanse of her back beckons me, and I want to trace the line of her spine with my tongue, make her arch beneath me as I fuck her from behind. She quickly fastens the bustier, not needing any help, and then leans forward, shimmying slightly and doing something to her tits, but my eyes are fastened on the flash of her ass again.

It's delectable, just enough that I could massage, knead . . . and spank it until it's bright red. It's taut, perfect, the type of ass that could grip my cock until we're both crying out. That peek is going to taunt me all night and for a long time to come. After slipping her heels and apron on, Meghan struts toward me looking like a fucking Valkyrie in petite-fairy form.

I hold my position, expecting her to either stop in front of me for another scathing dismissal or maybe push me out of her way. But she does neither.

Instead, she turns her body to step around me, not even brushing me with a faint touch of her skin. That stabs my heart more than anger or violence somehow. It's a dismissal. It's her saying that she understands and isn't going to waste her time on me any longer.

The scent of her lingers in her wake, and with a deep breath, I draw it in, knowing it might be my last chance to savor it. I let it sear its way into my brain for the upcoming lonely nights and empty beds, when the weaker side of me gnaws at my mind and tells me I could have had the most beautiful, flawless woman I've ever seen next to me. Even if only for a moment.

It takes me a while to settle my nerves, and I wipe at my cheeks and forehead, dismissing the moisture on my fingers as just sweat from the heat back here.

It's gonna be a long fucking night.

CHAPTER 9

MAGGIE

How dare he? I fume to myself as I move around the tables, catching as many orders as I can. *That arrogant son of a biscuit!*

Shane had me all fired up and ready to break the rules. He talked about Dominick, but I know that rule too.

The first day I worked here, before I'd even met Shane, Dominick had gone over his employee rules. Number one of which, and the one that seems the most pertinent right now, considering my wet panties, was no fraternizing between staff.

Considering what I now know about the way his eyes follow Allie's every move, it seems a bit hypocritical. But he's the boss, and if he wants to break his own rules, I guess he's allowed. Although, maybe he really does just watch her from afar. Allie has never said otherwise.

At the time of my sit-down with Dominick, I'd just been concerned about getting the undercover job without his being suspicious, and the rule seemed reasonable. I totally understood, but now I'm frustrated. Shane has me so . . . darn it, all I can do is try and avoid him. But he's a dang moving target all night, working the door, working the floor, and with those dark clothes of his, he's like a ninja when he wants to be.

At one point, he settled into a position on the far wall, so I asked Sarah to switch sections with me, and she did, albeit with a questioning look.

I had a few moments of glee at getting away until Shane switched stations too, glaring at me as he took up his new perch. Ugh, fine. Play your games, but I'm not playing.

Even as I tell myself that, I know it's not true. I'm pissed, I'm disappointed, but if he told me right now 'one-time ride . . . get on', I'd hop on his dick so fast he would see stars.

I sigh, shaking my head. Why do bad boys have to be so hot?

How is that even fair to us mere mortal girls? I mean, I know that I shouldn't be looking at guys like Shane.

I should try to find a nice guy. One who'll take care of himself and his family, who might not be perfect but will love me and any children we have. I need a guy who wants that too, a simple, happy life. That's what good girls are supposed to do.

But with Shane, I feel such a connection. And I'm no fool. Chemistry like that is rare, and if once was all I got, I'd go for it and pay the emotional price later.

So I spend the night alternating between ignoring him and glaring daggers at him.

Marco doesn't slow down, though. He's got drinks to get ready and customers to serve. Still, he's not heartless. "Hey, Meghan, here's your pitcher for table forty-five, but what's up with you tonight? You okay?"

I huff, trying to make my voice light and bubbly but failing miserably. Still, I gotta try. "Yeah, I'm fine. You?"

Marco laughs, shaking his head. Good bartenders are half-baked shrinks, and Marco's no different. "Nice try, sweetheart. Last night hit you harder than you thought?"

"No, it's not that," I reply, hoping he doesn't push the issue. What Shane and I did in the back was probably close enough to being over the line, and as pissed as I am at Shane and his sexy bad self, I don't want him to get in trouble. "Just one of those nights, I guess."

"I can dig that," Marco says with a chuckle. "We all get them. By the way, I heard you put the smackdown on Mr. Creepazoid last night. That right?"

I grin a little, showing Marco my knuckles. "Yeah, I got one good punch in before Dominick sent me home."

Marco takes my hand and looks it over, giving a small whistle. "Sweet. Glad that Shane and Dom took care of the rest though. You mad at that?"

He looks at me questioningly, and I know that he's giving me an evaluating question, one that might have multiple layers to it. But regardless of the legality of the beating, my reply is quick and honest. "Oh, heck no, definitely not mad at that. I appreciate their having my back. Tonight's just a weird night."

Before I can stop it, I glance over my shoulder at Shane, who is watching

my exchange with Marco with eagle eyes, even from across the room.

Marco follows my eyes and sees Shane looking our way. “Hmm, not really my business to get involved in. But Meghan?” He waits for me to look back at him before continuing, “Don’t go barking up that tree. He might’ve saved you a couple of times, but he’s no Prince Charming. And you know the rules.”

Marco’s eyes pointedly flick up to the camera at the corner of the bar. I understand. Dominick’s always watching. You just never know when. “Best to stay in your own lane, especially around here. I wouldn’t rat you to Dom, but I’m also not going to lie to the man if he asks.”

I sigh, nodding. “I would never ask you to. Not trying to court trouble. Just . . . a weird night.”

I know I’m repeating myself, but I don’t want to take the risk of exposing what happened backstage. At least I can be assured that Dom didn’t see that. He’s never put a camera back there to give the girls some privacy. Or that’s what we’ve been told. “Okay,” Marco says, giving me a shrug. “Just be careful.”

“I will, thanks. Thanks for listening,” I reply. “Anyway, back to work.”

I grab the pitcher Marco poured for me and deliver it to table of what looks like personal trainers, who seem to be out for more work talk than to watch the performances on stage. At least, while they remark on Tina’s dance on stage, they’re peppering their comments with remarks about her ‘intercostals’ and ‘core stability’ as much as her boobies.

After another hour, I’ve managed to push Shane from my mind, too busy slinging drinks to see if his eyes are still following my every move.

At least he’s not positioned in my section anymore, the security team’s rotation putting him on the other side of the room now. Thank goodness for small favors. Besides, I’m nearing the end of my shift, and I can’t wait to go home, slam a Nytol to put me out quick, and dream of a tomorrow without a certain bad boy both frustrating and arousing me.

I come back around, checking on one of my loner tables, a single guy. He’s my age, maybe, but his eyes look wiser than my twenty-five years and his suit easily costs more than my car. He has a worldliness to him, watching the performances almost as though they are artistic displays, not tawdry fantasies of the flesh.

As I come nearer, he raises a manicured hand. “Can I get another Macallan, miss? Actually, I’m headed back for a private dance with Allie.

Can you bring the bottle back, Rare Cask Single Malt?”

I nod, surprised. Allie’s very particular about her private dances, and her rates are pretty exorbitant. “Of course, sir. I’ll keep your table reserved for after?”

He dips his head, rising to stride confidently to the back, and I head back to Marco to order the bottle service. With the bottle and a fresh glass on my tray, I head back to Allie’s usual private dance room, the one closest to Dominick. It’s the best room in the back too, mirrored and with a pole, but with a luxury feel to the supple leather seating and soft lighting.

I give one sharp rap as warning and then slowly and invisibly enter, pouring the scotch for the customer as Allie selects her music from the playlist in the corner. I give her a wink as I turn to leave, and she winks back. Considering that he just ordered a three-hundred-dollar bottle of scotch, it’s gonna rain in here.

As I head down the hallway, I see a large guy striding toward me. He’s wide, and the black of his jeans and T-shirt blend with the dimness of the hallway, although the moving laser lights bounce off him. He looks cold and calculating to a degree that seems to almost chill the very air around him. Our security guys are pretty badass themselves, but there’s something raw about this guy, a missing element to his soul.

He’s ugly as sin too, with a bald head that gleams lightly in the dim light and squinty eyes. His left ear’s all types of screwed up, what I think some people call cauliflowered, like an alley cat that’s had one too many scraps over the garbage cans.

I walk past him, hugging the wall and drawing myself in tight to seem as small and unimportant as possible, knowing that I’ll have to tell security to keep an eye on him. Even still, my back ripples in goosebumps as I slide by.

This guy zings my red flags as a definite potential problem. I’m almost to the corner when I hear a fast ra-tat-tat sound, but it’s barely audible over the loud bass-thumping music on the main floor. My brain takes a split second to register the sound as gunfire, but it’s not until I hear Allie scream that I turn and run toward her. It’s stupid. I shouldn’t be running *toward* gunfire, but all my brain is telling me is that my best friend may have just been shot, and I have to help her.

I see the guy in black running out the other end of the hallway as I stop in the doorway of Allie’s room. She’s crouched in the corner and covered in blood splatter but seems to be uninjured. She’s just frozen in shock, her eyes

wide as she stares at what used to be a human being slumped on the couch.

My brain seems to shift, taking all of this in, not in panic, but in still-frame shots like my eyes have turned into a camera. I see the scotch-drinking suit guy, obviously dead since he's got three bullet holes in his chest, slumped over on the couch, blood pooling brightly across his white shirt.

I see the other holes in the wall and can only assume that Allie's alive because she was near the wall when the attack happened. Maybe she hadn't fully gotten into her routine, or maybe she was getting ready to drop her bra. Whatever the case, there's a bullet hole in the wall just about a foot from where she's cowering, and it's by luck or fate that she's not wounded too.

"Allie—" I start before Dominick blasts through the door that leads to his office, charging down the hall like a raging bull.

"What happened?" he yells, his face taut. "Allie?"

Dominick pushes me out of the way, rushing in the room and gathering Allie in his arms, blood and all, as he checks her over. I somehow find my voice, pointing down the hall. "He went that way. Big guy, in all black, black and cold eyes. Had a screwed-up ear."

As I speak, the security guys surround me, so fast and quiet I didn't even realize. Nick turns, his voice hot with anger. "On it, Boss."

He races down the hallway, following the direction I pointed. Shane grabs me, turning my face to his chest, where I burrow in without hesitation, needing something solid to hang on to because this is all too surreal. "I've got Meghan."

Dominick never takes his eyes off Allie, but he talks over his shoulder to Logan, the last of the security guys. "Take care of that."

Logan nods, moving closer to the suit, and Allie flinches. Dominick picks Allie up, heading toward his office, and Shane moves me quickly and steadily to the dressing room, dragging me to my locker and pulling out my backpack.

His voice is urgent but quiet in my ear. "What do you need outta your locker? Anything?"

He's shoving my wallet, my phone, my makeup, and clothes into my backpack. "What? What do you mean?"

He glances back once but then returns his attention to my locker, giving it one last scan before closing the door. It's nearly empty, except for maybe that chocolate chip muffin I brought in last week and had sort of forgotten until now.

He slides the backpack onto one shoulder before turning and looking into my eyes. “Meg, we have to go. You can’t have seen what you just saw. They won’t allow it. We gotta go. Now.”

CHAPTER 10

SHANE

My heart's hammering in my chest as I peek out the back door of the club, scanning the lot carefully. It's nearly deserted. The soundproofing is good and nobody heard the shots. If it wasn't for Dominick getting on the radio, nobody on security would have known.

So there isn't a panicked rush of customers running for their cars. Part of me wishes there was. It'd help cover what I'm about to do. Instead, I'm forced to lead Meghan across the parking lot by her arm in a quick walk, looking more like I'm escorting a drunk customer than helping her flee for her life.

I aim for my truck. It's closer than Meghan's car, and a lot more secure. Hitting the unlock button on my remote, I shove her in the rear seat of the crew cab from the driver's door, hopping in behind her and yanking my door closed. I'd like to be gentle, but right now isn't the time for gentleness. It's the time for action.

"Buckle up," I instruct her, and thank fuck, she listens and sits up, reaching for the belt as I start the truck. It takes all of my willpower to pull out of the lot calmly and not put the pedal to the floorboard and peel out. I know that Nick's still out here somewhere, and Logan might be around too. I can't take the risk that two guys, one of whom I trained, might react.

Right now, eyes on us is the last thing we want. The parking lot cameras are bad enough. I know Dominick's going to check the tapes when he notices that Meghan and I are gone, but hopefully, he'll be so distracted with Allie that we're far away before he does.

It's not that I don't care about Allie. She's a nice girl who I hope is fine, but I know Dom cares about her. He'd never touch a hair on her head. Meghan, though . . . I have to protect her.

Meghan is quiet, curled in on herself, with her feet in the seat and knees hugged tightly, obviously in shock as we hit the highway.

As my truck growls its way up to eighty, chewing up pavement and spitting out miles and minutes between us and what she saw, she finally settles. I watch her out of the corner of my eye, never taking my awareness off the road in front of us or the cars behind us to make sure we're not being followed. Can't be too safe.

I can see Meghan willing her mind to focus, taking deep breaths that she holds for a two-count before letting them out slowly. Still, after five miles, her body is still shaking, her hands trembling as she reaches up to adjust where the shoulder belt is rubbing against her bare neck. And when I meet her eyes in the rearview mirror, they're wide, but with a turn of my head, I can see that they're at least clear as she starts processing things. "What are we doing? Where are we going?"

I nod, shifting my eyes back to the road. "Those are great questions. And I promise to answer them, but what you really need to know right now is that I'll keep you safe. I'm taking you somewhere secure until all this blows over."

She opens her mouth to ask more questions, always inquisitive, but right now, we don't have time for her to be curious. I hold up my right hand, silencing her. "Angel, I promise. Just give me a minute to get us where we need to be."

The nickname subdues her, even as her eyebrows perk up. She's so smart. Her mind ticks along in a way that's impressed me since I first met her. But she closes her mouth, looking around as I exit the highway and head to a deserted lot on the outskirts of town, just before we get to the truck stops that mark the way west.

I pull in next to a covered car, knowing that underneath is a four-door sedan that looks like a million others on the road. That's the point. I want us to look like any other car that might be out right now, and as 'un-Shane-like' as I can get.

Grabbing her backpack from the floor, I rifle through and grab her cellphone, leaning forward to drop it to the floorboard. I do the same with mine and then grab a duffle bag from behind the seat. "Okay, when I say go, open your door calmly, get out, and get in the car next to you. I'm doing the same."

"What about our phones?" she asks, reaching forward. "Why did you put

them in the floorboard? I need that."

I place a hand on her forearm, the touch electric as I feel the tremble of her muscles underneath my fingertips. "Nope. They're traceable, like my truck, and we've got to be ghosts until we figure out what's going on."

She sputters, looking at me with renewed fear in her eyes. "Traceable? Ghosts? What the heck are you talking about?"

"Go," I order. "There's time for answers later. I promise you that, but for now . . . go."

I open my door, snatching the corner of the dust cover on the sedan and pulling it back, revealing a ten-year-old Ford before grabbing the spare key from the magnetic box hidden in the rear wheel well and climbing into the driver's seat. I hit the unlock button, relieved when Meghan opens her door and buckles up, her eyes full of questions, but she keeps her silence as I start up the Ford.

Thank fuck.

With a turn of the key, we're back on the road, heading way out of East Robinsville. As we drive, the reality of the situation hits me.

Fuck. This has gone so damn sideways.

How much do I tell Meghan? There are secrets piled on top of secrets around her, and the layers go so deep that sometimes even I don't quite remember which way is up.

How much does she already know? It's common knowledge not to cross Dominick, but just how much does she understand?

She's quiet in the seat next to me, scanning around us occasionally but mostly watching the scenery blur by, but I know her silence won't last long. She's just too curious.

"Your truck?" she says after a bit, and I shrug. "What's that mean?"

"I mean that if it gets stolen, it gets stolen," I reply. "That lot's pretty out of the way. Decent chance it might be unnoticed."

"And this thing?"

"Just an old car. I promise to explain. Just wait a bit longer."

My answer silences her for a bit, and it's almost dawn when we pull over at a no-tell motel in the middle of nowhere. I know where half a dozen of these places are around the area, places that are desperate enough to take cash without too many questions but not so rundown as to become crack houses that'll attract the attention of the police.

I run inside and rent a room under a fake name, paying cash before

parking and shepherding Meghan inside. Closing the door behind us, I lock it and peek out the window. We're clear.

But as I look back to see Meghan perched on the edge of the bed, so tiny but her eyes sparking with anger, I know the grace period of time I asked for is over. Hell, considering the worn-out carpet, dingy walls, and patched bed cover, I'd be pissed too, even if I was clueless about the rest.

"Okay," I start before she can say anything. "Where do we start?"

CHAPTER 11

MAGGIE

I stare at Shane, who's looking for the first time since I've met him less than a hundred percent sure of himself. If anything, he looks frightened, which scares the schnitzel out of me. "Okay, so we're wherever this is," I start.

I look around us, my nose upturned at the dingy motel room, noting the large crawly thing underneath the table in the corner and reminding myself not to go to sleep without covering every pore of my skin. "And seemingly safe-ish, wildlife notwithstanding. Now what the frick is going on? Why aren't we at the police station reporting a murder? Shane!"

He sighs, running a hand through his hair, and steps away from the door to sit down on the edge of the bed, still watching me with those eyes of his. "No matter how I spin this, you're likely to freak the fuck out, but you're in the middle of it now, so I'll dive in as delicately as I can."

I nod, just wanting him to tell me already. "Delicate, not delicate. Just get to the truth, Shane. I'm not following you one more step without it."

He nods and strokes his chin. "Deal. So, do you know who that was back at the club?"

I shake my head, turning to face him and criss-cross applesauceing my legs between us, needing the space to keep a clear head for this conversation. "The suit or the shooter?"

He eyes sharpen, and he sits forward, his voice immediately hardening. "Either."

I shrug, refusing to break his gaze as I stare back at his face, making sure he understands me clearly. "No idea. The suit was drinking Maclellan in my section for a bit, the expensive stuff, and he took Allie back for a lap dance. I took the scotch in and Allie was picking music in the corner. She gave me a thumbs-up, and I silently wished her luck."

“And the other guy?”

I take a deep breath, hating the fact that I have to try and relive those few moments but somehow knowing that it’s important. “I saw him coming down the hallway. That guy chilled me just with this . . . I don’t know . . . aura. Next thing I know, big man was shooting up the place and Allie is screaming bloody murder. You were there for the rest.”

He nods, letting that sink in. “Okay, the shooter is a hired gun. Hitman. Assassin. Maybe if you tell me more, I might be able to tell you who he was. The list of men with the skills and either the guts or insanity to make a hit inside Petals is pretty small. The suit was Carlos Rivaldi, bastard son of Sal Rivaldi. Names mean anything to you?”

I shake my head, and he scoffs lightly, smiling a little. “So fucking innocent. Let’s rewind. Meghan, you know Petals is a money laundering front for the mob and Dominick is The Boss, right?”

I squint, making sure I heard right. “Wait, Boss? Money laundering?”

Shane nods. “Boss. As in, Boss of the Angeline family.”

I shake my head vehemently, but after a moment, my brain whirls. I think back to some of the customers, the business meetings in Dominick’s office, and the large security team that has always made me feel safe. Petals is a small club. There should be no reason they always have three and sometimes four guys working security. I thought it was because of the clientele, a sense of fancy-schmancy to make the celebs feel like VIPs.

I gasp, looking at Shane. I knew Dominick was a shrewd businessman, but the level of what I’ve walked into . . . did my former boss, Donnie, know when he came up with this idea for me to work undercover? Does Jeanine know? Do they even care that I’m covering stupid celeb gossip in a freaking mob club? Oh, my God, everything I’ve been doing suddenly seems so much more dangerous. My reporter senses felt like there was more to Petals, but something like this never even occurred to me. How could it have? It’s crazy. “Dominick is The Boss? Holy frack. But . . .” My words stutter, another thought jumping forward. “Oh, no! Allie!”

Shane shakes his head. “Allie is fine. She’s Dominick’s. Well, she isn’t, but she might as well be by the way he looks at her and I suspect feels about her. He wouldn’t touch a hair on her head unless she directly betrayed him. That’s why I’m confused.”

“Confused about what?” I ask, the reporter in my head pushing back the fear. It’s not hard. Right now, I’m pretty sure that information means life, and

Shane's about my only source of more information.

"Dominick is the head of the Angeline family, who are basically mortal enemies of the Rivaldi family, even though there's been peace for years. It's been a Cold War in the area, two sides that posture and talk a lot of shit, but nobody's been willing to actually draw blood. Still, it's not like Carlos Rivaldi was welcome inside Petals. So why was Carlos in Dominick's club? The Rivaldis have their own bars, their own club. So why would he be at Petals?"

He looks to be thinking for a moment, but my mind has already begun rolling, considering angles and strategies and manipulations. It's what's given me my best stories, being able to see all the possible motivations and consequences of people's actions. "Maybe he was a spy? Or you said he's the bastard son. Maybe he's pissed at that label and wanting to stir stuff up? Or maybe someone just invited him to come check out the show and have a drink? It could be anything."

Shane rubs his jaw, his words coming slowly as he considers my comment. "You're right. Carlos could've been spying for his daddy, in which case Dominick would be pissed as fuck and could've hired the hit. There's another option though."

"What's that?" I ask, nodding when I understand a moment later. "Dominick invited Carlos."

Shane nods. "If he thought he could bring Carlos on board, it'd have changed the entire game in this part of the country. The Angelines are the big dogs by far, but it wasn't always that way, and the Rivaldis do have some pockets of power. Sal Rivaldi's getting up there in years. The issues between the two families started with Dom's daddy. If Dom and Carlos thought they might be able to forge an undercover alliance and get Sal to retire quicker, either voluntarily or the hard way . . . Daddy Sal might have heard about it, and he's not the kind to forgive treason, even from his own blood."

I swallow, feeling like I want to throw up. Down the rabbit hole, and I'm still not sure how deep I've gotten. "He'd kill his own son?"

Shane nods once, chuckling darkly. "Carlos is his bastard son. He just found out about him a few years ago and there's no love lost. Apparently, Sal had a one-night stand when he was trying to make inroads with the Colombians, and he left Carlos's mom with a souvenir."

"And he never knew?" I ask, and Shane nods.

"I don't know the full story, but apparently, Carlos just showed up,

wanting his birthright and being pretty fucking aggressive about it, from what I hear. Sal ran the DNA, but not much else he could do about it."

"So either Dominick killed his arch nemesis's son, in which case, I'm guessing Sal will be pretty POed, even if he didn't like the kid. Or someone, maybe even Sal himself, sent Carlos to his death on Dominick's turf. It sounds like the beginning of a mob war," I comment and shake my head. "And I got a look at the ugly mug who did it. Great."

Shane's face pales as he looks at me. "You might be the only one who did, too. Allie was near the edge of the sofa, right? And she had blood on her chest and face, so she couldn't have seen from that angle. She'd have been facing Carlos, her back to the door. But you saw the hitman face-to-face. Could you identify him?"

I nod, biting my lip. "I feel like that's a question you should automatically say no to when you're talking mob hitmen, but yeah, I'd recognize him anywhere. That face, the squinty eyes and cauliflowered left ear . . . I could probably sketch him for you, if that's helpful. I'm not an artist, but it'd be close enough."

"Yeah, we'll see if we can get a pencil and some paper because we need to know who the hitman is so we can figure out who hired him," Shane says, sighing. "I can't believe we're talking about your sketching a hitman."

"But why can't we go to the police? They could help us," I ask, almost pleading with him, and Shane laughs harshly. "What? That's their job!"

Shane looks at me with pity in his eyes and smiles bitterly. "Both families have the police in their pockets. The only way to be a cop above Desk Sergeant in East Robinsville is to be friendly with one family or the other. If we go to the cops, we'll likely never be seen again because they'll turn us over to whoever wants us the most."

"As in?" I ask, fearing the answer even before Shane says it.

"Meaning whoever's willing to pay more for our silence. Knowing some of the cops in this town, they'd do the job for the families and might even try to collect from both of them if there's money in it."

Hating that answer and needing more, I run through the whole evening again in my head, something wiggling at me, but it's not until I see the blood spatter on Allie's favorite costume that I realize what it is.

"Hey! What about the cameras? The security? How'd the hitman even get inside without being seen? He should be on cameras all over the place. There should be all sorts of images of him, not just my memory."

Shane nods but gets up to pace the carpet. “Yeah, but that’s only helpful if it’s Sal’s guys fucking with Dominick. If Dominick did this, he’d erase the recordings. All it takes is a single button push on his system. That’d leave him just one last loose end to clean up.”

Shane gives me a pointed look, and I realize he’s telling me that if Dominick is behind this, he’ll want me killed. If Sal did it, Dominick won’t hurt me, but Sal probably will. I’m messed up either way. “So, where does that leave us? You’re Dominick’s guy.”

I leave the question as to whether he’ll hurt me unasked, but he knows that’s what I need to know. Shane walks to the curtained window and glances out before turning to me, looking at me from across the room with intense eyes that burn with . . . something.

“It’s more complicated than that, but I swear to you, Meghan, I would never, ever hurt you. I work at Petals for Dominick, but I’m not in the mob, not one of his guys. I promise with my very last breath to keep you safe.”

“And how do you plan to do that?” I ask, my heart pounding as the intensity of Shane’s words hit me. In another light, another situation, they’d be the most romantic thing a man has ever said to me. I feel the sting of tears in the corners of my eyes, but refuse to let them loose, even though this is all so overwhelming.

Shane doesn’t have the magic answer I was hoping for, instead being a bit vague. “We’ll figure it all out.”

For a moment, I think about telling him that it’s even more complicated than he realizes because I’m not just a cocktail waitress at Petals, but an undercover reporter using the job to get stories for a celebrity tabloid. Part of me wants to tell him everything, because deep down inside, I feel this almost instinctual need to be totally honest with him.

We’ve danced around each other for two months to the point that earlier tonight ,we nearly kissed, despite knowing the rules. We both know that we want the other, and that the only reason he’d gotten me so angry at him earlier tonight is that he’s under my skin.

But that seems minor in comparison to mob hits, and honestly, I don’t think telling Shane that I’ve been lying to him is going to ingratiate me to him.

And I need him right now, to stay safe, to stay alive.

So I let the truth die on my lips, keeping that secret.

For now. I only pray that before this is all over, there’s a chance that I can

tell him the truth. Because just once, I’d like to hear him call me Maggie instead of Meghan.

CHAPTER 12

SHANE

For a moment, Meghan looks like she's got something to say, maybe something important that dances on the tip of her tongue, but with a sigh, she deflates, biting the words back, and I'm curious what she was going to tell me.

Maybe something about the shooter? Big guy, cauliflower ear. I can think of a few suspects, but I'd need more to be sure since the ear doesn't ring a bell at the moment.

Still, the look on Meghan's face. I have to know what she's thinking. Unable to stop myself, I cross the room, crouching in front of her and tilting her chin up, forcing her to look me in the eye.

"You're safe. We're okay right now."

She bites her lip, and I can see the sheen of fear in her eyes. Tears form on her lower eyelids, and I pull her to me, hugging her close. She lays her head on my shoulder as I rub up and down her back.

I hear her sobbing gently, her sniffles breaking my cold heart wide open. "I . . . I never . . ."

Nothing should make something as sweet as her cry. Ever. I lean down, bringing my lips close to one perfect shell-pink curve of an ear, and breathe deeply of her scent, which is undercut with the acrid stench of fear that still can't overwhelm how beautiful she is. "Shh, let it out. I've got you."

She quakes a few more times, burying her face in my chest as she clutches at me for a moment before taking a steadying breath, but even that sounds a bit shaky. She might have pulled herself together by sheer will, sealing over the cracks in her worldview with Scotch tape, but she's still fragile, and that tugs at every heart string I have.

As she pushes back from me, a watery smile on her face, she's trying so hard to be brave. "I'm not sure why I'm even crying. It's just a lot to take in,

you know? Guess I'm a bit overwhelmed. And mad! I'm mad I didn't see what was going on when it was right there in front of my face. I feel stupid, and I'm definitely not. I was just focused on the wrong things and didn't see the forest for the trees."

Her voice is stronger by the end of her rant, her fire making me reevaluate just how fragile she is. I think she's made of stronger stuff than I gave her credit for, and the momentary breakdown was the anomaly, not her usual default when things get tough. It's an odd reassurance that her sweetness is tempered with some iron, like pretty cotton candy on a steel core.

I lay a light kiss to her forehead, comforting her, but the touch of her skin to my lips is like fire in my veins and blood rushes to my cock. "Meghan."

The heat in my voice is evident, and she looks up at me, her eyes flickering too. "Yes."

I don't need another word as I drop to my knees on the carpet, and Meghan spreads her legs as wide as her skirt will go, letting me between her thighs. I press the growing bulge in my jeans against the side of the bed, looking for any relief as I get closer to her while trying my damndest to be respectful. She just saw a shooting, had a breakdown . . . the last thing she needs is my intensity. I force myself to sit back, making my jeans tighter to the point that my cock and balls are painful, but I take a deep breath, regaining a modicum of my unraveling control. "I think Dominick does a good job of hiding the truth from those he doesn't want to see it. He's cultivated an image of being a high-class businessman, and only those who need to know the truth do. Hell, some of the guys in his organization probably don't even realize he's The Boss at the very top. That's the way he likes it. Low-key and calculated. But Meghan, I'm not lying when I call you an angel. You have no place in this mess, and I'm sorry you got caught up in it."

I didn't realize it, but I've been rubbing small circles on her thighs with my thumbs, soft and gentle but getting higher and higher.

Her breath hitches, and I can smell her arousal, like vanilla and sugar, as her muscles contract beneath my fingertips. She leans back, her shoulders thumping lightly against the wall as she bites her lip, looking down at me. "Shane?"

I force my hands to stop moving, instead grabbing hold of her thighs and squeezing her flesh with a tight grip. "Yes, Angel?"

"What are you doing to me?"

I clear my throat, but my voice still feels gravelly, rich with lust and need as I look up at her. “What I want to do is run my hands up higher, take your panties down, and bury my tongue so deep in your pussy that you scream my name the way I’ve been dreaming for weeks.”

She lets out a mewl, her hips fighting against my hold to lift toward me. “Oh, God. I’ve wanted that too.”

I squeeze one last time, forcing myself to let go as I roll back, my cock screaming in pain as my jeans nearly become a goddamn tourniquet. “But you already said you’re overwhelmed. I will never take advantage of you. That’s not how I do things. You’re not ready for this, for me. Not now.”

With all my willpower, I get to my knees and push to stand up, pressing a palm against my throbbing cock, hoping the attention will relieve the pressure, but it just makes me want to arch against my hand.

Meghan’s mouth opens when she sees the bulge in my jeans and a little squeak sounds out from her throat. “You’re . . . big.”

I force myself to stay still, not giving in to the urge to release the pressure of my zipper and show her exactly how big I am, but my cock jumps anyway, desperately wanting to be closer to her mouth as she sits forward, just inches away from my crotch. She watches me, the tip of her tongue coming out to trace one plump lip, and I have to turn away. “Fuck, Angel. Don’t look at me like that, all wide-eyed and open-mouthed. All I can think of right now is how much I want to slide my cock past those full, pink lips and into your hot mouth. I wonder if you could swallow me to the hilt?”

I tilt my head, watching her throat work as she swallows. “I wonder that too.”

Her voice is breathy, a sex siren so damn close to making me crash on her shores.

I rub my cock through the denim once more before balling my hands at my sides, wrangling control back of my lust-addled body before I need to punch myself in the thighs. “I need—”

Meghan interrupts, her voice soft as she looks up at me. “Yes.”

I smirk, wishing I could finish that sentence the way I want but knowing that I’m right, and fucking Meghan right now will only make her regret it more later.

A deep part of me says to do it anyway, fuck her and take what I want while she’s willing to give it. But I’m not an animal, and if I’m going to be between her thighs, I don’t want her to hate me for it tomorrow.

She'll hate me enough from all this mess. I don't need to add to my karmic bad shit list, so I hedge, turning away and squeezing my eyes shut. "I need you to take a shower, get cleaned up while I make some calls to see what the word on the street is. Then we'll sleep for a few hours. I want to be back on the road by sunset. This place . . . it won't be safe for more than twenty-four hours."

My words don't register for a split second, but when they do, her mouth closes hard enough that I hear her lips smack together, and I glance back to see her blushing, looking down and embarrassed by my denial. "Shane, this is maddening. One minute, you make me feel like the sexiest woman in the world and then you turn—"

I lift her chin again, meeting her blue eyes. "Angel, don't do that. Never, ever doubt yourself. Fuck knows, I want you, but I'm trying real fucking hard to be a good guy here and keep my promise. You . . . you deserve a good man. Not me."

She stands to study my face, her body so close to mine that my cock is straining for her. Her eyes soften, then sparkle, and I can see the sass in them before she even speaks. "Fine. I'm getting in the shower. But Shane?" She pauses dramatically, lifting to her tip toes and leaning toward me. "Nobody asked you to be a good man. And I happen to have some fantasies involving you . . . and a shower."

With that parting shot, she bites at my jawline, the stinging flash of her tiny teeth on me making my blood boil. She turns to swish to the bathroom, but I reach out, smacking her ass through the denim miniskirt.

The pop is loud in the silent room, but her cry is one of pleasure, not of pain. She glares at me over her shoulder, but I can see the spark of interest in her eyes and make a mental note of that. *Oh, Angel. You do have a little devil inside you, and those wings might not be the purest white either. Fuck me, but it makes you even sexier.*

But as the bathroom door shuts behind her, I know I can't go there with her, no matter how much we keep crashing into each other. The whisper of the shower through the door is pure torture, but with this sword of Damocles hanging over our heads on a single silken thread, I can't let myself get any more distracted by the pleasures that she offers me or the ones I could readily give to her. I can't, because I have to keep her safe. I have to get us both out of this mess. That's all this can be, or we'll both end up dead.

The fact is, even at my best, I might still end up getting us both killed, but

I have to try. And I need a clear head for this. The dire thought is enough to calm my raging desires and let my brain focus on the tasks ahead. Taking a moment to at least undo my zipper and let my cock have a little bit of relief , I dig in my duffle to pull out a burner phone.

I dial Chucky, a guy who's more a tool than a friend, but someone good to have on your side. He's gotten in trouble a few times with the law and walks in that gray area where what he does can be legal or illegal simply based on whose computers he's doing it to and who he's working for. The line connects, but it's silent, as always, because he waits for you to speak. "Chucky, it's Shane. Ran into some issues at work."

His voice, high-pitched and wheezy, comes through the line like it always does. "Shane. Good to hear from you, man. Heard there was some carnage."

Chucky speaks like everything is a video game come to life, and I doubt he's ever seen actual carnage or he wouldn't throw that word around so carelessly.

"What have you heard?" I ask, not only for curiosity's sake but to know how fast and far the word's getting out. I can judge the heat on me and the severity from that.

"Heard a legacy man went down on enemy soil," Chucky replies. "That true?"

I consider how much to tell him, but I need his help, and getting information comes at a price, usually telling or confirming information. And this isn't too bad. Chucky can't use it to hamstring me. "True. Professional hit on Dominick's turf. Carlos Rivaldi."

Chucky whistles low and long, knowing that there's always a ticking time bomb between the Rivaldi and Angeline families, just waiting on the spark of ignition, which this could be. "That is a problem, isn't it, Shane? You do it?"

"No," I growl, wanting him to understand this one hundred percent. "Did you forget who the fuck I am? I had nothing to do with it. Hitman came in and out clean, and we were all chasing our tails to catch him, deal with Carlos, and get the girls out."

"Girls? What girls?" Chucky asks, and I can hear the excitement in his voice.

Shit. He didn't know about the girls yet. "Girl was in the room when the show went down, uninjured. Another was in the hallway, also uninjured. Come on, man, it's Dom's club. What did you expect?"

"Hmm, either girl see the hitman?"

Trying to appeal to his nature, I use his vocabulary. “Maybe. That’s why I’m calling, Chucky. I got an innocent that needs protection, needs to disappear for a while, maybe long-term respawn.”

Chucky laughs in my ear, not harshly but he’s not buying it yet. “Good one, but don’t bother, Shane. Just tell me.”

I try again, knowing I don’t have a lot of time. “Look, Dominick’s keeping the dancer safe. She’s his. But this other girl, she’s mine. Not like *that*, but I promised her I’d keep her safe. Also, right now, other than the camera, she’s the primary witness who can identify the hitman and help figure out who’s behind the whole thing. I need you to see what you can find out. Let me know how much shit we’re in here and if we should be hiding from Dominick or Sal or both of them. I don’t fucking know.”

Chucky huffs, sarcasm dripping from each wheezy exhalation. “Oh, sure, just all that. No problem. Would you like for me to get into the IRS D-base while I’m at it?”

“Please, Chucky,” I beg, wondering how much more horse trading this guy’s going to need. For Meghan, I’d be willing to bargain away every chip I’ve got, and maybe promise a few more down the line. “This is important.”

Thankfully, Chucky lets me off the hook, humming for a second as I hear his keyboard clacking away in the background.

“All right, Shane,” Chucky says finally. “I’ll see what I can find out. But this is a big ask and a big owe. I won’t forget.”

I nod, even though he can’t see me, relieved that he’s not going into details. “I know, Chucky. Thanks.”

CHAPTER 13

MAGGIE

When I come out of the shower, Shane is lying back on the bed with his eyes closed. For a moment, I let my eyes trace over him, noting the flops of dark hair he's obviously been running his fingers through, his long lashes, the soft part of his full lips, and his strong jawline. Before I can continue my perusal any lower, his eyes pop open and he catches me leering at him like a creeper. Without a word, he stands and disappears into the bathroom to clean up, giving me time to change clothes. My body's exhausted after all the stress of the night, the fear, and then having a couple of heaping doses of arousal thrown in there with it.

Still, slipping into my after work tank top and some fresh panties helps me regain some sense of normality, and despite my earlier worries, the sheets on the bed are fresh and smell like fabric softener. I promise myself that I'm going to stay awake for Shane, but I'm just so worn out, my eyelids are drooping almost immediately, and the darkness seems so inviting and unavoidable after everything that's happened.

Sometime after I fell asleep, Shane must have decided to join me in bed because when a bad dream wakes me with a barely suppressed gasp, I find myself waking up in his arms.

The dream was horrible. I was back at Petals, but this time, I was in the room ready to dance, and instead of it being Carlos in his thousand-dollar suit, it was Shane watching me with lustful eyes when the door burst open and suddenly, Shane's body exploded in bullet holes.

Still, the feeling of him holding me melts the dream away in an instant, and I relax. His bare chest is warm on my back, the big spoon to my little spoon, one arm wrapped high around my shoulders and one low around my hips. The fingertips of his left hand are just above my panty line, in that small space where my tank top always seems to ride up, but it feels good and

reassures me that my dream was just that—a dream.

I wiggle slightly, pleased and comfortable in his arms. When I press my hips back, I can feel him, thick and hard against my peachy bottom, barely contained in his boxer briefs.

I bite my lip to suppress my moan, knowing I'm already wet between my legs. This fire he keeps stoking in my core had cooled to embers while we slept, but it lights to an inferno instantly as I feel him grow even larger against me.

I grind my hips back again, stroking his length between my cheeks, mimicking the lap dances I've seen the girls at the club give. It's amazing, electric to my very core, and my panties feel soaked as I part my thighs a little, still making little movements against him with my butt. But Shane stays still, sleeping through my attempt at seduction. Frack, I'm so turned on, already on the edge.

Maybe I could . . . no, not with Shane right behind me. He begins snoring softly, his breath warm against my hair. He's passed out, deep in sleep and would never know. I'll just have to be super quiet so he doesn't wake up. I know it's a risk, but maybe a quick release will help me deal with him today?

Decision made, I slowly let my fingers trace up my thigh to my center. My panties are soaked through, my clit already pulsing in need.

I rub slowly, circling clockwise and then counterclockwise, teasing myself through the cotton as I chase my own touch.

Slipping my hand inside my panties, I cup myself, sliding a thin finger inside to spread my juices up to my clit. I find a rhythm, trying to stay still, but my hips are circling against Shane, the feel of him against my ass giving me that extra spark, taking me higher.

I bite my lip, stifling my moans, already so close to coming.

Suddenly, Shane's hands tighten around me, his hips pressing forward to squeeze his cock between us. I have a split second of hope that he's still asleep, reflexively pressing against me like he did when we slept on the couch.

That hope is dashed, mortified horror taking its place as he moans, obviously awake, and his hand comes up to cup my breast, pinching my nipple. I don't know what to do, but then he growls in my ear. "Don't you fucking stop, Angel. You started this and we're fucking gonna finish it. Touch that pussy for me. Get yourself off and let me hear you come."

He grabs my wrist, pressing my palm flat against my core with his. I'm

still frozen, but as he moves my hand, his fingers rub with mine against my clit in strong, hard circles. He arches against my back, stroking himself along my ass, and I give in, too far gone to stop.

"Shane, oh, my God . . . so good."

"That's it, Angel. Show me how dirty you are, rubbing your hot little pussy while you think I'm sleeping behind you. So fucking innocent. So fucking sexy." Shane grunts, his hips grinding against me in time with his finger, guiding me to his rhythm.

I gasp, thrumming at my clit faster, bucking my hips to get closer to my own touch and then to massage along his length. "Oh, Shane, I'm gonna come."

"Do it," he gasps, his cock throbbing against my ass. "Come for me. Come for me, and I'll give you the same. Get those fingers coated in your honey so I can lick them clean. Fuck, I need to see if you taste as sweet as you smell."

Every muscle in my body tenses, riding the knife-edge of pleasure, and with one more brush across my clit, I cry out, feeling myself release intensely. Shane pinches my nipple hard again, pulling on it as I cry out once more. My body shudders, riding the waves of bliss as they roll through my body.

Behind me, I hear Shane grunt, his body jerking as he pulls me tight against his hips, his cum warm through the cotton separating us. I circle my hips one last time, trying to wring out the last drops of pleasure from us both, but Shane has other ideas. He rolls me to my back, half pinning me as he props himself up on an elbow, looking in my eyes. "Give me your hand."

His fingers encircle my wrist, holding my wet fingers up for his savoring. With a smirking grin, he licks a long line up my index finger before taking it into his mouth and sucking the whole thing deeply. It makes me think of what I could do to him, and my soaked pussy quivers again. I whimper, "Shane."

He hums in appreciation and repeats the sexy move on my other fingers, his eyes gleaming with appreciation. "You do taste like sugar and vanilla, so sweet, but there's more, sexy undertones of a dirty girl. Isn't that right? Maybe you're not so innocent after all, considering you just used me to get yourself off."

My jaw drops, indignant anger racing through me. I press my leg to the side. "You did too!"

Shane smirks down at me, and I realize he's teasing as he gives my

fingers a final lick before bending down to murmur in my ear. “Yeah, but you took advantage of a sleeping man, rubbing that tight ass of yours along my cock and touching your little pussy so soft and quiet, like you didn’t want to wake me up. But you can wake me up like that any fucking time, Meghan.”

I cringe inside, keeping my face steady. Meghan. Not Maggie. I can’t believe I just basically had sex with Shane and he doesn’t even know my real name. Is that weird? I’ve never had sex on an undercover job, and I don’t know the moral code for that. Actually, we’ve never even had a date, and that’s a new one for me too.

But Shane must see the flash of thoughts on my face because he lets go of my hand where he’s been licking and suckling along my fingertips to cup my cheek. “What’s going on in that head of yours, Angel? Talk to me.”

I bite my lip, mentally racing through potential reactions and outcomes to telling him the truth, and still not sure if this is the best course of action. But I can’t do this any longer. He’s risking his life to protect me. The least I can do is tell him my real name, especially considering the rest of the lies I’ve told.

Apparently, there’s a big web of lies and deception around us, considering the things I didn’t know about Petals. But this is within my control. If it ruins me, if it ruins what I’ve felt building with Shane for the past few months . . . I’ll have to live with the consequences. If it risks my life, that he won’t want to protect me . . . I’ll walk out the door and do my best to figure out what to do. At least then he’ll know my real name, and if he reacts poorly, then I’ll know better than to ever tell the rest of the truth.

I look down, unable to meet his eyes. “Shane, my name . . . it’s Maggie, not Meghan. I didn’t want to use my real name at a strip club. I’m sorry for not telling you before.”

I can feel the heat radiating from his body, hear his teeth grinding, but I don’t lift my eyes, flinching as he growls. “What the fuck? Maggie? You’d let me fuck you and call out a name that’s not even yours?”

I gasp, looking up at him in pain. “We didn’t . . . I mean, kinda, but not really.”

He jumps up from the bed, his eyes flashing as he paces back and forth before turning to me, legitimately angry and hurt. “Not really? Not sure of your definition, Angel, but what we did is riding a pretty fine line of fucking. Maybe you make a habit of telling guys fake names or not caring what theirs might be, but I fucking don’t.”

He runs his hands through his hair, growling in frustration. I’m mad too,

and flustered by his reaction as I sit up in the bed holding the sheet to my body. I'm not yelling, but I'm dang close as I form my reply. "I'm sorry, Shane. It's just been my work name for so long that I answer to it too. But I wanted you to know in case . . . well, because I don't go around having sex with guys who don't know my name."

Shane grabs his jeans from the chair, sitting down and yanking them up his legs. "Get dressed. We need to hit the road."

Feeling the shift in the room, I'm embarrassed again by his easy dismissal of me. How does he always seem to do that?

"Yes, sir!" I say with all the sarcasm I have, which is admittedly not much. It's childish, but I can't help needling him for his bossiness, the sudden urge to get out of here coming out of nowhere to escape the discomfort of the argument.

He freezes, his voice cold and commanding as he looks at me with eyes that are flashing with warning. "Don't call me that, Angel. Don't mess with things you don't understand."

I know what he's talking about. I'm innocent, not stupid, and a curiosity whips across my mind and through my body. The spanking. The promises. Now this? On the heels of my revelation is another ripple of desire.

There's still plenty of sass in my voice, though, and fiery anger sparking between us as I press him. "Sir? You don't want me to call you 'Sir'? Are you sure about that? Because you seem to like it . . . a lot."

I look down pointedly at the reawakening bulge in his boxer briefs, the dark stain of his cum making him look even bigger and sexier. He moves to stand in front of me, grabbing my hair in his hands and tilting my head up to lock eyes. "You think you want to play? Push me and see where my limits are? Trust me, girl. You'll break long before I will."

I can see the lust in his eyes mixed with wariness as he tests me, but I want to test him back, challenge his assessment that I'm some fragile, dainty little thing. I can take him. Heck, I want to feel him wild and rogue, see what he's got and maybe see if I really can handle it. "Challenge accepted . . . Sir."

I feel his fists tighten in my hair, the sharp bite keeping me present, ready for whatever he says next. "Maggie." It's just my name, but it hangs in the air between us for a moment, meaning so much to both of us before he continues. "Maggie. I think you need to apologize for lying to me."

My mouth opens to argue but snaps shut at his look. This is Shane, yes, but this is a side of him he's never shown me before, a side that I've only

seen hints of.

“Good girl,” he says, smiling sternly. “Don’t make this worse than it needs to be. Seems like I cleaned up your fingers for you rather well, I’d say.”

I nod, head still cradled by his hands. “Yes, Sir.”

His eyes flash again at the word, and he hums. “I think you need to clean me up too.”

My eyes drop to his dick, straining against the cotton right in front of me. “Yes, Sir.”

Heck yes, I’m in for this. I’ve been dying to get a look at Shane’s dick after feeling it in his jeans and against my back.

I grip the waistband of his boxer briefs, slipping them over the head and down his legs, and his dick springs free, gorgeous and hard, with evidence of his earlier orgasm still covering him.

I lean forward, laying kisses and licks over the red head and along the velvety shaft, tasting the saltiness of his cum and moaning in delight.

I trace my fingertips along his length, wanting to drive him wild with the light touches all over, nothing aggressive enough to get him off, just enough to tease and torture him. I hear his growls above me, and I look up with what I hope is my most innocent look.

“Fuck, Maggie. Suck me already. You’re killing me.”

I pause, leaving my tongue out to lick at him like a lollipop as I look up through my lashes at him, smirking. “My apology, my way.”

He groans, his hips pressing forward involuntarily, seeking more contact. I give in, sucking more of him into my mouth, but instead of his dick, I choose his balls, letting his length brush along my cheek as I swirl my tongue over one, then the other.

Finally, I lick one long line from the seam of his balls up the entirety of his shaft, and at the top, I swallow him to my throat in one smooth motion. “Oh, fuck. Right there.”

Shane holds my head, using my hair as leverage to keep me deep-throating him. He gives tiny little pulses of thrusts, and I hum against him, already feeling him getting close to the edge. I start to gag, and he releases the pressure on my head, letting me catch my breath before he pulls out totally. He lets go of my hair to wrap a powerful hand to his shaft, squeezing himself to stay on the edge.

“Can you do it again?” he asks, looking at me with total adoration. “Fuck,

I want to watch you swallow me down, cum and all."

I nod, diving back for more, and Shane's hands tangle in my hair again. He hits the back of my throat, pushing harder, and I hum, wanting desperately to taste him again. Shane pulls back, dragging the head of his cock over my tongue one last time before slamming deep into my mouth.

From above, I hear Shane cry out, roaring for a split second before I feel rope after rope of his warm cum shooting down my throat. I swallow, gulping deeply and not wanting to lose a drop as Shane jerks and shudders, holding me tight the whole time. As he tapers off, I lick along his length, getting every last drop before I sag, all the energy wiped from my body.

Shane pulls back, cupping my face and running his thumb along my cheekbone. The sweet oxygen is like a gift, and I look up at him, knowing my victory is written clearly on my face. But his eyes are serious, something more than I'd expected hidden in their depths. "Maggie. Apology fucking accepted."

I smile shyly, pleased with his response. "Thank you, Sir." And then because I'm a dork and can't help myself, I wink at him sassily. And I'm not one of those cute gum-commercial winkers, so it probably looks like I've got something in my eye.

He laughs, kneeling down to cup my face and lay a soft kiss on my cheek. "Fuck, I really want to throw you on this bed and spend all night buried in you, but we really do need to go. It's getting late and we've got miles to roll."

I have a thought, wiggling to the surface from deep inside, that my name isn't the only thing I'm hiding from him. He might've accepted my name with relative ease, considering it's not too uncommon at strip clubs to use a fake one. But if he finds out the real depth of my lies, I'm scared that no number of apologies, verbal or on my knees, will make that okay to a man like Shane.

CHAPTER 14

SHANE

It takes us a little longer to get going than I thought. Besides Meg—Maggie and me crossing a line that I never thought we'd cross, it took me a while to locate a safe location for us to crash.

It's nearly sunset by the time I say fuck it and we hit the road, knowing that I need to get us out of the area so no one loyal to Dominick or Sal reports seeing us. I still haven't located a safe place for the medium term, but there are plenty of no-tell motels along the highways heading west.

The hardest part is that I don't know how Dominick will react to our running. Or if we show back up. He might understand us laying low until the smoke clears. Or we could be kidnapped and taken to him or Sal. Or worst case scenario, shot on sight. I'm sure that if Dom's innocent of the hit, he'd let Maggie go. Well, mostly sure.

I'm just not one-hundred percent, and that's the problem. As desperate as the situation is, or might be, I don't want to freak Maggie out too much.

Maggie. It makes me shake my head a little as we roll along the highway, the dim light hiding my movements.

I can't believe she lied about her name. Well, I can. I just can't believe I couldn't tell.

One thing I know without a doubt is that I can read people, but she somehow slipped right under my radar. In more ways than one. Without raising a single flag, she's slipped past all of my defenses.

That both irritates and intrigues me, making me want to know more, even if only so that she couldn't possibly hide anything else because I already know it all.

Know her inside and out. My cock jerks at that thought, but I talk it down, wanting to use the road time for a better purpose. I look over at

Maggie, her feet in the seat, her knees pulled up to her chest. Yesterday, I thought that position was a sign of her shock, her curling into herself, but I'm starting to realize it's just her.

It's as if she's trying to be small, non-intrusive, or even overlooked. It's as good a place as any to start with the things I want to know.

"Why do you sit like that?"

Maggie startles a little before looking at me, confusion on her face. "Like what?"

I gesture at her feet, appreciating the way it folds her up and the curve it gives her pert little ass before refocusing on the road. "All curled up. I don't think I've ever seen you sit down with your feet on the floor."

Maggie grins, shrugging dismissively. "I don't know, just always have." She pauses, her eyes flicking up and to the left as though she's remembering something. "Even when I was a kid, my mom would tell me to 'sit like a lady' and try to get me to sit up straight and cross my legs. It never worked, mostly because at my house, all the chairs were so short compared to the tables. I had to sit on my knees or something just to be able to eat dinner for a long time. Later, in school, kids were sometimes cruel."

My hands tighten on the steering wheel, even though I know what she's talking about was years ago. "Kids can be motherfuckers."

"Making myself invisible helped to keep their sights off me. Eventually, I guess it just became habit, along with being invisible. It lets me watch from the sidelines, learn things about people because they don't perceive me as a threat even if they notice me."

It's a deeper answer than I expected, and that she shared makes me happier than it should. "Angel, nothing about you is invisible, and if you ever thought you were, you were fucking mistaken. I saw you the moment you walked into Petals and have been mesmerized by you every fucking day since."

She blushes, seeming pleased, but laughs lightly. "I don't think for a second that you were watching me sling beer when there are nearly-naked women swinging on poles right in front of your face."

I laugh and glance over. "Day one—a pink backpack with a daisy hanging on it. You wore your hair down, curled, and had too much makeup. We shook hands, and I remember that you had hands that were baby smooth."

"You notice and remember a lot," Maggie says quietly. "What else?"

I smile, remembering. “You wobbled on your high heels, and the first night you were nervous, never looking at the stage once but doing a surprisingly decent job waiting tables. By the end of the first weekend, you learned to pull your hair up. It shows off your neck and makes me want to bite it, but I’m guessing it’s more to do with how hard you work. You lightened up on the makeup, playing up your big eyes and assuming a young bubblegum airhead persona that is complete bullshit. The customers didn’t know, but we all knew you were a smart girl. Innocent, sure, but smart as a fucking whip. And you learned how to strut in your heels perfectly, your ass swishing this way and that. Yeah, I’ve been watching you every damn day, Angel.”

“Oh.” Her voice is softly high-pitched, surprise written clearly on her face as her eyebrows raise high on her forehead. “I had no idea. I mean, I noticed you too, hard not to with your whole . . . *you* going on,” she says as she moves her hands about, encompassing my whole body, “But I knew the rules and figured if you were going to break them, it wouldn’t be for someone like me.”

I reach across the console, grabbing a handful of her thigh and squeeze gently. “If I’m gonna break the rules, it’s only gonna be for someone like you.”

She bites her lip, like she’s not sure what to do with that answer, the glimpse of white making me want her teeth on me, marking my chest and neck. “So, what’s your story?” she finally asks, trying to get her balance back. “You usually go around playing hero? I know you don’t have any tights on underneath those jeans, and there’s no S on your chest.”

There’s interest in her lightly playful tone, but also a bit of worry, and I know she’s thinking about our situation. Happy to distract her, I try to give her an edited version of my life, one that won’t cause us more problems.

“Well, I guess I do have some hero tendencies, but not usually to this extreme, admittedly. My dad was a real hero. He went to Vietnam right before the US pulled out, and when he got back, he became a cop in the small town I was born in.”

“Vietnam?” Maggie asks. “What, are you the youngest of the kids or something?”

“No, it took him awhile after he got back to feel he was ready to have kids. He was older than Mom too. He was almost forty and she was only twenty-six when they got married. Still, he was a good role model, taught me

right from wrong, and I grew up always wanting to make him proud."

She lays her hand on mine where it rests on her thigh, holding it tenderly. "I'm sure he would be. You're definitely my hero. Maybe after all this is over, you can tell him how you saved me from a mob hit and the resulting war?" She says it jokingly, like she's trying to make the monster less scary by laughing at how ridiculous it sounds, but the underlying fear is obvious. "I'm sure he would love this story, on the run but not sure yet exactly who we're running from."

I sigh wistfully, shaking my head. "He died about five years ago. He would have liked the story, and I know he would have liked you. I tell myself he's my guardian angel now."

Without thinking, I salute the way I always do, lifting my hand from her leg to bring two fingers to my lips and then raising them toward the sky. "Thanks, Pop."

My hand goes right back to Maggie's thigh and hers goes right back on top of mine. It's comfortable, and I ponder just how strange it feels that a gesture that's only been in my life for about three or four minutes feels like I couldn't go the rest of my life without it.

"I'm sorry for your loss," she says softly, with genuine regret that she won't get to meet him. "He sounds like a great dad. What about your mom?"

I smile, keeping my eyes on the road. "She's great too. After Pop died, she didn't let it get her down. They talked about that, and they agreed that she should do what makes her happy. So she sold the house and bought a little condo in a nice building. She works as a secretary at an elementary school. She says the kids keep her young, even though she's not all that old, really. I'm one of the lucky ones." Feeling like the storyline of my history might be getting into dangerous territory, like how the son of a war vet police officer ended up working door security in a mob-owned strip club, I turn the questions back to Maggie. "What about you? What's your family like?"

Maggie's lips screw up a bit, and she hums quietly before answering. "Well, not as picturesque as yours, but they're good. My parents divorced when I was little, so I bounced back and forth between their houses, but it was an amicable divorce at least, not some made-for-TV drama deal. I see them both regularly, talk to my mom almost every Sunday on the phone."

"How'd you end up waitressing at Petals?"

I can feel her retreat, like a physical removal of her warmth even though she hasn't moved. "Oh, I've done a lot of moving around, this job and that.

Waitressing is something I did when I was younger, so it seemed like a good way to make some money."

She's lying. I can tell this time, but I can't put my finger on how I know. Her tone doesn't change, her face is neutral, her body relaxed. And that worries me. This girl, innocent as she may seem, is lying, and she's good at it. Really fucking good at it.

Wanting to tease out what she's lying about, I pick at her answer, keeping it casual and teasing her a little. "This and that? Tell me, what has an Angel like you done before becoming a strip club waitress?"

She smiles, but it's her fake one, too much teeth and not enough eyes. It's a dazzling smile still, but I guess when you've made a woman come and then made her deep-throat you, you get to see a lot of what her eyes can reveal. "Well, I've been a barista, a secretary, a copy girl, a waitress, a nanny, and a personal assistant. It's not quite the Village People, but finding a construction job is really difficult at my size."

Her list sounds real and honest, and I wonder where the lie was in her previous response, thinking maybe it was something else she was lying about. Maybe it was the moving? Or the money? A lie of omission, maybe?

Before I can ask more follow-ups, she redirects us to the current problem at hand. "What do you think is going on back at the club?"

I know pressing her more isn't going to get any results, so I decide to go with the flow. "I don't know. I've got a guy looking into it for us. I'll check in with him in the morning, see what he's heard."

"You've 'got a guy'?" Maggie asks, lifting an eyebrow. "Seriously? That even sounds like we've jumped into the middle of a mob movie. How in the heck did we end up here? I mean, how'd you get in touch with this guy?"

"Burner phone in my bag," I admit. "The phone's off for now, just in case. But I'll check in, and we'll see what he's hearing back home."

She looks at me with calculating eyes, and I'm reminded once again just how smart she is and how careful I need to be with her. "So, on a moment's notice, you snatched me up, switched vehicles to a nondescript sedan that you knew would be waiting in that lot, have a duffle bag packed with at least one day's worth of clothes, cash, and a burner phone, took us to a no-tell motel, and now we're headed to another safe location, and you 'have a guy'? That about sum it up?"

Fuck. She's putting a bunch of shit together pretty damn fast, and it does sound like a fucking action movie script. Scrambling, I try to stay calm and

put her on the defensive, a tactic that usually works on most folks. I laugh heartily, not taking my eyes off the road as if I'm not concerned. "Well, when you put it all together like that . . . you're welcome, Angel. You planning to say thank you on your knees too? Because that was a damn fine apology this morning."

She doesn't take the bait, sidestepping the crude, and honestly rude, comment. "Who are you, Shane? You said you're not one of Dominick's guys, not in the mob. But it sounds like . . . are you tied up in all of this?"

I grit my teeth, growling as I clench the steering wheel a little tighter and hoping it'll scare her into backing the fuck off. "All you need to know is that you're safe."

As we've talked, her curled knees had fallen loosely to her left, toward me, but at my harsh words, she pulls away. Her knees are once again clenched tight to her chest in a protective posture. She half turns away, her back mostly to me as she faces the window, her eyes unfocused as the scenery flies by.

It hurts, honestly. I was enjoying talking to her, but I need to keep her from probing in areas that she shouldn't. I realize I likely hurt her feelings, and that despite her brains and sass, she's got a vulnerable side too. Unable to reach her thigh, I rest my hand on the back of her neck, squeezing lightly, comforting and not threatening, I hope. "Maggie, you're safe, and I promise to keep you that way. That's all you need to know right now."

She doesn't answer, doesn't even acknowledge that I've spoken. I turn my attention back to the road, knowing I should give her space. Hell, I should give myself some space to figure out how to handle this, handle her. Fuck, that doesn't even sound right. Maggie's a grown ass woman with her own mind. She shouldn't be 'handled'. She should be respected, but the situation makes my caveman instincts come out and all I want to do is protect her.

As my thoughts swirl, I leave my hand where it is, drawing small lines up and down her neck with my thumb, soothing her anger, her fear, even if some of it is my fault.

If I'm honest with myself, having her satin skin under my palm calms me too, and that's a fucking problem.

CHAPTER 15

MAGGIE

We drive for hours, only stopping for a bathroom break at a truck stop with a burger joint attached to it. We take the burgers and fries to go, along with some snacks and an odd assortment of cheap undies, a pack of socks, and some souvenir T-shirts so that I can have clothes, and keep driving. It's quiet for a long time, neither of us willing to give in to the stalemate.

He hurt me, and he knows it. I can feel his remorse, but I'm not ready to forgive and he hasn't apologized. Eventually, Shane turns on the radio and music fills the car. It's nothing much, just the regular late-night stuff you get on Top 40 stations, some slow songs mixed in with oldies and a few tunes for the young lovers who might want some mood music. After a bit, I hear him humming along with an old Green Day song, even singing softly under his breath. It's nice. I can tell he has a good voice, deep and mellow with a raw emotion to it that tells me he actually knows this song.

As the chorus begins, he gets louder, and I look over at him, enjoying the mindless way he's getting into it. It feels like a peek into the real him somehow. Without saying anything, I join in, singing along with the radio and Shane, a trio of voices filling the car.

"I've never heard anyone out-sing the original," I say as the guitar music fades and I wonder if September ever really is going to end for us. "You're pretty good." It's an olive branch, making the first move to break the silence between us and I'm curious if he'll take it or shut me out again."

Shane looks over at me, a small smile tilting the corners of his lips. "Dad loved this song. He always thought that even though it wasn't written about the 9/11 bombings or the Iraq war, that it spoke to him. He never was into what we did there."

"But he was a cop."

Shane nods, shrugging. “Dad was more *Andy Griffith* than *Criminal Minds*. He was the cop people came to for advice, the cop who’d walk into a domestic disturbance without his gun and get everyone calmed down. He always told me that he saw too much of the evil men could do to each other in Vietnam and he didn’t want to add to it. So the first time he heard that song, it stuck with him.”

It’s not a truce. There are too many questions unanswered for that. But it’s a pause on the inquisition, a recognition that whatever is going on and whoever he is, we can sing along as we run. And that there’s something between us, something building. It doesn’t have to be adversarial. Goodness knows, we’ve all got secrets, and maybe I shouldn’t judge him too harshly considering the one I’m still holding close to my heart.

By dawn, we pull over to check into another sketchy motel. Shane apologizes for the seedy accommodations as we pull in, explaining why. “Folks around here aren’t as likely to remember us and definitely aren’t as likely to talk. They don’t want anyone or anything putting attention on their own lives.”

“Whatever. I just need a clean bed, not a five-star fancy place,” I reply, trying to put a positive spin on things. “So, I guess no free continental breakfast?”

Shane laughs. “We’ll be in bed during breakfast hours anyway.”

My thoughts flash back to this morning in bed and how Shane and I had sex . . . kind of. Wow, was that just this morning? It seems so long ago, time both speeding by like a rocket and dragging like my ass after an all-nighter.

Once we’re in the room, Shane pulls the curtains closed and then plops on the bed, lying back and closing his eyes as he stretches out. “You can take a shower first. I gotta work this tightness out of my back before I do anything.”

He looks yummy as a bowl of peanut butter fudge, and I long to lick the sliver of his abdomen that shows where his shirt rides up. But I haven’t forgotten his earlier words, even if we have ridden in relative civility for the last few hours. “Call your guy.”

He opens one eye, giving me a semi-amused, semi-angry look. “No.”

I cross my arms over my chest, giving him all the glare that I can muster. Which, considering the difference in our sizes, probably isn’t much, but by gosh, I’m gonna try. “Call. Your. Guy. Find out what’s happening back home.”

I can see that he’s trying to think of an argument to get out of this, some

way to reason with me, but he settles on being an ass.

"No. Take a shower. I'll call, and we'll see what he says."

Knowing that sometimes, retreat is the finest form of strategy, I acquiesce. "Fine."

Grabbing the micro-sliver of cheap soap off the vanity and missing even the luxury of tiny bottles of cheap shampoo and conditioner, I stomp into the bathroom, closing and locking the door before turning on the water. Instead of stripping off my clothes, though, I put my skills and my strategy to use, listening intently at the door.

I hear Shane dig around in his bag, and then an unmistakable start-up song as he turns the burner phone on. I can only hear his side of the conversation, but it's enough for now. "Hey, Chucky. What do you got for me?"

There's silence for a moment, and I assume Chucky must be giving Shane some type of update. "So, he's a ghost? Probably wishful thinking to hope he left town straight from the job. What about us? Heard anything about my girl, Ma–Meghan?"

A zing goes to my heart when he calls me that. His girl. I like that, even if I know there's more to him than meets the eye. He's hiding something, but at his core, he's a good guy. I'm sure of it.

His girl. It makes me smile.

My sweet musings are abruptly stopped when I hear Shane start cursing. "Fuck. What the hell should we do then? She's got people who are gonna fucking notice if she goes missing."

Missing? I think back to our conversation in the car and wonder again if Shane is a mob guy. I try to think it through. Is he lying about being Dominick's guy?

If so, why would he run with me? Or maybe he's not running *with* me? Maybe he's kidnapped me for Dominick and is making it seem like I need to run so that I'm a cooperative and stupid victim?

But to what end? If Dominick wanted me dead, Shane could've done that multiple times already. We've been driving on some lonely stretches of highway, and he could've dumped my body along any of them and I likely wouldn't have even been found.

Or he could be Sal's guy? Protecting his boss, or heck, maybe taking me *to* his boss?

But Shane has been protective. I at least know that and truly believe that's

real. He wants to keep me safe, not turn me over to a mob boss to be handled like a witness in some B-grade movie. He's even bordered on the near-obsessive sometimes, not allowing me to go into the convenience stores at gas stops without him escorting me, even if it's just to pee.

No, I don't think Shane's a gangster, even if he's worked for gangsters. There's more going on, and I'm going to have to stay on my toes since Shane is hiding what that is, but I trust him. Lord help me, I'm listening to my gut and heart more than my brain, but that's what I'm going with.

I hear him wrap up the call with Chucky and quickly hop in the shower, wetting my hair and scrubbing my body as fast as possible. Luckily, the soap is barely better than rubbing sand all over my skin and I've got plenty of reasons to hurry it up. As I emerge from the steamy bathroom, Shane walks past me, his face hard, jaw clenched.

I open my mouth to say something, not even sure what, but he simply shuts the door in my face and I hear the water start back up again for his shower. I pull on the same tank from last night and clean panties and sit down on the bed, fighting the urge to lie back on the scratchy sheets. "Not this time," I promise myself softly. "I have to stay awake. We have to talk. There are too many questions that need to be answered."

It takes Shane awhile, though, and I'm lying down by the time the bathroom door opens. Shane is quiet, tip-toeing to put his clothes over the chair before carefully sliding into bed behind me. Still, he can sense the tension in my body as he lies down, and he props himself up to whisper, "You awake?"

I turn to face him, curling up on my side as he lies on his back. "Yes. What did Chucky say?"

He looks down at me, his smirk visible even in the low light, that amused glint back in his eyes. "Who?"

"Stop jerking me around," I reply. "You know who."

"Were you eavesdropping, Maggie?"

I growl at him, sounding more like a kitten than the tiger I'd prefer. "Well, what did you expect? You're not telling me anything. Two days ago, I was a waitress minding her own business. Today, I'm on the run from the fudging mob—oh, excuse me, *mobs*. Or what is the proper term?" I say, emphasizing the 's' to illustrate just how crazy my life has become in the last forty-eight hours. "And you're hiding stuff from me. Yeah, I eavesdropped. I'm furious. I'm . . . scared."

My voice cracks, the fire snuffed out by the cold fear in my heart. Shane grimaces, like my anger and fear physically hurt him. “Come here, Angel.”

He pulls me to him, pressing my head to his chest as he wraps his arms around me, holding me tight, grounding me to him. “Don’t be scared. I’ve got you, and I’ll keep you safe.”

“You keep saying that, but I don’t even know what or who you’re keeping me safe from,” I reply, even as my body says it doesn’t care about all that, the comfort of having Shane hold me telling my traitorous body everything it needs to hear to relax. But I still talk, demanding even. “Tell me what Chucky said.”

Shane lays a light kiss to the top of my head. “Not too much, actually. Hitman is in the wind. They figured out who it was without your input. Dominick knows we’re gone, and he’s pissed and is trying to track us down. But Chucky doesn’t know if it’s because he wants to protect us or kill us. Dom’s playing this very, very close to the vest, which is his style.”

I fall silent, trying to take it all in. I know there are more questions to be asked, and I want to be strong and fierce, but this is so far above anything I’ve ever experienced it’s crazy. My brain’s being overwhelmed. I just want to go back to the way things were. My boring life was safe. Secure.

I break down, tears trekking silently down my cheeks, pooling on Shane’s chest. He rolls us, my back hitting the bed as he holds himself on his elbow beside me, his thigh on top of mine, splitting my legs.

He swipes at my tears with a gentle thumb, his voice soft but still strong. “Don’t cry, Angel. I know this is a lot, but it’s gonna be okay.”

I know my eyes are glossy with tears, my face flushing as I try to stop the torrent. “Ugh, I’m sorry for crying. I swear I’m not such a baby. Usually I never cry, but this is all so . . .”

“It’s fine, Angel. It’s your emotions needing an escape. The fear, the nerves, the . . .” He stops and I wonder what other emotion he was going to list because I’ve got a few in mind. Desire. Need. Hope.

Instead of continuing his list, Shane leans down, catching a tear with his tongue as it streaks down my face before kissing the trail away.

He lays more kisses along my cheeks, moving down to gently kiss my jawline and then my neck. I can feel the shift in him, going from comforting caresses to heated desire, and it awakens the same lust in me.

He talks into the curve of my neck, sending warm shivers through my chest and down my spine. “Your tears are salty, but here . . .” His tongue

sneaks out for a lapping touch of my skin. “Here, you’re sweet. So very sweet, Angel. It makes me wonder what you taste like all over.”

I whimper, his words amping up my desire, bringing my focus to him and him alone, the rest of the world and my fears fading away. I need this, this release from the fear, release from the worries. For that, I need him. The wolves are out there, hunting us, and we don’t even know why.

Shane isn’t telling me everything I should know about him, and I haven’t been honest with him either.

But right now, I don’t care. Secrets, lies, risks, fear . . . they all slip away in his arms.

CHAPTER 16

SHANE

Feeling Maggie whimper under my tongue, the sound echoing in my ear, is pure liquid desire and heat being poured into my body. If I were a car, it's a shot of nitro and my engine's ready to tear up the pavement, but I hold back. I want more of those throaty sounds from her, want to make her moan and scream my name.

I know that we shouldn't, not in the middle of this shitstorm. She's going to regret this later, regret me and probably hate me. But I'm a fucking selfish man, and if she wants this now, wants me to make her forget everything else for a little while, I'm going to fucking make her forget it all.

It's cheap medicine for reality, but it'll work. The side effect is that I'm going to make it so that even after this is all done, she is mine, marked body and soul. Then again, I'm pretty sure that the reverse is true, that I'm going to be marked by her as well. A small price to pay for having an honest to God Angel.

I roll onto her, forcing her legs wide around my hips as I press my cock to her pussy and cage her in with my arms. I can feel the heat from her pussy, the thin cotton the only thing between us as I kiss her neck and tug at her ear with my teeth.

She reaches up, her little nails leaving pink lines where she scrapes my arms, tugging me toward her. I lower my body, covering her lips in a searing kiss that leaves us both panting. She looks at me, her eyes full of want and fear and pain and more.

Grabbing her hands, I push them to the bed above her head, her back arching beautifully to press her full tits toward me. "Angel, tell me to stop and God help me, I will. But if you'll let me, I'll make it all better, even if only for a minute. Let me make you forget."

Her eyes are sparkly, the tears replaced with heat, lust, and need. Her voice is breathy, but I hear her clearly regardless. “Yes, Shane. Yes.”

That’s all I need to unleash the last of my personal restraints, knowing that I’m going to give her everything she wants. I kiss her again, fast and hard, my mouth claiming her perfect lips hungrily before I move along her neck, dipping down to her chest.

Her nipples are hard beneath her tank top, and I take advantage, taking one then the other into my mouth through the thin cotton to suck and bite at her. This poor shirt’s going to have to go in the trash. I’ve stretched it out so much, but that’s okay. I’ll tear the damn thing to rags if it makes her happy.

She gasps, arching into me once again. I release her hands, yanking the straps of her tank down her arms, freeing her tits to my hungry eyes before pinning both of her tiny hands with one of my larger ones.

“Fuck, Maggie,” I rasp, taking in the sight. I hadn’t seen them yesterday, only felt their soft weight in my hand as we dry-humped, but they’re perfect, soft and full and delicious looking. “Look at these pretty nipples, all pink like candy, making me want to eat you up.”

“Please, do . . . all you want,” Maggie says, and I remind myself again that maybe she knows, but she may not, just how intense her words are to me.

I lower my head to take her nipple into my mouth, swirling my tongue around again and again to drive her wild before finally sucking her deep, swallowing and feasting on her succulent body.

She cries out, begging for more. I keep suckling her, back and forth between her right and left, as her hips buck beneath me, asking desperately for attention and rubbing along my hard cock.

But her moans are getting sharper, and I lift my head up to look into her unfocused eyes, challenging her. “Are you gonna come just from me sucking on your tits?”

She shakes her head, lifting her hips to grind against me. “More,” she begs, but now that I know how close she is, I want to see this up close. “Please.”

I lower myself down, but this time, I keep my eyes on her face as I swirl my tongue around her nipple and she picks up her head to watch me.

“You like watching me lick you?” I ask, teasing her nipple lightly. “A voyeur?”

Her eyebrows pull together, her eyes locked on my mouth. “Or maybe . . .” I murmur before I grab her nipple between my teeth, biting just

hard enough to keep it in my mouth as I pull, blending a sharpness with the pleasure to see how rough she likes it.

"Ahhh!" she cries out as her head falls back. I know she's on the edge, needing just a bit more to get there.

"Or maybe if I suck hard enough, the pleasure will shoot right down to your empty pussy, clenching on nothing and wanting my cock so damn bad that you can't help but come. Let's see."

At the same time, I pinch her left nipple between my fingertips and suck her whole right areola and as much pale skin as I can into my mouth, drawing hard and deep. I grind against her soaked pussy, thrusting my hard cock to slide over her clit through her panties, pushing her over.

Maggie bucks wildly, crying out as her orgasm washes through her, and I have an up-close view of her face as the bliss overtakes her.

It's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. Her fingers clench on my arms before going totally straight, her body shaking uncontrollably like a guitar string. She's still shuddering, her eyes closed as I release her hands, moving down her body. I pull the tank over her hips and off, tossing it to the floor before focusing on the soaked mess of her panties.

I trace a light touch through the moisture, pleased that it's because of me, that I did that to her. "God, I'm hungry for your taste again. So sweet, and so dirty for me. Lift your ass for me, Angel."

The meaning of my words hits her hard, and she stops, fresh heat in her eyes as she lifts her ass just like I commanded. I pull her panties down and off too, my cock surging so hard I nearly come just from the evidence of her first orgasm and the anticipation of what I'm going to get when I lick every drop of it until she coats my mouth with her second.

I press her thighs open wide, hovering so she feels my breath, and look up at her, my voice a throaty growl of need. "Tell me, Angel. Tell me what you want."

She squirms beneath me, wordlessly lifting her hips toward me. I shake my head, pinning her hips with my hands, and blow a hot, open-mouth breath across her lips, knowing she's watching me tease her. "Say it."

"Lick me, Shane," Maggie says, spreading her knees out wider and mewling her need. "Please."

I raise an eyebrow at her, moving toward her inner thigh, right on the crease of her center, and licking a slow line with the flat of my tongue, watching as she jumps. "Here?" I ask before doing the same thing to the other

side. “Or maybe here?”

She groans in frustration, and I have mercy, giving her the words. I trace her lips with the tip of my tongue before looking up again. “Tell me, *‘Lick my pussy, Shane’* or maybe, *‘Suck my clit.’* Tell me what you want, Angel. Unleash the dirty side of you, and I’ll give you everything.”

Her voice is stronger than I would’ve thought, need giving her power as she mimics my words, looking at me with a sexual energy that has me breathless. “Lick my pussy. Suck my clit, Shane. Make me come all over your mouth. Make me your Angel.”

Fuck me, hearing those dirty words come out of my sweet girl’s mouth is almost enough to make shoot my load into the bed I’m grinding against, but I manage to fight it off, needing to give all I have to her.

I growl, diving in and running a flat tongue from her entrance up to her clit, repeating it again and again as I watch her. I pay attention, stroking her pussy just the way she likes, switching when she needs it, and giving her everything she wants. She’s frozen, her body rigid, hands full of the bedsheet, and her mouth dropped open in an ‘O’ of pleasure as her tongue curls up in her mouth.

When I focus on her clit, I thrash my tongue across it, fast as a fluttering hummingbird’s wing, and she squeals, her voice high and tight, she’s so close again. “Oh, God. Shane, don’t stop! I’m coming.”

I pause just long enough to look up at her, demanding. “Give it to me, Angel. Come all over my mouth so I can drink down your sweetness.”

I press her hips down, not letting her move an inch and ravishing her clit with my tongue. It’s only seconds before she shatters, crying out above me as her body shudders, her pussy getting wetter with each spasm. I clamp my lips over hers, drinking her honey and swallowing every delicious drop. She’s heady, a liquor that I’ve never imagined before. It makes the world disappear, leaving me with just her while at the same time energizing me. My cock strains even more with every moan of satisfaction Maggie gives me as I sweep over her sensitive skin.

She collapses against the bed, spent as I pull away and sit up. I consider for a second that she might be done, not able to take more after coming twice so hard.

Instead, she inhales deeply, smiling and opening her eyes. She looks hazy, satisfied, but at the same time playful. Somehow, I’ve tapped into an inner well of sexual energy that maybe nobody’s ever seen, and here’s the

innocent vixen that I've known she's had inside her all this time.

Maggie sees the need on my face and sits up, kissing my lips tenderly. "Now it's your turn . . ." she murmurs as she reaches for my boxer briefs, pulling them down to let my cock free.

"Oh, fuck, Angel," I gasp as she wraps a soft hand around me. "See what you do to me?"

Maggie looks down, gasping softly and looking surprised at my size, like she hasn't already sucked me off. "Oh, Shane," she says breathily.

I help her lie back before drawing my head through her folds as I squeeze tight at the base my shaft, staving off the orgasm that's already drawing too close. I rub the tip of my cock over her clit before pausing at the entrance to her pussy. "I'll try to be gentle, Maggie. I don't want to hurt you, but I'm on the fucking edge."

"Don't you dare," Maggie says, grabbing my forearms. "I'm not that fragile, remember? You won't break me."

"I might," I rasp. There's more honesty in those words than I'd like to admit, but if she wants to take me, I can't hold back. I drive into her with one thrust, balls-deep, and she cries out as I grab her thighs, pulling her hard to me. It takes all of my willpower to freeze, letting her adjust and trying not to come from the tight grasp she has on me. "Fuck, Maggie. You're so damn tight."

She smiles, her voice cracking as the pain and pleasure mix for her. "Or you're just big. Really . . . big."

"You okay?" I ask, giving her a few tiny thrusts, testing to see if she can relax a bit but bottoming out deep inside her.

She moans, biting her lip as her head drops back, and I can feel her pussy walls already quivering around me.

"Damn, Angel," I half tease, my cock throbbing as she clenches me hard, her body massaging my cock even though I'm not moving. "Are you coming on my cock already?"

She nods, crying out as she begins to squirm on the bed, moving back and forth and fucking herself on my cock. I hold myself still, looming between her thighs, watching as she takes my cock, disappearing inside her and coming back out coated in her cream. It's the sexiest thing I've ever seen.

Her energy gives out, the orgasm depleting her, and I take over. Rolling her legs up until I can wrap my hands under her arms, I grab her shoulders for leverage.

I pound into her, pulling and pushing her tiny body under mine and using her pussy to jack myself off as I bury my face in the curve of her neck.

Sucking the tender skin into my mouth, I mark her, needing proof that she's mine, even if only for this moment. Maggie's crying out, holding onto my neck as I drive her harder and harder, my hips slamming against her and shaking the whole bed.

"Shane! Please, come. I need you to come," she begs. Her voice drops off. Her brain's so overloaded that all she can do is moan wordlessly even as her pussy squeezes me even tighter.

Anything my Angel wants, I'll give her. With a roar, I explode, my cock pumping jet after jet of hot cum deep inside her, triggering her once again, and her walls flutter, milking me. She cries, no words possible for either of us as we're both destroyed and remade in the energy of this bonding.

We ride out the waves together, finally crashing to the bed spent. I lift up, not wanting to crush her small frame with my heavy ass, but she pulls me back down, snuggling beneath me.

I chuckle lightly, not wanting to move, not wanting to disturb my still semi-hard cock inside her. "You sure I'm not smothering you? Can you even breathe?"

In response, she takes an audible breath and blows a weak raspberry against my neck. "Yes, I can breathe. It smells like you, manly and salty and sexy."

I bury my face in her hair, feeling a wide smile overtake my face. "Well, you smell like cupcakes and sugar. Is that just you? Or do you buy special soap that makes me want to eat you all the time?"

I move to nibble at her earlobe and she giggles. "A lady has to keep some secrets to maintain an air of mystery."

She says it lightly, teasing, but a beat later, even as we're still connected as one, the reality of the secrets we are both keeping presses down heavily. We both pause, and I pull back to look at her face.

She lied to me about her name. She's probably lying to me about why she's working at Petals, and fuck knows, I'm lying about shit.

But for a moment, we escaped. Just the two of us . . . until reality crashed back in like it always does. We release each other, both of us needing a moment now, and I quietly roll off her to grab a washcloth from the bathroom. Running it under the warm water, I clean myself before coming back with another fresh cloth for Maggie.

I wipe her down, letting her know that while I've still got issues, there's something that I don't want to let go of between us. She watches me silently, her face promising me things I'm not ready to trust just yet, but I want to. When she's all clean, I toss the rag toward the bathroom door before lying down. I feel like that rag, wrung out and used, and I imagine Maggie feels the same way.

"Come here, Angel."

She scoots closer to my open arm, curling against my side like a kitten and placing her head on my chest as I hug her to me. We might be hiding things, but right now, we both need comfort. And I can give that to her. I'll give her anything.

Her voice is a whisper, but there's steel in it, her bravery shining through, even in the face of a problem she never imagined she'd face. "Shane? What are we going to do?"

I squeeze her tighter and kiss her temple softly. "Right now, we're going to sleep. We'll figure out the next step this afternoon."

She sighs softly, and in moments, I feel her relax, drifting to sleep. I lie awake, though, mentally running through every scenario, every possible outcome, the risks of each making me tense.

We're going to have to trust someone, but if we choose wrong, it'll likely be the death of both of us.

CHAPTER 17

MAGGIE

In what's starting to feel habitual, I wake up curled against Shane's side, my leg slung over his and my head nestled on his chest and shoulder. It feels right, comfortable. Safe. I snuggle in deeper, and he stirs, pulling me tight and lifting my hand to his mouth to lightly kiss my fingertips. "Morning, Angel. Well, evening, I guess."

I lower my hand to rub his chest. "What are we thinking today? Drive all night, eat crap food, and then sexercise ourselves to sleep?"

Shane cups my chin in his hand, lifting it toward him. "Sounds like fun, but we'll have to see. First, a kiss. Second, we need to hit the road. We slept in, so just a kiss."

He winks at me. I know a kiss between us could easily turn passionate and keep us in this bed all night, but we likely do need to get a move on. I don't know if Shane's burner phone could be tracked, but sitting around probably isn't the best idea.

I scoot up the bed slightly to reach him with puckered lips, but he pulls me astride him in one quick swoop instead. I gasp, laughing a little. "Whoa . . . hey! You said a quick kiss."

My center brushes against his washboard abs, and I can't help but circle my hips a little, the warm prodding of his morning wood standing proud behind me giving me naughty thoughts, even if it is late afternoon. "This does not feel like a quick kiss."

Shane mock-growls, pressing his hips up into me and adding to the sensation as his stiffy nestles between my cheeks and we both hum happily. "I didn't say quick. I said a kiss."

He's teasing, but the gravel in his voice sends jolts to my core. I swirl my hips again, letting him feel the heat and wetness he's building in me, and the

tingle runs up my body to make me whimper. Shane grabs behind my neck, pulling me down to meet his mouth in a punishing kiss, his tongue licking along the seam of my lips, demanding entry.

With a moan, I grant him access, twisting my tongue with his, needing more. Forget the time. Forget the miles we need to roll. Fifty miles or whatever aren't going to make a huge difference. What is going to make a difference is the huge hardness pressing against my butt that I need inside me again. I lift my hips, trying to impale myself on his dick, but he stills my movements with strong hands on my thighs.

Breaking our kiss, he looks up, his chest heaving in the space between us. "Fuck, Angel. You're killing me. We really do need to leave. Tonight, I promise."

I whimper, hips pumping in the air as I try to push back. I can nearly feel the heat of his head against my lips. "We can be fast."

His dick jumps at my words, the tip touching my soaked lips, and we both groan. "Shane."

I'm pleading, something I would swear I'd never do, but right now, I need him filling me more than I've ever wanted anything.

With a growled curse, he pulls me down hard, sliding into my wet core easily and pumping fast and deep. "You want my cock, Maggie?" he asks in between each hard thrust. "We're in fucking danger. You get that, right? But all you want is my cock, isn't it?"

I throw my head back, my nails digging into his chest leaving little half-moons where I grab for purchase. I drop my hips in time with him, our bodies meeting in slaps that shake me to the very center of my body. "God, yes. Shane, fill me up. I want it."

I want it . . . and I want so much more. I know we're not being logical, and I'm normally a very safe girl.

But any concerns I might have are obliterated as Shane smacks my ass hard, the sound ringing out in the quiet room. "Such a bad girl. I said a kiss and look what you've done to me, Angel. I can't help but give you everything you want."

I cry out, the thickness inside me and the heat on my ass getting me so close to the edge. "I love being bad. With you. *For* you. You just feel so good inside me . . ."

The honesty in my words make Shane surge even harder, thicker. He thrusts powerfully, slamming deep in my core and I cry out. "Ahhh . . . Yesss

. . .”

Shane groans. “That’s it. Show me how your good girl pussy can take me like a bad girl. *My* bad girl.”

It doesn’t take long, my cries mixing with Shane’s continued dirty words until I scream, clamping down around his hips. “I’m coming . . . God . . . Shane!”

Shane jackhammers into me, holding my hips still and forcing me to take his punishing thrusts as I spasm in his hands, the waves washing over me. “That’s right, come on my cock. Squeeze that tight pussy and milk me. I’ll give you everything you want.”

I tense my muscles in time to his strokes, and he groans, losing the rhythm as I feel his hot cum filling me. I take over, slowly rolling my hips up and down to take him, coating him with a mixture of our orgasms and pulling every last drop from him as he shudders. It’s warm, intense, and I feel emotions bubbling up inside me even as I feel the first drop of his cum squeeze out of my pussy to roll back down his shaft.

I lean forward, pressing our chests together, and Shane surprises me with another smack, to my other cheek this time. I wail in surprise, my muscles clenching against him once more.

Shane chuckles darkly, his eyes sparkling. “Mmm, I’ll have to remember how tightly you squeeze me when I spank you, but we really do need to go.”

I grin down at him, happy I got my way and knowing he got his way too. I give him a soft kiss, stroking his face and nodding. “Okay, let me rinse off and we’ll go.”

He grabs a handful of my mess of hair. “Oh, no, Angel. Bad girls don’t have time to take a shower. You’re gonna ride in that car all night, feeling me between your legs, knowing that cum you so desperately wanted is deep inside you. That you’re marked by me.”

He runs his thumb along my neck, and though I haven’t looked in a mirror since our session last night, I can feel that there’s a heck of a hickie glowing on the pale skin there. It makes me tingly inside, proud that he wanted such a visible sign of what we did.

I smirk, running my fingertips along the claw marks on his chest, knowing I’m not the only one marked. “All right, Bad Boy. But then that goes for you too. You’re gonna have my scent all over you tonight too.”

He grins, wiggling his hips and sending another little tingle through me. “Maggie, I would happily smell like your sugar anytime you’ll let me.”

The sweetness of the moment is short-lived because as we head out to the car in the golden setting light, I see a familiar face heading our way. Pulling hard on Shane's hand, I point. "Shane, that's the hitman."

Shane follows my finger, seeing the large guy who has already spotted us. We duck and try to make our way through the cars in the lot, shuffle-running toward ours as fast as we can.

No luck, though, as the window in the car next to us shatters violently. "Get down!" Shane yells, shoving me to the ground. The rough pebbles bite against my palms and against my cheek, but that's nothing compared to the fright racing through my body as I scramble behind a tire, hoping I've got enough to protect me.

Seeing that I'm listening, Shane pulls a gun out of his waistband at his back. *What the 'fridgerator?* I didn't even know he had a gun! Has he been carrying that thing this entire time and I just didn't notice?

Popping his head up from between the cars, Shane aims toward the hitman and fires, his shot much louder than the first. Shane fires off three more shots and I hear glass breaking again. "C'mon!" Shane growls, grabbing my hand and pulling me up, placing it on his waistband at his back, right where the gun had been.

He starts to walk carefully but quickly, leading me toward our silver sedan as his head stays on a swivel, scanning in the direction of where he shot. *Pffzt* . . . *pffzt* . . . two shots whizz by us from behind, more air whooshing than a bang, and somewhere in my head, I realize the hitman has a silencer on his gun while Shane's is ringing loudly as he fires back again.

We sprint, reaching the car in a second that feels like an eternity. Shane yanks the passenger door open and shoves me in, still looking for the hitman. "Stay down."

It's silent for a few seconds that feels like forever, until the driver's door opens and I see Shane again. I start to sit up when I hear the *pffzt* sound once again and Shane grunts. "Fuckfuckfuck."

"What happened?" I ask, but Shane just slams his door, jamming the keys in the ignition before peeling out.

From the floorboard, I stare at Shane, who seems angry, but in control, nowhere near the basketcase-in-shock that I currently am. "Shane?"

His eyes cut from the rearview mirror to the road in front of him twice more before he looks down at me. "You okay? Are you hit?"

I shake my head, wanting to get up but afraid to move from my protected

little hole. “No. I’m okay, but what—”

He takes a turn fast, throwing me toward the door, and then another, throwing me forward into the seat, where I plant my hands. His eyes flick their circle again, rearview mirror, front windshield, then me. “You can get in your seat now. Buckle up.”

I quickly do as he says, immediately looking out the side mirror behind us. “Is he following us?”

“No, I don’t think so. Not right now, at least. But we need to ditch this car.”

I’ve been undercover for stories before and have experienced a lot of stuff, but nothing like this. I feel like I’m in a freakin’ action movie, like somewhere along the way, I got mixed up in something way above my pay grade. But I refuse to be the too stupid to live girl who always ends up dead or causing the hero to die because she’s running around like a chicken with her head cut off, panicking at every turn.

I take a deep breath, letting my brain click into the reality my life has become. On the run from the mob, with a hitman chasing us down. Heck, I think I’ve even seen this movie before. The joke falls flat, even in my own brain. With another breath, I realize . . . okay, I can do this.

“Ditch the car? That means we need another one. Do you happen to have another one hidden around here?”

I say it without humor, totally serious and honestly curious considering I don’t know how well-prepared Shane was for all this, but Shane laughs bitterly. “No. Don’t have another handily stashed unfortunately.”

“Okay, we need a shopping center,” I reply, thinking quickly back to a stakeout I did once for a story. “An old one where the security won’t have been updated. We can steal a car from the lot and not be caught on camera.”

Shane looks at me, lifting an eyebrow. “Done this before, have you? Got a juvenile record you don’t like to tell people about?”

“No, but it stands to reason,” I reply, trying to sound nonchalant about it. I look up and down the streets around us. We’re not on the highway but close enough that there are plenty of little strip malls nearby. “There. Turn around.”

Shane hangs a U-ey in the street, turning where I indicate, and we pull into the parking lot of a strip mall that looks like it might be on its last legs. There’s a bail bonds shop, a Greyhound bus station, a tattoo parlor, a pizza delivery place, and four empty storefronts that look like gaps in teeth. Down the street, I see a newer, fancier looking mall that’s probably the reason for

this mall's downfall.

He drives across the back row, parking the sedan and turning to me. "Okay, the blue truck beside you," he says, nodding toward a twenty-year-old Dodge that's got a 'For Sale' sign in one window but not too much dirt otherwise. "I'll come around, bump it, and then you're going from this car, through the driver seat of the truck to the passenger side. Put your backpack on and I'll take the duffel bag. Got it?"

I nod.

Shane gets out, and I see a smear of dark wetness on the seat where he was sitting. If it was a white seat, I'm sure it'd be red. Oh, my gosh, he's hit, and he didn't say anything. Anger and fear war in my gut, but I know that leaving his blood here is a bad idea, especially so visible to anyone passing by the car. I reach over, wiping it off with the sleeve of my shirt. It's not much, but at least it turns into a sort of icky streak that'll dry to a dark black soon enough.

Shane knocks once on the window, and I open the door, hopping into the truck. Thankfully, the truck has a bench seat and I slide over easily, buckling up as he does the same. He leans over, hissing only slightly under his breath as he fiddles around with the wires for a moment while I try to keep myself unseen.

"Come on, you son of a bitch," Shane grunts, and a moment later, the engine turns over. It's sluggish at first before catching, and Shane sits up, letting out a hum of satisfaction, but there's a hint of pain mixed in from the movement. "Okay. Let's go."

It's a little surprising when we pull out of the lot casually, not speeding to draw attention, and merge back with traffic. After a little bit, I reach up and grab the 'For Sale' tag and toss it in the back.

"Thanks," Shane grunts, his tone reminding me of his security guard grumpiness. I can feel my body calming, the adrenaline starting to wear off, and suddenly I'm feeling like a nap.

But I know Shane's hurt, and I force myself to pay attention. As soon as we're on the highway, I turn to him, crossing my arms over my chest. "You're hit. How bad is it?"

He looks at me, then turns his attention back to the road, his lips tight as he speaks. "Just a flesh wound. Bullet nicked me. I'm fine."

I give him an appraising look, then shake my head. "Don't lie to me, Shane. I can see it on your face. We're in deep trouble here. If you're hurt,

we need to address that first."

Shane reaches over, weaving his fingers into my hair, holding my head in his palm and looking over with affection. "I'm okay. But I need to report in. See if Chucky has found out anything new, because the hitman tracking us shouldn't have been fucking news. Also, I need to know if the hitman is cleaning up loose ends on his own, or if someone sent him after us."

"What's the chances of each?" I ask, and Shane shrugs.

"About fifty-fifty. But whether the hitman is using his own network to find us or one of the bosses, the result is the same. We're the loose end he's hunting. But if one of the families is helping him, we'd know who the risk is and who the safety might be. Then we could decide if we should try to outrun this, lay low, or maybe even go back. Hopefully, Chucky will have some intel."

CHAPTER 18

SHANE

I pull over at a large truck stop, parking in the middle of the lot mixed in with the other cars, knowing they'll disguise the truck a bit since there's a chance it's been reported stolen by now. Best guess, the truck was put out there by one of the workers at the strip mall, and if so, they'll notice as soon as they get off shift.

Maggie digs in my duffel, handing me the burner phone. I remind myself to buy a new SIM card for it, but one or two more calls shouldn't be a problem. I turn it on, and before I can even speed-dial Chucky, it rings, and I recognize his number on the display.

Shit, that's not good. I answer, putting it on speaker and staying silent as we always do as he jumps in. "Shane? You okay?"

"Yeah, Chucky. Fine and fucking dandy, except for the hitman who took us by surprise at the fucking motel," I reply, holding a finger up for Maggie to stay silent. "What the fuck's going on?"

Chucky hisses through the phone, sounding upset. "Yeah, I've been watching for you to turn the damn phone back on so I could warn you. Got word earlier today that he's looking for your girl because she saw his face. Loose ends, you know. He wants to disappear."

I reach across and take Maggie's hand, her face remarkably stoic for having confirmation that she's on a hitman's shit list. "Well, he found us already. Got a few shots off, hit me too. Took a nick to the left bicep, but nothing serious. Meghan's fine."

Chucky's voice drops to a whisper, and I can hear him lean into his mic, the wheeze unmistakable. "We need to talk about her, Shane. Your girl is in some deep shit, not just with the hit."

Maggie pales slightly, squeezing my hand, and Chucky continues. "You had me check out all the employees at Petals, and I did. I checked out

Meghan Postland and she was clean. But when the shit hit the fan, I ran a wider search, and found a Maggie Postland . . .”

Maggie suddenly yanks her hand back, her knees pulling to her chest in a position I know all too well and was happy to see go.

She’s mouthing, “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry,” silently, and I can see the fear in her eyes. This isn’t good.

My voice is hard as I answer Chucky. “What about Maggie Postland?”

I hear a few clicks, like he’s typing on his end, and then he reads. “Maggie Postland, 289 Westminster Drive, Apartment 175.”

I nod my head, knowing that’s where I’d taken Maggie the night I drove her home. This is nothing new. “Yeah, and . . .?”

“She works for *The Daily Spot*, Shane. That online tabloid rag that reports on celebrities and shit.”

Still hoping I’m wrong about where this is going, even as Maggie’s head falls and she hugs her knees, I sigh. “You sure? I’m not saying it might not be Meghan, but maybe she answers their phones or something? She told me she’d done some office work before.”

Chucky makes a tsking noise, and I can imagine him leaning back and giving me a sarcastic look. “I’m looking at her articles, Shane. She’s a reporter. She was the one who sprang that expose on the basketball player. And if I know, they might know—all of them. Dominick, Sal, the hitman.”

I nod, and I know I need to have a private conversation. “I gotta go, Chucky. Give me a minute and I’ll call back in. Stand by.”

I click the *End* button before staring across at Maggie. A reporter. A fucking reporter? My voice is icy, the anger turning my heart cold. “Were you ever going to tell me?”

She doesn’t respond, doesn’t even move, just sits there, small and curled around herself. She’s so scared, so afraid . . . and right now, she should be. Not from me, but from what her presence and digital footprint brings down on us.

“Maggie!”

My voice rings out sharply in the truck, and she flinches but raises her head. Her eyes are red-rimmed, tears tracking down her face. “Yes! I wanted to tell you, but then everything went all to crap and I didn’t know how to!”

“Well, do it now. Tell me what the fuck is going on with you,” I demand, my voice hard. “If there’s even a snowball’s chance in hell of keeping you safe, you need to tell me everything. Omit fucking nothing.”

She swipes her tears, her eyes flashing fire as she sits up a little, cobbling together the remnants of her courage from deep inside her soul. “Yes, I work for *The Daily Spot* as a reporter. I got a job at Petals a few months ago because we had reports there were a lot of celebrities going there for side action. I was undercover, reporting on that, like when Jimmy Keys came in.”

I mentally recall our hallway conversation where she’d been taking pictures of the basketball star and claiming to be a fan. I’d been duped . . . that almost never happens to me. And this girl has done it several times without me even suspecting. If we were in any other situation, I’d be impressed. “I see.”

“But I like the job, the people . . . like you, Allie, and Marco. Even Dominick didn’t seem like that bad of a guy. I had no idea about how deep things went. I mean, who would expect this? This is for the movies. I just thought it was a popular strip club, exclusive VIP kinda stuff for the celebrities and businessmen. And then people started shooting, and Allie had blood all over her . . . and we started running.”

Her eyes look to the left like she’s remembering the scene at the club, and she shivers. I have to force the next words out through clenched lips, but I have to know, even if it hurts to ask.

“Is that it? You lied about your name and you lied about why you were there. Is there anything else you need to tell me? Now’s your chance.”

My voice is a bit softer than before, but still harsh and commanding. Maggie notices and looks at me squarely, still so brave I want to pull her across and cuddle her to my chest.

“I did lie about those things. But nothing else. The things I’ve said to you, done with you . . . those were all real, all true.”

Her eyes are soft, wide and open, letting me see into her soul. She’s being honest. I can tell this time because the emotions I see are mirrored in my own heart too. I give a curt nod and turn away. “Okay, let me call Chucky back.”

I reach for the phone, but Maggie lays a staying hand on mine. “Now, it’s your turn.” Her voice is laced with steel. “You’ve been hiding things from me too.”

I look at her, a look of question in my eyes, but her expression is calculating now, the softness gone as she looks at me with a coldness I’ve never seen before. “*Shane*, is that really your name?”

“Have I given you any reason to doubt that it isn’t?” I ask, trying to deflect.

Maggie's eyebrows lift, and she's not going to give up that easily. "I'm not stupid. You seem pretty intertwined in a mob-owned strip club. You had a bugout bag, a stashed getaway car, and you apparently carry a gun that you're skilled with. Those are all things a mobster would have, and I bet somewhere in that duffel of yours are some pretty good fake IDs. But there's also Chucky."

"What about Chucky?" I ask, scared but at the same time impressed. She's seeing a lot. No wonder she's a good reporter. I thought she was smart before. Now I *know* she's smart. And has probably been putting things together all along, just biding her time until the moment was right.

"Earlier, you didn't say you *needed* to call him. You said you needed to 'report in' and see if he had any 'intel'. It made me think back. You weren't close with Dominick, not any moreso than the rest of the employees. He trusted you, I could tell that much, but you were just professional with him. Same with Marco and all of the girls . . . and me, at first. I've been undercover for stories a lot. I can blend into the background easily, being small and underestimated. But that's not how you play it when you go undercover, is it? And I'm betting you've been undercover a time or two before too. So, what are you, Shane? ATF? DEA?"

Fuck. I need to get her on another track real damn fast. Even if it hurts. I make my voice harsh, glaring at her. "Maggie, you're seeing zebras instead of horses when you hear hoof beats. Just because you lied about everything from the moment you walked into Petals doesn't mean I did. I'm a security guard. That's why I know how to shoot a gun. Dom wasn't going to hire some idiot to head his club security team who didn't know how to do anything but use his fists. And Chucky's a buddy who helps me out. That's it."

Maggie jerks when I mention her lies, but she doesn't back down. "FBI?"

I'm a pro, so I know there's no reaction on my face, but that lack of response must be what solidifies it for her. She narrows her eyes, nodding almost to herself. "So that's a yes to the FBI then."

It's quiet in the truck, the gravity of the situation sinking in like a fog of heaviness. It's hard, and I feel my facade of sternness crumbling under her soft but unrelenting eyes. "Maggie."

She lifts a finger at me, silencing me like I did to her earlier. "So, to recap, I'm an undercover reporter for what is mostly a two-bit gossip rag. You're an undercover FBI agent working in a mob-controlled strip club. I'm

guessing you're there to investigate Dominick. And now a hitman is chasing us because I'm the only witness to a hit. And we're in a stolen truck with a guy named Chucky as our only backup. That about right? Anything I missed?"

I nod. "Yeah, close enough. My name really is Shane, but my last name isn't Nelson. It's Guthrie. Special Agent Shane Guthrie, Federal Bureau of Investigation."

I hold my hand out, offering her a shake even though we're way beyond that now. Still, it's the only thing that seems appropriate, and she returns the shake, smirking a little. "Maggie Postland. Journalist with *The Daily Spot."*

We eye each other, so much unsaid between us but neither of us knowing where to start with this tangled web that's quickly unraveling. Finally, she clears her throat and looks at me expectantly.

Maggie hums. "So now what?"

"Now," I reply, "we call Chucky back to see what else he knows. By the way, that's not his real name, but he always says his work is child's play, and he can be an evil son of a bitch when he wants to be . . . so the nickname was pretty natural."

She nods, and I reach for my phone once again. The line connects quickly, silence on Chucky's end.

"Hey, Chucky. So, we're transparent on all fronts on this end."

Chucky's voice is hesitant through the speaker. He's not used to this type of communication. "Just how clear are we talking?"

"Crystal, man. Say hi, Maggie."

Maggie grins and puts on her 'club voice.' "Hi, Maggie."

Chucky doesn't find it funny though. "Fuck, Shane. You can't do shit like that. She's a fucking civilian."

Chucky keeps babbling, but I don't have time for his shit. "It's already done, Chucky. Just be glad she doesn't know your real name. Now what's going on back there?"

Chucky sighs, still wanting to speak his piece about Maggie knowing I'm FBI, but we need to move on, figure out the next step. "Okay, so it's looking like Sal sent Carlos into Petals. Told him it was a power play or some shit, just to go in and see how things were looking, not make waves if he got recognized but to lie low, observe, and report back. Later on, he would use the fact that his son was able to penetrate Dom's HQ as leverage."

What a crock of shit. I know too much about Sal Rivaldi to buy that. "It

was a setup then. But Carlos was his own son. That's pretty fucked up, even for Sal Rivaldi."

Chucky's hum tells me he's thinking the same thing. "Yeah, apparently, Carlos was sowing some dissension among the lower lieutenants and Sal decided he needed to clean house. On the down low. He contracted the hitman himself, but he's selling that Dominick killed Carlos for being in his club. Sal's wanted to declare war on the Angeline's for a while, and this way, he's getting a two-for-one . . . rid of his asshole son and riding into battle like some sort of avenging father."

"We can't let that war happen," I growl. "Those two kick off, and the streets are going to turn to rivers of blood."

"No shit," Chucky replies. "You're the one working with the guy. What's he like?"

I shrug, looking over at Maggie. "He's careful, methodical, and strategic. More businessman than loose cannon, even if he is a crime lord. He's scary, but it's like a controlled burn with him. If we let the Rivaldi's get even a small foothold on more power, Sal will destroy the city and everyone in it with his crazy power plays. He's more like a wildfire . . . it'll be chaos."

"That's what I'm seeing too. You want to call it in?"

"Not yet, that's a lot of bureaucratic red tape I'm not ready to jump into," I reply.

Chucky understands and laughs softly. "I gotcha. I've looked at this from every angle to see what the best move is and to be honest, I'm not sure, man. It's your call."

I tap my fingers on the steering wheel, doing the same analysis Chucky says he's done and coming up with the same results.

Maggie clears her throat. "I have an idea."

CHAPTER 19

MAGGIE

The tension hums in the air as Shane turns to look at me and Chucky goes silent across the phone line. Shane's looking at me with both respect and anticipation, while Chucky . . . well, he's at least not talking. "Whatcha thinking, Angel?"

"You said Dominick is the better choice for the city, and Sal Rivaldi used his own son as a pawn to incite war," I reply, trying to put words to the thoughts that have been tumbling in my head for only a few moments. I'm trying to put it together with what I know about Dominick, the city . . . everything I've learned in my career in journalism. "We have to appeal to Dominick to prevent the war. The FBI can't exactly go in officially and tell Dominick he's their pick as crime lord . . ."

"That's an understatement," Chucky says, interrupting. "But . . . they might be willing to work under the table if necessary."

"Exactly. He's the best option we've got," I add as Shane gives me a pondering look. "And he can help with the hitman, might be the only one who can."

Shane taps his hands on the dash, his head nodding quickly as he thinks. "You want us to go back to Petals? To Dominick?" he asks before his nods change to shakes. "That's a suicide mission, Maggie. No."

I want to challenge Shane, but Chucky interrupts before the stare-off can reach ridiculous levels. "Actually, I'm thinking she's on to something. You could go back, maintain your cover, share the intel, and nudge Dominick the right way."

"Almost right, Chucky," I interject. "If we go back, we go back honestly. We have to come completely clean with Dominick. If we hold back anything, he'll know and doubt the rest of the information. Besides, having a waitress and a security guy going back doesn't carry weight. A reporter and an FBI

agent . . . if we go in and show all our cards, he's more likely to believe us and not go after the Rivaldis. It's risky, but it's the best play."

Shane looks at me incredulously. "You want me to tell Dominick Angeline, head of the Angeline crime family, that I've been undercover with him as an FBI agent for a year and that he's had a fucking reporter working as a waitress in his club, and expect to walk out of that room alive?"

I bite my lip, thinking it through. "Yes. Besides, we can offer Dom things that he would want to take advantage of."

"Like what?" Shane asks, and for the first time, I feel like grinning. "What's going on in your head?"

"Dominick's going to be surprised, and angry, that the FBI has infiltrated his organization," I say, knowing the description is kind at best, stupid at worst. "But if the FBI gives him a tacit agreement for some breathing room, a willingness to back him, even if it's under the table . . . he might be willing to help."

I know I'm pushing it, but Shane needs to understand that I'm all in on this, and I need him to be too.

He nods, obviously thinking through what I've said. "We'd need a safety mechanism, something that will make Dominick talk first and hopefully, *not* shoot later." He pauses, thinking for a moment before grinning. "Not a safety mechanism, but a safety *person*. Allie. We use her as a liaison, make sure she's there for the meeting. I don't think Dominick will kill us in front of her."

He's right. I hate to get Allie involved in this mess. She's my friend, and I don't want her to be in any more danger. But I think Shane might have found the only way to insure we get in and out alive and with any chance at securing Dominick's help with the hitman.

"Okay. We'll talk to Allie."

Shane reaches over, taking my hand and giving it a supportive squeeze. "All right, Chucky, you got all that? I'm going back offline. I'll text you the meet info when it's set."

We hang up, and then it's just Shane and me in the truck. The lies, the hiding, and the stress of the crazy situation melt away as we look at each other, our hands touching, leaving just the chemistry, the connection we've had even when we knew we shouldn't, couldn't pursue it.

I feel naked, vulnerable under his gaze like never before. Unconsciously, my knees pull up to my chest, but I don't drop my gaze. His dark eyes stare

back at me, and he gives my hand another little squeeze. “Don’t do that, Angel. Don’t try to hide now, not when I can finally see you. And you can see me.”

I let my knees fall to the side, facing him. My voice is quiet but steady as I meet his eyes, needing to see every nuance of his reaction. “Is this real for you? Because it’s real for me. And as scared as I am about all this crazy mob stuff . . .” I wave my hand around, gesturing outside the truck, then place my hand on my heart. “I think I’m more scared that this is some pretend piece of the character you’re playing and that you’re going to walk away from me when it’s all done, leave me alone, broken, and not knowing real from pretend.”

Shane grabs my arms, pulling me across the seat and into his lap. Wrapping his arms around my waist, he looks into my eyes, his voice raspy and intense. “It’s real for me too, Maggie. So fucking real, and I’m terrified that I’m taking you into the lion’s den and won’t be able to keep my promise to keep you safe. And I can’t stand the thought of that. I need you. I love you.”

The doubts in my heart burn to ash as he kisses me, the truth of his words resonating through me. Yes, we’ve only been intimate for a few days, but I don’t care. For months, I’ve been watching him, dreaming of him, needing him. “Shane, I love you too.”

He kisses me again, leaning me back in his arms to lay along the bench seat before covering me with his body.

Shane kisses down my neck, and I lift my head to give him greater access. He groans into the soft skin at the curve, sucking to refresh the mark he’s already given me as he grinds the ridge of his dick against my core. “I want to take my time with you, Maggie. Worship every inch of your skin, but I don’t want to risk anyone seeing us here. Let me get you somewhere safe for the night so I can make love to you.”

I look up at him and pout, wanting more, wanting him now. But he’s right. We’re too exposed here and I feel like I just found the real Shane. I can’t lose him.

With one last fiery kiss, I nod and we wiggle back into our seats, buckling up. “First thing, though. We’re getting that arm bandaged.”

Shane looks at his arm, chuckling before nodding. “Okay. We’ll find a pharmacy or something. Just . . . I love you, Maggie. I promise to keep you safe, no matter what happens.”

I take his hand, interlocking our fingers, my tiny hand engulfed by his giant one. “I love you too. I know you’ll keep me safe. We’ll do this together.”

He dips his head, handing me the phone. “Call Allie. Don’t answer any questions or give her any indication about where we are. Tell her to set up a meeting tomorrow at noon at the club. She needs to meet us at the front door with one guard of Dominick’s choosing. Once we’re inside, it’s Dominick’s show. Whatever he feels is warranted, as long as he listens to us.”

I bite my lip, suddenly nervous as we’re at the point where the poop hits the fan. “Is that smart? Shouldn’t we try to limit the guards, give us a fighting chance if things go awry?”

Shane shakes his head, sighing. “If he wants to kill us, it won’t matter if there are two guards or ten. Better to let him feel in control about as much as possible, because we’re going in with a big favor to ask and demanding that he put the one weakness he has, Allie, at risk at the same time.”

I take a steadying breath, turning the phone on and dialing Allie’s number, glad I have it memorized. Allie’s voice is hesitant when she answers the unknown number. “Hello?”

Good, she’s not dancing yet, or maybe she’s not dancing at all after the shooting. “Allie, it’s me, Meghan.”

It feels strange to use my fake name again, but it’s all Allie’s ever known, and it’s like a firecracker to her. “Oh, my God, Meghan! Are you okay? What the fuck happened to you? Where are you? Are you with Shane?”

She’s shooting questions rapid-fire style, and I can’t even answer one before the next starts. I try to reassure her. “I’m fine. I’m with Shane. Are you okay?”

Her voice is calmer now, but still tight and probably a little worried. “I’m fine too. I was freaked out for a bit, but I’m okay now. The club just went on like business as usual. I don’t think the customers on the floor even realized what happened.”

I don’t think I realized how scared I was that Allie wasn’t okay until I heard her voice, getting stronger and steadier as she speaks. Tears of relief fill my eyes, and I lean my head forward, holding in the sniffle as best I can. “Good, I’m so glad you’re okay.”

Shane waves his hand in a circle at me, indicating I should wrap this up. I guess it’s got something to do with tracing the call, or maybe just because we need to get going. His arm has to be burning like fire. “Listen, I need your

help with something."

"Of course, anything," Allie says immediately. "I've been worried about you."

"Look, there's a lot going on here that you don't know," I say, wishing I could tell her. "It's sort of safer if you don't for now. I need you to trust me and do exactly as I say, okay?"

Allie's voice tightens, and I can hear her tapping her phone with a thumbnail. "You're scaring me. What's going on?"

"I need you to set up a meeting with Dominick for us. Tomorrow at noon, at the club. There's stuff that Shane and I need to talk to him about."

"Why not just call—" Allie says, but I cut her off, needing to rush this.

"You need to be there to meet us at the front door. A guard's fine if Dominick feels it's warranted, and he can have as many guys there as he wants. We're coming in to talk, and he needs to hear what we have to say, for everyone's sake. If he asks, tell him it has to do with Sal. Got all that?"

Allie sounds confused, but still sort of put together. "Yeah, tomorrow at noon with security. But what's going on?"

"We'll explain everything tomorrow. I need you to be there, so you'll hear everything," I tell her, instantly hoping she'll want to still be my friend after my lies are laid out for her. "This is important, Allie. Please, tell Dominick he needs to listen."

"I'll set it up. Whatever you need," Allie says. "But you promise me, you're not doing anything stupid?"

I have to laugh. We're light years past stupid. "You know me, Allie. I just take after you, my friend."

"That's what worries me," Allie says, laughing a little herself. "Okay, well . . . see you tomorrow?"

"I'll see you tomorrow," I promise, my voice cracking a little. "Check ya later, babe."

I have to hang up before she can reply, the knot in my belly cinching tight. I'm scared now, and it's not the primal, instinctual fear that I've felt for the past few days. This is deeper, both body and mind, and part of it is that, of all the silly shiz, I'm going to disappoint my friend.

Shane wraps a hand around the back of my neck, pulling me toward him and laying a soft kiss on my forehead. He understands, and he'll be here for me. "Good girl, Angel. Let's roll some miles."

CHAPTER 20

SHANE

The house isn't exactly a mansion in Bel-Air, but compared to the past two nights, it's a glorious luxury. A two-bedroom house in a nice suburban subdivision. It's an FBI safe house, and it feels good in a lot of ways to use it. It means that all our cards are on the table and that I don't need to hide from her any longer.

She might've semi-accepted the car switch without an interrogation, but having a random house stocked with all the goodies we could need would've raised too many questions I couldn't answer.

I'm glad we're being totally honest with each other now, because beyond all this craziness, I really have fallen in love with this brilliant, tiny, innocent woman.

It didn't take sex, or looking back, even a single kiss to start falling in love with her. It was in the snippets of conversation, in the looks that we've shared. It happened when I was willing to go as far as needed to protect her. It was when I was willing to beat a man within an inch of his life for threatening her, and when I was willing to defy a mob boss to keep her safe.

Sex? Oh, I'm not turning that down with my naughty little Angel—never will. It's been more intense, more satisfying, more meaningful than any I've had before. But I loved her even before that, and I think she loved me before that too.

I pull the truck into the garage, dropping the mechanical door and locking it tight behind us before we enter the house. Inside, it's small and tidy, neatly decorated in stuff that's used but clean and kept prepped and ready. I know without even looking that in the kitchen will be a freezer of basic frozen stuff and some microwave meals, and the pantry will have boxed goods. Nothing fancy, but we'll be able to eat.

"Won't the neighbors wonder about us?" Maggie asks, looking around. "I

mean, that there are lights on and stuff?"

I do a routine full sweep of the interior, tossing our bags into the bedroom. "Safe houses are set up with a cover story for any nosy neighbors. In the old days, we'd say it was owned by a pilot who'd let flight crew crash during layovers. Nowadays, we tell people it's an AirBnB to make it easier. People usually accept what they're told at face value, and not many would suspect something as wild as an FBI safe house in their family neighborhood."

Maggie nods, looking around. "I never thought you were FBI, that's for sure. You seem like too much of a bad boy to be one of the good guys."

She says it with a teasing note, so I know that she's pleased with both sides of my personality. I grin. "Uh, you hungry? They keep the house stocked, so there's usually some Hungry Mans around here."

Maggie nods, stepping closer. "I am hungry . . . for *my* man. Forget the fried chicken."

Her words hang in the air, heavy with need as she looks up at me with pleading eyes. I cover the remaining space between us in two steps, sweeping her into my arms and lifting her by the backs of her thighs. "I think I can satisfy your hunger."

She wraps her arms around my neck and legs around my waist, her tiny body climbing my larger one like a tree. I devour her, my tongue meeting her hungry one and the two of us invading each other. Faintly, I can taste the sugary coffee she had earlier at a truck stop, the bitterness making the sweetness even more of a treat.

"Lock your ankles around me," I command her, kissing to her ear. "I want to see you fly."

I feel her feet shift behind me and hold her shoulders, dipping her back parallel to the floor. "Let go. I've got you."

Her hands let go of my neck, and she spreads her arms as she closes her eyes. She weaves her fingers into my hair as I kiss down her neck. "Mmm, Shane. I feel like I'm floating. Your kisses are the only thing anchoring me here."

She sounds dreamy, and I smile against her neck, proud that I'm the one making her hazy. No one has given me this much pleasure, and nobody has ever given her what I've given her.

"I want to anchor you to this moment, to me . . . mark every inch of you with my tongue and my teeth so no one doubts that you are mine. Not even

you.”

Her head lifts, eyes clear as she meets my dark gaze, and her fingers dig into the back of my neck. “Do it. Make me yours.”

I return to her neck, leaving sucking kisses along her pulse, feeling it jump under my tongue as the bruise raises brightly against her pale skin. I know these are going to fade in a few hours, but I’m just getting started.

Fuck. I need all of her. I turn, tossing her to the bed and watching as she bounces on the surface, grinning the whole time. “Take your shirt off. Bra too. Now, Angel.”

I rip my t-shirt over my head, a ripping sound coming from the exhausted cotton as my muscles tear the fabric off me. I’m covering her before she even tosses her bra to the floor. I’m so ravenous for her and for what she promises me.

Her palms cup my cheeks, lips puckered for a kiss, and I grant it to her quickly before returning my attentions lower. Moving down her body, I lick, kiss, suck, and nibble her upper body, tracing every inch with my tongue and lips and leaving more marks along her breasts as I find the spots that tickle her . . . that tease her . . . that drive her wild.

“Shane . . . ohh,” Maggie cries out as I suck on her pink nipples, her nails clawing at my arms as she pulls me tighter. I love that my sweet girl turns into a wildcat in bed, her need making her desperate . . . for me.

I push off, standing by the bed and grabbing at her shorts, pulling them down and off, along with her gas-station wannabe Crocs.

I place her feet on my shoulders, needing to bend down a bit so her short legs can reach, even with her hips raised high, and begin to worship her shapely legs with little kisses on her toes before moving up inch by inch. “These legs have been in my dreams for months, Maggie. Wanting to slide my hands up your thighs every time you bent over a table, wondering how silky your skin would be under my palms, knowing they led to fucking heaven.”

“I’ve been dreaming of the same thing. Just like this,” Maggie whispers as I suck on her soft skin. “You make me feel alive.”

My mouth makes its way from her ankles . . . to her knees . . . to her inner thighs, where I force myself to pause, knowing I want to indulge but also knowing I want to take my time. I nibble and suck still, leaving no doubt that this pussy is mine, her cheap panties framed by the signature of my marks.

“Did you know?” I ask as I look into her eyes. “Did you know how much

I wanted you? That I wanted to risk it all, my career, my cover . . . my life?"

Maggie's breath catches, and she nods "Yes, and no. We were flirting, and I wanted you so much, but I thought I'd never have you. So I flirted back harder, bending over those tables with my ass toward you on purpose, hoping to tempt you into wanting me. You were like a predator, powerful and dominant, and I felt in my dreams that you could be the man I would spend the rest of my life with."

Her words ignite me, my hands finding the edge of her panties. I tug them to the side to gaze upon her pussy before using my thumbs to massage her outer lips, the softness under my rough hands the perfect symbolism for the two of us. Soft and rough, innocent and jaded, but somehow fitting together perfectly. I can see her juices coating her as she gets wetter and wetter. "Fuck, Maggie. I need to taste you."

"Yes, my love," she gasps, but it turns into a giggling rush as I scoop her up the rest of the way and stand, her thighs over my shoulders and her pussy right in front of my mouth. "Whoa. Holy Shitzu!" Maggie exclaims as her hands grab at my head for balance, but I'm holding her solidly in my palms, my fingertips dimpling her luscious ass as I hold her tight.

"I've got you and I'm just getting started," I promise, dipping my tongue into her folds. I groan at her taste, my cock still trapped in my jeans but straining for freedom. "Fuck, you're so damn delicious. All I want is to eat you up."

I lick her entrance, sucking at her clit, delighting at her whimpers above me. I want to drown in her, suffocate in her sweetness. She's gasping, her voice getting thick as she moans.

Gently, I lower her back to the bed, quickly kicking off my shoes and jeans to lay down naked beside her. I watch her pink face as she blinks, grinning at me. "Two more strokes and I would've come. Not sure you could hold me up if I was squirming through that."

"I wouldn't have dropped you, I would've pulled you in even tighter to get every drop." I reply, patting my chest. "Now get up here, you naughty Angel. Straddle me. Sit on my face and let me feast on that pussy."

She blushes a deep rose shade of pink but does it, stripping off her panties before turning so that she's facing my body. She looks down, and I can just see the naughty twinkle in her eyes before she lowers down. "I want to suck you too."

My cock jumps at her words, trying to get closer to her mouth for the

pleasure of her murmured words. She chuckles and lowers her pussy slowly, teasing me. It's not nearly enough for what I want to do to her. I grab her hips in a hard grip, forcing her down to my mouth and immediately thrashing my tongue all along her pussy. Immediately, I'm covered in her sweet juices, my tongue in heaven as my nose presses lower and my eyes are covered in the soft weight of her ass. Heaven.

Above me, I feel Maggie lean forward and then her soft touch along my shaft as her fingers explore me delicately. I groan, my knees falling to the sides to give her total access. My tongue speeds up, finding the button of her clit and stroking it quickly, circling around it before sucking softly. I want to mark her, but not here. I'll never hurt her.

She cries out at my attentions to her clit, and I feel the wet heat of her breath just before she takes my head into her mouth, swirling her tongue along the slit to taste my precum. It shifts her hips down—she's so small compared to me—and I lift my hips while burying my tongue deeper in her pussy, my nose pressed between her ass cheeks, but I never stop.

She moans at my flavor, like it's a treat she savors, and the buzz of her moan zings through me. I pull back, smacking her ass playfully. "That's it, Angel. Suck my cock down your pretty little throat. I'm gonna lick this sweet pussy and make you moan around my cock. Moan on me, Maggie."

I dive back into her pussy, thrusting my tongue in and out of her. She's close, grinding her pussy on my hungry mouth and moaning around my cock as she keeps sucking me down. The feeling drives me wild, making me growl against her pussy. "Fuck, that's so good."

"You too," Maggie gasps breathlessly, her hips bucking, wanting more. "Let me feel how much you like me sucking you."

We become louder, our grunts and groans echoing against each other in a cycle that renews with each sound until Maggie freezes, my cock deep in her throat as she cries out her release.

I pull her tighter, burying my face in her so deeply I can't even breathe, but I don't care because all I need is her and the sweet nectar she's pumping against my tongue.

As soon as her spasms stop, I push her off me, pinning her underneath me and slamming my cock into her.

I don't give her time to stretch, wanting to feel those last orgasmic quivers of her pussy, but I slide in and out slowly, needing to feel every bit of her silky walls against my cock. She moans, wiggling her hips as she

squeezes me with her pussy, wanting more.

I gather her hands above her head, holding them with one hand and cupping her jaw with the other so that our eyes meet.

“You and me, Angel. I don’t know what’s going to happen tomorrow, but it’s you and me. Together. And if this is all we have, then I’m spending the rest of my life with the woman I want by my side until the end. I love you, Maggie.”

Her eyes shine with tears, but her voice is strong. “I love you too, Shane. Tomorrow is tomorrow. You said you were anchoring me to this moment, but I need you here with me. Right now, just be here with me. My man. Forever.”

I look over her body, my marks visible along her neck, her chest and tits, her hips, and though I can’t see them, I know she’s claimed on her thighs and above her mound too. “You are mine, always.”

Maggie smiles, nodding and biting her lip. “Yours. And you’re mine too.”

I thrust into her, harder and more powerfully, my strokes getting rougher as I demand more and more from her small body, but she takes me, fiercer than I’d ever imagined my Angel to be.

Our eyes stay locked the whole time, never leaving each other for a moment, even as we both come hard. We don’t even cry out. The whole time, we’re nearly silent as our eyes say everything that needs to be said, the only sound the rush of our breath and the slap of our hips.

My cum creams out of her as I pull out and we collapse in each other’s arms. Maggie curls against me, falling asleep fitfully in my arms, but I stay on alert.

I’m dreading tomorrow’s meeting, knowing it’s potentially a suicide mission. But I’m hoping that we can make Dominick see reason.

CHAPTER 21

MAGGIE

Even after an entire morning of Shane's constant coaching about what to do in every possible scenario he foresees for the meeting, I'm still nervous. Noon comes faster than I expected, and my stomach is grumbling as I sit in the passenger seat and watch the streets. "I should have eaten."

"I offered," Shane reminds me. "Nothing better to start your day than frozen breakfast sandwiches."

I laugh, looking over. He's wearing just a tank top, the bright white of the bandage over the taut skin of his arm taunting me. It really was just a nick, didn't even need stitches or glue, but still . . . it's a bullet wound. I nod, "I know, I know."

Shane chuckles and flexes his arm. "You know what I want to do when we get some normalcy again?" he remarks. "I want to go to the gym again. Gotta stay in shape. You wear me out."

I smile, knowing he's just trying to relax me. "I could be enticed into watching you get your buff on."

Our conversation tapers off as we drive up and down the street three times before Shane pulls the old blue truck up outside Petal's front door.

He does a full scan, and then with one last quick kiss, we get out and approach cautiously. Shane knocks twice on the door, and it opens a crack, Nick peeking out. He looks wary and confused at the same time, like he shouldn't be this concerned about people he knows.

"Shane? Meghan? You alone?"

Shane nods "Yeah, Nick. Alone and unarmed. You know Dom's got three cameras on us right now. It'd be stupid not to be. Allie here?"

The door swings open wider, and I can see Allie, her face a mask of confused fear, but when she sees me, she squeals and runs for me. Her long

arms surround me in a tight hug even as she starts demanding answers. “What the fuck is going on?”

Her hug has pulled me away from Shane a step or two, and with a quick jerk, he pulls me back to his side and out of Allie’s reach. Allie’s jaw drops in surprise at his move, and then she narrows her eyes, taking in the visible marks along my neck and the upper swells of my breasts. “Ooh, it’s like that?”

She’s teasing, giving me a thumbs-up, and I almost even feel like smiling. Until I realize Nick is leering at me like he never has before.

Before he can say anything, though, Shane steps between us, blocking his view. “Nick, we need to see Dominick. Now.”

Nick nods once, moving to pat down Shane, looking a little embarrassed by it. “Protocol, man.”

Shane allows it but barely manages to hold himself in check as Nick does a more thorough check on me, like I’d be hiding a gun in these shorts. I knock Nick’s hands away when he gets a little high on the inner thigh, though. “I’m clear and you know it, pervert. This ain’t the airport, and I’m pretty sure that ‘don’t touch’ rule still applies.”

He smirks but turns and leads us into the main room. It’s well-lit, more like it is when we clean after closing each night than the usual dim ambiance I’d expected.

But it lets me see the room and its inhabitants more clearly. Dominick is sitting alone at a table near the edge of the stage, right in front of the big pole that dominates the middle of the room, a glass filled with amber liquid on the polished wood beside him.

As Nick takes his place, I can see that there’s a guard in every corner. Dominick doesn’t bother standing, just gestures to the chairs opposite him, and we sit.

It’d almost feel like a double-date, Dominick and Allie on one side, and Shane and I on the other, if it weren’t for the pesky fact that things are about to go more than a bit sideways. Well, that and the guards in every corner.

Dominick picks up his glass and takes a sip before setting it down and studying us curiously. “So you asked for this meeting. What is so important?”

Shane looks at Allie, then back to Dominick. “I appreciate your agreeing to meet with us. And I apologize for asking that Allie be present. I know that would not be your preference, but I feel it affords us a certain amount of safety, considering the information I’m about to share.”

Dominick's face tightens slightly, just at the corners of his eyes, belying his anger, but he keeps his cool. I can see it now, the aura of power, the comfort in his place in the hierarchy. I'd been fooled that it was just about him being the boss of such a hot club, but there's so much more. Not to mention, I think he has ice in his veins considering the cool tone as he speaks. "There is always risk to sharing information. I hope that you have not set either of us up for any . . . safety issues."

The pause in his speaking makes his threat crystal clear. I don't need to look to know that each of the guards are on high alert, ready to handle us if there's a problem. Or just at Dominick's say-so.

Shane and Dominick stare each other down for a moment, the testosterone and dominance contest drawing out between the two of them for too long, so I break in, hoping to deter the two alpha males from locking horns until one of them's dead. "Dominick, I would like to apologize for lying to you."

My words aren't totally unplanned. It was one of the many different scenarios that Shane and I went over, a way to keep Dominick off balance and willing to listen.

The shock of my admitting to lying does exactly what we hoped, and Dominick's attention diverts solely to me, his eyes now boring into mine with his eyebrows raised in question. "Meghan, you lied to me? Explain."

I start rambling, trying to get out the whole prepared speech at once. "My name is not Meghan. It's Maggie Postland. In certain circles, Petals has a reputation. Apparently, it has several. But I was only aware of one . . . I didn't know what Petals was, what *you* are. I just knew that celebrities of a certain caliber frequent the club for a bit of fun. I work as a tabloid reporter, writing stories strictly about celebrities. I began my job at Petals as a way of investigating these stories and wrote articles a few times."

My eyes tick to Allie, who looks like I just slapped her across the face. I focus on her, the next words not important to Dom, but I insisted on them with Shane. "But while I worked here, I found friends and a place of belonging, a family that worked together, day-by-day and shift-by-shift, to look out for one another. I found a self-confidence and power I never knew I possessed. It hurt every day to lie to them, because I care about them very much."

I look back to Dominick, who's leaning forward a little, interested now. "I didn't know exactly how deep the rabbit hole runs around here, and

honestly, right now, I don't care. My concern now is the trouble chasing me, trouble brought because I'm a part of the Petals family."

Dominick's eyes have gotten colder as I've spoken, and I can see the muscle in his jaw working as he clenches his teeth. His voice is a deadly whisper, but at least he's not yelling as he looks around at the guards. "A fucking reporter? How the fuck did you get past the background check?"

I shrug, downplaying my awesomeness because it doesn't seem the time to brag about how many times I've successfully gone undercover. "I'm good at my job. Please feel free to take a moment to Google me. I promise, you'll see I've only written a couple of stories that relate to celebrities attending strip clubs, and I never mention Petals by name."

He holds up a finger, reaching into his vest pocket with his other hand and fishing out his phone. He clicks around for a moment, and I speak up helpfully. "The only one that probably would've caught your attention is the Jimmy Keys story."

Dominick laughs, setting his phone down. "You broke that story? That guy's a total douchebag, tried to stiff me on the bill too. I was glad he got busted . . . but not in my damn club."

His voice is hard again by the end, and my momentary hope that maybe he wouldn't be too mad, at least about that part of our revelations, are crushed.

I lower my eyes, unable to help it because I know there's worse news coming. "Dominick, please. There's more."

He huffs, sitting up as Allie lays a hand on his shoulder, helping to calm him. He glances at her and nods, waving a hand at me. "It's your show, apparently. Tell me."

I glance at Shane, but he gives me a reassuring nod. I'm doing fine. Keep going. "So, the night of the shooting . . ."

I see Allie flinch and give her a soft smile of apology for bringing up something that must be scary for her to think about. "That night, I was in the hallway after delivering the scotch, so I saw the hitman. I don't think he even registered me at the time. I'm just kinda invisible to most folks."

I shrug because it's the truth, but Shane squeezes my hand, and I know he sees me. He always sees me, and it gives me the strength to continue.

"But yesterday, when Shane and I were lying low, the hitman found us. He's tracking me, tying up loose ends because somewhere along the way, he realized I'd seen him and could recognize him."

Dominick steeples his hands, fingertips pressing together under his chin. “And this hitman chasing you, you want me to do something about it, I take it?”

I nod, the plea in my eyes. “Please, Dominick. Help us.”

“Tell me, Maggie Postland,” Dominick says, leaning forward again and studying the both of us. “The suit with the scotch. Do you know who he was?”

“I didn’t then, but I do now,” I admit. “Carlos Rivaldi. This is where Shane comes in, I think.”

Dominick looks to Shane, annoyance and anger clearly written on his face. “It appears you’ve been tagged. You’re *it*.”

Shane holds Dominick’s glare with steady eyes before beginning. “Dominick, I want you to take a minute and think back on the time I’ve been working for you . . . the things I’ve done, the things I’ve seen, the things I’ve told you.”

Dominick smiles, but it feels threatening, not friendly. “Yes, we have done some rather interesting things in your time here. And until this little incident, I thought you were a fine *employee*, one of the best I had. But what’s that got to do with this?”

“Have the guys step out for this. Just you and me, and the girls. Trust me. Please.”

They seem to be communicating with their eyes, taking each other’s measure, but I think it’s the ‘please’ that does it.

Dominick turns, his voice clear and sharp as he looks at the guards. “Leave us. Secure the building perimeter.”

The security guys disappear at once, and I hear both the front and back doors open, then close. Dominick waits, then looks back at Shane. “Okay, we’re alone. Out of respect for what you’ve done and the honor you’ve shown toward all the ladies who work here, I did that. Don’t make me regret it. Now tell me what’s so important.”

Shane nods and leans forward, his elbows wide on the table as he looks at Dominick. “Approximately twelve months ago, word on the street was that Sal Rivaldi was making progress, increasing the size of his operation, but doing it quietly and in small pocket areas that are only loosely in your control. The way things were looking, he was positioning himself to divide East Robinsville, or maybe take over the whole city.”

Dominick leans forward, his eyes intense. “And you know this how?”

Shane looks Dominick in the eye. There is no fear, no hesitancy, no apology on Shane's face. "Because I'm FBI."

Dominick explodes, standing so fast his chair clatters to the floor behind him as he slams his hands to the table. Allie and I jump at the sharp sound.

Shane stands too, holding his ground as Dominick stalks around the table to grab him by the shirt. Dominick rears back for a punch and Shane doesn't try to block him, just keeps his voice level. "There's more . . ."

Dominick pauses, and I think for a second that he's not going to punch Shane in the face. But he redirects the punch to Shane's gut, the powerful hit echoing in the empty room.

Allie cries out as Dom rears back again, and I can't sit here and let this happen, so I yell, "Dominick, Sal's declaring war! You have to listen!"

Dominick's head whips to me, one fist cocked back and frozen. "I thought you didn't know anything about that side of the business? Hmm, Miss Postland?" he sneers. "Or is that another lie?"

I'm trying to be strong, but I know my voice sounds weaker than I'd like as I stand up to him. "I didn't before. I do now. I've spent the past twenty-four hours learning so I can try to stay alive. Please listen."

He shoves Shane back, letting go of his shirt, and both men slowly sit, wary of each other.

"That's your freebie because I respect the fuck out of you, Dominick," Shane says as he smooths his hair. "Next time, I'll fight back."

Dominick's eyes narrow, the coldness intimidating as frick even when it's not directed at me, but Shane doesn't flinch. "If you get a chance. But say your piece."

"I was sent in undercover in your operation, another agent in Rivaldi's," Shane says, leaning back in his chair. "It took some time to get that agent's information, but I'm giving you all I have. Carlos was giving Sal shit, and you know there's no love lost between the two of them. Sal decided he needed to stop the coup Carlos was stirring up, but for Sal, that's not enough. If he's going to kill his own son, why not use it as a power play? He knew that if he could pin Carlos's death on you, he'd have the Colombians with him when he wanted to go hot around here. So he sent Carlos to Petals on a fool's errand and secretly hired out the hit so it'd take place on your territory. Sal's telling his whole crew you killed Carlos, and now he has the best justification ever to start a war . . . to avenge his son."

"The Colombians do go for family," Dominick concedes. "Never hired a

Colombian dancer for just that reason. Too likely to have some bloodthirsty cousin on my doorstep."

"But Sal set it all up—set *you* up. He's making a play for more control, and he's ready to war with you to get it."

I can see Dominick taking in everything, the calculations and strategies running through his mind as he plays out scenario after scenario. He reaches down, picking up his seemingly forgotten drink and draining the rest of it in one swallow.

"That is a lot to think about, many things to consider. But tell me this, FBI agent. Why are you telling me all this? You wouldn't be trying to entrap me into something, would you?"

Shane chuckles darkly, crossing his legs almost casually. "No, Dominick. I'm not trying to entrap you. What you do with this information is your choice—war with the Rivaldis or don't war with them. My thinking is this. There are devils in every world, some more evil, some perhaps less. But they're necessary, to balance out the angels."

Shane takes my hand and looks lovingly at me before turning back to Dominick. "Sometimes, you help the devil you know is the lesser evil in the hopes that they will help you too."

Dominick looks from Shane to me and back. "Ah, so this is where the help comes in. You've given me information in the hopes that I will do something for you too. What is it you want?"

Shane lets go of my hand and leans forward again. "The hitman. I've got a name. I've seen his face now too. He's seen us and is hunting us still. I'm slightly worried about how he's getting his information, but that's a fight for another day, and likely solved if he's dealt with the way I'd prefer. Right now, I need him to stop. Means and methods are yours to decide, of course. If you do us this favor."

Dominick nods thoughtfully and rubs his chin in consideration. "I do not like people who choose to do their dirty work inside my own place of business. It's disrespectful and bad for my reputation, you see? It's in *my* best interest to punish the hitman for his transgression, but I will say that it's for your benefit and hold that over you. Agreed?"

Shane nods. "One more thing . . ."

Dominick smirks, the smug arrogance obvious on his face. "I thought there might be."

"We walk. Maggie and I walk away from all of this safely. Forever. No

outstanding threats, no looking over our shoulders. You will never see either of us again."

That hurts, and I glance at Allie, knowing that if Dominick agrees, it means our friendship's over too. But it has to be.

"Agreed. You may both walk away safely, but I will not promise you will never see me again. Having friends in certain positions can be an excellent resource, so while I will not use you frequently, I will keep you available if the need comes up. And . . . Mr. FBI Agent, your East Robinsville privileges are revoked. Permanently. You don't set foot in this town again. Unless it is by my invitation."

There's a carefulness to his phrasing, the details somehow in the words he's not saying. I can see the methodical strategic mind Shane said Dominick possesses, making contingencies until the end.

I feel like we're all pawns in Dominick's chess game, but we're still on move three and he's already planned out his game to the checkmate move.

Shane nods and offers his hand. "Agreed, with one caveat. You will not use either of us in a way that would endanger us, especially Maggie."

Dominick bows his head and offers his own hand. "I wouldn't threaten a man's family. That's how cockroaches operate, and while I may be a devil in your eyes, I'm no cockroach."

They shake, and the agreement's made.

CHAPTER 22

SHANE

"Oh, my goodness, I can't believe Dominick's going to help us!" Maggie exclaims happily, falling ungracefully to the couch. We're upstairs at the club, in the private apartment Dominick keeps. I've been up here before, mostly on days when Dom's stayed over himself. It's a cush place, small but fancier than anything I've ever had for damn sure. And it's not even his real home, just a crash pad.

After reaching our agreement, Dominick 'offered' us the protection of the club and the use of the place. It wasn't so much an offer as a demand. We're definitely more prisoner than guest, but his protection comes with his rules, so here we are.

I sit down beside her on the couch, pulling her legs into my lap and slipping off her shoes to rub her feet. "He's helping, but we can't get too comfortable in this gilded cage. I'm not certain he won't flip on us. And we still don't know what he plans to do about Sal."

Maggie looks thoughtful, smiling as she wiggles her toes for me. "Honestly, I'm not sure I care. All this mob stuff was happening before, right under my nose, and I was oblivious. If I wasn't in the middle of it this time, I probably still wouldn't know about this potential threat to the city. Maybe I'd be better off, happier in my blissful ignorance."

I run my hand along her calf up to her thigh, marveling at the power in her muscles and tracing the fading marks from last night. "Maybe so. But the power structure that directs the city, from politics, to businesses, to the streets, it's all intertwined, and if things are running smoothly, you don't notice them."

"Kinda like the sewer company?" Maggie asks. "As long as the toilets are working right, you never notice them."

I nod, thinking Maggie's found a pretty good analogy. "You haven't

noticed things here because Dominick does a damn fine job of keeping himself seamless. If Sal were running things, you'd know the difference. You'd see it on the news, you'd feel it when you walked around your neighborhood. To be a part of the solution, you have to be aware of the problems . . . all of them, even the scary ones."

Maggie's eyes bore into me even as she leans back against the couch cushion. "Is that why you do it, why you're an FBI agent? To be part of the solution?"

My hands still. I've known this was coming. We dropped these big bombs of who we are on each other but then had to let the issues lie while we got to safety.

Now that we've got the semblance of protection, the tenuous pause on our questions drops away. "Remember how I told you about my dad?"

Maggie's chin dips as she whispers quietly. "Yeah. Barney Fife, more or less."

"Well, Barney Fife, who was about the same size as me, but yeah. He's why I do this. I grew up seeing him help people, sometimes by being a big, powerful guy with a badge, but more often, it was by being an ear to listen to people's problems and help them find a way out of whatever trouble they were having. When I was a kid, it was normal to come downstairs and find that Dad had taken in a stray overnight . . . sometimes a kid, sometimes a whole family, and a few times, a recently released felon who needed guidance to see the better path available to him. We had a couple of tents that Dad would let them use, or if the weather was bad, he'd let them crash on the porch or even inside in winter. I always knew I wanted to be a police officer like him, to help people."

"So, how'd you end up in the FBI?"

"I knew I wanted to be more than a street cop," I reply honestly. "Dad always said that the real criminals were the ones he could never touch, and I thought I could make a difference. So I went to college for criminal justice, and my grades and performance were good enough to catch the attention of the right people. I was given a few scholarships and cranked my way through a four-year degree in three years before reporting straight to Quantico for the FBI Academy. They broke me down and molded me the way they wanted, taught me how to go undercover, that creative problem-solving is an asset, not a rule-bending problem, and so much more. I don't think my dad fully realized the extent of what I'd gotten into, but he knew I was an agent before

he died, and he was proud of me. My mom kinda lives in denial about my job, but she's proud too. She just can't handle the constant anxiety when I disappear for long assignments."

Maggie bites her lip, worry written on her face. "So, when this is all over, what will you do then? Will you leave for another assignment? Leave me behind?"

I pull her into my lap, cupping her face and laying a sweet kiss to the tip of her nose. Leaving no doubt as to the truthfulness of my words as I lay my heart open for her, I look in her eyes, my voice quaking with intensity. "Angel, I honestly don't know what happens after this. All I know is that I love you. I want to be with you, know every thought that runs through that brilliant mind of yours, watch you drink coffee ice cream for breakfast every day, and hold you while you sleep every night. I want to grow old with you, have a family with you, and claim not just your body," I rumble as my eyes rove across her skin, peppered with my love, "but also claim your heart. Forever."

Maggie is smiling, the hope shining in her eyes as she takes my hands and holds them in hers, almost like we're praying together. "I want that too, Shane. God, I want that too, to be your haven when you're protecting everyone else, to fill your heart when you've given more than you should, to create a life with you that you want to come back to reality for after a long time pretending to be someone else. I love you so much. I never thought something like this would happen to someone like me."

Our words feel like vows, promises for a future we may not get. There's no preacher, no ring, nobody to even witness them, but none of that matters. I kiss her fiercely, putting every bit of my heart and soul into the breath I give to her and demanding every bit of hers in return. Nothing less than pure honesty between us will ever be enough again.

My body responds, my cock surging inside my jeans as we part lips, panting, and I want to slip inside her sweet pussy once again, be one with her.

But I need to be inside her mind even more, know everything there is to know about my sweet Maggie, so I still her squirming hips, holding her tightly against my thickening cock. "Tell me, Angel. What did you think would happen to someone like you? What did little Maggie Postland think her life would be like?"

She smiles softly, suddenly shy. "Don't laugh, okay?"

My face is calm, more curious than anything, and after she's sure I'm

listening, she continues. “I wanted to be Barbara Walters. She’s like this spitfire you don’t expect. Early in her career, she was seen as this blonde woman who couldn’t possibly do a man’s job and interview these powerful leaders. But she did, and she used her charm to get insights no one else could, without selling herself short. Nobody imagined she’d accomplish so much, but she never doubted her ability to get the scoop, verbally wiggling and manipulating her way into the interview of the decade, all the while making it seem like it was just a friendly chat. And it gave little me, blonde, sweet, kinda nerdy little Maggie hope that I could do that someday and make a difference.”

I take a moment, studying her face before nodding. “I can see it, *Interviews by Maggie Postland*. You sitting in a chair, sipping coffee, and smiling that sweet smile. Maybe not Barbara style, but more like Oprah, maybe, or like one of the late-night hosts?”

“But more serious,” Maggie says, and I nod.

“Right. The people you interview would never see it coming until you hit them like a fucking heat-seeking missile and started asking the tough questions. Hell, they probably wouldn’t even know they’d spilled government secrets until it was too late, mesmerized by your sweet girl goodness.”

Maggie lays two fingers over my lips and then lifts them high, blowing a puff of air across her fingertips. “From your lips to the universe’s ears.”

I smile, knowing that she’s being silly but at the same time, very serious. “What about now? What about your job?”

Maggie scrunches her nose up like a bunny before making a disgusted sound. “Ugh. I’m pretty sure that I’m fired by now. My boss is strict and demanding, and considering I haven’t submitted a story in over a week and haven’t even called into the office in days, she’ll have already started paperwork to fire me. And I’m guessing Dominick won’t let me wait tables here anymore, so currently, I’m unemployed.”

“And how does that feel?” I ask because she doesn’t seem all that upset, which surprises me because I’ve seen how hard this girl works. If someone could figure out a way to generate electricity from her, she could power half the city.

Maggie grins, sighing happily. “Honestly, I feel free. You have to understand. *The Daily Spot* isn’t like working for *CNN* or even *TMZ*. Sure, it was a job, but everyone there—well, nearly everyone—was either trying to

scramble their way up the ladder or was bitterly hanging on so they didn't fall down to *Weekly World News* level. It was dog-eat-dog, and not even about important things. Just an overarching sense of desperation and disrespect. And here with you, even though we're basically being held hostage and everything's going to hell right now . . . I feel free."

She smiles, and I'm struck stupid once again at her beauty. I don't know how, or why, but I do think I've freed her of something she's been carrying around for a very long time. Although I bet if I were to dig deep enough, I'd find out that all I did was help her free herself.

From there, we spend the rest of the afternoon and well into the night talking about our lives, our hopes and dreams, books, TV, and everything in between. It's like we're taking our courtship, the little things that most people learn over the course of weeks or even months of dating, and compressing them into a hyper-speed conversation.

But I don't feel rushed at all. Instead, with every revelation from the mundane to the philosophical, I fall deeper in love with this girl, storing away every tidbit she gives me in my heart.

The heat builds between us, embers always burning just below the surface but spark-flashing into flames, and we pause our conversation to make love or fuck, sometimes both. The pulsing music from the club below occasionally gives us a new tempo to match, leaving us both laughing at times afterward.

With Maggie, even when I'm slamming into her from behind, her hair wrapped in my fist as she cries out, her ass pink from my hand and my marks all over her smooth skin . . . even then, it's a hundred percent love.

Finally, we fall into bed together, happily exhausted.

"Well, at least we've done one thing right," Maggie says as she giggles and lays a naked thigh across my leg.

"What's that?" I ask. "I think we've done a lot of things right today."

"Oh, no doubt. But what I meant was that everyone goes to a strip club to indulge in a sexual fantasy, but it's only that, a fantasy. We get to do the real thing."

"Good point. Now we just need to get a pole up here and—"

Maggie tickles me in the ribs, making me laugh. "And I'll make you dance for me!"

I don't answer, but the reality is if she asked, I damn well might do it.

CHAPTER 23

MAGGIE

By late that night, or technically early the next morning, Shane and I finally lift our heads from being lost in each other and the hopes that there's any way this is going to be okay.

Okay, okay . . . we lift our heads from a nap, but as I told Shane, I'm unemployed.

Soon after the club closes, we carefully head downstairs, as Shane says he wants to check in with Dominick. I sneak backstage and find Allie alone in the locker room.

She's dressed in her silky robe, sitting at a mirrored table to remove the layers of makeup she wears for the stage. "Hey, Allie. How was the show tonight?"

She looks up, meeting my eyes in the mirror, and I can tell she's still mad. Guess I can understand. I mean, I did drop a grenade into the middle of her world.

"No, don't do that," Allie replies, barbs in every word that sting as they hit my eardrums. "Don't ask me shit like how my dancing went or how my night was. Like you care when your whole gig here was fake."

Ouch. I step into the dressing room, really trying. Allie's important to me. "I do care. And it wasn't all fake. Yeah, the job, calling myself Meghan . . . but I meant what I said about feeling like I belonged here and that I found a family."

Allie snorts, her eyes glued to the mirror as she peels her fake lashes off. "I don't know if I should believe that. I mean, you're obviously a good liar, so how can I ever believe what you say?"

I sigh, hugging myself and knowing she's got a point. "You're right, but I swear, Allie. You're one of my best friends, not just in *this* life," I say, indicating the club around us, "but in my whole life. You think I didn't want

to let you in all the way? I'm sorry I didn't tell you the truth and that it hurt you."

Allie finally turns around to face me. "This is some really fucked up shit you've gotten me into. I didn't know all that stuff from yesterday."

My eyebrows jump as my jaw drops, and I try to keep my voice to a whisper. "You didn't know about Dominick, about the mob?"

Allie shakes her head, whispering back just in case we're overheard. "No! I mean, I knew Dom was a bigwig, but I thought it was just . . . here, as the owner of a fancy strip club. I didn't know he was *big*, like in charge of the city. Who wants to work in a mob-owned strip club?"

I nod, knowing that especially with Allie's background, that's the last place she ever imagined she'd end up. "So, what happened?"

Allie turns back to her table and starts working on her makeup again. "That guy's blood was all over me. Dominick carried me into his office and helped me get cleaned up. He was furious, the anger buzzing around him like a force field, but he was gentle with me. Tucked me in on the couch in his office and went out to talk to the guys."

"That was about the time Shane was hustling me out of the club," I reply. "He was so worried about me. Looking back, it was touching."

Allie finally gives me a ghost of a smile, looking into the mirror. "I bet. I don't know what Dom told the guys. I guess I just avoided thinking about it because I was in shock. He gave me a couple of days off, even offered to let me stay upstairs in the apartment you're in, but I just wanted to go home and hide in my own bed, you know? So he drove me there himself and came by morning and night to make sure I ate and was okay. He took care of me, and when he wasn't there, Nick or Logan was downstairs, making sure I was safe. And then you called with the whole meeting thing, and he said he needed me to be there, for him and for you. And the three of you just sat there and spouted off all this big scary shit like it was normal conversation."

I realize that while everyone always teases me about my innocence, this time, it's Allie whose bubble of innocence was burst. "I'm sorry you found out like that. I didn't know what you knew, but we needed you there because we thought Dominick wouldn't hurt us in front of you."

Allie smiles sadly, turning around to face me. "You used me. I figured out that part, at least, and I guess I can see why. I just wish I could go back to being blind to all of this around me. I mean, Dominick's a great guy who's been taking care of me, a good boss who makes it feel safe here, considering

it’s a strip club. But now, I’m just . . . lost.”

Her words break my heart, and I step closer, putting my hands on her shoulders. “You’re not lost, Allie. Nothing here has changed. You’re still you, Dominick is still Dominick, and I’m still me. Now, the veil is just lifted and you’re seeing behind the curtain a bit. It’s shocking, but it’s better to know the truth, even if it’s ugly, than a pretty lie.”

Allie puts a hand over mine and looks over her shoulder. “That’s me, the pretty tragedy. Don’t worry, I’m just still adjusting. I don’t know what to think about all of this. Tonight was the first night I’ve performed since the shooting. I was just in total mind dump mode, not thinking at all. Although I practiced so much at home that I finally got that spinning death-drop move perfected. It was flawless.”

I grin, even as her eyebrows pull together. “I might need to rename the move though. Seems a bit dark, considering what’s been happening.”

I rub her shoulders gently. “Call it whatever you want. Allie, what’s awesome about you is how even in the deepest of valleys, you’ve never given up. You keep working until you find a hilltop, and that’s where you make your stand for the next journey. You sort of helped me, too. So many times over the past couple of months, I kept telling myself, ‘be like Allie. She’d keep going.’ And it was true.”

Allie takes a deep breath, nodding. “I like that. So . . . Shane? Is that where you’re standing for your next journey?”

I smile, feeling the mood shift to some semblance of before, when we’d dish about how hot the security guys are and lament Dominick’s no-fraternizing policy. Even as she cheered me on, she also thought it’d never happen. Guess we were both wrong.

Grabbing a chair, I sit down next to her, grinning foolishly as she raises an eyebrow. “What can I say except . . . he’s amazing, even better than what you used to tease me about. The last few days have been scary, especially when we had to explain the huge web of lies and get everything untangled. But he’s been there for me, kept me safe.”

I sigh, not fully able to put into words everything I feel about Shane.

But Allie seems to understand, grinning mischievously. “I can see he’s been there . . . and there, and oh, over there too, twice, by the looks of it,” she says cheekily as she indicates the various marks visible on my body. “Is there any part of you he *hasn’t* been?”

I blush furiously, proud of Shane’s claiming of me but feeling shy that

she's pointing them out so . . . individually. "Yeah, he's a little . . . mouthy . . . and possessive. I, uh . . . I like it."

I can feel my face burning even brighter, and Allie smiles.

"Well, that's what matters. And good God, a mouthy man. Bet he gives the best oral! Lucky girl."

She winks at me, and things feel like they're okay, or at least like they might be okay someday. "Hey, you wanna see my spinning death-drop?"

Eager to get the focus off me and Shane and our bedroom activities, I nod. "Yes! Let me see, girl! But only if you're not too tired after your performances tonight."

"Never too tired for you," Allie replies with a snort. "I could use a few more practice spins too. Come on!"

We go onto the floor, where everyone but Marco has already left, and Allie takes her place on stage while I sit at the front row center table. In the background, I can hear Marco working downstairs, probably still cleaning up.

She does a few warmups, and within minutes, she's twirling around the pole, high above the stage floor. There's no music, so it has a different feel. Gone is the sexy sway. It's just the quiet intensity and small grunts as Allie *works* the pole. No wonder they do pole dance fitness classes.

Allie does some kick trick that I couldn't describe even if I tried because it happens so fast, my brain can't even register it. All I see is her stilettoed foot kick out, and then Allie is speeding upside down toward the floor in a spiral with her arms spread wide in a T, and I gasp. "Allie!"

Right before her head smacks into the stage, she grabs the pole and rolls it along her shoulder, her legs straddling open for a moment before she settles to the floor in the splits.

As if she didn't just cheat death and defy gravity, she pulls her feet back under and rises gracefully. "So, what do you think?"

My mouth is still hanging wide open, but I manage to yell out, "Mother trucking smurfin' yeah, biz-nitch!" as I clap loudly. "You're my hero!"

Allie smiles, and I can see the pride on her face, even as she downplays it. "Yeah, it's not ballet, for damn sure, but it sure is fun!"

From the side of the stage, I hear a door open and close, and both our eyes snap that direction. But it's only Marco coming up from the stockroom, boxes of beer in his hands.

He sees me and immediately sets them down. "Holy fuck, Meghan! Where have you been? You okay?"

I run over and give him a hug, and Allie joins in. The three of us hug like it's been years instead of days, and even though Marco called me by the wrong name, I feel at home.

It doesn't matter that it's a strip club or that there's more to the story than we planned.

I'm home with these people.

Guess Shane's right. There is a bit of bad girl inside me.

CHAPTER 24

SHANE

I stand on Dominick's left, Nick to the right as we knock once on the door of the large brownstone near downtown. That we're even here is just shy of batshit crazy, but it's Dom's show. I'm just the muscle who may or may not have to pull out his FBI badge along with a gun at some point.

"You sure?" Nick, who doesn't know the full story, asks. "I mean, this place—"

"If you don't have the balls, Nick, I suggest you leave," Dom says, not turning his eyes from the door. "I'd rather go in with just Shane having my back than someone who doesn't have balls."

Nick swallows but stands his ground. The door opens, and though the muscled man who answers doesn't say it, his surprise is written clear as day on his face.

Dominick doesn't pause or look at all worried as he adjusts the cuffs on his perfectly tailored suit. In a tasteful black, of course, befitting the occasion. "Good afternoon. We're here to pay our respects for the loss."

You can tell the goon wants to object, or at a minimum wants to pat us all down, but what's the use when we're all obviously carrying weapons at our sides? Instead, he steps to the side, giving a respectful nod. "Please come in, Mr. Angeline."

We enter as a group, both for security and to make sure that we can't get separated. Inside, the wake is loud and boisterous, more of a party than the somber affair of a man who just lost his son unexpectedly and tragically. Actually, considering that I hear what seems to be Latin music playing, it sounds like a damn graduation party.

Still, when Dominick enters the room, a hush falls over the gathering and eyes dart left and right, obviously confused about his appearance. The music

stops, and the only sound is one kid who's in the corner and obviously doesn't quite understand what's happening as he keeps doing some lame ass jig until someone pops him in the shoulder.

Fortunately, no one pulls a weapon. From an armchair in the center of the room, a man with slicked back ebony hair and large thick-framed glasses stands up. I've never met him, but for the past year plus some, I've made sure I'm intimately aware of his face. He's old enough to be Dominick's father, and considerably larger, but there's no mistaking who the real alpha male in the room is.

Sal Rivaldi might try and push his way into East Robinsville, but Dominick isn't going to let that happen with a breath in his body. Even in his thirties, Dominick is the king of this city and wears his invisible crown like a man with experience and the balls to back whatever play he has deemed correct.

It matters not if the battle is physical or mental. I'd bet on Dominick to win every time.

Looking as if he were standing in his own church instead of the wake of his biggest rival's son, Dominick extends his hand toward the older man. "Don Rivaldi, I wish to extend my most sincere apologies on the loss of your son. Word of his character had spread throughout the city, and you must be devastated."

Damn, he is a slick son of a bitch. Not many men could make an expression of sympathy include a backhanded comment about what a shitstain your son was, while also letting it be known that nothing happens in your city without your knowledge. And the use of the term 'Don'. Very smooth, in that it both gives Sal respect, while at the same time saying he's behind the times. Dominick's never insisted on being called Don. In fact, I've never heard anyone under the age of sixty use the term with him.

Rivaldi dips his chin in acknowledgement but keeps his eyes on Dominick the whole time. "Please, we are past all these niceties. You can call me Sal."

I hide a smirk. Dad used to listen to an old song that sounded a lot like that. Dominick looks genuinely pleased, although probably because in the subtle game of mob bosses, he was just elevated in the Rivaldi family's eyes. "Of course, Sal. And you may call me Dominick."

Everyone notices the infinitesimal put-down. Sal said that Dominick could use his casual name, while Dominick insisted on his full first name.

Nearly, but not quite the same level, and Sal knows it. They eye each other for a moment, the tension in the room building, but Dominick stays cool as a cucumber, no tension in his body even though I know he could snap into asskicking mode in an instant. “Sal, the timing may be indelicate, but I wondered if we could speak?”

Sal looks like he might start something but then relents. “Yes, of course.” He gestures to the chair next to the one he just vacated. Sal moves to a bar in the corner, lifting a decanter of what’s either scotch or something similar. “Drink?”

My training says to never, ever accept a drink from an enemy. Especially alcohol. It’s too easy to hide shit in there. But Dom operates by his own rules and instead nods easily, confident that Sal wouldn’t be stupid enough to try something. “That would be lovely. Thank you.”

Dominick takes the amber liquid from Sal and swirls it in the glass before resting it on the arm of the chair. Sal sits, the excitement obvious in his eyes. He thinks he’s gotten one over, that he’s actually going to take over the city from a man clearly his better in every way.

I’m reminded of the saying, *‘Pride goeth before the fall.’* because Sal has no idea the precipice he’s standing on. I take station behind Dominick, while Nick stands a few feet away, his eyes scanning the rest of the group as quiet, tense conversation begins anew.

“I wanted to discuss some things with you,” Dominick leads off, still swirling his drink as he looks Sal in the eye. “Some rather troubling things I’ve heard about your organization.”

Sal doesn’t move, but the light in his eyes turns more suspicious and the tension in the room pulls even tighter. The room is silent, with only an occasional whispered comment as everyone keeps their eyes on the two bosses. I scan, noting the guy to my left who just unbuttoned his jacket, a sure sign he’s getting twitchy.

“What things have you heard?” Sal asks, sipping his drink. Dominick, though, keeps his glass swirling, almost maddeningly. The liquid never stops moving and Dom’s gaze never wavers. Motion and stillness, attack and patience . . . both Dominick’s strong suits, and something everyone in the room is well aware of.

“Word on the street is that you’d like to expand your stronghold, which I can, of course, understand,” Dominick says casually, as if he’s discussing the weather. “I can even appreciate your ambition. But you forget your position

of power is in *my* city simply because I allow it to be. And your growth, or lack thereof, is also at my discretion."

Sal sneers, his fingers tightening on his glass. "I'm sure you'd like to think that, wouldn't you? But I own parts of this city because I work them when you don't. The people there fear me, not you. They need my drugs, my protection, not yours."

Dominick nods, still unruffled. "Perhaps. But that is because I've let you have the scraps from my table, the areas that are too troublesome for the meager dollars I could wring out of them. Do not think that I've not kept my fingers on the pulse of those areas, nor that I could not cut off that pulse with a single twitch of my fingers if I wished. I haven't concerned myself with your actions. Until now."

Sal feigns a look of surprise, trying to regain his balance. "My actions? I've done nothing but continue my business as usual. Yet, here we are, mourning my son. Dead in your club, let us not forget."

Sal is playing up the sympathy card with the audience.

Dominick chuckles, playing to the audience as well as he turns away from Sal to look around the room, speaking to those watching. "Ah, yes, Carlos Rivaldi. The bastard son who shows up out of the blue, full of ego and demanding his birthright. Must have put you in an uncomfortable position, not able to deny your blood-son, but he was just so . . ." Dominick pauses dramatically before locking eyes with Sal, "*weak*. And ungrateful for the scraps you gave him. I dare say, he was much like his father. And how did you handle this?"

Sal stammers, his voice quaking with rage and an undercurrent of worry that tells me he's scared of what Dominick might say. "I gave him every chance, and then he gets killed on a simple mission."

Dominick smirks, knowing he's totally in control of the conversation and where it's heading. "No, I don't think you gave him every chance. You knew he was weak, ungrateful, and power-hungry, so *you* had him killed. On my territory. Such disrespect and ugliness. Especially the part where you've been blaming me for his death to anyone who'd listen."

The reaction to Dominick's revelation is instant, the crowd of men all murmuring and looking at one another. Sal rears up, finding indignation in Dominick's accusation. "I would never! He was my *son*!"

"Perhaps so," Dominick says before dropping the bomb I know he's had planned this whole time. "In which case you should know that I am also

hunting the *hitman* who conducted his business on my grounds. I will have revenge for that insult, and it will be slow and painful. I'll make sure that he tells me *everything* I wish to know. But beyond that, I would say that having a son who is such a disappointment, who even in a sacrificial death was not able to serve your ends, is punishment enough. Although his mother's Colombian family may not feel the same way." Dominick locks eyes with the dark-haired man we all know is the Colombian's representative at the wake.

Dominick lets that sink in for a moment, silently watching Sal's face for any response as he realizes that his plan is backfiring in his face. With shaking fingers, he downs the rest of his drink, the ice in the tumbler chattering when he sets it down. "So you're not here to discuss war."

Dominick looks amused again and chuckles lightly. "I'm merely here to extend my apologies for your son, and perhaps to share some advice with a fellow businessman."

"Oh, and what's that?"

Dominick stops his swirling scotch and tosses it back in one practiced movement, not reacting at all as it burns its way down his throat to explode in his stomach. He sets the empty glass on the table in front of him pointedly, commanding every eye in the room with his presence. "When you are being allowed to scurry and play like mice, it is best to not draw the attention of the cat. Because once the cat has set his sights on you, it's difficult to circumvent his instincts. His instincts to hunt, to destroy, to own. In the scheme of life, the cat worries not about the mice. They are inconsequential until they become a nuisance. Then, the cat takes delight in playing with them, until eventually, he kills them."

Sal looks a bit flushed, the tip of his olive nose and cheeks ruddy with fury, and maybe alcohol, but he manages to keep it together, trying to save face with the room full of his men who are now looking at him with new eyes. "Excellent advice, I'm sure. Thank you."

Dominick rises, indicating the conversation is over. As he nears the door, Nick and I still shadowing him, he turns around. "Oh, Sal. I was discussing the shooting with my team when a curious thing occurred to me."

Sal, who's whispering furiously to an underling, looks up. "Oh?"

"In watching the security feeds, it seems the hitman never entered the club through the front door," Dominick reveals. "In fact, it seems he entered through a back door and completed the hit during an irregular blip in our surveillance. Most unusual, wouldn't you agree?"

Sal nods, a smarmy smile crossing his face. “Yes, must’ve been his lucky day.”

Bad move, and Dom just won the war without even firing a single shot. With his words, Sal just unintentionally confirmed Dominick’s version of events in front of his entire crew. The men look angry . . . at Sal.

Dominick nods, letting things play out with just one more nudge in the right direction to let Sal destroy himself. “I don’t particularly believe in luck myself. I believe in planning and strategy. And I asked myself, what would be my plan for a job like this? It took me a moment to come to terms with my answer, admittedly because I wanted to refuse the truth, but truth is apathetic, neither caring whether we want it or not. It simply is . . . true.”

In a lightning-fast move that I can barely follow, Dominick turns and punches Nick square in the jaw, sending him crashing to the floor. I drop my foot back to steady my stance, keeping my eyes on everyone but Dominick, knowing he can handle himself with Nick on the floor. Everyone in the room is frozen, on high alert, but not getting involved . . . yet.

“*An inside man*. That’s what he needed to get in and out undetected,” Dominick growls, bending down to grab a handful of Nick’s hair and slamming his face to the floor. “Someone in the club had to let him in the back door and mess with the security feed.”

Dominick slams a heel on Nick’s knee, the crack audible even as Nick cries out in agony. I see Rivaldi men tensing, but this isn’t a matter they can involve themselves in. Dom is beating the shit out of his own man. Besides, they know I’ve got the drop on the whole room, my pistol in my hand but not drawn yet.

Dominick trusts that I’m watching the room, a huge move on his part, He ignores the gathered men, instead addressing Nick, his voice rising in anger. “Even once I admitted that someone in my organization had to have been in on it, I didn’t want it to be you. You were the good soldier, I thought. But it lined up. It was you. Did you even try to catch him when you pursued him? I doubt it.”

Nick is trying to crawl away, but Dominick stomps on his right hand, twisting his heel to get every finger. The bones sound like twigs being broken, and Nick collapses, rolling onto his back and cradling his ruined hand to his chest. “Dom—”

Dominick grabs Nick’s shirt, pulling him face to face. “I trusted you, Nick. And you repaid me with betrayal, working for the little mice and their

hired gun. For what? Money? Power? You think they'll trust you when you've already turned once?" Dominick sneers in disgust. His voice quiets, the amount of control scarier than if he was raging. "Not killing you today is a kindness for the years of service you did give me. But if I ever see you again, I *will* kill you."

And with the final threat, Dominick lands one last powerful punch to Nick's nose and blood splatters. Dominick drops him, reaching into his pocket with his clean hand to retrieve his handkerchief and meticulously wiping the blood away.

I reach down, taking Nick's gun while Dominick finishes up, turning back to Sal and sounding like nothing's happened. "I'll leave this trash for you. Not sure he'll be of any use to you with a bum knee, fucked trigger finger, and buyable loyalty. But he is *your* man after all. I trust there won't be a repeat of this issue."

Sal looks from Dominick's stone-cold eyes to Nick, groaning in agony on the floor, and seems to realize that he'd severely underestimated just how smart and how batshit-crazy Dominick really is. "No, Mr. Angeline."

Satisfied, Dominick walks out the door, stepping over Nick dismissively. I wish I could do the same, but the anger in me is too much to bear. Nick is part of the machine that put my Angel in danger.

I can't do anything about Sal right now. I can't get my hands on the hitman the way I'd like, but I trusted Nick and Maggie trusted Nick. He was the guy I thought was my most trusted coworker.

So I give in, kicking him as hard as I can in the gut with my steel-toed boot. Nick screams, curling protectively into a fetal position. He probably deserves more of a beatdown, but I'm done.

I follow Dominick out, getting behind the wheel to drive him back to Petals. Outside, we stay silent until we pull away. "Shane."

"Yes?" I ask, looking up into the rearview mirror. If he did want to kill me, this would be the best time. He could shoot me through the seat. He's buckled in, and we're not going that fast.

Dom's eyes meet mine in the mirror, icy grey and hard. "I wanted to handle that myself. It was necessary for an appearance of strength and knowledge," he explains, finally answering the question I'd asked in his office when I checked in with him last night. The conversation had led to some rather unsightly conclusions after I reviewed the remaining security video and we'd talked through different possibilities of what happened. "The

hitman on the other hand . . . if you would like, you may have your turn. Or I can take care of that as well. Your choice. For now though, let's go back to the club."

Back to Maggie.

CHAPTER 25

MAGGIE

I pace back and forth in the apartment, trying my best not to get freaked out. When Shane told me last night that he was going with Dominick on a mission to hopefully prevent the war that could ruin the city, I begged him not to go. I was nearly paralyzed with terror that it was a setup by Dominick.

But Shane said that he and Dominick talked things through, and he felt like he needed to back Dom's play. He also promised he'd be safe before we made love and he left a few new souvenirs along my skin.

But since they left, I've been jittery with nerves that I'll never see him again. Knowing I need to keep busy, I give up pacing and decide to check in with my regular life . . . the one I had before everything went so haywire.

I can't believe that Dominick's let me have access to a computer, but he did. After our first night here, I gave Allie my keys, and she went to my apartment, coming back with some clothes and my laptop. Dominick didn't even ask to go through my files. "Maggie," he said, "anything you have that you've already published can't be pulled back, and anything you have in there that you could publish, I trust you won't." He said it kindly, but the threat was apparent in his simple words.

A quick run through my email deletes most of the spam, but there are several from Jeanine at work. She's left several voicemails on my phone that were forwarded to my email program too, but after two, I turn them off. It's best to go straight to the source.

I grab the burner phone Shane left me, dialing into the office and waiting for the receptionist to transfer me to Jeanine's office line. I get lucky. I'm not left hanging on hold for long.

"Jeanine Matthews."

"Hi, Jeanine. It's Maggie. I wanted to call to—"

Before I can even get my greeting out, Jeanine interrupts me, her voice crisp and hard. “You have some nerve calling in like this. You drop off the face of the Earth, don’t return my calls or meet deadlines for nearly a week, and now you just call in? You should’ve just stayed gone.”

She’s mad. Still, some professional instinct guides me to try to patch things up so I’m not leaving under the pall of job abandonment. “Ma’am, I had an emergency and I couldn’t call in or check emails for a while. I’m back now and trying to catch up.”

Jeanine stops her rant, greed tingeing her voice. Toss her a sniff about a headline, and she’d let me get away with murder. “Anything story-worthy?”

If only she knew, but she thinks I’m just a strip-club waitress looking for celebrity gossip. She has no idea about the depth of how things go at Petals, who Dominick is, or any of the things I’ve learned over the last few days. And this is a story I wouldn’t touch with a ten-foot pole. Dominick’s shown me some trust. I’m not stupid enough to betray that.

“No, just a family emergency.”

It’s not really a lie because the people at Petals are my family now, and while it might take me awhile, I plan on regaining their trust, if that’s possible.

Jeanine sighs, annoyance making her drag it out longer than usual. “Unacceptable, Miss Postland. We have standards, the least of which is that you turn in quality work on time. Abandoning your job and your duties cannot stand. You’re fired,” she jeers, obviously enjoying the opportunity to shut me down. “I wish you all the best in your future waitressing endeavors.”

I’m not surprised. I figured this would be coming, even told Shane as much when we discussed it. But now that it’s real and actually happening, I thought I might be upset. But all I feel is relief . . . free. And it’s a bit funny that she thinks getting fired is such a big deal, considering I’m on the run from a hitman trying to kill me. Losing a crappy job is the least of my concerns.

Instead of laughing like I want, I clear my throat, but still, my voice is light, maybe even hinging on giggly when I respond. “I understand, Jeanine. If you could please have the HR department mail me my last check. My apologies. It’s been *interesting* working for you.”

It’s as close as I can get to telling her that she’s a shrew whom people mimic at the office. Hanging up, I let the laughter overtake me. “I’m fired!” I cheer as I throw my hands up and laugh uproariously. “Bwahahahaha, I’m

actually fired!”

I’m still basically a prisoner for my own safety, but I truly feel free. No more lies—with Jeanine, with Dominick, with Allie, and most importantly, with Shane. Knowing I need to make one more call, I dial my mother, but only to tell her I’m fine, not filling her in on recent events.

Luckily, she wasn’t worried about me, saying she figured I was just busy with work and stuff. It’s hard to imagine, but it’s really only been days since this whole debacle started. It feels like so much longer. So much has happened. So much might happen still. And Mom never has really asked about my job. I think she’s still disappointed I didn’t become an accountant or a lawyer or get some nice office job where I could meet a ‘good man’.

Well, guess what, Mom? I’ve met, bedded, and laid claim to not just a good man, but an amazing man. And if I live another month, who knows where Shane and I will be? We’re moving so fast already.

I feel the smile spread wide across my face, the happiness bubbling out unbidden. I turn the phone off and lay down on the couch, eyes on the door as I wait for Shane to get back.

I have to trust that he and Dominick are going to come back. That I’ll be safe again. That I’ll have a chance to figure out what to do from here. That Shane and I will figure out a way to be together.

I don’t nap, but the time just sort of slips by. Still, when I hear the familiar heavy tread of his footsteps coming up the stairs, I’m waiting for him. “Angel, I’m—”

Shane doesn’t have a chance to finish his greeting as I throw myself across the little apartment, laughing and leaping into his arms to smother his face in kisses. With each smooch, relief and happiness course through me. He wraps his arms around me, picking me up higher and using my momentum to spin us in a circle as we kiss.

It feels like I haven’t seen him in forever, even though it’s only been a few hours. I was just so scared.

Pulling back, Shane looks deep into my eyes. “Damn, Angel. That’s a welcome home I could get used to.”

I smile, kissing him again, softly this time. “I missed you today. I was worried.”

Shane sets me down, cupping my face in his hands. “I told you, we’re gonna be okay. Today was a step in the right direction, and Dominick handled Sal like a boss.”

“A boss?” I ask, and Shane laughs.

“Well, more like The Boss. It went well, and I think we prevented the war. Sal’s guys know what he did, how he tried to manipulate and lie and killed his own son. I don’t imagine them charging into Dominick’s territory after his display today. Hell, half of them probably want to work for Dominick now, and the other half pray they never have to see him again.”

I smile, trying to imagine Dominick as a monster who would make grown men shake in their boots, but I just can’t. Dominick is scary, no doubting that, but he’s civilized and has a code of honor. I can’t picture him getting rough and dirty.

“So, one crisis averted? One to go?”

Shane looks at me, then nods. “Yeah, Angel. For now, all we can do is stay here, wait for intel, and be safe. Dom even found a mole who let the hitman in. It was Nick.”

“Nick? Really?” I ask, disappointed. “He seemed like a nice guy.”

“Maybe he was, but it doesn’t matter,” Shane says, kissing my forehead once. “You’re what matters. We can relax for a bit. Chucky and Dom are both looking into the hitman issue, so we should know something soon, but for now, all we can do is wait.”

He lays his cheek against the top of my head, hugging me close. It’s sweet and comforting, but that’s not what I want. I don’t want to be babied and kept like a fragile doll he’s scared to break.

I want to celebrate that things are getting better—freedom from my job, hope that there won’t be a war—to celebrate this moment as the gift it is.

My cheek pressed to his chest, I reach down, letting my hand roam closer and closer to his waistband. “Well, that’s not *all* we can do . . .”

Shane looks down at me, and I bite my lip, waiting to see what he says, what he’ll do. He’s searching for something in my eyes, some sign that I’m really okay with everything that’s happening.

I can’t wait any longer for him to decide and force the issue by lifting up to my tiptoes and using his shoulders as leverage to press my mouth to his. I lick the seam of his lips, begging him to open for me as my free hand reaches down to cup him through his pants.

It’s all it takes to wipe away the last of his worries, and it’s the last moment I’m in charge. His tongue presses into my mouth, consuming me as he pulls my hair, tilting my face higher toward him.

A moan escapes me, and Shane answers with a growl. Holding me in his

strong arms, he carries me across the room into the living room, but our mouths never break contact. Instead, he's guided by some form of internal radar or something until he reaches the middle of the room. He sets me down, immediately ripping my long T-shirt over my head and slipping my panties to the floor.

I stand there, naked and wanting as he pulls his clothes off with almost unnatural speed. His cock is hard, reaching toward his belly button, and I can see a drop of clear precum on the head. I want it and unconsciously, I lick my lips as my knees start to bend.

Shane notices and smirks. "You want to taste me again, Angel? It's yours. I'm yours."

I drop all the way to my knees and look up at Shane from the floor. "Then give it to me."

I stick my tongue out as Shane grasps his cock, guiding the tip to my outstretched tongue, and the flavor of the salty drop explodes across my tongue, making me whimper for more. I want to worship him, to show him that he's my everything.

Shane slides a hand into my hair, holding me still, and slips his tip along my tongue, teasing me, teasing himself as he reads my eyes, nodding. I cover his shaft in little butterfly kisses and lollipop licks until he shudders, his control stretched as far as he can take it. "Fuck, Maggie," he growls, pulling my hair tighter. "Suck me."

It's all the permission I need to take back a bit of control, and I close my lips around him, letting my tongue dance around his slit before bobbing up and down along his shaft, setting a fierce pace.

I hollow my cheeks, sucking him hard and delighting at the sounds I'm drawing from him. I reach up, my fingers digging into the dimples on his powerful ass muscles as I pull him in all the way. He's mine, and I'm his . . . his loving, worshipful woman who can take all he has.

All too soon, though, he pulls back, squeezing tight at the base of his shaft as he shakes his head. "Not yet. I want to come inside that sweet little pussy."

I nod, smiling as Shane offers me a hand, helping me rise from his feet and then immediately turning me so that my back is to his front. The entire skin of my back is pressed against him as I look over my shoulder while he cups my breasts. He guides me toward the couch near the wall. It's big, and when he pushes me over the high arm of the couch, my toes barely reach the

floor while he gets me positioned the way he wants.

“Damn, Angel,” Shane says, his voice raspy and heavy with need. “You look so pretty like this, ass up in the air so I can see your wet little pussy, so ready for my cock. Only one thing could make it better.”

I’m squirming, needy, so when he bends down, I expect a nice lick to my soaked core. But that’s not what Shane does, my mouthy, possessive man.

He swipes a thumb through my folds and bites low on my ass, right at the meaty part above my thighs, and the sharp prick of pain blends with the pleasure as he strokes me. I cry out, arching my back for more, but Shane stands, and I look over my shoulder.

He’s licking his thumb, sucking my juices from his skin and moaning at the flavor. “Always so sweet . . . but I think I’m turning you into a dirty girl, Angel.”

“A naughty angel for my devil with a heart of gold. I am a dirty girl, Shane . . . *your* dirty girl.”

The words set him off, and with a growl, he slams into me balls-deep and immediately begins pumping in and out, hard and fast. I reach back, wanting to feel him piston into me, my nails scratching along the skin of his hips. I can’t see them, but I know I’m marking him too, little pink lines proclaiming him as mine. I dream that maybe those marks will be permanent, maybe something that we can share.

Shane grabs one of my hands, pulling it to my lower back and locking it in place with a tight grip. His other hand twists tightly into my hair, and I’m at his mercy, pinned down and getting *fucked*. Even to myself, the word sounds filthy, and that turns me on even more. I mewl, whining as I beg him.

“Yes Shane . . . fuck me . . . please . . .”

He pulls me tighter, his voice a low, growling demand. “What did you say?”

I don’t know if he likes it or hates it, and right now, I don’t care because it’s all I can manage to say. “Fuck me, Shane. Fuck. Me. Hard.”

He leans over me, covering my back with his body and pressing me into the couch arm, one hand still trapped between us. “Mmm, my fucking *dirty* Angel.” He strokes into me again and again, filling and stretching me as I whimper, begging for more. “Come for me.”

He suckles the flesh along my shoulder into his mouth, marking me once again, and I feel pushed harder than ever. His cock is so deep, and I cry out in pleasure and pain.

The moment stretches, both of us on the precipice forever, riding that edge before I fall off, crashing into my orgasm, and Shane comes too, ropes of his hot cum filling me. It drives me more, my pleasure drawing out like a rope too, going on and on as I scream hoarsely. I’m calling out his name and swearing that I’m his as his deep bellow accompanies my cries in a symphony as we finish together.

CHAPTER 26

SHANE

We spend the rest of the evening in the apartment, relaxing. For several hours, we can hear the music booming below us as the club carries on business as usual. We'd done the same, continuing our rounds of talking and lovemaking, pausing to eat and chat before our passions overtake us again.

Around two in the morning, Maggie mentions going downstairs to see Allie, but after the run-in with the Rivaldis, I'm uneasy. "Angel, I know Dominick seems to think this is all handled, and I'm hopeful he's right, but sometimes, a cornered animal is the meanest, and I'm nervous Sal is going to be desperate enough to do something crazy."

"But what about Allie and Dom and . . . well, everyone downstairs?"

I nod, hugging her tightly. "I know. But I can't protect them all. I can protect you, though, and it'd make me feel a lot better if you had Allie come up here rather than us go downstairs."

She agrees, and Allie's actually willing to hang out a bit before she heads home so we can all grab some shut eye. Waking up at noon, Maggie and I eat a simple breakfast of Golden Grahams and tea before sneaking downstairs carefully to check in with Dominick.

I knock on his door, my usual two raps, and from inside, I hear him. "Come in, Shane."

We enter, and he turns around from his desk, smirking that he knew simply by my knock. "Please, sit."

He motions to the chairs sitting in front of his desk, and we sink into them. I notice Maggie has her knees pulled to her chest again, her arms wrapped around her legs. It makes me worry, but I know it'll take her awhile to feel comfortable in Dominick's presence now. "Thanks. Just wanted to check in."

Dom nods, stroking his chin. “So you’ve heard.”

I furrow my brow, confused. I came down for a general check-in and to see if there was a way for Maggie and me to safely stretch our legs. “Heard? Heard what?”

Dominick leans back in his chair, relaxing. “Have you been in contact with . . .” He seems to be searching for a word, an uncommon occurrence for a man who uses words like sharp knives. “Your handlers?”

I look to Maggie and then shake my head. “I don’t really have one. An unofficial contact, but making official contact is . . . dramatic.”

Dominick smiles, seemingly laughing inside. “Perhaps you should check in with them. At least your unofficial contact.”

He doesn’t seem inclined to give me privacy for the call, so I reach into my pocket and speed-dial Chucky, putting the phone to my ear.

The line connects with silence, and I talk first, keeping Chucky’s name out of it lest Dominick get curious for more information. It may be a nickname, but I wouldn’t put it past Dom to find out Chucky’s real name and entire history in less than forty-eight hours if he was motivated to do so. “Hey, man. It’s Shane.”

Chucky sounds excited, panting as he greets me. “Damn, dude, you must have balls of fucking steel! Everyone here is talking about how Dominick walked into Sal’s house, in the middle of a fucking wake, told all his shit to the whole damn crew, including the Colombians, and then beat the shit out of a traitor. And you just stood there, sweet as you please, with no reaction.”

Interesting. Guess they didn’t hear about my kicking the shit out of Nick on my way out. Probably a good thing, considering everything else. I never actually met the man the FBI put in the Rivaldi family, but he must not have been present. The FBI wouldn’t ignore my beating the fuck out of Nick like that. The boot to the gut on a downed man was definitely past ‘appropriate use of force.’

“Yeah,” I reply airily, though, trying to play it off. “That’s pretty much what happened.”

“Weren’t you shitting your pants that Dominick was going to kill you?” Chucky asks, still panting a little. “I mean, I know you’re in Dom’s custody, but it would’ve been real fucking easy for him to say he was taking you to Sal’s and then dump your body in the river. Probably even keep the girl for himself.”

I look at Dominick, considering what happened in the car yesterday, and

make up my mind. “No, if he wanted me dead, I would be. He’s a man of his word and said he’d help, so I trusted him to follow through.”

Chucky whoops like a teenager at a pop concert, and I have to pull my phone away for a moment to wince. “That’s some top-notch loyalty there, man. Not sure I’d trust anyone that that much, even if they were player one in the game.”

“It’s not a game, man. Any other updates? Word on the hitman?” I ask, getting irritated at Chucky’s casualness considering this is my life. Maggie’s life.

Chucky whistles, obviously surprised. “You haven’t heard about the hitman?”

There’s something to Chucky’s tone, a weirdness I can’t place. I look to Dominick, who’s eyes are crinkling a bit . . . in amusement? “No, I haven’t heard. What is it?”

“Sal Rivaldi woke up this morning to find the hitman dead . . . in his living room . . . sitting up in his fucking throne of a chair . . . and none of the guards saw a thing.” Chucky delivers the details with dramatic pauses for effect, and it works.

“So, he’s dead?” I ask, a little disappointed. The bastard almost killed my woman and put a groove in my left bicep that’s going to leave a wicked scar. I wanted to at least get a little bit of a receipt on that.

Chucky laughs darkly, obviously pleased, although I know if he found a dead body in his living room, someone would need to call an ambulance for his heart attack. “Yeah, you could fucking say that. That’s not even the best part, though.” I wait, knowing Chucky will tell me when he’s ready. Finally, he laughs. “The best part is that on the coffee table were a handful of bullet cases, presumed to be the brass from Carlos’s shooting, and an invoice . . . for the repairs to Petals’s private room!” Chucky is wheezing, laughter taking his breath away, and I can’t help but smile. Dominick is a twisted, manipulative son of a bitch and a damn scary motherfucker.

I like him. Too bad we officially have to be enemies when this is all said and done.

Chucky is winding down, getting himself under control while I study Dom, who’s openly grinning now. “You know, I gotta ask. Everyone knows Dominick either did it or had it done, but you’re the inside guy. You know anything?”

I grin back at Dominick, who’s watching me with interest, and lean back

before forming a casual reply. “Nope, Dominick came back here after we went to the Rivaldis’ and was here all night. It was business as usual at Petals.”

“Yeah, figured he wouldn’t have you in on any of the dirty work,” Chucky says. There’s a rustle on Chucky’s end, and he seems to messing around with something on his computer from the clicking sounds. “The office thinks you’re clear. Word I’ve got here is that you can make official contact, mission accomplished, and you can exfil now. Report in when you’re out.”

“Understood,” I reply before hanging up the phone. I look over at Dominick, who’s still watching me. “Seems the hitman has been taken care of, rather spectacularly. Better than anything I could’ve done for sure.” Dominick tilts his head, a pleased smirk on his face as he accepts the compliment and understands that I’m thanking him while not saying that he actually did anything because that would be dangerous. “We’re clear.”

Maggie stutters, her voice a near-whisper. “Really? We’re safe?”

And then she turns to Dominick, the question in her eyes, knowing he’s really the one who decides if we’re safe or not. He nods once, his face schooled back into tightly a controlled blankness. “Yes. “Yes, you’re safe. But do not forget our agreement. If I have need of you, I will use you as a resource. Otherwise, you will not return.”

Maggie nods, then opens and closes her mouth like she has something to say. Dominick waits patiently, not encouraging her but not dismissing her either.

“What about Allie?” she asks desperately. “Can I still talk to her?”

Dominick smiles, and I think I see a bit of melt in that frost behind his eyes. “If Allie wishes to speak with you, I would not prevent something that makes her happy. I personally think you two have had a good effect on each other and make good friends. However, if she doesn’t want to talk, I will support her choice to cut you out of her life.”

Maggie nods, still encouraged. “Thank you, sir.”

Dominick smirks at the turn of phrase and gives me a knowing look. “Maggie,” I say calmly, “can you wait outside for a second? I need to talk to Dominick.”

She bites her lip, uncertain, but nods. “Yeah, I’ll go backstage and see if Allie is here yet. Maybe she can show me her new move again.”

She leaves, and both our eyes follow her out. When the door closes, Dominick turns back to me with a look I’ve not seen before. It’s like he’s

showing me a glimpse behind his mask, to the real man he is underneath the mob boss persona. “She is an unusual find, Shane. I told you once that a man like you would break her, and then I’d be forced to break you as well. I find that perhaps I was wrong. She is stronger than I gave her credit for, although if you hurt her, I think I’d still find myself inclined to take the offense out on you.”

“No need. If I hurt her, I’d punish myself more than you ever could,” I reply honestly. “Even with your . . . creativity. I do appreciate the way you make a statement, that flair for the dramatic when warranted,” I tell him, smiling as I envision the brass balls it must’ve taken to pull off a stunt like that.

Dominick inclines his head, smirking. “And I appreciated your company last night while I was at the club.” The lie is crystal clear, but only because Dominick allows me to see it. He could lie to me easily, but he’s telling me in just a few words that he’s approving the lie I told, giving him an alibi.

“So, we can leave?” I ask, moving things along. “No offense. Your apartment is nice, but we’ve stopped the war, sent Sal scampering back to the dark, stopped the threat of the hitman, and you know the truth about everything. It seems our agreement has been met. And I’d like to be able to get some fresh air and sunlight with the woman I love.”

Dominick nods, his mask coming back into place. “Yes, same as I told Miss . . . as I told Maggie. I’ll reach out if I need you. However, for you in particular, Shane, there is something else. You mentioned that you were placed in my organization, and another FBI agent into Rivaldi’s. Is that agent still in play?”

I nod, already seeing where this is going. “Yes, that agent is in place. I don’t know his name, though. It’s standard FBI procedure. That way, if one of us got outed, we couldn’t be tortured to reveal the other.”

Dominick nods in understanding. “I thought so. A policy I’ve used myself when I’ve had to send men . . . undercover. But, if any information comes up that would be either potentially beneficial or harmful to me, I trust that you will reach out to share?”

He’s smiling, but there’s an implied threat to his words, and I know that he would see a lack of information sharing as an insult. “Of course. I assume your phone number won’t be changing?”

Dominick laughs softly. “Well, it might, but even if so, the number for Petals won’t. I’m sure you’ll keep that number around.”

I nod, then rise and offer him a hand. “You are an interesting man, Dominick Angeline. Regardless of the initial reason for my placement, I have enjoyed working with you. I like you.”

Dominick shakes my hand, pulling me closer to his desk. “I like you too, Shane Guthrie. Hope to *not* see you around my town.”

I chuckle at his slickness, a compliment tied up in an ‘I know who you are’ threat with a bonus order to get out of dodge. He’s one of a kind.

CHAPTER 27

MAGGIE

It feels weird to walk through the quiet main room of Petals, knowing I'll likely never return. I look around the room, seeing the dinginess to everything in the light of day.

But somehow, it makes it feel comfortable. I like knowing that table nine is a little wobbly so you have to be careful setting the beers down or else you'll have slop to mop up, or that the fastest route from the bar to the private rooms is to take the outside loop even though it's twenty-five extra steps, but there are no grabby hands to get in your way. The biggest thing, though, is knowing that the people here are my friends.

I mean, what else can you say when Allie and a bunch of the dancers and waitresses are here to say goodbye? I have no idea what Allie told them to cover up the reason. But even Marco's here, looking slick as always, even as his practiced smirk looks a little faded at the edges..

I give Allie a big hug, still loving that she's promised we'll get together soon. "I think we'll have to get you a bright slutty red when we get together for mani-pedis next time," she teases, looking over my shoulder at Shane before giving me a wink. "And some sweet gel nails that are guaranteed not to break when you scratch someone's back."

The other dancers laugh along with me while I give hugs all around. When everyone's wished me well, I turn to Marco, who's talking quietly with Shane. The two shake hands, and Marco turns to me. "You know, it's not gonna be the same without you around."

"Oh, you'll just have to be more careful with those harassing comments," I joke, making Marco laugh. I give him a big hug, patting his back. "You make sure you stay out of trouble, you got me?"

"Never." Marco laughs, hugging me back and picking me up. Shane looks a little jealous, which makes Marco and I both laugh. "Relax, Dragon.

I'm not gonna try and take a girl who settled for your ugly ass."

Shane laughs, flipping him off. "Fuck you, man."

I don't get the inside joke between them, but it seems good-natured as they bro-hug. Shane shakes hands with a few of the girls and gives a quick hug to Allie, and then we're done. As we approach the door, I look up, seeing Dominick watching us. He doesn't say a word, just stands in the doorway of his office, watching us, but I wave goodbye and smile anyway. Dominick had sent someone for Shane's truck days ago, so it's waiting in the parking lot for us.

I curl into the passenger seat, tears already starting to slip down my cheeks. Shane looks over and wipes them away with a gentle thumb. "Hey, what's wrong?"

I shake my head, kissing the ball of his thumb softly. "It just feels . . . final. Like I'm not going to see them again, you know?"

"Angel, you literally just made plans with Allie for this weekend," he reminds me. "You two are going to be thick as thieves, and I doubt I'm gonna get two minutes of you to myself. That's the definition of *not final*."

I smile through the tears, chuckling. "You're right. It just feels like I'm saying goodbye."

Shane is thoughtful, considering that for a moment, then puts his truck into drive and pulls away. "Well, you are saying goodbye to a lot of things. Your job at Petals, your job at the tabloid, your innocence at how the city runs. But you're starting a lot of new things, like this with me. It's not the end of things. It's the beginning of new things."

I lean across the seat to wrap my arms around his arm, laying my head on his shoulder. "You're right. Let's go home."

It doesn't occur to me that I didn't say 'my place' or 'your place' until Shane pulls into the parking lot of my apartment. "Oh, if you need to go to your house, we can. Sorry. I didn't mean—"

Shane puts a finger to my lips, shushing me. "Maggie, *you* are my home. My apartment in the city is a front, part of the assignment. For the past year, I've basically lived out of a duffel bag. My place is more of a pit stop than anything else. I like your apartment, it's like you, sweet, innocent, warm. If you don't mind, I could use a little more sweet innocence in my life."

I smile shyly, nodding. "Okay, then let's go home."

We walk up the stairs, and I feel like we're walking hand-in-hand to something bigger, better. At the landing, Shane swoops me up into his arms

and carries me across the threshold like a bride. It makes me warm and bubbly inside.

He kicks the door closed and bends down for me to lock it, and then continues his trek to my bedroom. He sets me down gently on the edge of the bed before looking around. “Bathroom? I sorta forgot.”

I point behind him, and he disappears for a minute. I can hear him digging around, looking for something, and I call out. “You okay? Need something?”

“Nope, got it,” he says, then I hear the bathtub turn on, the water echoing out in the quiet apartment. “There, that’s perfect.”

Shane reappears, pulling me up from the bed. He begins stripping me, and my body responds instantly, knowing what it wants, and I try to kiss him.

Shane steps back, his eyes twinkling in amusement. “Nu-uh, Angel. I will always give you what you want, but trust me to know what you need too.”

Confused, I let him undress me the rest of the way and then watch as he strips too. Once we’re both naked, he leads me to the bathroom. I’ve always liked this bathroom. It’s why I put up with the rest of the place. The big garden tub is full of steaming water and fluffy bubbles, and there are tea candles lit on the countertop.

The bubbles in my belly rise again, the happiness bursting out as I giggle and turn to Shane. “Are you giving me a bath?”

Shane holds me, our naked bodies pressed together as he kisses my temple. “Angel, we’ve had a rough few days. And tomorrow, I’m going to have to start the process of becoming Agent Guthrie again. But for now, I want to wash all the roughness away, start fresh and clean and honest with each other. Never lie to me, never hide from me. Give me all of you. And I’ll do the same for you.”

I nod, tracing a fingertip along the designs covering his chest. “I love you, Shane.”

He presses his lips to mine, smiling. “I love you too, Maggie. Now let’s get in.”

He steps in first, holding my hand to help me in too. I grab a hair band from the tub edge and quickly twist my hair up into a messy bun on top of my head.

We sit, my back to his front with his legs spread wide around me. Settling in the hot water, the suds tickle and tease against my skin. Shane grabs my pouf and pours body wash on it, working it to a foam and inhaling the scent

deeply, grinning. “Mmm. I figured it was a special soap that makes you smell so good. Makes me want to eat you up.”

I smile, too dreamy to reply as he moves the pouf along my skin, covering my arms and my chest in the warm vanilla sugar scent of my body wash. “I’ll make sure to buy another couple of bottles this weekend.”

Shane nods, reaching down and motioning for my foot. “Give me a leg.”

I raise a foot toward the ceiling, not as flexible as the dancers at Petals, but not too shabby, if I say so myself. I can feel Shane hardening against my back as he washes down the length of my calf to my thigh, where it disappears into the water. He repeats the move on the other leg, his forehead dotted with sweat, either from his arousal or the warm water, or both.

Once I’m curled back under the surface of the warm water, he shifts, pressing me forward so he can wash my back. The pouf drops into the water, and I feel Shane’s rough palms tracing along my back, washing the bubbles away and massaging my soft skin. His lips follow the path of his hands, kissing and nibbling along my shoulder and up to my neck. “Angel . . . so sweet.”

A moan rolls past my lips, and I feel like I could lie in his arms forever, but I want to do for him what he’s done for me. I want to wash all the past, the lies, the fear away. I want him to know that I want to be by his side. Even if the FBI says that we have to move, or that he has to go man the office in Alaska or something, I’ll be there with him. I sit up, breaking his embrace for a moment before turning to face him and sitting between his splayed legs.

I feel around for the pouf. Finding it, I use more body wash to work the lather back up as Shane watches me with hooded eyes. “Hope you don’t mind smelling like me,” I say flirtatiously as I start to swirl the pouf along Shane’s chest. “I happen to love covering you in my . . . scent.”

Shane growls, his hands resting on my hips and pulling me closer, bit by bit. “Pretty sure I told you I’d smell like you anytime you’d let me. I meant I liked your juices marking me, reminding me and everyone else that I’ve been between those sweet thighs. But I’ll take any damn thing you want to give me, Angel. Although I am hoping that normally I can use some regular soap.”

Having washed his thick chest, the bumps of his washboard abs, and along the length of his powerful arms, I move my hands lower. His cock jumps as I lick my lips, leaning in. “Good . . . because time for getting washed is over.”

Under the water, I let the pouf go, wrapping my hands around his

thickness and giving him a few strokes.

Shane groans, his fingers tightening on my hips. “Fuck, Maggie.”

I keep the pace slow, wanting to control how fast he builds, but he bucks against me, fighting for more. I move to straddle one of his thighs, forcing him still, and lean forward, licking his earlobe. “Shane, let me love you. Let me jack you off, let me mark you the way you mark me. Let me . . . let me be your woman.”

His body is strung tight, using all of his control to hold back and let me have this. I move down his neck, kissing and licking and nibbling the way he does to me.

I find a spot in the curve that makes him moan as his dick jumps in my hand, and I smile to myself. I latch onto the spot, sucking and nibbling just to the edge of pain before soothing it with a licking kiss.

All the while, I stroke him, every stroke up his shaft timed with a sucking draw on his neck. I’m mindlessly riding his thigh, letting the soft hairs tickle my lips and grinding my clit along his tight muscles. “That’s it, my man. So hot and sexy,” I purr in his ear. “So strong, you could break me, but you didn’t. You woke me. I’m yours now, your sweet angel and your dirty girl. You like that, don’t you?” I kiss back down, finding that sweet spot on his neck and suck again.

I can feel his balls pulling up tight, on the edge of letting go. “Fuck, yes,” he groans. “I want you by my side, Angel.”

I let go of his neck and lick his ear as I pump him quickly under the water. “You’re *mine*, and I’m *yours*,” I whisper.

It’s enough to trigger him, and he bucks beneath me, raising his hips out of the water. His cock pulses in my hand as he comes, white cum coating my hand. The sight does me in, and I grind along his thigh, finding my own release as he holds me, keeping me steady as I shudder on him.

“Mmm, that was wonderful,” I whisper, cuddling against him. “Thank you.”

“Thank you,” Shane whispers back, holding me close. “For everything.”

Eventually, we get clean, and still naked, we walk into the bedroom. Shane throws the covers back, tossing pillows to the floor as he sees my carefully constructed arrangement.

He laughs as I scramble to pick up a few of them. “Why do you have so many fucking pillows? There’s like a dozen of them here!”

I laugh, picking up one to swat him on the butt. “Because they’re pretty

and soft and I like to curl up in them."

Shane tosses me in the bed, climbing over me and caging me in. "You're pretty and soft. And you can curl up with me now."

He lies on his back, one arm stretched wide in invitation. "C'mere, Angel," he says, and I quickly snuggle into his side, throwing one leg over his before he pulls the blankets back over us.

It feels comfortable, right, just like always. "You'll be here when I wake up, right? This isn't all some dream?"

Shane kisses my forehead, tenderly stroking my arm with his hand. "I'll always be here when you wake up. Sleep now, though. You've been through a lot."

I can feel sleep already overtaking me, but I manage to kiss his chin before yawning. "I love you."

Just as I drift off, I hear him reply softly, "I love you too."

CHAPTER 28

SHANE

For three days, after waking up and deciding that no, I don't need to formally exfiltrate myself from my assignment yet, we've camped out in Maggie's apartment. This time, not because we need to. There's no one chasing us, no monsters looming.

Instead, it's simply because we can. We've enjoyed every moment of being together, and we've had a wonderful vacation 'playing house,' but we have to be responsible too. I've put off the FBI as long as I can, but when Chucky sends me a text to '*get to the office today or else'*, I know I have to go.

But I'm taking Maggie with me. It's not protocol, but fuck if I care. I'm not letting her out of my sight. Not until we're one hundred percent sure that she's safe and we're settled in.

"Are you sure?" Maggie asks as we approach the Federal building. It's small. East Robinsville isn't exactly Los Angeles or New York for a field office, but that's okay. "I mean—"

"I don't give a damn what Uncle Sam has to say," I reply, holding her hand as we approach security. I watch her go through first before laughing as her jaw drops when I put my gun and badge in the bin to walk through the metal detectors. "Guess you haven't seen these yet."

"No," she admits, her eyes going even larger when I flash the badge in its black leather billfold at her. As I replace them, badge in my back pocket, gun in my holster, I realize she's watching me, biting her lip. I cup her chin, bringing her eyes up to look me in the face. "It's okay, Angel. Don't be scared. I'll never hurt you."

She shakes her head, looking left and right to make sure no one can hear her before whispering in my ear. "It doesn't make me nervous. You look hot

and tasty as fresh French fries, all confident badass. Especially in that T-shirt."

I smirk, kissing her hard but keeping it fast. I don't want any of the fuckers around here seeing my woman turned on. That's fucking private, just for me and her. I groan, wishing I could shove her into a broom closet or empty office, but there's never anything private in this place.

I take her hand again and start to lead her to the elevators. "Come on, we'd better get this over with so we can get back home."

The ride up to the fourth floor is quiet but slightly tense. Maggie's probably never even been in a normal police station, except maybe to pay a parking ticket, and now she's going to an FBI office. I give her hand a squeeze as the door opens, and we head into the bullpen area. I'm surprised to see Chucky jump up immediately when he sees me.

"What the hell? When'd they let you out of the basement?" I ask, giving him a big hug, bro-patting him on the back. "Damn, Chucky, you lost weight! What the hell happened?"

He steps back, flexing and patting on his considerably flatter stomach. "Yep, Pokémon Go sucked nuts, but getting outside to catch the little fuckers did me some good. Got me away from my desk and even to the gym. Having to watch my diet now that I'm mostly playing Fortnight and my usual Call of Duty team."

I grin, shaking my head. He's a geek, but he's a good face to see. "Battle Royale?"

Chucky grins. "Fuck, yeah, anytime."

I glance at Maggie, who's wearing a half amused, half scared shitless look on her face. "Might be a bit, but soon, man."

Chucky sees Maggie, and he walks toward her, hand outstretched. "You must be Maggie. Nice to meet you. I'm Chucky. I sorta run the computers, you know."

Maggie smiles, shaking his hand. "I remember, and thank you. Nice to put a face to the voice on the phone."

Our reunion is cut short by the appearance of my boss, SSA Solomon. A tall woman in her early sixties with a no-nonsense brown helmet of hair that nobody in the office has the balls to fuck with, she's run the East Robinsville office for five years now. "Shane. How good of you to join us. You two come on in my office."

I look to Chucky for some read on the situation, but he shrugs. Keeping

Maggie's hand, we go into the office.

I try to start on the right foot, with introductions. "Maggie, this is my boss, Maria Solomon. Maria, this is my . . . Maggie."

I didn't know what to call Maggie. Girlfriend doesn't seem remotely strong enough, and I can't just go around proclaiming her 'mine' like a caveman to other people. When it's the two of us, fuck, yeah. But in public, probably not exactly politically correct. Although, Maggie's still got a bit of pink tint to the delicate skin of her neck where my lips sucked a day or two ago, and she looks proud of it.

I knew this meeting was coming and at least tried to keep my marks to the skin that'd be covered by her clothes. I smirk a bit, knowing that she's got my claims on her tits, her belly, her thighs, her ass, and she was begging for me to '*fuck her'* just this morning.

It's those filthy words that do me in every time my sweet girl uses them, my dirty Angel who makes me hard as a rock in an instant.

But right now, she's sitting prim and proper. A lady by every appearance, except to me since I know what lays under those clothes and in her dirty mind. While I've been daydreaming, they've shaken hands, and we sit down, Maria behind her desk and Maggie and me in chairs in front of her.

"I haven't seen your report yet, Shane. But I've got Organized Crime calling for a quick and dirty update, so I need a rundown of everything verbally. And then you can start catching up on your far overdue paperwork. Time to be an agent again, Guthrie."

She's mad I haven't finished the job, but fuck it. I was busy. The hard work was done. The paperwork is always the part I hate anyway. It's part of why I'm better undercover than as a regular agent. I mean, undercover just has to get shit done. The paperwork's later.

Still, I do my best to give Maria a rundown even though she knows parts of it from my check-ins with Chucky. Starting with the shooting at Petals, I move on to the hitman, Maggie and me on the run, and I end with my conversation with Dominick as we left.

"I think we parted on respectful terms, all things considered. War averted, Dominick on alert to watch out for Sal a bit more carefully, and the hitman handled so Maggie is safe. My recommendation is to leave the agent in Sal's organization for a bit to make sure that licking his wounds doesn't turn ugly."

Maria looks at Maggie, and I know I'll have to answer a few hard questions later about the details of why Dominick just let me walk out with a

handshake. “Anything you’d like to add, Miss Postland?”

Maggie looks at Maria for a moment, sizing her up, and nods. “I guess just that when I worked at Petals, I didn’t know about the mob stuff. All I knew was that Dominick ran a tight ship, cared about his employees, and when the crap hit the fan, he helped us.”

“That’s his style,” Maria replies. “But—”

“He didn’t have to do all he did for us, but he did,” Maggie continues, and for once, I see Maria actually shut up. “I don’t know what the FBI’s going to do about him. I just want you to know that he is a good man. It’s not black and white, criminal or not, and I hope you’ll take that into consideration for future operations regarding Dominick and his businesses.”

Damn this woman. I’d half expected her to sit here, quiet and shy like she sometimes gets, and just nod along with the big scary FBI folks. But the other piece of her, the brilliant mind she keeps hidden behind blonde curls and innocent eyes, is a work of fucking art. Maria smiles, a predator who’s seen her prey, and I’m not about to sit here while Maria skins Maggie with poisonous words.

“Maria, I think we should go. I’ll type up the report at home and send it in ASAP.”

Maria looks to me dismissively and then returns her eyes to Maggie. “You are quite something, aren’t you?”

Maggie shrugs but doesn’t break eye contact with Maria. “I do what I can.”

Maria nods, an amused glint in her eyes. “When we figured out who you are, I had Chucky do some digging. You have quite the impressive resume, Miss Postland.”

I’m confused. I know Maggie is a tabloid reporter, but that’s not exactly something that would impress Maria. I look out of the office window to the bullpen, seeing Chucky watching our exchange. When he catches me looking, he startles and looks down, shuffling papers.

Before I can ask what’s going on, Maria continues, ignoring me for the moment. “Your resume includes undercover work on a number of stories, everything from politics to celebrities. You’ve been . . . let’s see, an intern for a state Senator, a candy striper—”

“Candy striper?” I ask, imagining my innocent Maggie in one of those uniforms. Maggie gives me a little smile, blushing as I’m sure she’s thinking the same thing I am.

“As I was saying,” Maria says testily. “A secretary, and a waitress in a mob-owned club. In none of those jobs have you ever been detected until after the story came out and sometimes not even then. You’ve written many articles about mostly frivolous fodder. The FBI doesn’t really care who’s sleeping with whom—”

“Most of the time,” I say, earning a glare. “Sorry.”

“But some of your work—the investigative part, the undercover work—is well beyond your current situation at a tabloid,” Maria finishes.

Maggie smiles but shakes her head. “Actually, I no longer work for the tabloid. Nor Petals. I’ve been fired by both.”

There’s delight in Maria’s eyes, and she opens a manila folder on her desk, taking out a small packet and toying with it. “Ah, so sorry to hear that,” she replies in a way that makes me suspect she’s known that since Maggie walked in. “However, I do have something I’d like you to consider.”

She looks at me, then back to Maggie. “Working undercover, finding ways to tell the truth while lying, and finding out people's secrets in subtle ways are skills that are very difficult to teach. Most field agents in the FBI will go through quite a few training courses and never be able to do them effectively. Wouldn’t you agree, Shane?”

I nod, knowing that most FBI agents are products of their bureaucracy. They can grind, they can use the FBI like a bludgeon, but very few can do what I do. “Not many. Are you saying what I think you’re saying?”

“Seeing possible solutions beyond the scope of the usual point-to-point way of thinking is also exceedingly rare,” Maria says, turning her attention back to Maggie. “It seems you do well with both of these. In short, you impressed me, Miss Postland. And I don’t impress easily.”

Maggie gulps beside me, and I squeeze her hand. “See? I’m not the only one.”

Maggie blushes more deeply, but smiles. “Thank you.”

“The FBI has a very straightforward system for becoming an agent,” Maria says, toying with the paper in her hands. “But, there is considerably more flexibility when it comes to being a consultant. Especially when you’re a relatively minor field office like this one. So I’d like to offer you a job with my team. Very entry-level to see how you do, an internship, if you will. But an opportunity beyond anything you’ve ever considered before.”

Maggie looks at me, shock clearly written across her face as Maria slides the paper across her desk. “Me? Working for the FBI?”

I smile, encouraging her. “It’s your call, Maggie. You’re free to do anything you want now. If this sounds interesting, go for it.”

“Can I become an agent too?” she asks, looking at Maria. She picks up the paperwork, flipping through it for a moment. “I mean, what does a consultant do?”

“Basically, you’d be able to do all the grunt work, but you can’t carry a gun or arrest people,” Maria says. “But if you want, well, I could set you up on the path for that. I’d discourage it, though. Consultants don’t have to worry about rank or getting reassigned away from their . . . significant others.”

Maggie nods, then grins at me. It’s so beautiful I want to kiss her, right here and now, but I manage to refrain.

For now.

“That does sound interesting,” Maggie says, setting the papers back down on Maria’s desk. “I accept, but can I have one request? That I work with Shane and Chucky as I get my feet wet. I trust them and want to learn from them.”

Maria stands, offering her hand. “Already planned, although you’ll get some oversight and training from me too. See you two on Monday then. Get out of here for now.”

Just as we reach the door, Maria speaks up again. “Oh, and Shane, I need that report. Today.”

I grin, knowing that I can get it done and still be able to take Maggie out for a little celebration later. “Sure thing.”

We walk out hand-in-hand, ready for the next beginning. Together.

EPILOGUE

MAGGIE

Walking into the apartment, I can immediately tell something is off and I go on high alert. Quietly opening my purse, I reach for my pistol. I scan the living room for anything amiss, keeping my back towards the door I just cleared.

Seeing nothing but trusting my instincts, I walk heel-toe further into the apartment, looking into the kitchen to make sure no one is ducked down to take advantage of the blind spot. Clear. Other than a couple of dirty dishes in the sink, everything looks just like it normally does.

Silently steadying my breath, I breach the bedroom doorway. Before I can fully scan, an arm pops down across mine, knocking my weapon to the floor and continuing the maneuver to twist my arms up behind me.

I'm yanked against a hard body, male, judging by the impressive bulge pressing against me, and a lot taller than me, considering the bulge is pressed to my back, not my ass.

"You forgot to check your blind spot first," a deep voice growls in my ear. "You know what happens now.

My training kicks in, and in one smooth motion, I pop my hips back to knock my attacker off-balance, pull forward in a twisting motion, and dive into a front roll to get space between us.

I grab my gun from the floor, standing in perfect stance with my attacker three feet away with his hands up in surrender. "On your knees."

My voice is hard, projecting power, something Maria's had me work on in training. He lowers to his knees, a smirk on his face as I step closer. "Usually, I'd prefer for you to be on your knees, sucking me off. But this works too. Come here and let me lick you, Angel."

The gig is up when he calls me that, and I laugh, letting the gun lower to my side. "Dang it, Shane! I was doing so well! And you ruined it with your

sweet dirty talk."

Shane takes the empty training gun from my hands, setting it on the dresser behind him and grabs around my waist to pull me to him. "Allie even laughed at my training pistol today. She sent a pic to Dominick, who said he thought mine would be pink, not bright orange."

Shane smiles. "How was your shopping?" But before I can answer, he shakes his head, "Never mind, tell me later. But really, you did just fine clearing the rooms and even handling me. But fuck if you don't turn me on when you get all fierce and badass like that. Makes me want to earn your sweetness back, taste the innocence you only share with me."

As he talks, he's kneading my ass, his nose nudging along my belly and down to my core. More brave than shy these days, I begin unbuttoning my blouse, tossing it to the floor.

Shane sits back on his heels, watching me. "More," he demands.

Having learned a few tricks from Allie, I don't obey instantly. Instead, I tease him, tracing a finger along the swells of my breasts, which are almost eye-level with Shane. He growls, licking along the edge of my bra, and I decide maybe teasing can wait. I reach behind to unclasp my bra and shrug it off.

Shane cups my breasts, pressing them together and burying his face in their fullness, groaning as he begins licking my skin, sucking here and there to leave the marks he always wants to see on my body.

Finally, he takes my nipple into his mouth, and my hands tug on his hair, holding him there, wanting more. His fingers work at the waist of my pants, undoing them before he helps them slide down my legs.

I step out of my shoes and then the pants, standing before Shane in just my cotton panties. I asked him once if he wanted me to wear sexier lingerie, but he assured me with his words, his hands, and his cock that he liked my simple bikini briefs. He said they look sweet, like me.

Seems his opinion hasn't changed because he's using his thumbs to trace my lips through the soaked cotton, desire darkening his eyes.

"Lie down on the bed," he rasps. "On your stomach."

Like I need a reason to do as he says, feeling Shane's weight on the bed as he straddles me, his strong thighs supporting him so he doesn't squish me.

"Hold the headboard, Angel."

I look back at him over my shoulder, but his face is unreadable. I move my hands up, holding one of the slats in the headboard.

Shane leans forward, and before I realize what he's doing, he's handcuffed my hands around the slat.

He sits back, pleased with himself. "Good girl."

I laugh, half turning even as my body thrills. We've talked about this, but this is the first time we've taken the game this far. I love it. "Shane? What are you doing?"

I can feel his rough hands tracing my skin, and once in a while, he bends over to lay a sucking kiss or nibble to a spot that entices him. "Celebrating. The first night I came here, I drove you home after that asshole scared you at the club. Your keyring had a fluffy white pompom on it."

I smile, loving that he remembers details like that about me. "I still have it. And?"

"And as of today, you're officially field cleared," Shane says. "Maria texted me the news."

I've been working hard these last few months, both with Shane and at Maria's insistence. I've learned so much, including FBI procedures, hand-to-hand fighting, firearms, and more. And while I've been able to sit next to Chucky as he pores over his computers, learning the in-house intel side, I hate that Shane is out there, undercover without me.

After his last mission, we decided he was going to wait for me so we could do the next assignment together. He took some well-deserved vacation and requested that Maria let him oversee my training, to which she agreed.

Maria's actually excited to have a team available for undercover work as a couple. Apparently, that's rare and makes us uniquely fit for a few different intel-seeking positions. I squeal in excitement at the news, kicking my feet behind Shane, but not dislodging him. "What's that got to do with handcuffing me to the bed?" I ask.

"Look at the handcuffs," Shane whispers, licking my earlobe and making me shiver. I look up to see white, fluffy handcuffs encircling my wrists and laugh. "They're a bit of the old you, soft and innocent, and a bit of the new you, badass. And best of all, they make you all mine."

Shane scoots back, sitting between my legs, and I arch my back, giving him access to my center. "Tell me, Angel."

I groan, more comfortable with the words now, but still only with him. Maria laughs at my cursing workarounds. "Lick my pussy, Shane. Suck my clit. Mark me up so everyone knows I'm yours."

He growls, lowering his face toward my pussy. Right before his tongue

touches me, he whispers, “Give me your sugary sweetness, Angel. I want it all.”

I’m already gasping from the heat of his breath, so when his tongue touches me, it’s like fireworks exploding inside me, and I buck, fucking his face and chasing his tongue. Shane tortures me, his tongue and lips keeping me balanced on the edge, drawing it out until my stomach is quaking and my toes curling in frustrated desire, and I whimper.

“That’s what I wanted, Angel,” Shane says before sucking hard on my clit. Like a pistol shot, I’m released, my body spasming as I cry my relief.

“Yes! Shane, I’m coming!”

I didn’t even hear him unbuckle his jeans, but as soon as I cry out, he’s there, shoving his thick cock into me. It paralyzes me, my orgasm stopped almost mid-crash as he fills me like I dream, pushing me higher again already.

“Fuck, Maggie. Finish coming on my cock. Squeeze me with your sweet pussy, and I’ll fill you up,” Shane says as he starts pumping deeply in and out. “I’ll give you what you want.”

I tense my muscles, drawing out every drop of pleasure from my own orgasm as Shane thrusts into me. I push back, meeting him stroke for stroke, wanting his cum inside me, wanting him to lose control and experience this bliss. Knowing what will send him over, I look back, biting my lip. “Fuck me, Shane. I love you so much.”

With a powerful thrust, Shane bottoms out deep inside me, grunting like an animal as the heat of his cum sears me. It pushes me to another toe-curling orgasm, and my eyes roll back, my mouth trapped open as I pull on the handcuffs. We’re going to have to do it again this way. I like it.

Spent, he lies on top of me, keeping his weight off so he doesn’t smush me. “That’s my dirty fucking girl,” he growls lightly in my ear, “and I love you too. In fact, I had a question.”

I raise my head, and he meets my lips with his own, sealing our vows of love with a kiss. “What’s that?” I ask as our lips part. “And can you unlock me now?”

“Of course . . . if you’re willing to lock me up,” Shane says, reaching into the bedside drawer and taking out a keyring with a small handcuff key. On the keyring is a golden circle, with a small, beautiful diamond on it. “Think you want to?”

“Is that what you call a proposal?” I tease, my heart racing. “Because if it

is, I'm gonna have to call Dominick to teach you some manners."

Shane laughs and unlocks my wrists, rubbing them gently even though the fuzzy trim cushioned my skin from the metal. I sit up, turning to face him and he moves to kneel in the floor beside the bed. "You know you've had the key to my heart for months now. This is just making it more . . . formal. You're my woman, I'm your man. Now . . . Maggie Postland, will you also be my wife?"

I smile, nodding like a bobblehead. "Yes!" I hold out my hand and Shane puts the ring on my finger. I look at it happily, then give him a huge kiss, a sloppy one because I can't stop smiling long enough to pucker properly.

Pulling back, I give him a serious look. "Oh, there's one condition . . ." I say, and his face sobers.

"You know I'll give you anything. What is it, Angel?"

I grin, not able to play serious any longer. "We do that again right now!" I say, nodding towards the handcuffs dangling from the headboard.

"Deal. You're a tough negotiator, future Mrs. Guthrie." He smirks, then tackles me and I squeal, rolling over and lifting my hands for him to cuff me again.

Our future is still full of unknown possibilities and opportunities, but one thing is for sure—us.

This is real. This is love. This is home.

Join my mailing list (www.laurenlandish.com) and receive 2 FREE ebooks! You'll also be the first to know of new releases, sales, and giveaways. If you're on Facebook, come join my Reader Group!

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Dirty Talk

Dirty Laundry

Read on for a preview of Dirty Laundry, and bonus material from my Irresistible Bachelor series! At the end, there's a preview (prologue) of my current work in progress!

MR. FIANCÉ

BY LAUREN LANDISH

It’s fake, but it feels so good.

Oliver Steele is supposed to be my knight in shining armor. He’s tall, handsome, and as cocky as he is rich. With his good looks and charm, no one’s going to suspect a thing. No one’s going to believe our engagement is fake.

But he’s taking this thing way too far. The way he wraps his arm around me like I'm his. The way he kisses me and presses his hard body up against mine. I almost believe that it's real. Almost.

He's doing it on purpose now; he loves that this is getting to me.

Two can play his game, I won’t let him win. By the time our week together is done, I’ll leave Oliver on his knees and begging.

But the minute we’re alone in the bedroom, I know I’m in over way my head. When he undresses me with his eyes, I realize I lost before the game even started. It’s only a matter of time before I lose myself in his touch and let him do whatever he wants to me.

I know what I want, but I can’t tell what’s real anymore

MINDY

“Can we get some service over here?” yells a woman who’s seated at one of the tables in the packed coffee house. “You girls are moving slow as molasses!”

I slap the lids down on a couple of cups and place them in a cup holder before taking them over to the counter. I pause for a moment to dab the sweat from my brow with my apron, sighing. My feet ache from running back and forth during the early morning rush and I need a damn break.

Jesus, I tell myself as I force a fraudulent smile on my face. This is the worst morning ever. It’s a blistering hot day in July. The A/C’s shoddy, it’s like 100 degrees outside, and it feels like I’m working in the fiery pits of hell. And to make matters worse, it’s a packed house and I’m running behind. I don’t know how much more of this madness I can take.

“We’ll be right with you, ma’am!” I call out, flashing her an easy smile and a playful wink that hides my irritation. I ring up the order for a man standing at the front of the line and then send him on his way with his two iced coffees. He’s immediately replaced by another man, who spits out his order so fast I almost feel dizzy, barely catching it all. “We’re just running a little behind schedule this morning.”

“Bullshit!” the woman snaps, glowering at the line of people in front of me. She’s a well-kept, middle-aged blonde with an immaculate short hairdo, garbed in fur-trimmed designer clothes that go along with her snobby attitude. “There’s three of you back there, yet I’ve been waiting for over ten minutes for my frap.” She shakes her head, practically frothing at the mouth. “It’s ridiculous!”

A lump of anger forms in my throat. I quickly swallow it back, glancing to the sky. *Dear God, give me the strength!*

I grit my teeth, my eyes cutting off to the side where the equipment is. I see Cassie, one of my employees, taking her sweet ass time blending something. She’s acting like we don’t have customers piling up out the ass. Throwing her long, brown hair back, she takes in a deep yawn as if she’s tired from working *so* hard. If she weren’t new, I’d chew her out.

I shake my head.

At least she looks nice enough in our new uniform, a blue skirt that shows a lot of leg, with a white V-necked T-shirt with *Beangal’s Den* printed over the chest. But looking cute and pretty doesn’t mean shit to me if you’re not getting work done.

Sighing, I look around for Sarah, my other employee, but she’s nowhere

to be seen.

Figures, I say to myself. *One disappears on me, and the other is moving slower than a snail. Why did I want to be the manager of this place again?*

"Ma'am," I say as politely as I can manage, turning my eyes back on her. I signal to the waiting customer that I'll be with him in a moment. "I understand your frustration with having to wait, but there's no need for that language. There are kids in here." I pause and add, "However, I promise that once you try our world-famous Tiger Caramel Frappuccino, you'll forget *all* about the wait. It's just *that* good." I flash her another smile and a wink, hoping to defuse the situation.

"Ha! We'll see! But if your service weren't so damn bad, we wouldn't have a problem," the woman hotly retorts, ignoring my peace-making attempt and looking as if she's ready for a fight.

I clench my hands, biting back a sharp response that instantly forms on my lips. Usually, I can handle even the most disgruntled customer with my charm, but this one seems immune to it. And she's testing my patience.

Taking a deep breath, I draw myself up, then speak in calm, even tones. "Ma'am, if you can't watch your language, I'm going to have to kindly ask that you leave."

Steeling myself, I wait for her to challenge me. But surprisingly, she just grumbles, muttering something nasty under her breath as she looks away.

I sigh in relief. I was half-expecting to have to call hotel security to deal with this one.

For the next five minutes, I go back to frantically taking and filling orders. I have to stop three times to tell Cassie to pick up the pace. It does little good. If anything, she moves slower, like she's silently protesting having to work hard.

Dammit. I just don't have the time to get on Cassie's ass right now. It wouldn't be so bad if Sarah weren't MIA.

It just so happens that as soon as the rush of customers is gone, Sarah reappears from the back.

"Where on earth have you been?" I gasp, setting down a tray I've brought over from an empty table on the counter. "We've been slammed out here! I'm doing three people's jobs!"

The twenty-year-old short brunette with dimples *normally* has a penchant for being overzealous about her job. She shakes her head as her eyes fall on Cassie. "I bet. She was probably up all night screwing Brad's brains out." I

hold in a groan. Sarah loves to get digs in against Cassie whenever she can. I ignore responding to the bait as Sarah looks back to me. “I’m sorry, Mindy. I was just having a little trouble back there.”

I frown with confusion. “What kind of trouble?”

Sarah tilts her head to the side, biting her lower lip. “Well, uh, my tampon __”

“TMI!” I say, cutting her off and looking around fearfully, hoping no one heard what she just said. “Jesus, Sarah,” I hiss quietly, “what are you trying to do, scare our customers away?”

Sarah blushes, her cheeks turning a rosy red. “Sorry!”

I shake my head, gently grabbing her by the shoulders and guiding her toward the dining area. “Never mind that. I need your help. There’s like five tables that need to be cleaned off and wiped down, and I need a few supplies from the back.”

Sarah nods dutifully, wiping her hands on her apron and making her way over to the messy tables. “On it, Boss!”

I sigh and shake my head as I watch her nearly run into a customer on her way. A pulsing ache runs down my side as I lean against the counter for support. I really don’t know how I’m going to get through the rest of the day. The stress of running this place is getting to me lately. In fact, ever since I became the operating manager of Beangal’s Den, I’ve been overworked and tired. Sure, I’m making more money than I ever have, but I’m beginning to wonder if it’s even worth it.

I work so much now that I have no social life. The vibrant small-town girl who wouldn’t hesitate to give a wild bull a run for his money has been replaced by an old maid. In fact, I can’t even remember the last time I’ve been with a guy and let him do the . . .

A buzz at my side and a Taylor Swift ringtone of *We Are Never, Ever Getting Back Together* interrupt my thoughts. Grumbling, I pull my cell out of my pocket and glance around the cafe to make sure things aren’t getting back out of hand before I answer it.

“Hello?”

“Mindy, my dear!” my mother’s voice greets me in a singsong tone.

I hold in a groan. I love my mom dearly, but she’s the last one I want to hear from right now. She always gives me a headache with her constant picking. “Mother,” I reply cordially.

“My God, Mindy,” she complains with a sniff, “we haven’t talked in

weeks. Can you sound any unhappier to hear from me?"

I knew I shouldn't have answered.

I try my best to keep my tone even. "Sorry, Mom. I'm just working right now. Can I call you back after my shift?"

"No," she replies flatly. "This is important."

I try not to sigh out loud. "Okay, Mom. You have two minutes before—"

A piercing shriek interrupts my words and I jump in surprise. I turn around to see Cassie wiping coffee off her chest at the counter. Luckily, she'd only gotten it on herself and not a customer. I swear, I don't know what I'm going to do with this chick.

"What the hell was that?" my mom demands on the other end of the line.

I pull away from the counter, shaking my head. Then I walk around, grab a towel from a shelf, and hand it over to Cassie. "Nothing," I reply. "Just the background noise of the cafe."

"It sounded like a dying cat."

Can't argue with that.

"There was something important you wanted to tell me," I remind her, getting back on point.

"I'm getting married next week," my mom announces, dropping the bomb on me without warning.

My jaw drops and my heart skips a beat at her words. While I've been expecting this, it still feels like a shock. After the heartbreak of Dad's sudden death during my senior year of high school, Mom swore on her grandmother's grave that she'd never marry again . . . until she met John Wentworth, a multi-millionaire businessman.

Unfortunately, I've heard more about John's status than anything else about him. During their courtship, it was almost all she talked about.

John has this, and John has that. John bought me this and John bought me that. And one of my favorites, 'Do I need to remind you how much John is worth?' It's a line she likes to pull out whenever I dare question the dynamics of her relationship. I swear, I think the only reason she's doing this is because he's loaded.

Still, despite my misgivings on the authenticity of their relationship, now is not the time to voice my displeasure or doubts. This is her happy moment, and whether I like it or not, I need to be supportive.

"Mom, that's wonderful!" I say in the most joyful tone I can manage.

"Isn't it?" Mom says proudly. "It's going to be absolutely gorgeous. He's

already rented out the venue too. A grand ballroom that sits on the shore with breathtaking views of the ocean."

"Gee, Mom, that sounds great. I'm so happy for you!"

There's a short pause and my mother's voice drops a few octaves. "And I want you to come."

I pause, glancing around the busy cafe. Cassie's finally gotten most of the coffee off her shirt, although there is a giant stain on it, and is taking a man's order. Meanwhile, Sarah's busting her ass, bringing the sitting patrons their fraps. She's looking pretty worn-out herself.

"Mom . . . I don't know," I say slowly, not wanting to upset her. "This is a little out of the blue. With my work schedule and all, I don't know if . . ."

I hear her sharp intake of breath. "Are you kidding me right now, Mindy Isabella Price? I'm your mother, the most important person in your life and the one who gave birth to—"

"You're right!" I say quickly. If I don't head that off, I'll be here until next week listening to her tell me how she was in labor with me for thirty-seven hours and that I owe her the universe. "I don't know what I was thinking. Of course I'll be there."

"You need to take at least a week off," Mom adds.

"A week—" I began to protest. Dear God, with Cassie and Sarah running things? They'll burn the place down.

"Yes, a week! Everyone's going to be there. Your sister, your cousin, and your aunt. Your grandmother."

I open my mouth to argue but then shut it with a snap. It's a fool's errand. My mother has a head harder than granite sometimes. Shaking my head, I bite my lower lip, thinking. *Damn, she drives a hard bargain.*

But the more I think about taking a week off, the more I begin to like the idea. I haven't seen my little sister, Roxy, in forever. Same for my cousin Layla, Aunt Rita, and Grandma Ivy Jo. It sure would be nice to take a break from this mess to relax and chill with the fam.

"I can do that," I say finally, feeling more at ease. "It'll be so good to see you and the family again."

Heaven help Cassie and Sarah.

"It sure will," Mom agrees. "Roxy has been asking about you non-stop."

A grin plays across my lips as I think about my younger sister. At twenty-one, Roxy's young, dumb, and full of fun. Basically, an even more smartassed and sassier version of myself.

But my Mom's next words take me out of my reverie and hit me like a lightning bolt. "And I expect you to bring your fiancé."

"My fiancé?" I ask with a croak when I can finally find my voice.

"Yes! You know, Harold. Tall. Handsome. Rich. Good in bed. The one you've been bragging to me about for the past year." She lets out a little laugh. "Roxy's been dying to meet him . . . and so have I."

Shit, shit, shit!

I pause, the phone pressed against my ear, my mind racing in panic.

That lie. I should've known it would come back to bite me in the ass. I'm not one for long-term relationships, and I got sick of Mom trying to set me up with some man back at home she wanted me to meet. Knowing her, probably a son of one of John's friends. I got tired of it, so I told her I was engaged to get her off my back.

Stupid me.

I suck in a deep breath, about to tell her the truth, but I stop. There's no way I can admit that I was lying for the past year and show up at her wedding without a man. Absolutely *no* way. By now, everyone in the family has heard about my fiancé, *Harold*, and mom is going to be overly dramatic if I fess up now. Besides, she's getting married. She doesn't need to hear that I lied.

"Mindy?"

"I—" I began to say, not knowing how I'm going to get out of this one. At that exact moment, Brianna Adams, my best friend and ex-partner in crime—and now part-owner of the Beangal's Den—walks through the door, her adorable little boy, Rafe, balanced expertly on her right hip.

Suddenly, I'm struck by an idea, my face lighting up like a light bulb. "Of course, Harold," I say cheerfully, regaining my composure. "He'll be coming. He's been wanting to meet you for forever!"

I can practically feel my Mom beaming through the phone. "Perfect! I'll be expecting you both. See you soon, love."

The line goes dead, and I'm quick to pocket my cell as I wave Brianna over to the counter. She's halfway there when the disgruntled woman from earlier jumps up from her seat. Apparently, she's finished with her drink and not satisfied in the least.

"You were wrong," she says loudly at me, brushing by Brianna to get to me. "It wasn't worth the wait. I've tasted far better, like the Unicorn Frappuccino they serve at the place on the other side of town." She shakes her head angrily and almost yells, "You guys suck. I'm never coming here

again!” Cutting her eyes at me, she spins around and walks off, nearly running into Brianna on her way out.

Brianna’s forehead crinkles into a frown as she reaches the counter. “Having a bad day, I take it?” She asks.

My chest fills with warmth as my eyes fall on my good friend. Dressed in a white and yellow flower dress that has a low V-cut with her long brown hair pulled into a lazy bun, she looks absolutely voluptuous. Shit, had I known pregnancy could do that, I would’ve gotten knocked up years ago.

“Besides the A/C not working and being overrun for over half the morning? Business as usual,” I say dismissively. With my mind on my idea, the dissatisfied customer is already old news. “We were a little behind earlier.”

“I feel sorry for you. Someone’s been called about the A/C,” Brianna says. She pauses and frowns again. “And what the hell’s a Unicorn Frappuccino?”

I roll my eyes. “It’s all the rage right now. What rock have you been hiding under?”

“Have you tried it?” Brianna asks curiously.

I shake my head. “Hell, no! I have a friend who did and she was shitting glitter and rainbows all week.”

“Mindy!” Brianna protests.

I shake my head. “I’m serious! It’s a real drink.”

Brianna looks like she’s about to argue and then thinks better of it, shaking her head. “I’ll take your word for it.”

“Good,” I say, reaching across the counter to tug on Rafe’s small hand. He giggles as I shake it. He’s a spitting image of both his parents, with adorable baby blues and dirty-blonde hair. “How’s my little man doing?”

Brianna smiles, her eyes lighting up as she looks at her baby boy. “Good. He’s talking even more now and can almost form a full sentence.”

“That’s awesome.” I grin at Rafe and soften my tone into a voice as sweet as sugar. “Can you say a sentence for Aunt Mindy? Huh, Rafey?”

“Hungry!” Rafe says, reaching for his mom’s left breast.

“Rafe stop it!” Brianna snaps, grabbing Rafe’s little arm before he can pull her boob out in public, her cheeks turning red. “Sorry,” she mutters. “He does that all the time.”

I shake my head. I know I shouldn’t, but I can’t help myself. “Takes after his Daddy, and I don’t blame him, Jersey Maid. You look like you can feed

the village with those milk jugs."

"Mindy!"

"Girl, I'm serious. What are you, a triple-D now? If I ever run out of creamer, I know just the person to call."

"I'm gonna leave!" Brianna threatens.

I let out a laugh. "Oh my God, lighten up, will you? It was just a joke."

Brianna scowls. "Well, you're not funny."

"Yeah, I am." The grin on my face slowly fades as I remember my idea.

"So how's Gavin?" I ask, clearing my throat. Gavin, Brianna's husband, is almost just as good a friend as Brianna is to me. A former football star, he's settled down into small-town life with surprising ease. But I would think it would be hard not to with the beautiful ranch they moved into. "He enjoying fatherhood much?"

Brianna nods, a smile coming to her face. "Very much so. He can't wait until Rafe is old enough to go fishing with him. He talks about it every day."

"What about work?" I ask, leaning in with intense interest.

Brianna gazes at me for a moment. "Well, with the money he made during his football career and his investments, he's not hard up for a job. He's taking it easy right now. The kids love the football camp he runs, mentoring disadvantaged children, and helping local actors—"

Brianna's talking, but I'm starting to zone out, my mind drifting to my predicament.

It seems she notices, and Brianna stares at me suspiciously. As my best friend, she always knows when something is up. "Mindy Price, what is going on in that head of yours?"

"Umm . . . I need to ask you something," I admit.

Brianna arches an eyebrow as I feel sweat begin to form on my brow. "Oh, really? What's that?"

I stand there silently, not knowing how to form my next words, my heart pounding like a battering ram. *Jesus, she's not going to make this easy.*

"Mindy," she presses. "I'm waiting."

I'm unable to part my lips. I don't know how to tell her about the lie that I'm caught up in.

"Mindy!" Bri cracks.

"Mindy!" Rafe echoes, pointing at me.

Just say it!

Closing my eyes, I take a deep breath. And when I open them, I finally

ask, “Know any hot guys named Harold?”

OLIVER

“Pair of aces,” I announce with a grin, turning my cards over on the wooden table and gathering the pot from the middle of the table in one giant swoop. “Bend over, buddy. Your ass is mine.”

“Fuck, man!” Jason Woods, a twenty-four-year-old friend and fellow businessman yells, slapping his hand down on the table with enough force to cause some of my chips to go flying off, his face an angry red. “That’s the second fucking time you called my bluff,” he complains.

I sit back in my seat and appraise him, hiding a smirk. Jason’s not a good poker player. He’s okay when he’s winning, but whenever he starts losing or is under pressure, I can read him like a book. With his tells, I can easily see if he’s bluffing or if he has a good hand.

“He’s a lucky bastard,” Kevin White, another buddy of mine in his early thirties who’s sitting beside me, agrees. Shaking his head, he rolls back the sleeves of his white dress shirt, his blonde hair glinting against the single light hanging above our heads. Having lost nearly all night, he’s not as pissed as Jason is. But then again, Kevin never gets that pissed about anything. I bet he could lose his life savings and his reaction would be mild.

“Sorry, boys,” I say with a grin and then joke, “I taught Phil Ivey everything he knows.”

Jason lets out a derisive snort. “Dude, you’re so full of shit. Your whole game is about sitting there with that cocky smirk on your face and getting lucky on the river.”

I huff out a short laugh. “Don’t hate. A win’s a win.”

“And a dick’s a dick,” Jason snarls.

“Hey, hey, now,” Gavin Adams says sternly from across the table, shaking his head at Jason. Dressed all in black, he looks like the dark knight with golden hair as he scowls. “Let’s not. We all know Oliver’s good. We’re all grown men here. There’s no reason to get pissed when we lose. This is like the third time you’ve popped off after a loss, and it’s getting old.”

Gavin’s words seemed to calm Jason at once. “You’re right.” He barely looks my way as he adds, “Sorry, Oliver. Tired of losing, that’s all.”

As a former football star and kind of a celebrity, Gavin has more clout

with the friends in our circle. No matter how wrong he might be, they almost always agree with whatever he says. It's a nice perk, but it's got to get old with everyone being fake around you. I'd rather someone give it to me straight.

I toss Gavin an imperceptible nod of thanks, though I think I could've handled the situation just fine myself.

"All good," I tell Jason. "No offense taken."

"Yeah, cause you have my money," Jason mutters under his breath, but I pretend I don't hear it.

"Glad y'all got that out the way. Now can we fucking play?" Kevin says.

The blood rushes through my veins at his words, Jason's anger quickly forgotten. Looking at my stash, I rub my palms together in anticipation. "Let's do it."

I love playing poker and taking risks. The higher the stakes, the bigger the rush.

Rock climbing, sky diving, martial arts, poker . . . if there's a real risk involved, I want a taste of it. It hasn't always been this way, though.

As an executive at Steele Pharmaceuticals, I never wanted for cash. My father was the CEO and owner, and I was his right-hand man. I could have and do anything I wanted. But with that position of power came a fuck ton of stress . . . along with a lot of disagreements. The stress and the arguing got so bad that I eventually sold all of my shares of the company and quit after my seven-year tenure, leaving my Dad to run the company by himself.

My father was furious with me over my move. He thought my leaving at the height of our success was a huge slap in the face. But I couldn't help myself. If I'd stayed there any longer, we would've ended up at each other's throat and hating each other. I didn't want it to be that way, so I left.

A year later, I have a net worth of over ten million, living the small-town life. I even own a small home a few blocks down from my mother when I could be living large. It's been quite an adjustment for someone so used to the city. But it's nice to be able to help my mom, a poor single woman who chose not to accept a red cent from my wealthy father when they got divorced.

"Well, as long as you gentlemen don't start pulling out guns and shooting each other," says old man Joe, the sixty-year-old barber and host for our games, "I'm fine with it."

I chuckle as my eyes find the man sitting at the head of the table, dressed

in dark clothing with a straw hat on. Old Joe has a large belly and a big mop of salt and pepper hair. He has one of those finely groomed beards that hides his face and makes him look like he's jolly even when he's pissed. He's the living punchline of the old joke, if a town has two barbers, go to the one with the bad haircut since he's the good one and the other one sucks.

"Let me get a smoke first," Jason says, taking out a cigarette and a lighter in one smooth flourish. He's about to light it when Gavin shakes his head.

"Not in here," Gavin says firmly. "If you want to do that shit, go outside."

"Come on, man," Jason whines. "Are you serious? We're playing poker. Smoking goes hand in hand."

"We have to tell you this shit every time. You're the only one who smokes here. Take it outside."

Jason scowls, still fingering the cigarette like it's his lifeline. "My wife doesn't care if I smoke."

"Yeah?" Gavin says, "Well, mine does. And I'm not going back home smelling like second-hand ass funk."

Jason mutters something under his breath, but he stuffs the lighter and the pack of cigarettes back into his pocket.

"How's Brianna anyway?" Kevin asks.

A light brightens Gavin's eyes and a slight smile comes to his lips. "Pretty good. She's having a blast raising our little man Rafe, but lately, she's been complaining about the baby weight that won't come off."

Kevin chuckles. "Tara does the same thing. But I think it fits her."

Gavin nods, a boyish smirk curling his lips. "I rather like it myself," he agrees.

I shift in my seat, feeling slightly uncomfortable. Talk of wives and babies always makes me feel anxious for some reason. I don't particularly have a desire to settle down with a woman and have children.

Not when my last relationship left me sour with how overly needy and clingy she was. She loved the way I fucked, but she loved the size of my bank account even more. When I found out what she was truly after, I dropped her faster than a hot potato.

Since then, love 'em and leave 'em has become my motto. Except lately, I haven't been doing much loving at all. I'm always too busy with my corporate security startup and helping my mom when she needs it.

In fact, it's high time I get some action. It's been awhile since I made a girl . . .

“So when are you going to settle down, Oliver?” Jason asks me, tearing me out of my thoughts. “You’re the only guy at the table who’s still single.”

I clear my throat. Why do we always end up talking about this shit? Can’t we just play the damn game without going into our personal lives? “I don’t know. Haven’t met the one yet.”

Kevin shakes his head. “You’re missing out, man. Nothing beats having a family to call your own.”

“I could argue against that,” I say in braggadocious tones, not letting any of my feelings show. “Being free to do whoever you want, whenever you want has its perks.” I wiggle my eyebrows for maximum effect.

“So about that game,” Gavin says, suddenly eager to change the subject, noticing that it’s something I’d rather not discuss. “Let’s play.”

Joe deals me my two cards, and I look—Ace of diamonds and the Ace of spades. I wait while Gavin checks his cards. “I’ll raise five thousand,” Gavin says.

“Five grand? Are you out of your damn mind?” Jason asks, shaking his head. “Man, every time I get a decent deal, you just slam the pot with that shit. Fuck this. I’m sitting this one out.”

“Yeah, me too,” Kevin adds, turning his hand over and tossing it in. “Two-four off suit? I’m not an idiot yet.”

Gavin’s done that before, tried to bully the little bits of the blind by splashing the pot, but I’m not taking it this time. Not with paired aces. “Ten grand.”

Joe drops the flop, and I see magic. Ace of hearts and two sevens. I’ve got a full house—three aces and two sevens. Gavin licks his lips, and I know I have him. I got exactly what I needed. He checks. I knew he was trying to steal the pot.

“You wanna raise the stakes? I raise twenty thousand,” I reply, shoving in the chips. The odds of him beating my full house are slim to none, and I’ll admit, I’d like to get one over on the former football star.

I can’t believe it when Gavin calls my bet. “Call,” Gavin says, his hands shaking slightly. Joe gives Gavin a look but shrugs as Gavin moves in the chips, and then he flips over the turn card.

King of diamonds. Gavin blinks, his eyes tight. “Check,” he says.

Inside, I grin. I’ve got him. Even if he had two kings in his hand, he loses. “One hundred thousand.”

There’s not a sound in the room as everyone looks at Gavin, wondering

what the fuck he's doing. Finally, he takes a deep breath and slides his chips into the middle. "Call."

Joe drops the river, and I feel a sense of concern. But then I see it's the ten of clubs. No chance in hell he can beat me, but his next words confuse the hell out of me. "Five hundred grand," he says.

Gavin gives me a tight smile and slides the money in. Has he lost his fucking mind? "This one's mine," he gloats.

"Hardly," I say with a laugh, pushing in my chips. "Call." Gavin grins again and turns over his cards. "Four sevens."

As soon as I see the pair of sevens, the air is ripped from my lungs.

I stare at the cards in disbelief, feeling numb all over. He raised five grand on a pair of fucking sevens and then flopped four-of-a-kind? How lucky can you be? I can't believe it—he flopped a four of a kind. Around the table, everyone seems to be echoing my shock. Old Joe, Kevin, and Jason are frozen like statues, staring at me with surprise in their eyes.

I clench my jaw, anger rising from the pits of my stomach. It doesn't matter though. I accepted the bet and I lost.

I get up from my seat, feeling absolutely defeated, ignoring all the eyes on me. "I'll transfer the funds to your account in the morning," I say, keeping my tone even, even though I'm fucking pissed with myself. I don't know what the hell I was thinking.

It fucking sucks losing that much money, but it's not going to break me, though it's sure going to hurt.

"I'm done for the night. That's gonna put me on tilt if I keep playing," I tell them, turning to leave.

"Wait," Gavin says, standing up.

I turn, arching an eyebrow. "Yeah?"

Gavin glances around at the other men. "Are we done for the night? Let me talk to Oliver alone."

Without saying a word, Kevin, Jason, and Joe get up, gather their things, and leave the room, each one casting sympathetic looks my way as they file out.

"What's this all about?" I ask. "It's a lot of money, but you know it's not going to break me."

Gavin stares at me for several moments before asking, "What if you could keep your money?"

I frown. "What do you mean? I got overconfident and lost fair and

square."

Gavin goes silent, studying my face. Finally, he speaks up. "I have a proposition for you."

"What—"

"You do a favor for me and we'll call it even."

I want to tell Gavin to go fuck himself. I'm a man, and I pay my debts. But a part of me is intrigued now, and I'm dying to see what Gavin has up his sleeve. "What kind of favor?"

Gavin steeples his fingers together, staring at me, appraising me.

"Well?" I ask, the anticipation killing me. "What is it?'

His next words shoot across the table like a speeding bullet. "I need you to pretend to be a friend's fiancé for a week."

I let out an incredulous laugh. I was totally not expecting something like that. "What?"

Gavin proceeds to tell me all about his friend, who's the godmother of his child and best friend of his wife, and how she's gotten herself into a bind because of a lie.

"Absolutely not," I say firmly when he's done, shaking my head. I'm not gonna lie, his offer is tempting. But there's no way I can accept it. I have too much lined up. Business meetings, lunch dates . . . and there were those repairs to my mom's attic I'd promised her I'd fix myself instead of paying some stranger to do it. "I'm not disrupting my life and plans to be some chick's cuckold for a week."

Gavin leans forward in his seat. "Just think of it this way . . . you get to spend a week with a chick for over half a million dollars."

"My half a million dollars," I say dryly.

"*Was* your half million," Gavin corrects. "And you can keep it if you just do this one little thing."

I stare at him long and hard. His words are tempting enough, but it suddenly dawns on me how invested he is in this.

"You set this whole thing up," I accuse. "You knew I was the only single guy in our circle. You've been waiting all night to try to get me in this position."

Gavin manages to look guilty but doesn't say anything.

I begin to get up from my seat. "I'm done—"

Gavin reaches into his pocket and tosses a small photograph across the table. As soon as I lay eyes on it, my mouth goes dry. The young woman in

the photo is drop-dead gorgeous, with beautiful golden brown hair, gorgeous green eyes that sparkles with mischievousness, and an impish smile to match.

"Yeah, so what? I was getting shit for cards and had to make a move. I didn't expect to flop those sevens—that was a miracle. Anyway, it's one week," Gavin nearly purrs, watching my intense interest in the photo. "And you have your money."

His words hardly register. I can't seem to bring myself to take my gaze off the picture. The playfulness in her eyes seems to call to me.

When I finally look away from it, I have only one question on my mind.

"What did you say her name was?"

MINDY

"You owe me," Brianna says as she hangs a right turn. "Like . . . give me your firstborn owe me."

I laugh. I can't help it. We're driving to her ranch, and it's an amazing day. The sunroof is down on her convertible, and for the first time in months, I feel like I'm getting back to normal. With the wind rustling our hair, I feel like a woman in my mid-twenties who has a million options in life. Not an overworked coffee shop manager stuck in day-to-day drudgery.

I was a little surprised when Bri came by to pick me up, telling me we're meeting the new mystery guy. It's *so* not her style. She's always been the conscientious one of us. And despite all my needling, Brianna's been mum about how he looks. It's intriguing.

"How on earth did you find someone so fast?" I ask as we leave town and head out toward the ranch. Honestly, I didn't and still don't expect much. After all, who the hell would be willing to do this? There's likely not a man who could live up to all the hype that I've made "Harold" out to be.

"I didn't," Bri says with a twinkle in her eye. "Gavin did."

I'm a little surprised. I mean, Gavin's a friend and all, but damn, that's the sort of stuff you don't even expect from your sister. Actually, thinking of Roxy, she would hook me up with a guy . . . and I'd regret it.

As long as he can remember what I tell him, it'll be fine, I try to tell myself.

"Do I even wanna know how Gavin got Mr. Mystery Man to agree?" I ask, slightly curious. I remind myself to never underestimate Gavin Adams.

Bri smiles. “I’m not even sure myself. All he said was the guy owed him a favor. I didn’t ask any questions.”

“What *do* you know about him?” I ask, unable to contain my curiosity.

“I really don’t know anything, Mindy. I’m as in the dark as you are. I jumped on it because, well, you got anyone else lined up?”

I stick my tongue out at her. “Bitch, you don’t even know if he’s hot?!” I can’t help myself. I feel like a little school girl and it’s so unlike me.

Brianna shakes her head. “I have no idea. But he made it seem like your problem was solved. Maybe it’s an old football buddy . . . you could be shacking up with a stud for a week.”

“Great, just what I need. A dumb jock who thinks he’s—sorry, I know Gavin’s not like that.”

Ugh. I feel like I’m going on a blind date and I’m getting all antsy. I hate this.

Brianna waves me off. “I trust Gavin to not do you wrong. Just relax. We’re almost there.”

I’m not so trusting. We’re always joking with each other, but I hold my tongue. I mean, I did have a role in hooking him and Brianna up. I hope he remembers that.

We get to the ranch, and when I step out of the car, Gavin greets us outside, a smile on his face. Bri scoops up Rafe from next to him, tickling him and making her son giggle while Gavin and I exchange hugs. “I can’t thank you enough for what you’ve done for me,” I tell him. “Miracle worker.”

Gavin shrugs, smiling a secret smile that tells me he’s got something up his non-existent sleeves. He’s at home, and he’s got no problem showing off the body that made him into a football star. If anything, he’s even more ripped, if possible. “It’s no big deal.”

“So how do you know him?” I say suspiciously, getting right to the point. “Bri’s keeping me in the dark.”

“We’re good friends.”

I gawk at Gavin, alarm bells going off. Friends, sure. But this . . . “*Good* friends? You just asked him to be some stranger’s fake fiancé and he said yes?”

Gavin smirks, that maddening twist of the lips that I know makes Bri both weak in the knees and ready to choke him. Right now, I’m ready to choke him. “We have an arrangement. That's all that really matters.”

I scowl. He’s really getting a kick out of this. “Well, where is he?”

Gavin steps to the side with a sweep of his arm, giving me a mocking half-bow. “He’s waiting for you in the living room.”

“Okay.” Suddenly, I’m nervous. I was anxious on the way over, but now I’m nervous, and that’s something I never feel. I mean, not about meeting guys. Guys have been easy to me ever since I realized that the combination of my smile and my boobs usually shorts out their big brains and turns on their little brains. Problem is, I always attract the wrong ones.

I start walking toward the front door and then stop, turning around when I don’t hear anyone else moving. Instead, I see them staring back at me, Gavin still with that cocky grin on his face.

“Well, you coming?” I ask, annoyed. I get it—Gavin’s pulling a bit of a joke, but this is taking it too far.

They both shake their heads. “I thought it best that you two meet and get to know each other,” Gavin says. “We’re gonna go for a walk.”

“What?” I ask, shocked. “Brianna Adams, you’re not gonna do this to me!”

Brianna shrugs, chuckling from something Gavin whispers in her ear before turning a saucy grin on me. “Mindy Isabella Price, don’t tell me you’re scared of meeting a man?”

I snap my lips shut. She has a point. I’m never scared of anything, especially not men. I stick my nose up in the air, turning on my heel with a harrumph.

“Fine. I don't need you. Bye, Felicia.”

Brianna laughs as I spin around and march down the hall. Despite my show of bravery, I can barely stop my heart from hammering away in my chest. By the time I reach the archway, I’m covered in a sheen of sweat. I pause at the doorway, gathering myself.

Get ahold of yourself, Mindy.

Taking a deep breath, I start to relax. I’m in control. I’ve got this.

I walk through the doorway into the living room. “Hello?”

My breath stills in my lungs and my heart stops as the man in one of the chairs sets down the book he’s been reading and looks up.

There, sitting in a leather club chair, is God. Well, he’s not God, but maybe the dark, sensual reflection of Him . . . maybe the Devil? His coal black hair is accented by rich brown eyes that gleam with intelligence and a dark dangerousness that both chills and thrills me at the same time. He’s

wearing a white shirt with bulging biceps straining against the fabric, and I can see the swell of his chest muscles under his tanned skin through the deep V at his chest. I swear it looks like he's got a grapefruit stuffed in his pants as he sits there, his legs slightly apart like he owns the place, an amused smirk on his sensual lips.

Say something, you idiot!

I know I should speak, but it's like a cat's got my tongue. He's put me in a trance and he hasn't even said anything yet.

"Were you expecting someone else?" he asks with a slight chuckle, and I note the confidence in his eyes. The cocky curl of his lip. He thinks he's all that and the bonus prize, doesn't he?

I don't fucking think so.

I stand up straight and walk over. His eyes follow me, and my skin pricks, my normal confidence evaporating as I get another look at him. Holy fuck, he's hot. I sit down across from him, crossing my legs, showing him what I think is my best asset.

I gesture between us, trying to appear more confident than I feel. "I want to start by saying that I appreciate your doing this for me—"

"Gavin," he says, interrupting me. His voice is deep, rich, and soothing. It reminds me of the taste of smooth, delicious white chocolate. "I'm doing it for Gavin."

A flush comes over my cheeks. "Well then . . . doing it for Gavin," I say, still a little tongue-tied. "Sorry, this is all catching me a little off balance. Uhm, what's your name?"

The man chuckles, and his dark eyes gleam as he looks me over. "Oliver. And trust me, I was just as shocked when Gavin told me about it."

I feel like squirming. He's got me heating up, and all I know is his first name! "So, why are you doing this for Gavin?"

His eyes never leave my face as he replies, "I owe him."

I want to ask him to elaborate, but I can tell in his posture that it's something he doesn't want to talk about.

"Talkative, are we? Well, can you at least tell me *something* about yourself?" I ask. "Have you been married? Got any kids?"

He chuckles. "Never married, and last girlfriend was over a year ago." He scratches his chin, and for some reason, it makes him even hotter that he's not totally perfect. I can't help it. I'm relieved he hasn't been married. "I recently quit my job, actually," he adds.

“Why?” I ask. Here it comes, the big let-down. He spends his days playing video games and wants to be a YouTube ‘star’.

He pauses for a moment, choosing his words carefully. “I had a disagreement with my boss and decided it was time to go on my own way. So I moved here. Mom has a bad leg and needed help around the house. I wanted to help her and maybe start up something here in town.”

I nod softly. Better than I hoped. “That’s admirable.”

“I hear you work up at that coffee shop in the Grand Waterway,” Oliver replies. “Enjoy it?”

I roll my eyes. “Most of the time. I’ve been hoping to open my own one day. There’s a ton that we have to do to fit with hotel policies that I don’t like. I’ve been saving and saving, and I mean, working with Gavin and Bri is great and all, but . . .”

“Running a business is harder than you think. If you think you work a lot now, wait until you have your own,” Oliver says.

I stop, surprised. “Yeah, but it will be mine so—”

“You’ll work harder?” he interrupts. “Yeah, at first you will, but then it’ll become the same old, same old and you’ll want to slop the work off on some other poor bastard.”

“That’s not my style,” I say.

He shrugs, uncaring. “That’s what they all say.”

“Well, they’re wrong,” I say more sharply than I intended, and I realize it. “Sorry. But I don’t shirk shit off onto my workers.”

Oliver waves it off. “Don’t be. At least you’re being real. I imagine you won’t be as soon as we see your family.”

His little jab stings. But I feel like I have to do this next bit. “My mother, she’s uh . . . she’s marrying someone who has money. She’s become a little snobby.”

Oliver groans, rubbing at his temples as he gives me raised eyebrows. “One of those?”

“Yeah. One of those.” I pause, digging in my purse to bring out a picture. “I brought a picture book with names attached. This might be a little easier if you can recognize a few of them.”

I toss it over to him, and he opens it and begins flipping through pages. “Aunt Rita,” he mutters.

“You’ll love her. She’s a firecracker with a sharp mouth.”

Oliver keeps going, pausing a few pages later. “Roxy? Cute name. She

looks like you.”

“That’s my sister. She calls herself a younger, better version of me. But that’s a lie.” I swing my hair around, lifting my nose to the ceiling. “You can’t top perfection.”

He chuckles and flips through a few more pages then sets the book aside. “I can handle it. I’ll give it a look over later.”

“Also,” I say, digging in my purse and pulling out a piece of paper, “I’ve prepared a list of rules, some dos and don'ts. Just so we’re on the same page here.”

I feel stupid. When I made it this morning, I didn't know I’d be walking right into a man who’s literally sex on a stick, but he just flashes me a little grin. “Hit me.”

I try not to tremble as I recite them. “First, when we’re not in the presence of my family, you’re not allowed to touch me. And if there comes a time where we display affection for show, only I initiate it. Also, in front of my family, you’ll never lay a hand anywhere on my body that can be deemed inappropriate. Last, you’ll always be respectful and laugh at my jokes.”

My heart is pounding as I lower the paper. “I’ll give you a paper with more, but that’s all I could think of for now.”

He chuckles, amused. “That’s cute. But I’m going to let you know now, Princess, that I’ve never followed rules well.”

I grip my throat as anger flares up. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

He smiles. “We’re supposed to be engaged, aren't we?”

“Yes, but—” I start, but Oliver cuts me off, his eyes quieting me in an instant.

“Okay then. Then let’s be real. If I want to kiss you in front of your family, I will. If I want to grab your ass to show them what’s mine, I will.” His eyes bore into me with an intensity that seems to say, *and if I want to fuck you, I will. So get your pretty little head used to that idea, Princess.*

Oh, my God. What have I gotten myself into?

“I’m willing to pull off this little act for Gavin,” he continues, “but I’m not going to act like some cuckold to make you look better.”

I draw myself up, ready to unleash fury on him. Let him know that he can go fuck himself and I’ll just fess up to my lie, but I’m interrupted by a sound in the doorway. It’s Brianna in the doorway with Gavin, Rafe balanced on her hip. “Everything going okay in here? Have you two decided where you’re staying on your honeymoon yet?”

Looking at the grinning Brianna and the adorable baby in her arm, I feel my defenses falling. Fessing up makes my stomach crawl, and I don't have much choice now. I can't find someone else and he knows it.

But looking at the smirk on Oliver's face, something tells me this might actually be fun.

"Yeah," I finally say to Brianna. I turn my eyes back to Oliver, giving him a challenging grin of my own. "Hell, I might enjoy doing some ball busting over the next few days."

Oliver gives me a smirk. One that says *like hell, you will.*

OLIVER

I trail my finger over the photograph of Mindy, sitting back in my office chair and shaking my head. I shouldn't be doing this. I've got a lot to get done before I leave. Getting a company off the ground takes a lot of work, even with a large bank account. But instead of getting work done, I'm staring at this photo.

She's so fucking beautiful. I thought I knew what to expect, but meeting her in person was intense. As soon as I laid eyes on her, any regrets went out the window. I played it cool, though, not letting her know the effect she had on me.

My fingers trace over the lips of her picture. I can't wait to taste them. The way she tried to get all high and mighty with me makes me eager to show her who's the boss. If she thinks I'm about to follow all of her silly little rules, she's got another thing coming. I'm gonna take what I want, and judging from the look she had in her eyes, she's gonna love every minute of it.

My dick hardens in my pants and suddenly, I have to adjust my collar and loosen my tie. *Fuck*, I think to myself. *I haven't gotten this worked up in a long time. Get a hold of yourself, Oliver.*

But the only thing I want to take hold of is her ass. Grip those bubbly, luscious cheeks in my hands and pull her in close, taking her body and ravaging it for everything that it's worth. My cock throbs harder in my pants, dying to be let out even if I am in my office. I hold in a groan. I refuse to let her have this power over me.

But no matter how hard I try, I can't get her out of my head. Even worse,

I’m actually looking forward to the trip. I need this. I’m gonna have her eating out of my hand in no time. Oh, the things I’m going to do to her. I bite my lower lip at the thought.

My cock throbs again, but I ignore it. I tuck the picture of Mindy underneath my briefcase and push the thoughts of her out of my mind.

I open my email on my laptop, trying to focus on the things I need to take care of. It's afternoon and I'm stuck in my office in the middle of town, trying to get my affairs in order before my trip. We’re leaving in two days, and whether I need it or not, part of me wonders if I’m walking into a fucking trap. Mindy’s mom must be a piece of work for her to have to lie.

There’s a knock on my door, pulling my attention away. Martha, my part-time secretary, sticks her head in. “Mr. Steele? Your ride is ready.”

“Thanks, Martha,” I say. “You sure you can hold down the fort?”

Martha looks around our small, two-room office and chuckles. “I’m pretty sure,” she says. “But sir, hiring a car?”

“He’s family, and besides, it’s a tax write-off,” I joke. Martha is great for me. She’s a natural penny pincher, and it helps balance my splurging tendencies. I know she’s saved me a lot of money as we get Steele Security Solutions off the ground. “When we get back, I’ll introduce you to him. Your daughter might like him.”

Martha, whose daughter is nineteen and just starting college, laughs. “If he’s anything like you, Mr. Steele, I’ll have my shotgun ready.”

I laugh. “You’ve got me all wrong. Okay, I’ll be back.”

Outside, the black Lincoln SUV with a driver waits, and I climb in. The driver and I say nothing as we head over to the university. I spend the whole time working on my tablet, relishing the peace and quiet. When we pull up outside one of the dorms, my brother Anthony sticks his head out of a third-floor window, a wiseass grin on his face.

“Don’t you just look important as fuck?” he yells loud enough for the whole campus to hear.

I growl, already fed up with his antics. I know he's younger, twenty-one years old and still in college, but he goes out of his way to be a smartass and piss me off. When our parents divorced, he badly wanted to go live with my father, but my father wanted me to go with him instead. So Anthony went with Mom, and it was timing I guess that brought me home just as he started looking for his own freedom. He’s going to college in town but staying in the dorm, and he needed to not have Mom to worry about.

“Get your ass down here, would you?” I yell back, knowing I look like an asshole standing outside a college dorm building in a suit and tie and yelling up at one of the students, but I can’t help it. They’ve got locks on the doors.

“Two minutes!” Anthony says, and for once, he’s actually on time, though I sort of wish he’d put on something besides a sleeveless T-shirt and jeans. He approaches the SUV, laughing at the magnetic removable logo on the side.

“Steele Security Solutions? Sounds like something out of a damn comic book. You got a super suit in the back?”

“Just get in,” I grumble, making Tony laugh as he gets under my skin. I swear, every little brother in the world is born with the sole mission of pissing off their elder sibling.

“What, you missing the secretary and the morning blowjob?” he needles me, as always. “You’re usually more patient.”

“I’ve got shit to do, that’s all. I’m going to be out of town for a week,” I reply as the driver pulls away. “I’ve arranged for Martha to be looking in on Mom.”

“Martha? She’s nearly as old as Mom,” Anthony bitches. “Can’t you at least get some naughty little home helper instead? I’ve got vacation next week, asshole.”

I check the urge to give him the beating my parents never did. He’s a cocky little shit. “I’d have just asked you, but I know you’re going to be spending your whole vacation chasing tail.”

“Damn, Oli, that’s harsh even for you,” Anthony says. “So what’s the deal? I can help if you need it. I mean, it’s Mom.”

I think for a second, calming down. “Okay then. Listen, I need you to take care of some things while I’m gone.”

“Where are you going to—” Anthony starts, but I cut him off. My brother is all questions when he wants to be.

“That doesn't matter,” I say flatly. “I need you to man up and take care of some stuff this week. Martha can take care of the office, but I need you on backup. And I need you to help out with Mom.”

“When are you leaving?” Anthony asks, growing more serious. He’s got some potential at least.

“In a few days,” I say, not offering more.

Anthony shakes his head. “I can’t. Dad wants me to check on a property for him down in Georgia. I’m flying out Tuesday.”

“Fuck him,” I say, sharper than I intend. “And fuck his grooming.”

Anthony recoils slightly and goes silent for a moment. “Are you going to tell me what happened between you two? It’s been months now, and neither of you will say what went down.”

I clench my teeth, looking out the window. I still get hot under the collar thinking about the disagreements we had. “Another time.” I make sure I say it with enough conviction so he won’t press the issue.

Anthony’s silent for a few moments before he replies, his voice quiet and intense. “You’re an asshole, Oliver. And Dad’s gonna be pissed when he can’t count on me.”

“That’s too bad. He doesn’t need you. Mom does.”

“He wants me to take your place, you know. At the company,” Anthony says. “Says he needs a right hand he can trust.”

Anger surges through my chest. He gave me the same line of shit back when I was twenty-one and he was recruiting me. But Anthony doesn’t understand. “That will be the biggest mistake you ever make.”

“Seems like you’re the one making a big mistake,” Anthony replies hotly. “Look at you, giving up your stake in our father’s company and moving here. And for what? Tell me one thing that’s here for you.”

“Mom,” I say. Truth be told, the list ends there, but it’s enough.

Anthony goes silent, guilt showing on his face. I know why. He wanted desperately to go with Dad like I did, to live the good life. But that would’ve left our mother all alone.

“You’re right,” he says quietly. “There’s Mom.”

I nod. “And I need you to spend time with her while I’m gone. In fact, I want you to stay at her house rather than the dorm. Martha shouldn’t be the one taking care of her.”

Anthony looks pained at that comment. “Damn, man. Travis said he was going to hook me up with this hot chick this weekend—”

The stony look on my face shuts him up. “I'm going to need you to stop making excuses. Take some fucking responsibility for once.”

Before Anthony can start, I cut him off. “I was supposed to help her with fixing the lights in the basement. She twisted her ankle doing laundry and needs a few things done around the house.”

Anthony swallows. “I didn’t know.”

“You don’t call. You never check on her.” I could go off on him about how he lives in the same town and neglects his mother. I checked in with

Mom more when I was in college, and I was several states away. He lives in the same town.

“I’ve just been busy with classes. School work. This shit’s harder for me than it was for you.”

I turn away, looking out the window and ending the conversation. I don’t need to hear his excuses. I've always known that actions speak louder than words, and Anthony's actions have amounted to diddly squat when it comes to his relationship with our mother. Finally, as we pull up in front of Mom’s house, I turn back to him, my voice quiet.

“There’s more to life than just having a corner office, fucking chicks, and partying. Time to be a man, Anthony.”

“Oh, my word, my two boys,” my mom, Jamie Steele, says as we step into the living room of her house. She tries to get up from her seat, an old raggedy recliner, but I quickly motion her back down, noticing her bandaged ankle.

“Sit down, Mom,” I tell her, closing the door. “No pressure on the ankle, remember?”

I don't give her a chance to respond. I quickly make my way across the room, bend down, and pull her into my arms. It's been a few days since I last saw her, but she looks disheveled, her hair in disarray. She has fine frown lines going down the front on her lips brought on by cigarette smoke. Another thing Gavin and I agree on—I hate cigarettes, but I can’t stop her. It makes her look a lot older than she really is.

Her eyes light up when I step away, and she looks at Anthony. “And Anthony too? What have I done to deserve this?”

“Oh, stop it,” Anthony says sheepishly, coming forward to give her a hug.

“I can't help it,” she says as she pulls away. “You never come to see me. The last time I had you both under this roof is when Oliver came home from . . .”

Her voice trails off and a distant look comes over her eyes. I know what she's thinking about. How I left her to be my father's pet child. I thought she'd be okay with Anthony, but he resented the fact that I was gone and took it out on her like any kid would, with lots of stress and backtalk. It was only the fact that he was a kid when he did it that saved him from an ass beating.

She didn't tell me how bad it was until I came back home. I was furious when I found out what was really going on. At the same time, I felt guilty. I

felt like maybe I shouldn't have left. And to know that she didn't take one red cent from my father makes it worse. She lives off the meager income she gets from her job as an office manager for a trucking company. I try to give her money to help, but she's too prideful to take any. I barely convinced her to take time off work with her ankle.

"You know I'm sorry," Anthony says, and I think Mom's words hit him harder than mine did. "I'm going to try to do better. Oliver told me that you hurt your ankle."

"Yeah, I was trying to get the fabric softener refill in the basement when I fell," Mom says. "My own fault. You know, Anthony, if you'd be more dependable . . ."

I think Anthony's had enough. I went in on him the way over here, so I interrupt Mom before she can really get going. "Mom, Anthony's going to be saying with you for the week. I asked him to help out at my office, and then he said he wanted to spend some quality time with you."

Anthony gives me a grateful look as Mom turns to him, her face brightening in disbelief. "Tony? Is that true?"

He nods his head. "Yes. I'll help out with any work you need around the house. Help out with groceries, take care of the basement, all that."

"You'll see, Mom," I say. "Tony's going to be a great help while I'm gone."

My mom turns to me. "Gone? Gone where?"

I grit my teeth. I can lie to Anthony, but I can't lie to Mom. "Just going away for a week to a wedding."

My mom's eyebrows raise. "A wedding? Whose wedding?"

"A friend's. I'm going as someone's date." It's not a total lie but one I can get away with. I can hear Anthony grind his teeth, and I know I've got some explaining to do with him later. Not now.

"It must be someone important if you have to leave town for a week," Mom fishes a bit too eagerly. "It sure would be nice to have some grandbabies."

I almost blanch. She snuck that one in there with a quickness I wasn't prepared for. Babies are the furthest thing from my mind right now.

"It's totally not like that," I say, my tone firm, letting her know the discussion is closed. "I'm doing it as a favor."

My mom looks around suddenly, very excited. "Well, since I have you both here, why don't I make your favorite, cherry pie? Hmm? If nothing else,

we can spend some family time together before you leave with some good home-style cooking."

My mom grins, and I'm so glad I forced Anthony to come. She's the happiest I've seen her in a long time. "Sure, Mom, as long as you stay off your ankle."

"Well, you know back in my day, there was a song about cherry pie. Mine's sweet enough to make a grown man cry," Mom boasts with a laugh.

Anthony groans, slapping his forehead. "Really, Mom? That's not what that song's about. Please stop . . ."

I open my mouth to comment, but right then, Mindy pops in my mind. Her long legs, her sweet lips. And I have to think that maybe that band had a point.

There's a sweet cherry pie, and I plan on tasting it.

MINDY

"How did it go?" Brianna asks me. "When I walked in on you guys, it looked like you'd seen a ghost."

We're in my bedroom and I'm getting the clothes ready that I'm going to wear for my trip. I packed a lot of nice dresses, and now I've got a problem. I might have packed some nice things, but I've got to do some shopping to get a few more outfits that would be more in line with what my mom would expect.

Peering at myself in the mirror, I spin around and place my hands on my hips, fixing Brianna with a scowl. "I don't appreciate your sending me in there unarmed. He was an asshole."

Brianna lets out a laugh. "Unarmed? What did you want to go in there with? A shotgun? I've never known a man you couldn't wrap around your finger in about two minutes flat," she says with a snap of her fingers.

I shrug. "I dunno. A big fat dildo, maybe? So I could've shoved it up his cocky ass."

"Mindy!" Brianna protests. "What did I tell you about these words around Rafe? You can't be saying those things! He's started repeating every new word that he hears!"

"Sorry, Rafey," I say to the little boy who's sitting atop a mountain of my discarded clothes, playing with one of my sports bras.

I get lucky, as he seems to have ignored my foul mouth and instead pulls one of my sports bras on top of his head. “Look, Mommy! I’m a Duacone!”

“A what?” I ask, giving Bri a glance.

“Cartoon,” Brianna says with a chuckle before looking back at me. “Still . . . why so mad?”

“Are you kidding? I was sweating bullets before I even walked in there!” I say, my face flushing. “He wasn’t what I expected, and I’m just frustrated that he was able to get the upper hand on me.”

“And I . . .” I clench my fists, my breath tight in my throat. “He got to me, okay?”

Brianna’s jaw drops. “I can't believe I’m hearing this. Aren’t you supposed to be Miss Fearless? The woman who takes life by the balls?”

“Balls,” echoes Rafey. “I like balls!”

I mock-scold Brianna, sticking out my tongue. “Wanna tell me where your son gets his bad language again?”

Brianna scowls at me. “I’m so going to kill you.”

I spread my arms defensively as Brianna glares murder at me. “I just wish you would’ve told me.”

“Told you what?” Brianna asks, trying hard to be mad but looking like she wants to burst into laughter.

I gesture sharply, leaning in to whisper so Rafe can’t hear. “That he was hot as fuck!”

Bri looks at me out of the side of her eyes before she shakes her head. “How was I supposed to know? I’d never met him.”

“I don't believe you,” I say. “You did that on purpose.”

Brianna looks genuinely hurt. “I swear to you, I didn't. I never saw him before I walked into the room with Gavin. It was his idea.”

I look into my best friend’s eyes to see she’s telling the truth, and I sigh, shaking my head but not smiling yet. “Never mind that. I seriously don't know how I’m going to live a week with that guy without killing him.”

Brianna glances at Rafe, who’s now quite happily turning my Under Armour sports bras into hand puppets, and leads me into my connecting bathroom. “Was he that bad?”

“You’re damn right!” I growl, letting go for the first time. “You wanna know what he told me?”

“What?”

My hand goes to my throat, remembering his deep voice and the way that

it both pissed me off and turned me on. “Basically, that he would do anything to me that he wants since we’re supposed to be engaged.”

Brianna gapes. “He did not!”

I nod, my skin flushed. It pisses me off that I’m getting hot thinking about it.

Brianna thinks for a minute, then chuckles. “Well shit, you said he’s hot, right? That should be right up your alley.”

I glower at her. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Brianna shrugs, leaning against the bathroom wall and grinning. “I recall a certain person urging me to sleep with Gavin when I barely knew him.”

“But this is different,” I protest. “Gavin was sweet. He wanted to court you, treat you like a princess. This guy . . .” I shake my head as the curl of his cocky lips appears in my mind. Oh, what those lips could do to my . . .

I shove the treasonous thoughts away, my chest heaving. “He’s different. Let’s just leave it at that.”

“You all right?” Brianna teases, raising an eyebrow. “Feeling a little hot in here? Need a cold shower or two?”

I wave her off. “I’ll be fine.”

“Mmmhmm,” Brianna replies. “So, should I close the door behind me so you can break out your purple friend?”

I scowl. “Please. He might be hot, but he’s not *that* hot.”

I smile, and we both start laughing at how bad my lie was. “I might need to take it with me though,” I admit. “We’re going to have to fake all this affection. From what he says, he’s not exactly worried about keeping his hands to himself, but with how he was talking to me, I’m not about to sleep with him.”

Right then, I see Rafey pull out a red number from the pile of clothes, a dress I bought years ago but have never worn. Even for me, it’s pretty sexy and flirty.

“Oh, Rafey, I can just kiss you,” I say, rushing over and grabbing it from him, but he hangs on like a toddler will. He giggles as I tickle him and deliver kisses to his head, letting go of the dress and letting me snatch it up without any more trouble.

I rush back to the bathroom and pull it on. It doesn’t go with the undies I’m wearing today and I’m not wearing heels, but it gives me an idea. I come back out, spreading my arms and twirling a few times for Brianna. “How do I look?”

Brianna's eyes go wide. "I think you know how you look."

"Good," I say with a naughty grin, the plan cooking up in my head on the fly, "because I'm going to wear this tomorrow to meet Oliver."

Brianna looks at me like she's about ready to call the psych ward. "Seriously? You just said you weren't going to sleep with him, but then you're gonna wear something like that? Don't make me say what that dress is screaming. Not with Rafe around."

I make a face, wiggling my butt in Bri's direction as I check myself in the mirror. I know the heels I need to wear with this. They'd make me . . . oh, yeah. "I'm not gonna sleep with him. But two can play his game."

"Right," Brianna says. She grins as she gets the point of my plan. "You're going to grab the bull by his horn."

"More or less," I say as I place my hands on my hips, admiring the dress that hugs my curves like Saran Wrap. *Oh, I most certainly fucking will.*

OLIVER

"Remember," I tell Tony as we pull up to the curb of the airport. I hired a driver again, both for convenience and to make sure Tony and I can talk. "Don't pull any bullshit while I'm gone or you're going to find your ass and your head meeting."

"Relax. I got it," Tony says, annoyed. "You've only said it a hundred times before."

"Good. Take care of Mom. We're all she's got," I remind him, more gently this time. "She needs us."

"Damn, Oli, you're just leaving for a week. Not a lifetime," Tony says with a grimace.

We pull up in front of the airport, and I offer Tony my hand as we come to a stop. "Take care. I'll be in touch."

Tony shakes, and I'm encouraged. He's got a man's grip. I get out of the car and grab my bags out of the back. With a wave, I slap the hood and watch the car take off.

I stop and look around. I got a text from Gavin this morning telling me that Mindy would be here before I was. But she's nowhere in sight.

I wait five minutes, and I'm about to pull out my phone when Brianna rolls up with Mindy, the sunroof down on her convertible. She gets out of the

car and I have to fight to keep my expression neutral. She's wearing dark shades and a tight body-hugging red dress. She might as well be wearing nothing at all.

Blood pumps furiously to my cock as it instantly hardens. Good thing I'm wearing a sport coat.

"Hey, Oliver," Brianna greets chirpily as she gets out of the car. Mindy pretends she doesn't notice me, walking around to the side and bending over to get her bags out of the back, giving me an unrivaled view of her ass. I'm pretty sure she's doing it on purpose.

I swallow hard as fire runs through me. I see her toss a little glance behind her and then quickly look away as she slowly pulls her bag. I knew it—she's doing this shit on purpose.

Okay, Princess, you wanna play? Challenge accepted.

"Hello, Brianna," I say politely, trying to keep the strain out of my voice. "You're looking as beautiful as ever. Gavin's a lucky man."

She walks over, gesturing at me with a smile. "Looking good yourself, Mr. Fiancé. What is that, Gucci?"

I chuckle. "Thanks. I figured I'd play the part. Mindy's supposed to have this stud of a date, so I dressed down a little."

Brianna chuckles, then leans in to whisper to me. "Thank you for doing this."

I shake my head. I still don't get why this charade is needed, but whatever. "It's no problem. I think it'll be fun," I say, trying to restrain a grin from spreading across my face.

Brianna gives me a measured look, and I wonder how much her husband has told her about me.

"I think that's it," Mindy says, pulling our attention to her. She has a small hoard of luggage. She's packed for a month, not a damn week. "So where's the redcap?"

Brianna winks at me and stands on her tiptoes to pat me on my shoulder. "Take care of her for me, okay? She can be a handful."

I give her a polite nod. Regardless of the dirty things that dress makes me want to do to Mindy and her body right now, I can tell Brianna cares about her a lot. "I'll do my best."

There's a twinkle of mischievousness in Brianna's eyes when she turns away, and something tells me that she's laughing at an inner joke. Something tells me Mindy's got something up her sleeve.

“Bye, trick,” Brianna says to Mindy, giving her a hug. “I’ll miss you, even if it’s only for a week.”

“Bye, hussy,” Mindy says, delivering a quick peck on her cheek. “Please control your language around my little Rafealicious while I’m gone. It’s really getting out of control. I’d like to know someone’s raising him right.”

Brianna turns to me, a mock scowl on her face. “You know what? I take that back. Have your way with her.”

Mindy gawks, then laughs defensively. She wasn’t expecting that one. “Oh, come on, you know I love you!”

“Nope, not listening,” Brianna says, sticking her fingers in her ears as she walks around and jumps into the driver seat. “I hope you get hogtied and covered in honey!”

Oh, the ideas that brings to my mind. Mindy blushes too but waves it off with a laugh. “Whatever!”

“That’s right!” Brianna says cheerfully. She starts up her car and gives us both a playful wave. “Bye, Felicia!”

She drives off, leaving Mindy looking almost shocked. “I’m so gonna kill you when I get back!” Mindy yells at the fleeing car, flipping the bird.

I chuckle at their antics. I don’t know if they’ve always been this way. Gavin says that his wife used to be pretty shy, but she could have fooled me.

When Brianna is gone, I walk over to Mindy. I look her up and down, letting my eyes tell her just how much I like it. “Dressed for the weather?”

She looks down at the dress before giving me a saucy grin and putting on a terrible Scarlett O’Hara fake accent, teasing me again. “This little ole thing? I just threw it on.”

Painted it on is more like it, I think, checking her out again. “It looks good on you,” I admit, but not offering too much. I’m not going to let her think she has power over me and think I’m going to obey her little rules.

A blush comes over her face and she looks away. “Thanks.” She turns back around a moment later. “Can you get my bags?”

“Just a second,” I tell her, holding in my grin. I pull out a black velvet box from my pocket, raising an eyebrow. “You’re missing something.”

“What is that—” she begins to ask. Her breath catches in her throat as I open it to reveal a platinum engagement ring with two stones, emerald and diamond to match our birth months. Gavin was helpful. “Oh, my . . .”

I lean in close, pressing my body into hers, letting her feel my cock pressing into her side and whispering in her ear. She’s trembling already, and

I feel confidence returning. She's so going to be mine.

"For you," I say, meaning both my cock and the ring. I pull away a second later, grinning at the effect my moves have on her. "I'm sure it's just the right size."

She's red in the face and her chest is heaving as I take the ring out of the box and place it on her finger. A perfect fit, of course.

"Why—" she begins to say breathlessly when I step away, staring at the ring as if it's magic, and she's not sure if it's good magic or bad yet. "How did you . . .?"

"The details don't matter, Princess," I tell her. "We're supposed to be engaged. How would it look if you show up without an engagement ring?"

She looks like she wants to say something, but she knows I'm right. "You're right," she mutters so low I can barely hear her. "I guess I didn't think about that. Where'd you get it?"

I wink at her and throw her words back in her face. "That old thing? Oh, I just found it lying around somewhere."

I hold in my grin as she scowls at me and I call the redcap for her bags. We check in the airport and walk through the terminal. On the way to the plane, she says very little. I try to keep my eyes off her tight curves, wanting to keep the little edge that I've got.

But by the time we board the plane and get in our seats, some of her spark has returned. We're flying first class, of course, and she knows as she slides past me to the window seat exactly how much her ass is in my face. The flight attendant brings us some pre-takeoff drinks, and she turns to me, raising her glass.

"This ring is beautiful," she says, her shoulder brushing mine as she leans slightly in to toast me. Up close, I can smell her perfume and it smells like heaven. Running her finger along the band, she chuckles as she checks out the stones. "Nice bullshit story about where you got it though. So, you're a May baby?"

"I am," I admit. "Figured it'd help you remember."

"Nice idea," she says with a chuckle. "So where'd you get it?"

Damn, she really wants to know badly. Well, it won't hurt to tell her. "I got it from Feinberg's in the middle of town. He's got a good selection of stuff."

"It must've been a small fortune," Mindy says, biting her lip unconsciously.

“It wasn’t cheap,” I confirm. Actually, Feinberg will let me bring it back, minus a thousand bucks, but Mindy doesn’t need to know that. Besides, the ring looks good on her hand.

I clear my throat as the plane begins to taxi. “So what’s this place like?”

“Summerfield?” Mindy says, looking out the window for a moment. “It’s a rich bay town, sorta like the Keys or Martha’s Vineyard. Oh, by the way . . . for the next week, your name is going to be Harold.”

“Harold?” I ask, raising an eyebrow. “You must be fucking kidding me.”

“You got a problem with that?” Mindy asks in challenge. “Seriously, it’s what they’re expecting.”

“I’ll go by Oliver,” I say firmly. “There’s no way in hell I’m answering to Harold.”

“But . . .” Mindy says, stopping when I shake my head.

“We’ll say Harold’s a bad joke of a name you gave me. For something being especially . . . hairy.”

Her mouth opens and shuts like a fish and I hold in a grin.

“Nothing wrong with being called Harold,” she grumbles after a moment, having to get the last word in. “I had a goldfish named Harold. By the way, did you rehearse the names?”

“I looked at it a little.” To be honest, I couldn't focus much on anything but Mindy.

She sucks in a breath, frustrated. “Okay, let me give you some tips. Mother can be bossy. She’ll try to run all over you. Grandma pretends to be dumb, but don’t let it fool you—she’s as sharp as a tack.”

“Anything else?” I ask. Sounds like Mindy’s not going to be the only fun I have this next week.

“Listen to me and follow my orders and you’ll be fine.”

I have to grin. She should know by now. “What did I tell you about that, Princess?”

Mindy hums and turns back, her hand brushing her cup and dumping half a Sprite with ice in my lap. “Oh, Harold, I’m sorry!” she says with an overly dramatic gasp.

Before I can react, she gets a napkin and dabs at my crotch. Her strokes barely brush the top of my dick, and it twitches, wanting nothing more than to get rid of the two layers of fabric between me and her soft fingers.

I grab her hand a second later when the shock wears off, putting it firmly in her lap. “I got it,” I say. “You should be more careful.”

My cock is straining against my pants so much it hurts. She was intentionally brushing her hand up against my cock. My cheeks are flaming, and I have to use the photo book to hide my crotch as the plane makes the final turn and starts down the runway, accelerating into the air.

"I really am sorry," Mindy says with faux sincerity as we reach our cruising altitude. "I so didn't mean to do that."

Yeah, right. The little triumphant smile I see on her face says it all.

This is fucking war.

MINDY

My heart pounds in my chest as the limo rolls to a stop in front of Wentworth Estate, parking on the circular driveway. It's like something out of a storybook, or maybe even a painting. Lush green grass is perfectly trimmed on the huge manicured lawns. Three statues adorn the lawn, all of them classically-themed pieces, one of them of a man on a horse. If I remember what Mom told me, it's supposed to be a Wentworth who won the Congressional Medal of Honor back in the Civil War or something like that.

"It's beautiful," I breathe, momentarily stunned.

"It's nice," Oliver agrees.

For some reason, his lack of gushing pisses me off. He sounds so casual about it all.

I'm still smarting over what he did. Pushing his body into me when he gave me the ring, intentionally pressing his big, hard . . . wait, what am I thinking? I shove the thought away, my face turning red.

Jesus, will it ever stop?

We're not even a day in and I can already cut the sexual tension with a knife. My body is on hormonal overdrive, and I've still got six days, eighteen hours, and too many damn minutes before we're done with this charade.

"You okay?" Oliver asks, seeing my trouble. "Did the plane ride upset your stomach or something?"

I wave off his concern, not letting on to my desire. I can't let him know just how much he's affecting me. "You can save the hero act for a bit. I'm just a little nervous, that's all."

The corner of his lips curls up into a grin and I grit my teeth. I got the last laugh on the plane, but somehow, I know he has the upper hand now.

“Hey, don’t worry about me,” I say. “Remember the back story?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Oliver says, rolling his eyes. He doesn’t understand yet. Mom and Grandma both have minds like tape recorders and the cross-examining skills of a lawyer. They’ll tear him apart if he starts screwing around. “You only said it a million times on the way over here. We’ve been together a year. I walked into your coffee shop and told you that you were the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen. Short and sweet.”

A flush comes to my chest. The words sound nice even though they’re fake. “Yeah, something like that. Don’t forget about you dropping to your knees when I said yes.”

Oliver’s smirk turns into a genuine smile, and I feel my flush deepen. “Don’t worry,” he says, giving me a reassuring, smoldering look. “They’re going to buy every word. We’ll see about going to my knees though.”

Somehow, his words don’t give me comfort. It’s like everything he says has layers of meaning, and no matter what, my mind wants to think of sex. Like him covering my body in kisses and being on his knees, his lips . . .

The door opens and the driver, an old man named Sam, stands ready for us. “The Wentworth Estate. Please watch your step on the gravel, Miss.”

I step out, relishing the cool breeze that blows in lightly from the east, caressing my soft flesh as I take in the scenery. It’s a beautiful day with sunny, clear skies, the large French Provincial mansion looming against the azure sky. If I weren’t so nervous, I’d be amazed.

“Don’t worry about your bags,” Sam says when Oli makes a move to grab them out of the back of the limo. “The house staff will get them and make sure they’re delivered to the proper bedroom.”

Oliver gives me a look. “The house staff?”

I just shrug. I knew John had money, but I’ve never cared enough to find out exactly how much. I was expecting a nice big house, not a damn castle with house staff. “I’m just rollin’ with it.”

“If you’ll come with me,” the driver says.

Sam leads us to the cobblestone walkway that leads to the huge double-door entry of the mansion. As we head up, Oliver places his hand on the small of my back. Warm currents begin to ripple out from his touch, and I squirm on the inside, flustered.

“What are you doing?” I whisper out of the side of my mouth, alarmed by what his touch is doing to me. How am I supposed to share a bedroom with this man for a whole week?

“Being your fiancé,” he whispers back, grinning at me. “Come on, Princess. Let’s meet the fam.”

He says it so sweetly that I almost wish it were true for a second. A part of me likes being on his strong arm, though I’d never admit it to him.

By the time we reach the double doors, my forehead is dotted in sweat. My heart is pounding in my chest like I just sprinted a half-mile or something. Truth be told, I'm overcome with sudden anxiety.

Too late to worry now, I realize as Sam puts his hand on the twin handles of the front door. *I’m in too deep.*

The large door springs open before the driver can turn the handles, and out steps my mother with a small barking dog, a fluffy white Pomeranian at her side. Sam springs out of the way, pretty spry for a guy his age, which is a good thing or else he’d get run over.

“Mindy, my darling!” My mother sings, stepping forward with her arms outstretched. The woman is practically dripping in diamonds, with a matching necklace, bracelet, and earring set over top of her white brocade dress that flows down her body all the way to her ankles. “It’s been so long!”

“Mom,” I say as we embrace. I smell her perfume, and it smells expensive as hell. “I’ve missed you.”

I pull back and feel tears forming in my eyes as I survey her. Her face looks different from when I last saw her. The wrinkles that had begun to show around her eyes are mysteriously gone, along with her forehead wrinkles. It’s a little weird, and I wonder if Mom’s just feeling youthful from love or if she had a little help from Botox.

“You’re lookin’ good. Not as good as me, but you’d do just fine in a singles bar on Ladies’ Night.”

My mother laughs. “Yeah, well, that’s in the past for me. You look good too, honey. I never could have worn a dress like that at your age.”

“Who’s this little lady?” I say, gesturing at the dog who’s running circles around our feet, barking and carrying on in an attempt to deflect attention away from my dress. I feel nervous enough feeling Oliver’s hand still on my lower back. I can’t decide if I want his hand higher . . . or lower.

“Oh, that’s Bertha,” Mom says with a dismissive wave of her hand, “a puppy John got me several months into our courtship. She’s a handful, but I can’t imagine this place without her.”

Weird name for a tiny little dog if you ask me, but hey. Mom turns her gaze on Oliver, her eyes widening as if noticing him for the first time.

“Mindy, you never said your young man was this handsome. Why, you’re practically perfect!”

“He is,” I mutter, not quite sure what I’m agreeing with. I step away from Oliver, using hand gestures to complete the introductions. “Harold this is my mother, Mary Jo. Mom, this is Harold.”

Oliver grins, taking my mother's hand and gently kissing the back of it, his eyes twinkling. “It’s a pleasure, Ma’am. They say that a man can see his future wife when he looks at her mother . . . and I’m a lucky man.”

My mom looks at me approvingly, sounding slightly out of breath. “Ooh, Mindy, I like him.”

“Don’t be fooled,” I say under my breath before replying, “Thanks, Mom.”

Mom shakes her head, running her hand down the length of Oliver’s arm in admiration as if he’s a toy on display. “You must work out a lot, Harold. You’ll like the gym, I hope.”

“Oliver, please,” he says gently. When my mom looks at him in question, he chuckles. “I prefer to go by my middle name.”

She looks at me, her eyes accusing. “How come you never told me that?”

“I . . .” I’m at a loss for words when Oliver saves me.

“She’s always forgetting things,” Oliver cuts in. “She even forgot the day we first met and when I decided to honor my grandfather by going by my middle name.”

I turn a dark scowl on Oliver, trying to tell him to stop it with my eyes.

He grins at me and winks, but before I can reply, I hear a voice from the doorway. “Well I heard that you had your mother’s beauty, but that just doesn’t do it justice. It’s good to finally meet you, Mindy.”

A white-haired, distinguished-looking man steps through the doorway, dressed in a fine gray suit and tie, everything about him perfectly groomed.

“Honey! Mindy, this is John, my wonderful fiancé,” my mom gushes as John takes my hand and kisses it, his mustache prickling lightly on my skin. It tickles, and I have to smile a little as he steps back, clasping my hand in both of his and smiling.

“Nice to meet you, John,” I say politely.

“It’s a pleasure.” He turns to Oliver, sizing him up the way men do and looking impressed. “And is this Harold?”

“Oliver,” Oliver corrects as he offers his hand, and the two men shake in another one of those male measuring sticks, both looking like they passed the

other's test. "I recently decided to go by my middle name."

"Well then," John says, gesturing inside. "Come on in. Let me give you the ten-cent tour."

My breath is taken away again as we step fully into the foyer. Gleaming marble floors, impossibly high ceilings, and a winding staircase make the entryway look like a grand entrance to heaven.

"Wow," I breathe. "So which king did you rob to get all of this stuff?"

My mom clasps her hands together with pleasure. "It is like a palace, isn't it? The first time I stepped inside, I felt like I'd had my Cinderella moment."

"Nice place you've got here," Oliver says, again sounding not as impressed as I thought he'd be.

"Everything is—" I start before Oliver pulls me to a stop, cutting off my words.

"It's nearly as beautiful as my little Princess," Oliver says, taking me by surprise when he pulls me close, and before I can do anything, he kisses me on the lips. His kiss is intense, powerful, and before I know, it I'm kissing him back, even as his hands pull me against his hard body. I feel a growing heat rising again between my thighs. I'm left breathless, chest heaving when he pulls away. I flash murder at him as he whispers in my ear, "Payback for your little stunt on the plane."

I can hardly listen. My body is hot, and I know my nipples are tight and aching inside my dress. I'm probably poking through the thin bra I wore to show off the dress. My cheeks burn, and I'm so embarrassed to be turned on in front of my mom.

"You okay?" she asks me, amused. "Young love is so passionate."

"I'm fine," I stammer, pushing away and not wanting to. "He caught me off guard. And someone forgot we had garlic chicken on the plane. Tic-tac next time, honey?"

Oliver flashes his mocking smirk at me before giving Mom a raised eyebrow. "I always leave her breathless. Sorry, I couldn't resist. Your daughter's too beautiful."

John chuckles at that. "I'm liking you already." He pulls out a cigar and inhales as he runs it under his nose before sticking it in the corner of his mouth. "Trust me, I'm so glad I can get these legally now. They're a bad habit, but I allow myself one or two a week. Cuban, imported directly from Havana. Come, Oliver, let me get to know my eventual son-in-law."

Oliver smiles. "Got any Cuban rum to go with that cigar?"

“How’s Jamaican? And do you like cars?” John asks, his eyes twinkling merrily.

Oliver laughs. “Of course I do. When I was a kid, I had all the best sports cars in my toy collection.”

John seems giddy like a schoolboy, and he claps Oliver on the shoulder, charmed already. “Come with me and I’ll show you my garage. I’m sure there’s something there you’d like. Let these ladies catch up.”

The two of them head off, Oliver giving me a wink. After they leave, Mom leads me through the mansion.

“Where is everyone?” I ask as we leave the foyer. “Where’s Roxy? And where’s this *staff* I’m hearing about?”

“It’s not all that,” Mom says with a shrug. “John sent the staff on duty to town together. I wanted to do something special for dinner. As for Roxy, she’s with your aunt out getting their dresses for the rehearsal dinner.”

“I can't wait to see them,” I tell Mom honestly. “It’s been too long.”

Mom shows me around the house, and as we do, I feel a question that’s been on my mind for a long time bubbling to the surface. Finally, I have to ask. “Mom?”

“Yes, honey?” Mom asks, stopping in front of the eighteenth-century German grandfather clock that she’s been going on about for a while. “What is it?”

“Mom . . . do you love him?”

She gives me a questioning look. “What do you mean, Mindy? Do I love John?”

“Yes,” I say, letting my fears out. “Most of the time you talk about him, it’s about his money. His things. His stuff. You come to the door looking like you’ve stepped out of an old Elizabeth Taylor movie or something . . . but what about John?”

Mom nods, looking at the bracelet on her arm, then chuckles. “If John lost it all tomorrow, if we had to hock these diamonds, if we were left with nothing but the clothes on our backs and the feelings we share . . . I’d still marry him. I love him, Mindy. It’s just hard for me to put my feelings about John into words, so I talk about his things instead. You don’t know how strange it is, telling my adult daughter about how I’m left feeling like a schoolgirl again, a . . . what’s the word Oliver used for you?”

“Princess,” I say automatically, and Mom laughs.

“Yeah, that’s how I feel. I’m fifty-four, and I feel like a princess,” Mom

says, reassuring my fears. “So, what about Oliver? He seems to be very into you.”

“I . . . well,” I start, lost in thoughts over Oliver’s kiss. My lips still tingle and my body feels warm even at the memory, and I stammer for words. “He’s great.”

“Seems more than great to me. He seems like a catch,” Mom says, but before she can say anything, there’s a booming sound as the doors to the estate are thrown open and a voice I’ve long missed calls out.

“MOM! We’re home!”

Roxy. Oh my God, I’ve got to go back into performance mode. Roxy’s going to want to see Oliver, and he’s going to want to kiss me again, and my body . . . I’m babbling in my head and I can’t stop it.

“Mindy?” Mom says, shaking me back to the moment. “Hey, you okay? You looked pale there for a second. Was it the airline food?”

“No . . . no, I’m fine, Mom,” I lie, wishing it were just the airline food. Fine? I’m not fine, and now I have to deal with Roxy and Grandma.

Shit.

OLIVER

“Oh, my darling niece,” Aunt Rita coos as she comes forward and wraps her arms around Mindy. We’re in the waiting room just outside the dining room. John and I spent a good hour in the garage going over his pretty sweet collection, and now it’s time for dinner.

Mary Jo made us all wait outside for the rest of the family to get acquainted with me while dinner was being prepared. I’m glad I dressed the part. This family seems to like dressing up. Chalk one up to my father’s constant social skills lessons. I can go back to being a blue blood very quickly.

There’s a few more people here now. Behind Aunt Rita, Mindy’s grandmother is with two girls, one who’s nearly the spitting image of Mindy except that her hair’s shorter. She must be Roxy. The other looks like she’d prefer to be anywhere else but here.

“Hey, Auntie,” Mindy says excitedly, taking her in an embrace and delivering a kiss to her cheek. She takes turn embracing each woman then steps back, giving her aunt a questioning tilt to her head. “Where’s Uncle

Charles?”

“He’s outside having a smoke,” Rita replies, sighing and rolling her eyes. “No matter what I try, I just can't get that man to stop. You take a pack away, he’s got seven more hidden.”

John, I see, has a guilty look as his hand unconsciously pats the suit pocket where he’d put his cigar case, and I’m glad I didn’t take him up on his offer. I seriously doubt he’s going to pull another out for as long as Rita’s around. Meanwhile, Rita turns her eyes on me, and I can feel the question burning in everyone’s eyes. “Who is this fine young man?”

“This is Oliver, my fiancé,” Mindy announces proudly, gesturing to each woman in turn. “Oli, this is my Aunt Rita, my cousin, Layla, my sister, Roxy, and my Grandma, Ivy Jo.”

“Nice to meet you ladies,” I say, flashing them all a charming smile. “And thank you, Princess, for remembering my name this time.”

Ivy Jo holds out her arms at me as Mindy gives me an evil look. “Don’t stand across the room, young man. Come give an old lady a hug.”

I chuckle and do as she commands. “Who am I to resist the charms of a beautiful woman like you?”

“Oh, stop it,” she murmurs as she pulls me into a hug and runs her hands up and down my back, finishing with a pinch of my butt. “Nice and strong, just like old Johnny used to be.”

“Grandma,” Mindy says warningly and casts me a sympathetic glance. “Let’s not molest my fiancé before dinner, please?”

I chuckle. “It’s okay. Sometimes, it’s nice to eat your dessert before dinner,” I tease. Mindy blushes slightly, and I give Grandma my full attention. “Johnny’s your husband?”

“Was,” she corrects, but I can tell by her voice that it’s an old loss. “He’s worm food now, but boy, do I enjoy remembering the days when he used to hike these old legs back and—”

Mindy coughs loudly, shaking her head, while Layla grabs her grandmother by the shoulders and pulls her to the side, shutting her up. “Uh, she gets that way.”

“No problem,” I reply with a laugh. “I love doing some hiking myself,” I say, looking over to make sure Mindy heard me.

Layla gives me a grateful nod while Mindy turns a deeper shade of red, and Roxy steps forward, peering at me with wide eyes. “Oh, my God, he’s gorgeous!” she exclaims to Mindy. “Girl, you got a keeper. No wonder you

wouldn’t stop bragging about how good he was in bed.”

Mindy scowls murder at her sister. “Roxy, please don’t—”

Roxy shakes her head, not listening. “Shoot, I might have to go back home with you if they’re serving up dishes like this.” She gives me a look. “You got a brother? You know, for the longest time, I swore you were just the battery-operated fantasies of a girl who wasn’t getting her needs met. Glad to see I’m wrong.”

“Ignore her,” Mindy half pleads, half commands. This is hilarious. “She’s just being silly.”

“What?” Roxy asks, giving her sister a smirk. “So anyway, about there maybe being a younger version of you . . .”

I chuckle. I like her already. “Yeah, I have one, but you’d want to kill him after five minutes. I have a feeling Tony would like you though.”

“Why’s that?” Roxy asks, her eyes going slightly wide.

“Well, he kind of likes anything with a vagina and a pulse.”

Mindy glares at me with eyes that seem to say I want to kill you, but Roxy just laughs. She’s enjoying the banter.

“I hear you’re a singer,” I say. “What do you sing?”

Roxy lights up like a light bulb. “Yes, I have my own band. We sing on Friday nights and weekends at a bar in town called Trixie’s. Lots of rock, but we mix in pop too—we kind of have to depending on the night.”

“Really?” I say honestly. “That’s impressive.”

“Little Roxy has a beautiful voice,” Rita says. “Why don’t you sing a few lines for the man?”

“Please, let’s not,” says Layla with a roll of her eyes. “I can only handle so much ass kissing at once.”

I ignore Layla and give Roxy a smile. “Go for it if you want.”

Roxy looks like she just hit the jackpot. “I can,” she says with a dimpled smile. “What do you like? Beyoncé? Taylor Swift? Katy Perry?”

I laugh. “I’m more of a Johnny Cash man myself, so I’ll let you choose.”

“Honey, I don’t do country. But I can start singing some Fifth Harmony and Mindy can start twerking for us. Remember your last birthday when you got drunk and they started *Worth It?* Oh, my God . . .”

Mindy places her hands on her hips and opens her mouth to berate her sister when the doors to the dining room swing open and Mary Jo appears in the doorway, clapping her hands and beaming at us all. “Dinner’s ready!”

We go into the dining room, where I see that Mary Jo has actually gone to

the trouble of putting place cards out for everyone. While I help Mindy with her chair, a short, tubby man who smells like every nasty, old ass smoky bar in the world comes in, walking by me and spewing clouds of noxious odor behind him. “Sorry I’m late.”

Rita tries to hold back her disgust as Charles sits next to her, but I can understand. The man smells like he didn’t have one cig, but the whole damn pack. “Charles, if you don’t mind?”

“Piss off,” he growls, and I’m about to say something about being respectful, but I feel Mindy dig her fingernails into my thigh as she gives me a small shake of her head. I get it. I don’t know these people and it’s not my place, but it’s hard to watch the disrespect.

“So how long have you worked for Honda?” Grandma asks as we wait for the servers. “I didn’t know they have an office in town.”

“Oh, since I graduated school, and I have to commute,” I say quickly, keeping a smile on my face. Mindy gave me some details, but a lot of it I’m just making up on the fly. “It’s worth it though, small-town living and all that.”

“And how did you first meet?” John asks.

Mindy smiles and tries to take the lead. “Well, you guys have to listen to this. I was in the coffee shop, my hair all messed up. He walks in and says I’ve been—”

“Actually, I came into the coffee shop and was sitting down. Mindy started flirting with me, asking if I worked out. I was surprised by her boldness, but I liked it. I had to give her my number when she asked me for it.”

“That sounds like my Mindy,” Ivy Jo winks. “Forget the clothes—check out the biceps.”

“I don’t blame her. I’d have been offering free fraps and singing *Call Me Maybe* if I’d had the chance,” Roxy adds with a grin. “And I hate that song.”

“Now, now, Roxy,” Mary Jo says. “I think you’ve embarrassed your sister enough.”

“Just kidding, Mom,” Roxy says, obviously not apologetic. “But seriously, Oliver, you do look like you work out. I’ll play the guy here—so whatcha bench?”

“I really don’t know,” I reply. “I’m more into martial arts than lifting.”

“Really? You didn’t tell us you were dating Bruce Lee,” Roxy teases Mindy.

Beside me, I feel Mindy go stiff, and I don't have to look to know she's cutting me with her eyes. She reaches over and puts her hand on my thigh, giving me a fake smile, when there's a commotion at the other end of the table.

"Jesus!" Ivy Jo squeals as we hear a yelp, and suddenly, Bertha goes running around the dining room in fear. "Mary Jo, you get that HEFFA on a leash or I'mma skin it and make me a coat! Or maybe a rug!"

"Bertha, you behave!" Mary Jo snaps, and Bertha runs out. She looks at me apologetically. "Sorry."

"Oh, it's no problem," I say easily. "You don't like dogs, I take it?" I ask Ivy Jo.

She raises her nose to the ceiling. "I'm more of a cat lady myself."

I chuckle. "My dog would never let me own a cat."

"Oh, yeah, your golden retriever," Mindy says. "What was his name?"

"Her name was Hershey, and she was a brown spaniel," I say casually, chuckling as I look at Mary Jo. "What was it I said about her being forgetful?"

I don't have to look in her direction to know Mindy is cutting her eyes at me again. But I ignore it, enjoying conversation with her family. Besides Charles, I think I like everyone in the room. They're certainly not the cultured one-percenters you'd think of with a place like this, but they are real. And I'll take real over a pedigree any day.

Everything is going fine and smooth when Mindy suddenly sets her napkin aside and gets up from the table. "Can I speak to you outside?" she asks, walking to the doorway and turning around to give me a look that says *Now*.

"Sorry," I say, flashing a wink at everyone. "Relationship goals."

There's a polite chuckle from the group as I leave the table, following Mindy out the back door. We step onto the marble patio, and I take a second to admire the layout of the back garden. It's beautiful, with a clear sky and the stars starting to come out in the purplish sky. It's going to be amazing later.

Before I can comment on it, Mindy whirls on me, her voice barely contained. "What the hell are you doing?"

"What do you mean?" I ask innocently, trying not to laugh. Watching her upset like this is just glorious. "I'm being your fiancé."

Mindy shakes her head, and I must admit she's hot as hell when she's

pissed. Hotter than she normally is. “Don’t play dumb. You know exactly what you’re doing.”

I shrug, purposely still trying to piss her off. “I thought what you said was boring. Come up with better stuff next time.”

“Boring? Come up with better stuff?” She grabs me by the shirt, getting right in my face. Her eyes are sparkling with anger, and again I think, damn, she’s hot when she’s pissed off. I so need to make her mine.

“Listen here, you muscled up, arrogant bastard!” Mindy hisses, shaking me and snapping me back to her words, “You’re supposed to be here doing what I say, not trying to humiliate me. That had better be the last time you slip up or I’m gonna introduce your balls to Grandma’s nutcracker collection, got it?”

She moves to turn away, but I grab her arm, pulling her in close. Lowering my lips until they’re a fraction of an inch from her ear, I grind my hips against hers, letting her feel my cock as it quickly stiffens. “What did you say you wanted to do to my balls?”

She’s flustered, her face going red. Her lips are parted, and in the light, I can see her eyes go darker. She’s torn. She wants me, but she also wants to slap me. I’d give it to her right here on this balcony, make the choice for her, but I know there are others inside. I’m not going to push my luck that much.

I move my lips until I’m just a fraction of an inch from hers. She mewls like a kitten almost, and I know she wants to close the gap, to kiss me again. Right when our lips are about to touch, I hear steps at the entry and Mary Jo comes out, her voice cutting through the tension between us.

“Everything all right out here?”

At the sound of her Mom, Mindy tears away from me, her breathing ragged.

“Yeah, Mom,” she says, not even able to look at me. “We’ll be there in a minute.”

Mary Jo gives us a questioning look, then shrugs. “Okay. But the duck’s on the table, and I’d like to get things started. You know how Grandma is with her pills. We can’t delay dinner too long.”

She goes inside, and Mindy turns back to me. “Don’t touch me unless I tell you to. I still haven’t forgotten that stunt you pulled back at the airport and that kiss you gave me.”

I chuckle, wiggling my eyebrows. “I’m sure you haven’t, Princess. I’ll admit, you kiss pretty damn good, too.”

My comment only riles her up more. She swirls and stomps back into the mansion, giving me another breathtaking view of her ass in that tight dress and those heels. In my mind, I can imagine pulling her dress up, bending her over, and seeing just how soft the skin of her ass really is.

I shake my head, adjusting my cock to make sure I don't stick out too much when I go back inside. As I step back into the house, I can't keep the grin from coming across my face. Crossing the foyer back toward the dining room, I mutter softly, "You'd better get used to it, Princess."

MINDY

"That meal was wonderful, Mary Jo," Oliver says beside me, stretching his arm out along the back of the leather loveseat. "Thank you and John for your hospitality."

I shift around, trying to minimize the chances of contact between me and Oliver, but the loveseat is too damn small and his arms are just too damn long. We're sitting in the library after dinner, relaxing and sipping some after dinner drinks. Mom wanted everyone to have a little bit of family chill time after dinner, but I'm so ready to do anything but chill.

Sitting next to Oliver, I'm fuming on the inside while trying to look as calm as possible, smiling on the outside. But really, I'm still smarting over what he pulled at the table. Even after we came back, he would trip me up when he could, never directly saying I was wrong but subtly steering things. Every time Roxy or Grandma had a question, I could see Oliver putting his own little twist on things, just enough to make me look foolish if they remembered what I'd told them before.

I could literally grip his balls right now and squeeze. Just grab them right through his trousers and yank. But I hate that the very thought of touching his balls and his cock fills me with desire.

John gets up, stretching. "Well, I think I'm going to turn in. No offense to you all, but I have one more day of work to do before I officially go on vacation. Have a good evening."

Mom smiles at Oliver, charmed to the bone by him. At least *that's* gone well. "Well, Oliver, I'm so glad you could make it here to spend some time with us. I can see why Mindy is so taken by you."

"My word, Mary Jo," Grandma remarks with a cackle, "you keep on with

much more of that and your nose is going to turn brown."

Mom blushes, and I understand what Grandma means. Mom can't seem to stop praising him.

Roxy lets out a snort and a giggle. "I still want to see if this Tony is as bad as Oliver makes him out to be."

If he's half the cocky bastard his brother is, I think to myself, *you're better off hanging out with the gay guys at Trixie's.*

Ivy Jo waves a hand. "I'm just so proud that Mindy has found her a nice handsome man to treat her right. And he has money too." Grandma beams at me for a moment before asking. "Should I be planning for great-grandbabies anytime soon?"

My heart skips a beat. Babies? Is she kidding? "Uh, Grandma—"

Oliver chuckles, grabbing me around the shoulder and squeezing me close. "Maybe not soon, but we sure have been practicing, haven't we, Princess?"

He winks at me, and I can't help it. I bite my lip at the idea of 'practicing' with him. But still . . . I could just kill him.

It's hard not to scowl, but instead I just grin. "Uh, honey," I say, gesturing at Roxy and Layla, "not in front of the children."

Roxy sticks out her tongue, but I'm quick to change the subject. "So Mom, what about the wedding—"

"Oh no, Mindy Price, I'm serious," Grandma persists. "When's it happening? I'm not getting any younger, you know, and not everyone gets to be a great-grandmother." She looks at her other two granddaughters. "Unless one of you two wants to give me one first."

Roxy grabs her sides. "Oh no, Granny Goose," Roxy says in between holding in laughter, "don't go putting designs on this uterus. I don't need that kind of pressure on me, not when I just barely climbed out of the womb. Why, I'm perfectly innocent!"

"I seriously doubt that," I mutter under my breath, and Oliver chuckles. I'm annoyed with him, but I can't help but be charmed by his handsome smile.

Roxy shakes her head. "Besides, I still have a lot to do before I have a baby. Queen Bey might be able to have a couple of kids, but she's already the queen. I've got a way to go yet."

"A baby's the last thing Roxy needs. She needs to get a real job first, at least," my mom says.

“I resent that. What’s wrong with singing?” Roxy complains.

Mom frowns. “I think it’s sweet and all that you like to sing, but baby, the odds of ever actually making it big are slim.”

“Tell that to the people down at Trixie’s,” Roxy rebuts, sounding hurt. “They love my voice.”

“I think it’s admirable that you have the guts to try and find your own way,” Oliver says, and I hear something in his voice that I haven’t heard before. He sounds legitimate, like it’s not for show. He looks directly at Roxy as he talks, the rest of us forgotten. “I think you should keep going for it. Don’t get roped into a job, a life you don’t want, just to fulfill someone else’s idea of what you should do. Trust me on that one.”

Oliver seems to have silenced everyone, but Grandma finally speaks up. “Let’s just leave the poor girl alone. She’s young and has more than enough time to figure everything out.”

“Thank you,” Roxy says with relief. “Now can we please get back to the subject at hand? Babies—when are *y’all* gonna have babies?” Roxy says, turning to me. Oh, I could kill her. I think I can. The law might be on my side. I’m temporarily insane. “Cause y’all look like you’d make a litter of beautiful ones.”

“We’re waiting until after we’re married,” I say. I give Oliver a meaningful glance. “We want to do things right and all.”

I figure that as soon as we’re gone from here, I’ll call Mom and tell her that Oliver and I had some issues and broke off our engagement. I’m sure it will upset them, but I really didn’t expect things to get this deep.

“Well hopefully, that’s sooner rather than later,” Grandma says. “You might think I’m still a spry chicken, but I’m just about plucked and ready for the fryer.” She looks around and smirks. “Not that I can’t think rings around all of y’all though. But on that note, I think it’s time for bed.”

Grandma starts to get to her feet, but before she can heave herself up, Oliver’s there guiding her up. “Thank you, young man. Handsome and a gentleman. Good night, you all.”

“Goodnight, Grandma,” I say, watching Oliver give me a smoldering look as he sits back down. When he settles in, I lean over and whisper to him softly. “That was nice of you.”

“She’s funny,” Oliver whispers back. “I like her.”

“I think it’s time we all retired,” Mom says, also rising to her feet. “We have a packed schedule this week. Breakfast is served at eight in the morning.

I expect everyone to make it, even if you're just eating some Pop Tarts." She arches a brow at my sister. "I'm looking at you, Miss Roxy Price. And show your sister and Oliver to their room, will you?"

"Of course," Roxy replies, jumping to her feet. "We made sure to give you guys a nice, private room far from everyone else so you can't disturb everyone with the wild sounds of whips and handcuffs," she says with a big wink and nudge from her elbow to my midsection.

"Oh, we Ieft those at home," Oliver quips, making me blush as we let Roxy lead us up the stairs.

"You guys really make a cute couple," Roxy says. "You could be a couple in a movie or something."

"Thanks," Oliver says. "We get that all the time."

"I was serious about your brother. No pressure, but I'm a little hard up," Roxy says with a laugh, and I'm surprised. My outgoing little sister, hard up for a date? Then again . . . Oliver's brother, if he even exists? No chance in hell.

"Trust me, you don't want to do that," Oliver says, and I feel an awesome wave of relief wash over me. He's not a total asshole.

Roxy lets out a sigh as we reach the guest bedroom. "Damn. Oh, well. Here it is."

Roxy, swings open the doors, stepping inside with us. "Welcome to the . . . I think John called it the Morgan Bedroom. No clue why."

The room is huge, with a giant picture window that dominates one wall and a balcony outside, white walls, and a huge gray four-poster, canopied bed in the middle. The rug is gorgeous, and every carved twist of wood, from the details in the door frame to the gilded edges of the molding on the ceiling, screams luxurious. I look around, and I notice that our luggage is waiting for us beside the Cherrywood dresser.

"Goodnight, you two," Roxy says, mischievously wiggling her eyebrows at us. "Don't make too many bumps in the night. Or at least, muffle the screams when you do."

Before I can protest, Roxy turns and walks out, closing the door behind her. I step toward the door and turn, realizing that I'm alone with Oliver for the first time since meeting him in the living room at Gavin's.

The moment hits me, and I realize that I'm faced with the situation I've been dreading. This room is so extravagant, so why isn't there a sofa in here that I can make him sleep on? The room has everything but a damn sofa.

“This is . . . nice,” I remark, trying to stall. I walk around the bed to the other side of the room, studying the night through giant French doors. “We’ll have a great view in the morning.”

“We will,” Oliver agrees, and I turn around to see him beginning to unbutton his shirt.

“What are you doing?” I ask, my voice unsteady. “You can’t be serious!”

He gives me a look before pausing. He’s got his shirt half opened, revealing a set of super-hard abs and tanned skin beneath.

“I’m unbuttoning my shirt. What’s it look like?” Oliver asks. “You know, I can’t exactly go to bed in a sports coat and khakis.”

My mind is flooded with thoughts of all the dirty, sexy things that could happen if I let them. I’d normally be down for a night of fun with a man like him, but I just can’t get over his cockiness. My pride’s getting in the way of a good fuck. But lying in a bed with him with only a few inches and some cloth between us? Asshole or not, his body is irresistible.

I grab myself by the arms, squeezing, trying to ward away the desire flowing through my body as the image of his lips burning into mine flashes in my mind. My pussy clenches as I remember the kiss from earlier that seemed to promise paradise. Oh, fuck.

I’m not caving on the first night. No fucking way.

I set my face as hard as I can and stab a finger at the floor. “I think you should sleep on the floor for tonight. I’m not sharing a bed with you.”

Oliver looks at me like I’m crazy before letting out a chuckle. “Like hell. I’m a man, not a dog. If you want to sleep on the floor, be my guest.”

He pulls his shirt all the way off, tossing it to the side. In an instant, I have a full view of him. Every muscle on his torso is defined and flows like a piece of artwork from one to the next, and all of them are saying *fuck me, Mindy.*

My knees give a wobble as they become weak. Sweet baby Jesus. He is on fire.

I place my hands on my hips, trying to be strong. “Yeah, that’s exactly why I want you to sleep there. You are a dog, and I don’t fucking trust you.”

On one hand, I’m pissed that I can’t let my pride go. I want to get in that bed and lick him from head to toe, but beyond his being an ass today, I’m scared. I’m scared what would happen if I sleep with him. And it’s totally not me. I’m on guard because he’s different. He feels . . . I can’t decide if the right word is dangerous . . . or special.

And he's not really my fiancé, I remind myself. It's pretend.

"When are you going to learn, Princess?" he says, walking over and placing his hands on my waist. "I don't follow your orders." He leans into me just a little, invading my space, and whispers in my ear, "And I think you like it." I can hear the smirk in his voice.

His body is so hot that my temperature is rising. I can see the ridges between his muscles, ridges I want to trace with my fingernails and scratch lightly, just the way I know he'd like it. I look up at his full, sensuous lips, and I practically feel them on my skin.

Fight it, bitch!

I pull away, my chest heaving and my face burning. "Keep your hands off me." I try to sound firm, but what comes out sounds more like a moaning whisper. "Remember my rules."

My words sound so weak. I'm having a hard time even thinking straight, and Oliver grins as if he's saying *you'll be changing that tune soon*. "If that's how you want it."

"Yes, that's how I want it," I rasp, not even trusting myself to look at him. I stare at the door instead. "You need to follow the rules."

No, you don't! Take me now! my body seems to scream. *Touch me, tease me, make me scream your name!*

"I'm going to go change," I mumble, trying to calm down. I go get my bag and walk into the adjacent bathroom. I stare at myself in the mirror, taking a big calming breath. I throw cold water on my face, hoping it'll shock my system back to normal, but after patting it dry, the same lust-crazed, barely in control reflection still looks back at me from the mirror.

"Okay, Mindy. Get yourself together. You're stronger than this. Stop letting him know he affects you and he'll stop," I whisper, but the girl staring back at me says I'm a fucking liar. And I'm pretty sure she's right.

I go through my bag, finding my brand new nightgown. I bite my lip. I shouldn't wear it. It's only going to make things worse. But fuck him. He's got me all worked up, so now it's his turn.

I take my gown out, a little red number I got from Victoria's Secret, and put it on. The satin slips over my skin and I feel sexy, my nipples hardening as the lace rests against the tops of my breasts, and I quickly brush my teeth, looking at myself in the mirror. I've made a lot of strong men go to their knees with a lot less than this, and Oliver Steele is no different. I can make him beg and then shut him down. Or at least I'll be in control when I fuck

him senseless.

I walk back out, strutting with each step and not saying a word.

Oliver's sitting on the bed in just his boxers, and he pales when he sees me. He swallows a lump, and I have to smirk a little when I see another lump twitch and grow between his legs. "Uh, you're wearing that?"

I hide my grin as I walk over to the bed and sit down. "It's my favorite nightgown. If you've got a problem with that, I guess you need to pull on some sweatpants or something," I say with a raised eyebrow and a pointed glance down at his crotch.

His eyes burn into mine. My nipples get even harder, and I know he can see the diamond hard points. I don't care. His lips seem to twitch, and I know he's imagining sucking on them.

I pull back the blanket and lie on the sheets, stretching just a little bit, displaying what he isn't going to get tonight. Oliver stares slack-jawed for a second before lying down, and then I see it. Lying down, there's no way to hide it anymore. That huge fucking bulge.

His cock is straining to get out, and I'm both glad and regretful he's wearing boxers without a front fly. I'd love a peek, but it's hard enough already to not to want to pull it out. My mouth waters—I can't help it—and Oliver notices my swallow.

"If that's what you want," he says with a deep growl to his voice. There's no teasing, no fucking around now. One word from me, and he'd fucking ravage me.

"It is," I say, my breath rasping again. I turn away, pulling the sheet up and over me before squeezing my eyes shut. Desire burns through me. Oliver clicks off the light, and the minutes pass like years.

I can't sleep. Several times, I almost roll over and grab it, reach for him. But I fight back the feeling. I can't give in. I'm not gonna let him win. But why does it feel like I'm the one losing tonight?

OLIVER

I wake up in the early morning sunlight to the sound of running water and a hard cock. Rolling onto my back, I let out a soft groan, opening my eyes. The ceiling is so high that it gives me vertigo for a moment, and I close my eyes again, reaching over to feel the warm sheets next to me.

The spot beside me is empty, Mindy's soft, sexy body nowhere I can feel. I turn my head and open my eyes, seeing nothing but rumpled sheets that still hold her scent and warmth. She must be taking a shower.

I slept like hell, maybe the worst night of sleep I've ever had. Every time I would close my eyes, they'd fly open again at the slightest sound she made, hoping that every movement was her turning to me, giving in to the moment. I groan again, gripping the bedding and wishing she were right here and ready. I'd punish her with the wood she gave me all night long.

I look over at the bathroom, my mind drifting into fantasy mode, but after a night of maybe an hour or two of sleep at most, I don't give a shit.

I lie in bed, trying not to think about her in that nightgown when she walks out. Thankfully, she's dressed in blue jeans and a white scoop-neck top, but damn, she still looks hot as fuck. My eyes are silently and quickly undressing her as she saunters across the room and sits in the chair near the window. She bends down to pull on some socks and gives me a look down her top at the valley between her tits. My cock twitches again, and I'm glad the blanket's over my waist.

"Sleep well?" Mindy asks, and there's a hint of a smile on her lips. I know she thinks she's won, but she's dead wrong. I can see in her eyes that she's just as sleep-deprived as I am.

I yawn, placing my arms behind my neck. "Pretty damn good," I lie. "Haven't had a night's rest that good since the Delaney sisters." I kick my legs a little, and the blanket slides down to my knees. I don't do anything to hide my hard-on now, even squirming my hips slightly as if I'm moving to get comfortable. Mindy's mouth drops open a little, and I know what she's thinking about. "You?"

"Oh . . . fine," she says, her eyes falling to my cock before jerking away. I see red come to her cheeks and I smile.

"It's a quarter till eight," she says, her voice small as she suddenly focuses on making sure the tongue on her shoes is just perfect. "You should get ready. Mom was serious about everyone being there for breakfast."

"Leave any hot water for me?" I ask jokingly. A mansion like this could probably heat enough water for a hotel and not have a problem.

"Should be enough," she says, still refusing to look at me. She fusses with her shoes a little more, then stands up. "I'm going to head down."

"No," I say, rising from the bed, and she looks at me with surprise. "Wait."

“What—” she starts, then crosses her arms underneath her breasts, frustrated. “Why?”

“Don’t you want us to be more cohesive? We need to go down to breakfast together.”

“Uh, yeah, I guess,” she says, biting her lip again, and she looks so cute. I smile and swing my legs over, giving her my back as I go over to my bag. “So . . . I guess I’ll just hang out. Hurry, please?”

I chuckle. Please, now? Progress. “I’ll be ten minutes.”

I gather a change of clothes, some nice black dress pants and a white dress shirt, and walk into the bathroom. I take a quick cold shower, half to take care of my dick and half to wake me up. After a quick shave, I brush my teeth and step out, feeling more in control of myself.

Mindy looks up from sitting on the bed, picking at her nails. I see something flash in her eyes and she says, “You look . . . refreshed.”

I grin. “Thanks. Listen, about last night—”

“You don’t have to say anything,” she says, giving me a slightly regretful half smile. “What we’ve both been doing is wrong. But we made it through one night. We only have six more to go. Let’s just drop anything that came before and get through this without killing each other.”

You mean fucking each other, I say in my head.

“Agreed,” I reply instead, though I know it’s all a lie. There’s too much tension between us. There’s only one way for this to end up, and that’s her playing cowgirl on my cock.

Still, I smile and offer her my arm. “Ready?”

She looks at my arm for a moment before she takes it, rising to her feet. We leave, and part of me feels good with Mindy on my arm. Maybe we’re pretending, but I could get used to pretend.

We go downstairs, but before we enter the dining room, Mindy plasters a heavenly smile on her face.

“Good morning,” Mary Jo chirps as we walk in. “Thanks for making it on time.”

I look around and quickly notice that not everyone is here. Aunt Rita and Ivy Jo are here, along with John, but Charles, Layla, and Roxy are missing.

“Good morning, ladies . . . and John,” I say with charm. “Lovely morning, isn’t it?”

“Did you guys sleep well?” Mary Jo asks.

“Absolutely wonderful, didn’t we, babe?” I ask Mindy. “I slept like a

baby," I add.

Mindy nods. "Mmmhmm. That bed was really comfortable and the room was gorgeous. I loved the view from the balcony. I felt like I was sleeping at the Ritz Carlton."

"I hope some baby-making action was going on," Ivy Jo mutters. "Less viewing. More screwing."

I chuckle as everyone seems to ignore her. I guess she's earned the right to say whatever the hell she wants at her age.

John sets down his spoon, standing up from his plate of grits and eggs to give Mindy a hug. "I'm glad you both enjoyed your room. You know we just had it redone? My father had turned it into my playroom when I was a child. I just couldn't see doing that anymore, so I had it restored and upgraded."

"It's lovely," Mindy says, looking around. "Hey, where's Roxy?"

Her mom scowls, and I have to laugh. Mothers everywhere are the same. "Late to breakfast, as usual. I swear, that child . . ."

"And Uncle Charles?" Mindy asks, hoping to stop a rant before it begins.

Rita shakes her head. "Honey, you'll be lucky if he's up by two. He usually skips breakfast. It's those damn cigs. He has no appetite."

"Good morning, lovelies," a cheery, singsong voice says. Roxy walks in looking bright faced, a disgruntled Layla behind her. "How are my favorite people?"

Roxy goes around kissing everyone before sitting, totally ignoring the daggers her mother is staring at her. Meanwhile, Layla sort of slumps into a chair, still looking like she'd prefer to be anywhere but here.

"Would've been better if you were here on time," Mary Jo finally says, stabbing at her eggs like she's ready to murder the chickens they came from.

Roxy looks over at us, giving us a saucy grin. "So how did you two sleep?"

"Everyone seems to be asking that," I say, reaching over and hanging an arm around Mindy. "We slept great."

"Like a baby," Mindy agrees, letting my hand stay for a bit.

Roxy looks disappointed. "I didn't hear screams and whips at all. Major letdown, you two. Get with the program."

"We're not here for entertainment," Mindy grumbles, rolling her eyes and taking my hand off her shoulder.

Silence falls over everyone for a few minutes as breakfast is eaten, and I must admit that whoever Mary Jo has cooking for everyone has skills. Roast

duck is easy. Good grits are hard.

As Roxy scrapes the last of her insisted on granola out of her bowl and crunches down, Mary Jo rises to her feet and claps her hands together. “Enough dilly-dallying. There’s so much to do and not enough time to get it done. We’ve got to get flower girl gowns, and there are decorations and dealing with the caterer . . .”

Roxy sticks her hand up, sort of, interrupting her mother. “Mom, I think it would be better for everyone if we worked in groups. Keep you sane.”

Mary Jo brightens. “That’s actually a great idea, Roxy.”

Roxy sticks her tongue out at Mindy. “You’re not always the pet!”

“Girl, please,” Mindy says, waving her away. “I’ll go with you, Roxy. Keep you out of trouble.”

“And I’ll go with them,” Ivy Jo adds. “Keep these old bones youthful.”

Mary Jo looks like she’s about to protest but relents with a nod. “Well then, can you three deal with the dresses? Rita and Layla, come with me to get the decorations.”

“And Oliver can come with me for a ride through town,” John says. “I want to show him a few things and get his opinion on some others.”

Mary Jo claps her hands together, pleased. “Okay. That sounds great. Be back here by one for lunch.”

As everyone is getting up from their chairs, I pull Mindy in close. “Bye, Princess,” I tell her, giving her a kiss on the lips. This time, she isn’t as shocked, and I’m surprised when she kisses me back quickly.

“Goodbye, handsome,” she tells me, giving me a cute little smile that stops me in my tracks for a moment. I think I’m having just a little too much fun with this roleplay. “See you in a bit.”

I get up, and John and I make it outside and jump into his classic Mustang convertible, cherry red, of course, and we head into town. The engine purrs as we cruise, and I have to admit, it’s a great car.

“That Mindy is quite a handful,” John says as he drives, the top down and just the engine providing background noise. “Just a more grown-up version of her younger sister. But what I love about them most is that mischievous sparkle in their eyes. They’re always ready to hit you with a joke that will have a grown man giggling.”

I chuckle. “I can't argue with that. You’d be surprised how often she knocks me on my heels.”

“Do you love her?” John asks me directly as we pull up to a stop sign.

“No offense, but I’m about to be her stepfather. I’d like to know she’s going to marry a man who will love her, not just be a good match.”

I hesitate. Love is such a strong word. I know I’m supposed to be pretending to be in love, but to actually answer a direct question, I feel uneasy. But I can’t help but answer with what he wants.

“Yes,” I say. “Heaven and stars above, I love her very much.”

John studies me for a moment, then nods. “Good. Then don’t ever let her go. Girls like her only come around once in a lifetime. So to hell with the rules. You make sure you hold her, please her, and give her everything she desires.”

“Desires,” I muse as John pulls away. *Desires indeed*.

Hopefully, she gives in to that desire sooner rather than later. Another night of her dressed in that nightgown and I’m going to have a serious case of blue balls.

“Oliver?” John asks. “Did you hear me?”

“Hmmm?” I reply, glancing over at John. “Yeah. I was just thinking how stupid rules can be, and that you’re right. Mindy deserves her wildest dreams.”

“Good,” John says, turning his attention back to driving. I look out the car window again, not really watching as the greenery rolls by. I’m thinking about Mindy. And rules. The only thing separating me from her is a flimsy barrier of rules she’s put up between us.

And if I want to get the rules to change . . . I need to change the game.

MINDY

As Roxy and I ride with Grandma, I know I’m in big trouble. I can't stop thinking about the way he kissed me.

The way that his hands felt on my waist, and the way his thumb brushed over my cheek when our lips parted. It’s fake, but it felt so real. I can still count on one hand the number of times he’s kissed me. The scary part is that each one is getting better than the last. The really scary part is that I’m looking forward to the next one more and more.

It’s more than the way he uses his lips or the way his body feels pressed against me. It’s the look in his eyes. There is real desire there, and something else too. Something that scares me.

But last night was a real test of faith. I think I deserve entry to the gates of heaven because I'm a goddamn saint for resisting him. Call the Pope or something, because I felt like Eve, and Oliver's big fucking dick was the forbidden fruit. I didn't partake, so now I need to be rewarded.

"Yoo-hoo! Earth to Mindy!" Roxy says, waving her hand in my face.

I'm snapped back to attention. Roxy's driving us down the road in her white convertible with the sun roof down. The wind ruffles through our hair, and the weather is amazing. You couldn't ask for a better day, really. With clear blue skies and the sun warming our skin, everything is just right. Off in the distance, I can see the deep blue ocean. This place is nothing but beautiful. If I had to name a place to live, I think I would love to live here.

"Yeah?" I ask, setting aside my thoughts about Oliver and the creeping fantasy I have of him and me and this place. "What?"

Roxy grins, raising her voice to talk over the wind. "You look like you're in another world. Was the sex that good?"

I scowl at Roxy. "You do realize your grandma's in the back seat, right?"

"Are you serious?" Roxy asks, glancing in the rearview mirror. "She says and hears things far worse than that, ain't that right, Grandma?"

In the back, my annoyance grows as Grandma cackles. "Honey, I might be old, but I ain't dead. I've had more than my fair share of rides in the rodeo back in the day and put more than my fair share of cowboys away wet at night."

"See?" Roxy says as I wish I could just crawl into a hole and die. And Brianna thinks *I'm* forward? "Hell, I'd have her twerking on ladies' night at Trixie's if I could."

"Don't you dare," I say, feeling like the most mature person in the vehicle. "You're not about to have my Maw-Maw down there looking like some geriatric Nikki Minaj."

Roxy laughs, and silence reigns for a moment. "So, how have you been?" I ask Roxy seriously. "I haven't gotten a moment alone with you since we got here. You doing okay?"

"I've been good," Roxy says, giving me a smirk and a shrug. "But Mom's been giving me hell for taking a year off college to pursue singing. What else is new? She doesn't approve of anything I do unless it's something she wants."

Her words resonate with me. Aren't I pulling this whole charade to please my mother? I'm making an ass of myself in front of my family just so I can

appear to have found a man. “It’s just her way,” I say.

We make it to the dress shop. It’s a small little place in a strip mall between a karate studio and an eyeglass shop. I’m not sure at first, but when Roxy leads me inside, I see that everything’s high-end. “This looks expensive as hell. I’d feel like I was slumming it in a Vera Wang,” I say. “Jesus, this thing costs more than what I make in two months.”

“Good thing I have John's credit card then,” Roxy says with a chuckle, patting her hip pocket.

“What do you think of that?” I ask.

“What do I think of what?” Roxy asks as Grandma settles into one of the well-padded chairs and hums to herself.

“Of Mom marrying him?” I ask.

I know the conversation I had with Mom, but I want Roxy’s opinion too. She bites her lower lip for a second as she thinks before answering. “He seems like a really sweet man. At first, I didn't think that they made a good match. He's laid-back, and as you know, Mom can be pretty . . . high-strung. But for the most part, they've meshed pretty well. And despite all the bullshit, Mom’s really the same inside.”

“That's good. As long as she's happy,” I say as I finger a tight little party dress. It’d look great on me, and I can just imagine myself dancing with Oliver . . . wait, what the hell?

“That's always what's most important,” Grandma says as I quickly let the dress go. Now is not the time to think about Oliver. “Because if you ain't happy, everything and everyone around you will be miserable.”

Roxie lets out a snort. “I know that's right. Preach, Granny Goose! You’re on a roll today!”

“And if the shoe doesn't fit, don't wear the stinky thing,” Grandma says, egged on by Roxy. “Cast it out!”

Roxy laughs as the salesperson comes over, looking like someone cut a fart in church. “May I help you?”

“Yes, we’re here to pick up some dresses,” Roxy says. “The name is Wentworth?”

At the mention of John’s name, the bitch face disappears and a giant smile comes out. “Of course! I’ll have them out in a second.”

It’s not quite a second, but they’re back in a jiffy. They’re certainly high-end. I seriously doubt any flower girls in history have worn dresses quite this level before.

“These are cute,” Roxy says. “These would be great for your wedding too, Mindy!”

I want to have enthusiasm, but It’s hard to even think about. There won’t be any marriage. At least, not with Oliver. “Yeah, that would be cool.”

“What’s the matter?” she asks, noticing my tone. “You don’t seem too excited. Aren’t you looking forward to your wedding? You two just seem so perfect for each other.”

Looking at my sister’s encouraging smile, I feel like a fucking fraud. I should have known this fake-marriage thing wouldn’t be so casual. I catch Grandma looking at me. She tears her eyes away when I see, but in that instant, I’m reminded that Grandma has been around for a long time. She’s raised two daughters and a son, buried a husband and her son, and the whole time has been smart as a whip. She sees things other people don’t. I need to be careful.

“Of course I am, but we haven’t even set a date yet.” God, I sound guilty, I know it.

Roxy shrugs, turning her attention back to the dresses. “Fine. I didn't mean to upset you.”

I just want to hurry up and get this week over with. I feel like time is crawling, every minute is a year of mental agony already, and every mention of sex, Oliver, weddings, or babies is like a stab right in my gut.

We spend the next hour checking the dresses, but in the end, everything looks good. The tab makes me blanche while Roxy doesn’t bat an eyelash at letting them swipe John’s card. Instead, she just laughs as we carry the dresses out to the car. “Man, I really wish we could have gotten some of those party dresses. I saw you eyeing one. You’d look great in it. Not as good as me, but good.”

“I’d make you look like a little girl playing dress-up,” I tease back. “Oh, wait . . . you ARE a little girl playing dress-up.”

“Bitch,” Roxy says with a laugh, and I feel good again. On the way back, I forget about my worries as we all catch up on each other’s day-to-day lives.

When we reach the Wentworth estate, my stomach is grumbling and I can't wait to get some food. We both help Grandma out and bring the bags in, setting them in the den where I guess Mom’s starting to gather the stuff.

“We’re home!” Roxy sings when we walk back into the foyer. “Looks like Mom, Rita and Layla, and the men aren’t back yet. Let’s go wait in the TV room. You’ve gotta check out John’s system. They should be back soon,

but seriously, Min, you need to see this thing. It's nearly the size of a movie screen!"

"I hope they're quick, 'cause I'm starving," I say, following Roxy into the entertainment room. Her description was a bit over-the-top. It's not the size of a movie theater, but still, a seven-feet-tall projection screen is pretty damn sweet. "Wow, imagine watching Ryan Gosling on this thing. He'd be life-sized."

"Imagine watching porn on this thing," Roxy says with a laugh. "The guys' dicks are life-sized."

"You . . ." I start before just shaking my head. "Just please tell me that you watch it by yourself."

"Well, duh."

Before I can reply, I hear a yell from the foyer. "We're home!"

Thank God for a mother who insists on making her lunch appointments. We go out where Mom and Aunt Rita are handing off their bags. "How'd you girls do?" Mom asks. "Been back long?"

"Everything went well," Roxy reassures Mom. "They're in the den. You guys?"

"Good. We got almost everything," Mom says before scowling. "They just won't be able to get in the *Toro* sushi that I wanted."

"Oh, that sucks," I reply, trying not to sound annoyed. Jesus Christ, Mom. When I was a kid, you'd have been happy with Chicken of the Sea, and now you won't be happy unless the fish were given massages before getting filleted. Jeez, no wonder you couldn't trust the wedding planner to do everything. There's no way any one human could remember everything you want for this thing.

Mom catches my tone, though, and chuckles. "Okay, Mindy, point taken. All right, lunch time. You guys wait—"

"Oh," Roxy says next to me, her hand pressed against her chest. "Talk about Prince Charming."

I turn to see Oliver walking in carrying a bouquet of roses. My heart does a backflip as he walks over to me, a beaming smile on his face. "I brought something for you, Princess," he says, handing me the roses. "They're not as beautiful as you . . . but then again, nothing is."

I stare at the bouquet as if it's a vase full of snakes. Still, his words have an impact, and I'm shocked. What's he up to? "Th–th–thank you."

"Oh, my God. That's so sweet," Mom says, fanning her face to prevent

smearing her mascara, tears in her eyes. Every woman in the room has watery eyes with the exception of Layla, who looks like she's going through great lengths not to roll hers. Even I'm feeling a bit choked up, and looking into his face, I'm having to remind myself over and over that this is all an act. He's just pretending. He *has* to be.

"You're welcome," Oliver says, his deep voice dripping like honey. He leans down to give me a firm kiss on the lips. His scent envelops me. It's a bit spicy from his cologne, but underscored with his unique manly flavor. I love it, and pretend or not, my body responds.

When he pulls away, I almost feel like I need a ventilator. My head is swimming, I'm confused, not able to think, and I can feel my cheeks burning. To hide my embarrassment, I bury my nose in the roses. Maybe it's the moment, but they smell better than any roses I've ever seen.

"That was so sweet of you," Mom repeats. "You really are a gentleman."

Oliver grins and flashes her a smile. "I try."

"Can we clone you?" Roxy asks, and while I know she's just being silly, I swear she sounds like she's all gaga too.

Oliver laughs, shaking his head. "Sorry, Roxy, I don't think that's possible yet."

"No, seriously. Can we clone? I got a cup that you can donate your DNA __"

"That's enough, Roxy!" I say firmly.

"Selfish, stingy . . ." Roxy's words trail off as she makes a face, then turns and walks toward the dining room.

"Hold on, Roxy," Oliver says. "John and I were talking, and we've had the tables set out on the second-floor balcony. We're going to do lunch out there. The day is too beautiful to let it go to waste."

Mom looks at John, beaming. "That's a great idea! You two make a great team, John. It's going to be great having Oliver as your son-in-law."

"Thanks, honey," John says, "but it was all his idea."

Oliver turns his eyes on me and smiles. It's not a smirk, and it's not mocking or joking. It's a smile that makes me weak in the knees. "It's nothing, really. I do it all for her. My Princess deserves the absolute best."

I tear my eyes away from his gaze, my cheeks flaming. My heart feels fuzzy. Weird. I'm so confused and conflicted. I know this is all supposed to be fake, but Oliver is turning up the heat, and my heart, among other places, thinks it's real.

If he keeps this up, I'm going to be clawing his back and screaming his name before the week's out.

OLIVER

"Here you go, Princess," I say, pulling out the seat for her. Out on the balcony, I don't think I could ask for a more perfect lunch time. The sun's high in the sky and the skies are a perfect blue. Past the back lawn, you can see the wall that borders the estate before the land drops, and the ocean begins. It's not too warm, not too cold, and the breeze has just a hint of salt on it. I don't think I could have scripted a more beautiful or romantic location for lunch.

Mindy's cheeks flush as she sinks in her seat. The staff have set up small tables for two or three people around the balcony as if it's an outdoor restaurant. Each couple has their own table while Roxy, Layla, and Ivy Jo share a third, leaving one for me and Mindy.

"Thank you," she says, her voice small.

I wink at her. "My pleasure. You look lovely, by the way."

I take my seat as a cool breeze flows in from the ocean, and I inhale deeply. "Jeez, this place is like a paradise."

"It is," Mindy agrees, enjoying the cool air with a satisfied look. "This was all your idea?" she asks quietly enough so the others don't hear. She doesn't need to worry—she'd have to be talking pretty loudly. There's comfortable space between the tables.

I nod. "It was nothing. Everything was already planned. I just suggested we do it out here."

"Why?" she asks.

"Because you deserve it," I say with a smile. "And I wanted to have a nice lunch with you."

She stares at me, unconvinced. "I can't tell if you're playing or if you really mean it anymore, Oliver."

"Maybe a little bit of both," I tease. "Maybe I don't really know myself." And that's the truth. I might be getting a little carried away, but maybe I actually mean it.

"Yeah, which means it's bullshit," she says. "You strike me as a man who always knows exactly what he's doing and what he wants."

“Isn’t that what you want?” I ask.

She starts to respond, but the kitchen guy comes out with the menu for everyone. He goes around to each table, leaving the menus and then taking the orders for drinks. John’s going all out. We’re practically at a restaurant.

There’s only a few selections of wine. Mary Jo is saving the best stuff for the actual wedding. I take a quick look, then hand it back to him. “Can I have the Darioush Chardonnay 2010 for us, please?”

The man nods, pleased. “Certainly, sir.”

Mindy immediately glowers at me when he’s gone. “Who said you could order for me?”

“I did,” I say firmly. “I’m supposed to be your fiancé, remember?”

“How y’all doing over there?” Roxy calls from her table. “Enjoying the view?”

“Just fine,” Mindy yells back, flashing a quick smile. “How about you worry about what’s on your own plate?”

“Smart ass,” Roxy yells.

I laugh. “You two are a riot. I bet you two were cats and . . . well, cats when you were kids.”

“Oh, you haven’t seen anything yet.” Mindy scowls. “It’s tame right now because people are around. It’s an all out rumble when it’s just me and her. Or it used to be.”

“What would we do without our younger siblings?” I ask, my mind briefly going to Anthony and wondering if he’s doing what I asked him to do.

He’d better, I tell myself, *or when I get back, we’re going to have more than just a little talk this time. I really should find time to give them a quick call, but it’s been impossible so far.*

“Repent,” Mindy jokes, “for thou art cursed with the younger sibling. And with great wailing and gnashing of teeth, the elder siblings were thus cursed.”

I can’t help but to laugh. “Something like that.”

“Nah, I’m just joking,” Mindy says more seriously. “I don’t know what I’d do without that girl.”

“Then why didn’t you come here with them? If a coffee shop is your thing, I’m sure John could’ve set you up.”

Mindy frowns. “Because when Dad died . . . I just felt paralyzed. Like, I didn’t know what to do with myself. Then running the coffee shop gave me something to focus on. Mom moving away was like a relief at the time. When

she was around, it reminded me of him too much."

"I'm sorry to hear that. But I definitely understand where you're coming from," I tell her honestly. "My parents . . . they're not together either."

She peers at me closely, looking at me with real concern. "What happened?"

Before I can reply, the waiter returns with my drink. I look over the menu quickly and decide. "I'd like the lamb kebabs with couscous and grilled vegetables. Mindy?"

"That sounds . . . actually, I'll have the same," Mindy says, giving me a little smile. "What? You were right on the wine, so I figure I'll trust you on the food too. So . . . you were saying?"

"My father doesn't speak to me," I say when the waiter is gone. "We had a disagreement back at the company."

Mindy fingers her wine glass. "You know, there's a lot I don't know about you, Oliver. Hell, I didn't even have time to Google you. What was the disagreement over?"

I hesitate. This conversation isn't going in the direction I want it to go. I'm supposed to be turning up the heat, not turning up the mush. "I'd rather not talk about it. At least right now."

Mindy frowns. "That bad?"

"It was." There's silence for a few moments as I fidget, trying to think of anything to steer conversation away from me, but thankfully, Mindy doesn't push things any further. Finally, I glance around the balcony at her family. "So how do you think it's going?"

Mindy looks around, thinking deeply before replying. "I think everyone is pretty much fooled, if that's what you're talking about. Well, except for Grandma, but she's always wary. But you need to stop with the tricks."

I hide my grin behind the glass. "I'm done with those. Nothing but complete obedience from me from here on."

"Why do I think you're mocking me?" she asks suspiciously. "And why is it that almost everything you say seems to have a double meaning?"

"It's a talent of mine, one of many, I might add," I say with a grin. "When I was in school, they always told us never to talk yourself into a corner. Always give yourself another possible explanation in case things go wrong. So . . . well, I'm having fun—aren't you?"

"I most certainly am not," Mindy says, blushing and tucking a lock of her rich brown hair behind her ear. "I mean . . ."

“You’re playing the game as much as I am,” I finish for her. “And that’s fine. It’s no fun playing a game without a good partner to play it with.”

“Why did you do this?” she says suddenly, trying to duck out of the way the conversation is going. “What is it that Gavin has on you?”

The ability to hide pocket sevens and the devil’s own luck on the flop, I think, but I don’t tell her that. “Well, he and I have known each other since soon after I got back to town. And he did something big for me, so I owed him one. I’ll be honest, I thought he was insane when he first proposed it, but then . . .”

The waiter interrupts us, bringing our plates. He sets them down before leaving, and I give Mindy a nod. “*Bon Appétit*.”

“*Salud*,” Mindy says, reaching for her wine. As she does, her hand hits the bottle of sauce that the waiter had brought for our kebabs, and it tips over. “Shit!”

Before I can react, sauce has splashed all over my plate, and I’m pretty sure I have some of it on my shirt. Mindy blushes, reaching for her napkin, but I wave her off. “It’s okay, really.”

“Really?” she asks nervously, and I look at my right hand, which got covered in sauce all over my index finger.

“Really. Here, try some for me,” I say, holding out my finger to her. “Tell me if it’s too spicy, or else I might end up with hiccups all afternoon.”

“No way,” Mindy says, stopping when I put my finger against her lips.

“Do it,” I say, lowering my voice. “Open your mouth.”

Her eyes darken as she opens her lips, and I slide my finger into her mouth, my heart quickening and my cock jumping to rock hardness in a split second as she licks my finger. Her lips are velvety soft, and her tongue . . . it’s beyond words. It’s devilish, erotic, and as she sucks my finger in deeper, I can tell she likes it as much as I do.

“Hey, get a room over there!” Roxy yells from her table.

Mindy freezes, pulling her head back and her face blushing furiously. Not saying a word, she gets up and runs into the house. I’m on her heels in half a second, ignoring the fact that my cock is tenting my pants or the impending argument between Roxy and her mother as I follow Mindy inside.

She’s quick, her shame and my hard-on giving her an advantage until I catch her just outside our bedroom. I grab her arm and pull her to a stop, where she spins against the wall, her eyes wide and desperate. “You said you were done with that!”

“I didn’t say you could leave,” I say, moving close to her. I step even closer, putting my arm out and trapping her against the wall. “Who gives a shit what Roxy says? Everyone ignores her antics most of the time, it seems. You were enjoying it as much as I was.”

I reach out and stroke my finger down her cheek, and she’s practically trembling beneath my touch. “Stop,” she half moans, half whispers. “Just stop!”

“Why?” I ask, leaning in closer. We’re less than two inches apart, and I can feel the heat and the tremble of her breath on my skin, and I want her so badly I could take her right here in the hallway. “You’re running from what we both want. What we both need.”

A soft sigh escapes her lips. “We’re not supposed to be doing this.”

“There’s nothing wrong with it,” I whisper, leaning in closer. “There’s nothing wrong with having a little bit of fun.”

I move in closer, and our lips touch again. Our kiss is soft at first before growing hot, and I trail my lips down her neck, licking and feasting on her skin. She’s delicious, and she melts into my touch, her hands pulling me closer as I close my hand around her left breast, feeling her hard nipple under my fingers and pulling on it.

“Oh, sweet God,” Mindy moans, her thighs parting as I slip a knee between them, and she starts grinding against me. “What the hell are we doing?”

“What you need, Princess,” I moan, moving my hand from her breast and down her belly to unbutton her jeans. I slide my hand inside and run my hand over the slick satin of her panties. She’s soaked, nearly dripping wet as I slide them to the side and slip two fingers inside her while the heel of my hand rubs against her clit.

I know I shouldn't be doing this here in a hallway. Someone could walk by and see us. But I’m filled with so much desire I don’t want to fucking move. And the danger of someone seeing adds to the excitement.

“Oh, fuck,” Mindy moans, her fingernails digging into my shoulders as I nibble on her ear.

“You know you want this as much as I do,” I whisper in her ear, rubbing the secret spot inside her quickly as I rub my thumb over her clit. “Say it. Say you want it.”

“No,” Mindy moans, trying to fight it and losing. “I can’t . . .”

“You can. Say it. Say you want to feel my cock pumping into you and

making you scream. You know how good it'll feel stretching you open and making you—"

"Coming," Mindy moans as her pussy tightens around my fingers. She clamps her lips on my neck, stifling her cries against my neck as she bites down, and I hiss, the pain adding to my strokes as I keep her coming, melting against my hard body and clinging to me, needing me . . . wanting me.

When she sags against the wall, spent, I pull my fingers out and run them under my nose, relishing the scent before I lick them clean. "So fucking delicious."

"Fucker," Mindy half gasps, half curses me, even as a satisfied grin crosses her beautiful face. "That was totally against the rules."

"I told you, I don't like rules," I say, stepping back. Mindy doesn't move. Her legs are still shaking from the intensity of her orgasm. I turn and start walking down the hallway before I stop and look back. "And Princess?"

She can't even speak, but her eyes find me.

"Next time," I say, giving her my best intense look, "it's not going to be my fingers. You're going to be coming on my cock."

MINDY

I lean back against the wall, buttoning up before someone sees and trying to catch my breath. My legs are trembling from the aftershocks of the orgasm Oliver gave me, and my heart is still hammering in my chest. And the intensity of his promise as he walked away . . . I can't help but wish he would've dragged me into our room and fucked me senseless.

I suck in a trembling breath, rubbing at my throat where I can still feel the burning kisses he left on my skin. My panties are soaked. I need to change them. His eyes held sweet promise the whole time, his fingers ripping a climax from me that was otherworldly.

This is getting out of hand. I wasn't supposed to feel this way. I want him to take me. To possess me. And I don't care about any of my fucking rules anymore. I want him to break them all.

"Are you okay, darling?" a soft voice says behind me.

I nearly jump out of my skin when I look to my right to see Grandma looking at me with concern.

What the hell? How the hell did she sneak up on me? She can barely

move.

I swallow and flash a cheery smile. “I'm fine.”

“You sure?” She persists. “You ran away from your table like a bat out of hell. The dessert wasn't even served yet.”

“I just needed to clean up what spilled on me. I didn’t want it to stain.”

She's quiet for a moment, letting me squirm in my obvious lie. We can both see my shirt is unchanged. Finally, she looks at me. “Is everything all right between you and Oliver?”

“Of course,” I say. “Why wouldn't it be?”

Grandma waves her hand lightly. “Oh, I don't know. It just seems that you're not happy when asked about him. To me, that's a sign that there is trouble.”

“There's nothing wrong between me and Oliver. If anything, I'm just a little high-strung about Mother getting married. After what happened to Dad, I never thought I'd see the day.” While the last part’s true, I’m just trying to deflect her curiosity. The truth is . . . there might be trouble, but not what she’s thinking. There might actually be something building between us.

Grandma shakes her head. She loved Dad like a son. “I never thought so either, but you know people have to move on with their lives. It wouldn't have been fair if she sat there and lived in the memory of your father and never started living her life again. Look at me. I never remarried, and a part of me regrets it.”

This is news to me, and I feel compelled to take her hand in mine. “Oh, Grandma, I had no clue that you were lonely. You always seem so strong and independent.”

“That was just the shell that I put around myself. Every morning I wake up alone is terrible. It gets to you after a while,” she says.

I shake my head, tears forming in my eyes. “Grandpa would’ve wanted you to be happy.”

“You know, Mindy, for the longest time, I thought the opposite. But then I realized that I was projecting my fears onto my deceased husband. I felt guilty because of my own feelings. By the time I realized my truth, it was too late. Now I would be happy and just settle for a great-grandbaby.”

Damn, *that* again. Why, oh, why am I to be saddled with these expectations? It’s not fair to Grandma, but it’s also not fair to me, and it makes me feel even more like a liar.

I do a nervous chuckle, trying to buy for time. “Well, maybe we’ll

surprise you."

It makes me sick to my stomach saying it, but I don't know what to say. "Babies do tend to sort of just . . . well, happen."

"Well, as much as I would love that," Grandma says, "I wouldn't dare ask you to do it to make me happy. If it happens, it happens. The most important thing is to live your truth. Because when you do that, the universe will make all the things you want happen."

Live your truth. When I'm living a damn lie. I can't believe I allowed myself to get into this! What was I thinking? I'm too used to joking about things and brushing things aside. I didn't stop to consider the feelings of others who would be caught up in my web of deceit because I didn't think it was that serious.

It's hard, but I manage to plaster a grateful look on my face. "Thank you so much for your words of wisdom, Grandma. Don't know what I'd do without you." I pull her into an embrace, holding her frail body tight. "What can I do to ever show you how much you mean to me?"

"How about visiting me more often? You don't want to wait around. The next time you see me, they might be carrying me out in a cardboard box."

"Oh, stop it. I'll do better. I promise."

"That's what I want to hear," Grandma says. Standing on her tiptoes, she gives me a kiss. "Now come back out here and get your dessert. The others will be wondering where you went."

"Okay, I will," I tell her, turning toward my room. "After I go to the bathroom to tinkle."

She nods at me and totters off. I sigh in relief as soon as she's gone. This is turning out to be harder than I imagined. I thought it would be easy to come back, crack jokes, and hide behind all the bluster. Oliver isn't making it easy by being so irresistible.

Just a few days, I tell myself. *This will all be over. I'll tell them Oliver and I are done. And this will just be one bad memory.*

I go to the bathroom and clean up, changing my panties. He's so going to pay for that.

Back outside, there's a commotion going on. Grandma is waving her arms, yelling at Mom, while Bertha is going off like she's on crack, and it takes a moment for me to figure out what's happening.

"I told you about keeping this dog on a leash!" Grandma is snapping, pointing at Bertha, who is circling her and barking at her like she's intruder. I

look, and my breath catches in my throat as I see that Grandma's slacks have been ripped, although I don't see any blood. "That heffa doesn't like me!"

"I got it," Oliver says, rising to his feet and letting out a piercing whistle. Bertha stops in her tracks, sitting on her haunches. Slowly, Oliver approaches her. When he gets close, he bends down and picks her up with ease.

"There, there, girl," he says, stroking her gently. "Time to put you in time out."

"Wow," Roxy says, shocked by how easy Oliver handled the problem. "You're a dog whisperer too?"

"Glad someone could tame that little heathen," Grandma mutters, retaking her seat. "If I'd known Mary Jo was going to let that ball of fur run wild, I would have brought my cat, Giselda, to put her in her place."

I ignore Grandma for the most part, my heart fluttering as I watch Oliver hold and stroke Bertha. I don't even know why. I'm okay with pets, but the way he's holding the dog in his arms, almost like it's a baby, is doing weird things to my ovaries.

I walk over and sit back down at the table. Oliver follows me over, still holding Bertha.

"That was something else," I say to him as he sits down in his seat. The dog looks like it's silly putty in his hands, nuzzled against his chest. It's hard to act like nothing happened after he just finger-banged me in the hallway, but I have to pretend like nothing did, both because it's my family and because I need to maintain my sanity.

"I have a way with dogs," Oliver says with a smile, looking up at me. His eyes seem to say to me, *and with women*.

A flush comes to my cheeks and I look away. I can still feel his fingers inside me, and I want more. So much more.

Oliver gives me a questioning look. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," I lie through my teeth, giving him a sickly, weak grin. "I just . . . I could use a little bit of that Panna cotta."

"Here," Oliver says, taking a bite of his before sliding it over to me. "Take mine. I think Roxy has devoured the rest."

"Thank you," I say automatically. Oh, God, I'm thanking him now?

The Italian custard is delicious, and as I eat, I watch Oliver. I'm afraid. I came into this week thinking this would all be easy. That Mom would be so much the center of attention that I wouldn't have to keep building lies on top of lies. And if I got lucky, maybe even get a little play cock.

Now, my defenses are crumbling, and I’m constantly thinking about babies and the idea of Oliver’s thick, juicy . . .

I’m hanging on by my fingernails at the edge of a bottomless pit, and I don’t know how much longer I can keep it up.

OLIVER

“A blob!” Roxy guesses excitedly as Layla spreads her arms out, wiggling them around before making big circles with her hands. I have no idea how Roxy’s getting blob out of it, but then again, I have no damn clue what Layla’s trying to say either.

We’re sitting in the living room playing Charades after dinner. It was nice, too. There was no gaming between us, just a good time. Mindy seemed to enjoy herself. She smiled, and as we talked, I felt myself being drawn to her more and more.

Not that I’m going soft. I can't stop thinking about the feel of her tight, slick pussy on my fingers or the way her teeth bit into my skin when she came. Now, playing Charades and having her next to me, I’m . . . torn. Good guy, bad guy, or just be the guy for Mindy? I can’t decide anymore, except that I fucking want her.

“Fat ass!” Roxy yells, pulling me back to the game. “Mindy has a fat ass!”

Layla drops her act, throwing her hands in the air. “I meant to say Mindy has a big brain. That she’s smart!”

“You’re horrible!” Mindy says with a huge laugh. “You couldn’t wait to do that. I’ve seen you trying to get it in for three rounds now.”

Roxy laughs. “You know I was just playing. If anything, you could gain some back there.”

“I don’t mind Mindy’s curves myself,” I say, rubbing her thigh. “They’re in all the right places.”

Mindy blushes, but before the next round can start, my phone rings. I pull it out to see that it’s from Gavin. Showing Mindy the caller ID, I excuse myself and go outside to the patio, where it’s another picture perfect night. “Gavin, what’s up?”

“Hey, Oliver, I was just calling to see how things are going,” Gavin says with a chuckle. “Brianna and I haven’t heard from you two. We got worried.”

“It’s going pretty good, actually,” I say, leaning against a wrought iron fence and chuckling. “We’re playing Charades, believe it or not.”

“Really? Doesn’t sound like your style,” Gavin says. “Any sparks between you and Mindy? At each other’s throats?”

I chuckle. Oh, there's been sparks all right. "Nah, we're good. I'm not going to lie, there were a few hiccups at the start, but everything's going well now."

"I'm glad to hear that." There's relief in Gavin's voice, and I know he cares about Mindy beyond her being his wife's best friend. "I'll be honest, I wasn't sure if you could pull it off. Have you checked in on your brother yet?"

"I need to call him after this, actually. I've been meaning to. Do you know if my house is still in one piece?"

"From what I can tell. At least nobody's called the cops yet."

I shake my head. Hopefully, Gavin's joking. "Well, I'd better take care of that then. Mindy's mom is all about family time, so I won't have a lot of time. Take care, man."

"You too. And be good to her, okay?"

"You know it," I say, hanging up the call. I tap my phone against my chin for a moment, then dial Anthony's cell. It's a good sign when he picks up on the second ring. "Hey, Tony?"

"Oli, I'm dyin' here," Anthony says. "She's kicking my ass."

I chuckle. "If she could kick your ass, I wouldn't be worried. You doing okay?"

"Let's see," Anthony says under his breath. "I'm doing laundry, cleaned the whole house top to bottom, and so far, the closest thing I've had to getting laid was some late night downloaded porn. How do you think I'm doing?"

"Sounds just fine to me," I crack, and Anthony laughs. "Seriously, though, Mom's doing okay?"

"Yeah, we're doing fine," Anthony says. Suddenly, music comes on in the background, and Anthony scrambles. "Sorry, I had my game on pause. The network just put me back in."

"What else have you been up to in your free time?" I ask, not really caring about his game.

"Nothing, just chilling and doing my best to take care of Mom, that's all. She's saying I should go out Friday night, so maybe I'll bounce then. Hey, speaking of that, you bang that chick yet?"

I ignore his question, and Anthony gets the message. He changes subjects. "Hey, Martha wants me to go with her to look at some property that you said you want to look at."

"I think she can do that fine by herself," I reply. "Don't worry about it."

“Well, she's insisting. Don't you trust me? I looked at a lot of property for Dad.”

I sigh, nodding as I reply. “Okay. Go on, but no shenanigans.”

Anthony laughs. “Dude, I can be serious when I need to be. You gotta have faith in me.”

He’s right, and Anthony needs something to do besides porn, video games, and helping Mom around the house. “That's what scares me. All right, man, you take a look and tell me about it when I get back. Take care of Mom.”

I hang up from him and go back inside, where I find that the game’s wrapped up and everyone’s gone to bed except Mindy, Layla, and Roxy. Layla’s got a drink, while Roxy is leaning back, her legs kicked over the arm of her chair, laughing at something. “What’d I miss?”

“Roxy sent everyone to bed with her silliness. She answered John’s attempt at ‘John Wayne’ with ‘my sister likes anal’.” Mindy rolls her eyes. “You’re worse than me, you know that? You have no filter,” she says, looking at Roxy.

Roxy throws her hands up. “Yeah, well, we all suck at that game. Someone had to bring the fun.”

Mindy shakes her head, yawning. “Well, I’m a little tired too. I think I’m going to bed with my future husband.”

The way she says those words makes my heart pound in my chest. Her future husband. Does that mean she’s going to perform her wifely duties? My cock twitches in my pants and excitement courses through my veins. Her future husband. Damn.

I get up off the sofa and help Mindy to her feet. Her hand stays in mine, and I swear her fingers squeeze mine even after we get up. I barely pay attention until my calf bumps the coffee table, and I turn to see Roxy grinning. “Good night, ladies,” I tell them.

Roxy’s grin widens. “Goodnight, lovebirds.”

We walk upstairs to our room, and I’m feeling blood rush through me every step of the way. This isn’t teasing like before, and it certainly isn’t the aggressiveness that I gave her earlier. Mindy’s fingers are entwined in mine the whole way, and her demeanor seems different.

She’s ready.

“What’s up?” I ask softly to make sure nobody overhears us. “Charades bore you to death?”

“No,” Mindy says, giving me a deep, longing look. “But after earlier, we both know things are different. And I’d rather do it this way than someone walking in on us.”

I lean in close, and Mindy pauses for only a second before putting her hand on my neck and pulling me in for a kiss. Our first kiss was nearly forced, and the second was in front of her family. Earlier, I kissed her neck and she was passionate, but it was just sex.

This is smoldering. Her tongue slides over mine, and I taste her mouth. I feel her press her body against mine as her hand pulls me in deeper, and we’re both promising the other things with our lips that words can’t even begin to explain. She moans softly into my mouth and I groan back, my cock throbbing in my pants as she cups me, and we pull back. She turns and starts up the stairs, her voice shaky. “How’s that?”

“Not bad,” I grin, letting her know it was amazing. I take her hand again. “So what did you think of today?”

“It was an interesting day,” she says as we reach the door to our bedroom. “I loved how you handled Bertha. That was sweet.”

We go inside, and I close the door, pushing Mindy against it, not pinning her but just keeping her there by the force of my eyes alone. “What else did you love?”

Her lower lip trembles as she looks at me. We both know what we want, and while it feels dangerous, I don’t care. I need her, and the rush I get from having her this close is bigger than anything else I’ve felt in my entire life.

I place my hands on her waist, tugging her away from the door and close to me, pressing her body against me and looking into her beautiful eyes. “You haven’t answered me yet.”

Mindy doesn’t answer. Instead, she puts her arms around my neck and I know I have her. She’s mine. The girl who has excited me since the first time I saw her picture is totally mine.

I lean in for the kill, intent on working her body from this side of the moon to Sunday, when there's a knock at the door.

You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.

MINDY

I pull away from Oliver with a gasp, my skin prickling with desire. I want

him so fucking badly I can practically taste it.

I shiver. Ever since dinner started, I felt like I was just going along, doing what came naturally, waiting for this moment. From the moment I stood up and took his hand, it was like my mind was on cruise control.

But can I control what comes after?

“Don’t answer that,” I say breathlessly, leaning back in to kiss him again.

Oliver begins to shake his head when I hear Roxy's muffled voice. “Mindy, open up. I know you're not asleep yet. You guys literally just left the living room.”

I roll my eyes, cursing my sister. I turn around and take the two steps to open the door. Roxy is standing there with a smile on her face while holding Bertha in her arms. “What?”

“Ooh, I hope I didn't interrupt anything,” she says, a mischievous sparkle in her eyes.

I want to choke her. “Oh, yeah, I was just about to pull out my strap-on. Oli’s got a fetish, you know.”

She slaps me playfully on the arm. “You liar!” She looks over my shoulder at Oliver. “She’s lying, right?”

“You’ll never know,” Oliver says.

I nod at Bertha. “What's this?”

Roxy grins again. “After Mr. Dog Whisperer here showed his skills today, I thought this would be the best place for her for tonight. So . . . here.”

She thrusts Bertha forward, and I step back, totally disbelieving. “What are you doing?”

Roxy nods. “Grandma was going to kill her, and Mom wouldn't let her stay in her room tonight because she had an accident or something. She kept running and pawing on Maw Maw's door. That used to be mom’s room. I tried to take her with me, but she kept whining and I want to be able to sleep.”

“And you think she’s gonna be fine here with a couple of strangers?”

Before Roxy can reply, Oliver walks over and takes Bertha from her hands. “It’s fine, we’ve got this. Goodnight, Roxy.”

I turn to glower at him, but when I see the small dog in his arms, my heart melts. “Yeah . . . goodnight, Roxy.”

Roxy beams at Oliver. “Thank you. You have a heart of gold, unlike Miss Evanora over here.”

“Goodnight, Roxy,” I repeat forcefully. “Love you.”

I gently shut the door in her face. I hear her mutter some insult on the other side of the door, but I can't make out what it is. Instead, I turn to Oliver. “You must really like dogs.”

He nods, petting her. “I always had golden retrievers. Loyal to a fault and greatly behaved. Bertha’s no retriever, but she’ll do in a pinch.”

Bertha snuggles into his arms, and I swear she's claiming him as her own. I just can't get over how cute she looks in his arms.

I reach out and stroke Bertha’s soft fur. She’s not as bad or as annoying as she was earlier, or maybe it’s just who’s holding her. “I love seeing you hold her.”

A slight smile turns up Oliver’s lips as he stares down at the dog. “Do you, now?”

“Yes. I can see the soft, vulnerable side of you. And it makes me . . .”

He looks up at me, and there is fire in his eyes. Fire that heats my body again in an instant. Soft and vulnerable? No, those aren’t the right words. Protective, nurturing . . . those words might be better, because I don’t think anyone in their right mind could call Oliver Steele soft.

“Makes you what?” he asks, his voice low and magnetic.

Sweat beads my brow as my heart pounds in my chest. “Want you even more,” I finish.

I can't believe I admitted that! To hell with it. It’s true.

Oliver gently sets Bertha on the floor and takes my hand, leading me over to the bed.

“Then why not enjoy the benefits of having a fiancé?” he says, running his fingers along the curve of my left earlobe. “You know, I have a special talent.”

“What’s that?” I moan as his fingers find the little spots along my skin that send sparks shooting through my body.

“Let me show you,” Oliver says, urging me back. I resist for a moment, but my body can’t fight anymore, and I sit down with Oliver kneeling on the carpet. “See? You always wanted me kneeling at your feet.”

I giggle as he pulls me down into a kiss and I’m swept away. His tongue is liquid fire in my mouth as he nibbles and sucks on my lips, his hands stroking my thighs and urging my knees apart. He pulls me close, leaving open-mouthed kisses down my neck, my heart pounding in my chest as he comes closer and closer to the edge of my sundress. “Oliver . . .”

“Not yet,” he teases, pulling back and laying a kiss on my knee. “Trust

me.”

The bed’s just the right height for Oliver as he kisses the inside of my left thigh, his eyes sparkling mischievously as he kisses higher and higher toward the aching, quivering heat of my pussy. Just when I think he’s about to dive in, he pulls back, switching to my other leg, leaving another trail of kisses and licks that has my hips jerking before he’s even touched my pussy.

“Lie back,” Oliver says softly, putting his hand on my chest. I don’t want to. I feel the overwhelming desire to watch him, but I find a couple of the pillows and grab them, tucking them under my head as I obey him, lifting my hips as he rolls my panties down my thighs.

The first touch of his tongue on my pussy lips is electric, and my hips jerk all on their own as he strokes his tongue up my lips before kissing and sucking his way back down. Oh, my God, if this is what he means by a special talent . . .

Oliver’s tongue has the devil inside as he licks and kisses my pussy, stroking me first with feather-light strokes before dipping deep inside me and growling hungrily as he sucks. I can’t control myself, my hands clawing at the bedspread and my thighs squeezing on his head. He grabs my knees and pries them apart, pushing them up and rolling me until he’s got me nearly bent in half, staring into his eyes and the glistening shine of his mouth.

“That was just a preview,” he purrs, smirking. “Now the fun starts.”

Grabbing my dress, Oliver pulls it up over my head and tosses it aside as he starts licking and sucking harder. My body is practically on fire, and I throw my head back, staring sightlessly above me as my body is swept out of control.

Oliver’s lips find my clit, and I know I can’t help myself. Grabbing the pillow behind me, I quickly pull it over my mouth to muffle my cries as Oliver nibbles and sucks on my clit. I’ve never felt anything this good before. His tongue is as fast as a hummingbird's wing on the tip of my clit.

This isn’t a build up to coming. I’ve been strapped to a rocket that just lifted off. Oliver’s hungry muffled growls are the final straw as he bites my clit just hard enough, and I’m sent into spasms as I come hard. The pillow muffles my screams as I buck and my feet kick helplessly against his broad, powerful back. Black roses bloom in front of my eyes as I run out of air, and I’m on the verge of passing out when my orgasm finally passes. Oliver pulls the pillow from in front of my face, coming up and kissing me.

“Told you I had a surprise,” he teases lightly in between gentle kisses.

We squirm higher up onto the bed, Oliver peeling out of his shirt and pants, giving me time to breathe as he climbs into the bed with me, kissing my lips again before kissing down my neck to my breasts. His talented mouth is put to good use as he licks and teases my nipples, not too hard, not too soft while I stroke his hair and feel his skin under my fingertips. He strokes me with his hands, his fingertips running over my hip and down my thigh to my knee before he kisses back up, nibbling on my neck.

"Mmm," I sigh warmly as I pull his head back to kiss him on the lips. Our lips meet again and caress each other until I urge him onto his back. He lies back, sliding an arm behind his head as he looks at me with an amused grin.

"I see you're recovered."

"Now it's my turn to show you my special skills," I tease, reaching for his underpants before stopping. "Wait . . . condom?"

"In the nightstand," he says, chuckling. "I kinda prepared."

I reach over, laughing quietly as I find a pack of condoms and lube, setting them next to him on the pillow before scratching my nails down his chest and lightly kissing his lips as I reach for his boxers again. "Now, let's see . . ."

My words die on my lips as I reach into his boxers and pull out his cock. His cock is perfect. Long, thick, and with a head that is flared just right. My mouth goes dry as I think of how good he's going to feel inside me. "Give it a kiss. It won't bite," Oliver teases. "Unless you're afraid?"

Oh, you won't get that out of me, I think with a light growl as I kiss down his body, biting his nipples just a bit harder than needed as I slide down his body to his cock, looking him in the eye. I kiss the head before licking, dragging my tongue over the silky soft flesh as I work my way down to his perfect, egg-shaped balls, sucking them into my mouth before blowing on them lightly and kissing my way back up, sucking just the tip of his cock into my mouth before holding my hand out.

"Tease," Oliver complains lightly, but he hands me the condom. Using just my mouth, I roll it down his cock, swallowing most of him as I get the condom down as far as it will go before pulling out and grinning.

"I'm planning on your taking it out on me," I retort as I lie on my back again, lifting a leg. "That is, if you can."

"Oh, Princess, you have no idea," Oliver growls. Straddling my left leg, he holds my right leg up as he positions himself, the tip of his cock just starting to stretch me open. "You ready?"

There’s something in his words that reassures me, and I nod, smiling more gently than I thought I would. Oliver reaches up and takes my hand, pushing forward. His thick cock spreads me open, and it’s so good that I moan from deep in my chest. “Fuck . . .”

Oliver slides all the way in, my pussy clenching and squeezing as I adjust to him. He’s amazing, swirling his hips as he stretches me open and setting my body on fire. He reaches up with his left hand, squeezing and massaging my breasts as he starts to pump in and out of me slowly, taking his time relishing my body. “Mmm, you are good.”

“So are you,” I gasp as he pinches my right nipple. “Hard, Oliver. Please?”

“You only have to ask,” he says with a light laugh, his hips speeding up. His cock reaches deep into me with every powerful thrust, and I can hear the headboard start to bang against the wall. I’m too lost in this overload of pleasure to care, though. I just hope Roxy and the rest the family can’t hear it as Oliver starts fucking me harder and harder.

His hips smack into mine as he holds my thigh against his chest, pounding me hard, sweat springing out on my forehead. It feels so intense, my body is lit on fire. I’m groaning again uncontrollably, turning my head to bury my face in the pillow to try and stifle the moans when Oliver pinches my nipples again.

“Uh-uh, Princess.” He grunts as his cock slams in and out of my pussy. “Look at me.”

I turn my head to look into his eyes as he speeds up, the sweat glistening on his skin like diamonds as he hammers me, wiggling his hips back and forth with every thrust and lighting every nerve inside me on fire. I’m being swept away again, but I want to feel one more thing. “Oliver . . .”

“Now!” he moans, and the single word triggers my second orgasm, my body shaking as my pussy squeezes him tightly. I feel his cock swell and the throbbing pulse of his coming, Oliver’s eyes rolling up as he grinds into me, the condom catching it all. A whisper in my mind says I don’t want the condom, but it’s soon overwhelmed by the intense feeling of my orgasm, and I collapse into the bed senselessly.

I feel Oliver pull out, and then the sound of him getting out of bed to take the condom off. I lie there with my eyes closed until he comes back with a warm, slightly damp washcloth, cleaning up my body. “You awake still?”

“I’m surprised you didn't fuck me to unconsciousness,” I whisper in reply

as I lie on my back, watching as Oliver carefully wipes down my body before running the cloth between my legs. “Where’s the condom?”

“Chucked it in the trash,” he says, jerking his head. “Didn’t want to risk clogging the drain.”

I nod, still gathering my wits as he goes back to the bathroom before coming back and sliding into bed, wrestling the sheets until I’m spooned with him, sighing happily. “You’re pretty damn amazing.”

“You too,” Oliver says, kissing the back of my neck before yawning. “Listen, about this . . .”

“Friends. With benefits,” I say, taking his hand and placing it on my chest. “No more fighting, okay? Let’s just have fun and enjoy the week?”

“I can do that,” Oliver says, but I hear something in his voice, or maybe it’s just that annoying whisper in my own head again that says after what just happened, maybe being just friends isn’t the best idea.

Either way, I yawn again and chuckle when Oliver echoes me, kissing the back of my neck once more. “Goodnight, Oliver.”

“Goodnight, Princess Mindy.”

I wake up to what seems like a dream. My body is spent, but in a way that feels amazing. Turning over, I see Oliver, his left arm tucked behind his head and his glorious body stretched out, his eyes fluttering behind his eyelids. “Wake up.”

Oliver smiles lightly but doesn’t open his eyes.

“Rise and shine, sweetie,” I whisper playfully, running my fingers over his chiseled abs to slide underneath the sheet. I find the thick tube of his cock and stroke it with my fingers, wrapping my hand around it and stroking him.

He grows hard quickly, and I hear him chuckle. “Rise and shine for sure.”

I look up to see his beautiful eyes taking me in, and I snuggle closer, kissing him. A single soft kiss quickly turns into a deeper one, and Oliver pulls me close, finding my ass and squeezing it in his powerful hands.

“One more before we shower?” Oliver urges, and I pull back, letting go of his cock. “Why?”

“We have breakfast,” I say regretfully. “We don’t have time for this. You know how Mom is.”

“Bullshit,” Oliver teases. “You know you want it.”

I moan as he pulls me back in for another kiss, and I have to force myself to pull away again. “Don’t tempt me. I want to feel that cock of yours inside

me again. But we don’t have time.”

“You sure?”

“No,” I say, laughing slightly. “Trust me, if we had another half hour . . . but it’ll give me something to look forward to later.”

He gives me a warm smile, then nods. “Later.”

I stretch, knowing my body’s on display for him but enjoying the way he takes me in. I'm about to go to the bathroom to take my shower when I notice Bertha lying over in the corner.

“Bertha, dear, are you okay?” I ask, worried.

Instead of popping up and being her normal hyperactive self, she just lies there, looking dejected. “Hey, I think something's wrong with Bertha.”

Oliver gets up and comes over. He runs his hands over her sides and even opens her mouth, looking at her teeth and down her throat. “Nothing seems to be wrong,” he says after inspecting her.

“Mom’s gonna be worried sick.”

“Hold on,” Oliver says, but I'm too worried to listen. I don’t want anything to happen where Mom’s wedding could be ruined. I have no idea what could be wrong. I pet the dog, who wiggles in my lap a little but doesn’t do much else.

“Uh . . .”

The catch in Oliver’s voice causes me to spin around, and I see him squatting in the corner, inspecting something.

“What?” I ask. “Tell me you stubbed your toe.”

“I think I found our problem” he says, displaying the empty trash can that has several bite marks around the rim. I think back and try to remember what could have been thrown in there, and then it hits me.

“Oh, my God,” I moan, picking up Bertha and looking her in her little doggy face. “You ate the fucking condom?”

OLIVER

“You’ve gotta be fucking kidding me,” Mindy demands of Bertha with a disbelieving laugh.

I laugh. “That has to be it. Unless someone came in here and stole it.”

Mindy laughs so hard. “So fucking gross!” She shakes her head. “Poor Bertha. But . . . is she supposed to be feeling this way, though? Like, can’t

dogs eat anything?"

I shrug. "She should be okay. It's not gonna kill her. My dog ate a beer-soaked pair of socks one time and was sick a little, but he was fine after he hacked up the fuzz ball. It was funnier watching him stagger around drunk."

Mindy laughs lightly. "Your sperm must be doggy kryptonite then."

I laugh. "Aren't you glad I didn't make you swallow?"

Mindy chuckles, blushing hard. "Seriously, though, what do we do about this? We have to be down there for breakfast in like twenty minutes," she says.

"Let's just go down there, have breakfast like normal, and then we'll take her for a walk. She'll be fine. She just needs to poop it out."

Mindy giggles. "I hate that it happened, but I can't help but laugh."

I have to laugh too. "It makes for a great story to tell our grandkids." I pause after the words leave my mouth. Grandkids. It was almost as if I was talking like *we'd* have grandkids. Am I really that deep into character after a couple of days?

The mirth flees Mindy's face as well, making an uncomfortable silence, as if the same thought came to her. "I'm gonna go get ready."

"All right," I agree, squatting down next to Bertha and rubbing her belly.

Mindy hurries into the bathroom. We both take our showers and are down in the dining area within the next twenty minutes, just making it. I'm dressed casually in jeans and a breezy shirt because I'm in the mood to relax today, and Bertha's already caused enough stress.

Mindy has on a sundress, a cute little light blue thing that hugs her body. She looks beautiful in it, flirty and sexy with just the right amount of skin showing. I have a fleeting memory of the way those arms clung to me last night, and I have to take a few deep breaths before I can continue.

"Remember," I tell her before we step in the dining room. "Act normal. Anyone asks, we let Bertha out to do her business in the middle of the night."

"I'm not sure that'll be believable," she says before I open the door. With the magic of a natural actress, her face lifts and she puts on a big smile and her voice lifts cheerfully. "Good morning, Mother!"

Everyone is in the dining room for once, with Uncle Charles slouched over a big bowl of what looks like Lucky Charms and looking like death warmed over, while the rest of the family at least looks like they're enjoying the good food the kitchen has to offer. Mindy goes in, giving her grandmother a kiss on the cheek, then her mom.

“Y’all look good this morning,” Mary Jo says, her eyes sparkling as she takes us in. “You certainly got up on the right side of the bed this morning.”

She most certainly did. On my side.

“Thank you!” Mindy chirps, and I feel a tremor inside. “You look good too, Mom. Everyone’s looking happy this morning. Except Uncle Charles, but at least you got some early morning swag going on with that getup.”

Rita gives her niece a look. “Swag? You are blind, girl. More like sag.”

I nudge Mindy a little. I told her to act normal, not try to distract by overcompensating.

Thankfully, Mindy takes my nudge and shuts up, still smiling. “You sure are happy this morning,” Roxy remarks. “You guys must have really rocked the boat last night. Nice job, Captain Oliver. I’m so jealous. I’m about to go down to the beach and find me a nice cabana boy.”

I love how this family just rolls with all of Roxy’s antics, paying her no mind. I guess after both Mindy and Roxy, they’re used to it. John’s certainly adapted quickly.

“Hey, Oliver, let’s make sure Mary Jo’s got us cleared for free time,” John says from the front of the table. “I’d love to give you more rides in my pride and joy. My Honey’s to-do list is longer than what I get some days at the office.”

“I’m not that bad,” Mary Jo says. “I’m just . . .”

Suddenly, Mary Jo stops mid-sentence and glances around. “Where’s Bertha?”

“Hopefully, stuck on a beach raft and floating away in the ocean,” Ivy Jo mutters.

“I gave her to Mindy and Oliver last night so she could sleep with them,” Roxy says, looking over at us.

Mindy glances at me, but I’m already on it.

“We let her out in the middle of the night. She was clawing at the door and whining,” I say smoothly.

“Well then, where is she?” Mary Jo asks, worried. “She never misses breakfast.”

“Calm down, Mary Jo,” John says. “She’s probably just playing in the garden like she did when she got out over St. Paddy’s Day, remember?”

She ignores him. “Bertha!” she calls, “Where are you, honey?”

“Act normal,” I whisper in Mindy’s ear. I can see the nervousness on her face. “Mary Jo, Mindy and I will find her after breakfast. Don’t worry, I’m

sure she's around here somewhere."

It settles her enough, and we finish our breakfast in peace. After we're done, Mindy and I go to our room, trying not to practically run. Bertha's still there, her tail flapping around. That's a good sign at least.

Mindy picks her up and tries to cover her with a blanket, but Bertha hates it and squirms so much that I'm worried she'll raise a fuss if we insist. Finally, I grab a towel and throw it over my shoulder, taking Bertha and holding her in my arms so that the towel lies over her and mostly obscures her.

"Let's go," I say. "You take the lead."

I feel fucking ridiculous trying to sneak out of the house with a little dog. But still, this shit is funny, and I can't help it, I start humming the *Mission: Impossible* theme under my breath as we make our way down the stairs. We're clear all the way to the back lawn when Roxy's suddenly on our ass.

"Hey guys! You guys . . ."

I try to hide Bertha, but the dog lets out a little bark, alerting Roxy, and she stops, smiling for a moment before giving us a suspicious look. "Bertha! Mom has been looking all over for her."

"We found her. Taking her for a walk," Mindy says, hoping to end the conversation.

"Can I come?" Roxy asks excitedly, seeming to ignore the fact that I'm *carrying* Bertha.

"Uh . . . no," Mindy says, giving me a desperate glance.

Roxy scowls. "Why not?"

"Because we'd like a little couple time to ourselves," I say with a fake embarrassed chuckle. "A nice walk with our little friend here."

Roxy can't come up with a reason to argue. "Well, give me her if you're so intent on being with each other. I'll take her to Mom and you two can go get your outdoor freak on."

Mindy glances at me, at a loss for words. I think quickly and shake my head. "Actually, Rox, I told your mom I'd find her. I could use the rub on my rep."

Roxy gives me a grin and a nod. "Okay, okay. Buttering up to Mom some, huh? I don't think you need it, but whatever. Have at it."

Roxy goes inside, and Mindy shakes her head when she's gone. "Why couldn't she have just listened to me from the get go?"

"Little sisters never listen to big sisters. And what can I say? I have that

charm the ladies love."

I expect some sort of rebuttal but she lowers her lashes. Her reply is almost too soft to be heard. "Yes, you do."

We walk down to the beach, and as soon as we're out of sight of the house, I squat down, setting Bertha down. She walks around, sniffing everything, but definitely not interested in pooping yet.

"Fuck me," Mindy groans, then laughs at her words. "No matter what Roxy said, that's not an invitation. Not yet."

"Later," I remind her, and we start walking. "So, Mindy Price, tell me about yourself. I mean, beyond what I know."

"If you tell me about you," she says, looking so sexy in her sundress that I forget for a moment the reason we're down here. "What do you want to know?"

"Fair," I reply, grinning. "So . . . first kiss. How old were you?"

"Eighteen," Mindy says, and I stop, gawking.

"What, did they send you to an all-girls' school or something?" I ask, trying to imagine how a girl as beautiful as Mindy Price got all the way to eighteen without even kissing a guy. "Was every guy in your school blind?"

Mindy laughs, shaking her head. "Nope. You can thank the orthodontist. I had some pretty badass hardware in my mouth for a few years. Hard to kiss a girl when she looks like an extra in a Mad Max movie. You?"

"Twelve," I admit, shrugging. "Junior high dance. It was a dare. Trust me, I wish I had a better story. It was terrible."

Bertha starts doing the dance, and I stop. "Wait . . . I think we've hit the jackpot. Come

on, Bertha, baby, show me the money."

Mindy turns her head, shading her hand over her eyes. "Oh, my God, this is so fucking gross. I'm a coffee vendor, not a plumber," Mindy says. Bertha finally squats and does her business. "Damn, did it come out?"

I squat down, grabbing a stick and poking in the mess. "There it is."

"I should've brought a barf bag," Mindy says, gagging. Bertha is herself again at least, running around and doing the little shake. "Well, I guess we got lucky. She looks fine like you said. Come on, let's go back."

"Hold on," I say, reaching out and taking her wrist. "Q and A isn't done yet, is it?"

Mindy looks down at my hand, then smirks. "Guess not. So, tell me, how many girlfriends did you have in school anyway, Mr. I Got My First Kiss At

Twelve?”

I feel heat creep up my neck, then chuckle. I asked for it. “Zero.”

“You liar!” Mindy says with a laugh. “There’s no way you didn’t have a girlfriend. Or ten!”

I shake my head, sobering up. “God’s truth, not even in college. My father . . . well, he pushed me hard. Since my folks were divorced, he turned all of his focus on me. Nothing was ever good enough. All Conference in football? Should’ve been All State. Three point eight GPA? Should’ve been four. I was so stressed by him that keeping a *real* girlfriend was pretty much impossible.”

“I noticed you emphasized *real*.” Mindy comments, and I shrug. I won’t lie. “Thank you for not lying.”

“What about you?” I ask, trying to change the focus. “I mean, even with the mouth hardware, your personality had to have gotten you plenty of attention.”

Mindy laughs and hugs her body. “I’ve always been wild, but in that department, it wasn’t always so. In High School, I was the out girl. I was ‘that’ girl.”

“What do you mean?” I ask, feeling drawn to her. I step closer, putting my arms around her waist from behind, and she snuggles against me.

“*That* girl, you know? The girl who’s fun to hang out with but nothing more. I was the walking, talking personification of the Friend Zone. That changed later, but yep, that was me then.”

I smile, kissing her neck. She moans and reaches back to grab my jeans, pushing her hips into my rapidly hardening cock and making us both gasp.

“Wait,” Mindy says, pulling away and turning to look at me, her lip trembling and her dark eyes wide with arousal and desire. “What about Bertha?”

“She can watch.” I chuckle, reaching for Mindy and pulling her closer. “She won’t run off.”

“And if someone sees us?”

I growl lightly, pulling her against me and kissing her neck. She moans, arching her neck, and I lift her up, whispering in her ear. “Then let them watch and be jealous.”

I reach down, massaging and squeezing the taut swells of her ass, hungry for her body. Bertha yips and yaps but gets distracted by a gull, leaving me with nothing to focus on but Mindy’s body. I stroke and caress her, tugging

on the straps of her dress as she pushes away. “What?”

My fears of her backing away are relieved as she drops to her knees, reaching for my belt. “I know you wanted this last night,” she says with a chuckle. “And this morning too.”

My eyes widen as she frees my cock out of my pants and kisses the head, licking around it for a moment as she pumps my shaft before sliding it between her sensual lips. I moan as she swallows more and more of my cock before pulling back. A naughty glint shows in her eyes as she starts pumping my cock in and out of her mouth, bobbing her head while she reaches under and fondles my balls.

She’s amazing, her tongue light as a butterfly’s wing but with every touch sending massive tingles up my cock all the way to my head. I want to grab her hair and throat fuck her, but something holds me back. I’m rewarded when Mindy works more and more of my cock into her mouth until she has me all the way in, the head of my cock lodged in her throat while she makes little gagging sounds of pleasure.

Mindy pulls back, looking up at me with hungry eyes. “I want you to come in my mouth.”

“Why?” I ask, and she laughs lightly.

“Because after this, I want you to fuck me . . . and I don’t think you’ve got a condom on you. So you can finish on my ass.”

Her words send another tingle up my spine as she starts sucking my cock again, faster and faster while her right hand pumps my shaft. I’m groaning, my knees shaking as I try to stay on my feet. Time stretches out, and I cry out, scaring the gulls and almost overwhelming the sound of the waves crashing twenty yards away as my orgasm crashes over me and I fill Mindy’s hungry mouth with my come. She sucks greedily, my eyes rolling back as she milks me, massaging my balls until the last drop is gone. Pulling back, she gives me a naughty grin before smacking her lips. “Yummy.”

I spread out the towel we used to cover Bertha, but it’s not big, and Mindy looks at it for a moment before shaking her head and pulling her panties down her long legs before kneeling on it and looking over her shoulder at me. I read her eyes and drop behind her, kissing her ass as I reach between her legs and massage her dripping wet pussy, sliding a finger inside her as my body recovers.

I kiss closer and closer to the deep valley between her ass cheeks as my finger pumps in and out of her while Mindy moans, lowering her elbows to

the sand. I hear Bertha come back, yipping before stopping and wandering off again.

My tongue reaches out to tickle her ass crack, and Mindy gasps but pushes back into my hungry mouth as I wonder . . . have I found the perfect woman? Some women are so shy about this, but Mindy loves it as my tongue circles closer and closer to the puckered knot of her asshole, and when my tongue touches her, she groans from deep inside. “Oh, another time . . .”

I mumble my reply into her ass as I finger fuck her pussy, licking and sucking on her until my cock is hard and throbbing again. I quickly line up behind Mindy, pulling my finger out and reaching up, grabbing her hair for a hold as I thrust deep into her in one long stroke.

Last night, I marveled at how perfect Mindy’s pussy felt wrapped and clenching around my cock, but that was with a condom on. Now, my mind is blown away as I feel her fully, and my body cries out in joy as sensations I’ve never even imagined fill my body. “Fuck, you feel so good.”

My hips take over on their own, pumping my cock in and out of her pussy as she moans in front of me, looking back over her shoulder and grinning at me with lust-crazed eyes. “Give it to me, Oli. Fuck me raw. Make my pussy scream.”

Her constant stream of filthy words drives me on like whips on a thoroughbred, and I hammer her deep and hard, grunting with every thrust of my cock as I watch her eyes, seeing just where to stop and riding that line, my hips smacking against her ass. I pull her up, biting the curve of her neck as she moans, lost in a haze. “You’re mine, Princess.”

“Yours . . .” she moans, and I slow down, pulling back a bit as I push her down again, thrusting my cock in time to the waves, drawing out the ecstasy for both of us. Mindy squirms, pushing back into me after a few minutes, and I speed up again.

It’s hard not to come inside her. Mindy’s body is heaven as she squeezes me, her pussy gripping around my cock as I push her higher and higher. I listen, grinding my hips against her as I speed up, until she cries out, her pussy clamping around me. She’s so tight and thrilling as she comes that I barely pull out in time, another hard jet of seed splattering on her ass before I can turn and leave the rest of it on the sand. I tremble. My cock aches from coming so hard twice so quickly. I can’t believe how much Mindy pushes me.

I think about what we just did. I wasn’t trying to seduce her. I’d totally

intended to bring Bertha down here, get the condom out of her, and go back.

I didn't mean for this to happen. It wasn't just fucking on the beach.

But that's what this week was supposed to be. Take the girl out, show her a good time, and clean her pipes if we wanted to.

But not this. Not like this. I never even thought it was possible.

"Oliver?" Mindy asks, and I look up at her, seeing her tentative, concerned smile. "You okay?"

"Yeah," I lie before getting to my feet. Okay? I'm far from okay. I'm starting to wish this were real. "Come on, let's keep walking."

MINDY

It's a little late for lunch, just after two in the afternoon by the time we return from the beach. Walking up the pathway, I feel natural reaching over and holding hands with Oliver. Bertha's running at our heels and circling us, and I have to stop as we climb the stairs from the dunes up to the main property.

The estate looks so beautiful. The sun is still high in the sky behind the house, making it blaze in front of the sapphire blue sky, and I feel my breath taken away. It's just gorgeous. I wonder what it would be like to have all of this, raising a family here. It would be paradise. If only . . .

I suck in a deep breath, trying not to think about it. I know I'm getting carried away with the fantasy. This isn't real. But damn, did his being inside me feel real. The way his hands felt on my body. My neck still burns from his kisses.

It was everything I've dreamed it could be. More than I imagined. I've been with men. I'm no virgin, but none of them were anything more than a fuck or a passing thought. None of them were more than a physical exercise, a release of primal need.

I've always kept a shell around me to protect me from the very thing I'm feeling right now. But I have to wonder if I'd be feeling this way if we weren't pretending to be engaged.

As if sensing my thoughts, Oliver smiles at me, squeezing my hand. My heart skips a beat, warmth flowing in my chest. "Don't worry," he says reassuringly. "Nobody's gonna blame us for being out for so long. I just hope Roxy told your mom we had Bertha."

I nod, knowing I need to get ahold of my emotions. It's scary to be feeling anything when this charade is over in a few days.

We don't even reach the steps before Roxy's out the front door to confront us.

"Where the hell have you been?" Roxy demands. "Mom has been going nuts. I told her you went on a walk, but when it stretched for hours, I started wondering if we were gonna have to send out the Baywatch crew." She pauses, then looks back and forth between the two of us before grinning, reading our expressions. "What did you do, ride a surfboard?"

"No, I got eaten by a shark," I joke. "What's it to you?"

Roxy waves it off, chuckling. "I just wondered. You said you were going on a walk."

Oliver chuckles. "We just walked down to the dunes and watched the waves a little. It was gorgeous."

Roxy rolls her eyes. She knows we had enough time to walk halfway to the next town if we'd wanted. "Well, I'm glad you two lovebirds had fun. But Mom wants to see you."

"Why?" I ask.

"She wants help with stuff. I don't know. Decorations, I think, and they have to go up this afternoon and evening. You know how she is—everything needs to be her way, and she refuses to hire it out. I know she wants Oliver to help move that big ass sound system."

"Easy enough," Oliver says. "I'll handle it so John and Charles don't have to."

Roxy shakes her head. "Good. Because let me tell you, they probably won't be much help. I love them both, but those two geezers can't do much heavy lifting."

I have to laugh. She's rude but she's right. "Roxy!"

"What?" she asks innocently. "I'm just sayin'."

Inside, Mom is happy to see us and gives Bertha a gigantic cuddle. "There you two are! We're preparing to go to the reception hall. We've got staff moving stuff there but still need some help." Bertha squirms in Mom's arms, turning to lick her face, and I have to snicker as Bertha gets a noseful of foundation. Mom doesn't seem to mind. "I was so worried about you, snookums!"

"Lord have mercy, I was hoping that rat catcher was gonna stay gone," Grandma mutters, sitting in a chair and fanning herself. "Most peaceful

couple of hours my whole visit."

"Quiet, Momma," Mom says, setting Bertha down, where she immediately begins hopping around like her normal self. "All right, let's get going. Oliver, John and Charles are waiting for you in the garage."

Everyone starts filing out of the room. When it's just the two of us, Oliver turns to me. "I really enjoyed this morning," he says softly.

"Besides the dog poop investigation, I did too," I say before I give him a smirk. "You really ought to be careful where you plant your seed."

He laughs. "I know the best place to plant it next time."

A flush burns my cheeks, remembering the unbridled passion on the beach and the way we seem to crash like the waves themselves. He grabs me and pulls me in, giving me a kiss that leaves me wanting more. "See you at the reception hall," Oliver says.

Outside, I get in the SUV with Sam, the driver, behind the wheel. All the women are in it, and Roxy's already called shotgun. "Let's roll, Sam!"

"So what's this place like again, Mom? I know you told me about it over the phone, but I forget the details," I say, turning to her. She's behind me with Grandma.

"You'll love it. It's not that far, only about five miles away. It's on the beach in a little cove," Mom says. "You're really going to love it."

When we arrive at the hall twenty minutes later, it doesn't disappoint. The outside is amazing, a beautiful giant adobe, almost Caribbean-style structure sitting just on the edge of the sand. The inside of the hall is gorgeous with huge windows along the eastern wall that give a breathtaking view of the ocean. This place looks like something out of a fairytale wedding . . . but that's what Mom's getting.

"I'm speechless," I breathe as I look around the inside. "Forget the reception. I'd love to have my wedding in some place like this."

"All right, ladies, let's get to work!" Mom says. "Lots to do, and not a lot of time to do it in!"

Roxy and I are given the task of hanging up some electric lights shrouded in lace, and we get to work with the ladder. As we get the strands tacked, Roxy chuckles. "You know, you and Oli should use this place. You guys are just so beautiful together."

"You think?" I ask, my heart aching. Before, I could easily lie, say he was just a bastard who has a hot body, but now, the truth hurts. He's a sham of a fiancé, but he's got everything I've ever dreamed of a man having. Face it—

he’s a catch.

My cell buzzes in my purse, saving the day. I pull it out. It’s Brianna. “Hey, Rox, can you handle this for a few yourself? It’s my bestie.”

Roxy glares at me, a thumbtack in her mouth. “Hurry!”

“How you doing, girl?” Brianna asks as soon as I pick up the line, and I feel a grin start before my worries start up again. Brianna knows what this all is. Maybe she can help.

“Good. I guess.”

“What’s wrong? You sound down,” Brianna says, and I hesitate. I don’t know if I should tell her the truth. “Come on, Min, I know you well enough even over the phone. Aren’t you having fun?”

“Oh, I’m having fun,” I admit. “All I can handle.”

“How’s Oliver been?” Brianna asks. “Behaving?”

“No,” I say with a little chuckle. “But good. Very good.”

“I know that tone, Mindy. Something you need to tell me?”

“Well . . .” I say, wondering how much I should tell Brianna. “At what point did you start thinking you had feelings for Gavin?”

“Oh, it’s *that* sort of problems,” Brianna says. “Well, to let you know, I think it was about three seconds after I saw him the first time.”

“Come on, I’m serious!” I protest. “When?”

Brianna’s voice grows somber, and I can imagine that intense look on her face that she has when she’s worried about me. “Mindy, it doesn’t really matter. It happened. So what’s the problem?”

“You know this isn’t . . .” I start before lowering my voice. “You know this isn’t supposed to be real!”

“And I was supposed to be a one-night stand or a sport fuck,” Brianna reminds me. “Look how Gavin and I turned out. If you’re feeling something for him . . .”

“Hey! Get off the phone and help me, you lazy skank!” Roxy yells. “I’m not doing all of this my damn self!”

“Roxy?” Brianna asks, and I chuckle.

“How’d you know?”

“She reminds me of some foul-mouthed, cute as hell coffee shop manager I know,” Brianna says. “Seriously, though, if you like him . . . don’t wait and give yourself the drama I did. Tell him.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I reply. “Thanks. Love you, Bri, but I gotta go before Roxy starts throwing tacks at me. Bye.”

I head back over toward Roxy, but before I can get halfway across the hall, the doors open. I see Oliver carrying a huge set of speakers, one in each hand, the DJ behind him.

"Over there," she says, and Oliver gives me a sexy little grin and blows me a kiss as he heads off across the hall.

I get back over to help Roxy, who climbs down from the ladder, handing me what looks like paper lanterns. "Here, you hang. I'll hand you the next ones," she says, grumbling. "You know how hard I've been working?"

"Sorry," I say, climbing the ladder. I start putting up the lanterns but get distracted in my thoughts. I think about what a good man Oliver is. With the dog and all that, I could totally see settling down and . . .

I try to push the thoughts away. I have to remember this is fake. In a few days, it will all be over. I just need to enjoy it for what it is—a fun vacation fling.

But it's not that easy. The passion. The connection. All of that feels real.

Maybe Brianna is right.

Roxy waves her hand in front of my face.

"Mindy?" Roxy says. "The lanterns?"

"Huh?" I ask, looking away and blinking. "What's that, Rox?"

"I know you love your fiancé's ass and stuff, but we need to get this done."

I chuckle as we go back to work, doing my best to deal with the questions running rampant in my head.

But there's one thing I know for sure. I don't know what's real anymore.

OLIVER

The bedroom lights are low, and I marvel as I run my fingers down Mindy's arm, enjoying watching the goosebumps rise on her skin. "How do you keep doing that?" she asks, smiling. "Two days of us having sex, and you keep surprising me. I know it's coming and you still make it happen."

"A secret." I chuckle, looking into her eyes. "And you've got great skin."

The past few days have been paradise. With most of the big stuff done, we've had some more time to just spend together. Most of it has been spent talking.

The more and more time we spend together, the more I grow confused. At

first, this was all fun and games. But it's turned into something more. Being here with her, getting to know her and her family, I've enjoyed every minute of it.

Sure, some of them are wild. Her sister has sex on the brain way too much, her mother's a bit too worried about money, and her grandmother gives exactly zero fucks what anyone thinks about what she has to say.

But they're real, and they love each other. All of them. And Mindy herself . . . she's more than a Princess. She's an angel.

She reaches up, cupping my face to look into my eyes. Her breathing is still ragged from our early morning quickie, and watching her naked body on top of the sheets, I can't believe that I've had the chance to be with her as often as I have. "That was great," she says, shuddering. "You take my breath away."

"Good," I say, delivering a kiss to her lips. "Because I plan on doing that a lot more."

She smiles for a moment, then it slowly fades. "A lot more? We only have a few days left. Reality's coming, and it's coming too damn fast."

I feel a little jolt. It's now Friday. It's the day before her mother's wedding. Honestly, it feels like our last day together. Our return flight is Monday morning, but I'm sure Sunday will be spent preparing to go home and spending a lot of time with the family. It'll be the hug and kiss goodbye time and a chance to wish Mary Jo and John off on their honeymoon. They're flying out Monday too.

We don't even have all day today. Today is already packed with rehearsals and trying on stuff. This will be our last leisurely morning. And it's hard to admit, but I don't want it to end.

"Yeah," I murmur, my chest feeling like I've got a lead weight pressing down on it. It's taking away my breath and making it hard to even say what I want to say. I want to tell her that the dream doesn't have to end. I want to promise her more than just a fantasy week on the ocean.

But I can't form the words. How can I tell her that I don't think this is fake anymore? Our engagement might be fake, but what I'm feeling damn sure isn't.

"What are you going to do when you get back?" she asks softly.

"Probably check on Mom first, then make sure my business isn't in total shambles before it ever gets off the ground," I say, slightly troubled. Last week, making Steele Security a name in the corporate world dominated my

thoughts and my efforts. Now, it just doesn't seem as important as spending time with Mindy. "Then I'll make sure my little shithead brother hasn't burned down my house. I asked him to watch my place."

She smiles. "I'm sure everything will be okay. If he's anything like Roxy, he's a pain in the ass but comes through when your back's to the wall." She sighs and turns on her side, running her hand down my slightly stubbled cheek and making my morning shadow crinkle. "But I'm not gonna lie. I'm not looking forward to going back to that damn coffee shop. I've been having so much fun, and the days have flown by."

"I've been having a blast," I agree. "I've really enjoyed my time here."

A flush comes to her cheeks and goes down her neck to her chest, and she bites her lip, smiling slightly. "Thank you. It means a lot, and you make me feel good. And to think, the first time I met you I wanted to choke you."

I chuckle. "Yeah, well, that was hot. I loved how you walked in there with your little list, thinking you could tame me. It was . . . cute."

Mindy smiles and traces my jaw with her fingers like she's trying to memorize me with her touch as much as with her eyes. "Who's to say I'm not just doing this to wrap you around my finger? An insidious plan to make you my love slave?"

"Who's to say I'm not doing the same? When I first saw you, I told myself you thought you were a queen and I was going to have to be your king. How am I doing?"

Mindy laughs. She runs her hands down my body, making my skin prick. "I can't complain, that's for sure. I don't think I've ever been this satisfied."

I don't need compliments, but her words still warm me on the inside. Her opinion matters to me. It makes me feel important.

Her eyes flicker for a moment before they dim, and I see her gaze grow distant. She's thinking about something. I've grown close enough to her over the past few days to know that look.

"What is it?" I ask her. "Whatever it is, you can tell me."

Her lips part, and she struggles for the words that I can sense even before she tries to form them. They're foolish, but I want her to say them. I want her to tell me that she truly wants me, that perhaps there's a chance for something back home. I don't know how I'd react, but to hear her say those words . . . I need it. I need her.

She looks away, turning over and wrapping her arms around her body. "It's nothing."

“It’s something,” I say, spooning behind her and feeling her amazingly soft skin press against me. I bring my lips to the back of her neck and nuzzle, knowing just where she likes to be touched already, just how much she likes that little spot right where her hair makes a little V-shape at the nape of her neck. I kiss and nibble, wrapping my arms around her and stroking her arms. “You know you like it. Tell me what's on your mind.”

She lets out a soft little moan, arching her back to slide her right breast into my hand and pressing her ass back against my cock. “Jesus, you know what you’re doing. But really . . . it’s nothing.”

“Oh, really?” I say playfully, trailing my free hand down her thigh, enjoying the feel of her soft flesh. “I think you’re lying to me.”

“What gives you that idea?” she asks breathlessly, gasping as I pinch her nipple and tug on it lightly. “Fuck . . . I didn’t know I could get this hot so quickly again.”

“I can feel your pulse racing,” I murmur, kissing her neck again. “Under my lips.”

“That’s just because of what you’re doing to me.” She gasps. “And we both know where your hand’s going.”

I grin, recognizing the deflection. “Well, if you’re not gonna tell me, I can stop. Or I can continue.”

She squirms, still not answering me. I pull her tighter against me and press into her. I roll her onto her back and get on top, kissing her lips with more passion. She melts, and I pull back, grinning. “Got anything to say?”

Silence.

“Okay, if that’s how you want to play it,” I warn her. I bring my lips to her neck, trailing kisses down her body. She arches her back, her head pointed to the ceiling as I stroke her skin with my hands while I kiss down to the hard buttons of her nipples, sucking on them and biting them lightly before I make my way down her belly. Then I stop. “Still nothing?”

“Okay!” Mindy gasps. “Please, don’t stop!”

She needs this, we both need this. But I don’t want to rush things. We’re not going to have many more intimate moments. Fuck everything else. If we have to bring it all to a close in a few days, and this is the last chance for me to show her what she is, what she’s starting to mean to me . . . then that’s what I’m going to do.

“Oliver, let’s make this quick. They’re waiting.”

As I go down between her legs, my mouth watering at the heavenly scent

already wafting from her wet pussy and ready to devour her, I growl, looking up into her eyes. “Let them wait.”

MINDY

“Oh, Mom,” I crow, tears coming to my eyes as she steps out of the dressing room in her wedding gown, her arms held out wide. She looks glorious. The beautiful white gown hugs her figure, all lace and classy design that makes her look elegant. The full train scrapes the floor, and she looks like she’s walking on a cloud as she crosses the polished hardwood. Tears cloud my eyes as I search for the words to tell her how she looks, but I can’t. “You’re beautiful. Absolutely radiant.”

It’s hard to believe that it’s already Friday afternoon. After missing breakfast and sleeping in with Oliver, it’s been pedal to the floor the whole time. Doing rehearsals, getting last-minute adjustments to our dresses, and checking that Sam and the other staff are on the spot with bringing in dozens of people from both sides of the family.

Now, we’re all dressed in our gowns for the wedding, doing the last dress rehearsal and fit, making sure things look good. Aunt Rita, Layla, Roxy, and Grandma are all together with us, sitting around the room, and all of us are amazed at Mom as she comes out.

“Beautiful is right,” Rita says, putting a hand on her chest. “I can't wait to walk you down the aisle tomorrow.”

Grandma cackles lightly. “Yeah, my baby is beautiful, but my word, Mary Jo, your butt looks like it grew three sizes.”

Leave it to Grandma to work in a wisecrack. Mom waves it off, knowing it’s the design of the dress itself, and of course, Roxy puts her own two cents in.

“Yeah, Mom. You got so much booty in that dress you’re gonna be making John holler tonight,” Roxy adds, thinking she’s funny. It’s definitely not something I want to think about, and I doubt I’m alone. Roxy looks cute though in her white knee-length Valentino dress, flirty but still sexy at the same time. It hugs her upper body before flaring itself at her waist but doesn’t go full party dress mode and keeps the poof under control. It’s perfect for her.

“Oh he’ll be hollering all right,” I say with a grin, “hollering for her to shut up about where they’re going for the honeymoon. You thought about

where you're going yet?"

"Probably Hedonism, where they can get their freak on right there on the beach," Roxy says before Mom can answer. It's been one of the only secrets left . . . where they're actually going on their honeymoon.

"Oh, stop it," Mom says, laughing. "You two are such a riot. I love you both."

Roxy and I go over to Mom, the three of us doing a group hug, and I can't help but tear up a little at it. "We love you too, Mom."

We walk out of the dressing room for rehearsals after Mom lectures all of us about what she wants. I can tell Grandma wants to tell her to shut up a few times, but we all just listen, knowing it's her show. It's crowded in the chapel near the reception hall, with staff going around everywhere. There are family members I haven't seen in ages, and I know that tomorrow's going to be all playing catch-up with them. Some of them, like my cousin Jamie, I'm looking forward to. Others, not so much.

"Hey, check it out," Roxy says, jostling my elbow. "Stud alert."

My breath catches in my throat as I follow Roxy's guiding hand. I see Oliver standing with the group of men, talking like he's part of the family. He's just come out of the dressing rooms, and the rest of the room fades away as I look at him.

He's gorgeous dressed in his tux. It fits him in a way that makes him look debonair, relaxed, and powerfully seductive. More than ever, he looks like the devil in a tuxedo. My heart is doing back flips. He is so damn handsome. He sees me and blinks for a moment before giving me a smile and a nod.

"You'd better be careful," Roxy jokes, nudging me again. "I think John's niece is eyeing Oli."

I look around, and Roxy's right. She's practically ogling him.

Bitch better stay away from my man, I say to myself.

Is he my man?

"Wow, you look so handsome," I tell him as I come up. He grins and takes my hand, another thrill running through me at his touch.

"And you look beautiful yourself," he says, delivering a soft kiss to my cheek. My chest gets fuzzy as emotions start running through my body, a mix of panic and arousal and confusion that makes me both smile and want to scream at the same time. He places a hand on my hip, and now desire's added to the mix. When we first came here, it felt weird being on his arm. But now I wear that badge proudly, excited and happy to be here with him.

“I wish there weren’t so many people . . .” he says quietly, his voice dripping with need. I know he’s not trying to seduce me. He’s just being honest. But he’s making my blood boil, and I bite my lip. I want to melt into him, to find the nearest empty room and ignore the rest of the world. I want to turn the entire universe into a bedroom, a space where Oliver and I can indulge in each other’s bodies and maybe our hearts too. But not here right now. It’s too much, and we both know it.

“Later,” I promise him, hoping there is a later. I hope there’s more than a later, but that’s a foolish hope. “By the way, Mom wants us to sit in the front row during the ceremony.”

“She didn’t want you to walk her down?” Oliver asks, slightly surprised. “Why?”

I shake my head. “I told her to let Rita do it. Grandma was gonna do it but she was scared about falling in front of everyone. I didn’t want her to have to pick between me and Roxy. Besides, Rita and her . . . they’ve always been pretty close.”

“I see,” Oliver says, looking around as we reach the front of the chapel area. “This is pretty nice.”

I nod. “I’m loving it. It’s gonna be clear weather tomorrow too. So it’s going to be a gorgeous day.”

“Well, I know it’s only been a few days, but I’m glad. Mary Jo deserves as perfect a wedding as she can get.”

We sit down, taking in the whole chapel. “I bet this place looks a lot different in daylight.”

Oliver shifts around, pulling his arm around my shoulders as he gets a better view. “I think so. Those windows are going to look out on the ocean, and we’ll get a lot more open light. Not that it isn’t nice now, but tomorrow, it should look fantastic. The sort of place . . .”

Oliver goes quiet, turning back around, and I lean in. “What?”

“Nothing,” he says, giving me a nervous smile. “Just fantasy running away from me.”

Before I can push the issue, Roxy walks up, sliding over to find her seat next to me. “Hey, you two lovebirds, I wanted to know if y’all will come to Trixie's with me tonight? I’m gonna be singing and it will be fun to have a few drinks. Just a little non-wedding fun, ya know?”

“It’s up to Mindy,” Oliver says diplomatically, giving me a look. He wants to, I can tell, although I’m not sure why.

I don’t know. I’d love to hear Roxy sing, but what would being out with Oliver outside the fantasy be like? Going with him to Trixie’s isn’t part of the wedding charade.

“Come on, Mindy, it will be our last night of fun together. What can it hurt?” Roxy asks. “Be a big sis.”

“All right,” I agree, worried.

The bass of the music is bumping as we walk up to the club doors. The line’s long, but as soon as the bouncer sees us with Roxy, he waves us through no problem at all. “Hey, Roxy Rox.”

“Thanks, Enrique,” Roxy says, giving me and Oliver a wink. We go inside, and I have to say, Trixie’s is a nice place. The lights are dim, so I can’t tell too much about the decorations, but there’s lots of mellow blue under-lighting that gives the tiles on the floor a shiny tint. There are flashing lights and lasers, but they’re restricted to the stage area in the back of the room and dance floor. It’s about three-quarters filled right now, a couple of gay couples but mostly pairs of men and women dancing, grinding on each other as the house DJ spins some sexy club tunes. “So what do you all think?”

I nod, looking at Roxy, who’s dressed in a sparkling red halter dress that makes her look cute and sexy. She’s totally ready to perform. Oliver is easily the hottest man in here in his fitted black jeans, gray t-shirt, and blazer. I feel sexy myself, dressed in a tight black dress that Roxy said made me look hot.

A guy with blonde hair and the bluest eyes I’ve ever seen approaches us. He’s a handsome guy, about six feet tall. He’s dressed in some dark pants and a dark vest over top of his skintight white shirt, but he’s clearly not interested in women. Not with the way his eyes crawl over Oliver before he turns his attention to Roxy.

“Hey, Roxy-girl!” he says with a totally put-on lisp, pulling her in for a hug and air-kissing noisily around her face. “You singing tonight?”

“You bet your ass I am. Hey, Brad,” she says, gesturing at us both, “this is my sister, Mindy, and her fiancé, Oliver.”

“Oh, my gawd!” he says, bringing his hands to his lips, his eyes passing over me and going wide as he takes in Oliver again. “Have I met you before?”

Oliver chuckles, shaking his head no. “Not that I know of.”

“Honey, you look like Brad Pitt, with a mix of Chris Pratt and a little bit

of Henry Cavill with a side of whip cream and a cherry on top."

We all three laugh, even Oliver, who looks surprisingly relaxed after just being hit on by a man. He just takes it in stride. "Well, Mindy seems to like me."

Brad looks at me, nodding in approval. "Congratulations."

"Thank you . . . I think," I say with a laugh. "So, how long have you known Roxy?"

Right then, the music changes and *Freekaleek* comes on, Petey Pablo's classic earning a cheer throughout the club.

"Oh, hell-o, bitch, this is my song!" Brad yells, bobbing his head and raising his hand while moving his body like an eel. "Sorry. Gotta go!"

He grabs the nearest guy and moves into the crowd and starts twerking. He's dropping it low to the floor and jumping back up again with surprising quickness for a man his size.

"Yaaas, bitch! You better work it!" Roxy yells. "Shake dat ass, bitch!"

Looking at him, I can't help but laugh. "This place is fun."

Roxy smiles, turning her attention back to Oliver and me. "See? I told you. You guys needed to get out. You've been cooped up with us crazy people for five days. It's just not healthy. You needed some relaxing fun."

"Thanks, Roxy," Oliver says, grinning. "Been a long time since I've been in a place like this."

"Come on, I have a table reserved," Roxy says. We go over and sit down, and the music cranks up another notch, making it hard to be heard.

"So when do you go on?" Oliver yells, and Roxy checks her watch.

"About thirty minutes!" she yells back. "You gonna dance?" she asks me.

"Dance?" I ask, shocked. "You've seen me dance!"

"Yeah, but Oli here hasn't!" Roxy teases. "He hasn't seen your Spaz Special yet!"

"I bet she's a great dancer!" Oliver retorts. "I know she can move!"

"Yeah, well, let me see you two tear up the floor," Roxy says. She checks her watch again, shaking her head. "Okay, I've got to prepare. Y'all have fun."

She slides out of her chair, gives me a kiss on the cheek, and leaves. My eyes are immediately drawn to Oliver, who's looking back at me with intensity in his eyes. "Well, let's get some drinks."

The music quiets down for a moment, and he calls a waitress over. "Grey Goose martini for me, and Mindy . . .?"

“Stoli and soda,” I order. “Twist of lemon?”

The drinks come quickly, and *Freekaleek* is still playing when I take my first sip. Off in the crowd, I still see Brad getting his groove on. Filled with excitement, the bass of the music is pumping my blood, and I throw back the rest of my drink quickly, deciding to run with it.

“Can you dance?” I ask Oliver suddenly. “I might be bad, but I’m not as bad as Roxy makes it sound.”

I think he’s gonna tell me no, but then a grin comes on his face. “I might have a few moves.”

“Wanna go?” I ask.

He climbs to his feet and my heart soars. “Sure, why not? It’ll be a warmup before Roxy gets on stage.”

We make our way to the now crowded dance floor, moving into the hot undulating bodies, the bass of the music bumping us as much as the people we’re weaving around. *Freekaleek* is still thumping, the extended club mix obviously a Trixie’s favorite.

I’m glad. With all this tension in me, I need to let it all out. I’ve been holding on too tightly, and Oliver notices it as we start dancing. “Relax,” he says, grinding against me. “Just have fun.”

He places his hands on the small of my back, gyrating against me like he’s Channing Tatum and we’re in *Magic Mike*. The heat inside my body only rises as he uses it like it’s his personal playground, his hands moving down to grip my ass, his intense gaze burning into me.

Watching him, feeling him, I’m fucking shocked. He can move. What can this man not do? He can turn me on with a wink of an eye, fucks like a bull, can tame wild dogs, and now I find out he can move that incredibly hot body of his like nobody's business. *And work mine like it is his business.*

I’m hot and wet between my legs, and it has nothing to do with the temperature in the club.

If I could get him to fetch me Funyuns and make a macchiato, he’d be perfect.

“Wow!” I say, wiping sweat off my brow once the song is over. The way he worked me was fucking hot, and I’m glad the song wasn’t longer or else I might not have my skirt on anymore. Seriously, I’m so fucking hot I almost feel like having him take me down the hallway and fuck me. “You can really move!”

He grins. “I’m glad you liked it.”

Another song comes on and we dance. Not as hot, but that's mostly because of the song, and then we have to go sit down. The music ratchets down a notch too, and I can see the stage crew getting a mic in place for Roxy.

"Shoot, you wore me out," I say. We sit down, and Oliver orders another round. "Next round is no alcohol for me, okay?"

Oliver nods and sips at his martini. "Just wait until after Roxy's done and we get back to John's."

His words warm my cheeks, and I down about half of my Stoli and soda, needing to cool off.

Brad comes over to the table with his friend just as Roxy climbs up on stage, grabbing the mic out of the stand and waving to the applauding crowd. "What's up, Trixie's?"

"Go, Roxy!" I yell, supporting her. "Work it!"

Roxy laughs, and she begins singing several songs, all pop. Taylor Swift, some Selena Gomez, and a few other pop standards. I cheer through each one. Even Oliver gives her a shout out.

"She can really sing," he says, impressed. "There's no way she can give up on this."

"Yeah, that's my baby sister," I say proudly. I haven't heard her sing in a long time and it's really great. I love hearing her. She was right. I needed this."

After her third song, she takes a moment to pause to address the crowd.

"Hey, everybody. I'm glad y'all are enjoying my set, but I'd like to share something with you. Tonight, I have two very special guests . . . my sister, Mindy, and her fiancé, Oliver. Can y'all give them a round of applause?"

A spotlight opens on us, and everyone is suddenly looking at us and applauding us, and my cheeks burn. *Roxy, I'm gonna fucking kill you!* I say In my head while I bow my head stupidly. Meanwhile, Oliver looks less disturbed, and he just smiles and nods his head at people, giving a little wave.

Up on stage, Roxy laughs. "Ain't her man the best? The past week, we've spent time together, and I've been so inspired by their love. I want something like that one day. So I'm gonna mix it up a bit and dedicate my next song, *I Wanna Love You Forever* by Jessica Simpson, to them both. Because they make me want to have my own forever love."

She clears her throat and a serious expression goes over her face. No, Roxy. Not this. I can't handle this. I glance over at Oliver, who also looks

uncomfortable, but then he looks at me, and I can see pain in his eyes. A pain that mirrors mine.

You set my soul . . .

Each word is like a stab in my heart as I force myself to listen. The emotion in Roxy's voice rings out. It's so strong. So real. So raw. She really cares about me and my relationship. How in the hell am I supposed to tell her that it's a lie?

I'm gonna love . . .

She hits the high note, and tears come to my eyes as Brad jumps out of his seat while the crowd goes wild. "YASSS, honey!" he yells, leading the cheers. "SING, BITCH, SAAAAAANG!"

I climb to my feet, clapping as Oliver rises as well, and we both exchange awkward glances.

Tears are streaming down my face and I'm unable to speak over the lump in my throat. I'm crying, but not for the reason I should be. Even Oliver's looking choked up, and I wish I could feel worthy of what Roxy just gave me.

"How'd I do?" Roxy says to me after she gets off stage, dabbing at the tears in her eyes with a napkin. "I hope I didn't fuck it up too much."

The tender, vulnerable look in her eyes just adds to the tears streaming down my face. But it isn't because of happiness or gratitude. It's because I feel like an absolute fucking fraud.

As I take her in for a hug, I can only tell her the truth.

"Baby, you were absolutely amazing."

OLIVER

"Woo, that was so much fun!" Roxy says as we walk through the doors of the mansion at one in the morning. After her set, we stayed another couple of hours, and she's feeling pretty tipsy. "I'm so glad you guys came."

"We're glad we did too," Mindy says quietly, exchanging a glance with me. I know what she's feeling and thinking. The raw emotion Roxy displayed for us set us both on edge. I feel worse for Mindy. She wanted to please her family too much and didn't think of the consequences. Now we're mired in a web of lies. Even if she did want this to last past this week, the amount of lies and bullshit is so deep that it could poison any chance of our having peace.

We can keep it up for a week, but for longer? Hell, I can barely keep the stories straight now, and I've been the ones telling them. No matter what, for Mindy, it has to end after we go home.

Nothing can be done about it now, I say to myself. *Only two nights left.*

I don't know if I could go back to my life though. Knowing that Mindy's literally around the corner? I'll never be able to have a minute's peace.

"You guys looked really good together," Roxy continues. "I saw you dancing on the floor. Y'all were tearing it up."

"Yeah," Mindy says quietly without much enthusiasm. "Listen, Rox, I'm kinda tired, and with the ceremony tomorrow . . . well, I'm gonna head up to bed."

"Sure," Roxy says, giving me a big wink. "You too, Oli?"

"Yeah," I agree. "Roxy . . . you've got real talent. Don't stop singing, okay?"

My words pierce some of the fog of alcohol around her, and she nods. "Sure, Oli." She gives me a big hug, squeezing my neck hard. "I'm gonna love having you as a brother-in-law. Thank you."

We all three head upstairs, Roxy in front since she's down the hall from us and her balance isn't quite what it needs to be. As Mindy and I make sure she doesn't fall and break her neck, she rambles on. "I can't wait for your wedding. It will be something truly special. Mindy, you gonna let me walk you down the aisle? "

Mindy hesitates, glancing at me. I place a hand on her arm, giving her a nod. Even if we're a lie, Roxy can walk her down when Mindy does get married. "Of course," she says weakly. "That would be great, Roxy."

"What's wrong?" Roxy asks, turning on the riser. I guess she could hear it in her sister's voice. She weaves a bit, and I steady her shoulders as she peers at her closely. "This ain't the time to be gettin' sappy!"

"Just tired. The dancing, ya know," Mindy says quietly. "Takes it out of you."

"Girl, you act as if you're as old as Grandma." Roxy giggles. "Y'all go on. I'm good to get to my room. Good night, sis, I love you both."

"Night, love you," Mindy says. "Thank you for the song."

"Goodnight, Roxy," I echo, feeling like I just got punched in the chest. Roxy loves me too? Fuck me, what am I supposed to do now? No matter what, we're going to break her damn heart.

We go into the room. Neither of us says anything, although I can tell

she’s having the same thoughts I am.

Mindy walks over and sits down on the bed, sliding off her shoes before she leans forward, putting her elbows on her knees. “I had fun tonight. Until . . .” Her voice trails off. She shakes her head, her eyes clouded as I come over and sit down next to her. “It never really hit me how far we’ve gone with this thing until I heard the emotion in Roxy’s voice. How much she feels for us.”

I’m silent. I’m not sure what to say. I want to tell her that maybe Roxy’s convinced our love is genuine because it *is* real. Maybe the silly girl sees something we’re too stupid to see. But I don’t know if I’m ready for that yet. As much as I love being with Mindy, we’ve only been with each other for five days. Everything I’ve ever been told tells me it’s impossible to know if you love a person that fast.

But at the same time, no one has ever made me feel the way she makes me feel. I never believed in storybook love before, the sort of all-consuming, all-encompassing love that hits like a bolt of lightning and changes your life forever.

“I just wish I’d never done this,” she says.

“Don’t say that,” I say, more emotionally than I intended.

“But I can't help it,” Mindy softly wails, tears coming down her face. “I lied to everyone. My family. I’m just a fraud. A big, fat, terrible fraud. I’m a horrible person!”

I put my arm around her, comforting her as best I can. “You’re not. You just want them not to judge you and to please your mom. It’s totally understandable.”

“Yeah? Then why can't I just tell them the truth then? Even now, I know if I had to tell her, I’d still lie to save face. And I don’t know why I fucking care. I’m always brushing things off and don’t take things seriously . . . but this . . . I just can't.”

I pull her closer, sliding around so that I’m holding her from behind, just giving her comfort. “Mindy, we all lie to please others. When my parents divorced, I went with my father while Tony went with Mom.”

“You don’t talk much about your father, really. I mean, beyond him making your life like boot camp.”

I nod my head and bury my nose in her hair. Even after a night at the club and tinged with sweat, she smells good. “After college, majoring in business, of course, my father brought me into the family business as his right-hand man. Oh, I was being groomed for success, given a nice chunk of stock, a

Vice President's position right off the bat . . ."

"But you gave it up. Why?"

I nod, holding her more tightly. "Because I never wanted to be in pharmaceuticals. Steele Pharma started off generations ago doing good stuff. We developed treatments for yellow fever, for bacterial infections, all of that. When my father took over, though, that started to change."

"Why?" Mindy asks.

"Because you make more money selling skin tighteners, tooth whiteners, or wrinkle removers than you do curing diseases anymore. My father shifted all the R&D into cosmetic areas, and now the only real medicines Steele makes are generics on stuff that's a generation old or more. That's not the sort of life I wanted to lead."

"So you quit?" Mindy asks.

I shake my head. "No. Not for years. I was like you are now, living a lie and hating every minute of it. My father and I started fighting, and it got worse and worse until I had to walk away. I had to, or else I'd never be able to speak to him again. So I know what it's like, and I'm here for you."

Her body trembles, and I hold her closer. She starts to cry, and I turn her to me, holding her in my lap and letting her bury her head in my shoulder. I murmur in her ear, stroking her hair and back, letting her know I'm there for her. "Mindy, if it counts for anything, I wouldn't want to lose this week."

"Why?" she asks, sniffing and looking up into my eyes. I stroke her cheek with my thumb and give her a little smile.

"Because if it hadn't been for this week, I might never have met you."

Mindy cuts me off by pulling me close and kissing me, her mouth hot on mine. She's desperate for reassurance and lost in the fantasy that's not really a fantasy anymore. I have to have this moment too, a chance to reassure her and to show her, even if it's just once, what she really means to me.

We tumble to the bed, and I'm careful not to crush her underneath me, her hands tugging at my shirt to stroke my back, not with the rough urgency of our earlier passions but tenderly, searching for something we can't put into words yet. She mewls, moaning like a kitten as I lift her top up to her armpits and explore the silky soft skin of her body. "Oliver . . ."

I stop and look into her eyes, swallowing back the feelings that are threatening to overwhelm me. "I'll be very careful, Princess."

I sit back, unbuttoning the rest of my shirt and shrugging it off, before I scoot back off the bed and unbutton my pants, her eyes drinking me in the

whole time. “Mindy, I know tonight’s maybe our last chance. I want this time to be special.”

She nods and sits up, pulling off the rest of her clothes and dropping them over the side of the bed. Mindy's smile fades as she looks at me in amazement, blinking silently until my eyes meet hers, and I swallow, pulling her to her feet. “You truly are the most beautiful woman I’ve ever known.”

“You make me feel beautiful,” she tells me, stepping closer.

Mindy smiles and puts her arms around my neck, mashing my cock between us as she kisses me again. She’s just short enough without her shoes on that I have to bend my head more than what's comfortable, but it’s okay, and she leads me back to the bed, stretching out beside me as we keep kissing.

I've never felt my heart filled with such pleasure and pain as we just kiss and let our hands stroke over each other’s skin. I never touch her breasts or between her legs. Not yet. I want to explore everything else, goosebumps of pleasure breaking out on her skin as I pour myself into her. Mindy’s touch is just as electric, my brain frizzing out again and again as she finds another spot on my skin that leaves me gasping and moaning. I’ve never let myself be this vulnerable, this open before, and I know that no matter what, tonight’s going to change me forever.

“Oliver,” she whispers in my ear, even the tickle of the warm air causing me to tremble in anticipation, “I want to taste you.”

Mindy kisses down my body, her eyes beseeching as she looks up at me, smiling. I nod, and she reaches out with her tongue.

I don't know how to describe what happens to me the instant her tongue touches the tip of my cock. It's like a rifle shot goes through me, my nerves all lit up at once, pleasure beyond anything I've ever thought possible. She licks softly, my body shaken by the sensations each time, and I’m awakened to new heights of ecstasy. After teasing my head with long, loving sucks, she buries my cock in her throat, bobbing up and down until I’m on the edge, and she pulls back, looking me in the eyes with deep emotion.

Love, my mind insists on saying. Is that what this is? This feeling inside me, or is it just that I’m caught up in a fantasy that I hadn’t even planned? Am I going insane, or is Mindy looking at me with a feeling that we never expected? We were supposed to be buddies, friends with benefits as I help her out of a jam. This was never supposed to grow beyond that.

Maybe I faze out a little, because the next thing I'm aware of is the sound

of a foil packet being opened, and Mindy's kneeling between my legs, rolling a condom down my cock. She rolls over, spreading her legs and giving me a beseeching look.

I nod, climbing on top of her and lifting her hips, her eyes still fixed on my face as I line myself up. I push in, the feeling of her pussy again mind-blowing, and I feel something inside me as Mindy opens up doors to my heart and soul.

It's not her body, as perfect as it is. It's in the way she looks at me, her eyes full of meaning. I bring my hands up to caress her breasts in gentle strokes. We move slowly, wanting this instant to last forever. The world outside doesn't exist as I bend down and kiss her and begin to thrust in and out slowly.

Before, I've been aggressive, powerful, blurring the line between having sex and being greedy with her body. Part of it was the game—Mindy's got a freaky side to her too, and we both enjoy it that way. But this isn't the time for that. Instead, I'm gentle, trying to show her through my body the feelings that I'm too afraid to say. I see it reflected in Mindy as my fears are replaced with a warmth that builds in my chest as we kiss and look into each other's eyes. I kiss her deeply as our bodies move together, my cock rubbing over the places deep inside her with every thrust.

"Oliver . . ." Mindy whispers before words fail her and she moans incoherently. My hips speed up to give her what she needs. She wraps her legs around my waist, giving herself fully to me as we build, faster and harder. Our hips start to slap together, and I feel myself building toward a huge orgasm, my back flexing as her fingers claw at my skin. I want to give her everything I have, everything I am, but I can't make words either, and all I can do is make sure she's given everything I can give her.

My body is trembling, her pussy sending vibrations through me as we build higher and higher. Mindy's shaking, and I squeeze her ass, on the edge myself. Suddenly, her eyes open wide, and she's there, crying out softly in a choked wail. With a final hard thrust, I come, filling the condom as I try to soothe the pain deep in my heart. She's an angel, a fantasy, and I give all I can to her.

My body trembles as I hold Mindy afterward, sweat drying on my forehead as we lie looking into each other's eyes. She's still in so much pain, and I wish I could take it all away from her. "What is it?"

"Oliver . . . I love you," she whispers, cupping my cheek.

I'm shocked, and my heart leaps in my chest. Is she for real? I want her to be, but how can we really feel this way? Finally, stuck, I tell her the truth. "Mindy, I love you too."

She nods and gives me a little smile. I can see the question in her eyes, the same one I have. Is she caught up in an emotional moment, or are her words the truth? I know what I feel.

"Thank you," she whispers and snuggles against me. Her breathing calms, and in minutes, I can feel her nod off. After she's asleep, I give her a kiss on the forehead, still troubled.

I was telling her the truth. Crazy as it sounds, I was.

Was she?

MINDY

I can't help but feel my pulse quicken as I hear the violins and flutes start up, the pre-ceremony music just as beautiful as I thought it would be. In fact, everything is as beautiful as I could have ever dreamed of. Everyone is dressed to perfection, all the women looking gorgeous in nice dresses and all the men in their suits or tuxedos. The flowers are perfect, the weather is perfect, everything is amazing. Even the sun and clouds are cooperating, with just enough puffy cotton balls in the sky to break up all the eye-watering blue without taking away from the impact of the sky and the ocean.

The procession music starts, and the priest comes down the aisle, his plump, cherubic face smiling over the top of his vestments and his Bible held to his chest reverently. After him comes John, who looks dashing and proud in his tuxedo, his face beaming as he looks forward to the next thirty minutes that will change the rest of his life.

Behind him are the flower girls, each of them looking innocent and joyful as they sprinkle white rose petals down the aisle. Their dresses fit just right, and their gold-trimmed baskets twinkle merrily as the musicians swing into the pause, building toward Mom's big entrance.

"This is so beautiful," Roxy whispers next to me on my left. She's the prettiest I've ever seen her, and I almost can't believe the angel sitting next to me is my little sister. "I can hardly wait!"

I nod, unable to form words, and I turn my head the other way to get a better view of the back of the church. As I do, I see Oliver, sitting on my

right. He looks so handsome in his own tux, his bright eyes taking it all in, his jaw set, and he's whispering something to himself as he takes it all in.

It's the only flaw in this perfect day. Every time I look at him today, I feel sick. I know it's drawing to a close. After tonight, what we have will be no longer. We don't even have much time today. It's Mom's day. We'll have the reception and party that'll last to at least one in the morning, and we'll spend all day with the family tomorrow. Both days, we're going to go to sleep exhausted, and then Monday morning, we board the plane to go back to the real world again.

Who knows what's going to happen then? I guess we could continue dating, and a part of me is hopeful we will. But there is no guarantee.

All day, I've had another image running in my head though. We go back to town, and I go back to work at the Beangal's Den. He calls a few times, and maybe stops by the shop, but as we look at each other, we just know that the fantasy was just that, and our time is over. I found myself crying in the bathroom as I took a shower this morning because the image was so strong in my head.

Why couldn't he see that I was serious last night when I said I love him? Was he just giving me a last little bit of fantasy? I gave him time to say more, but he didn't. All I wanted was for him to say that he wants to see me at home, that we can make it work somehow. But he didn't, and now . . .

"You okay?" Roxy asks, seeing the tears forming in my eyes. "It's a lot, I know."

"Yeah," I agree quietly. "What's taking Mom so long?"

"I dunno. I wonder if . . ."

"Hush, you two!" Grandma whispers. "I am not going to have this tarnished because my granddaughters can't stop jabberjawing!"

Roxy gives me a smirk and I can't help but smile a little. Grandma looks like she's about to burst because she's so happy. The musicians swing into *The Wedding March*, and we all stand as the doors in the back of the church open and Mom steps in with Aunt Rita.

"My goodness," Roxy whispers, truly stunned, and I have to agree. Sure, we saw Mom in the dress just last night, but today, with her hair and makeup done, the lighting just right, and all the buildup . . . she's more beautiful than I've ever seen her in my life.

Aunt Rita looks proud enough to burst herself in her dress, a pale apricot color that makes her look young and beautiful. They reach the altar, where

Rita passes Mom over to John and steps back to her position on the side.

The preacher starts his speech, but to be honest, I stop paying attention. Instead, I think about Mom. She's beaming, looking at John with her eyes lit up, the perfect bride. Despite whatever turmoil I'm feeling inside over my own life, I couldn't be happier for her. She truly looks happy.

After Daddy's death, she never crumbled. Even as Roxy and I mourned, even as the insurance money ran out and the costs mounted, she was our rock. She was the one who made sure enough of Daddy's life insurance was set aside to pay for college for Roxy and me. She was the one who worked hard raising two daughters who were, in reality, not that easy to deal with. She sacrificed a lot for us, and though we may have never actually said it, we appreciate what she did for us and never want to disappoint her.

I was a bit worried when she met John as I saw her become what I thought was too comfortable with her new lifestyle. But over the past week, she's reassured me. And now, I'm nothing but happy for her.

"And now," the minister says, turning to John, "John, do you take Mary Jo to be your wife, to love and honor, to cherish and protect, in good times and bad, as long as you both shall live?"

"I do," John says, sliding Mom's ring on her finger, and my heart catches in my throat. We're at the ultimate moment, and I can barely breathe.

The minister turns to Mom. "And do you, Mary Jo, take John to be your husband, to have and to hold, to love and cherish through sickness and in health, in good times and in bad, as long as you both shall live?"

"I do," Mom replies, sliding the ring onto John's finger.

"The veil, please," the minister says, and John lifts Mom's veil. The world doubles, then trebles for a moment before I realize that I'm crying, and I hurriedly wipe at my eyes. I have to see this clearly. "You may kiss the bride."

John and Mom kiss, and as they step back, I glance at Oliver. He's beaming, and a thought runs through my head.

If only . . . if only.

"Let the party begin!"

Leave it to Roxy to kick the reception off right. She bursts through the doors of the reception hall already thrusting her hands up in the air, ready to turn the reception into her own personal rave if she has to.

I can't help it, I'm caught up in her enthusiasm—everyone is—and pretty

soon, I'm laughing and joking along with everyone else.

"Well, hello, there!" Brad yells as he crosses the floor. Of all the guests at the wedding or the reception, he's easily the loudest, both in the way he talks and in the way he's dressed. Then again, anyone wearing a bright lilac suit and pink bowtie to a wedding is going to stand out. "I was hoping to see you!"

"I think he's talking to you," Roxy laughs, poking Oliver, who's just returned with some wine from the open bar. I take a sip and it's good wine, that's for sure. "I mean, I'm pretty sure I'm hot as hell right now. But I know he doesn't have eyes for me."

Oliver hands me my drink, chuckling. "Hello, Brad. Enjoy the wedding?"

Brad grabs the wine from Oliver's hand before tossing it back, grinning. "Honey, I'm just looking forward to the day I get to be up there. I'm gonna be one sexy bitch!"

"I bet you are," I retort, laughing. "You got the lucky guy all picked out yet?"

"Hmmm . . ." Brad says melodramatically as he looks around the room before rolling his eyes back to Oliver. "The best is already taken."

I blush, but Oliver handles it with a smirk and a laugh. I think he realizes Brad's just messing with him. Or at least I hope he is.

"Mind if I show your woman what she's missing?" Brad asks, grabbing my wrist. "Come on, Mindy, let me show you what you're going to be missing."

I hand Oliver my wine, and he gives me a smile and a toast as Brad and I head out to the floor. Mom and John aren't here yet, so the floor is still mostly empty. I'm shocked when *Look Back At Me* comes on, but Grandma doesn't look upset as Trina and Killer Mike drop some of the raunchiest twerk anthems of all time.

"Come on, now, work it!" Brad says as he starts, and there's no way in hell I can pass it up. I start dancing right next to him, dropping it as low as I can in my party dress.

I pop my hips from side to side as Brad tries to keep up. By the time the four and half minutes are up, my legs are burning but I'm laughing my ass off, Brad's antics and dancing leaving me breathless. When the song ends and the DJ takes back over, we make our way off the floor, and just in time. The DJ starts some jazzy music, and the doors open for John and Mom to make their grand entrance.

“Well, that was good timing.” Roxy giggles as she hands me a glass. “By the way, Oliver’s eyes never left your ass the entire time you were out there.”

I don’t really have a reply, and when Oliver sits down, I try my best to keep up with everything. But I can’t—my attention keeps getting pulled back to Oliver, and I see him giving me looks too. Is that longing I see in his eyes? But if it is, why can’t he just say this isn’t over when we leave?

Up front, it’s time for the toasts, and after a hilarious one from Grandma, it’s my turn. I make my way to the front of the room where the mic is set up, trying to remember what I worked up this morning when I had a few minutes. I clear my throat, and look out at the crowd, at the cousins and second cousins and John’s family with all their kids, and my mind goes blank. “Ahh . . .”

There’s a nervous titter in the crowd and then silence, and I’m about to break down when Oliver stands up. “I know I’ve only known Mary Jo and John a week,” he says, making his way to the front of the room and putting his arm around my shoulder. His blue eyes find mine, and I feel both strength and longing flood my heart. Oliver smiles and gives me a kiss on the cheek before continuing. “I know that’s not a long time to get to know someone, but I don’t need a week. I don’t even need another minute to know that John is one of the luckiest men in the whole damn world.

“Some of you are probably thinking I’m saying this because I want a better wedding gift when Mindy and I tie the knot,” he says, earning a few laughs. “And I’ll admit, the thought did cross my mind. John, I happen to think that Monaco is a great place to take a honeymoon, don’t you?”

His joke earns more laughs, and even I have to smile, putting an arm around Oliver’s waist and holding him tight. He hugs me, then continues. “But seriously, I know that you’re a lucky man, because so am I. Because any woman who was able to raise two daughters as wonderful, as beautiful, and as special as Mindy and Roxy . . . that’s a woman you want to have by your side for the rest of your life. The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree, they say. Well, the reverse is true. To the luckiest man in the room and to his lovely bride. May your lives be filled with happiness and joy.”

There are tears in Mom’s eyes as Oliver raises his glass, and as we make our way back to our seat, I give his hand a squeeze. “Thank you.”

“I meant it,” he says quietly, giving me that same heart aching look. The toasts continue, with Roxy going last, dedicating her singing instead of a normal toast. As Mom and John dance on the floor to Roxy’s version of

Wonderful Tonight, I can't help but feel my throat grow tight for what feels like the thousandth time today. Oliver sounds moved, too. "They're going to have a good life."

"I hope so," I whisper, choked up. I look at Oliver and reach over, taking his hand. "Will you dance with me, next song?"

He nods, taking my hand in his, and as Roxy finishes up, we stand and go to the floor. I'm hoping for something faster, something that won't tear my heart out anymore, but Roxy sees us, and we're trapped as she starts up. *A Thousand Years*.

"Just dance," Oliver says quietly, sensing what I'm thinking. He pulls me into his arms, and I let myself move, losing myself in his eyes as we dance. I'm scared, I'm hurting, but I let myself go, putting my arms around his neck and dancing with him. Christina Perri's lyrics might be a total lie. I haven't even known Oliver for a thousand hours, let alone a thousand years . . . but the heart's the same.

And I'll give him a thousand more, if he'll have me. I'm just too scared to tell him, to tell him that as I look at him here on the dance floor, I want the lie to be real. That he's better than the fictional *Harold* I created as a lie. That I want him, that I need him. That I *love* him.

"Oliver . . ." I say, trying to form the words, but before I do, there's a tap on my shoulder, and I see Mom giving me a smile.

"May I have this dance with my daughter?" Mom asks, and Oliver nods, moving off to dance with Grandma. For the rest of the reception, we have fun, but Oliver and I never get a chance to talk until dinner arrives and we sit down. The tables have been rearranged, and Oliver and I have joined Mom, John, Roxy, and Grandma at the head table.

"You know, Oliver, you're full of it," Grandma says as the filet mignon is brought out. "I heard you tell Mindy that you can't dance. You move like a cat."

"Well, what I said was I can't twerk as well as Brad," Oliver says with a grin. "That's not a lie. I didn't say I couldn't dance."

"Yeah, well, you keep it up, and I'm going to have to drag you out there to see if you're lying about that," Roxy jokes, sipping her wine. "What a great reception."

"This wedding has been wonderful," Mom says. "Best night of my life . . . or second best . . . or hell, I'm just going to say it's tied, and this one doesn't involve me giving birth!"

“Yeah, well, after this, I can’t wait until Mindy’s and Oliver’s,” Roxy says. “I so wanna see that ceremony.”

There’s a clatter of silverware, and I look up from my plate to see Mom staring at Oliver and me, her eyes wide. She suddenly snaps her fingers, grinning ear to ear. “That’s it!”

“What?” Roxy asks, and I feel a wave of despair sweep over me.

“Mindy and Oliver! What if you got married tomorrow? This place is so wonderful!”

“What?” I ask, hoping to nip this in the bud. I can’t do this, I just can’t. “Mom, that’s not what we planned. Besides, you need to get packing after this. You’ve got a honeymoon to get ready for.”

“Nonsense!” Mom says, and I feel nauseous. I glance at Oliver, but I can see the same desperation in his eyes. We’re trapped, and I don’t know how we’re supposed to get out of this without hurting someone. “The whole family is here. It’ll be Sunday. Instead of us gathering for some stuffy lunch, we can have the wedding here. John, you can get that handled, right?”

Grandma doesn’t say a word, but the way she’s looking at me, I can see the hope in her eyes. She’s not as forward as Mom is, but she’s hoping we say yes, I can see it.

“But Oliver’s family—,” I began to protest, but Mom cuts me off, holding up her hand.

“Can have their own ceremony for you two. You’ve already told me you both wanted to have a wedding some place like here. John is more than willing to take care of it. I mean, you’ve already been engaged for a year. Wouldn’t it be wonderful?”

I open my mouth to say no, but I freeze when I see the weight of everyone’s eyes on me. I hate that Mom put me in this position, but I know she’s just being Mom and she means well. I look uneasily at Oliver. He’s quiet and tight-lipped. This isn’t a game now. I can tell he’s as flustered as I am. All I can do is look in his eyes, and as I do, I keep thinking about the way he said he loved me last night and the way he looked at me while we danced today.

What am I supposed to do? In a perfect world, I’d have met Oliver a year ago, he’d have walked into the Beangal’s Den, and he’d be my actual fiancé. I wouldn’t be lying. I wouldn’t be trying to decide which is worse, a sham marriage or breaking my family’s heart.

I lick my lips, looking around the table at everyone as they all stare at me.

Even though there's conversation at the other tables, at ours, it's quiet. I can hear my heart pounding in my chest.

Now would be the time to tell them the fucking truth. I can't keep mounting lies on top of lies.

But looking at everyone, I feel my heart squeeze. I can just imagine the look on their faces when I fess up. God, I might actually kill Grandma by breaking her heart. Congratulations on the wedding, Mom. Your daughter's been lying and killed Grandma because of it the same night. Sorry.

Oliver starts to try to say something. "John, Mary Jo, this place is amazing, but this is your time. You guys should have the spotlight."

John waves it off, wiping his lips with his napkin. "If that's what you're worried about, forget it. Mary Jo wants to see her daughter happy. Mary Jo and I are far too old to be worried about this day being special just for us. If you want to make it special, let us give you this gift. Let me do this for you."

I look around at the hope in their eyes. The pressure is enormous, more than anything I've ever felt in my life. Any thought of telling them the truth dies in that moment as I look in Mom's hopeful eyes.

"Okay," I say, ignoring the shock that flashes in Oliver's eyes. "We're getting married here."

OLIVER

"How could you do something like that?" I ask, pacing back and forth in the middle of the room. "I mean, I know this, all of this, is because you've dug yourself a big ass hole, but . . . fuck!"

It's hours after the reception, and we're back in our room. I think almost everyone else is asleep, but I'm still dressed in my wedding outfit. I've at least taken the time to strip off my bow tie and jacket, half unbuttoning my shirt to try and be able to breathe because I'm so pissed.

Mindy's found the time to get out of her dress, pulling on a sexy little pair of sleep shorts and a large V-neck t-shirt that does nothing to hide the fact that she's gorgeous. In fact, if I weren't so mad, I'd be obsessed with showing her just how gorgeous I think she is.

She looks sad and conflicted. "They were all looking at me and depending on me. I knew I should have said no, but I couldn't do it."

"It's pretty easy. No. *Nyet. Nein. Non*," I bite back, forcing myself to take

a deep breath when I see her lip tremble. I hate how angry I sound. But this came completely out of left field. I know I've been lying the whole time by saying I'm Mindy's fiancé, but this was something that didn't have to be. But on another hand, I don't know why I'm so worked up. "You could have at least said you'd think about it, that you don't want to answer without having a private conversation with me. Played it off or something. Not get us deeper into some shit . . ."

"I'm usually strong and independent, but when it comes to family—" she says softly, her voice cracking. She stops and starts again. "You don't *really* want to marry me, I know. You hate me now."

"I—" I try to reply, but I choke up. I can't speak over the lump in my throat. Is that what she wants? A real wedding? Is that why she's looking so miserable right this moment? Does she really think I hate her? "I don't hate you. And I don't know what I want, not while I'm this angry. Not while . . ."

Mindy nods, and I see the hurt in her eyes. But after a week of lies, of half-hidden comments and games back and forth, I can't lie anymore. I'm too pissed off to really respond to that.

Still, I feel like shit because I can't assuage her pain. I know she's trying to please her family. It's noble from a certain point of view. And she isn't the only one who's guilty of lying. I know we're both in too deep. But this seems like she stepped over the line. Save your mom's feelings? Sure, I get it. Sham marriage? No, there's got to be a line somewhere.

When she speaks again, her voice is small and filled with shame. "I'm sorry. I know I'm a terrible person, Oliver. I swear I'm normally not such a coward. It's okay if you hate me. If you don't want to talk to me ever again after this is over, I'll understand."

Not talk to her ever again? It hurts to even hear the words. And I don't know why I can't just tell her it's okay, we'll do it and just get through it. I guess I'm just still raw over everyone's emotions, seeing them hope for Mindy, wanting us to consummate our love. Love that they don't know is supposed to be fake.

"Don't say that," I say more harshly than I should.

"Don't say what?" she asks, her voice raw and choked with half held-back tears. "That you hate me? Go ahead and say it. At least someone this week knows the truth about me!"

"That's not true—" I start, stopping when my thoughts start to tumble over each other. I hate the lies, but I can't hate Mindy. And the truth about

how I feel about her is so enormous, so insane, it scares me to even think about it, let alone say something about it.

“You’re so mad right now you can't even talk. You think I’m weak!” Mindy continues before I can get my head right, emotions sweeping her away and taking me with her like a lake that’s broken through a dam. We’re helpless in the rush, and all I can try to do is hold on for dear life.

She’s definitely not weak. She’s one of the strongest women I’ve ever known, and that’s what I love about her. She just puts others before herself a lot of times. I’ve seen it in everything Mindy’s done this week. From this whole charade to the stories she’s told me about her life back home, even the ways we’ve had sex, everything this woman does is to please others. Her deepest desire is the desire to see other people happy. She drinks it, survives on it like it’s her daily bread.

I’m unable to offer anything, not trusting myself to speak. I don’t really know what I can say. I’m angry, so angry that my fingers are trembling as I hold them behind my back just to give them something to do. I’m hurt. And worst of all, I think I’m madly in—

“I’ll just go fucking tell them,” she says, jumping to her feet. “Get this over with like I should have in the beginning. I don’t know why I did this.”

I step In her way. “Don’t,” I growl. As much as I wanted her to say no at the time, I don’t want to see her hurt more by telling her family and upsetting everyone. “We just need to carry this thing through at this point.”

She tries to step past me but I grab her by the arm. “Don’t,” I repeat, staring into her beautiful eyes that are now blazing in anger. “You’re not going out that door.”

She tries to twist out of my grasp, but my hand is like iron, and while I’m not squeezing her, I’m not releasing her either. “Let go of me!”

“No.” I step closer until we’re almost touching foreheads, my own anger growing. “You’re not going anywhere, Princess. You committed us to it, and we’re going to fucking do it.”

“But you don’t want to,” she hisses. “And you have that right. I shouldn’t have said yes. I'll just tell another lie,” she says, lowering her head in shame. “I’ll tell them we changed our minds, that your mom said she didn’t want you to have it without her.”

“No!” I repeat, pulling her back from the door. “We’re doing it, and that’s final. We’ll get an annulment as soon as we get back.”

She goes lax in my arms. The anger evaporates, leaving just a wounded

hurt in her eyes. It's like she's upset that I'm going to annul our fake marriage. It's what she wanted, wasn't it? And how could I get married and stay married to someone I've only known for five days?

"What do you really owe Gavin?" she asks quietly out of nowhere after a long pause. "Why would you do this for him? And don't try to tell me it's nothing. I've been trying to figure out this whole time why a man like you would go through all of this, even for a friend, when I know you can't be that close to him. Brianna and I are besties, and she knew nothing about you until that first day. So what is it? I haven't been able to come up with a damn thing."

My first reaction is to play it off, be evasive. She goes over to the bed and sits down, pulling her legs up to her chest and looking at me with a wide, trembling gaze.

I want to lie, but the way she's looking at me is like a mute, desperate plea for some sort of truth, some way to understand in this world of lies. She's drowning. I'm telling her that I demand to go through with a sham marriage after a sham week. As much as we've gotten to know each other, as much time as we've spent over the past week, I know she'll know if I'm lying.

I can't do it. I won't lie. "I lost to him in a game of poker."

"A game of poker?" She furrows her brow. "You're doing this over a game of poker? Are you fucking nuts?"

I lick my lips. I hate to say this. "I wish it were that simple, that I'm insane. But it's more than that. He beat me out of a little more than half a million dollars."

The breath escapes her in surprise. "No wonder you agreed to do this," she says when she regains her voice. She shakes her head angrily, then looks at me with venom in her smile. "Gavin fucking owns your soul, doesn't he? So this whole week, you've been just trying to do what he asked, and I know what he asked of you. He said to show me a good time, be everything I could dream of. Be the perfect fiancé, and by God, you did it!"

"I agreed to be your fiancé," I agree. "But since then—"

"So you telling me you loved me the other night, that was just part of you trying to get your half mil back, wasn't it? I was such a fool. I even started to get lost in the whole damn thing. I was beginning to believe it. But now I know. This whole thing has been fucking fake. How much was that I love you worth, huh? A hundred thousand? Two?"

Anger tightens my chest. It's like she's accusing me being some sort of gigolo, a whore doing this for money, when she was the one who wanted and needed someone. "Isn't that what this is supposed to be? Fake. Why are you acting like it was supposed to be anything else?"

I know my words are angry and hurtful, but I speak before I think. I'm out of control, the pain too damn much. "I did my job, Princess."

She hangs her head, tears streaming down her cheeks to drip onto her thighs like diamonds on caramel. "You heartless son of a bitch."

"You're going to call me names now? I'll let you fucking know that I have more than enough money. Losing that much is never fun, but I didn't need that money, Mindy. And I told Gavin to kiss my ass with his request and was just going to pay up until I saw . . ." my voice trails off, my voice blocked again.

"Saw what?" she asks, getting off the bed to look in my face. She's hopeful, I can see it, but I'm too afraid of what I'm trying to say.

Instead, I swallow it all back, forcing it into the depths of my stomach where it sits like a sour pill, roiling and churning at my gut. "Nothing. You have no right to be mad. Yeah, at first I was doing this because of money, but all of that changed when I got to know you. I've had a good time, regardless of the fact that it wasn't supposed to be real at first."

She crosses her arms, scowling at me.

"It's the truth. I don't make up lies to save my ass." Fuck. I regret the words as soon as they leave my mouth. I wish like hell I could take them back. "I didn't mean—"

Mindy's hand lashes out, unthinking and fueled by the hurt and shame that's boiling inside her. She hits me with every ounce of fury in her tiny body, probably even before she knows she's doing it, whipping my face to the side.

"I hate you!" she hisses, spit flying from her curled lips to splatter on my cheeks. Her manicured nails, shaped and done just for the wedding today, slide down my face as she pulls away, and I feel red hot fire as they almost break my skin. "Fuck you!"

It doesn't really hurt . . . stings a little, but not truly painful. What hurts more are the words, and anger boils up within my stomach. She hates me? She thinks I don't fucking care about her? When I'm willing to go through this whole charade for her and even do this sham wedding?

"Fuck me, Princess?" I hiss, grabbing her by the arms. "Whatever you

might think, that wasn't part of the deal. I could have slept on the fucking floor this past week. So if anyone wants to talk about fucking, it should be you, because you've loved every damn minute of it!"

"You fucking . . ." Mindy rasps furiously, but I cut her off by pulling her into me and smashing my lips into hers in an angry kiss. For a moment, she resists, but then she seems to melt into me.

"Fucking?" I growl when we pull back, my hand wrapped in her hair. Her green eyes are blazing in want and fury as I push her onto the bed, grabbing her t-shirt and pulling. It tears like tissue paper, and her lithe, sexy body tenses as she pants. "I'm going to show you fucking."

"Asshole." Mindy hisses like a cat as I pounce on her. I pin her arms above her head in one powerful hand, giving her another bruising, battling kiss before I use my free hand to maul her breasts, squeezing and pinching her nipples until she's moaning and whining at the same time as her tongue duels with mine. I kiss down her neck to her left breast, sucking hard as I let go of her wrists. My tongue runs over and around her stiff nipple as I reach down, yanking her panties to the side and slamming two fingers deep inside her in one vicious thrust, wiggling them up and down inside her wet pussy.

Mindy claws and yanks at my hair while I relentlessly finger fuck her, pumping my fingers in and out of her pussy while I rub her clit with my thumb, but I barely feel it. The sting of her fingernails on my skin just makes me thrust harder and harder, adding a third finger. Soon, most of my hand is pounding her soaking wet pussy as I bite and chew on her nipples, and she's not fighting anymore. Instead, I feel her hips thrust into my hand even as I push harder, and she's clawing at me, wanting more.

I bite down hard on Mindy's right nipple, pulling back as she howls, her back arching as she coats my fingers in her wetness, coming hard on my hand and her feet beating into the bed over and over.

I'm merciless, rubbing my thumb roughly over her clit even as she comes, pulling away from her breast to stare in her eyes. "I've given a lot to you," I growl into her face, yanking my fingers out and shoving them in her mouth. "But it's my time to take."

Mindy sucks on my fingers, tears in her eyes as my words sink in, but I'm too angry, too driven as I pull them out and lift her leg, getting between her legs and staring in her eyes as she sneers at me in anticipation of what's going to happen. "Take? Is that all you've got?"

I growl, tearing my shirt off before pushing my pants down, freeing my

cock and grinding myself against her. “You’ve been cock drunk on me since before you ever saw this fucking thing,” I taunt back. “I’m the best you've ever had, and I’m the best you ever will have.”

“Then prove it,” Mindy says, clawing at my back again. I grab her hair and pin her to the pillow as I wet the head of my cock with her juices before thrusting in hard. She howls in pain and pleasure as I go all the way in with one deep stroke, slamming into her pussy and driving the breath out of her.

“Like that?” I hiss as I pull back and thrust deep into her again, grinding my cock into her. I thrust in again, her pussy squeezing me even as she sneers at me. “Tell me you love it.”

“No . . .” Mindy whispers, her eyes brimming with tears. They pierce my fog of rage enough that I let go of her hair enough to plant my hands on each side of her head, staring into her eyes. I kiss her hard, our tongues fighting as she claws at my neck and back, my cock hammering her pussy hard. The only sounds in the room are our moans and the harsh smack of our hips as I fuck her hard and deep.

Mindy gasps in pain but at the same time pushes up into me, challenging me. “You’ve gotta earn it, you son of a bitch.”

Mindy mewls, pulling her knees up as I push her up harder, staring her in the eyes still. “Say it! Tell me you love it!”

I pull back, thrusting in hard again, and as I speed up a little, I growl, my anger pouring out through my cock and my voice as I fuck her. My cock drives deep into her body again and again, pounding her with everything I have as I grab her around the throat lightly. She moans, staring right into my eyes.

“I never hated you,” I pause and whisper before I start thrusting into her again. My hips slap against hers hard as she scratches down my back, the pain making me speed up. “I wanted the impossible, to have you after this too. Even if you are ungrateful.”

“I’m sorry,” Mindy manages, her fingers not letting up on my back, and I wonder if she’s drawing blood.

I growl, squeezing tighter as I speed up, hammering her into the bed until my cock is throbbing deep inside her. Mindy’s squirming, and I speed up until she screams, her pussy clamping tightly around my cock as she comes again. I keep going, ignoring her moans until my cock is ready, and I pull out, groaning as I come and spray her chest with my seed, crying out as the last of my anger is gone and all that’s left is . . . I don’t know.

I sag, sitting on the bed and shaking my head, saying nothing. I lie down and stare at the ceiling, both guilty and totally shaken to my core. I've never been that rough before, and I certainly have never come that hard before. My heart aches in my chest, my thighs tremble, and I don't know what to say.

Tell her you love her, you damn idiot! Tell her that somewhere along the line, maybe Tuesday or so, you fell in love with her for real! Tell her that she's worth more than all that money, she's worth the entire fucking world!

I roll to the side, but before I can say anything, Mindy gets up. Reaching down, she finds the shredded remains of her shirt and wipes herself off before balling it up and tossing it uncaringly in the chair. "Mindy . . ."

She looks at me, and in her eyes, I see something that chills me all the way to the depths of my soul. She looks dead. Her doll's eyes have no emotion left in them. "I'm sorry for lashing out at you," she says almost robotically. "I know this was all supposed to be fake. But somewhere along the line, I started to feel like it was real. It was a mistake, and though we just had sex, I know it was just sex. But . . . I just don't want to fight anymore. So please, no more words tonight, Oliver. No more pain."

I open my mouth to tell her that I do truly love her and that if she loves me too, maybe we can make something out of this fucking mess. But before I can, she turns away. "After the wedding, you're free to never speak to me again. Actually . . . after we get back home, I don't want to see you again. It'll hurt too goddamn much."

She walks into the bathroom and closes the door, leaving me feeling like I just got punched in the chest, and I roll onto my back, covering my eyes. I lie there for a moment before getting up, pulling on my boxers, and going out to the balcony to stare up at the moon, which doesn't have any answers either.

MINDY

"I never thought I'd live to see the day," Mom says, tears shining in her eyes as she looks at me in the mirror. We're in the dressing room at the reception hall, putting the final touches on what I'm wearing. The wedding begins in fewer than thirty minutes, and Mom's been fluttering around me all morning. I know she means well, but all she's doing is making it worse. I've been so nervous all morning and so guilt-ridden that I refused breakfast and haven't been able to talk in anything more than grunts and one-word answers.

My chest is tight as I gaze at myself in the full-length mirror. I look beautiful—even I have to admit it. My hair is pulled to the side and hangs over my right shoulder, letting my back remain bare in my body-hugging lacy white gown. My shoulders are bare, and it's just a little risqué, with a deep curving V-cut that drops deep between my breasts.

When I was a lonely teenager who didn't have a boyfriend, I'd stay up and look at bridal magazines. I'd dream about my wedding, how I'd look, and what sort of gown I'd wear. I had it all planned out, the perfect fairytale wedding. And suddenly, so fast I'm still reeling, it's here. Well, sort of. My eyes filled with tears when I first saw the gown in the bridal shop. I wanted it right away, and I couldn't stop myself despite my guilt. The perfect gown for the perfect fraud.

"Ha," Grandma says to Mom, "you never thought *you'd* see the day? Well how about my old crusty ass?"

"Momma, please," Mom says, smiling into the mirror. "Don't make Mindy laugh in the dress. She's barely got room to breathe as it is. I can see why you skipped breakfast."

Anxiety is twisting my stomach tighter. I want to say something, but instead, I just turn away from the mirror and put on my high heels. Mom need not worry about me laughing. I haven't been able to so much as crack a smile since I woke up this morning from a fitful hour of sleep. Since last night, my emotions have been running rampant. The hot, angry sex with Oliver last night was amazing. I came deeper and harder than I could have ever imagined. If just a few things would have been different, I'd be smiling and joking just as much as my family is.

But now I know that for Oliver, it meant nothing. He was repaying a debt, and the sex was just his little way to put his own twist on the whole thing. The kind words, the cuddles, the laughter. All of it was just him getting into his role. He never loved me. Hell, last night, he probably fucked me so hard because he wanted it to hurt, to show me just how angry he was.

This whole thing is one big fucking fraud. And Oliver's right—I'm just a liar.

"Are you okay?" Mom asks me, seeing the tears that are threatening to fall from my eyes.

I flash her a weak smile, forcing at least my lips to turn upward some. "Yeah. Just nervous, Mom."

"Oh, baby," she says, giving me a hug. "I understand. I was so nervous

yesterday. And the day that your father and I got married, I was so worked up I got sick. But there's nothing to be nervous about. This is your special day. Be happy. Rejoice in it. All of your family is here to see you except for Grandpa Johnny."

"But he's watching from heaven," Grandma says. "You can be sure of it."

Their words are supposed to make me feel better. I know that, but they only succeed in making me feel worse. Grandpa was old school, one of those men who always talked straight. He never told a lie that I knew of, even when it might have saved him a lot of pain. He never would have done what I've done, and if he's looking down on me, he's not proud of me.

"Thank you both," I reply, forcing the words out. "I'm so glad you're both here to see my special day."

I try to make conviction ring true in my words, but they sound false even to me. Still, they chalk it up to my pre-wedding jitters and come over, giving me a kiss.

"We're both so proud of you!" Mom says, patting me on the cheek.

I do my best not to break down into tears as they leave the room to find their seats in the chapel hall, and I take a minute to try and compose myself before I leave. Outside in the hallway, I see Roxy waiting for me. She's my maid of honor, and I don't think I've ever seen a maid of honor so giddy that she's hopping from side to side like a boxer getting ready for a fight.

"Girl, you look so beautiful," Roxy says with a smile. She's wearing the same gown from yesterday because it compliments my gown just right. She's added a few flowers in her hair, weaving them into the curls the hairdresser did. She's a vision.

"Thank you. You look gorgeous too," I reply, trying to just keep myself from breaking down. My sister is more beautiful than she's ever looked in her entire life . . . and it's for a lie. How is she supposed to ever believe in love after this?

"What's wrong, bae? You don't look happy like you should be," Roxy says, stopping her bouncing and stepping close, putting a hand on my shoulder. "Are you feeling all right?"

I flash another weak smile. By the time the day is over, my cheeks are gonna be sore from flashing fake smiles all the time. Each one feels like I'm lifting a half ton with hooks driven through my cheeks. I'm exhausted already, and I've got hours of this to still look forward to.

"Just nervous," I tell her. "You know how it is."

“Yeah, right. Honey, if I had a man like Oliver, I’d be like let's get this shit over with and bring on the consummation!” She giggles.

I fidget with my gown. Even Roxy’s normal humor isn’t enough to get a laugh out of me, and Roxy notices. She takes my other shoulder, squaring up and looking me in the eyes. “I know. Every wedding is a performance. And if I know anything, I know how it is to be nervous before performing. And I know you’re doing this as much for Mom, Grandma, and me as for you. So thank you. It will be okay though. I don’t say it enough, but you kick ass.”

“Thanks,” I say, though I feel dead inside. Kick ass? I can’t even man up about a fake wedding. I don’t kick ass. I suck it. “It really means a lot to me that you’re here.”

“I wouldn’t miss it for all the world,” Roxy says before stopping. “Oh, wait!”

“What?” I ask, and Roxy smiles, rooting around in the cups of her gown for something before pulling out a small packet. “What’s that?”

“An old button, a blue Tic-tac, and a penny I borrowed from Aunt Rita. All wrapped in a new handkerchief,” Roxy says, tucking it inside the left cup of my gown. “There, all the bases covered. Time to do your damn thing.”

We walk to the back of the chapel, waiting for my moment. We’re doing it a little different than Mom’s yesterday, and Oliver’s going to meet me by the altar. I’m the only one getting the big entrance, the total star of the show. It makes me want to puke, and as I hear the warmup music and then the minister’s opening remarks, I’m nearly shitting bricks.

“It’s time,” Roxy says softly as *The Wedding March* starts. “Ready?”

Ready? No chance in hell. My anxiety is through the roof, my heart is hammering in my chest like a Dubstep concert, and I feel like I’m sweating this damn gown through. I’m far from ready. But I have no choice. “Let’s go.”

The doors open, and for a moment, I feel stalled. Dread is a force field, keeping me from taking the first step through the doorway. I feel myself start to lean back, ready to run, but Roxy gives me a gentle push and we walk into the room.

As the sound system plays, we begin our slow walk down the aisle. The room is filled with almost as much family as yesterday. Familiar faces are all around, cousins and family friends. All those damn eyes staring at me above wide smiles. Fraud! they seem to scream. I tear my eyes away from them, staring straight ahead. My legs feel weak, and I’m glad Roxy’s walking me

down. I think I'd stumble otherwise.

Even in my frazzled state, I see how beautiful the place is. They even put more decorations up than Mom had and changed the theme. Instead of being a sort of airy elegance, it's almost totally over the top. There's finery everywhere, gilt-edged curtains and bunting all around the hall. There are flowers all over. I don't even want to know just how many flower shops John emptied out on this. They even redid the altar, making it sparkle and shine even more than before.

It's a wedding chapel worthy of a Disney movie. It's a room that a real Princess would walk down the aisle in. Except it's not fucking real.

I blink to clear my vision, and my breath catches in my throat when I see Oliver. He's waiting up ahead at the altar. Standing by himself except for the priest, he's the perfect groom. He's wearing a tailed waistcoat, his hair slicked and styled just right, his hands in front of him respectfully. Every inch of him screams poise and strength, and he's fucking gorgeous. But my heart does a weird twist, and with each step, the blackness that's threatened to overwhelm me all day grows.

I should've known someone like him was too good to be true. I should've known that getting involved too deeply would end in heartbreak.

I should have . . . and now it's too late.

By the time we reach the altar, I'm a mess. My breathing is ragged and I'm trying to do my best to control my arms from shaking. Roxy even has to help me up the first step before she lets go and peels off to take her seat.

Oliver's eyes are on mine, but they are carefully neutral, his emotions hidden behind a mask. I can't read what he's thinking.

The priest clears his throat and begins. "Dearly beloved . . ."

Just like yesterday, I lose track of what he's saying. I hear noise, music once, but mostly just noise. Instead, I think about my misery.

It's not going to end today. What, is Oliver going to go on a fake honeymoon with me, pose so we can Photoshop ourselves on the beach in Cabo? When is enough, enough?

"If you'd face each other," the minister says quietly, and I'm jerked back to reality as Oliver takes my hand and turns toward me. Through my veil, I look at him again, his face a mask, the joy on his face not reaching his eyes. "Oliver Steele, do you take this woman to be your . . ."

I don't hear anything, I stare at Oliver as he listens, and I see a glimmer of something in his eyes when the minister finishes. It's pain. Still, he nods

before clearing his throat. “I do.”

“And Mindy Isabella Price, do you take this man to be your . . .”

I open my mouth to say I do, but the words die on my lips. There’s so much pain in Oliver’s eyes. I’m ruining this, not just for myself and not just for my family, even if they don’t know it, but for him too.

I tear my eyes away from Oliver to look around the chapel. Beside me, I can see Roxy in tears, hungrily awaiting my answer. I see Mom staring at me, her face shining with so much emotion and pride. Beside her are Aunt Rita, Grandma, and cousin Layla. Behind them are John, Uncle Charles, and everyone else, all of them waiting for these two simple words. The heavy weight of guilt becomes almost unbearable.

I'm a liar. A big fucking liar.

The priest clears his throat again as the silence stretches on. I look back at Oliver, and something inside me breaks. No more of this, no more lies. “Oliver . . . I’m sorry.”

I throw off my veil as I hike my dress and jump off the altar, stumbling on the thick carpet for a moment. There’s an audible gasp in the audience as I book it for the back doors, and I hear a sharp wail of dismay from someone—I think it’s Roxy.

Suddenly, Mom grabs my arm, trying to pull me to her. She pulls me around, and I see confusion and pain in her eyes now, too. Everywhere I look, there’s pain. “Mindy, stop! What are you doing?”

I jerk my arms free, stumbling backward. I can feel the tears start to flow, but I don’t care. Let them all see. Let everyone see the fraud that I am, not the fairytale princess that they came here to see. “Leave me alone! Why can’t you just leave me alone!”

“Honey, please,” she says, still not understanding. “You’re just scared and overreacting—”

“It’s all fake!” I yell at the top of my lungs. Mom stops, and everything freezes. I’m not even sure if they’re breathing or if they know what I mean. “Don’t you understand? Everything! Oliver, my engagement, all of it! Everything is fucking fake!”

Sobbing uncontrollably, I hike up my dress and run from the chapel, leaving everyone too shocked to even try and stop me.

OLIVER

I pause in the hallway, my hand on the knob. It's early afternoon now, hours after the service was supposed to happen, and I can't think of another time in my life that's been more difficult. The image of her stricken face still dominates my mind, the way she looked at me as she apologized and then ran from the chapel.

Yeah, it was fake. Yeah, we were going to get the damn thing annulled by Friday next week. But it still stings because of how I really feel about her.

I don't know how, I don't know when, but standing at that altar today, I let myself start to wonder. I wondered if we could lie our way to reality. If there were a way to keep digging deeper and deeper and end up on the other side free and clean.

Her running away felt like she abandoned me. Just when I was beginning to work past the doubt and pain of her words last night, she just abandoned me at the altar. She left me out there, all alone, to face all those people by myself.

It was hard dealing with that. For a few minutes there, I wasn't sure I was going to be able to get out of the chapel alive, surrounded by accusatory glares and shouted questions from her family. But I didn't say anything. I didn't betray her.

But I can't let this stand without doing something. I have to tell her I'll help make it right . . . I have to tell her that I want . . . something. Something I didn't even have a chance to fully figure out before the whole day exploded into chaos like a party favor from hell.

I open the door to see her lying across the bed, her shoulders shaking from giant sobs. She jerks upright almost immediately when she hears me step in the room, and I see that she's stripped out of her gown at least, wearing just a long nightshirt that makes my chest ache with conflicting emotions. I want to hug her, I want to kiss her, and I want to choke her. In the end, I stand right where I am.

"What are you doing here?" she says, her voice a soft croak. "Come to yell at me?"

"I came to see how you were doing," I say softly, taking a step into the bedroom. "You left before anyone could even react."

She sniffs, wiping at her nose with her forearm. Not sexy, but totally understandable. "I'm obviously not fine. But I'll live."

"I'm sorry," I say quietly, sticking my hands in the pockets of my tux. "I should have done more."

“Why? All of this is my fault. I deserve all of it. You only did what you were asked to do.”

“You don’t have to face it alone.” I step closer, but she scoots back, and I freeze, knowing that if I get closer, I’m going to spook her even more. “Your family is waiting to hear an explanation. Listen, I was thinking as I walked back here that I’ll tell them I made you do it. That I’m the one who had a marker on you, and that I’m the bad guy.”

I walk closer and sit on the far edge of the bed, reaching out slowly until I take her hand, that soft, warm hand that I didn’t get a chance to put a ring on today. The hand I regret leaving empty. “Come on. Get up, get changed, and let’s go out there and—”

Mindy pulls her hand back and snorts, shaking her head. “I’m done with everything but the truth. I deluded myself thinking this would just be some casual little white lie.”

“But I can still help . . .” I start, but Mindy holds up her hand, getting off the bed and stopping me cold.

“And we’re done too.”

I shake my head, trying to negate what she’s saying. No, it can’t be over. “Mindy, think about it. You’re just upset right now. Please, think about what you’re saying.”

She cocks her head, giving me a sad little half-smile. “No. For the first time all week, Oliver, I am thinking about what I’m saying. Your debt is paid.”

I try to speak, but she spins on a heel, going to the big doors to the balcony and hugging herself, her voice hardening.

“It’s fine with me. I totally understand. And I’m not mad. I can't imagine any man not doing the same in your position. The problem I have is more with myself. I’m angry for putting myself in this position. I don’t blame you for any of it. Hell, you wanna know what really pushed me over the tipping point to telling the truth? I suppose I should thank you, because you did. Seeing that pain in your eyes, I realized that I was going to ruin it for you too. It was just one too many people I’ve hurt. And while you never loved me . . . I did fall in love with you. And I can’t keep going on hurting the people I love. So, I just want to free you. Let me face my problem on my own.”

I stand up and walk over to the window on shaky legs. She really loves me? She said it before, but I wasn’t sure if she really meant it. “Mindy, don’t be so hard on yourself. I know you didn’t mean to do this with malicious

intent. I see the good in you. You're so special, so funny, and you've made me think. You've made me laugh. If you're guilty of anything, it's caring too damn much. You are a good person. I've seen your heart. You only wanted to please your mother."

She's quiet for a long time, and I'm beginning to think that she's listening, that I'll be able to bring her to me, that we can handle this together. But when she speaks next, her words hurt even more. "Please leave, Oliver. I don't need you to try to save my feelings. I'm so very sorry, but I want to be alone right now. I'll tell the truth, that it was my idea and I didn't intend for it to go this far. And I'll tell Gavin you did your part."

Gavin and the money? I can't believe that she still thinks this is about money. "Listen to me—"

"Just go!" she shouts, turning to me, furious and in pain. "Just forget this all happened."

Her words tear at my heart. She's being unreasonable, but I can see that she's so emotional right now that I can't get through to her. "Mindy, come on. Our plane leaves in the morning, I have one more night to stay in this town, you know."

"I think you should go now."

"Excuse me?" I ask, surprised. "Mindy, what are you saying?"

She shakes her head, pointing at the door. "I think it would be best if you don't stay here tonight. I just can't see you right now, and it's going to make things even harder."

I stiffen. As much as I hate it, I have to leave her alone or this could get worse. "If that's what you want."

"It is. Please leave, Oliver."

I don't want to. I want to defy her. But I know it's pointless. She's too overwhelmed with emotion.

"Very well," I say quietly. I walk to the door and stop, turning to look back at her standing at the balcony door, staring out into the backyard again. "I know you don't believe me. Maybe I deserve that, but I don't think so. I enjoyed the time we spent together. Despite what you may think, it wasn't about the money. I hope you work things out with your family."

She doesn't say anything as I walk out. I close the door and realize that I've got two suitcases worth of things in there. "Fuck it," I mutter. Besides my tablet, there's nothing that was all that personal. Instead, I start down the hallway. Maybe Sam can give me a ride to the airport or I'll just call a cab.

I'm at the head of the stairs when I see Roxy coming up, heartbreak etched into her young and previously innocent face. "Oliver? What're you doing?"

"Leaving," I say softly. I can't be angry at Roxy, no matter if she was part of the pressure that Mindy was feeling. I like the girl too much, and I know she would have made a great sister-in-law. "Mindy's asked me to go."

Her face goes white with shock. "What? Why? Oliver, if you think the rest of the family . . ."

I look at her face, seeing the tears in her eyes. My heart twists for Mindy at what she has to do and how her family is going to react. "I've enjoyed getting to know you over this past week, Roxy. And don't ever give up on your singing. You've got a gift."

"Oliver, please stop," Roxy says as I start down the stairs. I don't, and when I'm about halfway down, she calls out to me, wailing. "Dammit, please tell me what's going on!"

I stop and look up at Roxy, promising myself that when I think about this week, it's not going to be this Roxy I remember, but the Roxy who was a vision behind the microphone, the Roxy who made me laugh. "That's not my place to say, Roxy. Give my regards to everyone . . . and take care of Mindy for me, okay?"

I turn and walk out, leaving the mansion for good. I can call for a cab while walking down the road.

MINDY

"It was all fake."

The words hang in the air. They're the first thing I say to my immediate family after what has to be several long minutes of silence. It's just Grandma, Mom, Roxy, and me. John wanted to join us, but Mom asked that he stay at the wedding hall to take care of things there.

After throwing Oliver out of my room, I ignored Roxy's pleas for me to come out for hours, sobbing into my pillow. I couldn't imagine facing anyone, and I felt like doing nothing more than hiding under my bed. Eventually, though, I calmed down, and I found myself putting on a t-shirt and pants. I felt like it was my duty to talk to them, to face them. So I dragged myself out here.

“All of it?” Roxy asks, and I can see the tears in her eyes. She genuinely liked Oliver and me together. I’ve always known that Roxy was a lot deeper than the image she puts out. There’s no way someone who wasn’t could sing the way she does.

“The whole thing.”

I lower my eyes, tears threatening to spill over my lashes and down my face. I don't want to see their faces. I don’t want to see the many questions in their eyes.

It hurts down deep inside, where you’re supposed to carry your guts and instead, I just carried my fear. I can't believe I thought I could joke my way through something like this. That I thought being silly could solve something so serious. How wrong I was, and now what started as a silly little white lie over a year ago has come to this.

“Why?” Roxy says softly. “I sang for you guys, Mindy.”

I swallow the lump in my throat and let the burning pain in my chest try and fuel me. I can’t lie to them any longer, so I might as well be totally honest. “I just wanted to avoid any relationship questions. You can be a little hard to deal with sometimes, Mom. But that’s no excuse. It was stupid. And after a point, I didn’t want everyone to think I was a liar, and I just dug myself deeper. So . . . enter Oliver. I didn’t even know him before this.”

“Oh, honey,” Mom says, and I look up for a second to see tears in her eyes. “I know it must feel like I put pressure on you with my expectations, but I wouldn’t have loved you any less had you shown up without a fiancé.”

“You do put pressure on us, Mom,” Roxy says quietly. “All of us. With me, you don’t like my singing.”

Mom stops, wiping at her cheeks. “I just . . . I want what’s best for my girls.”

“How is being miserable and jumped on best for us?” I ask her. “Mom, you bugged me even in college about whether I was going to find a guy. You made it seem like I was going to school for a wedding ring and not a degree!”

“I just . . . being young, it’s the time for love,” Mom says, defending herself. “I wasn’t trying to say you had to marry some guy right out of school.”

“You made it feel that way sometimes.” I look over at Roxy, who looks miserable as she twists her hair around her finger. “I can’t even imagine what you’ve been through!”

“Me?” Roxy asks, getting up. “Really, Mindy? You ask about me? I

really liked Oliver and was invested in you both! I thought your love was real. It sure did seem like it. But anyway, I'm your sister. We used to share everything!"

"Yeah, well, I'm sorry!" I yell before taking a deep breath. I look at them. "I'm really ashamed about all of it. You know me—carefree. I didn't think it was a big deal when I started. I just didn't want to disappoint anyone. I wanted to make you proud."

Roxy comes over and puts her hands on my shoulders. "Please, you know you're the favorite. Everyone's proud of how you did things on your own. I love you, and you know I'm going to be on your side no matter what."

I swallow back tears and look around to everyone. "I'm sorry to all three of you. I took it too far."

"I knew I should have said something earlier," Grandma says, and everyone turns to look at her. Reading the question in my eyes, she waves it off. "Oh, I don't mean about Oliver. That's one fine hunk of a man. He had me pretty well fooled. I mean about you, Mary Jo."

"Me?" Mom asks, and Grandma nods.

"Honey, after Jacob's death, you got a little off kilter. The girls are right, you kept nosing in where you don't belong. But I hoped that with John, and this past week . . . well, I kept seeing y'all grow closer again, that you were fixin' what needed to be fixed. So I figured it would all work itself out. Guess I was wrong."

"I'm sorry," Mom says, looking at Roxy and me. "I don't mean to put pressure on you girls. I really don't. Neither of you ever has to worry about disappointing me. I could never feel that way about either of you. You're two beautiful, strong women, and I couldn't be more proud of you."

Her heartfelt words help, and I come over, kneeling in front of Mom and hugging her. I'm shocked a moment later when Roxy grabs the two of us and hugs Mom too, the tears flowing hard and fast. "I love you both," Roxy cries before sitting back and wiping at her eyes. "But Mindy . . . if you ever, and I mean ever, pull some shit like that again . . ."

"Don't worry, I won't," I promise her before suddenly laughing and squeezing her tight. "You too, okay?"

"I won't," Roxy promises me. "Still . . . I had my hopes pinned on you guys. You looked so good together."

"You weren't the only one, Roxy," Grandma says. "I swear, Mindy, either there was real feeling between you two or you need to look into

acting.”

Grandma’s and Roxy’s words shake me, and I’m on the verge of tears again. The hard part is, I think they’re right, and my chest aches. Roxy puts an arm around me, stroking my hair as I start crying. “Roxy . . . I feel lost.”

“I know, honey,” Roxy says as Mom hugs me too. “I know.”

“I was a fool,” I blubber. “I should have never done it.”

Grandma laughs. “If I had a nickel for every damn fool thing I’d done when I was younger, I’d be rich,” Grandma says. “The big thing is, Mindy, what are you going to do about it now that you’ve made your mistake?”

I cry more until I feel the tears start to dry up. “I’m going to make it up to you guys. I’m so sorry.”

“You do what you can when you feel your heart broken,” Grandma says, standing up painfully and coming over, stroking my hair. “You move on as best you can.”

“Move on?” I whisper, fresh tears coursing down my cheeks. Move on means moving on from Oliver. “What if I don’t want to move on? What if . . . what if I really love him? And what if I told him I hate him?”

“Then have faith that he loves you too, and trust in fate,” Grandma says. “Love finds a way.”

I nod miserably. Love finds a way.

What do you do when you can’t see the way?

OLIVER

I feel like hell, and Anthony gives me a double-take as he gets out of my Audi. At least he listened when I sent him the text last night telling him to skip getting the driver.

“Damn, was it really that fucking bad?” he asks, looking at the cheap discount jeans and t-shirt that I bought after walking to the hotel last night. “I mean, what the hell are you wearing?”

I don’t say a damn thing, and Anthony presses the issue. “Oli, come on, man. Your face looks like you’re sniffing shit.”

Fresh off my flight, I’m not in the mood to hear anything right now. I’m still smarting over Mindy pushing me away. I feel like so much is unresolved. I’ve been kicking myself for hours, cursing myself for being a coward for not dealing with Mindy’s pain and instead walking out on her.

“Hey. You gonna talk? What happened while you were there?”

“Just shut up and drive.”

I look over and see the look on his face. I didn’t mean to snap at him, but I haven’t slept since walking out of the mansion, and I’m going on fifty-five hours awake with only an hour and a half of sleep a day and a half ago.

I just haven’t been able to get her out of my head ever since I left. I kept hoping that she would show up on the flight, that she’d sit down next to me in the first-class seat and we’d have a chance to talk. That maybe I’d get her to listen to what I told her, make her believe me when I said that I do care about her. That I love her.

I look over, shaking my head. “Sorry. I didn't mean to snap at you. I just don’t want to talk about it right now, Tony.”

“All right,” he says, surprising me. Usually, when he knows I don’t want to talk about something, he pushes the issue even more. The thought makes my throat tighten again, and I turn away, looking out the passenger window as Tony pulls out. He gets to the airport exit and hangs a left, heading toward the highway back home.

“Mom has been a lot better,” he says, changing the subject. “Her ankle’s all healed up, and she’s already told her boss she’s going to go back to work tomorrow.”

“Well, that’s good,” I reply, glad to have at least some good news.

Anthony laughs. “Yeah, well, my social life is going to enjoy it too. I’m ready to handle my business. Oh, speaking about business, Martha and I found the perfect property for you.”

“Oh yeah?” I ask, being pulled into the conversation. “What property is that?”

“Remember the ones she was supposed to look at? She’s been holding down the fort really well, I think. She spent all week going around, then she put down a retainer deposit on two of them. She took me to both of them, and I’ve gotta say, you’ve got to see the one down by the university. It’s awesome. We have an appointment to see it in two days.”

“What was it?” I ask, leaning back. “University’s a crowded area. It can’t be cheap.”

“Yeah, but it’s a steal, man. I ran the numbers, and it’s good. Used to be a Chinese restaurant.”

“Chinese, huh?” I reply. “Too many of those around.”

“Yeah, well, the place might smell a lot like moo goo gai pan, but hey,

I've got a lot of good memories of moo goo gai pan," he says with a lift of his eyebrow, trying unsuccessfully to lighten my mood.

Good memories. I'd like to have good memories again.

"Everything's good," Gavin says, leaning back in the deck chair. I really should have checked in with him a few days ago, but I had to spend the last two days just getting some rest.

"That's good," I reply, leaning back in my own chair and sipping at an iced coffee. "You look like a man who's having a good streak."

"Yeah, well, I'm not gonna risk the money again," Gavin says with a chuckle. "You know, it's a shame things didn't work out between you and Mindy. I had hopes."

"She's a remarkable woman," I say, "but sometimes, stuff happens. You know how it is. I had fun, at least."

"That's a shame," Gavin replies with a sigh. "She's back in town at the coffee shop, by the way."

"Oh, yeah?" I ask, surprised. "I feel like six feet of warmed over leftovers. How in the hell did she do that?"

"Good question. Bri and I tried to insist that she take a few more days off, but she walked into the shop Wednesday and went right to work. She's not having much fun, I hear. She and Brianna have been talking every day. She's even been taking Rafe with her, hoping that Rafe would cheer Mindy up. Trust me, that could totally boomerang on us. Mindy sometimes doesn't have much of a filter, and Rafe is . . ."

"A tape recorder?" I ask, and Gavin nods. Even though I'm still depressed, I have to laugh at that. "Yeah, I bet. And I know what you mean. Most of her family's that way. It was surprising, but I liked it. They're real."

Gavin laughs. "Yeah, I can imagine. So the rest of her family's the same?"

I nod, laughing for a moment. "You should meet her little sister. Roxy's a total trip. The time she took us to the club and . . ."

Memories flood me, not only of the fun times but the way Roxy sang for us, and I clam up, draining the rest of my coffee and looking out at Gavin's backyard. "Anyway, it was what it was."

"I can imagine," Gavin says quietly. "You know, Oliver, sometimes things get weird. If you asked me three years ago, I'd have told you that I'd be riding out the biggest contract of my career. I wouldn't have guessed I'd

be retired and a family man."

"Why'd you do it?" I ask him, turning and looking him in the eye. "Not giving up football and all that. I get that. Why'd you put that money on the line for Mindy? Hell, until the last card, I had your ass."

Gavin looks back at me, and I know he's measuring something in me. Finally, he answers. "If it hadn't been for Mindy, I'd have never had a chance with Brianna. She's a wiseass, but she's also totally amazing, and I was hoping . . . well, I was kinda hoping that she'd find the same happiness that she gave me and Bri."

I nod, getting up and grabbing my empty cup. "I hope so too, Gavin. I really do. Thanks for the coffee."

"No problem," Gavin says, getting up. We shake hands, and he walks me around the house to my car. Just as I'm about to get in, he stops me. "Oli, one more thing."

"Yeah?"

"Don't walk away."

"Looks like the property is yours," the agent says, shaking hands with me. "I mean, I still need to run this by City Hall to get the title transfer registered, but I'll have that to you by Monday afternoon."

"No rush," I say, looking around the huge space. Two floors and a basement, with the upper floor being the former owner's apartment and storage area. And Anthony was right, it was a steal. "I'll get the contractors in here starting tomorrow though."

"Of course, Mr. Steele," the agent says. "If you want, I can give you the number of a guy I know who does good work."

"I'd appreciate it. Martha, what do you think?"

Martha looks around. "It's a great property, Oliver. If anything, it's overkill for what you need."

"About that," I say, then look at the agent. "If you don't mind?"

"Of course not," the real estate agent says, taking my contracts and putting them in his briefcase. He takes out two sets of keys and hands them to me. "I had the locksmith make a backup set, just in case. Enjoy your new place, Mr. Steele."

He leaves, and Martha gives me an inquisitive look. "What's up?"

"I've got a change of plans," I tell her. "I'm not using the first floor or the basement."

Martha lifts an eyebrow. “What do you mean?”

“Follow me,” I say, walking down the stairs to the basement where the kitchen is. “Look at all that. What do you see?”

“About ten thousand dollars in renovations. Unless you want to make fried rice,” Martha says. “Why, what do you see?”

“I see a working kitchen, and I see people working here,” I reply, walking around. “Look at this, a working walk-in fridge, plenty of storage space, and lots of room to expand. And upstairs, that can be converted into your office.”

“My office? What about yours?” she asks. “You’re confusing the hell out of me.”

“Change of plans,” I repeat. “I’ll fill you in on the details, but I’m going to need you busting your ass for me over the next week. Then, Steele Security Solutions isn’t going to happen. Instead, I’ve got a new job for you.”

“What? And what are you going to be doing?” Martha asks. “You’ve got the world in your palm, Oliver. Steele Security Solutions has at least a half-dozen clients lined up. What’re you doing?”

The world in my palm. She’s right, I could have everything in the world. But the one thing I want isn’t here.

Yet.

“I’m not walking away,” I tell her, smiling. “Come on, I’ll tell you the details on the way to dinner. I’m buying.”

MINDY

“I had to leave paradise to come back to this shit,” I mutter under my breath, looking around at the chaos of the Beangal’s Den. Two weeks back, and I’m missing the mansion already.

It’s not any busier or more chaotic than normal, the logical side of my mind insists. In fact, for a Saturday mid-morning, it’s slightly less insane than normal. The line’s not out the door, and if someone wanted a table, they could get one.

Still, the customers are driving me up a wall. Cassie’s doing better, but Sarah’s off today. I’ve got a new part-timer, a college girl named Nancy. She’s learning, but I’m too frustrated to be a very good mentor, manager, or leader to her right now. Hell, I can barely believe I’m keeping myself together.

“Hey! Where the hell is my coffee?” someone yells, and I look up to see the same lady from before. Great. Why’s she even coming back if she always seems to have a problem?

“Cassie, can you please?” I order, pointing in the customer’s direction. If I have to deal with her, I’m going to have to make sure the sharp knives are as far from me as humanly possible.

“On it, boss,” Cassie says, and I’m somewhat glad. She’s improving. Unfortunately for her, though, the bitch seems to be in a particularly foul mood.

“I just want my fucking coffee, not more excuses.”

That’s enough. I look up from the latte that I’m mixing and step over to the customer, patting Cassie on the shoulder. “Go finish that. Let me handle this, Cass.”

“Sure, boss.”

Cassie leaves, and I stare at the customer, who’s wearing the same faux fur trimming from last time. “Look, I told you last time that we don’t tolerate that sort of behavior here. Please stop with the swearing or you can leave.”

Sticking her nose in the air, she sniffs at me, not backing down. “This is three weeks in a row I’ve had a problem here. Last week, they couldn't even get my order right after writing it on the damn cup. Besides, I know who runs this place, and I’m tired of your bullshit. They serve better coffee on the other side of town.”

“You said that last time too,” I half growl, just holding onto my temper. “If you’re so dissatisfied with the service here, please give the owner a call.”

She shakes her head. “Yeah, you can’t say shit because you know you’re horrible.”

“Listen. Please leave now. If you don’t, I’m going to have to call security,” I say as calmly as I can, barely keeping my thoughts about her fake fur and bitchy attitude to myself.

“Whatever, you guys fucking suck!” she yells loudly, grabbing her Louis Vuitton knockoff purse and storming out the door. “Bitch!”

I let out a sigh. I never in my life thought I’d say this, but I’m sick of working here. I know it’s not just because of the customers. It’s because . . .

I hate to admit it, but I hurt. Every morning, I wake up and my body aches, my arms are empty, and my eyes burn from crying in my sleep. I haven’t been exercising, although I’ve still lost weight because I’m barely eating.

I keep telling myself to not think about him. Whenever Brianna tries to tell me anything about him, I tell her to shut up. She's pretty much given up on the whole thing, which just makes it hurt more.

I feel a buzz at my side, and I step into the back, checking my phone. I've got a text message . . . Roxy.

Mindy-girl, I just had a feeling that you needed a hug from home. I hope you're feeling better today. I know you left feeling like shit, and I know I got on your case again. I'm sorry. You're my sister. I love you. Gimme a call?

A sad smile touches my lips. Last Wednesday, after I left the mansion and came home, she called me. There were a few tense words in there, but the bond we have is maybe the strongest thing in the world, and soon, we were telling each other how sorry we were as we cried over the phone. Roxy admitted that she'd been pressuring me too and apologized, saying that she'd get over it and that she was coming out to visit me as soon as she got free time away from her singing gigs. She said she wanted to see if there are more Olivers out here. I didn't have the heart to tell her that Oliver's one of a kind and that I doubt even I'm going to find him again.

"What's happening?"

I look toward the employee entrance, sticking my phone back in my apron pocket as I see Brianna with a tired but still awake Rafe on her hip. Seeing him brightens me a little, but he can't push it all away.

"Nothing much, just slaving away as usual. Hey, thanks for covering a few shifts when I was gone. How's my little Rafey doing?"

"Firsty," Rafe says, perking up a little as I tickle his ribs. I walk with them back out into the cafe area and start mixing Rafe an iced chocolate milk while Bri checks out the menu.

Brianna looks over the menu. "So why don't I see you serving the unicorn frappe yet?"

I laugh. I know she's just joking. "Do I look like a freakin' leprechaun? Besides, that's the guys across town."

Brianna bursts into laughter, and I'm grateful I caught my tongue just in time as Rafe starts chanting. "Lep-a-chan! Lep-a-chan!"

"Aye, top o' the mornin' to you," I reply in the fakest accent ever, handing Rafe his chocolate milk while Bri chuckles. "What? I'm not Irish enough?"

Bri shakes her head. "You're a lot of things, but no. Thank you, though. That was good. First joke I've heard you crack in a week."

I shrug, rinsing the milk blender while Rafe finds a stool and Bri hangs out where we can talk. She knows everything, and I need someone to help me process all that happened. Being my best friend, she's been positive. She's even gone so far as to suggest there's still a chance for us.

Of course, she's out of her mind. I haven't seen the man in two weeks. If he wanted to get in contact with me, he could've. Despite telling him to go away, I started missing him even as he walked out the door, and that hasn't let up at all. But I get it. If I were in his shoes, the way I treated him at the end there, I'd swear off coffee forever and switch to smoothies.

But I've waited, hoping to hear something, anything, Even if it was from Brianna that he'd given Gavin a call and said something about me. For the past two weeks, I've spent almost every hour by my phone, hoping to hear something. I never have.

Bri gives me a soft smile. "You sleeping yet?"

"What do you mean?" I ask. "I got a whole three hours last night!"

Brianna rolls her eyes and looks over her shoulder at Rafe. "If you don't get seven hours of sleep tonight, I'm sending Gavin in to cover your shift tomorrow and getting your ass falling down, sleep the morning away on my sofa drunk. Got it?"

"I'll slam espressos all night just to see Gavin in one of the shirts and aprons," I joke, and Brianna grins. I go back to work, Bri stepping behind the counter to help out a little with the wash-ups as the crowd rolls in and Rafe finishes his tiny little drink. We small talk the whole time, nothing important, and when Rafe's done, I take his glass and give him a hug. "You take care of your Mommy, okay?"

He smiles, waving his hands around.

"Love you, kiddo," I say, standing up to give Bri a hug. "I promise you, ten espressos tonight."

"Girl, bye," Bri says with a chuckle. "I'll have Gavin ready. See you tomorrow."

Bri leaves, and I watch her go for a moment before I get caught up in work again. It's so busy, and I jump in to help Cassie with clearing tables as the lunch crowd settles in. I'm tired and not watching where I'm going when I turn with a blender cup and bump into Nancy, who's got a tray full of empties. "Oh!"

Thankfully, she doesn't drop her tray. I jerk back enough that I bounce my hip off the counter and drop my blender cup. The polycarbonate cup hits

the floor, making a hell of a racket but not breaking into a million pieces, and I give a deep sigh of thanks. “You okay, Nancy?”

“Yes, Miss Price,” she says, probably afraid I’ll bite her damn head off. Instead, I take a deep breath, calming myself. I squat down, checking the blender cup. It’s okay.

“So . . . got the new unicorn frappe yet?” says a deep recognizable voice, and I rocket to my feet, staring in shock. My heart jumps in my chest when I see him leaning against the counter in a light blue dress shirt, his eyes twinkling and his smile warming my chest. Where the hell did he come from?

“Hey,” I say awkwardly. “Oliver.”

His familiar grin nearly melts my heart, and he leans a little bit more over the counter, dropping his voice to that sexy purring growl that I’ve dreamed about for two weeks. “Miss me, Princess?”

Did I ever. Not that I’m going to tell him about the number of times I’ve typed him texts and emails and then deleted them over the past two weeks. “A little.”

“A little?” he asks with a raised eyebrow.

“Listen, about sending you—” I start, but Oliver reaches across the counter and puts a single finger on my lips, stopping me as my body thrills at just the single touch of his skin on mine again.

“Shh, you don’t have to explain. I know it all. I only left to give you time to reflect. I always intended to come back to show you that I truly cared.”

His words fill my heart with something that I haven't felt since coming home, flowing from him like cooling waters on the agonizing burn within me. It’s unbelievable after how I pushed him away, but he’s here, and his eyes are calm, amused . . . and loving. They also tell me the truth. Everything isn’t going to be sunshine and lollipops right away. There’s a lot to work on, but I take joy from a very simple fact—he didn’t give up on me.

“Why’d you wait so long?” I ask him directly, back in my element.

Oliver chuckles, and I swear he looks a little bashful. “Would you believe I intended to come by last week, but then . . . well, I got caught up in something?”

“Better be something good.” I say, putting my hands on my hips.

“Just some business stuff. I wouldn’t want to bore you with the details. I know how much you hate when I go on and on about myself and my business.”

I smile, biting my lip. “Mmmhmm. But that’s not good enough. Spill it.”

He winks, giving me that patented Oliver smirk. “Trust me, Princess. Got time for a ride?”

“When can I open my eyes?” I ask, my shoulders getting stiff. “I’m getting carsick.”

“Just a moment,” Oliver says, chuckling. He stops his car, and I hear him come around the car to open my door and help me out. Taking me by the hand, he has me walk a few steps, then stop. “Okay, open them.”

I open my eyes, and I’m totally confused. “Why’d you bring me to The Flaming Dragon? This place closed down two years ago.”

“It’s not The Flaming Dragon,” Oliver says with a laugh. “Come a little closer and you’ll see.”

Oliver takes my hand and leads me to the door, producing a key from his pocket and opening it. “Oliver, what’s going on?”

He opens the door, and I look in shock at the big letters that have been penned on the grease board next to the door. *FUTURE LOCATION OF MINDY’S PLACE (Steele & Assoc. 2nd Floor).*

“Welcome to the location of your new business,” Oliver says. “Ours, to be exact. If you want.”

“Huh?” I comment, reading the sign again and again. It still doesn’t make any sense. “Oliver, what—”

Shock rolls through me as my brain finally kicks into gear, and I put my hand over my mouth, speechless. Oliver leads me over to one of the stools that still line the big counter, sitting down next to me. “I’d asked my assistant to look for a few places where I could base my security business. She had this place on the list, mainly because of the location, and, well . . .”

Oliver takes a deep breath and puts the key to the place on the counter. “It’s yours. You own the place outright, Mindy. I told Martha I’m splitting my money in half. One half is to be used by her for real estate deals, other investments, whatever. She’s going to run it out of the office upstairs, close enough that I can help her out if she needs it.”

“What are you going to do?” I ask, feeling the teeth of the key. “And what about the Den? Gavin and Brianna are my friends. I can’t just abandon them.”

“Who do you think told me about the unicorn frappe?” Oliver asks quietly. “As for me, well, I don’t know a lot about running a restaurant, but I do know business, and if you don’t need a business manager . . . I can be

Johnny on the spot wherever you need me, boss."

I hold up my hand, concerned. "Oliver, before we go any further, why are you doing this?"

"Mindy, I've spent every minute since I walked out of the Wentworth mansion regretting one thing."

"What's that?"

"Not being honest about how I feel about you. Sure, I started this as a way to get out of a debt, but from the moment I first saw your picture, I was drawn to you. When you challenged me—"

"I challenged you?" I ask, amused. "I seem to remember you sitting there like a living sex god, telling me that you weren't going to do a damn thing I said. And you proceeded to do just that."

"I think we sort of liked toying with each other," Oliver says with a chuckle before growing serious again. "But I'm not joking now. I need you. I need you in my life, and when I told you I loved you that first time, I meant it. So I regret not staying, not doing my best to take care of you."

I swallow, emotion choking my words for a moment before I can answer. "And if I still say I don't want you in my life?"

"Then the building is still yours," he says softly, "but you'd be lying. I can see it in your eyes, and well . . . let's just say I've gotten a little bit of inside help."

Gavin and Brianna. I look at the open raw emotion in his face, and I know that he's telling the truth. There's only one answer I can give him.

"So I get to be the boss, huh?" I ask, smiling as I look at him. "And if I tell my new bus boy to kiss me, will he do as he's told?"

Oliver pretends to think for a minute, then he stands up, pulling me into his arms and lowering his lips to mine. "I'll have to demand at least minimum wage," he teases, and then he's kissing me, his strong hands pulling me against him, our bodies hungry for each other. I moan into his mouth as his tongue finds mine, his hands stroking my hair before running down to cup my ass. Our lips part, and he looks into my eyes again, touching his forehead to mine. "I love you, Mindy."

"I love you too," I moan in reply. "Oliver, can we start over?"

He shakes his head, giving me a smile. "No, but we can move forward."

"Then let's move forward."

Oliver smiles and picks me up, setting me on one of the empty tables, dust puffing up as he does. "Hmm, we're going to have to clean that," he

jokes as he pulls my shirt out of the waistband of my pants. He kisses my neck until I'm trembling before kissing back to my earlobe, licking it before whispering in my ear. "I love you."

"I love you too," I moan in happiness as I reach for the buttons on his shirt, undoing them quickly and peeling his shirt off, swinging it around my head like a lasso for a moment before flinging it across the room. I laugh, joy in my heart. "I've always wanted to do that."

"You'll get to do anything you want from now on," Oliver reassures me, his voice catching as I pull him close and bite his neck. Our night of rough passion has taught me a few things, and one of them is that I like it a little rougher with Oli than I did with other partners. "Mmmhmm."

"Anything, huh?," I growl playfully as he reaches for my pants and yanks them down along with my panties. "Well then, first things first—no more condoms."

"That I can do," Oliver says as he undoes his pants. His cock emerges and my mouth goes dry as I see it again in the dim, dusty light filtering through the soaped-over windows. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," I say as I wrap my legs around him and pull him closer. "I've just missed you. And that mind-blowing cock of yours. Speaking of blowing . . ."

"Later," Oliver says as he crushes my lips in another soul-searing kiss. I moan in agreement as I feel him line up naturally with me and slide in, stretching me open. My heart thrills as he fills me, body and soul, and I clutch at his powerful shoulders as we start moving as one, his cock sliding into me over and over. I squeeze my pussy around him as we look into each other's eyes, opening up fully.

How did I miss this? How, when from the first time he looked in my eyes as we had sex, I saw this same gleam, the same tenderness, the love in his eyes?

It doesn't matter now as we move, our souls joining even as his cock speeds up. Our lips meet in another kiss, and we share breath, my heart hammering in my chest as we push together. His cock lights up my body as he drives into me harder and faster. Claiming me? No, he claimed me weeks ago. Now, we're completing each other.

"Oliver . . ." I moan as he speeds up again, his cock hammering me and his balls slapping against my ass. I claw at his neck, passion overwhelming tenderness as we kiss hard, biting his lip as he growls, his cock swelling. I

feel him tremble, and with a deep groan, he comes, filling me with his warm seed.

My body reacts, and I'm coming too, squeezing and milking his cock of every last precious drop of his essence as I hold him, sobbing in joy as he stays deep inside me, holding me close as we ride out our orgasms. When I finally come down, he's holding me tenderly, and I hear the vulnerability in his voice. "Mindy, I'm so . . ."

"I know," I whisper in his ear, wrapping my arms around him and holding him close. "Like we said, let's move forward."

Now the hard work starts, but I'm not afraid of hard work.

MINDY

I look up at the sign, pride swelling in my heart as the workers make the final adjustments to the sign. *Mindy's Corner*.

"Wow, they work fast," Brianna says, coming out of the cafe. She looks up, nodding in approval. "I'm glad you named the place after yourself."

"Well, Oli gets to name the second floor, so I get to name the first," I say with a smile. "And besides, I get to have the bigger sign."

"It's not the size of the sign that counts," Brianna jokes. "Although it certainly doesn't hurt."

"We talking about signage or sausage?" I tease, and in a move that reassures me I haven't totally lost my damn mind this past month, Brianna blushes. "Oh, come on, I'm woman enough to admit that Gavin's probably got Oliver beat."

"And you're not jealous?" Brianna asks. I shake my head, and she grins. "Why's that?"

"Simple," I say, slinging an arm around her shoulder. "My man has a tongue that can tie and untie my apron blindfolded, and he's definitely not lacking downstairs. Also, the fact that he can make my toes curl without making me walk like a cowboy after he takes me from behind is a plus."

"Hey!" Brianna says, blushing. "I don't walk like a cowboy!"

"Well, let's just mosey on inside again then . . . *cowgirl*. See how the boys are doing."

We go inside, where I see Oliver and Gavin working together on the back wall of the restaurant, and I have to laugh watching the two undeniably

manly men getting salmon pink paint splattered on themselves.

"Keep that up, and I'm going to make you take off that T-shirt!" I tease Oliver, who turns and gives me a cocky grin before peeling his shirt over his head. Not to be outdone, Gavin pulls his shirt off too, and while I make Brianna a Pina colada iced frappe, we get to watch our men work. By the time the frappe's done, I need a drink myself.

I whip myself up an iced mocha with all the shiny new equipment. Best of all is the grill downstairs. We're going to be able to expand to a full restaurant setup when we want. In the meantime, downstairs is going to be our bakery. I've already taught Oliver how to make cinnamon rolls. "Hey, can I ask you a question?"

"Sure," Brianna says, not even pausing her eye-fuck of Gavin. "If you really wanna know, yes, we did, and yes, I loved it."

"Please," I laugh, shaking my head before growing serious again. "Not that. Although we're coming back to that story in a minute. Actually, I wanted to know . . . are you and Gavin really okay with my leaving the Beangal's Den? I mean, he bought that place for me to manage."

"Oh, don't worry there," Bri says, smiling. "It was really complicated, but basically, we sold the Den back to The Grand Waterways, and as payment, Gavin took an equal amount of stock value in the hotel corporation. We know you wanted your own place without worrying about complying with hotel rules."

"Really?" I ask, and Brianna nods. "Thank you, Bri."

"Oh, it gets better," Oliver says, turning around. "Gavin has decided to work with me on investing. Now, he's nowhere as rich and powerful as I am . . ."

"Unless you keep playing poker with me," Gavin mock-growls, and I have to laugh.

Oliver laughs before turning back to me. "Anyway, Gavin's pooling some investment money with Steele and Associates, seeing as how I know how to turn rich into super-rich. Trust me, Princess, these two are going to be sitting pretty while I'm elbow deep in flour."

"Sounds good to me—I'll just have to wash you up more often."

"I knew there was a reason you decided to keep the shower in the apartment upstairs."

Turning back to Bri with a smirk, I tell her, "Now, about that 'yes, we did, and yes, I loved it.' Tell me all about it." Just as I expected, she blushes

and ducks her head. Yep, still got it.

The line outside the cafe is buzzing, and I'm moved. Sure, it took a little bit of shameless self-promotion. And yes, Gavin has agreed to lend his bit of star power to the whole affair, but to see fifty people lined up when this isn't even the official grand opening?

"Whoa," Oliver says, looking as handsome as ever in his white dress shirt, sexy black jeans, and his apron with *Mindy's Corner* stenciled over his heart. "Hope we've got enough cinnamon rolls."

"I'm sure if you don't, I've got something that'll keep them entertained," a voice from behind me says, and I turn, nearly squealing in delight as I see Roxy come up from the basement. "Hey, Sis."

"Roxy? What the hell are you doing here?" I ask, running over and giving her a big hug. "How'd you get there?"

"Ask Mr. Sexy Pants over there," she says, grinning. "He invited me. Said he had something I just had to see."

I turn to Oliver, who's grinning. "Just in time too. Where's Brianna and Gavin?"

"Just a moment!" a muffled Bri yells from downstairs. "Dammit, you know I can't resist these rolls, especially since I'm pregnant again!"

I chuckle, a little jealous but knowing that Bri's earned it. Since finding out she's pregnant again just two weeks ago, we've both been giddy planning for her new baby. I'm hoping for a little girl. Bri and Gavin appear a moment later up the back stairs, Gavin wearing one of his old jerseys which I'll admit he still fills out well, while Bri's wearing a Mindy's Corner apron. For one day only, they're working together again under the same roof. "Yeah, well, don't eat all the damn profits!"

"Oh, I wouldn't worry about that," Roxy says guiltily. "I ate one, too. Damn, if I knew you were this good, I'd never have let you leave home."

"That was Oliver, actually," I concede, and Roxy looks at him in amazement.

"No shit?"

"No shit," Oliver replies. "Ruins the texture of the dough."

"Is there anything you can't do?"

"Well, there's one thing," Oliver says, "but I can fix that right now."

I turn and my heart stops as I see Oliver get down on his knee, reaching for my hand. "Mindy, I know it's a little fast, and it's a hell of a lot shorter

than the year you were engaged to that loser Harold, but . . . I can't imagine a better couple of months than I've had right by your side, and I want to keep it going. I've called you Princess ever since we first met, and it was a joke at first because you acted like you were a queen. It's not a joke anymore. Princess . . . will you let me be your prince? Will you marry me?"

He reaches into his apron pocket and pulls out the same ring that he'd given me for our fake engagement, and I gawk. "Where did you get that?"

"I had a talk with your stepfather," Gavin says with a chuckle. "He mailed it to me. Now answer the man!"

"Yes! Of course I'm saying yes!" I gush, tears coming to my eyes as Oliver slides it back on my finger. "Oh, Oliver . . ."

Oliver stands, and I jump into his arms just as the line of people outside, attracted by what they saw through the windows, erupts into cheers. Oliver holds me tight, kissing me hard after he sets me down with a grin. "So, Princess . . ."

Roxy wipes away the tears from her eyes. "Oh, I'm so jealous of you. I mean . . . not trying to move in on yours, but I need a man!"

"It'll happen. Probably when you least expect it," I tell Roxy, hugging her before exchanging hugs with Bri and Gavin. "You're going to find a man just as awesome as these two men," I say, gesturing at Oliver and Gavin.

"Nah, luck never runs in threes. I'm gonna be lucky if I don't end up with a loser who stalks me and tries to count my pussy hairs."

Brianna gawks at Roxy for a second before turning to look at me. "You're right, she is worse than you. How am I ever supposed to let my Rafe near you two?"

"Ear plugs. Good ear plugs."

"Mom, it's me!" Oliver hollers as we get out of his Audi. After a five-hour "sneak preview opening," I'm not sure if I'm ready for any more today, but I insisted on this after Oliver's proposal. There's no way in hell I'm meeting my soon-to-be mother-in-law at the wedding. I'm assuming I'm already going to have to meet his father that way.

"You know, she's gonna be pissed about this," I whisper under my breath.

"You'll be okay," he reassures me. "My mom is a sweetheart. Just ignore my brother and you'll be okay."

"You know, you didn't have to do this," I say as I see the front door open.

“I mean, we could have taken her to dinner or something.”

“I got to meet your family right in their home. Now you get to meet mine,” Oliver says with a smirk. “Or is my princess afraid?”

“Oh, hell no,” I growl, punching him lightly in the shoulder as the screen opens and a woman who’s a little older than Mom comes out. She’s got Oliver’s hair, and while she’s not as energetic as Mom, the love in her eyes as she comes out and hugs Oliver is evident.

“Mom, you’re looking good. I’d like you to meet . . .”

The woman’s eyes go wide as she takes me in, smiling. “Is this the girl you left to go see all those weeks back?”

Oliver nods proudly, putting his arms around me. “Yes, Mom. Sorry, I know I’ve been caught up in getting the cafe open, but . . . well, Mom, this is Mindy Price. We’re getting married.”

“Oh, my God,” his mom says. “She’s beautiful. Come in, come in!”

We go inside, where I see a younger version of Oliver coming in from the back yard. “You must be Anthony.”

“Yeah,” Anthony says, looking a little shocked. “Holy shit. Oliver, you brought in a dime piece.”

“And your head is about to be a showpiece if you don’t show some respect,” Oliver growls, but before the boys can continue, their mother steps between them.

“Now, now, boys, none of that,” she says with a chuckle. “Anthony, you know better than that.”

I laugh, waving it off. “Don’t worry about me. I’ve heard far worse.”

We visit for another two hours. After dinner, the brothers volunteer to wash up the dishes while I talk with their mother. She goes outside, where she lights up for a moment before staring at the cigarette in her hand and crushing it underfoot. “Nope, no more of those. I want to see grandbabies someday, and I won’t be doing that with cancer sticks all the time.”

“Thanks,” I concede. “So Oliver told you almost everything, huh?”

“Almost,” she says, chuckling. “Never has told me just why the hell you two took a dog for a walk for all those hours, but I’m sure you had your reasons.”

I blush in the deep purple twilight, nodding. “Yeah, well, your son . . . he’s good for me.”

“You’re good for him too,” she says, smiling. “When he came to town, he was so bitter at his father, and I can understand that. But he was going down

the same path his father did, all business and no heart . . . until he met you. So thank you. And Mindy?"

"Yes?"

Oliver's mom comes over and gives me a hug. "I'm going to love having you as a daughter-in-law."

I hug her back, happy. "I'm going to love having another mother, it seems."

OLIVER

"How's it going guys?" I ask, sticking my head in the door. I don't work the line anymore. Mindy's Corner has grown fast enough that we hired a real chef and staff within six months, and now, two years after opening, we're going strong.

"Doing well, Mr. Steele," Jake, the head chef, says. "Hey, when you've got a minute, I want you to try something."

"What?" I ask, curious. "So I can prep my stomach while I unload the van. I know how you are."

Jake laughs. He knows I've had to work doubly hard the past year to keep my body in good shape. The man's a good cook. "Yeah, well, I'm going to put it on the menu starting Monday, so if you don't want to try the Trenton now, I can't be blamed if your son doesn't like it. Where is he, anyway?"

"Hanging out with his godparents," I reply, stepping closer. The pizza looks delicious, and I have to smile as I cut a slice and sample it. "Jesus, this is good. Has Mindy tried any?"

"Of course, the Boss is upstairs being the Boss," Jake says. "So any tweaks for the recipe?"

"Not a one," I say, patting him on the shoulder. "You know, when you said you wanted to start a line of pizzas, I thought you were nuts. I thought you were double nuts when you decided to name them all after famous steels and swords. Thank you, I don't know if this one's going to bump the Valerian from the popularity list, but it's damn good. My son will be proud once he has teeth."

Jake gives me a grin, and I go upstairs, letting the kitchen staff unload the van of tonight's supplies. I find Mindy, looking more radiant than ever, making up a frozen drink. "Okay, the leprechaun rainbow frappe," she tells

the two new girls who we just hired to work the coffee bar. In the corner is Sarah, who we snatched from the Beangal's Den and made the front of the house assistant manager, prepping for opening. "Now watch carefully. You don't want to mint-nuke someone."

She's confident and sexy, and I have to admit my cock stirs in my pants watching her at work. She finishes, tucking the shamrock stirrer into the glass and presenting it. "Remember, if you screw it up, just grin, give the customer a little bit of charm, and you'll be cool most of the time. Now practice for me."

"I always thought it was the low-cut blouses that got you out of trouble," I tease her as she comes over and wraps her arms around my neck, giving me a kiss. I reach down to squeeze her ass, growling lightly. "Don't make me spill chocolate on you as an excuse to get you upstairs to the shower again."

Mindy chuckles, wiggling her hips against me until my cock is throbbing in my pants, and I'm glad that I'm wearing my cafe apron. "Yeah, well, maybe we can look at that idea of getting Trent a little sister tonight."

I pat her ass, grinning. "For sure. By the way, Bri says that our Trent and her Alicia are meant for each other."

Mindy laughs, shaking her head. "Remind me again how lucky we are not to have taken Roxy's idea on our son's name?"

"Oh, I don't know," I say, laughing. "Maybe if our next child's a boy, we can go with her idea. After all, Richard's a fine name for a boy."

"I am not naming my son Dick Steele," Mindy says, shaking her head.

I have to agree with that one, both of us turning as there's a crash from the coffee area to see a pile of green slush on the floor. One of the new girls, Rose, looks at us with fear in her eyes. "Mrs. Steele, I'm sorry, I just . . ."

"Did the same damn thing I've done a hundred other times," Mindy says calmly. "Get it cleaned up and try again. Sarah will give you a hand. Remember, you've got afternoon shift tomorrow, and with St. Paddy's Day coming up, those things are flying out the door."

"On pink unicorns," I joke, earning a stuck out tongue from Mindy. "Hey, guess what Martha told me? She found us a house. Or, as she called it, *Step One of the Steele Estate Project*."

"No way," Mindy says, grinning. "Where?"

"A couple of miles out on the other side of town," I tell her, laughing. "It's not as big as Gavin's ranch, and it's nowhere near the size of John's mansion, but it's got plenty of space and three acres for Trent and however

many more we want to play and grow."

Mindy bites her lip, nodding. "When can we go see it?"

"Sunday afternoon," I tell her. "Now, get this . . . you won't believe who the owner is."

"Who?"

"Your favorite banned customer."

Mindy gawks, then grins at me, shaking her head. It's been a running joke between us, one that's crept to the whole staff, really. "No freakin' way."

Motherhood's finally found a way to tone down Mindy's foul mouth. At least a little.

"Way. Martha confirmed it herself. Apparently, Miss Fake Fur and Attitude has been banned from every coffee shop in town for the past six months. The last one, she went on an epic rant where she threw an iced pumpkin swirl and swore that they totally sucked and she was coming to Mindy's Corner."

"Too bad we have a very strict no fake fur, no fake bitches allowed policy."

I laugh, pulling my wife in for another hug. "Yep. But her husband's being transferred somewhere for work. I'd hate to be that poor schmuck, but it's not my problem. I'm only worried about two things—my queen and our new castle."

"Castle, huh?" Mindy purrs. "I like the sound of that, my king."

It's good to be the king.

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HEARTSTOPPER

From Wall Street Journal & USA Today Bestselling Author Lauren Landish.

Roxy Price

After ten months without a date, I'm eager to go to the hottest new ticket in town, Club Jasmine.

I deserve a night of fun. I've worked hard and I finally got a promotion. But for one night, I'm going to let loose.

That's when I see him.

The drop-dead gorgeous Jake Stone.

With his god-like physique, pure blue eyes, and chiseled jawline, he might be the hottest guy I've ever laid eyes on. A total heartstopper.

The man's probably a player. Then again, maybe that's what I need—a man who knows what he's got, knows how to use it, and knows how to make me scream to the heavens.

Screw it. You only live once.

But when I go in Monday morning to meet my new boss, I'm greeted by that

same irresistible smile.

And Mr. Stone is making it perfectly clear that *strictly professional* is not in his vocabulary.

PLAYLIST

Toxic - Britney Spears
Rude Boy - Rihanna
This Is What You Came For - Rihanna/Calvin Harris
Dangerous Woman - Ariana Grande
Power Of Love - Celine Dion
Uptown Funk - Mark Ronson/Bruno Mars
Milkshake - Kelis
Freak Like Me - Adina Howard
Rockabye - Clean Bandit
American Girl - Tom Petty
Up Where We Belong - Joe Cocker/Jennifer Warnes
Do You Really Wanna Hurt Me? - Culture Club
Take My Breath Away - Berlin
I Want It That Way - Backstreet boys

ROXY

"The guys had better get ready," I say, twirling my hair around my finger. I'm riding shotgun down the road with my best friend, Hannah Fowler, in her beat-up Lexus sedan. The windows are rolled down, the wind blowing through the cabin and ruffling our hair as the downtown streets whiz by.

It's been a long time since I've gone out, and boy, have I missed it.

But tonight I'm going to let loose, I vow. *Enjoy myself for once.*

"Why's that?" Hannah asks as she speeds through a yellow light, glancing over at me. With shoulder-length blonde hair, big round cheeks, and eyes that are as blue as they are huge, she looks a lot like Amanda Seyfried, and she's played it up a few times. Equipped with a sense of humor that almost rivals mine, she's basically been my bestie since I struck out on my own. We're inseparable.

I grin, flashing my notorious wink I learned from my big sister, Mindy, and boast, "'Cause I'm about to release the Rox on them!"

"Did I just hear you just say you're gonna gobble all the cocks?" Hannah yells over the roar of the wind.

I laugh. "You know damn well that wasn't what I said!" I got ninety-nine problems and gobbling cock won't be one. If anything, that's on Hannah's menu, considering the tight black number she's wearing that looks like it's been painted on her frame.

Hannah giggles. "Well, it's better than unleashing your deprived vajayjay on some poor man!"

"I can't help it," I say, shaking my head. "You go ten months without sex and see how you feel. Knowing you, they'd have to call the Ghostbusters because you'd have fucked half a dozen men to death."

We share a good laugh and I smile as I let my arm hang out the window, enjoying the night breeze against my skin. We haven't even gotten to the best part of the night and I'm already in a good mood. It's a far cry from the sour, cantankerous pain in the ass I've become lately.

Don't get me wrong—my job at Franklin Consolidated is okay and all, but it's not my first love. The grin slowly fades from my face as I think back to three years ago. I was working the club scene and singing at Trixie's, a local club back home, busting my ass for my big break.

It never came. There were too many rejection letters, too many times I got passed up on auditions. I almost tried out for *X-Factor* but got sick right before with a bad cold, so even that didn't go as planned. Eventually, I set the microphone aside and went back to school. Mom at least had the decency to not say *I told you so* about my short-lived career as a singer. Instead, she gave me encouragement when I said I was moving away to finish up the degree that I'd been putting off.

I don't really know why I moved away. My stepfather, John, has more money than my family could spend in five lifetimes and is more than happy to share it. Champagne, designer dresses, cocktail parties, and vacationing on yachts. I could've had it all, the total deb socialite.

But nepotism is not a life I want for myself. I want to stand on my own two feet like my sister, Mindy. Sure, she ended up marrying a super-handsome, rich stud, but she worked her ass off before that and still does.

Thinking about her, I feel guilt tighten my chest. I haven't talked to her or anyone in my family for months. It's partly because we all lead such busy

lives, but I'd argue that Mindy's life is perfect now. She's got a great husband, two adorable kids, and a business of her own that she loves running.

I'm nowhere near there. And I can't help but have this nagging feeling that even if I'm successful in my new career path, I may never get that feeling. So yeah, a night like this is just what the doctor ordered.

"Seriously, though, I need this," I tell Hannah. "We should do this more often."

As a gift to us both, Hannah decided to hit the grand opening of Club Jasmine, a brand new nightclub that's being opened by a couple of rich pricks whose names I don't know. It's supposed to be hot and ritzy. I just want to get to the hot part.

Hannah nods. "I know, honey. You've been working hard for what? Ten months? And already getting a promotion. You need to reward yourself." She shakes her head. "I've been worried about you."

Satisfaction rolls through me. It's about the only positive thing I can say about my job. My hard work has paid off. I've been recognized by the execs, and starting next week, I'm getting promoted, working as an assistant to the new regional president. I'm not his secretary. I'm going to be one of the junior analysts, gathering data and such for him. I can see myself going up the ladder in a couple of years and making big money.

But at what cost? I think to myself. *At this pace, I'll be sitting in a corner office with nobody to come home to, my best years behind me.* The pay might be good, but is it worth giving up the one thing that brings me joy?

Hannah pulls up to a red light, and I force that troubling thought from my mind, checking my makeup in the mirror. I've got dark hair, sparkling hazel eyes, and pouty lips, just like all the women in my family, and I'm pretty enough, I guess. But my spark, that mischievousness that made men weak in the knees, is absent from my eyes.

I need to get back to doing what I love, even if only on the weekends. Screw prioritizing work.

"What you should be worried about is the poor guy who's gonna need a heart monitor when I get done with him," I say, determined to stay upbeat, snapping my lipstick closed.

Hannah gives me a serious look and deadpans. "Is it really that bad? I thought you were just joking at first, but Jesus, Rox, I'm kinda scared. You ever see that movie *Teeth*, with the vagina that grows fangs? I feel like that's you right now."

“Oh, go to hell!” I laugh, but Hannah grins.

“Seriously, maybe we should just call it a night before you get yourself in trouble. I mean, I’m sure you’ve got something in your drawer at home that will take the edge off.”

I laugh. “Sorry, only the real thing will do. I prefer my meat hard, throbbing, and able to spray paint the walls.”

Hannah gags. “Gross! Just make sure you use protection. Don’t want you to wind up on Maury waiting to hear ‘You are the father!’ and the crowd going apeshit.”

“Okay, Mom. I’ll make sure to snag some of his DNA just in case.”

We both laugh as she turns a corner, and we see a line of cars stretching up the street.

Despite all my talk, I probably won’t even sleep with anyone. I’m just here to have fun, unwind, and relax. And if it comes along with getting to flirt with a cute as fuck guy, I’m all for it. The gears might be rusty, but I bet I can still twerk my ass with the best of them after I get warmed up.

My breath catches in my throat as the club comes into view. It’s beautiful. The parking lot is big and well-lit. The building itself looks like anything but a nightclub, with a large fountain out front and beautiful marble steps that are flanked by grand columns leading to the white double-door entryway. There’s a long line wrapped around the building, and I can tell the grand opening ceremony is already over as they’re just starting to let people in.

I’ve seen a lot of clubs, but I’m truly impressed with the presentation of this one. Everything I see says the owners sank a lot of money into this place. Honestly, it puts Trixie’s, with its neon sign, disco ball in the ceiling, and pink and purple ambient lighting to shame.

There’s no room to park in the main lot, so we have to go to the overflow lot down the street, barely finding a parking spot. Getting out, a cool night breeze sweeps the area, causing goosebumps to rise on my skin and excitement to warm my blood. Overhead, the full moon makes me feel like a wolf on the prowl.

Hannah peers at me, looking around my backside. Unlike her, I’ve opted for a red club dress, one that hugs my curves in all the right places. I got it from Mindy, who had her fair share of good luck in it, so maybe it’ll do the same for me. “Damn, girl, your ass didn’t look that big when we left home. Did you stuff it with some pads or something?”

I place my hands on my hips and boast, “Girl, seriously? This is all-

natural! They write songs about an ass like this!" I start popping my ass, reciting some classic lyrics.

Hannah bends over, grabbing her sides while laughing. "Oh, my God, stop! You're killing me."

"Stop making fun of my bootyliciousness then and let's go!"

Giggling, we make our way to the club, evading people on the street. I see a couple of guys look my way and I feel a little thrill. I don't see anything I like, though, so I keep going until we reach the club and the line that's jam-packed out the building. Luckily for us, Hannah has a reservation for us so we don't have to wait. I'd like to dance sometime before next Tuesday.

We walk past the men in line, and I feel more eyes on me. These men are all dressed well. There are no open shirts and rolled sleeves but rather suits and ties. It must be the club theme for the grand opening. My confidence should grow, but I'm hit by a sudden feeling of anxiety. Am I really ready to rock someone's world or am I just looking for companionship? It's been so long since I've been in the social company of the opposite sex. I don't even know.

From inside the club, the bass of the music thrums against my body as we reach the door. My heart begins to pound. I almost feel like I'm back at Trixie's. Almost. The two handsome bouncers are dressed in fitted suits, their hair cut professionally and their designer sunglasses blocking their eyes. They kinda look like the Men In Black. Whoever is running this place isn't playing around.

"We have a reservation," Hannah says. I don't know how she got it. She's got connections, I guess. Hannah gives her name and the bouncers let us in, pulling the large double-doors wide.

The entire interior is just as luxurious as the exterior. The bar stretches around a good quarter of the large rotunda that makes up the main room, lit up beautifully in blues and dim whites. Out on the floor, beautiful women and men dressed in great suits are already dancing beneath a balcony that overlooks everything. There's a crowd up there, and I bet it's the VIP section from the way things look.

My eyes are pulled to the stage that's set up so that the VIP balcony can watch, and I feel my heart speed up some more. *I want to get up there. I want to feel their eyes. I want their applause. I want to rock this place out.*

"This place is incredible," I finally say. It's no lie, either. Everything, down to the smallest detail, is amazing.

“Isn’t it?” Hannah says, perfectly serious. “They really went all out.” Hannah’s eyes hungrily rove over the crowd. “But less talking and more stalking. Let’s hit the bar.”

We’re not even seated for a full minute before some blonde guy is hitting on Hannah. In my ‘lucky’ red dress, I feel a little deflated.

My disappointment is short-lived, unfortunately.

“Mind if I have a seat?” asks a voice. I look up into a pale but handsome face.

“Not at all,” I say politely.

He sits down beside me and grins, his eyes piercing into me. For some reason, my flesh crawls at his look. It’s just a bit off, even if he is hot.

“So where you from?” His voice has a nasal, whiny tone it, and I regret telling him to have a seat.

Somewhere you’re not, I want to say, *and hopefully will never be.* The words are on my lips, but I’m not comfortable being rude.

“Summerfield,” I say diplomatically. Come on, it’s been ten months. I should give the guy a chance. Maybe he’s just nervous and he’s actually sweet.

He arches an eyebrow. “Summerfield, huh? Where’s that?”

I wave my hands nondescriptly. “Off somewhere on the coast.”

He chuckles. “It’s like that, huh?” He nods at the waiter. “Can I have a Bud Light for my lady friend here?”

“You don’t have to buy me a drink,” I try to protest. I hate beer.

“I insist” he says firmly, grinning at me. “A beautiful girl like you shouldn’t be sitting here alone without a beer.”

“Is he the one?” Hannah whispers sarcastically in my ear. I could just kill her. The guy saddled next to her doesn’t give me the creeps and remind me of Draco Malfoy.

I mouth *No*, giving her an outraged look.

“Remember what you said. Unleash the Rox!” she jokes.

More like I’m thinking of unleashing The Rock to come lay the smackdown on this dude’s ass if he doesn’t take a hint.

The beer comes, and Mr. Weird tries to talk me up some more. “So, what do you do?”

“Office stuff, nothing cool,” I reply, trying to politely let the guy know I’m not interested. “You’d be bored.”

But he’s not having it. “Oh, every job seems boring when you’re doing

it," he says, fiddling with his drink. "Hey, try the beer. It's pretty good."

"Not just yet. I don't want to have to run to the ladies' room all night," I reply. Actually, hitting up the ladies' room might be a good idea. It'd get me away from this guy.

"Oh, I get that. But come on, what could one beer hurt? Hey, if you need to pee, I'll escort you to the guy's room. Nobody'll say anything."

Seriously? Now I don't feel bad. My gut feeling was right. This dude is a creep. As the music changes, I mutter under my breath, "Somebody *please* fucking save me."

JAKE - ONE HOUR AGO . . .

"This is gonna be epic," Nathan Scott, my childhood friend and business partner, boasts as the limo we're in rounds the corner. He's seated across from me, dressed sharp as a tack for our big night.

"All the cards have lined up for us," he continues. "We've got a great local band and an assload of local celebrities. We even got that girl who's got like two million Instagram followers because of her ass. That ass and Club Jasmine are going to be in front of two million people by the end of the night. I'm telling you, we've got everything." Nathan claps his hands and rubs them together. "This is going to be huge, Jake. Huge!"

I shift again in my cushioned seat, messing with the cufflink of my shirt. I can't deny the excitement in Nathan's words, but I know you can do all the right things and still have a business fail. So I'm not getting my hopes up too much yet.

The nightclub was his idea, developed right about the time the rumors started about Graham Holdings, the company I work for, buying out Franklin Consolidated. I'd been reluctant to invest at first. But when Nathan laid out the numbers, I was sold. "I'll believe it when I see it," I say.

"Damn, man, can you be any more excited?" Nathan says, peering at me with a scowl. "This is a big day for us."

It's not that I'm not excited, and I usually consider myself calm and collected under pressure, but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't sweating bullets. We poured a lot of money in this thing. In fact, I poured everything I've saved into this.

I need this to succeed.

Especially when I have Sophie depending on me to take care of her, I think to myself. Sophie's my sixteen-year-old sister who was orphaned six years ago when our parents were taken in a car accident.

She wanted to come with me tonight. Of course, she knew she couldn't since she's underage. "You can let me in. I don't even need a fake ID," she'd said, bouncing up and down and trying to look her cutest. Maybe that works when she wants me to let her buy a new skirt on my credit card, but this isn't the same thing.

Still, it makes me smile. I'd done the same shit when I was younger, but I'm not going to let her break off into bad habits.

"See it?" Nathan asks as I'm still silent in my thoughts, his Bronx accent coming on full as he pulls my mind back to the limo. "The fuck? It's all right in front of you. We got the whole fucking world at our feet."

Nathan's lucky that he works independently because he curses like a sailor.

I adjust my collar, rolling my neck. I'm not in a full-on tux, but I'm in a designer suit that I bought just for the club. It's a slightly brighter blue than I'd wear for my day job with a pristine white dress shirt and metallic red tie. Nathan insisted I wear something that 'pops'. "I was just saying there's a still lot of work to do, that's all."

It's easy for Nathan to feel more nonchalant about the whole project. He's a stockbroker who's gotten rich with other people's money, whereas I've had to work for mine. My grandfather lent me a name and a legacy that got me into a good school, but Mom's love of Dad meant a middle-class life. Climbing the corporate ladder has been grueling. I've busted my ass and more than once pulled eighteen-hour days to make sure that I'm in a place of power. I'm going to be the Regional President for the Franklin Consolidated subsidiary, and I plan to do great things with the role.

Still, I've got responsibilities, Sophie being the chief one. The five million I sank into this club could set her up for life. *Could* being the operative word. "We have a long way to go," I say.

"And I have every confidence we'll make back every red cent," Nathan says. "You do too. Otherwise, you wouldn't have signed on."

It's hard to argue. I knew this was a risk, but I don't mind that. I've always been guided by my instincts, and when something looks good, I go for it.

I shrug. "You're right. It's just a helluva few days—our grand opening

and this merger. I start in my new position on Monday."

"Oh, what's up with that?"

"I'm being sent to kick a little ass for an underperforming unit." To say it's been underperforming is a mild way of putting it. "I've been told to cut the fat or burn the place down if I have to. I'm not looking forward to being 'that' guy. I know some of the in-house employees are going to hate me."

"Oh, well. Fuck 'em is what I'd say," Nathan says. "You do you."

"Too bad I love my job," I say. "They might hate me for a little while because I'm new, but trust me, they're gonna respect me by next quarter. Those who are left."

"If you say so," Nathan says. "Glad I don't have to do that shit. Making money with other people's money is my specialty. I don't have to work on someone's job. Which is why you should be jumping for this club to succeed. If it goes right, you can retire off all the Benjamins we bank."

I chuckle. "That's the plan," I say, not wanting to tell him what I'm thinking. Truth is, I don't think I'll be satisfied even if this does turn into a huge income generating machine. I can't imagine just retiring right now. I work too much to even imagine what that would be like.

"Speaking of which," Nathan says as the limo rolls up to the sidewalk of the club. There's a good amount of press, and even a few of the VIPs are gathered outside the club. I'm as impressed by it during the day as I know it's going to look once the sun goes down. It was one of the things I insisted on, that our club looked as classy during the day as it will at night.

The crowd applauds as I get out. I shake hands with our local boxing champ and pose with him for a few publicity shots on the red carpet as the crowd builds. Cameras flash, and as the sun touches the horizon behind the club, it's a certified throng.

Nathan and I both adjust our suits, and I wave as we mount the platform in front of the fountain. Nathan pauses, giving me a wink. "It's show time!"

I know we look strange. I tower over Nathan at six foot three while he's a modest five foot six. The cameras are flashing in our faces as soon as we're ready, press calling our names and people in the crowd already chanting for the club.

Our staff strings the big red ribbon across the stairs leading up to the entrance, and I swear that I feel like I'm at a Hollywood premier. When Nathan brings over the special scissors that we're supposed to use for the ceremony, really just painted up hedge clippers, the camera flashes are nearly

blinding. I lift my hand, taking the wireless mic from Nathan.

"Thank you all for coming," I start. "I'm not going to say that we're as important as opening a new wing at the university hospital. But I'm proud of the work our team has done, and I'm looking forward to enjoying a few hours relaxing here. Thank you again."

There's polite applause, and I take one arm of the clippers while Nathan takes the other.

A cheer goes up from the crowd as Nathan and I slice through the ribbon, and the two of us lead the VIPs up the stairs and through the doors. It's been awhile since I've been here. I've been so busy setting up my place here in town and getting things settled with my transition to Franklin Consolidated. But seeing it like this, I have to give it to the architects. The place is a dream, with the perfect blend of classic touches that I like along with cutting-edge lighting and styling. It's going to be a unique club for a very long time.

I check out the bar and the stage, then head to the VIP section overlooking the club just as the doormen start letting in the regular customers.

"This club is amazing," one of the first women through the doors says to Nathan as she comes up to where we are. She's going around and checking everything out I guess.

By the look in Nathan's eyes, I don't think he'd be opposed to taking her home tonight. "Thank you. My partner here helped, of course. But all the heavy lifting was on me," he says to her.

I smirk. Nathan's going to take the credit, huh? "Well, I let you do the heavy lifting since you're closer to the floor. Less distance to move."

The girl chuckles, but Nathan's undeterred. "You know what they say, big things come in small packages. And you're right, having three legs to stand on helps."

I have to chuckle. Nathan is an outrageous flirt, and it works. The girl's eyes flicker down to his crotch before she smiles. Nathan pats the seat on the couch next to him, and she sits down, making me shake my head. He's going to have a fun night.

"Champagne, sir," the waitress says, handing me a glass. She's wearing a form-fitting blouse, a damn near painted-on skirt, and is even some wearing some thick-rimmed glasses, totally playing up the naughty professional vibe of the night. But she's as professional as can be, just like we instructed all of our employees.

It was one of the things I insisted on. While I know Nathan would love to sample what some of the girls could offer him, I won't allow it on my watch. I want to set an example for Sophie, and that means showing her that I can treat my employees with respect. I can be a gentleman. And I want my employees acting with respect too.

"So how much do you think we'll clear tonight?" I ask, getting down to business. One of the local celebs comes up, shaking hands. I return the favor, sending over a bottle of Kristal as thanks for coming by.

"You send more bottles like that? We might break even," Nathan laughs. "We're doing just fine, man. I'll check with the manager before we leave tonight. He'll get me an estimate. But remember, tonight isn't about turning profit. It's about getting rep. We get rep now, and we make bank later."

We chat for another forty-five minutes or so, and I'm amazed as the club fills up. There's no way the folks still outside are getting in for hours unless they've got a reservation.

"Great turnout!" Nathan crows, loving the flow of people still coming through the doors. It's fun, and best of all, authentic.

"It is," I murmur. I have to say even I'm impressed. "It's a weight off my chest . . ."

My voice trails off as I see her walk in. She stands out in the crowd of mostly whites and blacks in a fire engine red dress that hugs her body like it was custom made for her. Long brown hair frames her angelic face, and while I'm too far away to see her eyes, her lips are perfect. The way her cheekbones are shaped, she looks like . . . "An Angel."

"What?" Nathan asks, but I barely hear him as I watch her breathlessly. She goes over to the bar with a girl who's obviously her friend or wingman, and a thread of anger courses through my head as I see some guy come up on her. I grip my glass harder as I see him laying on the moves, even though she doesn't seem too into it.

Nathan waves his hand in front of my face. "Yo, Jake, are you listening to me?"

I blink rapidly, shaking my head as I turn back to him. "Huh?"

"I said this place is going to change our lives."

"Hold that thought," I say, my eyes and my mind on one thing only. I toss back the rest of my glass and get to my feet, heading for the stairs. As I leave the VIP area, I'm not thinking about Nathan, or money, or even how well our grand opening is going to turn out tonight. All I can see is the angel in a red

dress.

ROXY

“So, how about we go back to my place?” the guy asks for the second time. Is ‘no thanks’ somehow going to change in three minutes?

I try to hold back my annoyed scowl. Go back to his place? I’m about ready to splash my untouched beer in his fucking face. I’ve turned him down for a dance. He’s not that bad-looking. I’m sure he could find some girl in here, even with his creepy ass vibe. Why the fuck’s he still here with me?

I look around and see that Hannah’s deserted me. I can see her over on the dance floor, twerking her ass up against some cute dude. I’m certain he’s about five minutes from blowing a load in his slacks with the way she’s moving.

I look back over just in time to see Dr. Strangelove pushing the bottle closer to me, like he’s trying to remind me that it’s there and force me to drink it, but he’s gotta learn that there’s a lot of scrap in this little body. “Drink up,” he says.

That’s it. I just can't with this guy.

I open my mouth to finally tell the guy to fuck off. I’ve been overly polite and have made it perfectly clear that I don’t want what he’s selling. But before the words can leave my lips, a penetrating voice behind me speaks up. “Everything okay, Angel? Sorry I’m late. I was busy upstairs.”

I spin in my seat to get a look at the voice and my heart stops. Seriously, I might need a defibrillator to get it back beating again as the breath leaves my lungs. I take in the purest blue eyes I’ve ever seen under dark hair that glimmers and sparkles as the lights of the club catch deep within it. His chiseled jawline frames a sensual mouth, and it’s hard to pull my eyes away from his gaze and take the rest of him in.

He’s tall and broad-shouldered, his custom-tailored suit fitting him perfectly.

Fuck being a heartthrob. He’s a heartstopper. That’s what this guy is.

My mouth opens like a fish, but Mr. Heartstopper winks at me and I’m able to brush off my momentary shock enough to play along. “No, honey, I was just having him warm your seat for you until you got back from that little curb stomp appointment.” I flash a smile, not letting the nervousness I feel

flicker through. I turn and give Dr. Strangelove a pointed look. “Does that guy still have all of his front teeth?”

My former creepy-ass suitor scowls, and for a moment, I fear he’s about ready to fight for his seat. But when Mr. Heartstopper gives him a hard look, he gets up from his seat, mumbles something, and disappears in the crowd.

Relief flows through me and some of the tension leaves my body when I can’t see his face anymore. The music thrums, mixing with my heartbeat as I look at my savior, and I feel like this night’s going to change my life. The stage is almost prepared for the main act, a rock band that’s hot on the charts and has a fresh sound. I’ve been looking forward to it, but now I have another sweet distraction.

Trying to shake off my anxiety, I poke the guy playfully in the chest. “You got a blue leotard under there?”

He arches an eyebrow at me, confused but with a grin on his face. Fuck, he’s hot. “No, why?”

“The way you showed up and saved me from that creep, you must be Superman,” I joke. “I’m wondering where you keep the red cape.”

He chuckles, taking the seat next to me. “Nope, not Superman, but I have to admit to being called the man of steel a few times in my life.”

I arch an eyebrow. “Modest much?” Looking at him and his cut physique, though, I don’t doubt him. That suit can only hide so much of his body.

“You asked what I had under my suit. I was just telling you. Being real, you know?” His eyes twinkle, and something tells me he’s biting back a joke. I can’t help it, I smile. I like a man who can keep up with my sense of humor.

But the other half of my mind is dirty enough to know what he’s talking about. He has balls of steel and a huge, throbbing, steely cock. Fuck, we haven’t even introduced ourselves and I’m already getting hot.

“So what’s your name then, Superman?” I ask.

He chuckles as if he’s unused to a woman being so direct with him. “Jake,” he says. “How about you, Angel?”

“Roxy,” I say. I love the way he calls me Angel, even though I feel like anything but right now. Angel definitely sounds better than horny succubus. “And before you ask, yes, I rock hard.”

He laughs. “Cheeky, aren’t you? I like the name. It’s cute.”

“Why not sexy? Or hot? I like that better than cute.”

“I’d say you have all three covered,” he growls lightly, sitting next to me. “I can think of a few more words to describe you too.”

A flush comes to my cheeks at his compliment and I'm momentarily robbed of speech. This guy's a silver-tongued devil, and he's got a voice that seems to heat my body every time he speaks.

He nods at my beer. "I don't peg you for a Bud Light girl."

I recover and shake my head, making a face. "I'm not—haven't touched it. I don't really like beer."

He grabs the bottle and sets it in front of him and signals one of the waitresses. "Let's get something new for the lady!"

She comes over and gives him a look like she'd love to take him out back and ride him like a cowgirl. I know Jake has to be used to it though. The man's probably a player. Then again, maybe that's what I need tonight—a man who knows what he's got, knows how to use it, and knows how to make me scream to the heavens. "Something in particular?"

He turns to me, giving me a wink. "She'd like a Sex On My Face."

I gawk, shocked at his forwardness, but the waitress doesn't even bat an eye. And in my mind's eye, I can see myself grinding all over those sexy lips of his. My face turns red at the thought and I push it away. For now. "Of course, sir."

"You didn't have to do that," I say, trusting that I was just ordered a drink and not a room at the Holiday Inn.

"Nonsense, you've got to try it," Jake says with a laugh. "It's one of the house specials."

His persuasive charm just wins me over. The waitress brings back the drink, and at first I think it looks like an iced tea. I take a sip, my eyes widening. "This is good!"

He winks at me. "Told you. Take it slow. I've heard that they can hit hard." He takes the beer and sniffs it, then turns it up, drinking about half of it. "So, how'd you hear about the club?"

"My friend Hannah," I say, pointing her out on the floor. "She told me about it. I needed a night out to relax and have some fun."

And I need a man like you to take care of a certain need, I think to myself.

Jake nods. "Well, you picked the right place. Even for opening night, it's not over the top. This place has class."

"You're telling me," I agree. I think it'll be what makes Club Jasmine popular for a long time. They could pack this place and tear the dance floor up, sure. But the building's got enough inherent class and charm that it'll be a

chill spot too. “What about you? What brings you here?”

A slight smirk comes to one of his lips. “I’m friends with one of the owners.”

I stare at him as I take a sip of the delicious drink. It’s something else he’s not letting on to, but honestly, I don’t give a fuck. I didn't come here to learn his life history. And I damn sure don’t care about his friend. I just can’t get over how handsome he is. Those lips look like they could do damage between my legs, and the more I see them move, the more I want to feel them pressed against mine.

He asks me more questions about myself, but I can barely hear or find the focus to answer. I can only focus on his perfect smile. The more he talks, the more I feel like I want him. Even if it is only for a night.

I finish my drink in a hungry gulp and lick my lips in the most seductive manner I can. *Damn, I don’t know if that drink was seriously that good or if literally anything would taste amazing right now.*

“I was thinking . . .” I say, running my hand along his arm. Shit, I’m playing the seductress to the hilt. I even have my next line planned, something about how I’d like to have a little more sex . . . on *his* face.

He raises a brow at me, and anxiety twists my stomach as I look into his eyes. I’m suddenly uncertain. He has to get more pussy than animal control. My ego can’t take a hit right now.

But looking around the room, I realize one thing. He’s the only one I want. If I can’t have Jake, I’m going home alone.

I suck in a breath. Fuck it—you only live once.

“Look, would you like to go somewhere?” I cringe. I know I must sound so fucking desperate, like some slutty skank. But isn’t that what I came here for? I’m hot and heavy and this guy is doing crazy things to my ovaries just by sitting next to me. I *need* him.

He turns, looking me in the eye. “Direct, aren’t we? I can’t imagine an angel like you . . .”

I’m shocked when he seems to steel himself. He turns the bottle up and in one gulp drinks the rest, smacking it down on the bar, and growls almost ferally. “Let’s go.”

He gets up from the seat and I jump to my feet. He puts his hand on the small of my back as he leads me to the back of the club. “Where are we going?”

“Told you, I know the owners. There are . . . private places around here,”

he says, and I dismiss it. Fuck, I don't care if he takes me into the VIP bathroom. I'll take it right now.

The show is about to start for the band. I'm gonna miss it but I don't care. He takes me through a door and into a hallway. We come up to another door, and like magic, he produces a key to get in. Before I can ask him why he has a key, he's on me like a dog in heat, pushing me up against the wall and devouring my mouth in a hungry, fiery kiss.

Our lips crash together, and he's doing crazy things to my body, his hands roaming over my dress and lighting my skin on fire.

"Take me," I moan, my thighs trembling with need. Ten long months. And if that huge, hard cock pressing against my thigh is any indication, I want it right fucking now.

"Not here," he half-moans, half-slurs in lust, stepping back and taking me by the hand. He leads me down the darkened hall to a room. He opens the door and turns on the light. It's a medium-sized room with a bed and some rugs in the center. What the fuck is a bed doing back here?

But I don't care about that. I want him.

He's back on me again, and we're kissing, his hands tugging on my dress. With every inch of my skin that's exposed, the fire in my stomach grows as I feel all the sexual frustration start to boil over.

"I'm gonna give you a night to remember," I growl in his ear as I pull off his shirt. "You'll never forget Roxy."

Damn, call the exorcist. I don't know what's wrong with me. It's like the devil himself has possessed my body.

I rip off his shirt with an animalistic snarl. The air freezes in my lungs when I see the hard abs of his stomach. He wasn't fucking lying about being the man of steel. The rest of him has to be pure perfection.

"Your tits are amaaazing," he says, his slur growing, his hands squeezing my breast weakly.

What the fuck? Damn, how is he drunk already? He only had that one beer. I pay it no mind. I push him back onto the bed, tugging my skirt up to my waist and mounting his hips, feeling the hard bulge of his groin rub against my panties.

"Fuuuuuck, baby," he moans. His voice is sluggish. "I love how aggressive youuuu are . . ."

"Shh, baby," I tell him, slipping my dress down and showing him my breasts, turning my dress into just a band around my waist. "You ain't seen

nothin' yet."

I swear it looks like he's fighting to stay awake. But I don't need long to send him to heaven. I trail my hands down his abs and down to his happy trail. Reaching his belt, I hungrily unbutton his pants.

"Baaaby . . ." he moans, almost like he's gasping for air. I take the gasps as if he can't wait to be inside me. Fuck, I can't either.

I get his pants down and am about to pull his cock out and slide on a condom when he grabs onto my breasts with the force of Zeus. He holds tight and lets out an unearthly gasp, his eyes fluttering.

I stare down at him in shock as he takes one last breath and then seems to go unconscious.

"What the fuck?" I know I was about to give him the most glorious send-off he ever had, but did he really just pass out? "Hello?"

It takes some effort, but I'm able to disengage his death grip from my breasts. They ache, and I wonder if I'm going to have a few bruises on them tomorrow. "Hello?" I repeat, leaning in closer. "Jake?"

I shake him, and when he doesn't respond, I give him a little slap on the face. He doesn't move at all, and fear starts to clench in my belly.

Hands shaking, I place my hand on the side of his neck. I don't feel anything, and I'm getting more worried. What the fuck?

My heart pounds in my chest as I stare down at him in disbelief.

The Man of Steel is dead.

ROXY

"What do you mean, he's dead?" Hannah yells into the phone. In the background, I can hear the bass of the club music, although it's nowhere near as fast or as powerful as what's in my chest. My heart's pounding a thousand beats a minute, and it feels like I have a jackhammer going off inside me.

"I-I-I don't know, he just—"

In panic, I pump Jake's chest furiously. When that doesn't work, I bitch slap him across the face with as much force as I can muster. "Wake up, bitch!" I yell. He doesn't stir, and I slap him again. Still no response, and I stare in disbelief at his still body. How the fuck is this even possible? Is my pussy kryptonite or something?

The first night out, I fucking kill a man. Just my luck!

“Roxy, stop it!” Hannah shouts over my panicked gibbering. “Where the hell are you?”

“I don’t know,” I moan, moving away from Jake and trying desperately to remember how I got here. “Somewhere in the back. We started to—and then he grabbed my boobs and . . . oh, God, oh, God, oh, God!”

“Stop babbling! You’re not making sense!” Hannah snaps. She gives me a moment, then continues. “Tell me exactly what happened.”

Taking a deep breath, I relay everything back to her. “I knew I shouldn’t have let you out of the house!” Hannah snarls when I’m done. “The first guy you see, you go and fuck him to death!”

“Hannah!” I wail in protest, feeling tears sting my eyes. That one stung. I didn’t mean to kill this fine specimen! I was being sarcastic before!

A lump forms in my throat. She’s definitely not making this any better. “I don’t know why or how this happened, but please—”

“Never mind that,” Hannah says, hearing my pain. “Listen, I’m sure you’re overreacting. He’s probably passed out drunk. You said he started slurring, right?”

I glance over at Jake. He still has his color, but I’m afraid to go back over there. “Doesn’t look dead. But I didn’t feel a pulse.”

“Just go check, God damn it!” Hannah roars.

“All right, all right, geez. If I ever have a heart attack, you’ll be the last person I call.” Sucking in a deep breath, I go back over to the bed. I force myself to stare at him. Just when I’m about to give up, I see . . .

“Oh, God!” I cry out. “He still has a hard-on!”

“He has angel lust!” Hannah gasps before laughing. “Damn, girl, you weren’t messing around.”

My face pinches into a frown. This isn’t the time for bullshit. “What the hell is angel lust?”

“When dead guys have a hard-on,” Hannah says. “A lot better than calling it zombie cock, in my opinion.”

I almost gag. Just great, not only did I kill a guy, but I left him with a big, hard, raging boner. I can just see the news now—*Horny office drone kills handsome eligible bachelor and leaves him with a big, hard dick. Film at eleven!*

I take a deep breath and grab his wrist. I move my fingers around frantically, trying to find a pulse. Suddenly, I feel it!

“He has a pulse!” I nearly scream, sweat breaking out on my forehead as

I’m overcome with joy. “He’s alive! Alive!” I don’t mean to, but I sound like a Frankenstein movie.

Now that I’m more coherent, I can see his chest rise and fall in shallow breaths, so faint that I can see why I missed it before.

“Jesus, Rox! Don’t do that ever again!” Hannah yells before laughing. “You got me all worked up over here! Oh, and you owe me a night out. I was about to get my own itch scratched. Don’t have time for that now!”

“How do you think I feel?” I start to feel worry all over again. “It was strange how he just passed out on me in the first place. One bottle of beer shouldn't have done something like that, even if he was drinking before. I mean, he went from rock solid to staggering in like three minutes.”

“Who is he, anyway?” Hannah wonders. “Grab his wallet.”

“His name is Jake, that’s all I know. I don’t know if I should do that . . .”

“I’m not asking you to steal his money and credit cards, Roxy! Just find out who the man is!”

I check his pants before finding his wallet in his jacket pocket. I pull it out and peek inside. It’s thick with a wide packet of hundreds, and my heart nearly stops as I pull out his ID. The photo that looks back at me is like I felt when I first saw him. That boyish smile, those sensual lips. Thank God I didn’t take him from this world.

“Like I said, his name is Jake. Jake Stone,” I say, transfixed by his photo. I thought a good looking DMV photo was impossible. I guess it just needs Jake Stone on it.

“Well, it sounds like Mr. Jake Stone needs some help.”

“No shit. What should I do?”

Hannah sighs. “It sounds like he needs to sleep it off. Just get out of there. I’ll find someone at the front and tell them there’s a drunk guy in the back room passed out.”

“But—” I say, looking down at Jake. “What if he needs medical help?”

“Then they’ll get it for him! But he’s just drunk, Roxy. Come on, you’re not supposed to even be back there.”

Hannah has a point. “Okay,” I say finally. “Meet you out front.”

Click.

“I’m sorry, Jake,” I tell him. “But I have to go.”

Jake makes a little sound. I stop, going back over to the bed and pushing his shoulder, jostling him a little.

“Jake?”

He snorts a little but doesn’t answer, but at least I can see he’s breathing more. I don’t know what the hell happened, but I’m glad he’s all right.

I hear a bang somewhere outside and quickly jump to my feet. Someone’s coming. They’ll know what to do. Maybe he won’t even remember our brief steamy encounter.

But I’ll never forget it, I think.

“Catch you in another lifetime, handsome,” I say, blowing him a kiss as I scoop up my purse and things.

I rush out of the room and nearly collide into a small man in a sharp suit. In my heels, the top of his head just about hits me in the chin. He looks surprised, his eyes going wide.

“Hey, what the fuck are you doing back here?” he demands in a thick Bronx accent, grabbing me by the arm.

“I was with a friend,” I hurriedly say, turning my face so he can't get a good look at me.

He tries to pull me around to face him. “You’re full of shit,” he snarls. “No one is allowed back here.”

“Well a guy name Jake let me in. He said he knows the owners,” I retort. “He had a key.”

“Bullshit! Jake knows not to let any sleazy broads back here.” Sleazy broads? This little bastard is pushing his luck.

A groan from inside the room pulls his attention away, and I seize the opportunity, pulling myself from his grasp as I shove him and take off down the hall as fast as I can in these heels. I guess all those performances onstage still help out. I can move in these damn things.

“Hey!” the short guy yells. “Get your ass back here!”

I grit my teeth and find my way back into the club and make a beeline outside, fearing every second that one of the club security is going to grab me. Those MIB-looking dudes are scary.

Hannah is waiting for me by the fountain, arms folded, a scowl on her face.

We walk to the car and get in, not saying a word until we’re inside. Suddenly, Hannah bursts out laughing. “This is just so damn crazy. You were saying that you were gonna unleash the Rox, but damn . . .”

“I dunno, Han.” I laugh. “It was weird! I almost shit a brick! I’m not going to want to go out for another ten months.”

“Was he at least cute?”

“Oh, gawd,” I say, relaxing as Hannah pulls out of the parking lot. A ripple of remembered heat and unquenched desire flushes my cheeks. “He was hot as fuck. And I bet you could crack walnuts with his ass cheeks.”

We talk as Hannah drives, and she fills me in on the guy she danced with. I’ll admit, I feel a little bad about ruining her night. “So, are you going to call the guy?” I ask, shifting around to try and make my ass more comfortable. “I mean, you sound like you liked him.”

Hannah thinks, then nods. “Yeah, I probably will. What about Jake? You get his number?”

“I didn’t exactly think about getting his number,” I say sarcastically. I reach for my purse and open it, looking for my phone. When I do, I’m shocked by the thick black leather object inside. My memory flashes back, and I remember taking it out of his pocket and laying it next to my things. “Oh, shit.”

“What?” Hannah asks, pulling into our parking lot. When I don’t answer, she parks and shuts off the engine. “Rox, what’s going on?”

I pull out Jake’s wallet and show it to her. “I accidentally took his wallet in my rush to get out of there.”

JAKE

“Jake!” I faintly hear a muffled voice urgently yell from what seems a million miles away. Something hits me in the face, and I mumble something. The voice speaks up again, this time closer. “Jake, wake up.”

I let out a groan, my head pounding like that time I decided to do keg stands in college and lost my balance, hitting my head on the way down. I feel someone shaking me violently, but it's a chore to open my eyes.

“Jake, what happened?” the voice says, and I can finally identify who it is. That Bronx accent is pretty much unmistakable.

Still, even if I recognize Nathan’s voice, it's a struggle to open my eyes. I finally force them open, but when I do, all I see is a blur.

“Fuck,” I groan. “You get the number on that truck?”

“Jake, you’re fucking smashed, man,” Nathan says, and I swallow thickly, my mouth feeling both swollen and somehow dry at the same time. “Damn, I haven’t seen you like this before.”

I feel like my chest has been cast in concrete and like my limbs are

weighed down by stone. I blink my eyes rapidly, trying to focus, but it takes several moments for me to see Nathan clearly. He’s standing over me, staring at me with disbelief, concern, and yeah, a little amusement.

“Where is she?” I mumble, my words sounding like a jumbled mess. I'm trying to get my bearings, remember what’s going on. Some things are a little hazy, but her . . . I can’t forget her. Her lush body in my hands, those sweet lips . . . fuck.

Nathan frowns. “Huh? I don't understand you.”

I realize I'm not going to get anywhere for at least several minutes with the brain fog that is filling my mind. “Water,” I rasp, trying to imitate drinking motions. “Get me some water.”

Nathan looks like he’s about to make a wiseass comment but instead goes to the corner of the room and grabs a water out of the small refrigerator, bringing it over to me. I'm barely able to take it from his hands, but he plucks it out of my weakened fingers and opens it for me. Taking it, I chug some, the water churning in my stomach, but at least I’ve got something to focus on besides the jackhammer between my ears.

“Damn, dude,” Nathan continues, “What the hell is going on? You disappear and now I find you back here passed out, looking fucked up as all hell. How much did you drink?”

“Not drunk,” I say slowly, focusing on every syllable to make sure I’m understood. I remember throwing back that one beer, my second drink for the night. The champagne was the other, and it was a half glass.

“Not drunk?” Nathan demands, his face twisted in confusion. “Jake, you know damn well we can’t be having drugs in . . .”

“Drugged,” I say, not knowing if I’m thinking clearly enough. That had to be it. The beer. It had to be. It just doesn’t make sense any other way.

Nathan looks shocked. “What?”

“I was drugged,” I manage in a froglike croak. “I don’t know how or why, but someone spiked my drink.”

“It was that fucking tramp I ran into on the way here!” Nathan half yells, jumping to his own conclusion. “I knew there was something fishy about that broad being back here!”

“Roxy?” I ask, remembering her flirty dimple-filled smile. I don’t consider myself naive, but I don’t think my angel is responsible.

“That’s her name?” Nathan snarls, turning away. “I’m gonna go out there, find her, and call the cops . . .”

I hold out my hand and tried to stand, but I collapse back onto the bed, my head pounding. “Wait!”

Nathan turns back, scowling.

I shake my head weakly. “Don’t call,” I rasp. “Seriously.”

“Why the fuck not? If we let this type of shit happen, we’re going to be finished.”

“You’re usually more levelheaded than this. Think about it. I’m the one fucked up and I’m thinking more clearly. If you call the cops, that’s all everyone’s going to be talking about. We don’t need the negative press. Let’s just look at the security tapes and figure out what to do.”

The rage flees his face and his shoulders relax. “Shit, you’re right. I wasn’t thinking.”

I nod. “And there’s no need to call the ambulance. I just need a little time and some fluids. I can already feel the effects wearing off a little bit.”

Nathan runs his fingers through his hair. “What were you thinking, bringing her back here . . .” His voice trails off as if he suddenly seems to notice that I’m sitting on the bed. “Shit, did you at least hit it?”

I shake my head. “Was about to.”

“Man, what the fuck? All your talk about being on the straight and narrow, but you're bringing sluts to the back room on our grand opening night __”

“She’s not a slut,” I cut in.

“Really? Then what the fuck is she?” Nathan asks.

Nathan shakes his head when I can’t answer. “She probably robbed your ass blind.”

I pat my pockets and realize my wallet is missing. “Fuck me!”

Nathan is staring at me incredulously. “See? What did I tell you? Why else would she drug you if not to rob your ass!”

Anger tightens my stomach. Fuck, how could I be so stupid? “I’ll call and cancel all my cards. She won't be able to get shit off them. Listen, my head can’t take much more of this shit right now. Leave me be for a bit and go check the tapes.”

I’m glad when Nathan leaves without an argument, and I can’t help but see Roxy in my mind. That sweet, angelic smile and her irresistible laugh.

But no matter how hard I try to reason things, the fact of the matter is that my wallet is gone. Which leaves me with only one explanation.

My little angel is a thief.

“Roll the footage,” Nathan orders Andre, our head security guy.

I’d sat in the bedroom for twenty minutes, trying to gather myself before Nathan came back and helped me through the back to the security room. I can stand on my own, but the world’s still spinning a little, and I know I probably sound drunk as hell. Still, I’ve got my wits about me, more or less.

“That’s her!” I half-slur, pointing as I get up. I grab the edge of the desk as a wave of dizziness washes over me. On the video, Roxy is approached by some guy, and I recognize him. He was there when I approached her. He orders her a beer, and she never touches it, but when she looks away, you can see as clear as day that he slips something in the bottle.

“Son of a bitch,” Nathan breathes. “That bastard slipped something in her drink!”

I grab the edge of the security desk in a white-knuckled grip, my lip curling as I stare at the image on the screen, searing the man’s face into my memory. If I ever see him again, he’s going to get a beating. “Find him.”

Andre clears his throat. “I’ll get on the radio to the floor guys, and I’ll keep checking footage here. Trust me, if that asshole shows up again, he’s gonna catch a beatdown.”

“Okay, maybe I was wrong about the girl,” Nathan admits as we leave. I’m angry and would love nothing more than to go track this guy down, but the drug’s effect is too strong for me. “But it still doesn’t explain the wallet.”

“I’m going to go with it was an accident.” It’s the only alternative to *she stole it* and the one I want to believe most. Even an angel makes mistakes.

“Either way, we got a huge problem on our hands if this motherfucker is going around doin’ this shit. We have to catch him. I just don't know if we should call the police now or after we catch him,” Nathan says while I recover. “This type of shit is bad for business.”

“No cops for now,” I half growl, pissed off. “I want to teach this guy a lesson first.”

ROXY

“You can’t be serious! You’re not going back there!” Hannah says, pacing the floor of our apartment. Moonlight is shining in from the floor-to-ceiling windows, and even in this state, I have to admit that the view is the

thing I like most about the place. Hannah is wearing Barney pajamas, of all things, and has put her hair into pigtails. I swear she looks like a big-eyed Angelica from the kids' cartoon *Rugrats*.

Our grumpy looking cat, Mr. Felix, an orange and white Persian who adopted us when we were seniors in college, lazily watches her pace the room from his perch on the couch. I'm sure to him, his only concern about all of this is whether he's going to have to get strict when it comes time for his humans to put out his food in the morning.

"Why not?" I demand. "I have his wallet. He's gonna think I stole it."

Hannah stops to scowl at me. "Honey, by now, he already thinks you stole it! Because, well, you did."

"I did not!" I protest. "I just didn't realize I'd stuffed it in my purse in my panic to leave."

Her words sink in, and I feel a feeling of despair creep through me. "There must be something I can do. I can't keep his wallet. The longer I have it, the guiltier I'll look."

Hannah nods. "There is. Just go by Monday and turn it in to the club. Or better yet, mail it to the guy. You have his address, assuming his driver's license is up to date."

"Wait," I say. "Let me look him up." I don't know why I didn't think of it before. Taking out his wallet, I pull out his license and see that it's out of state, which makes me worry. But I have his full name, and I type it into Google on my phone.

The first headline makes my eyes go wide, and I jump so hard I nearly drop the phone. *Corporate Executive And Stock Wizard Opens Club Jasmine*. I click the link and see that most of it is a PR piece that was published just yesterday. My heart hammers in my chest as I read about how the two friends came together to open up Club Jasmine and how they wanted to make a new type of nightclub for the city. But the photo catches my attention more. It's the same face, the same piercing eyes that captured me earlier tonight. He's standing in the picture with the same guy who accosted me in the hallway.

"Oh, my God, he owns the club with his friend. That's the same guy I saw in the hallway."

"Let me see." Hannah grabs the phone. "Shit, you weren't lying. Mr. Jake Stone is sexy as hell. He's got those looks and money. Life ain't fair."

"Yeah, not fair that he passed out before I could ride him to heaven and back," I complain.

Hannah stares at the article for a little more, then hands my phone back to me. “That pretty much seals it. You’re not going back there. There’s no way they’d believe your story. You’ll just be some gold digger in their eyes.”

“Hey!” I protest, hurt. “I’m not a gold digging skank!” She’s right, though, and I feel horrible. I wish there were something I could do. But now I’m too afraid.

Not to mention my body is all sorts of mixed up with my hormones going in so many different directions that I can’t focus at all. I’m horny, scared, angry, and even a little bit hungry. “I can’t believe I was about to sleep with the owner of the club,” I say to myself. “Why did he pretend like he wasn’t some big shot?”

“Who knows? Don’t worry, chica,” Hannah says, coming over to wrap an arm around me in a sweet embrace. “Everything’s going to be all right.”

Right then, my phone buzzes and I glance down. Tears come to my eyes as I feel a tug in my heart. “It’s Mindy,” I say. “Not sure why she’s calling this late.”

“My cue to go to bed then,” Hannah says, delivering a kiss to my forehead before getting up. “Answer it and tell her all about the night. Considering how crazy you both are, I bet she has a story to one-up you. Just save some of the Cherry Garcia for me. I know how you get when you start talking with your sister.”

Hannah goes to leave, but before she can totally leave, I call out. “Hannah?”

She turns around, her hand on the door jamb to her bedroom. “Yeah?”

“Thank you for being here for me. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“Probably actually end up killing guys to get your needs met,” Hannah says. “And you’d probably have the freezer stocked with those dick-shaped popsicles that have sweet cream filling.”

I scowl, my lip curling. “That’s disgusting.”

“Just joking!” Hannah says, trying to smirk before sticking out her tongue. When that doesn’t work, she sighs melodramatically. “Enjoy your talk with Mindy. Goodnight.”

Hannah disappears into her bedroom area, and for a split second I debate on answering the phone. But when I think about how long it’s been since I last talked to her, I press the button.

“Hi, Mindy!” I answer as I would any other time.

“Hey, Roxy! How's it going?” My sister's voice comes through the phone cheery and upbeat.

I don’t want to rain on her parade, and I don’t want to get her worried. “Great. How’s things for you and the fam?”

“Really? That’s good. I didn’t know if you’d still be up. I know you're wondering why I’m calling this late, but I finally got some downtime from handling Leah and thought I'd call you and leave you a voicemail.”

I smile, thinking about Leah. The spitting image of Mindy if you shrank her down and made her chubbier and cute, she’s the darling of everyone in the family. And with a new generation of women in the family, Grandma finally feels like she’s accomplished nearly everything that a woman could ask for. She’s cute as a button, and if she’s anything like her mother or her aunt, Mindy’s going to have her hands full.

“How's my favorite little niece doing?” I ask. “Still wrapping every man she meets around her little finger?”

“Of course. She’s starting to talk more, and I’m trying to take her out so she can make friends with other kids her age,” Mindy says. “It's crazy keeping up with them.”

“That's wonderful. I wish I could see her.” That's one of the things I regret about living far away from family. I have missed out on the important moments.

“I wish so too,” Mindy says wistfully. “You know, Oliver asks about you all the time. I think he thinks of you as our good luck charm, or maybe the sister he never had.”

I hold my tongue because she’s right. I feel like I somehow, in a weird, fucked up way, had a hand in getting them together. And some of my favorite memories of the past few years have been with Mindy and Oli. “How's work?” Mindy asks.

“Stressful,” I admit. “I work an insane number of hours, but I’m still learning and it’s getting easier. I’m getting a promotion, though.”

“You are? That's wonderful!” Mindy says earnestly. “I knew you could do it. Are you excited?”

“I am,” I say halfheartedly. “I start Monday.”

Mindy’s quiet for a moment, and when she speaks again, her voice is soft, worried. “Is everything all right, Roxy?”

“I’m fine,” I say. “Just tired.”

“Don't lie to me. I can hear it in your voice,” Mindy says. “Spill it.”

For a moment, I debate on telling her the truth. It’s not that I think she’d judge me, but maybe it’s just a little too soon.

“Come on, Roxy,” Mindy presses. “I'm not going to give up until you tell me. If I have to, I’ll fly Oliver out there to start poking around, and you know how he is!”

I let out a sigh. “Fine. As long as you promise not to laugh. I’m sure I’ll think it’s funny later on, but it scared me shitless.”

“Deal. I’d pinky swear, but this is the phone.”

Smiling at the old joke a little, I tell her everything about the creep and Mr. Heartstopper.

“Holy shit, that's crazy!” Mindy says when I’m done. “I bet that creeper tried to spike your drink!”

“He . . . holy shit, you’re right!” I say, impressed that Mindy thought of it. I should have thought of it too, honestly. “Still, I feel like hell. I shouldn’t have even gone, but gawd, babe, it’s been so hard. I haven’t had a lot of time for myself, and I just wanted this one night to relax, release, and have fun.” A lump forms in my throat as the words leave my lips. “I miss being the Roxy who sang her ass off for you.”

Sympathy flows in Mindy’s voice. “Oh, baby, don't be so hard on yourself. I know how you feel. I went through the same thing working at Beangal’s. God, I was so burned out, and that was a place that was literally bought just for me to run. So I totally understand. There was nothing wrong with your going out to relax.”

The tears threaten to flow from my eyes. “Mindy . . .”

“You know what? I think it's time for a visit,” Mindy adds. “You got a bestie, I know that, but nobody can get you back to normal like me.”

“I don't know . . .” I begin, but Mindy laughs.

“I mean for *us* to come visit you. We might have some sister time to remind you who the real baddest bitch in the family is, but this would be for the whole family. I want to see how you're living, you can have some baby time, and hell, I’ll even let your roomie drool all over Oliver for a few.”

It would be nice to see my family again. I need to see my new niece and nephew. “When would that be?”

“Not sure with the business and all,” Mindy says with a smirk in her voice. “And I think I’ll let it be a surprise anyway.”

“After tonight, I don’t think I can deal with too many surprises,” I admit, and Mindy chuckles. “I’m serious, Min.”

“I know, babe, I know. I was just yanking your leg. Listen, let me check the schedule and I’ll get back with you. We’ll probably be there within a month. How’s that sound?”

“Good,” I admit. “I can hang on until then.”

There’s a silence, and Mindy speaks again. “What about singing, Roxy? I mean, you always felt better when you had a mic in your hand and were belting out something.”

“I guess . . . it’s hard, Min. I mean, what’s the point? I wasted a lot of my time on that as it is.”

“I didn’t say make it a career,” Mindy says gently. “I said sing. Sing for you, sing for your heart. Hell, just go to some karaoke bar and sing for the crowd there.”

“Maybe,” I admit, thinking about it. She has a point. Maybe I just need to do it for fun. “We’ll see.”

“Yeah, well . . .” Mindy says, sighing. “You be safe, okay? And I’m calling you Monday. You can tell me about your new job. I love you, Roxy.”

“Love you too, Mindy. Bye.”

After Mindy hangs up, I let out a deep sigh. It was nice talking to my sister, but damn, I’ve got a lot on my plate. Having a new boss coming in is stressing me a little. I was finally getting used to things. But now, I’m going to have this Jake Stone nightmare in the back of my mind.

I pick up Jake’s driver’s license from the table and stare at it before I set it down on the table and sigh, getting up. “He’s handsome, isn't he, Mr. Felix?” I ask.

Mr. Felix does nothing, practically glaring at me. He probably wants the darkness, and I’m keeping him from his beauty sleep.

I chuckle, walking over to the light switch to get ready for bed. Tonight may have been a nightmare, but something tells me my dreams are gonna be anything but. Just as I flick the switch, I see his ID on the table again and blow it a little kiss. “Goodnight. See you in my dreams.”

JAKE

Walking down the hallway from the elevator to the front door of my new penthouse, I lean against the wall, blinking and taking deep breaths. Whatever was in that beer, not only did it come on hard, but it’s hanging

around like a monkey on my back. Nathan wanted to follow me up and help me, but I'm too damn prideful for that.

I finally get inside and collapse into my living room chair, groaning and sitting back. At least now that I'm sitting, I can think a little easier. Besides being drugged and robbed blind, the grand opening of Club Jasmine was an overwhelming success. Everyone had a blast. I don't know any exact numbers, but we had to bring in well over six figures. Of course, that's not profit, but it was a good opening night.

"You look like shit," says a familiar voice, and with effort, I turn my four hundred-pound head with the nails stuck in it to see my sister, Sophie, standing against the kitchen counter with her arms crossed, eyeing me critically. The penthouse is a large open room, with floor-to-ceiling windows that span the entire length of the main room, giving a breathtaking view of the skyline. Honestly, I'm still getting used to it and slowly breaking in the furniture, but I like it.

"Why are you still up?" I ask, deflecting. I can't argue with her. I do look like shit. My shirt is rumpled and ripped from where Roxy tore it off, and my eyes are probably bloodshot red. "You were supposed to be in bed hours ago."

"Are you kidding me?" she asks, her luminous brown eyes gazing at me incredulously. "It's the weekend. If anything, I should have been out at Club Jasmine jamming with my friends."

"No, you shouldn't. We talked about this already. You and your friends are too young," I half groan, not wanting to go into this right now.

"So? I'm sure you got into clubs when you were sixteen."

"But you're not me and that was a mistake. I'm going to make sure you don't make the same ones," I remind her for what has to be the thousandth time. I'll give this to my sister—she's about as stubborn as I was at her age.

Sophie rolls her eyes at me. "Whatever. You could've at least brought me back one of the signature drinks as a gift. That Little Mermaid drink on the menu looks so delicious."

I hide a grin. The Little Mermaid, a sea blue drink with tropical notes, also contains a huge shot of triple sec and rum and could probably put Sophie on her ass with one glass. I came up with the name as pun for Nathan, who likes it. I think about Sophie's request for a second, then shake my head slowly. "No can do. I don't want you to turn into a full-blown alcoholic because the drinks are just that good. If you're good, I might let you have a

sip for your next birthday. That means grades as well as behavior, by the way."

Sophie sticks her tongue out at me. "Thanks, Dad," she says sarcastically.

Instead of pushing the point, surprisingly, Sophie changes the subject. "I saw you guys on the news," she says.

"Did you?" I heave myself out of the chair and walk over to her, shrugging off my suit jacket and setting it down on the kitchen barstool.

She nods. "The club looked totally ah-mazing. There were A-listers everywhere, including some delicious man candy. Nathan looked hella fine." A dreamy expression comes over her face, and I feel like I have to nip this in the bud. I like Nathan—he's my boy—but there's no fucking way in hell I'm letting him near Sophie.

"Nathan is too old for you," I remind her, "and he has a new girlfriend every other week. He found a new one tonight."

Sophie makes a face. She's not listening again. "Yeah. Because he's hot."

"I'll let others be the judge of that, but if you ask me, it's because he has money. If you have a million bucks in the bank, you can buy yourself a ten. Nathan knows that better than anyone. Some people think money can buy you almost anything."

Except happiness, I think inwardly.

"Besides, the dude is like the same size as you. Do you want a man that you have to tuck into bed every night?"

Sophie flushes. "Um, no. Of course not."

"Okay then. If you're gonna go for a guy, make sure he's at least a foot taller than you." I really don't care or think it matters, the height of a man, but I just want her to stop with this Nathan shit.

"Well, I wouldn't mind having a man buy me things. You're right about that," says Sophie, forgetting about Nathan. "I want a boyfriend with money. All the guys at my school will never have anything."

"That's a horrible quality to look for in a guy," I tell her, trying not to get angry. I remind myself that she's a teenager, and that's basically another word for ignorantly immature sometimes. "Money isn't everything."

"You just said that money can buy you almost anything and now you're telling me it isn't everything. Which one is it?"

"I said *some* people think that. I didn't say it was right. Sophie, it's what's in a guy's heart that counts," I tell her. "You can find a man who will buy you the world. But it doesn't mean a damn thing if he doesn't really care

about you."

Sophie's expression softens. "That sounds sweet and all. But if a dude bought me a hot red Ferrari, I think I'd be pretty damn happy."

I chuckle, heading into the kitchen. I can't really argue with that, especially with a sixteen year old. I fill a glass from the tap and drain it. It has to help in flushing this drug out of my system. "You really don't need to be thinking about boys right now, though," I say.

This silences Sophie, and I have to wonder if that means she's already got a boyfriend. I don't want to smother her, so I'm just going to forget about it for now. I'm her big brother, and while I take raising her very seriously, I'm not Dad.

I walk over to the couch and almost stumble, having to grab ahold of it to prevent myself from falling flat on my face.

Sophie is at my side in an instant. "Are you all right?" Concern laces her words. It's the one thing I have to give Sophie. I might annoy her and piss her off with my rules, but she doesn't want to see me hurt. She even tries to pamper me some. I've come home from a late night at work to find her curled up on the couch, a homemade dinner sitting on the stove, and a note for me propped on top.

"I'm fine," I say gently, brushing her aside. "Just tired."

Sophie walks over in front of me and crosses her arms, staring at me suspiciously. "Something happened tonight, didn't it? I've seen you be out later and come home looking a lot better than this. You look like something the cat dragged in."

I nod. "The grand opening was a major success. Nathan and I are both pleased."

Sophie scowls. "No, don't even try it." She gestures at me. "Look at you. Your shirt looks like you got into a fight with Wolverine." She shakes her head. "I've never seen you come home like this before."

I think about denying more, then change my mind. "Something was in one of the drinks I had. It messed me up pretty good. Nathan's double-checking the video with the security guys to see if it was intentional," I tell her. It's enough of the truth to satisfy her, but she doesn't need to know all the details.

"Jesus, Jake, are you okay?" Sophie asks, sitting down next to me. "Should you go get checked out at the hospital?"

"No, I'm fine," I reassure her. "Just a little sluggish. I'll be as good as

new in the morning, trust me."

"Still . . ." Sophie says, going quiet. She curls up against me, putting her head on my chest, and I adjust, sliding an arm around her shoulders and squeezing. Maybe it's the club, maybe it's the drug in my drink, but I don't mind it right now. I can use a little bit of reassurance that I'm doing the right thing by her.

"I know," I whisper quietly. "I miss them too."

"I miss them so much," Sophie says, her voice thick, and if I could turn my head again, I know she'd be crying softly. Instead, I hug her and kiss the top of her head.

"Sophie, I know I'll never replace Dad, but bear with me. I'm kinda learning this parenting shit on the fly, you know? But that's why I was so harsh earlier. I don't care about money, and I don't want you to either. You want that red Ferrari? You graduate college and I'll get you one. I'd rather you actually fall in love with the man, not with his bank account. You can marry the garbage man for all I care."

Sophie hugs me tighter. "There's nobody better than my big brother."

"Yeah, well, I love you too," I reassure her.

We sit there like that for a few moments before my phone buzzes and I fish it out of my pocket. "It's Nathan."

Sophie grumbles but gets up. "I'll let you guys talk then," she says. "I'll see you in the morning."

I give her a smile and a nod. "Yo, Nathan," I answer the phone. "You realize what time it is?"

"Hey, man, this night was crazy!" Nathan says, still buzzing off adrenalin. "I can't believe what happened. We'll keep an eye out for both, but that dude is done if he comes back."

"Thanks," I reassure him. "Is that all?"

"Nah, man. Other than your deal, the club opening was as good as we could've imagined. We're going to make millions by next year, just wait and see. I already have three more bands lined up."

I stare at my phone, still wondering why the hell Nathan's calling. "Nathan, couldn't this wait until morning?"

"Yeah, I guess. I'm just excited." Nathan says, slightly chagrined. "Yo, man, about the girl . . . we kinda lost her. She walked out with a friend, but we're gonna keep working on it."

I nod to myself. Roxy . . . if only I could talk to her again to clear this up.

“Don’t worry about her. I’m sure it’s all a misunderstanding. The guy is more of a concern. If he did that at our club, you can guarantee he’s doing it elsewhere too.”

“Okay, man, just . . . get some sleep. I just want you to know, this club . . . it’s our rocket to the moon, baby. Rest easy.”

“You too. Goodnight,” I say, hanging up on him and lying back. I’m pretty sure I’m asleep before I even hit the couch cushion.

ROXY

I'm a ball of nerves when I arrive at work Monday. It took me until nearly midnight last night to relax. Every time I heard a car outside on the street, I swore it was the cops ready to drag me off to jail. Eventually, Hannah got me to relax, but I still had to give myself some serious self-love to be able to get to sleep.

I’ve done pretty good with it so far since I got to work. I was even able to eat some breakfast after Hannah gave me a pep talk. I just need to focus on today. I don’t want to look like an idiot the first day I meet my new boss.

But still, as I check on the second floor for interoffice mail, I can’t stop thinking about him. How his lips felt against me. His hard body pressed into mine. The feeling of grinding on him, even if he was still inside his pants. It was . . . heartstopping.

I brush my desires and troublesome thoughts away as I take a deep breath and step off the elevator with a stack of papers in my hand, adjusting my black skirt with my right hand before making my way across the floor to my work area. Our office is at the top of a high-rise building downtown and has been around for decades. The floor plan isn’t my favorite, an open floor with cubicles that make me feel like either I’m constantly running a maze or that the agents are going to show up to arrest me for talking to Morpheus.

The board room is down the hall, past the coffee room and bathrooms, while along three of the walls are several glass offices for the higher-ups. Along the far back wall are three mostly unused meeting rooms, what a lot of us ‘cubey cats’ call the firing room, since the executives never fire someone in their own offices and they don’t like giving out pink slips in public.

“Here are the papers Byron wanted,” I say, bending over to place the stack on my co-worker, Matt Brown’s, desk. I don’t want to. I know he’s

getting a decent view down my blouse, but I have to or else I'm going to lose the rest of my stuff all over the place.

Matt glances up from his laptop, raising his eyebrows, his widow's peak going back on his head, making him look like the old young version of Eddie Munster. He's tall and skinny, with pale reddish hair and brown eyes.

I expect him to at least give me a thank you. You know, tell me how grateful he is about having me run down to the mail room to get his shit for him. Instead, he sighs. "Damn, Rox, took you long enough." He looks at me critically, up and down. "You get some decent makeup yet?"

He's subtly insinuating that I'm starting to sag and look older, which makes me want to laugh. I might have a stress wrinkle or two, but it's nowhere near what his baggy hound dog eyes have hanging under them. I grit my teeth but I don't snap back. He's always picking at me, trying to get under my skin, so I'm not taking the bait. Besides, I know I look good. I'm a fabulous bitch. Or I'd better be, given how long I spent in the mirror this morning. Matt's probably jealous he can't pull off the skirt, blouse, and heels I'm wearing.

I laugh, not letting him know he gets on my last nerve. He's really the only one here whom I dislike. "Let's not, Matthew. I'm trying to be nice today." *I'm not gonna tell you about how I want to take that tie and choke you with it,* I think inwardly. *Maybe hang you from the window as a warning to all those who try to fuck with me—run away as fast as you can.*

"Let's not what?" he asks, hiding his smirk. "I was just asking you a question. How was your weekend?"

He knows damn well what he meant, but I'm not going to entertain him. "It was good. Stopped a few hearts, broke a few necks, and stomped a few balls. Ya know, the usual."

He leans back in his chair, chuckling. "You know what, Roxy? I like you. Maybe we should hang out sometime. Have a few drinks after work?"

No way in hell. I'd rather take the Devil out for drinks. He'd only want me around to get drunk and then have the freedom to make me the punchline of his jokes.

"Sorry, got plans," I say politely. I can't resist getting a little twist in, though, and add cheerfully, "Although I have a friend named Brad who you'd absolutely fall in love with."

Matt arches an eyebrow. "Brad?"

I nod. "Mmmhmm. He's tall, blond, blue-eyed, and he can drop his ass to

the floor like you've never seen, then work it back up nice and slowly until you're throbbing in your pants."

Matt laughs nervously. "Hey, what are you trying to say?"

Before I can reply, Byron Smith, one of the top level executives, walks over. His tie is loose around his neck, and his combed-over greying hair gives him sort of a cloudy appearance. He's tall, and despite his skinny neck, he's got a big potbelly that's almost cartoonish over his chicken legs. I have no idea why he hangs around Matt. There's a huge gap in age, and Byron's duties have nothing to do with me or Matt. But when the two get together, it's like two grade schoolers. I swear they've swapped fart jokes sometime over the past year.

"Hey, Matt," Byron says, grinning foolishly. "Have you heard about the new computer password system?"

"No, what about it?" Matt asks, and I roll my eyes. I've heard this one before.

"Well, we have to put in new passwords," Byron says. "Tom down the hall went in and decided that his new password would be *Tomspenis*. He puts it in, and you won't believe what the computer told him."

"What?" Matt asks, grinning.

"It said *Try again. Tomspenis is not long enough."*

I try not to roll my eyes or to turn it around on them. Instead, I just gather up my stuff. "That's my cue to get back to work," I say. "Talk to you later."

I leave the two to continue their weird bromance. Their relationship just confounds me.

I walk through the maze and around the corner to my cubicle, glad to have my own little space that I've personalized a little. My heels are muted against the tough industrial-grade carpet, and more than once, I've considered ditching them for flats, except that the company does have visitors who expect them. I open my computer and login to my desktop, getting ready for the day. Franklin Consolidated was one of the first companies to build this city, and despite being bought in a corporate takeover, it still has prestige. We're in some of the top floors of our high-rise, and the view out the windows in the break room are breathtaking. Overall, despite it being corporate drudgery, I could be doing a lot worse. Besides dealing with Matt's bullshit, this place isn't that bad.

I'm not gonna let that dickhead get me down. I figure I'll get another promotion soon and move out of this cube-farm and into the outer ring

offices, and then I won't have to deal with him. Really, I'm just nervous about this new Regional President. It's been hush-hush about who he is, the corporation that bought Franklin Consolidated keeping things quiet. It's like they want it to be some sort of national security top secret or something. That, combined with knowing I still have Jake's wallet, is making me a big ball of butterflies.

There's a commotion going around the room, and as my email loads, I see why. The new boss is going to be in soon and everybody is excited. Or maybe nervous is probably the better word.

"Hey, Roxy, you excited?" Hannah asks. She's dressed to kill today, with a knee-length pencil skirt that shows off her toned legs and a blouse that is just a little tighter than normal. I guess she's playing it up some, but she's certainly got the right to.

"I think I'm holding up well," I say, flashing an anxious smile. "Just hoping he's not a huge pain in the ass," I whisper.

Hannah shakes her head. "I'd be nervous too if I were tabbed to be his assistant. Well, that and worried that the cops could kick down the door any minute. Say, how do you think you'd look in an orange jumpsuit? I hear orange is the new black."

I hold my scowl for all of two seconds before I can't help but laugh. "I can't be pissed with you," I say, leaning back. Her jokes actually make me feel less anxious. I'd do the same if she were in my position. "By the way, if I'm going to jail, you're going to jail too as an accomplice. Preferably to be cellies with some six-foot-tall girl named Missy who's hungry for blondes."

Hannah laughs. "Come on, that's why we're friends. We're each other's spirit animal. And I know if I get Missy as my cellie, you and I can alternate days on being her bitch."

"We are, I agree. Except you're more of a beast than an animal, and I'm not muff diving for you no matter who it is."

Hannah laughs. "Glad to see you back to normal."

"I have Jake's wallet," I say after a moment, sobering again. "It's here in my purse."

"I'll go with you after work and we can turn it in at the club," Hannah says. "I'll be your backup just in case."

"Thank you."

Right then, we hear talking, so Hannah and I stand up to see Tom Powers, the CEO of Franklin Consolidated, at the head of the room. He's a tall,

distinguished man with white hair, dressed as always in his dark double-breasted suit. He's totally old school, but in a grandfatherly sort of way. I heard that he's taking retirement with the corporate takeover, and if so, I'm going to miss him around.

"Hello, everyone, if I can have your attention, please?" he says. "Come on up if you'd like, or if you can see just fine, your cubicles are okay. Anyway, I'd like to take a few minutes to thank you all. I know that the rumor mill has been running overtime for the past few months, and . . ."

I tune Tom out a little, thinking about the day. After this, I need to finish checking my emails, then there's the report from the agribusiness division that I'll need to get together for my new boss . . . I wonder if he's nice? I wonder if he's a he, or maybe a she?

I know who I'd like to be working under. The dirty part of my mind fills with a picture of Jake in his suit. He was so powerful, so decisive, but at the same time a gentleman. The way he commanded everything and everyone without being a braggart or a loudmouth oozed confidence and masculinity. And yeah, the way he kissed me . . .

"Shit," I mutter to myself as I shake my head. I've missed most of what Tom's said already. *Focus, Roxy, focus!*

"For over seventy years, Franklin Consolidated has stood as a pillar of this community, and while our corporate headquarters is obviously changing, I can assure you that we will continue to serve this city and its people . . ."

"Oh, my God," Hannah whispers next to me. She jostles my elbow, and I glance at her just as Tom wraps up.

"My Franklin family, it's with great regret to confirm that yes, after this month, I will be retiring. However, I am confident in the hands that I'm leaving Franklin in. Without further ado, I'd like to introduce the new Regional President . . . Jake Stone."

"Is that . . .?" Hannah whispers as Jake steps up next to Tom. I turn white as a sheet and drop down quickly before he can see me, Hannah squatting down next to me. "Roxy?"

"I'm dead . . . I'm fucking dead," I whisper, looking at Hannah, terrified. "What the hell am I supposed to do now? I almost slept with and killed my new boss!"

JAKE

I stand before the window in my new office, looking out with my hands clasped behind my back. It's just after lunch, and the whole city lies before me, sparkling in the sunlight. This is a far better view than what I had at my old office. I can see the entire city and even the mountains in the distance.

I feel powerful. Like the world is at my fingertips, and while I haven't climbed the mountain yet, I'm getting there.

Even my office is better, a large, classical executive room with a polished oak desk and a large leather tufted chair. The shelves are lined with bookcases, and I've found it's more than just the standard assortment of old law books or regulatory books, but there are all sorts of things. I've found leather-bound classics of fiction, biographies of great leaders, and more. This could rival a lot of small school libraries.

Franklin Consolidated really wanted my talents. I found out that they requested me specifically, so they rolled out the red carpet for me. My arrival has been well-received so far, but I've already noticed one problem.

I saw who was standing in the crowd. It was just a moment. I barely caught sight of that angelic face. I swear, I blinked and it was gone, and later on, I couldn't find her when I walked the cubicle maze. But I know what I saw. She might be in my dreams, but I'm not imagining things.

I turn slightly when I hear the door open behind me, bringing me back to the tasks I have at hand. "Is there anything I can get you, Mr. Stone?" says Elena May, my new interim secretary, an elderly woman dressed in a crisp pantsuit. She used to work for Tom, and I gratefully accepted her services from him. "You told me to check in right after lunch."

"Yes, Elena," I say. "I need the report from the property management division, and the Jefferson agreement. Also, if you could get me a hot cup of coffee and something to snack on. I skipped lunch. I need something to get through the afternoon."

Elena bows her head respectively. "Right away, sir."

She turns away, ready to leave, and I know it's now or never. I tense and call out, "And Elena?"

"Yes?"

"Please send in Miss Price."

She pauses for a moment, a question in her eyes. But she doesn't question me. "Right away, sir."

She disappears, and I turn back to the window. I wasn't going to call her in. I can't even be sure I have the right person. It could be another Roxy. But

I can’t resist and I have to know.

It’s a miracle from the highest heaven or a curse from the depths of hell if it is her. I guess it’s lucky for her that it’s me and not Nathan. He would have started kicking ass at nine in the morning.

Five minutes after Elena leaves, there’s a quiet knock at my door, and it opens behind me.

I don’t turn around immediately, drawing out the moment as I hear muted footsteps on the thick carpet of my office. Instead, I stand, staring out the window, feeling the sun warm my face.

“You called for me?” Roxy’s soft voice asks, and I momentarily close my eyes. There is a hint of nervousness and anxiety in it, but her sweet, soft voice is still like music to my ears. I know I should be mad. I should be raging and demanding answers, but in those four words . . . I swear I’m hearing an angel again.

“It’s a beautiful day today, isn’t it?” I ask. “The sun is out. The view from this office beats the one at my old one.”

“It is,” she says, and I can hear the fear, the quaver in her voice, but also a note of something else, so soft that I don’t even think she knows it.

I turn to see her and the breath catches in my throat. In a tight skirt and blouse, her hands clasped respectfully in front of her, she reaches out and grabs my thoughts, a jolt going through me as I take in the vision in front of me. My God, she’s fucking beautiful. She’s still got that sweet angelic face, that gorgeous curvy body. Maybe I should’ve learned my lesson, but the things I want to do to her . . .

She gazes at me with anxiousness in her eyes. I know what she’s thinking, but she needn't worry. One look at her, and I know. Whatever happened Saturday night, she isn’t guilty of much more than maybe being overly horny.

I grin, hiding my desire behind a boyish mask. “I bet this is the last place you expected me to show up after you left me for dead.” My tone isn't harsh but playful. I’m trying to break the ice, but it seems to have the opposite effect.

Roxy frowns, crossing her arms over her chest. “I didn’t leave you for dead—”

“I checked the footage. I saw that sick bastard putting a roofie in your drink,” I interrupt. “I know you had nothing to do with it.”

Surprise shoots across her face. “You did?”

I nod. “We’ve set the bouncers and other staff to be on the lookout. But it still doesn't explain why you left like you did. And why you took my wallet and never came back with it.”

Roxy looks worried at first, then she cocks her head, smirking at me. “Well first of all, I thought I sent you straight to heaven,” Roxy says with spunk showing up in her voice. “I’ve gotta say, I’ve met a few guys who couldn’t hang with me, but never one who finished before we even got started. I didn’t peg you as one of *those*.”

I chuckle. “Is that right?”

“Oh, yeah. Had Mr. Creepy Bastard not gotten in the way, I would’ve showed you what paradise truly looks like.”

I have to laugh. It feels good to talk to her. I can’t believe my luck that I ended up where she works. “But seriously,” I say. “What happened?”

Roxy’s expression turns serious, and she walks over to the chair in front of my desk, sitting down when I give her a nod. “To be honest, when you started acting all Weekend at Bernie’s, I freaked out. I actually thought you keeled over for a second there.”

I’m caught up quickly as Roxy starts with her story, telling me everything that happened in painstaking detail. “So when I heard your friend coming, who has a foul mouth, by the way, I panicked and ran out. It was only after we got back home that I realized I still had your wallet.”

I stand there, silently taking in her story. It’s not really that hard to believe. Especially when it’s basically the scenario that I told myself happened over and over. I’m relieved to find out I was right. Because for some reason, I hate to think that the angelic vision in front of me is a thief. “So why didn’t you come back?”

She bites her lower lip. “It was all so crazy. I thought no one would believe me. I still have your wallet with me, actually. It’s at my desk in my purse. I can go get it—”

I shake my head. We’ve already wasted enough of my new work time. And I know it already looks weird that I’ve brought her into my office. I need to start getting work done. “You can give it to me later, after work,” I say. “Did you touch anything in there?”

She shakes her head. “Everything’s there. I’ll drop it off here—”

“No,” I interrupt her. “Bring it by the club.”

She pauses, confusion coming over her face. “Club Jasmine? Why would I do that when I can give it to you here?”

I nod. “I’ve got two reasons I’d rather you bring it to the club. First, because Nathan owes you an apology, and that needs to be delivered face to face. Second, I’d like to start back where we left off.”

I love how it knocks her a little off balance. Seeing the flush that comes to her cheeks, I’m reminded of how she looked in the club. Her lips part as she nervously licks them. “But It’s a work night and—”

“It’s fine. I’ll make sure you're back home by ten.” I give her a little wink.

I can tell she wants to. She’s warring with herself. She probably can’t believe I still want to be with her. “I don’t know, Jake. Maybe it’s better if we stay apart.”

“Oh, come on. We work in the same office, and you’re going to be reporting to me frequently,” I point out. “Consider this a business meeting where we can get to know a little more about each other.”

I don’t know why I’m pushing this issue. The dynamics have changed considerably. I’m her boss now, and maintaining a respectful relationship will be a challenge. But I’ve always been one to take a challenge and conquer it. Looking at Roxy, I want to conquer her, but probably not in the way that I should be thinking.

Roxy gives me an evaluating look, then nods. “Fine. What time?”

“Meet me there at eight. Bring your friend if you want.”

Roxy nods, then gets up. “Okay. Uhm, Jake . . . this is weird.”

I nod, grinning. “I know. But I’ll see you at eight.”

Roxy goes to the door and opens it. “Oh, and Miss Price?” I call out, slipping into more formal talk now that Elena might overhear.

“Yes, sir?”

“Don’t forget the wallet.”

Roxy smirks and walks out of the office.

ROXY

“So, how do I look?” I ask, turning away from my bedroom mirror to face Hannah. Instead of the bright red, tonight, I’m opting for something darker. I don’t want to admit that I’m dressing up for Jake again, but as soon as I got home from work, I couldn’t imagine going back to Club Jasmine wearing what I wore for work.

So I found this, and I'll admit it feels even more like coming back to who I am. Dark makeup and a dark dress help slim my frame, while I've got on four-inch open-toe heels that make my legs and ass look good. "I can't believe I'm going back there," I admit to Hannah, who's sitting on my bed and giving me an critiquing look. "I mean, after what happened, I figured Club Jasmine would be one step from the seventh circle of hell in terms of places I didn't want to visit."

"So why are you doing it again?" Hannah asks, and I turn, adjusting the gold chain belt that I have around my waist.

"I feel guilty for leaving him there," I lie. Well, I do, sort of, but I'm also obviously attracted to him. "So how do I look?"

"Like a five-hundred-per-hour hooker," Hannah jokes. "Maybe a thousand if you do something about that damn hair."

I scowl. "Not funny."

Ignoring Hannah, I turn to address the only furry critic in the room. "You think I look good, don't you, Mr. Felix?"

Felix, perched on the chair next to my makeup table, stares as if he gives zero fucks with his grumpy face. "*Rowr.*"

I stick my tongue out at him. "Fine, forget you. I'll remember that come feeding time."

Mr. Felix still doesn't give a fuck, giving a yawn and resuming his mean face.

"Really, you look beautiful," Hannah says, dropping her humor. But she pauses, a serious expression coming over face. "Still, though, I wonder . . ."

I turn to appraise her. "Wonder what?"

She swings her leg over the side of my bed and gets up, shaking her head slowly. "Do you think you should be seeing him outside of work?"

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"It was all fun and games before, and if it were anyone else, I still would tell you to go for it. But Jake is your boss now. And considering how you tried to screw his brains out on your first meeting, I'd say y'all aren't starting on the right foot professionally." She takes a deep breath. "I just don't think this is a good look."

I place my hands on my hips, trying to think of every damn excuse I can to justify going. "Just because he's now my boss doesn't mean I can't go meet with him. Which he guilt tripped me into doing, I might add. Plus, I still have to give him his wallet."

“Yeah, I know that but—” Hannah starts, but I hold up a hand.

“And who’s saying I’m going to sleep with him?”

At least not tonight.

Hannah opens her mouth to speak and then sees the look on my face. I’ve seen it before. It’s one I’ve inherited from my mother and my sister, the one that says *Proceed with caution. Your ass is on thin ice*. She takes another deep breath and lowers her voice. “Look, all I’m trying to say is that it’s different when you work with someone. Especially someone who’s your boss. If this is going to be friendly cordial, keep it friendly cordial. I just don’t think you should let it go beyond that, even if that’s how this all started. You don’t want people saying shit around the office.”

I want to deny Hannah’s words, but I have to admit that the same thoughts occurred to me as soon as Jake asked. But I’ve tried to ignore them. I just want an ending to our first night, dammit! I’m hungry for it. I want to know what lies behind those gorgeous eyes and that sun-bright smile. And yeah, part of me feels guilty and wants to make it up to him for leaving him like that in the club. That was a dick move on my part.

“I’ll keep it in mind,” I finally say. “You’re right. It won’t be good if this turns into something else. So I’ll keep it all business. Strictly professional.” I almost sound like I’ve convinced myself. “I’ll go there, give him his wallet back, let him know I’m truly sorry for everything, and leave it at that.”

Hannah lets out a sigh of relief. “Thank you. Don’t be mad at me. I just want what’s best for you.”

“I know,” I say. “Come here.” I hold my arms out to her and we embrace. “You’re not Mindy, but you make a decent placeholder.”

Hannah laughs. “Oh, shut up.”

Mr. Felix just *rawrs.*

On the way over to the club, Hannah and I talk very little. My mind is filled with what I’m going to say to Jake. The first night I met him, my mind was overrun with hormones and I couldn’t even focus on what he was saying. All I could see were those eyes that could command me to do anything. But now . . .

We pull up to the club. Surprisingly, there’s a lot of cars for a Monday night. This is a nightclub, not a sports bar showing *Monday Night Football*.

“Remember,” Hannah says as I get out, “keep it business.”

“Right. All business,” I say as we hug briefly. “I’ll be back by ten. Jake

said he'll give me a ride home, but I'll be home by eleven at the latest, okay?"

"Okay," Hannah says, giving me a look in the eyes. "Ten would be better."

"Okay, Mom," I half tease, patting her on the cheek. "You know he said you could come too."

"Yeah, I'm sure he would like that," Hannah teases, giving me a wiseass grin.

The line isn't out the door like it was Saturday night, but still, the place is fairly busy as I go inside. The music is good, more low-key than it was over the weekend. Thankfully, Jake is expecting me. I doubt I'd get in right now otherwise. "Hi," I tell the doorman. "Mr. Stone is expecting me. Roxy Price?"

The doorman, still one of the MIB crew, checks his tablet before nodding. "Just a moment, Miss Price."

He turns and talks quietly into his earpiece before nodding. "Is there a problem?"

"Not at all," the doorman says as another of the MIB come over. "John, here, will take you to see Mr. Stone."

"Right this way," John, who looks like he should be in the Secret Service instead of working nightclub security, says with a slight bow of his head. As we make our way through the club, I see that my first impression was wrong. This place is nearly packed.

I think the difference is the clientele. Over the weekend, most of the clubbers were younger, twenty- and thirty-somethings. This group is at least a decade older, and the music reflects it. I'm hearing some stuff that hasn't been in heavy rotation since the turn of the millennium. Then again, Will Smith is pretty smooth on *Switch*.

As John walks with me past the bar, I feel a moment of rising anxiety as I look around for the creepy bastard who tried to drug me, but I don't see him. John notices and gives me a reassuring smile. "All clear tonight, Miss Price. Come, Mr. Stone is waiting for you upstairs."

I look up and see Jake leaning on the railing of the VIP section, giving me a little wave. I wave back, and John leads me up, giving me the same little nod before he peels off to watch the steps to the VIP level. I'm surprised when I see that Jake's alone up here. We have the whole level to ourselves.

"You're looking dapper," I comment as he comes over. He's changed

from the suit he wore to work into a slightly tighter fitting, brighter gray suit that just barely gleams in the club lights. “How many suits do you own, anyway?”

“Enough,” he says easily, and as he steps closer, I’m just staggered again by his magnetism. He has this confident ease about him that isn’t cocky. It’s more like he’s saying *Yes, I have the looks, but I’m more than that.* “Come on, I have a booth for us.”

He leads me over to a nice booth, all done in black velvet with a low ebony table in the middle. “Let me get you a drink,” he says, signaling the waitress. “A Little Mermaid,” he says, “and a Highlander.”

I give him a raised eyebrow, and he chuckles. “You’ll like it, relax. You look amazing, by the way. Love what you did with your eyes. It totally changes your expression from work.”

His eyes roam over my face, causing my skin to feel like I’ve got a low grade sunburn. I feel sexy, and when I do a switch on my legs, crossing my right over my left, his eyes watch every movement. I love the way he makes me feel. It’s like we never left off. “Are you saying I looked bad at work?” I ask playfully. “Less feminine?”

Jake licks his lips and laughs. “Hardly. But you looked scared out of your mind. Not like you do now. You look at home.”

I shrug, reaching into my purse. “Here’s your wallet. Uh, just to let you know, I robbed you blind.”

He chuckles and takes it from my hand. “I doubt that.”

Without even opening it, he takes the wallet and slides it into his jacket pocket. I stare at him for a moment, shocked. “You’re not going to count the money?”

“I trust you,” he says confidently. “You look more like an angel than a thief.”

I blush, then I laugh. “Okay, just don’t get mad when you get the credit card bill for that trip to Hawaii I booked, complete with matching Louis Vuitton luggage.”

Jake laughs again. “You’re not the type for LV luggage.”

The waitress comes back with our drinks. His Highlander looks interesting, almost like root beer, of all things. “What the hell is that?”

“Two ounces Japanese sake, two ounces of Scotch whisky, and the rest is Coke over crushed ice,” he says, lifting the clear beer mug. “Basically a Duncan Macleod, but we use real Highland scotch, so we renamed it.”

I nod and take a sip of mine. It's fruity, with bright highlights, and I can already tell I'm going to have to go easy on it. I've got work in the morning, and I'm not supposed to be going home with Jake. "Damn, this is good."

"Thank you. I had a hand in making it," Jake says, sipping his mug.

"Did you? And did you have a hand in the drink the first night too?" I ask, and Jake shakes his head.

"No, wish I could say I did. The name alone is nice, though, don't you think?"

I laugh as I take another sip of my drink. "It certainly makes memories. And the club?"

"Nathan and I had an architect help with the details, but we chose most of the layout. I wanted something different from the average club."

"It's one of the nicest I've ever been in," I say honestly. "Nothing like Trixie's."

Jake takes a slow sip of his Highlander and sets it down, raising an eyebrow. "Trixie's?"

I nod. "The club I used to sing at." *And shake my ass like nobody's business.* "It was my favorite place back home."

"You're a singer?" he says with some surprise. "You're just full of little talents, aren't you? What kind of music?"

"Nothing anymore," I say, feeling the pain in my chest that comes with talking about it. Those days are gone. Despite Mindy's encouragement, I haven't given much thought to singing. But looking over the railing of the VIP lounge at the stage, I feel that same longing and admit to myself that there's a void where singing used to be in my heart. I force myself to look away, feeling a lump form in my throat. "I stopped when I went back to college."

"Why?" Jake asks, leaning forward. "I can see in your eyes that you practically want to run down there right now and grab a mic."

"Yeah, well," I say softly, shaking my head, "I didn't think it was right that I wasn't really making any money doing it and instead was mooching off my mom and stepfather. I thought it was time to move on, support myself."

Jake nods, but he doesn't look convinced. "Let me ask you, which makes you happier, singing or working at Franklin?"

"Singing," I answer without even pausing for breath. "I don't care what. Rock, pop, just about anything but country. But . . . like I said, I'm done living off someone else, Jake."

Jake hums, then finishes the rest of his drink. “Mind singing something for me? Call it . . . call it your penance for accidentally stealing my wallet.”

“I don’t think so,” I say. “I haven’t sung in so long, I’m pretty sure my voice would crack. I don’t want to burst your eardrums. I thought I killed you once as it is.”

Jake chuckles. He looks like he wants to press the issue but doesn’t. Instead, he leans back, crossing his hands over his left knee. “Point taken. For now, but I’m not giving up just yet.”

I’m almost tempted to say that I could maybe sing a little tonight, but before I can, Nathan comes up the stairs, cursing and yelling into the air. “I told you to check the fucking hidden costs, didn’t I? In fact, I remember specifically telling you, ‘No way in hell should you sink your money in this, Titus. It’s a golden turd.’ Now you’re calling me to bitch that you’re losing money? Get the fuck outta’ here!”

“You guys been friends long?” I ask as Nathan heads off to the other end of the VIP section, where I see a laptop on one of the tables there.

“Since childhood,” he says. “He moved into the neighborhood when he was nine, and we’ve been friends ever since.”

“He certainly has a way with words.”

Jake chuckles. “That he does. Not always to his benefit.”

I nod, smirking. “I think his first few words to me were *sleazy broad*, and I’m sure *fuck* was in the first sentence.”

Jake swallows, looking embarrassed. “Was it? I’ll have to talk to him.”

I shake my head, waving him off. “I was running out of that back room. He had no idea who the hell I was.”

Nathan comes over, his eyes twinkling in curiosity like he’s waiting to be introduced.

Jake gives him a head nod. “Nathan, this is Roxy. She brought back my wallet. Not bad for a *sleazy broad*, huh?”

Nathan looks abashed, but he laughs. “You’re right. Roxy, I apologize. My mouth gets the better of me sometimes. I looked at the video, and I promise you, if that asshole who tried to drug you comes in, he’s gonna find out I haven’t forgotten the old ways from the neighborhood.”

I offer my hand, and Nathan shakes it, then kisses my knuckles. “I like this side of you a lot more than the first impression,” I say.

“Of course. You know—” Nathan says when suddenly, there’s a crash down below. A drunken woman decided that Club Jasmine’s chairs were just

perfect for her recreation of The Pussycat Dolls' *Buttons* dancing, and she's knocked a table, a waitress, and a bunch of other stuff onto the floor. "Oh, for fuck's sake. Excuse me."

Nathan heads for the stairs, talking loudly in a juicy Bronx accent that I'm sure has plenty of people quivering in fear even as I try to hold in my laughter. "You know who he reminds me of?"

"Who?" Jake asks, and I laugh again. "No, really, who?"

"Joe Pesci. Like, how he looked in *Goodfellas*. Like Nathan would totally be at ease carrying a baseball bat right now."

"Oh, don't give him any ideas," Jake says, chuckling. "Nathan's a genius when it comes to making money, but there's a reason he's not working for a firm. He tried working for Goldman Sachs right out of college and ended up getting fired."

"Why?" I ask, and Jake laughs.

"One of the Vice Presidents had a proposal, and Nathan told him in his typical manner that he disagreed with it. When the VP decided to defend himself by saying that one of the Seven Dwarves shouldn't be worrying about what real men said, Nathan decided to get even. By the time Nathan was done, the VP was crying. I still don't know how he didn't get arrested for that one."

"Damn, and you're business partners with him?"

Jake laughs. "Don't let his foul mouth fool you. He's sharp as a blade when it comes to running a business."

I nod, intrigued. "Well, maybe I underestimated him then."

"So, how long have you been working at Franklin Consolidated?" he asks me, changing subjects. "I decided not to pry."

"For almost a year. I recently got a promotion, so I'm moving up some," I say with a touch of pride. "Apparently, I'm decent at something, too."

"That's nice," Jake says. "But no offense, you just don't strike me as the corporate monkey type."

"I didn't think I was either. Before going back to school, I was . . . I was more free-spirited."

Jake hums in appreciation. "You know, I think I saw a hint of that the other night. Unless you're in a habit of being that . . . free-spirited."

At the mention of my behavior on Saturday, I feel myself blush all the way to the roots of my hair, and I scratch at my chin. "Yeah . . . about that. I'm embarrassed about that. I'm normally not that hard up," I say bluntly,

feeling my confidence rising. “I’m usually a straight shooter, but I’m not *that* forward.” I take a deep breath and blurt it out brutally. “It’s been a while—let’s just leave it at that.”

He watches me intently, like he’s studying me. “I believe you.”

I’m tempted by the look in his eyes. He’s so handsome, so confident and assured, that I almost want to slide across the seat and kiss him. I want him to take me in the back and to finish what we started Saturday night, but Hannah’s right. *All business, all business,* I think to myself. In desperation, I try to think of something else to say. “So . . . how’d you get to where you are at your age? I mean, you’re not that much older than I am, are you?”

“Probably not,” Jake agrees. “I had a fire lit under my ass after I become caretaker for my sister.”

“Your sister?” I ask, surprised. “I didn’t know you had a sister.”

“Yes, she lives with me. Has ever since our parents passed,” Jake says. He leans forward, and looking at him, I feel like I’m seeing a side of him that few people do, and it’s a side that I want even more than what I saw on Saturday. “I had to grow up quickly.”

“I’m sorry for your loss,” I say honestly, reaching out and patting his hand. “You must care for her very much.”

The conversation flows, the two of us growing closer as we find so much in common. Besides the surface things like similar tastes in music, we both see the world as a place to stand on your own, to make your own mark somehow. I order another Mermaid, but Jake stops me after my second, and it’s with a shock that I realize it’s near midnight. “Oh, wow,” I say, not slurring very much. “I guess it’s time to go home.”

“Come on, I’ll drive you like I said,” Jake says, helping me to my feet. He’s so close, I can’t help it as I press myself against him, looking in his eyes, and his hand falls to my lower back. He lowers his lips, kissing me softly, and I kiss him back, not with the fiery passion of Saturday night but with something truer.

“Jake . . .” I whisper when I step back, biting my lip in torn desire. “This is the hardest thing I’ve ever said in my life because I want you so fucking badly right now, but I need you to call me a cab. You’re my boss, and we can’t finish what this starts. We need to keep this strictly business.”

Jake swallows, and I feel his hand pull me even tighter, but he stops and lets me go. With a shuddering breath, he nods. “Okay. I’ll have the staff call you a cab.”

I nod and reach down, grabbing my purse. “Thank you. Jake . . . this is like the best club I’ve ever seen, but I don’t think I should come back here. I think you know why.”

Jake swallows and nods. “I do.”

He calls John the security guy over, giving him instructions. John nods, and Jake turns back to me. “You’re all set. I’ll see you tomorrow?”

“I am, and yes,” I say, giving Jake a smile. “Goodnight.”

John escorts me downstairs and out to the already waiting cab, closing the door for me. Just as the cab gets ready to pull away, I see the door to Club Jasmine open again, and Jake steps out, giving me a wave. As the cab pulls away and I give him a wave back, there’s something inside me that says this is just the beginning.

JAKE

Strictly business.

Roxy’s words run through my mind as I button up the cuff links of my dress shirt, the early morning sunset peeking in a fiery orange through the window behind me. I finish my shirt and turn around, keeping my eyes directly from the sun but looking out over the city. It’s peaceful, certainly not as bustling as New York or one of those other cities that never seems to sleep.

It shouldn’t really be a problem. Being Roxy’s boss definitely changes things. I can’t even lie about how I’m new in town or that she doesn’t report directly to me. It’d be a problem eventually if we kept seeing each other. But I can’t divorce myself from the way she felt underneath my hands. The images flash in my mind, making my dick swell in my custom-tailored Italian slacks, and I unconsciously reach down to adjust myself as I turn away from the window.

But more than her body, I can’t get over what she told me.

I run my hand over my freshly shaven cheeks, checking for any missed spots as I think about our conversation yesterday. I just can’t get over the look in her eyes when she told me she’d given up her dream to work in the soul-sucking corporate world. It crushed me, and her tiny attempt at salvaging her pride by saying she got a promotion just made it worse. It made me feel for her, not as a woman I’d like to fuck, but as a person I’d like to

help.

Here I am, living part of my dream by being able to start my own business, which by every measure is going to be hugely successful, and she has to work a job she isn't happy with. I could see the spark she has for life is dimmed by it all. And being around her makes me want to reignite it. I just don't know how.

Saturday night, if I'd heard her story, it would have been easy. Foolish, most likely, but easy. Now, we're bound by rules. There's corporate protocol we have to follow. And I fucking hate rules. I've played by my own as much as I can for my whole life. It's the main reason I always want to be the one in charge. I know that eventually, my penchant for doing it my own way is going to make enemies if I'm not the one making the decisions. One misstep will have my ass flapping in the wind.

I finish up my grooming, grabbing my suit coat off the bed. The bed is an absolute mess, but my maid will be in here to clean it up. I throw my coat over my shoulder and leave my bedroom. I'll save the coat for later when I'm getting ready to go to the office.

I walk down the hall and knock on Sophie's door. She's been a sleepyhead recently, and I'm not going to let her skip school because I trusted her to get up on her own.

"Get up, Sophie," I say. "Rise and shine."

I hear a groan in the room and a creaking bed. Great, she hasn't even woken up yet. When she doesn't reply, I open the door and peek in. All I see is a spray of hair sticking out from under the sheet and what looks like her left foot hanging out below.

"Sophie, get up," I say, tapping on the door. "You've got twenty minutes."

Sophie's reply is a low, grumbling moan. "Ugh, I'm trying to sleep."

With no warning, I grab the blanket and sheet near her ankle and yank the covers.

"Ohmygawd! It's cold, you ass!" Sophie yells, trying to grab the blanket, but I pull it the rest of the way off. Her disheveled hair gives her a stringy, mop-top appearance as she looks up at me with red eyes. She must've been up late last night, and I only hope it's because she was cracking her history books.

"Get up. You have that test, remember?"

"Can't you just give me a note and call in sick?" Sophie says, reaching

for the little decorative blanket over her headboard, but before she can, I snatch it up and throw it out the door. “I fucking hate that class!”

“Doesn’t matter,” I reply, knowing the feeling. “Get up unless you want me to get the Super Soaker.”

I’m not one to be physical with a woman, but I’ve found the squirt gun a great way to get a teenage girl out of bed quickly. “Jerk,” she mutters. She grumbles and gets out of bed. “You’re the world’s biggest asshole.”

“An asshole who wants what’s best for you,” I say, holding back my grin. I know she doesn’t mean anything by it. “And be careful. I don’t want you to fall and crack that big head of yours.”

I leave her room and go in the kitchen, indulging in one of my personal hobbies. Setting my coat across the back of a chair, I grab the cast-iron skillet and start making breakfast. Six minutes later, I have scrambled eggs, toast, marmalade, and a glass of orange juice sitting at the table. Sophie comes out, and while her eyes are still red, she’s at least brushed her hair out and looks cute, in a sort of teenage high school *fuck the world, I wanna be in bed* sort of way.

“You stay up all night?” I ask. “You seemed to be sleeping when I came home.”

Sophie nods. “I tried, but I woke up. I was on my phone.”

Alarm bells go off in my head. “With whom?”

“Jax,” she says flippantly, as if texting with someone that late is normal.

My stomach tightens. “Who’s he?”

“Just a boy from my math class,” she says. “We talk sometimes.”

I bite my tongue. That’s something I don’t really want to touch unless I absolutely have to. “Cool,” I say, trying to be nonchalant. “Bring him by sometime so I can meet him.”

She’s mortified. “Seriously? You’re cool and all, but I don’t want to scare him away.”

Exactly, I think inwardly.

We finish breakfast and go out and get in my ride, a ten-year-old Maserati that I keep in tip-top shape. I could let the horses loose on her and smoke just about anything on the streets if I wanted. But it’s not my thing anymore. Like I told Roxy, I had to grow up fast. I usually drive Sophie to school instead of having a driver take her unless it’s unavoidable. I work so much that I don’t see enough of her as it is.

The early morning traffic is just starting to get brutal on the way to

Sophie's high school, but we talk about things on the way. Most importantly to me, this Jax. She tries to be as secretive as possible. I'm not liking it, but I'm not going to make a deal of it.

Sophie looks over at me as we pull to a stop light. "You look handsome today," she says, changing the subject.

"All right," I reply with a laugh. "What do you want this time?"

"No, seriously. You have an extra pep in your step or something today," says Sophie. "Something just seems different. I'm not trying to be weird or say you don't dress well usually. All my girlfriends seem to notice."

"Good for them," I say. "But I'm too old and definitely not the Prince Charming they think I am."

Sophie laughs. "Just trying to poke and see if there's something going on I don't know about. It'd be nice to see you focus on yourself for once. You've done enough for me."

I'm silenced, and I'm glad we've reached her school. It's not really something I want to talk about right now. I pull up out front, seeing the crowded student parking lot. I've considered getting her a car for her next birthday, but as crowded as that parking lot is, I'm not sure it'd do any good.

Sophie opens her door and grabs her bag, starting to get out before she stops and sits back down, giving me a half-pouting look. "For real, Jake. Chill out some. Go have some damn fun."

"I'll think about it."

She grins and jumps out. "Thanks. You're still a jerk for threatening the Super Soaker, but I'll keep you around."

"You'd better ace that test!" I call after her as she closes the passenger door.

I pull away and turn left at the first light, catching the main boulevard to head into the office. As I park and take the elevator up to Franklin Consolidated, I watch the city rise through the glass outside the elevator. It's beautiful, and I'm looking forward to the day, maybe even more than a normal Tuesday. I glance down at my Rolex as the doors open. "Just on time."

It's a bustle of activity as I walk onto the main floor. People are calling clients, and I can hear the hum, the lifeblood of business flowing through the cubicle maze. I see people hustling, and I wonder if just my presence here after one day is making the changes that I want to see.

My eyes scan the room as I walk through on the way to my office, but

I'm really only looking for one person in particular. Finally, I see Roxy, my stomach going tight as I take in her dark skirt and blue blouse. She looks up, almost as if she felt my eyes on her, and our eyes meet. She tears her gaze away, but not before I see the slight flush of pink on her neck. The corner of my lips lifts into a grin, and I turn away, heading to my office.

I get in and set my briefcase aside. Pulling my laptop to me, I fire it up and get to work. There's a report request from corporate about my first impressions on the managers and who I might see being potential 'trimmings', but it's too early for that. I send back a message saying that I need the rest of the week for evaluations, but I'll get them my initial ideas by Friday.

Elena sticks her head in ten minutes after I finish, a folder in her hands. "Here's the building inventory report Tom wanted to give you," she says, setting it down on my desk.

I glance at it, knowing I'll need to read it over but not wanting to. It's just not that important to me. "Thank you."

"Is there anything I can get for you, sir?"

"Get me the Hendricks report and the projections for next quarter. I'd like to review those before lunch."

"Right away," she says, walking briskly to the door.

My next words fly from my lips before I can stop them. "Oh, and Elena? Send Miss Price in, if you would."

Once again, she looks at me with confusion in her eyes. Roxy is supposed to be an assistant but not my secretary. She's not even high enough up the ladder to be talking with me at all. I can see Elena wonders what the hell I'm doing. But she doesn't question me. "Of course, sir."

When she leaves, I sit back in my chair, inwardly shaking my head at myself.

Was there any reason for that? I don't need anything from her right now. But I can't help myself. I just want to see her, hear her.

Several minutes later, there's a knock at the door, and I set down the pen that I've been spinning across my knuckles. I quickly adjust my tie and turn to my laptop, trying to look like I've been working and not daydreaming. "Come in."

The door opens, and Roxy walks in. I have a hard time keeping my jaw from dropping as she closes the door. She's so beautiful dressed in her tight skirt and blue blouse, her curvaceous figure seeming to taunt me with the

promise of paradise. Under my desk, my blood warms my crotch as I think of the things that I want to do to her. That I almost had.

"You wanted me, sir?" she asks softly.

Sir. All business now. None of that playful spark I've noticed since first meeting her. I see how it is. She's trying to put a barrier between us by being professional. I don't like it. I want her spread out on my desk, her legs wrapped around my hips as I fill her with my cock.

"Sir?" she repeats when I don't reply, breaking me out of my reverie. My cock is twitching in my pants, and I take a deep breath before replying.

"Yeah. How're things going?" Damn, I sound like a moron.

"They're going fine, sir." She continues to hold her facade. But beneath, I can tell it's hard for her too. "Elena told me I had to get some projections ready, and I've already pulled the data. It's printing now."

"That's good," I reply, still feeling like an idiot.

"Is there anything else you need from me, sir?"

Yeah, I need you in my lap with your tits in my face as you ride me in that skirt. It's almost criminal the thoughts she invokes in me.

I part my lips to tell her that I want to see her again. That the night before, she awakened a need in me that I haven't felt for a long time. But then I think twice. "No, thank you. That is all."

She nods respectfully to me and turns away.

"Roxy," I call.

She stops and turns, one graceful hand on the door handle, and the words dry up in my throat again.

Tell me you want it, I think to myself. *Tell me you want me to take you, bend you over my desk and fuck you like you've never been fucked before.* Her lips are parted, and I imagine her saying yes if I just say the words. "Enjoy your day."

Something flashes in her eyes, so fast that I can barely register it. "You too, sir."

Then she's gone, the door closing softly behind her. I drop my head to the desk, thunking softly on my blotter, feeling a cauldron of emotions swirling in my gut. I know I shouldn't be doing this. Maybe I should have her transferred to another floor so this doesn't get out of hand. But when I think about actually doing it, I know I can't. Looking up as my email dings softly with another request from corporate, I realize one thing.

"I've got to get myself under control," I mutter.

Over the next several days, I do my best to juggle work, overseeing the night club, and basically being both Mom and Dad for Sophie. During the work day, I spend my time concentrating on staying busy and settling into my new role of playing house-cleaner for the company, keeping thoughts of Roxy from my mind. I even use my lunch hours to use the in-building fitness center, hoping to bury my desire under a giant pile of sweaty tank tops and a couple of thousand pounds of iron.

After work, I drop by the nightclub to check in with Nathan. So far, Mr. Creepy Bastard hasn't popped back up, and Andre is itching to get his hands on him. Nathan, too, and I'm not sure which of them would be preferable.

Even with all I've got going on, my thoughts constantly return to Roxy. I can't help but wonder what she's doing, if she's thinking about me, and how I can spend more time with her. She's a sweet distraction. Throughout the morning, I find myself looking at her through the big window of my office whenever she's moving around the room.

She's bedeviling, that's all there is to it. The sway of her hips as she walks, the way she parts those sweet, luscious lips . . . it's maddening. My cock is begging to have them wrapped around it, sucking and licking till I explode down her throat.

"Will that be all, sir?" Elena says, pulling me from my reverie. She's just finished giving me the files I asked for earlier, and I realize that it's nearly lunch time.

Thank God the weekend is finally here. I'm ready to relax and release some tension. I need something besides the constant distraction of Roxy.

"That's all. Any weekend plans, Elena?"

She beams at me, backing up. "Nothing much, sir. I can say it's been a good week with you here. I won't have to drink half the amount I thought I'd have to."

I laugh, and this time, I don't tell her to come back and call Roxy. I haven't seen her all morning. But I've been trying to stay away, avoiding looking out my window on purpose. The sexual tension has grown so much between us you could cut it with a knife. People are going to notice if I keep it up.

I go back to my laptop, looking at what I was supposed to be doing for the past hour, which is the damn manager evaluation report. It's nothing formal. Corporate will grind through this for weeks before they do anything,

but I still need to get my recommendations right. I start pounding away at my keyboard, knowing exactly who I want to get rid of, and just as I hit *Send* on the email, my cellphone buzzes. It's Nathan. "What's up, Nathan?"

"Remember when I said we should have theme nights?" Nathan asks immediately, no 'hi' or 'what's up'. "Well, you know the bartender, Sarah? She thought it was a good idea to start a karaoke night. And I thought tonight would be a good time to do a sort of short test run. It's Friday, and a lot of people will be here to test the reception. Hell, I might even get up there and make some bitches' ears bleed."

I think, shaking my head. I'm really not sure about karaoke. But then it hits me . . . Roxy. I know I shouldn't be thinking about seeing her, but a part of me knows that she needs this. "Let's do it. Book it, Nathan. In fact, later tonight, let's talk. Maybe we can do an open mic night or maybe a singing contest, find some local talent that'll kick some ass."

"My fuckin' man! I like the way you think," Nathan says. "All right, I'll book it and see if we can get some social media marketing going on. See you later."

I get up from my seat, putting my phone away. It's near lunch time, and I see my workout bag sitting on my spare chair, ready for me, but first . . . I look through the glass into the main room. I don't see her at her cubicle, which until now, I thought was cursed since I could see directly inside.

I grab my bag and walk out into the main room, looking around. Finally, just as I'm about to give up and head downstairs, I see Hannah, her close friend, coming out of the bathroom.

"Hello, boss," Hannah says, all business when I walk up, though I see the mischievous spark in her eyes. I can see why she and Roxy are good friends. There's a lot of smarts in that wiseass look.

"Have you seen Roxy?" I ask, trying my best to keep my voice neutral.

Her eyes furtively flit back, and she looks me up and down but doesn't push it. I wonder what secrets she's hiding. I know they have probably talked about me. "She went down to the mail room to get something for Matt."

"Matt?"

"Yeah, you know . . ." she says before pointing. "The guy that works over there."

I look over, seeing whom she's talking about. I've seen him around. He's got a smug countenance that puts me off. "And does Roxy report to him?"

"No, just—"

“Then that’s going to have to stop. Matt can get his own stuff, don’t you think?” I ask, glancing back at Hannah.

Hannah nods, smiling a little. “That’s what I always say, but he tries to use his seniority to get her.”

‘What’s his position?” I ask. “I don’t know the full chain around here just yet.”

“I honestly have no idea. He’s Byron’s buddy, that’s all I know,” Hannah says.

I’m going to have a talk with Matt, I think inwardly while shrugging. “Thanks. You have yourself a good weekend,” I say, holding back my grin. If things go right, I’ll probably be seeing her tonight if I can convince Roxy to come to the club.

“You too, Mr. Stone.”

I leave and take the elevator to the second floor, where I see the signs for the mail room. I don’t see her when I go in, and I wonder for a moment if Hannah’s lied to me. But then I see her, down the hall with a stack of papers in hand. I pick up my speed and catch her just before the elevator doors close.

I stick my foot in the doors before it can close completely and step inside. Roxy’s lips part in surprise when she sees me, and she practically stumbles back against the wall. “Mr. Stone,” she breathes. “What . . .?”

I grin as I press the *Close* button, then the button for the fitness center. As soon as the doors meet, I turn and advance toward her, caging her in with one hand on either side of her. She shrinks further against the wall as nerves pulse from her in waves.

Her perfume wafts to my nostrils. I love the fragrance, a serious yet still light tone. She even has sultry makeup to go with it. I can’t help it—being this close to her and looking into her beautiful eyes, my cock grows in my pants.

“You’ve been avoiding me,” I say. “Why?”

She ducks her head. “We agreed that we’d be professional.”

“I didn’t agree to anything,” I counter. “*You* said we should be professional.” I know I shouldn’t be doing this. I’m her boss and I am dangerously over the line on sexual harassment if she wants to nail my ass. But I don’t think I can abide by the rules. “I *don’t* agree.”

She’s panicked, her eyes darting back and forth as I move in closer, pressing my hard body against her, letting her feel me. All of me. “But, sir . . .”

“Stop calling me sir,” I growl, staring into her eyes. “You’re too innocent for that . . . unless you want me to give you a reason to call me sir.”

I tug on a wisp of her hair, moving my lips down to her neck, tasting her sweet skin again, my body throbbing with need. Usually, I can’t wait for the elevator to make it down to the gym, but this time, I reach over blindly, hitting the *Stop* button with my free hand, not caring about the dinging noise. “Oh, gawd,” Roxy groans, nearly melting into me as my lips trail her flesh. I can feel her heart pounding so hard in tandem with the blood pumping through my dick. “Yes . . .”

My whole body screams for me to take her. Right here and now, to hell with the consequences. If we got caught, the whole world be damned. It’d be worth it. She’s worth it.

I reach down, grabbing her ass and pulling her skirt up, squeezing her ass with my right hand as I nibble and suck on her lips, feeling her submit to my insane desire. And it is insane. Seeing an employee is one thing. But fucking her in the elevator is a good way to find myself fired.

Still, I slide my knee between hers and spread her legs. She moans, grabbing my head and kissing me fiercely, gasping as the bulge of my cock in my pants rubs against the satiny slickness of her panty-covered pussy. “We can’t . . .”

“We are,” I growl, staring in her eyes. “You wanted me . . . you got me, Angel.”

I grind my cock against her, staring into Roxy’s eyes as her hips start taking over, riding the bulge of my cock. Even through the cloth, her pussy is white hot, and I thrust against her, dry humping her. Grinding against her, I can feel my cock throb, and I don’t care. I’m tempted to pull back, undo my pants, and bury myself inside her. Our tongues twist and taste each other as I pin her against the elevator wall, our bodies needing it.

I can feel her start to tremble, shaking as I push her harder and faster, and I thrust harder, staring in her eyes as she digs her fingers into the back of my neck, moaning thickly. “Jake . . .”

“Come for me, Angel,” I growl, grinding into her. It’s all she needs, and she bites her bottom lip, shaking and whining softly as she comes. “My turn.”

I let her down to turn her around, pushing her lush body up against the wall of the elevator so I can free my cock. It’s throbbing, and I can feel the precum soaking my boxers. I need her so badly. “Bend over.”

She does, and I realize I don’t have a condom, but I’m so fucking hard

that I don’t care. I’m going to fuck her anyway. I almost do, but she’s saved by the phone ringing. Fucking cockblocking Building Security. I pick up the phone. “Is everything okay?” a voice asks.

I step away from her, straightening my tie and fighting down my desire. My cock is raging hard in my pants, and I know that my underpants are ruined. Fuck it, I’m going to the gym anyway, and right now, I’ve got some extra motivation for my workout. “Yes, just a bit of nausea, thank you,” I say, hanging up the phone and starting the elevator again. I turn to Roxy, who’s still gasping. “Tonight is a special night at the club.” I omit telling her it’s karaoke night. “I expect you to be there. And wear something flashy.”

Her eyes seem to scream, *But what about our agreement?* despite the fact that we almost just fucked in an elevator. The car reaches the gym level, and with a ding, the doors open. Finally, Roxy speaks up. “What time?”

With one last look, I step out, grinning victoriously. “Make it eight thirty. I’ll see you then.”

The doors start to close, and just before they do, she flashes me a bit of her saucy grin. “Yes, sir.”

Oh, she’s gonna get it.

ROXY

“What happened to strictly business?” Hannah scolds me as we walk into our apartment after work and I toss my jacket on the couch. Squatting, I pull off my work heels and toss them onto the floor before I sag into the couch, exhausted by the half hour of bickering.

“And I have been!” I argue. “But I can’t help that he cornered me and ordered me to go.”

“Ordered you?” Hannah says, pulling off her heels and throwing them across the room and nearly hitting Mr. Felix, who goes scrambling away with a feline yowl of outrage. “What is he, your daddy?”

“No, but he’s my boss!” I groan, laying my head back on the cushion, hoping to keep the headache that’s threatening to break out behind my eyeballs from turning into a migraine.

“Yeah, but this isn’t something you had to say yes to!”

“He didn’t give me time to say no,” I half lie. “He walked off before I could say anything.”

Besides, the truth is, the way he made me come left me breathless. I still haven't gotten over how good it felt to feel that big, hard cock rubbing up against my . . .

"You just want to go," she accuses with a smirk on her face, pulling me out of my lustful thoughts. "Admit it."

It's true. I can't even work up the energy to disagree. All week, I've been avoiding him, trying my best to do what needs to be done. But after that move he pulled in the elevator . . . shit. I have to go. He dropped in on me and tempted me. Now I'm like a bee that's going after her honey.

"Anyway, I'm going to get ready," I say ending the conversation without admitting anything, but my eyes give it away. She's right and she knows it. "Tonight, yes, I'm going," I say when I'm not facing her. I laugh. "Don't worry! I won't overdo it."

Hannah yells, "You lowdown, dirty tramp!"

I laugh, going into my bedroom. *Wear something flashy*. Jake's words come back to me. Flashy? Oh, I know flashy. In fact, I'm pretty sure I've still got some of my club wear somewhere in here. I never throw anything out. I go plunging into my closet, reminding myself that someday, I have to clean and organize all this shit, when I see it. *My* dress. It was a gift from some of the guys at Trixie's when I was getting scouted for a record deal. Thigh-length and sparkly, it's flowy and flirty but still clings to my curves, molding itself against my breasts and making me look hot. Quickly stripping, I wish the dress had space for a bra, but there isn't. I'm just going to have to go all-natural. It makes me feel sexy, my nipples hardening in anticipation before I go hunting for my naughtiest silver and white thong and let the dress pour over my shoulders and down.

I find the matching heels for this thing and slide them on, checking myself in my mirror. A quick tousle of my hair, and I look at myself again, stunned. "Damn," I murmur, grinning. Here is what I've been missing. Here's the Roxy who used to make people scream my name, and not just the few lucky men in bed. I do a quick little touchup of my makeup around my eyes and walk out, twirling as I do, showing off with a spunk I haven't felt in a long time. "All right girl, whatcha think? Will I blow up the club or what?"

"Okay. Fuck this shit!" Hannah, who's sitting on the couch, yells when she sees me. Without another word, she disappears into her room. I can hear her mumbling that I'm making a huge mistake and should listen to her, and I can tell she's getting dressed. In minutes, she comes back in a similar sparkly

getup and heels. “Take that, bitch!”

She struts in front of me, popping a hip in my direction. “As you can see, you’re not the only one with an ass around here.”

I laugh. At least she’s given up on lecturing me. “So you’re going?” I ask incredulously. “And where the hell did you get that?”

“Just from that thrift store downtown, and you’re damn right. Someone’s gotta keep you out of trouble and show you how to do it. And someone’s got to protect the men from Roxy’s Raging Hormones!”

I laugh. “You could’ve at least worn something different. Copycat.”

Hannah scowls at me. “Copycat? Girl, please. I look good. Better than you! Don’t I, Mr. Felix?”

Mr. Felix, who is perched on the coffee table, jumps off it and crawls under the couch to the point where only his eyes are peeking out. I laugh hard. “I guess that answers your question. He knows the difference between class and ass.”

“You little bastard!” Hannah rages, pointing at Felix as she goes for her keys. “I’m serious, nothing but dry food from the dollar store for you, the cheapest I can find!”

I laugh uproariously as we leave our apartment.

We get into Hannah’s car, and on the way over to the club, she resumes her preaching. Thankfully, for my head, to a lesser extent.

“Remember, whatever happens,” she says as we park, “keep it cute or put it on mute. Just don’t go home with him. Let's have our fun or whatever.”

I roll my eyes, closing the door. At least this time, we’re in the main parking lot, even though it’s still pretty packed. “Yes, yes . . . I’ve heard this all before! Please shut up, Mother!”

We climb the steps to the door, where I see John from my last visit on door duty. He gives me a respectful nod again and a slight smile. “Miss Price, it’s good to see you again. Mr. Stone left instructions that he’d be waiting in the VIP section. Is this Hannah?”

Jake must’ve known I’d bring her. Hannah bites her lip, and I can see she’s into John a little bit. I get it. He’s handsome and charming in that mysterious kind of way, and anyone who could work security at a place like this has to know how to handle themselves. “Hi.”

John chuckles and opens the door. “Hi. Enjoy yourself.”

We go inside, and I’m immediately struck by how packed the club seems. There’s a trickle of energy threading its way through the crowd, and I feel

more beautiful than even the first night I was here. There's joy in the air, joy and excitement, and while I don't know why, I can't help but be infected by it.

"Come on," Hannah says, smiling too as she tugs me toward the stairs to the upper level. "Hey, you know the doorman?"

"His name's John, and that's all I know." I laugh, following her up the stairs. We reach the VIP section, and my heart stops when I see Jake. He's sitting in a huge semicircular couch, Nathan relaxing next to him. The glass table in front of them has wine bottles and glasses and ice. Jake looks like a vision dressed in black pants and a red dress shirt, a hint of his muscular chest visible. Hot desire shoots through my blood as I look at him, barely noticing Nathan, who is grinning deviously.

"Who's that?" Hannah asks, bringing me back to reality. "The other guy."

"That's his friend I told you about. The money man?"

"He's too short for me," she whispers. "Don't care about the money."

"But he has a big personality and maybe . . ." I start.

Hannah rolls her eyes. "Oh, please. Gimme some credit, I'm not *that* shallow."

"Ladies, ladies," Nathan says in greeting. "Or should I say angels? Wow, I have never been more wrong about my first impression of someone."

I laugh, shaking hands with Nathan while Jake gets up, coming over and shaking hands with Hannah before putting a hand on my lower back. "Nathan's right, you both look stunning," he says before whispering in my ear. "And you truly look amazing," he says, his voice dripping with desire. "My Angel."

Being called Jake's angel makes my knees quiver, and I'm glad when he leads me over to sit down, the boys in the middle while Hannah and I take the outsides. I'm aware more than ever of Jake as his leg presses against my thigh, and I'm glad when Nathan leans forward and pours everyone a glass of champagne. "To a second successful week of Club Jasmine, and to wrong first impressions."

"Not all first impressions are wrong," Hannah says, toasting with us. "The place still looks just as awesome as it did last Saturday."

"Well, of course. I'm still here," Nathan says with a laugh, sipping his champagne. "And with you and Roxy here, it has class, too."

I half choke on my champagne, laughing at the similarity to the joke Hannah and I had earlier, coughing a little before setting my glass down.

“Sorry . . . don’t mean to make an ass of myself.”

Hannah must be remembering the same thing, because she starts laughing, thankfully without a mouthful of champagne to choke back, and she leans against the couch. “So, Nathan, Roxy tells me you’re the brains behind the place?”

“Hey!” I protest, but Nathan chuckles.

“No, it’s a team effort. He’s got the show, and I’ve got more than enough go.”

Jake shakes his head, leaning back. He teases, “Put a pretty lady on his arm in public, and he’s Mr. Confidence. Just be careful, Hannah. Get him alone and you might find yourself disappointed.”

We talk back and forth, relaxing and having fun, and while I can see Hannah likes Nathan, there’s not really sparks there. We finish our glasses of champagne when suddenly, Nathan gets up. “Excuse me guys, I’ve gotta do my announcement.”

Without pausing, Nathan hurries to the stairs, leaving me confused.

“What’s that about?” Hannah asks, thinking the same thing I am.

Jake bends over and whispers something in Hannah’s ears. She looks at me, lit up like a light bulb, grinning a secret smile.

“Hey what was that all about?” I ask, wondering what the hell Jake and Nathan have cooked up.

Jake’s smile is all mystery. “You’ll see.”

Just as I’m about to open my mouth, I hear Nathan’s Bronx accent amplified on a microphone, and I turn, seeing him on stage. “What’s up, Club Jasmine?”

There’s a cheer from the crowd, and Nathan grins. He’s got enough personality to look seven feet tall on stage. “It’s been a hell of a week, guys. And today, my partner and I were trying to think of what we could do to say ‘Thank you’ to everyone who’s been coming to Club Jasmine. And we came up with an idea we think you’ll like. A way to give a little back to you.”

I sit forward, intrigued. Nathan continues. “So tonight, we’re holding an impromptu karaoke contest. For the next half hour, you can sign up at the bar. And while this is supposed to just be fun, the winner tonight gets a thousand dollars.”

The buzz is huge, and less than a minute later, some guy’s up on stage, belting out Bon Jovi. While he’s got energy and is having the time of his life, I think, he can’t sing for shit. “Jesus, my ears are bleeding!” Hannah yells,

covering her ears. “Make it stop!”

Jake laughs. “I’ve heard worse. You should hear Nathan!”

The first guy finishes, and next up on stage is a girl. She’s just as terrible, although she can shake her ass like it’s nobody’s business, so she gets plenty of applause as she caterwauls her way through *Break Free*.

Still, even though almost nobody can really sing, they’re having a great time. I’m feeling it, the itch in my toes and the thrum in my chest as each tone deaf contestant gets up there. Yeah, none of them are singers and they know it. But they’re up there, they’re performing and having a ball . . .

Nathan gets back on stage. “Jasmine, thank you. You guys are bringing it! Now, I have somethin’ special. She hasn’t signed up, but I think up next is my new friend over here.”

Suddenly, the spotlight shines up on us, and I’m blinded. It still hadn’t clicked until that moment, and I turn to stare at Jake in horror. “You did this!”

Jake shrugs. “Worked, didn’t it?”

I cross my arms over my chest. “No way, I’m not going!”

“Get your ass up there,” Hannah says. “You know you want to!”

Hannah’s right, the stage is calling to me. I can feel it pulling me. But I don’t move, setting my face. Hannah gets up and runs down to the stage. I don’t think she’s been in on this, but you could’ve fooled me. It damn sure seems it. The crowd roars as she snatches the mic from Nathan and starts shoving him off stage. “Go on, they’ve seen enough of your ass!”

The crowd laughs, and Hannah holds up a hand. “Guys, I wish I were the singer Nathan here was talking about, but I’m just the eye candy.”

There’s a few whistles about that, and Hannah grins. “Yeah, thought so. Listen, the person who is supposed to be down here is my best friend and roommate. She used to be a professional, so I think it’d be unfair to let her win the money. This is just for the love of singing. Now, I never actually saw her perform, but I’ve heard her sing around the apartment, and this bitch can sing!”

I blush, and Jake leans over. “Just one song. For me, Angel?”

I turn to him as Hannah continues. “So what I need from you guys, we need to give her some motivation. Roxy . . . Roxy . . . Roxy . . .”

The crowd picks up the chant, and Jake leans in again. “Okay, not for me. Do it for yourself.”

Jake’s closeness and the crowd’s chants leave me tingling, and finally,

blushing furiously, I nod. “Fine!”

I get up, and I feel Jake behind me, escorting me down the stairs, his hand light on my lower back again. In my heels and outfit, I feel sexy. But most importantly, I feel special. The crowd goes nuts as I reach the steps, and Jake leans in again. “You can do this. Go knock ‘em dead.”

He gives me a kiss on the cheek, and I get on stage, waving. “What’s up, Club Jasmine?”

I see the teleprompter, and I start thinking of some of the songs I know by heart, when suddenly, Hannah goes over to the DJ, whispering in his ear. *Oh, shit. What the hell is she going to put on?*

The music starts, and I panic, recognizing the raunchy classic *Milkshake* almost immediately. She *would* do that. One fucking time singing it half drunk for Mr. Felix, and this is what I get? Oh, my God, Hannah. I’m gonna kill you.

The crowd’s into it, though, and I feel forced to perform, moving my body to the sexy high-energy beat.

I move on stage, singing my ass off, and I feel it. The buzz inside me grows into a fire as I see the crowd’s reaction. At first, the audience sits there, surprised. People start looking at each other as if shocked I can actually perform, then they start getting into it, singing with me.

I get into it even more and start shaking my ass, my confidence building as I work the stage. It feels like old times again, and the crowd roars as I switch voices, a talent I picked up because I love so many group numbers, going from a low contralto to a high pitch and back as I play the various parts.

The crowd is jamming, getting into the song and loving it. I even see a few couples start dancing together, grinding, and one small group working it. They’re good. They could totally be dancers on stage.

As the last notes fade, I’m covered in sweat, but the crowd roars their approval, and I raise my hands, thanking them. “Would y’all like to hear some more?”

The crowd screams. “Roxy! Roxy! Roxy!”

I grin and go over to the DJ, taking a minute to write down four songs and swig some water before coming back on stage. The next song starts, and I grin at Jake as I start with the popular club jam, Rihanna’s *This Is What You Came For*. It might be more electronic than what I normally sing, but the crowd loves it, and some are even singing along before I take it even more

naughty, Britney Spears' *Toxic*, and then one totally non-sexy but fun song, *Uptown Funk*.

I'm covered in sweat as the crowd roars again, and I feel my breath rushing in and out of my lungs. "Wow, thank you, guys. Now, I'd like to wrap up the same way I always did at Trixie's with something a little slower. So if you don't mind . . ."

The DJ starts the song again, the sultry, sexy tones coming through, and I'm glad that it calls for breathy singing, because right now, *Dangerous Woman* is about all I've got the lungs for. Still, I launch into it, and as I hit the end bits, the crowd's loving it, hands in the air, and even the people at the bar are on their feet.

When I'm done, I have to almost stagger off stage, where Jake catches me coming down the steps. I'm literally slick with sweat, but he doesn't care, pulling me close and kissing me hard on the lips. His arms are so strong as I kiss him back, letting him almost carry me to a waiting chair.

"I'm out of shape for this. How'd I do?" I ask. It's the first question I always ask coming offstage.

Jakes eyes burn with desire, but he grabs a bottle of water, handing it and a towel to me. "You were absolutely incredible."

"Karaoke night was a hit!" Nathan crows. He looks at me. I've recovered enough that I've rejoined everyone upstairs in the VIP lounge as the club closes. "Jesus, Roxy . . . if you can sing like that, what are you doing working in the same shithole as Jake? You should be on a stage selling out stadiums!"

"Trust me, I tried," I say, feeling the pang of regret that comes with his words. "But when it's not paying the bills . . ."

"Fuck that noise," Nathan says as I shrug. "If I had a voice like yours, I'd crash a record exec's office and say you only need ten seconds before you'll wanna sign me."

If only it were that easy, I think inwardly. "What can I say? A&Rs are assholes."

Hannah, who's had a few too many Little Mermaids, giggles. "Hey, can I get another? I'm not ready to give up!"

I shake my head, knowing I'm going to have to take Hannah home. Besides, her last comment sort of stings, even though I know she wasn't talking about me. I didn't want to give up either. But in an industry where if you haven't made it by twenty as a woman, you're almost never going to

make it, I just couldn't face it anymore. Hell, some of the songs I sang tonight are damn near golden oldies, and the girl at the top of the charts this week wasn't even born when *Toxic* came out.

"Yeah, well . . . listen, can we leave Hannah's car here overnight? I don't think she's good to drive."

Jake, who's been smiling with Nathan, looks over. "Sure, but what's wrong?"

"Nothing," I lie, feeling a wave of depression start to creep in. "I'm just exhausted. I haven't done that in a long time."

Jake seems to understand. "Would you like to go home, then?

"I'd appreciate it," I say honestly. "But Hannah . . ."

"Babe, I'm fine," Hannah says, and I can see she's 'happy drunk' but not 'stupid drunk'. "You sure you're okay, though?"

I make sure my voice is convincing. "I'm okay, just tired."

"Okay then, go on, get out of here and get some rest. I'll be along in a little bit."

"But I can't just leave you here. How are you getting home?" I ask, but Hannah waves it off.

"Honey, don't worry about me!" Hannah assures me. "I'll get a cab if I need to. But what I do need right now is another Mermaid!"

Nathan laughs. "One more and then I'm cutting you off. After that, black coffee. Owner's orders," he teases. "Don't worry, Roxy. I'll call her a cab or take her home myself if she wants."

"Thank you, Nathan," Jake says. He stands up and takes me by the hand. "Come on, Angel. I'll make sure you get home safely."

JAKE

"You were amazing on stage," I tell Roxy, turning left. I'm driving her back to her place, glad that I only had a few drinks. Roxy did too, but she's exhausted. The set on stage gave her a huge high that's now crashing on her. She's been quiet since leaving the club.

Thinking about Roxy, I'm still blown away. Her voice was pure heaven. She worked the stage like a pro. Every time I thought she couldn't do more, she did. Watching her sway her hips to the beat heated my blood. Three times, I had to pick my jaw up off the floor when she dropped it down on

some of the songs, never missing a note as she did moves I don't think are legal in some states.

Even more than how hot she was, watching her on stage ignited a crazy desire inside me. I want to help her. I mean, it wasn't like I thought she was lying about the other club. I was sure she could hold a tune. But watching her tonight . . . she really has talent.

"Roxy?"

"Thank you," she says quietly. Something is on her mind. I saw it in her eyes, the disappointment when Nathan was complimenting her. It was like it only made her more depressed.

"What's wrong? The crowd loved you."

I loved you, I think inwardly, remembering how she looked so in her element. But those three words are too close to something else, and I don't want to have any confusion.

Roxy sighs, leaning her head against the window, looking out at the lights. "It just brought up memories, that's all. Reminded me of everything I went through."

My heart breaks for her. Her desire is one of those that sits right next to her soul, maybe even *in* her soul. Not having it is making her sick. I wish I could do something. I don't know anything about the world of music, but I'd learn just for her. "You did so well out there."

"I'll admit it was fun and all. And the crowd gave me life. But after the adrenaline wore off, it kind of hit home. I'm not angry at you, Jake, but maybe I should've never done it."

I'm speechless. It hurts to hear her say these words. I thought the exact opposite would happen. I was hoping that by showing her how good she is, she'd feel a jolt of energy again.

Roxy turns to look at me. "I'm not like you, knocking everything I try out of the park. I tried my hardest. Oh, my God, the number of hours I worked on my voice, doing lessons and sticking to diets to make sure I wasn't just overlooked because of that alone. And you know what I've got for it?"

"No," I reply, stopping at a red light.

"I've got a stack of demo CDs fifteen inches high. They'll never be heard."

I cringe inside, hating the defeat in her voice. "Did something happen to make you question your confidence in yourself?"

Roxy nods, looking in her lap. "Well, I've never told anyone this. But I

did get an interview with this record exec while I was finishing my degree. He said he worked for a subsidiary of one of the major labels. He wanted to hear my voice, said he listened to my demo CD. I borrowed my stepfather's car and drove five hundred miles to this guy's office. I thought maybe he'd want to listen to me sing with a band, or maybe in person, so I took the time to work up my best piece in three different genres. I could do fast pop, a ballad, or one of those tearjerker songs."

"Sounds like you took it seriously," I admit. "What happened?"

"I didn't even get to sit down before the guy said he'd get me a deal . . . if I gave him head. He said I'd get a Grammy inside of two years if I fucked him."

"Son of a bitch!" I half growl, clenching the steering wheel angrily. "I've always heard the rumors of shit like that."

"So yeah. I told him the only way his dick was getting off was by being jammed in his own ass. I'm pretty sure he spread rumors about my being difficult to work with after that, but I don't know that for sure. I just know all interest whatsoever dried up after that. I ended up going back to college, then applying for Franklin Consolidated. The rest is history."

Roxy falls silent as I drive the rest of the way to her apartment. I know this building. It's a great place. Not quite as good as my penthouse, but it's a good building.

"I guess this is it," Roxy says, reaching for her purse. "Can you make sure Hannah gets here safely?"

"I will," I say. I was gonna go back to the club, but now . . .

"Goodnight," she says, getting out. Earlier, she was ready to take me right there in the club. I could see it, but now she's down and I can't help but feel responsible.

"Wait," I say, getting out of my car. "Roxy, wait!"

Roxy turns, looking at me suspiciously as I approach, and I know she's distrustful of me right now. After that story about the record exec, I'm sure she sees me like I'm a snake.

"Let me walk you up at least?" I ask. I can't let her leave like this. She needs something to unleash all that emotion on.

"I don't know," she says, but I ignore her, taking her hand.

I hit my remote on my car, glad I parked in a visitor's slot. Then again, Roxy's worth a ticket and a tow.

She grips my hand back, and I tug her gently to come on. "I mean, the

place is a mess," she finally says.

"I'm not worried about your dirty socks," I reassure her.

"And then there's Mr. Felix . . ." she says, giving me a half smile and a sigh. "My cat."

We get to the elevator, and I'm reassured when Roxy hits the button for her floor. She doesn't let go of my hand when the door opens, and instead, we walk down the short hallway, Roxy fishing her keys out and unlocking the door.

"Welcome," she says, and I'm immediately greeted by the yowling of a big orange cat that goes streaking away from me at first sight. "That's Mr. Felix."

"I see he doesn't like me," I joke, closing the door behind me.

"Don't worry, he doesn't bite. He does scratch, though, so make sure you're on your best behavior."

I laugh, and Roxy smiles. She lets go of my hand to hang her purse on the coat hook near the door, giving me a look before walking over near the couch, which has a great view of the floor-to-ceiling window and the skyline around us. I walk over, admiring the view. "This is a nice place."

"Hannah and I make ends meet, but not much more."

"You said your stepfather's got money," I note, turning around. "He doesn't help out?"

"He would in a heartbeat, but I don't need it," she declares. "It's nice to know I have a backup if something ever happened, but I'd rather handle things myself."

I don't respond. Instead, I lean in, kissing her on impulse. It's deep and soft, not the hot passion of that first night or the seductive intensity of the elevator moment we dangerously shared at work. I'm kissing her because it feels so right, and Roxy kisses me back, her tongue touching mine, feather light.

"Jake . . ." she whispers, putting her hands on my chest. "You're my boss. You need to leave. We can't keep this up."

I look into her eyes again, my hands tightening on her waist as I pull her closer. "I know I should . . . but I don't want to. You're driving me crazy. You're all I think about. I don't know if I care about shoulds and should-nots."

Roxy looks like she's about to protest when suddenly, she melts into my arms, her arms coming up around my neck to kiss me hard. This time, the

passion, the need is immediate, and I push her against the window, my hand running under the hem of her dress to cup and squeeze her ass as I trail kisses over her lips and down her neck.

"Oh, God, this is . . ." Roxy moans as she runs her fingers through my hair.

"This is right," I whisper as I tug at her ear with my teeth, pulling her closer. "I need you."

"What if Hannah comes back?" Roxy moans, running her fingernails over my neck, pushing my shirt back a little as I squeeze her ass and move back to kissing her lips. "What if she walks in?"

"We just got here. She's not going to be home anytime soon," I growl, pulling her away from the window. "But we can still go to your bedroom . . . or the sofa, if that's too damn far."

I pick Roxy up. She feels like she weighs nothing in my arms as I carry her across to the couch. I set her down, and she lifts her dress for me. I'm stunned to my knees as her beautiful body is exposed to me.

I lean forward, pulling her into me as I kiss down her neck to her breasts, finding her right nipple and nibbling on it, the light bites making her gasp and moan. "Jake . . . oh, fuck."

I let my tongue tease the stiff nub of her nipple. It's perfect, tender and responsive. My cock throbs and my heart pounds as Roxy moans to every touch of my tongue, and when I start sucking on her nipple, she's shuddering, her hips bucking in the nearly see-through white panties she's still wearing.

"Oh, fuck, Jake . . . don't stop."

I reach down, sliding my hand inside her panties while I suck harder. Roxy throws her head back, gasping as I trace the wet outline of her pussy until I find her clit, lightly rubbing my thumb over it until she cries out. I look up at Roxy as her breasts quiver at the power of her orgasm. "Holy shit."

"Just getting started. I need to see you, taste you," I growl, tugging her panties down. She's glistening, soaked in the light of the overhead lamp, and before she can even take another breath, I devour her, sucking and licking her pussy. I run my tongue deep inside her, savoring her wetness until I'm moaning even more, ravenous for her.

"Jake . . . fuckfuckfuck," Roxy moans incoherently, tugging on my hair as she grinds her pussy into my hungry lips. "That's it, baby, that's how I like it."

"Mmm, your milkshake *is* bringing me to the yard," I half tease as I pull

my tongue out to lick her clit. It's perfect, and at the first flicker of my tongue over the tip, she lifts her hips, letting me slide my hands underneath her ass cheeks and not allowing her any respite.

There's something about Roxy that drives me to new levels of passion and hunger. Growling, I suck and nibble at the tender button, my ears ringing with her cries as I push her, squeezing her ass even as my tongue flutters over her clit, circling it and driving her higher and higher.

My cock throbs in my pants, and I'm glad that I've already given her one orgasm, because the way I feel, I don't know how long I'm going to last once I get inside her. Suddenly, Roxy pulls my head back, almost as if she senses my worry. "Fuck me! Pull your cock out and fuck me!"

I grin as I hurriedly undo my belt and yank my pants down, my cock standing thick and proud. I pull again, buttons flying as I tear my shirt off.

I don't care. All I see is Roxy as she holds her long, perfect legs open for me, her pussy calling to me as I line myself up. I stop, just before taking her, realizing I don't have a condom. I hadn't thought of it. "Roxy . . ."

"In my bedroom nightstand," she says, knowing what I'm thinking. "It's the room on the right. And hurry. If you don't fuck me now, you're never getting another chance," Roxy growls.

I practically run, grabbing a condom and getting back to her as fast as I can. Who am I to deny a lady what she needs? She's writhing on the couch, moaning for me to hurry. With a deep growl, I slide it on in one smooth motion. I take a deep breath, then thrust forward, filling her in one long stroke that leaves us both wide-eyed. Her pussy is perfect, gripping me and massaging my shaft as I stay deep inside her, grinding my hips against her as I claim her. Never have I felt anything like it, and I pull back, pausing for a moment before I sink into her again, relishing the sensation. I moan deeply as Roxy wraps her legs around me, both of us lost in a haze as our bodies fall into rhythm.

I thrust hard and deep, each stroke of my cock making Roxy's body shake as I pound her into the couch. Reaching up, I grip the back of her head as my lips find hers and we kiss hungrily. My hips stroke over and over into her, slapping against her legs and ass as I abandon myself. She's perfect, squeezing and clenching around my cock so tightly that it feels like my balls are going to explode.

With each hard, driving stroke, Roxy's eyes darken and her mouth drops open, her body overwhelmed by the feeling of what I'm doing to her. There's

no breath for words, just the harsh pants and grunts of two people meeting in deep, intense, passionate sex. My fingers clutch the back of her couch as I give her everything I have, my muscles rippling and the sweat running down our bodies as we hurtle together toward what I know is going to be an earthshaking orgasm.

"Almost there," I grunt harshly with the last of my control, my cock throbbing and steely hard within her.

"Come for me, Jake!" Roxy moans, and I'm pushed over. I thrust deep into her, crying out as I come. She's right with me, and her body shakes as she comes around my cock. I kiss her, holding her close as I tremble, staying deep within her as I catch my breath.

I pull back and rip off the condom when we can finally breathe again, looking at her, and she realizes I'm looking for a trash can. "Over there." She points. As soon as I toss it in, I realize this may have been a mistake. We're not going to be the same at work after this.

Who gives a shit? The little voice inside me whispers as I pick up her exhausted body and carry her toward her bedroom. I didn't even notice before, but looking around, I can see the music posters adorning the walls. And next to her bed sits the pile of demo CDs she told me about earlier. *You want her. She's worth breaking the rules for.*

"I'm going to have to go," I whisper quietly as I stroke her angelic face. Roxy nods and gives me a hopeful smile. "I don't think Mr. Felix is happy with me as it is."

She smiles, looking at me with those same deep eyes. "Jake . . ."

"I know," I whisper, kissing her softly. I'm so tempted to stay, but I have to go. It just isn't the right time yet, and Sophie will probably wonder what the hell happened if I'm not there in the morning. "I'll see you Monday?"

"Monday," she murmurs, dozing off. I watch her fall asleep, and I slowly make my way out to the living room, where I grab my shirt off the floor and shrug it back on. I let myself out quietly, a new thought coming to my mind.

Fuck any rules. I don't care about any of that. All I'm thinking is that she's got the talent, and she needs to rediscover her heart for it.

ROXY

I come awake with a gasp, my heart hammering in my chest. For an

instant, I don’t know where I am. I reach for Jake, but I moan in disappointment when I realize he’s not here.

“It was just a dream,” I mutter. A dream in which Jake stayed the night, then served me breakfast in bed. Followed by the hottest morning cuddlefuck a girl could dream of.

“What’s the saying?” I yawn, stretching out my arms above my head and hearing my bones pop. “If it’s too good to be true then . . .” An ache runs down my side, bringing my mind back to last night.

I don’t know how long it was before Hannah came back in. She’d woken me up, but I dropped off again quickly.

I’ve never felt anything like what Jake and I did last night. It was amazing, the way his lips danced on my skin, the way electricity crackled from every touch. He was powerful, tender, demanding, and giving, all at the same time. I’ve never been driven so wild to demand that a guy fuck me. I blush as I remember telling him to fuck me.

“Those eyes,” I say to myself, lying back and putting my forearm over my eyes. “The way he touched me, the way he looked at me . . . he almost stopped my heart.”

There’s that nickname of his again, and as soon as the words come out of my mouth, I feel something I haven’t felt in a long time. Words and a tune start flowing through my head like a river.

I can’t stand this creep, where is my Superman?
He’s late, but I don’t give a damn.
One glance in his eyes, and I know what I need.
Gimme mouth to mouth, because he’s a total
Heartstopper.

I jump out of bed and grab a pen and notepad from my nightstand, scribbling down some lyrics as I hum the tune that’s running around in my head. It’s been a long time since I had the urge to write a song. I’ve always been more of a performer than a creator. But being with Jake seems to have inspired me.

“What are you doing?”

The words pierce my consciousness, and I let out a cry, my pen clattering to the table as I jump and look in the doorway. Hannah is staring at me, clearly hungover, with her hair in a disheveled blonde halo, looking like a

crazy cave woman. “Jesus, Hannah, you scared the shit out of me. Ever heard of knocking?”

“Sorry, I didn’t expect you to be working with Mr. Rabbit,” she half jokes. She comes over and flops on my bed, throwing her arm over her eyes and groaning melodramatically. “Shoot me, would you? I have the worst headache.”

“So much for being the responsible one,” I tease, closing my notebook after picking up my pen. “Talking shit about me, and you look like you got fucking wasted.”

Hannah’s mouth pinches as she keeps her eyes covered. “I’m a grown ass woman. I can do what I want. But it won’t happen again . . .”

The door creaks open, and we both jump and let out bloodcurdling screams. Mr. Felix stops and peers curiously back and forth between us, padding into the room before hopping up on the bed, looking at us both like he’d like to give us a long lecture on duties to the boss . . . namely, him.

“Jesus.” We both laugh. “Can we get any jumpier?”

Hannah lies back on the bed, still shading her eyes. “So how did you get home last night?”

She knows damn well how I got home. That’s not what she’s asking. “Jake drove me home, remember?”

Hannah lifts her arm, peering at me suspiciously. “And that’s all that happened?”

I do my best to keep a straight face. “Yes, what did you think might happen?”

Hannah grins painfully. “I don’t know, maybe you screwed him and actually killed him this time with that hungry pussy of yours? Is his body in the closet?” She gets up off my bed and goes over, yanking the door open and taking a look. “Yoo-hoo! Jake? You in here?” she calls. “If you’re alive, tap your foot. I’ll rescue you!”

“Oh, stop it!” I laugh. “He’s not here.” I grin, deciding to turn the tables on Hannah. “Speaking of getting hot and heavy, did you get down with Nathan?”

Hannah closes my closet, turning to look at me like I’m crazy. “You must be out of your damn mind. He’s cute and all, but he’s not my type.”

“Mmmhmm,” I say, unconvinced. “I don’t know, you were giving him a few looks like you were more than ready to ride his pony.”

Hannah growls. “I’m gonna kill you.” She starts toward the bed, then

stops, nodding at my notebook. “What were you doing, anyway?”

“Writing a song.”

Hannah gawks in surprise. “A song? Now I know something’s *really* going on. It’s Jake, isn’t it? He’s got you seeing stars.”

“No,” I reply, even as I blush. I’m a terrible liar when it comes to Hannah.

“Come on, spill it. No teasing, no bullshit.”

I look at Hannah, who’s got her arms crossed, then roll my eyes. “Okay, maybe he is the reason, but singing at the club last night awakened something in me that I didn’t think was there anymore. Something I buried, and I want to find it again.”

I expect Hannah to laugh at me, to call me silly or something. Instead, she bites her lip then gives me a sad smile. “Okay, babe. If you need it, then I’ve got your back. Just . . .”

“What?”

Hannah sighs. “Don’t fall in love with Jake, okay? I could see it in your eyes, in the way you performed. You weren’t there for the crowd. You were cock teasing him and loving it. But more than that . . . I saw the way you looked at him. Just, be careful.”

“I am,” I reply, and Hannah sighs again. “What?”

“Nothing. I’ve got your back.”

I bite my lip. “I know.”

At work the following Monday, I try to avoid Jake whenever I can. I don’t know why I’m doing it. I want to see him. I want to talk to him. I want to be with him.

Even though I try not to, I find myself stealing glances at him when he’s in his office. As he talks, as he gestures, everything he does, he’s sexy. He commands the room like he owns it. His confidence is pure arousal, and I can’t help but rub my thighs together as I try to get work done.

Also, I can't get the song out of my head, and I find myself scribbling lyrics whenever Jake is around. Not all of them fit in this song, but there are some that do.

“Keeping a diary over there?” Matt asks out of the blue while I’m in the midst of trying to write the song instead of working.

“What’s it to you?” I growl, snapping the notebook closed.

“You keep looking off into space lately, scribbling in that book. Got

someone on your mind?" He raises his eyebrows toward Jake's office, and it unsettles me. I'm sure he's just fishing. How the hell could he know anything?

"Why don't you mind your own damn business?"

Matt walks away, grumbling under his breath about moody bitches, and I'm pissed off. But more importantly, I'm wondering if he's actually picked up on something. If he has, other people probably have also.

After lunch, I get up and go knock on Jake's door. Elena's still out at lunch, but Jake just came back from downstairs, and if I'm going to have any private moments with him, this is the time.

"Come in!"

I step inside, closing the door quietly behind me. "Hey."

"Hey," he says back, giving me a smile that makes the warmth between my legs rise to a deep burn. I do my best to reserve myself, but it's hard. He looks so handsome with his tie loosened and his hair ruffled from a fresh shower. He just finished his lunchtime workout. Watching his biceps flex as he fixes his shirt and tie, I remember how his lips and hands felt all over my body. The tension is so thick, I want to run and jump into his arms, sweep the stuff off his desk, and have him take me right here on top of his blotter.

I blink, clearing my mind. I'm about to tell him that what happened in the elevator and later when we got down and dirty was a fluke, that it can't happen again. Suddenly, he grins, holding up a hand. "Wait, I can see what's in your eyes, and I'll let you tell me, but first . . . I have a proposition for you."

"What?" I ask, hoping and also not hoping it's for me to get on my knees under his desk. Because I just might do it if he asks.

"Nathan's been going gaga all weekend, and I have too. We want to put you as a drawing act. One night on the weekends. You said you love to sing. The pay would be good. Not better than here, but it's only one night a week."

I stand in shock. I hadn't expected something like this. Sexual? Sure. But to sing . . . "Oh, my God."

"The people loved you. Nathan and I were shocked by how many people requested for you to come back. Seriously, you should see the club's Facebook page. There's over three hundred likes to someone requesting that you sing some more. They want you."

His eyes gleam, seeming to say, *And I want you too.*

I breathe, still stunned. The tune of the song I've begun writing for him

hums in my head. Staring at his face, I realize I can't say no to him. I'm weak in the knees. But I also don't know if I should say yes.

"Well?" he says, taking his seat behind his desk and giving me that same smile. "I know you want this."

I stand there, leaning against his office door, uncertain. The fact is, music to me is like an addiction. It was so hard to walk away from it last time. I spent weeks unable to sleep on Fridays and Saturdays because those were my performance nights. I still wake up sometimes with a little voice inside me wondering where the stage is, where the crowds are.

If I do this, I don't want that to happen again. Jake doesn't know what he's asking for. I'll have to train again. Vocal exercises, getting my body back in shape to maintain the high energy performances that I have to do . . . wardrobe, practicing lyrics, all of it. How's it going to affect my work?

I tried the club scene before, and it went nowhere but having one club love me. This can't be much different. Sure, I'm excited right at this moment, and yeah, Club Jasmine loved me Friday night, but once people got used to me, it would die down. I'd be right back to being a local act and that's it.

Still, maybe it's enough. The idea of singing, of being on stage . . . even if it's not my name selling out big shows, it feeds a piece of my heart. When I sing, I put my soul out there, vulnerable and excited to see if the audience will respond with cheers. And I can see Jake genuinely wants me to do it. Damn me, there's a part of me that wants to please him, too. Finally, I take a deep breath and look into his expectant eyes.

"I'll think about it."

JAKE

I hate the smell of cigar smoke. Sure, it's got the whole alpha male mystique attached to it, but damn if most cigars don't smell like burning dirty undershirts.

Tell that to Nathan, though. "We're looking at recouping our investment and turning a working profit within six months," Nathan says over a haze of his cigar smoke. Thank God we're up here where nobody except security is allowed and the air conditioners can deal with his disgusting habit.

"Show me the money," I say, sitting back and rubbing my hands in relief that this is going well. I was half-expecting for us to fall flat on our faces. I knew the market. So many clubs fail. But everything is turning out better than I dreamed.

"We're killing it, Jake!" Nathan says, grinning while sipping on some champagne, "And with karaoke night being a success, I think we should adopt it regularly. By the way, did your girl say yes about doing weekends?"

My girl. The thought is strange, but I like the sound of it. After I tasted her, after I filled her up and carried her to bed, I know that Nathan's right. Even now, I can't stop thinking about her.

"She said she would think about it." I don't point out that she isn't my girl. She will be soon enough.

"Think about it?" Nathan asks, surprised. "Didn't you say she was crazy about singing? What gives?"

I think back to what she told me and what I saw in her room. "She has some hang-ups. She's been burned before. But I think she'll come through."

Nathan shakes his head and puffs some more cigar smoke toward the ceiling. "Shit, I hope so. Those people were in fucking love with her! She rocked that stage like nobody's business. Shit, Beyoncé who? Selena what? Fuck that skank bitch Miley Cyrus. I'm telling you, man, Roxy should be a household name! One name too. She's gonna be so big if you say Roxy, the whole fuckin' world knows who we're talkin' about."

I sit back, sipping my own champagne and chuckling to myself. It's funny how Nathan went from calling her a sleazy broad to this. But I don't blame him. Part of that is Nathan. He's always been one to do a lot of shit talking until he really likes you. Most of it is Roxy, though. Her taking this

gig will end up doing big things for her. I can just feel it.

I chuckle. “Brother, I totally agree. She is pretty amazing, isn’t she?”

Andre’s voice crackles over the small walkie Nathan carries. “Hey, I think that creepy dude is back at his shit.”

My heart jumps in my chest as we both leap to our feet, Nathan just a fraction of an inch faster in snatching the radio up. “Where?” Nathan almost yells.

Andre’s voice crackles back. “At the bar. Near the bathrooms. He’s wearing a fucking purple blazer. Can’t miss him.”

We both take off, Nathan running ahead of me, pumping his shorter legs as fast as they will allow. I’m behind him simply because I don’t want to send him tumbling down the stairs. It’s early still, and the club isn’t quite packed since it’s just a Thursday night. We reach the foot of the stairs and I reach out, grabbing Nathan’s shoulder. “Wait!”

“What?” he asks, turning. “Let’s go bust this motherfucker!”

“No doubt,” I reply, “but we need to make sure we don’t freak everyone out. Go chill, okay?”

Nathan takes a big breath but nods. “Fine, I’m chill. Now where is he so I can go unchill?”

We look, and I see him first at the bar, that loud blazer making him stand out. He’s pressuring some girl who’s saying no in heavily-accented English.

The game is up, though, when the girl’s eyes flicker over to Nathan and me in desperation and the guy turns. Seeing us, he takes off. Nathan flies through the crowd while I cut at an angle. He’s so busy looking behind him for Nathan that I barely have to do anything to grab his arm and spin him around, locking him in an armlock with my other hand grabbing the back of his horrendous jacket. “Shouldn’t have come back,” I say in a threatening tone.

“Let me go, man!” the guy whines, squirming in my grasp. “I didn’t do nothing!”

“You’re full of shit, you . . .” Nathan yells before he lowers his voice, getting up close to the guy as I start pulling him toward the door. “You’re fucking scum of the earth,” Nathan rasps.

Nathan leads the way to the side door as we drag the guy outside. I see John, one of the security guys, covering our back, which I’m glad for. The former Delta Force operative can make sure we don’t take things too far.

“Is this your thing, going around and drugging women in clubs?” Nathan

demands as I hold onto the guy. “How many?”

The guy sputters, trying to play it innocent. “I didn’t drug nobody. I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You’re lying, asshole,” I rasp in his ear, jerking him around. “I drank one of your little spiked beers. So Nathan, what do we do to him?”

“You already know my answer. I say eye for a fuckin’ eye,” Nathan growls, cracking his knuckles. “He wants to drug and fuck women? I say we make him a bitch.”

Nathan’s threat makes the man struggle wildly, and he jerks his head back, catching me on the lip. I feel my lip split, and I grunt in pain as I pull my head back, loosening my grip just enough that the guy breaks free.

He takes off, trying to make a run for it, but Nathan’s quick for his size and tackles him around the knees, taking him down to the ground. Before Nathan can move, though, the guy kicks Nathan in the shoulder and tries to get up before my flying bodyweight drives him onto his back on the concrete.

I pop him once in the face, his head rocking back and hitting the concrete. I rear back again, but Nathan grabs me, pulling me off.

“He’s done, man!” he says. “His head went down pretty hard. You keep going and you’ll be talking with the cops.”

He’s right. Adrenaline just kind of took over. “John, call the cops,” I say.

“Just a second,” Nathan says, turning and punting the guy as hard as he can in the ass. He howls in pain, and I gotta believe that a size eight pointy wing tip up your ass has to hurt. “Get this fucking piece of shit outta here!”

After the cops come by, we go back in the club, where we’re both treated to a standing ovation and cheer from the patrons—the story’s spread that fast. “See, brother?” Nathan says, patting me on the back. “Take out the trash, and the people love you!”

It’s just after midnight when I walk into my apartment. I know I look like hell. I’m wearing another torn shirt, and I’ve got a bruised hand to go with my busted lip. Icing it helped some, but I’m going to look strange in the office tomorrow.

As I step into the living room, I surprise Sophie, who quickly flips her tablet face down on the sofa. “Jake,” she says, jumping up, her eyes looking furtive and nervous. “I didn’t know you’d be back so early.”

I’m sure I just caught her doing something, but my brain is too overloaded to consider what it could have been. “It’s after midnight, Soph. What were you doing?”

Sophie's guilty look makes me more curious as she shifts from side to side. "I was just watching this gross video. You know, girl stuff, disgusting, really. You wouldn't wanna see it."

I can tell she's lying, but I'm too exhausted and emotionally drained to push the issue. Instead, I remind myself to keep a closer eye on her. "Well, you've got school tomorrow."

Sophie squints her eyes, peering at me. "Jake, your lip . . . what the hell happened to you?"

I shrug, not wanting to go into it. "Just some club business. Roughed up some douche."

"What the fuck?" Sophie asks, shocked. "Jake, you got into a fight?"

I shake my head. "Remember when I said I got drugged? Same asshole came in tonight, trying the same angle on some girl."

Sophie grins, going into the kitchen to return with a popsicle, which she hands to me. "Glad you got him."

I take the frozen treat gratefully. "I am, too. We already called the police, and the girl he'd been stalking tonight gave a statement. His ass is going down for a while."

I put the popsicle against my lip, sitting down on the couch. I pat the spot beside me, saying nothing when Sophie moves her tablet out of the way. She sits, curling her leg underneath her, and I give her a lopsided smile. "So what's been going on with you?"

"Oh, you know, just school work, the usual," Sophie says. "Oh, I got a B on that test you were hyping me on."

"Did you? That's great," I reply, feeling a little bit bad. I haven't been able to spend as much time with Sophie as I'd like. I've been so busy with the club, and when I have been home, I've been distracted so often by thoughts of Roxy. "And you're getting along well?"

"It's okay, really. I mean, I've been thinking of joining the track team, so I've been able to get along, make some new friends."

Track, huh? That is new for Sophie. "Well, I want you to know that I love you and as soon as I get a hole in my schedule, we're gonna do something special."

That makes Sophie grin, and she gives me a hug. "Oh, thank you, Jake! You know, I was really hoping you could take me to—"

Before she can answer, there's a buzz on my phone. "One sec," I say, holding up finger. I pull out my phone to see a text from Roxy."

Fuck it. I'm in. Next week?

"What's that?" Sophie asks curiously.

I shake my head. I knew she couldn't resist. I'll get that spark to ignite in her if that's the last thing I do. I quickly hit reply.

I knew you'd pull thru. Incidentally, we caught that creep. He won't be spiking anymore drinks. Talk details tomorrow at the club, nine thirty.

Buzz.

Thank God. I owe u 1. 9:30 OK.

"Jake?"

"Just some club business," I half-lie to Sophie, sitting back and relaxing on the couch with a satisfied sigh. I wrap my arm around her shoulder. "Now, where were you saying you wanted to go? I'm thinking Sunday would be a great time for some 'us' time."

ROXY

"Lalalala . . . la la lah lah-la," I sing, doing my vocal exercises to open my throat. Standing in front of the mirror in my room, I know I look stupid, but it's what I have to do. Ever since agreeing to perform, I've been getting my voice in shape, torturing Hannah and Mr. Felix with my late night and early morning exercises.

I'm going to have to change into my outfit soon. It's my first night where I perform my own set, and I'm feeling the nerves. "Mimimimimi . . . eeeeoooahhhchchch—" I cough and start choking a little. I pushed that last low note a little lower than I really needed to. "Fuck."

"Damn, girl, sounds like you're gargling a mouthful of cock," jokes Hannah. "Keep that up and Mr. Felix might decide to attack. He's about to lose it in here. He's rolling around and giving me faces."

Going to the door, I look over to see Mr. Felix mean mugging me, looking like he wants to scratch my face off. I've already learned to avoid making the 'ssss' sound with my vocal exercises if he's around. The last time I did it, he hissed back and nearly clawed my leg to pieces. This time, though, it helps. I place my hands on my hips and throw my head back and laugh. "Oh, I so needed that, thank you. I can't believe I'm so nervous!"

Hannah chuckles. "If it helps, I am too. Still can't believe you agreed to do this, but at the same time, I'm happy for you."

I’m excited. I still can’t believe I’m getting to do it again. I’d given up on it. And I know I shouldn’t have accepted Jake’s offer because of everything it entailed, but being up there on stage brought me back to life. That place in my spirit I thought I’d lost forever is back.

“Thank you, Hannah. And thank you for being there tonight.”

“Don’t thank me, just please don’t sound like this on stage? The free drinks can only go so far.”

I laugh and go get ready. I already know exactly what outfit I want to wear. It was the same one I wore for my best performance ever at Trixie’s. With a frilly, lightweight skirt that’ll flare some when I spin and a sparkly red top that hugs my curves, I feel sexy. I pull up the thigh-high sheer stockings and boots that complete the outfit, giving myself a once-over in the mirror. “Oh, yeah,” I tease, shaking my hair side to side. “I’m gonna have them in the palm of my hand!”

You know what you want in the palm of your hand . . . and in your mouth, my inner voice says, and I blush, thinking about it. *Kinda shaped like a microphone too, with a long, hard shaft and a flared head that you want to . . .*

I curse myself to focus on the task at hand. Just as I finish lacing up my left boot, my phone rings. Checking, I see it’s Mindy. “Hey, babe!”

“Ooh, someone sounds excited. What’s going on?” Mindy asks. I bite my lip. I haven’t told anyone about this, but Mindy’s always been supportive of me.

“Well, I’m getting ready for an event,” I answer.

“Oh? Who’re you going to see? I’m glad you’re going out to have some fun.”

“Uh, it’s for me,” I say nervously, holding my breath while I wait for her to reply. “Min?”

“Roxy, I’m so happy for you!” Mindy exclaims, and I feel relief rush over me. “I always thought your totally giving up singing was too much. So tell me, what’s the gig?”

“Nothing big, just a local nightclub,” I reply. “It’s a bigger place than Trixie’s, but really, it’s just a once a week little gig. About an hour total.”

“Just a little gig,” Mindy mocks me, laughing. “So you’re going to tear up the stage and break hearts for an hour. Remember, I’ve heard you. You’re gonna have everyone eating out of the palm of your hand.”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

Mindy laughs. “Come on, don’t be nervous. Just go out there, Rox the place out, and tell me all about it tomorrow, okay?”

“Okay. I promise, we’ll Skype tomorrow or something.”

From out in the other room, Hannah yells. “Move your fat ass! You’re gonna be late!”

Mindy laughs. “Yeah, you two match up. Okay, Roxy, love you. Talk to you later.”

“Love you too. Bye.”

Club Jasmine is packed, with cars stretching all the way down the street from the overflow lot. The line out the front is enormous, and I’m so thankful that Jake arranged for Hannah and me to be brought around the back.

“Nice to see you again, Miss Price,” John the security guy says. “And you too, Miss Fowler.”

“John, I’m beginning to feel like you’re my personal bodyguard around here,” I joke, trying to allay my nerves. It’s not working. I can feel my chest get tight and I’m starting to pant.

“Hey, Rox?” Hannah says, patting me on the shoulder. “Just relax. Get it together. You got this shit.”

“It’s harder than I thought it would be,” I say. “It’s been so long since I did a real show.”

“If it helps, I think you have an amazing voice,” John says as he passes Hannah’s keys to the valet. “You’ll do just as well tonight as you did before.”

“Yeah, what James Bond said,” Hannah jokes. “You performed great last time. There’s nothing to be scared about.”

I gulp, taking deep breaths as John leads Hannah and me through the back of the club. He leads us to a dressing room, opening the door. Jake’s inside, and he gets up, looking so fucking handsome in his black suit, emerald green shirt, and blood red tie. “You look amazing,” Jake says, even though I’m wearing a trench coat. “But what’s wrong?”

“Can you please tell Miss Heart Attack here that she is beautiful and she can sing the face off any diva?” Hannah says. “She’s been gargling cock all afternoon she’s so nervous.”

Jake looks at me with concern. “Should I be jealous? Do I need to beat someone up?”

I smile, and he pulls me into him, wrapping his arms around me and kissing me gently. His lips pressed against mine cut off my worries in an

instant, and I feel myself melt into him. He pulls back, looking me in the eyes, his voice low and comforting. “Go out there and kick ass. I’m rooting for you. I know you’re going to be great.”

Looking into his eyes, all I see is sincerity. He truly means it. His words and his touch and presence calm me down and my heart rate steadies. I feel safe in his arms. “I’ll do my best.”

“Oh, so that’s all it takes?” Hannah mock complains. “Fuck, next time, I’ll lay a kiss on you back at the apartment. It’ll save me some stress!”

I chuckle, looking up at Jake. “I don’t think so, Hannah.”

Jake smirks and lets me go. “Come on, Hannah. I reserved a spot in the VIP section for us to watch from. Let’s get up there and get ready.”

Jake and Hannah leave, John giving me a nod as he closes the door. I take off my coat and get ready, checking my makeup and sipping some water. Just as I finish stretching out, I can hear Nathan in the front of the house, getting everyone hyped.

There’s a knock on my door. It’s John. “Miss Price? You ready?”

I grin. For the first time, I see his face change expressions when he sees me in my stage outfit. “Let’s Rox.”

I go to the wings, swallowing my nerves as Nathan turns toward me. “And now, Club Jasmine, by popular demand . . . she’s baaack. Roxy!”

Swallowing my nerves, I go out on stage, waving to the lights. I can’t see shit. The lights are dazzling, and the crowd goes silent.

The crowd stares at me expectantly, and sweat beads my brow. Oh, my fucking God, I’ve never had stage fright in my life. I even worked the stage like it was nothing on karaoke night, but now I’m standing here like a petrified tree.

I clear my throat. I can see Jake and Hannah seated up above, Hannah giving me *come on* motions with her hands. I feel like I’m about to pass out when Jake gets up, strides to the railing, and calls out, “You got this, Roxy!”

There’s something in that voice, and I don’t know what I’m doing when I bring my mic up. “Okay, boys . . . hit it!”

The first song hits, and I feel lifted by the notes and by Jake’s eyes as I start with my first number, a club remix of the Tom Petty classic *American Girl*. The song’s fast. Even with a dance bridge where I shake my ass, it’s only four minutes, but it breaks the ice, and when the last notes hit, I feel it.

I’ve got the crowd.

“Okay, guys, thanks for the patience,” I joke, and they cheer as I grin out

at them. “Now, I’ve been racking my head, thinking of good songs for you guys. I started thinking about my roomie. So this one’s for the *second* baddest bitch in the building, Hannah!”

It’s not as well-known as most of my set, but the pulsing bass and lyrics of the RnB classic *Freak Like Me* gives me plenty of chances to do my thing, and the crowd is digging it. It’s a little dirty, sure, but damn if they’re not singing along until the very end.

The crowd dances as I move through my set. About halfway through, I gesture to Jake and Hannah, waving them down to the stage.

Jake’s grinning ear to ear when I spring the little surprise that’s been buzzing in my head. I whisper in Hannah’s ear, and she grins, nodding as she runs to the side of the stage, pushing Nathan and Jake. Nathan’s grinning, and Hannah comes back with two chairs, plopping them down.

“Now, I want to dedicate this next song to the guys who bring us this wonderful club.”

The music starts, and the crowd cheers as Rhianna’s *Rude Boy* starts playing. It’s a little slower than some of the stuff I’ve done, but I pour myself totally into the performance, ignoring everything but Jake as I circle him, grabbing his tie and pulling his head between my breasts before practically giving him a lap dance as I sing.

He brings his hands up on instinct, but I wink and move away, teasing him and making the crowd cheer more as I catch Hannah giving Nathan almost as dirty a dance. He’s got to be ready to have a coronary as hard as she’s grinding on him. I get through the chorus again before I work my way back over to Jake, reaching down and pulling his shirt open, allowing the whole club to feast their eyes on his pecs as I go back to grinding on his lap. Oh, my God, he’s so hard. I can feel him pressed against my ass as I sing, and he’s got me so turned on, if I’m not careful, I’m going to be giving Club Jasmine another kind of performance very quickly.

Love me, love me!

I reluctantly climb out of his lap and drop it low to the floor, letting him see my hips sway side to side as the last notes fade away, and the crowd goes apeshit. I glance back at Jake, whose face is beaded with sweat, but at least he’s not as pink as Nathan, who looks like he might have come in his suit pants as he grabs both chairs and hurries off stage. Hannah gives me a smirk and a wink as I thank the guys over the mic for being good sports. Jake gives me a look too, one that leaves my throat dry for an instant before I remember

. . . I've got one last song.

"Okay, Club Jasmine, now I've got a habit," I tell them, looking out at the happy crowd. "I'm such a big sappy romantic at heart, I have to end on a ballad. So . . . enjoy."

The first notes are almost soft and plaintive as they ring out over the club, but as I start the lyrics, everything goes quiet . . . I have them enthralled.

Maybe Celine Dion's made a whole career off power ballads, and sure, it might not be her most famous, but *Power of Love* is amazing to me, honest and poetic. I sing my guts out, and as I hit the high notes, the whole club erupts into cheers and applause so thunderous it almost drowns me out as I wrap up the song.

It's like a dream when I finish. The crowd is calling my name, wanting my attention. Suddenly, Jake is at my side, raising my hand and leading the applause. Getting off the stage, I'm almost swamped by people, Jake protectively next to me the whole time. People are coming up to me, giving me hugs, some even asking for my autograph. I'm barely aware, still wrapped in euphoria from my performance. Before I know it, Jake is taking me by the hand toward the back of the club. Luckily, I see Hannah is preoccupied and doesn't notice, because by the way Jake's moving, he has an idea in mind. The same fucking one I do.

Jake looks back at me, and the look he gives me is filled with need. I swallow, nodding as he leads me to the back, the same place where we were that first night. There's something magical about coming back here, almost like we're fulfilling an interrupted destiny.

I turn to Jake, who's looking at me with so much intensity that my knees weaken, and I sit down, unable to look away from him as he shrugs off his jacket and undoes his tie.

"Now . . . now you can send me all the way to heaven," he says, pulling his shirt off. He climbs onto the bed, urging me down, and I'm unable to resist, not wanting to either. His lips find my neck and I nearly melt into his arms. Should this be happening? I said it wouldn't, but as his tongue flickers along my jawline, all resistance is futile.

"Oh fuck," I moan, laying my head back as Jake runs his hand up my top and under my bra, his fingers finding my right nipple. His lips mash against mine again as we kiss hard, my hands pulling him down as he rubs his thumb over my nipple. I'm left moaning, my pussy throbbing as he holds me down on the bed, his greedy hands roaming over me and setting my skin aflame.

Suddenly, Jake rolls, pulling me on top of him. I blink, half-stunned, and look down at him. “What are you doing?”

“You said you could take me to heaven,” Jake teases, lifting my top. I raise my arms, shrugging out of it and my bra, leaving me topless but everything else on from the waist down. “I hope you weren’t lying to me.”

I grin, leaning down and brushing my nipples against his chest as I tease his lips with the tip of my tongue. “I never lie about that. Just be warned—once you’ve been to heaven with me, it’s all that will be on your mind.”

He smiles. “I have no doubt about that.”

I grind on top of him, feeling the bulge of his cock inside his pants as I roll my hips against him, nibbling on his neck. He brings his hands to my ass, squeezing and massaging my cheeks and making me moan. He pulls me up higher until my nipples are even with his lips, and I’m left breathless as he sucks and pulls on them with his teeth.

His right hand slips over my ass to tug my panties aside, and suddenly, he’s rubbing my pussy, lightning shooting from his fingers through the rest of my body and jolting up my spine. He rubs deeper, the edge of his hand parting my ass cheeks and his thumb brushing over my asshole as he slides two fingers into my pussy.

I’m caught between two unbelievable tortuous pleasures, Jake’s mouth as he switches between my breasts and his fingers pumping in and out of me as I ride him. “Oh, God . . . oh, Jake . . .”

“I’ve got you,” Jake says, wiggling his two fingers and sending me into spasms of pleasure. “I’ve always got you. You’re *mine*.”

His words release something in me, and I plunge back onto his fingers, feeling his thumb press against my ass but not go in as I kiss him hungrily. Am I his? I don’t know, but I want to be, and as Jake’s fingers and my hips roll together, he kisses me again hungrily.

I can’t take it any longer. My pussy clenches, and suddenly, I’m coming, and I moan deeply into his mouth. Jake holds me close as my body trembles, shaking over him as I ride out the waves of my orgasm, finally collapsing against his chiseled chest, gasping. “Holy fuck.”

Jake pulls his fingers out of me, bringing them up to his lips, licking and sucking them clean. He growls, pushing me down until my pussy rubs over the bulge in his pants, and a fresh wave of heat fills my body. “Get on your knees, Angel.”

“Fuck me, Jake,” I beg. “Please, fill me. I need it so fucking badly.”

I slide off him, getting on my hands and knees as he slides off the bed. I hear the soft sound of his pants zipper sliding down and he steps out of them, pulling me to the edge of the bed. I hear the crinkle of Jake tearing open a condom and sliding it on, filling me with anticipation. My panties are soaked, and he pulls them to the side again, lifting my skirt and rubbing the head of his cock between my pussy lips, the huge, steely hard tool leaving me breathless.

"We're going to heaven together, Angel," Jake growls, smacking my left ass cheek with his hand as he slides his cock into me. I can't hold back my cry of joy and pleasure as his cock stretches me open, my pussy clenching around him with every glorious inch that disappears inside me.

Jake growls as his hips meet my ass, and I gasp as he smacks my ass again. Without giving me any chance to adjust, he pulls back and thrusts again. His hips slam into me, and I'm left breathless as he starts fucking me harder, his throbbing cock plunging in and out of me as he takes me. There's no pause, no mercy in his body as he fucks me with everything he's got.

I'm overloaded, my brain exploding in pleasure as Jake sends jolts up my body. I can't make any noise. I'm left a raw, sex-crazed animal as he hammers my pussy, my body shaking with every intense, long stroke of his cock in and out of me. I've never experienced something like this before, and I love it. I thought last time was good, but this . . . oh, fuck, I can't live without this anymore.

Jake grunts, grabbing my hair and pulling me back into him as he speeds up. "Now you know you're mine, Roxy. I'm gonna have you every fucking night if I want, and you're going to give it to me, aren't you?"

"Yes," I moan, my eyes losing focus. All I can feel is the pounding of my heart in my chest and the pounding of Jake's cock in my body. Everything else disappears, and I'm left in a world of pleasure. I squeeze his cock with everything I have, clawing at the bed to try and give him what he's giving me, but it's useless. I can't resist. His powerful muscles drive his perfect cock so deeply into me that I can feel him reach places I've never thought possible.

Jake pulls me up, kissing and biting my neck as his hips pound me harder and harder, his hands reaching around to squeeze my breasts, pinching my nipples. My mind goes, and I can't feel anything except the white hot pleasure of what he's giving me. I'm not even sure I'm breathing. All I can feel is what he's doing to my body.

Time loses all meaning. I'm left shaking and unable to do anything as I

feel his cock drive into me deeply, again and again. I can feel him swell, his cock is throbbing hot and deep inside me, and suddenly, he's coming, driving me insane with primal fulfillment and pounding the last sparks of consciousness out of me. I'm coming too, so hard that black stars bloom in front of my eyes as our bodies, slick with sweat, hot with passion, come together, and I know that I can't be without him.

I don't know if I passed out or not. All I know is that the next thing I'm aware of, we're in bed, Jake spooned behind me, his cock still inside me but softening. His arms are wrapped around me, and I unconsciously reach up to stroke his forearm.

"That was intense," he says.

"It was perfect," I reply, sighing happily. I snuggle against him, and as he pulls me close, I realize something. It's not just the sex I need . . . I'm starting to need him too. I'm starting to care about Jake.

A lot.

I blink, waking up. Jake's still asleep, and I turn over, just watching him. At some point, we've stripped naked, and I take a moment to admire him in the soft light in the room. He's got long, almost sensitive lashes. I know women who'd kill to have lashes like Jake's. But his face is powerful, with a strong jawline and chin that leave me with no impression of him being weak. I reach out, tracing the thick swell of his chest muscles, down to the chiseled ridges of his abs.

He's a moving, breathing, speaking human sculpture, a Michelangelo in the flesh. Best of all, I realize he's done so much for me. Tonight, I felt more alive than I have in years. The club, the crowd, it was like I woke up from a long nightmare and found out that I'm not from Kansas. I'm from Oz itself.

And then, afterward, the way he took me. We've had sex twice, and each time, my body's been left shaking with the intensity of how hard I've come. But both times have been different. The first time was mutual, almost tender in some ways. Tonight, he was powerful, conquering, taking me and making me his woman, and I loved it just as much.

But he's done all of this . . . for me. No wonder I'm getting feelings for him. He's done all of this for me simply because he believes in me. For the first time in my life, someone is reaching out, doing something for me out of a genuine desire to see me happy. He's called me his angel, but I feel like he's *my* guardian angel, descending from the heavens to pluck me out of a

life I wasn't supposed to lead. He's reminded me of what I am, what I'm meant to be. He reached out and touched me, and in that touch, he's laid a finger on my heart as well. Scared? Sure, I'm scared. But I'm more scared of not having him.

As I watch him, I hear the song in my head again, the same song I've been working on, and in a moment that shakes me to the bone, it all clicks. *All* the lyrics, all of them in order, the tone that I'll use, even the notes. I think if I wanted, I could even tell you what each instrument will play, and who I want to play them.

I roll out of bed and see a pen and tablet of paper on the small bedside table. I start writing, my hand flying across the paper as I feel sweat dot my forehead again. I'm gripping the pen so hard my fingers ache, but it's as intense a pleasure as when Jake was inside me.

"What are you doing?" Jake says softly behind me. He's woken up. I turn, blinking. God, he's so handsome. "You're scribbling like a madwoman."

"Maybe. I'm writing down how awesome you are," I reply. I don't want to tell him the song is about him. Yet. I don't know if I should reveal how much he's touched me.

"Really?" Jake asks, smiling. "Can I read it?"

I look down at the papers, and I see I'm missing just the final line. Still . . . "It's not ready yet. But I promise it will be good."

Jake sits up, grinning. "Oh, come on. Let me see."

I toss the pad aside, reaching out and grabbing Jake's hard cock. I can't believe he's so hard again already. I can feel it pulsing in my hands. Jake stops, moaning as I start stroking him, and I tug him to the edge of the bed as I get on my knees. Looking at his cock, I know I want to taste it. I want to give back to him since he's given to me.

"You'll see it when it's ready," I tease him. "Now, lean back and let your Angel see if she can get a treat out of this big cock."

JAKE

The last two weeks have proven to be a titanic struggle. My feelings for Roxy have only grown, but our relationship has been more or less confined to the club. We see each other at work, but we try to be on our best behavior.

We talked about it, and we're clear on things. It's better if no one knows. She's even tried dressing a little more . . . well, I'd say modestly, but it's just not working. I swear I go home with a case of blue balls every day after work.

Thankfully, I've gotten to relieve them with her a few times after work. But an hour here or there of passion in the back room just isn't enough. I want more. I want to be able to strut through the city with her on my arm like she's my real girl. At work, as bad as it may look and sound, and at the club most of all. Rules be damned. The fact that I can't bugs the shit out of me, and it's getting harder to keep my desire under wraps.

Her last two performances for Club Jasmine have exceeded all our expectations, bringing in hungry crowds every weekend to hear the hot new voice everyone is talking about. It's to the point where I feel like we should be cutting her a bigger check for the amount of business she brings in.

My obsession hasn't taken long to start affecting my work and personal relationships, too. Some of my reports to corporate have been flawed because I've been devoting a lot of time to the club and helping get Roxy's name out there. I know Elena's probably feeling like I've lost trust in her. Even Sophie has begun to wonder what's up.

I've made a pact with myself to do better and get control over my desire, but every time I see Roxy, I can't stop the emotions. It wouldn't be so bad if we didn't have to hide it. I love seeing her happy, seeing that spark in her eyes just after she gets off stage and taking her to the back and drowning in her. It's like I'm addicted to her smile. And being with her pulls me deeper into the addiction. I find myself . . .

"Sir, your friend Nathan is on line two," Elena tells me, snapping me back to the fact that I'm at work. It's Thursday, nearly one week from Roxy's last show-stopping performance. Already, I'm counting down the minutes until I can see her again. She said that she had some new songs she wanted to introduce to keep things fresh. If they're half as sexy as most of her performances, I'm going to need to do that ice bucket challenge thing to keep myself under control.

"Thank you," I say. "And can you get me the . . . uh, the report on the . . . oh, damn it."

Elena stops, giving me a raised eyebrow. "Sir, are you okay? You seem really . . . off lately."

"I'm fine," I reply, knowing I sound like a lying asshole. "Just busy

strategizing for next quarter."

She knows it's bullshit. "Well sir, sometimes a little break can help. But if you'd like, I have the quarterly projections from each of the divisions ready. Shall I get them ready for you?"

I sigh, nodding. "Thank you for that, Elena. I'd appreciate it."

"Of course, sir."

I white knuckle the desk when she's gone, cursing myself for being a fool. She hasn't said anything, but I can tell it's obvious to Elena that something is going on between me and Roxy. Roxy's been by my office too often. I thought we'd done a good job of being professional since that elevator incident, but it's definitely getting harder to keep my hands to myself when I see her. So far, only Elena seems to suspect something, or at least she's the only one I know of.

The flashing of my desk phone pulls me out of my thoughts. Shit! Nathan! "Yeah, Nathan."

"Yo!" Nathan says, his voice filled with excitement.

"What's up? You know I prefer not to talk at work."

Nathan guffaws. "Dude, you're not gonna believe this shit."

"Spit it out," I hiss irritably, wanting him to hurry up and get to the point. He might not take it seriously, but dammit, calling on my work line during work hours for something club related isn't cool!

"A music exec's assistant called me. He wants to come to Roxy's next show."

"The exec himself?" I ask, sitting forward. "Holy shit."

"No, the assistant. He's more like a talent scout. He wants to see the show first, and if he likes it, he'll pass on the word. Shit, man, this is motherfucking big time!"

My heart thumps in my chest at the good news. It's something that Roxy had given up on, and she hasn't seemed like she thinks it's a possibility anymore, even with performing at Club Jasmine. This news would excite her in ways she hasn't been in a long time. "Roxy will love to hear this," I say, glancing out the office window. I can't see her in her cubicle. She must be out doing something.

"Ya think? Dude, she's bringing in so much business. Listen," Nathan says, his voice dropping, "When you told me about karaoke night, I was like 'eh, it won't hurt, and it'll let my boy get his rocks off.' Then when I saw her, I had ideas, but I never thought this would happen. If this continues to go

well, we're gonna have to start giving her more money, because she sure as fuck deserves it."

"She does," I confirm. "Okay, I'll pass it along to Roxy, but I've got to handle some business here. So I'll skip the club tonight. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Sure, man. Actually, I'll see you at the show. I've got some business of my own tomorrow. Bye."

I hang up the phone. Other than the good news, Nathan didn't say anything that I wasn't already thinking to myself. I've been thinking about this the past week and started working on a surprise that should be finished any moment now. I'll start by giving her the respect and station that she deserves. Something to show she's important.

I guess I've now got a double surprise. A smile forms on my lips as I check my tie and leave my office, going out to the floor. I check Roxy's cubicle, but she's not at her desk again, so I go looking for Hannah. She always knows where Roxy is.

"Hello, Mr. Stone," Hannah greets me politely. In all the times I've talked with her in the past two weeks, she hasn't said anything. Roxy tells me that Hannah doesn't suspect the sexual side of our relationship and she's told her we're being professional, though I'm not sure if she's just saying that to calm my worries. I mean, I did lay a kiss on Roxy right in front of Hannah. She even joked about it.

Before I can ask where Roxy is, she smirks. "She's down in the supply room getting something for—" She doesn't get to finish her words, as a familiar and now thoroughly unwanted face walks over.

"Matt."

"Yessir," he says behind me in his slight Southern drawl.

"New policy. Get your own shit from the mail and supply rooms. Your co-workers have their own jobs to do. Thanks."

He sputters, and I walk off, giving Hannah a little wink as I do. I walk down the stairs to the supply room, where I find Roxy struggling with an armload of junk that makes me wonder what is going on in Matt's head. "Hey."

She jumps in surprise. She was so focused on trying to find what's on her list. "Mr. Stone, what—"

I reach out, taking the object from her hand, a red Swingline stapler, and put it back on the shelf. "Shh, you don't need to be doing this," I tell her. "He

can get his own shit."

A smile hits her face. "If you insist. Definitely not going to argue against that."

I close the door, smiling. "I do."

I approach her, her perfume filling my nostrils and making my head spin in that oh, so familiar and needed way. It's been at least two days since I got in this close, and I can't help myself. She arches her neck as I inhale deeply. "Actually, I have a surprise for you."

"Please tell me it's as big as the one in your pants," she says huskily. "I . . . oh, God, we're not supposed to do this at the office."

"Not quite that big. But I still think you'll be impressed by its size." I take her hand and place it on my crotch, lowering my lips to kiss her. She melts into my touch, and I'm so tempted to take her here and now. But I can't. She squeezes my cock through my pants before I step away, both of us breathing heavily. "So, are you impressed?"

"Your ego is showing," she says, giving me some of that sauciness that I adore. "Careful it doesn't get bigger."

"You love it," I tease. "And you need it."

"I do," Roxy murmurs before stomping her feet like a frustrated child. "Fuck, just tell me already!"

A grin curls the corner of my lips. "After work. I'll take you out for dinner first. Think about it—we haven't had anything other than the club and the office."

"Are you sure?" Roxy asks, and I nod. It's been on my mind for a week. I want to take her out and treat her like a lady. "I mean, we probably shouldn't fuel any suspicions."

"Leave that to me. Be ready by eight, and wear something a princess might wear. I'll be by to pick you up."

She seems to melt at the promise of being wined and dined. "All right. But it had better be good."

I smile, taking her hand and kissing it. "I promise, it will be."

I pull up outside Roxy's place right at eight o'clock. While I thought about hiring a driver for the night, I decided to give tonight a personal touch and drove myself instead. I'm glad, because as Roxy walks out, I'm stunned. She's in a sparkling black gown, silver threaded through the fabric to create almost a waterfall effect. Her hair is sleek, her skin so enticing as she

approaches me. She's so beautiful that I can barely think, and I get out almost a beat late, coming around to the passenger side of my car and opening the door.

"You are truly a vision of beauty tonight," I greet her, taking her satin gloved hand and helping her in. "You look like you're ready for the red carpet."

"You said dress like a princess, and when I dress up, I go all out," Roxy says. "So thank you."

I go around to my side and get in, still so drawn by her looks that she has to clear her throat and give me a raised eyebrow. "I hope you didn't mean just getting dressed up to sit in the parking lot and make out. I don't do back seats. Well, not anymore anyway."

Her joke breaks my paralysis and sends blood to my cock, and I grin. The back seat—that sounds fun. But I turn my attention back to the road. "You'll see."

The drive takes a while. When I told her not to worry, I made sure of it. She's giving me a look when we pull up and I hand my keys to the valet. "What's this place?"

"An exclusive, private members-only restaurant," I tell her, leading her through the plain, unmarked door. "We're totally safe here."

The maître d' checks my ID against the reservation list and seats us. As we make our way through the small, ten-table place, Roxy stops. "Is that . . . no way."

I glance over, seeing who she's talking about. "Kevin? Yeah, he's a member. Now, one of the rules is that everyone in here is equal, so he's just a guy."

"Okay," she says uncertainly. We sit down, and she looks around. "Wow. The decor here . . ."

"Is what gives the place class. This is one of those places where you get what the chef prepares. You just have to trust his judgment. But I checked the menu, and we're getting surf and turf with matching wines. So enjoy."

"Thank you," Roxy says, sipping her water. "So, Jake—"

"You can ask me anything you want," I say, cutting her off. "Come on, I can see it in your eyes. You've got a thousand and one questions about me. Now's the time for them."

"Well, okay," Roxy says, blushing. I understand. We've been having sex for weeks, and while I know a lot about her, she's not heard my story as

much as she might like. “Well, you told me about your sister and how she came to live with you, but . . . well, you don’t strike me as a rich boy.”

“I’m not, if you mean whether I inherited my money,” I tell her. “My mother came from a rich family. But she met and fell in love with my dad, who was a working-class guy. They defied my grandfather to get married in Vegas, and there were a lot of hard feelings for a long time.”

“Hard feelings?” Roxy asks, and I laugh.

“Well, actually, hard feelings as in a fist fight between my father and grandfather.” I chuckle. “They buried the hatchet after I was born, but Dad was stubborn. He never let my grandfather shower me with gifts or anything like that. He did let Grandpa set up a college fund for me and for Sophie, and of course, his name helped open some doors.”

Roxy nods. “Sounds like John, my stepfather. When he and my mom got together, I could have just mooched off him, but I had some good role models. I mean, after my biological dad died, Mom had to make it on her own for a long time. It taught me to be independent. What about you? What drives you?”

“Sophie,” I say immediately. “Our parents died just after I finished college, and it pushed me. I mean, Dad always made sure I knew what a real day’s work was. I did plenty of afternoons splitting logs for the fireplace, mowing lawns, stuff like that. But when I was literally a month after graduation and suddenly, I’ve got a little sister to take care of . . . it made me grow up a lot faster.”

Roxy’s eyes tear up, and I tilt my head, worried. “Are you okay?”

She nods. “Just . . . I can hear it in your voice. You miss your parents.”

I stop and have to look down at the table. She’s right. “There are times I don’t like thinking about it. I try not to remember the hard times. I just try to remember the stuff they taught me. My dad taught me how to be a man. My mom . . . well, if I’m not a total asshole, that’s her doing.”

“Well thank you, Mrs. Stone, then,” Roxy says. “Because I think you’re anything but an asshole. Most of the time.”

I laugh. “Most of the time.”

“Oh, yeah. You know, if you want to meet an asshole, you should see my boss. Always making demands of me in the supply room, calling me into his office . . . total asshole.”

I chuckle. Our food comes, and it’s as delicious as I expected. As she chews the last bite of her seared scallop, she sets her knife and fork down,

looking directly at me. “Jake, thank you for letting me in more.”

I reach across, taking her hand. “You’re worth it. You’re pretty special, you know that, right?”

She blinks. I know I touched her, and it takes her a moment before she grins. “Yeah, well, you just remember that or else I’ll break a high heel off in your ass!”

I laugh. “Come on, time for dessert.”

“Wait, we’re not having dessert here?”

“No, the real dessert,” I tell her, taking her by the hand again. We drive to Club Jasmine, where I lead her in through the back.

“Here we are.”

“What’s this?” she asks, eyeing the door that has a star with her name emblazoned across the center. It hasn’t quite dawned on her yet.

“Open the door and you’ll see.”

She looks at me, looking like her heart is suddenly racing, and opens the door. The breath escapes her lungs as the door swings open. “Ooh.”

We step into her new dressing room. It’s equipped with a high chair, mirrors, a professional vanity for hair and makeup, and a clothing rack that is already filled with show dresses. “I checked your size and got you an entire wardrobe. Of course, you can pick and choose what you want. Roxy, you may not be a star yet, but you will be, and you’re already a star in my eyes.”

“Oh, Jake . . .” she says as tears fill her eyes. “How?”

“I had the crew paint and do all this during the day so I could surprise you. It only took them two days. I couldn't wait to show it to you.”

“Oh, my God,” she whispers. She turns and pulls me into a tight embrace. “This is so sweet of you.”

“Wait, that isn’t all,” I tell her. “I have better news.”

Roxy pulls back, staring at me. “Don’t fuck with me. How can it get any better?”

I tell her about Nathan’s call and the talent scout coming Saturday, and her jaw drops. “You’re kidding, right?” I shake my head. “I can’t believe it.”

“Believe it, darling, because it’s happening. You’ve got a shot.”

She presses back up against me, a tear escaping down her cheek. “Jake, all this . . . but what I want—I want to be with you. Your girl, and none of this hiding in clubs or private dinner restaurants, even if the food was orgasm-worthy. I don’t want to abide by the rules.”

In this moment, I want to give her everything she wants. The whole

world. I nod, pulling her close and kissing her tenderly on the lips. “You *are* my girl. But we still have to *try* to play by the rules in the office, at least for a little while longer. At least while you’re working there.”

Roxy looks at me with hope in her eyes. “Oh, my God, do you think it can happen?”

“I know it can. I have faith in you.”

She shakes her head, tears swimming in her eyes. “I . . . I don’t know how to thank you. You’ve done so much for me. Thank you so much.” Roxy swallows, then wraps her arms around my neck.

She kisses me on the lips, and I pull her close. “You are more than welcome. Now blow their minds so I never have to see your ass around the office again.”

She grins, giving my ass a squeeze. “That’ll be one thing that’ll suck about getting a deal. I won’t be seeing your cute ass around the office either.”

“Nope,” I say, patting her ass back. “But you’ll get to see more of it.”

“Then they won’t know what fucking hit ‘em.”

ROXY

“Your own dressing room?” Hannah asks in disbelief as we step inside. She looks around, her eyes going to the clothes rack. “Whoa. This is fucking amazing.”

It’s Saturday, and my nerves are frazzled. I’m trying to get ready to perform. Except this time, the stakes are higher. I couldn’t believe when Jake told me about the scout. This is all happening so fast that I feel like my head’s spinning.

Hannah is in shock too. “It’s gorgeous!”

“Isn’t it?” I say dreamily. “I still can’t believe Jake had all of this done for me.”

“Hmm,” Hannah says, tapping her lips, her eyes flashing.

“What?” I ask.

“Nothing, I’m just not surprised at all. Have you seen the number of people who are packing in here to see you?” She turns around, checking out the rack of dresses, and I can tell that she thinks there’s more to it than that. She’s just giving me time to come out with it.

My phone buzzes, and I see it’s Mindy. I’d texted her about my show.

“Hey, it’s my sister.”

“I’ll let you two talk. Nathan’s got a great seat reserved for me. No way in hell am I dancing with you on stage tonight,” Hannah jokes. “Have fun.”

I give Hannah a quick hug as I pick up Mindy’s call. “Stick around. Min?”

“Hey, how’s my Grammy-winning sister doing?” Mindy asks. “You ready?”

“Fuck no, but hearing you helps,” I admit, relief flooding through me. “Can you believe this?”

“Nope. Hey, turn on your camera.”

It takes me a few seconds, but when I do, Mindy’s face pops on screen. Her face has a little more weight on it than the last time I saw her, but it looks good on her. “Heeeey guuurl,” I greet happily.

“Hey, mini me, what’s going down?” Mindy asks. “And who’s the babe next to you?”

“Mindy, this is my best friend, Hannah. Remember, I told you about her when I first moved here? She’s my roommate.” I put the camera on Hannah. “But you’re blind. I’m the babe.”

Mindy laughs. “How long do you have?”

“I don’t have long,” I admit. “You want to help me pick out my outfit?”

Mindy nods, and I hand my phone to Hannah as I go over, pulling out a tight black number with a cutout.

Both of them reject it, and I go through several more before we all settle on my outfit, red and silver, and I grin. Mindy’s grinning too. “Okay, I’ll let you get ready. Kick some ass for me!”

We hang up, and Hannah gives me a hug. “Kick some ass for me too. I’m gonna go get my seat.”

She leaves, and I quickly get ready. Just as I finish my vocal warmups and stretch, there’s a knock on my door. Jake sticks his head in, grinning when he sees me. “Hey, I don’t want to distract you, so . . . just knock them dead. I already know you’re amazing. Just show them what you show me.”

“Show them my boobs? I don’t think this is that kind of show,” I tease, and Jake blushes. “Thank you. I’ll see you afterward.”

Jake leaves, and three minutes later, I go to the wings of the stage. Surprisingly, I’m not nervous at all anymore. The DJ is supposed to play my music, but I’m getting a band soon. It’s a total pipedream, but I’d love to have my old one from Trixie’s.

I shake my head. I can hear Nathan out there. He introduces me with his normal gusto. “And now . . . she’s baaaaa-aaaaaaaack!”

The crowd goes wild. It’s like Nathan’s catchphrase now. “Here she is . . . ROXY!”

“I can’t believe how awesome you were!”

They’re the first words that Nathan says to me as I get off stage, and I can feel it. I had the whole crowd, and the place was so packed there wasn’t even much room to dance.

I grin, then bite my lip nervously. I was hoping he’d say something about the exec coming to watch the show. “Think anything is going to come of this?”

Nathan grins and pats me on the shoulder. “Come on, let’s go up and see Jake. He’s been charming that guy’s ass off.”

I laugh, some of my tension relieved. “So you think he liked it?”

“The guy is fucking deaf if he didn’t. You know, I don’t even like pop or any of that shit, but your voice . . . it’s hard not to enjoy it.”

Nathan takes me upstairs, where Jake’s sitting with Hannah and some guy who I assume is the talent scout. Seeing me, Jake gets up, so handsome that even with all of my nerves I’m feeling breathless watching him approach me to give me a kiss on the cheek. “You were amazing, Angel.”

The scout nods, standing up and shaking my hand. “Honey, you were hot—like fire out there. My boss is totally going to be in touch!”

He heads for the stairs, and I force a smile as Jake rubs my arm and talks softly. “See, you just had to have faith.”

It makes me feel better, but I’m not going to get my hopes up too much. If it happens, it happens. Hannah touches me gently on the leg, noticing I’m not quite jumping for joy. “Relax, I heard him gushing earlier. They’re gonna call.”

Before I can reply, there’s a huge commotion down below. Jake and Nathan’s heads whip around, trying to see what’s going on. I see it quickly, two guys fighting over a girl. She’s small, with coal black hair that to me looks like a wig.

“Hey, cut that shit out!” Nathan yells. It’s useless. We’re in VIP and there’s too much noise down below, but security is getting to them.

Meanwhile, Jake is squinting hard at the girl. “What the fuck?”

Without warning, he takes off, dodging people as he plunges down the

stairs. The look in his eyes and the way he's so in a rush fill me with worry, and I go after him. I don't know what's happening. Is the asshole who tried to drug me back?

I reach the floor of the club, gasping for breath, trying to keep up with Jake as he makes his way toward the commotion. He's grabbed ahold of one of the dudes, and the other one's disappeared off into the crowd. I'm sure security will get him.

Suddenly, Jake stops, and the other guy shakes his way free, right into John's grasp, of all people. Jake, however, looks stunned as he reaches out and grabs the girl who was in the center of the fight by the arm. "Sophie?"

"J-Jake," the girl says, pulling off her wig to reveal hair just like Jake's.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

"I . . . I came with a friend and—"

Jake looks furious, and he points at the guy John is holding. "How old are you? And don't you dare lie to me."

The guy struggles, but he sees something in Jake's eyes. "Nineteen!"

Jake's eyes go ice cold. "John, get him out of here."

"Wait!" Sophie cries as they begin dragging him away. Thankfully, they're dragging him toward the front door and not the back. She rushes off into the crowd after her brother but is stopped by another of the bouncers. I watch as she struggles violently against him. He's not hurting her. He's just not letting her pass.

"What the hell just happened?" Hannah says from behind me. I turn and see her and Nathan approaching, Nathan peeling off to talk to the security guy.

"A family squabble," I said, not really knowing much else yet. I just know Sophie's in high school and shouldn't be in here.

Jake comes back, his face as serious as I've ever seen it, staring a hole at Sophie. Jake says a few quiet things to her and Nathan, who nods and starts leading Sophie toward the back of the club.

"Jake, what's going on?" I ask when he gets close.

"I'm taking Sophie home," he says, his eyes still burning, but he manages a smile. "You did great tonight."

"Wait," I say, grabbing his arm. "Can I go with you?" I can't let him go like this. I've never seen him this mad before.

Jake looks like he's about to say no, but then he nods curtly. "Okay. Five minutes, grab your stuff. The car will be out back."

ROXY

Other than the purr of his engine, it's totally silent the whole way to Jake's penthouse. This is my first time coming to his place. I would be ecstatic under normal circumstances, but this is like a dark cloud on my happy moment. In the rearview mirror, I can see Sophie fuming. Her hands are balled into fists, and they press hard into her thighs. She's probably going to have bruises there tomorrow.

I want to comfort her, to tell her everything will be okay, but I know that to her, I'm a total stranger and it's not going to mean shit. I don't even know if Jake's told her about me.

Finally, at a stop light, Sophie can't take anymore. "I can't believe you did that!" she snarls. "You didn't have to treat Jax that way!"

Jake clenches his jaw. "Can't believe I did that?" he asks in disbelief. "You snuck into the club with a nineteen-year-old boy with fake IDs. I had every right to throw him out on his ass. He's lucky I didn't call the police on him. Wait . . . Jax? *That* Jax? I thought you met him in school! What's he doing at your school if he's nineteen?"

She ignores that part. "He's only two years older. I'm turning seventeen soon. It's not that big of a deal."

Jake's grip on the steering wheel tightens but I see him take a deep breath to try and relax. "Do you realize what you did? Do you know what could've happened if you were caught with a fake ID?"

Sophie's scowl softens somewhat. "Just a fine."

"Maybe. But if they wanted to make an example of you, they could get you for a felony." Jake says. "That's not something you want on your record."

"I didn't know that," Sophie says softly.

"Not to mention that if the cops know that you're my sister, they're going to assume I let you in on purpose. The club could lose its liquor license over that."

I look into the rearview mirror, and I see her fidgeting. I think it's setting in how serious this situation is.

"You need to think about—" he starts, but I interrupt him.

"Jake," I say softly, placing a hand on his arm. "Let's talk about this at home?"

He swallows and relents. I can tell he's both upset and worried. It's

obvious Sophie means a lot to him. “Okay. At home.”

Sophie falls into sullen silence the rest of the ride. We reach his penthouse and go inside. I’m floored by how opulent it is. It’s like everything in my apartment has had the volume turned up to eleven with a sprinkle of fairy dust thrown on top.

“This is beautiful,” I begin to say, but I’m interrupted by a sharp cry. I spin around to see Jake grabbing Sophie’s purse that she just put down.

“What are you doing?” she cries as he opens it and takes out her phone.

“Taking away your phone for now. There has to be some kind of consequence. I can’t believe—”

“Give that back!” she yells, trying to snatch it away from him, but he yanks it back, stepping away and putting the phone in his jacket pocket.

“No. You’re going to have to earn it back, and I don’t want you talking to Jax. He’s a bad influence on you.”

“You can’t do that!” she says, struggling against him. She lunges, but he holds her back with an arm. I place my hand on my throat, unnerved by how Sophie is acting. I want to do something. Anything. But I don’t feel it’s my place. This isn’t my home, and as much as I feel for Jake, I’m not part of this family.

Jake holds his voice steely. “I can, and I will. You’re my responsibility.”

“Fuck you!” Sophie screams. “You’re not my daddy!” she says, running to her room, crying her eyes out. Her door slams, and a sudden silence falls over the room.

Jake’s shoulders slump when she’s gone and he looks despondently at the floor. Tears burn my eyes, and I go over and place my hand on his shoulder. “Jake?”

“She’s never told me something like that before,” he says quietly, and I can hear the pain in his voice. “I’ve never tried to be a replacement for Dad, but . . .”

“Jake, I’m so sorry,” I say. “I know you care.”

“It’s not your fault,” he says. “I haven’t been paying attention to what she’s been doing. I’ve just been so busy with . . .”

His uncompleted sentence hangs in the air, and I fill in the gaps. He’s been busy with his new job, the club, and me. “Let me go talk to her.”

“It’s pointless right now. Might as well let her cool down.”

I shake my head softly. “I can at least try. I’m a woman, and I’m a stranger. Maybe that’s exactly who she’ll listen to.”

He looks in my eyes for a moment before he nods. “Her room is down the hall, second door on the left.”

I walk down the hall and stop in front of her bedroom door. Even if Jake hadn’t told me, I would have known it was Sophie’s. She’s got a pink My Little Pony on the door.

My palms are sweating and I’m nervous. I’m sticking my foot in deep, and this could be a minefield. I take a deep breath and knock on the door.

“Leave me alone! I don’t wanna talk to you!” a harsh voice calls from inside.

“It’s not Jake. It’s his girlfriend, Roxy,” I say quietly before I pause. It feels weird to say that, but wonderful too. His girlfriend. I like the sound of it. “Will you please let me in?”

Silence greets me, and my nervousness increases. I stand there for what feels like forever, shifting from side to side as my feet start to ache like they always do after a concert. I’m just about to give up when I hear a small, “Come in.”

I open the door and go inside. Sophie is perched on the bed, her eyes red. Moonlight streams through the window, and there’s only a soft bedside lamp on as I sit down and the bed creaks. Sophie stares at me for a moment, and I reach out, stroking her hair. “You’re so pretty,” I tell her softly. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but you and your brother are both beautiful people. You share a lot in common.”

She looks over at me and sniffs. “Thank you.”

Her voice is so small, like she’s disappearing. She reminds me of me when I was younger. “Your brother really loves you.”

She’s quiet, but she nods her head slowly.

“He’s not trying to be an asshole by taking your phone. He just wants to protect and look out for you.”

“But Jax isn’t a bad guy. I mean, he really likes me.”

I shelve that comment. I think Jake’s right. If he’s got her using a fake ID, what’s next? “That might be true, but he’s a few years older than you,” I say instead.

“So? Age ain’t nothing but a number,” Sophie says defensively. “I’ve heard it plenty of times.”

Did I sound this idiotic when I was sixteen? I was probably worse. “That’s true, but sometimes, numbers do count. I know a little over two years doesn’t seem like a lot, but you’re at that age where you do a lot of growing

up fast. Besides, you guys were in a place you shouldn't be. If Jax were really concerned about you, he wouldn't have brought you there."

"We just wanted to have fun," Sophie says, and I can see her struggle with tears again. "Is that so bad?"

"Nope," I agree, forcing a smile. "Honestly, I did a lot of stupid shit back when I was a teenager. I'm surprised my big sister didn't kill me a few times. I'll tell you something that I was reminded of tonight. The Bobby Gardner Rule."

"The what rule?" Sophie asks, and I laugh quietly.

"Bobby Gardner. He was this big stud jock when I was a freshman in high school. He was a senior when I was a freshman, and my sister kept telling me not to get with him. She said he was bad news. Our age gap is just right so she knew him when she was in school too. Of course, I didn't listen to her. So when Bobby asked me out, I accepted."

"What happened?" Sophie asks, and I chuckle.

"He picked me up in a stinky as hell beat-up Camaro, we go to the winter formal, and during the second slow dance, he tries to cop a feel. I busted him in the nose with an elbow, and he cried in front of the whole school."

"I don't get it. What's the Bobby Gardner Rule?" Sophie asks.

"Elbow in the nose trumps hand on ass," I say, and Sophie laughs. It's a good sign. "There you go. Feeling a bit better?"

Sophie nods. "A little. Um . . . girlfriend?"

I nod. "It's my first time saying that, but yes. Listen, Jake feels like shit, too. He thinks he's been ignoring you because he's been spending so much time with the club and with me."

"I guess Jake deserves it," Sophie admits, but I don't know if she's just saying that.

"Don't worry, you guys will work it out. Men are stubborn pains in the ass most of the time," I say, trying to loosen her up. If I were Jake, I'd be worked up too.

Sophie smiles. "Can't argue with that. I don't have anyone but Jake, though."

"I'll come around more if you'd like," I say. "I'd like to get to know you. Jake talks about you a lot, actually. He's proud of you."

"Okay . . . if you can teach me how to shake your ass like that?" she says, referring to what I was doing on stage.

I laugh. "I'm pretty sure your brother would kill me if I did that. Listen,

you get some sleep, and try to talk to Jake about this, okay?"

"I'll try." Sophie nods. "I'm kind of tired anyway."

I give her a hug and go back out to the living room, where Jake's sitting on the couch, wringing his hands. The worried look on his face tells me everything I need to know, and I feel my heart swell as I sit down.

"How'd it go?" Jake asks.

"She'll live," I say. "At least she's not wanting to take your head off. Anymore."

"Good," he says, relief flooding his body and making him collapse back into the couch, leaning his head back as he closes his eyes. "Thank you."

"You're more than welcome," I reply, putting a hand on his knee.

"Was I too hard on her?" Jake asks, opening his eyes and looking at me. "You must think I'm terrible."

I shake my head. "Not at all. I understand that you're trying to protect her. Just give her time, and no, I don't think you're terrible. She'll come around. She's got a good head on her shoulders."

He sighs, putting his hand over mine. "I've never had to deal with anything like this. We've always been close and she told me everything. She's been perfect."

I can understand his concern, and it touches me how much he cares for his sister. In a way, it turns me on to see a man who is so caring and kind. It sets my ovaries ablaze, talking to the deepest primal instincts. Here's a man who would fight for me, protect me and his children . . .

Is he the one? I ask myself. *Is he the man I've been waiting for?* They talk about them in romance novels and I've sung about them hundreds of times, but I never really thought one existed. They've always been like unicorns, nonexistent.

Watching him, I see in him a father figure, a man who will be everything I could ever hope for. God knows, if I ever have kids, they're going to need a strong father because they're sure as hell going to inherit some of the Price hell-raising DNA.

"Jake?" I murmur, reaching over and taking his hand. He turns his head, looking at me with loving eyes.

"Yes, Roxy?"

"I have something I need to give you," I whisper, my heart thudding in my chest.

"What?" Jake asks, and I shake my head.

“Not here. Take me back to the club.”

JAKE

It looks different, pulling in after everything’s closed up. The sun’s just lightening the sky in the east, and I feel a little strange shutting down the engine on my Maserati, the silence deafening.

For the first time, I can say that Club Jasmine doesn’t look like a museum or a temple, with trash littering the parking lot. There are napkins, a few cigarette butts, and I see some glass from smashed beer bottles. I comfort myself by knowing that the cleaning crew will come in a few hours, making Club Jasmine a jewel again.

I don’t say anything, my head still swirling. After losing my temper a little with Sophie, and then the tension of watching Roxy somehow put a bandage over things, then now . . . what is it she wants to give me?

I turn to her, trying to figure things out. “You couldn’t have given me this back at my place?”

There’s something reassuring in her smile. “Nope. Plus, I didn’t want your sister to hear.”

I arch my eyebrow inquisitively. Now I’m really curious. “Okay, you got me. Let's go inside.”

She gives me a secretive smile that only increases my intrigue, and as I lead her up the steps and unlock the door, I feel like I’m being drawn into something that will change my life forever.

Hitting the lights, I see that the club’s mostly cleaned up. The early crew can get the last of the tables wiped down as they restock the bar. Roxy looks around, her eyes still wide. “It must be wonderful to have all of this,” she says with a sigh. “To know that this place is yours.”

“Half mine,” I remind her. “We’re off to a good start, but I’ve seen clubs do well at first and then fall flat. We can’t get complacent.”

“I have faith in this place,” Roxy says, walking up on stage. It’s dark up there. I can barely see her except the glint of sparkles from her outfit. “Where are the lights?”

“Off to the side. To your left.”

Roxy disappears, and I can hear her fumbling around in the darkness. “Found it!” she yells. There’s a click, and the LED floodlights come on,

illuminating the stage. Roxy comes out, a pleased look on her face. “That’s better. Now, can you come stand over here please?”

I see where she’s pointing, and I climb up, chuckling. “What are we doing, reenacting a play? I’m telling you now, I’m horrible at remembering lines.”

“No,” Roxy says, going backstage again before returning with one of the microphones. “I know this isn’t turned on, but I just can’t do this without one.”

She points to a chair that’s in the middle of the dance floor, and I grab it, sitting down. “Okay, okay . . . so what’s all this about?”

“I’m calling this *Heartstopper*,” Roxy says as she lifts the microphone to her lips, and what comes out is . . . angelic. “*It’s been too long, gotta get out, hittin up the new spot with my girl. Lookin’ sexy as hell, workin’ the floor, hoping to give this place a whirl . . .”*

There’s no backing track, no instruments or sound system. Just the purity of Roxy’s voice as she sings for me. It’s slow, and I can tell that the song’s supposed to be faster, but as she starts the second verse, realization sets in . . . she’s singing about me.

“*Your touch is electric, has been from the start. Give it to me, baby, or I’ma stop your heart . . .”*

I’m grinning as Roxy finishes, smiling as she lowers the useless microphone away from her lips. “Well, now.”

Roxy’s face falls, and she blushes as she begins rambling. “It’s crap, isn’t it? I just wanted to write a song for you, and in my head, it sounds good. I just have to get everything right. I didn’t know how to tell you. I didn’t want to come off as a fucking cheeseball. I should have waited and prepared more. I’m sorry, every time I try and write something myself, it ends up coming out sounding like eighties shit-schlock . . .”

“I think it’s amazing.”

My quiet declaration cuts off her self-defeating rant before she can even get warmed up, and she looks up at me, her eyes full of hope. “You think so?”

I nod, getting out of my seat and walking up on stage. I reach out, taking her hand. “Roxy, it’s not a ballad, but I heard it. I heard the beat. I can see you singing that in front of like, fifty thousand people. It’s great. Two things, though.”

“What?” Roxy asks, and I chuckle.

“Let’s get a drink first. I feel like a good one right now.”

Roxy nods, and I lead her over to the bar, going behind to start mixing. “I’m not a bartender, but I know my way around a kitchen or bar.”

“I’ve noticed that,” Roxy says, her eyes full of curiosity. “What are you making?”

“The evil version of the Little Mermaid,” I say, adding in a second shot of Curacao. “When Nathan first tried it, it knocked him on his ass.”

I add a splash of maraschino cherry juice, and Roxy hums. “That’s not gonna be blue.”

“Nope,” I agree, shaking up the mix and pouring it into two martini glasses. It comes out just the right shade of purple, and I grin. “We call it *The Ursula*.”

Roxy laughs and lifts the glass. “So I was so bad that you need to get me wasted to numb the pain?”

I shake my head and raise my own glass. “No, a toast. To you and to *Heartstopper*.”

We clink glasses and sip, and the drink is just as strong as I remember. Roxy gasps, setting her glass down. “Shit, now I know why you only give a martini size. Whooo!”

“Yeah, I’m not trying to get you sloppy drunk,” I agree, setting my glass down. I come around the bar, sitting down on the stool next to her. “So, about the song . . .”

“Yeah?” she asks, and I reach out, putting my hand on her warm, smooth thigh, my body thrilling as the feeling of having her so close sweeps over me.

I pull her closer, taking her hand and putting it over my heart. “You have to know something. You’ve stopped my heart, too. In fact, you’ve captured it.”

Watching Roxy’s face, I can tell when it hits her what I’m saying. “You mean . . .”

“I mean I’ve fallen in love with you, Roxy. You want my heart? It’s yours.”

I place my hand on Roxy’s chest, just like in her song, and I feel the rapid thrumming of her heart. She feels as fragile as a hummingbird. Roxy steps closer, pressing her body up against me. “Jake . . . I love you too.”

I stroke my hand over Roxy’s breast through her top, her nipple quickly hardening as I lower my head, kissing her soft lips. There’s a hint of the curacao and cherry on her breath as our tongues wrap sinuously around each

other, Roxy moaning into my mouth as I stroke her nipple through her dress, her body pressing against me as our hunger rises.

"Oh, God, Jake . . . I need you," Roxy whispers, and I can hear in her tone that she means more than just for a good fucking. I lift her up. She's so light that putting her on the bar is easy. "What are you . . .?"

"Having dessert," I tease, kissing along her neck. I find the zipper on Roxy's dress, and I love the tension that builds with every click of the tiny teeth as I ease it down her back, my fingers exploring and stroking her sensitive skin. "Mmm, never done this before."

"Done what?" she half moans, sighing as I suck on the hollow at the base of her throat.

"Sex on a bar," I joke, pulling her dress down her body. As soon as her breasts are exposed to the soft light, I devour them, sucking hard on her right nipple as I pinch and tug on its twin, Roxy gasping and clutching my head to her as I feast upon her curves. "Lie back."

Roxy looks at me in wonder as she leans back, but it's not quite wide enough, so I twist her body, glad we're on a corner of the bar. Laying her back, I lift her skirt, enveloping my head in shadows as I kiss up the inside of her thighs. Roxy trembles, and I love that she can't see anything, just feel, as my tongue traces over her skin, moving higher and higher until I'm licking the edges of her panties.

She groans as I trace around them, moving closer and closer to where she wants "Jake . . ."

The first touch of my tongue to her pussy makes her jump, and I'm ravenous as I taste her, my cock throbbing in my pants as I pull the cloth to the side and slide my tongue inside her.

Her hips are shaking, thrusting against my quick tongue as I trace up and down her slit, sucking in between. I slip my tongue as deep as I can inside her, wiggling it and feeling her pussy clench around me before I pull out to flick the tip of my tongue over her clit. Roxy reaches down, grabbing my head again as she grinds her pussy against my mouth, pulling my hair. It's another thing I love about her. She's a woman who knows what she wants when it comes to sex, and she isn't going to just lie there for me.

"That's it, baby, that's how I like it," Roxy moans as I nibble and lick her clit. "Oh, Jake, oh, fuck, right there . . . oh, fuck, right there . . ."

I find the spot that she's looking for and lick faster, but with feather light strokes I devour her, my body aching as my cock presses against the fabric of

my pants. I want to fuck her so badly.

Suddenly, Roxy's hips lift off the bar, her thighs clamping around my ears as she comes. I hold her close, my hands reaching up to take hers as her body shakes like a leaf in the wind.

When she comes down, she's still gasping, her face covered in sweat as I pull my head out from under her skirt and she strokes my face. "You sure do like going down on me, don't you?"

"It's a gift," I tease, pulling her closer. "Now . . ."

"Your turn," she says, glancing around. "This is way too high for you to fuck me though."

I look and realize Roxy's right. I pick her up off the bar, looking at a nearby table before she squirms and turns around, bending over one of the barstools as she grabs the thin chrome railing that goes around the whole thing. I can't help it, I grin. "You know just how to look sexier every time."

Roxy looks back, giving me a saucy grin. "Well, are you going to fuck me or compliment me?"

I growl lightly, lifting her skirt before smacking the upturned curve of her ass, Roxy gasping at the flat crack of my hand on her skin. I can just see her glistening pussy lips from behind the way she's bent over, and my cock pulses to my heartbeat as I pull my shirt off and reach into my pants pocket, taking out a condom.

"No," Roxy whispers as she sees the package. "Please, Jake. I love you. I want to feel you. All of you. No condom."

I nod and let the condom tumble from my fingers to the ground, instead running my hands over Roxy's ass. I undo my pants the rest of the way and take my cock out, letting it bob to my heartbeat as I line myself up. I take her hips in my hand as I thrust my hips slowly, letting her juices coat my cock as I slide between her lips, my cockhead rubbing over her clit as she moans.

I line up my cock with her pussy, pausing. "You sure?"

"I am," she says softly, looking over her shoulder. "Never been surer."

I nod, pushing forward. My cock stretches Roxy open, and the feeling as I thrust into her in one long, deep stroke sweeps away all thought in a wave of static. I can't think. I can only feel as I grab her by the waist and pull back, thrusting harder and deeper into her.

My body is on fire, and I stroke in and out quickly. I can't take my time. There's no way I can hold back as she drives me wild. I'm grunting, sweat dripping down my face as I spank her ass, Roxy yelping and pushing back

into me, meeting my thrusts with her ass, our hips smacking together with sharp slapping sounds. I pound her body, driving deeply into her with each hard stroke of my steely hard dick. I pull her harder into me, grabbing her elbows and fucking her harder, each moan and cry from her lips pushing me faster and faster.

I feel my cock swell. I can't hold out much longer, but I don't care. I'm going to fill her up. With one more stroke, I'm pushed over the edge, and I cry out harshly, slamming my cock deep into Roxy. She cries out too, her pussy clamping tight on my cock as she comes with me, the both of us frozen as I hold her, unable to let go.

When our bodies relax again, I slide her off the barstool, gathering Roxy in my arms as she wraps her legs around me, burying her face in my neck. "I've got you, my love."

"Love . . . I never thought I'd hear a man say that to me," Roxy whispers. "Jake . . . even if it's secret, I have to have your love."

Her words hurt, and I set her on the barstool, stepping back to shake my head. "No."

"No, what?" she asks, and I hear a hint of fear in her voice.

"It's not going to be a secret. Roxy, I don't care about the rules anymore, consequences be damned. Nathan won't care. It's only the office. Well, you're more important than being Regional President of Franklin Consolidated."

Roxy beams as she looks around and finds her top, then she grins. "I guess I'm pretty special?"

"The most special," I reassure her, finding my pants and pulling them on. "Now, there is one thing we still need to do before we get out of here though."

"What's that?"

I chuckle and point behind Roxy. She turns, gasping when she sees the glint of light on the camera lens. "We were on camera?"

"Yep. Unless you want to run the risk of becoming Internet infamous, I think we should stop by the security office and delete the past hour or so of tape."

JAKE

I feel like a new man Monday morning as I get ready for work. The shackles that constrained me? I've released them. I no longer feel the need to play by the rules. I'm going to proudly have Roxy on my arm. Let the whole world see that I'm the luckiest man in all the world.

Of course, I'm still going to do my best to uphold decorum at work and keep it professional, but I'm not going to deny anything if I'm approached about it. It's my business what I do when I'm not at work, and there's no way I'm going to let anyone dictate anything to me. If Corporate wants to throw a piss party about it, let them.

I finish buttoning up my shirt, the classic blue with white collar, and tighten my tie before I get my coat and leave my room. I pause in the hallway, admitting to myself that I'm not looking forward to going to Sophie's room after the other night. We haven't talked much since. Sunday had about three words, and Sophie only came out of her room when it was time to get takeout. She wouldn't even let me cook her breakfast but instead took a couple of packets of Pop Tarts into her room.

I try her doorknob, but it's locked. I lean my head forward and almost rest it against the wood. I want to bang on the door, demanding she let me in. We've been lucky. We haven't had anything like this happen before. Instead, I remember what Roxy told me, and I take a deep breath. Knocking softly, I force myself to talk normally. "Sophie? Time to get ready for school."

Her door opens so quickly that I don't even have time to lower my hand. "Already am," she says sullenly, brushing past me as I take a stunned half step back. She stalks down the hallway, and I follow her into the kitchen, watching as she half slings her backpack onto the table.

"So what would you like . . ."

"Not hungry," she says before I can set my coat aside and grab a skillet. "Already had a Pop Tart."

I can't lie, her words really sting. I've cooked her breakfast every morning that I've been home for as long as I can remember. Now, she's eating goddamn Pop Tarts, of all things. But at least she's talking.

"Okay," I say, mixing up a meal replacement smoothie of my own. It's green and tastes like I'm licking the inside of a lawnmower, but it's quick. Just as I choke down the last of the gloop, Sophie crosses her arms over her chest.

"Can we go?"

I grab my jacket, fishing out a breath mint as we go downstairs. On the

way to school, she's silent, staring out the window as the city rolls by. Finally, when we're about a half mile away from school and stopped at a red light, I can't take it anymore. "Look, I'm sorry about what happened. And you're right, I'm not Dad, but I can't allow you to break the rules or the law, no matter how much that makes you hate me."

"I don't hate you," she says quietly, still looking out the window.

I snort. "Sure have been acting like it. We've always been close."

Sophie turns, looking at me, and I see the same stubbornness that I swear must run in our family. "I just didn't think it was fair. Jax is not a bad guy."

I could argue the point. "It might be true," I say, "but the fact that he's going out with a minor and thought it was okay to bring you to a club says he doesn't think."

"Jake—"

"Hang on, I'm not done," I say quietly as the light turns green. "Sophie, I'm only going to say this once, and I don't have a lot of time. First, I love you. I'm kind of learning as we go on, so I'm nowhere near perfect. But I know guys like this Jax. Maybe he does care about you. But if he does, then he should care enough not to be doing the things he did. He should respect you. Don't settle for a guy who won't."

Sophie says nothing. I pull up in front of her school and look over at her. "I'm on your side in this. I know I've been lax and haven't been paying attention to you. I promise I'll do better."

"Right," she says sarcastically. Shit, most of my talk didn't get through to her. "Have a nice day at work." She gets out and shuts the door hard, just short of slamming it.

I sigh. With all the good things going on, I guess everything in life can't be perfect.

"And that's how I'm going to bring the Franklin division back to profitability within two quarters," I say. It feels a little strange to be doing a presentation when most of the board of directors aren't even in the room. "By shifting focus toward the emerging biotech markets and out of the old markets, things are going to turn around."

"What about layoffs?" one of the members asks. They don't have the power they used to have, but they still have advisory and speaking rights in meetings like this.

"Thanks for asking," I reply. I hit the button on my laser pointer and

continue. “I’ve spoken with the union representative for the non-salaried employees, as well with various senior management. By limiting new hires and encouraging an accelerated retirement program for workers who are reaching that age, Franklin will reach appropriate manpower levels within one fiscal year. We might need to shift some workers to different departments and trim a little fat, but our losses should be less than 1% of employees, and even with severance packages, we’ll reach all of our transition goals.

“The fact is, we need a strong workforce at Franklin. While cutting the workforce with broad-scale layoffs might have the corporate shareholders happy for the next quarter, we’d be shooting ourselves in the foot if we do. We need to have happy, experienced workers in key positions. We owe it to the employees who stayed with Franklin through this transition to make sure we do everything we can to take care of them. If we do that, they’ll work their asses off for us because they’ll be working their asses off for each other.”

I can see nods and even a few smiles as I continue, and by the end of my presentation, I’ve done what I thought would be the impossible a month ago —make both sides of the Franklin merger happy with the changes we’re going to make. Corporate is happy that I’m turning around a non-profitable division, and the Franklin people are happy I’m not going all slash and burn around here.

There are several more speakers, but I zone them out as I go over my notes. When it’s all over, I’m pulled to the side by Tom Powers as I walk out of the room.

“Jake,” the white-haired man says, clasping a firm hand on my shoulder. Over the past month, we’ve had meetings, as he’s preparing for his retirement and the handing over of Franklin to me. “I’ve never witnessed such fire and passion.”

Falling in love will do that to you, I think to myself. I’m not ashamed to admit it now. I’m in love with Roxy. I don’t think I’ve ever felt this way about another human being. “Thank you, Tom. I’ll do my best to fill your shoes.”

“I wouldn’t worry about that,” he says, smiling. “You’ve done a phenomenal job with the division since starting here. But I have to say, I was getting a little bit worried for a second. You stumbled there for a week, and I had doubts, especially with your . . . other business. But you’ve pulled it out remarkably.”

I smile, relieved. “Thank you, sir.”

He grins. “I’m leaving this place in good hands. Thank you, it’s an honor.”

He offers his hand, and I shake it. “It’s an honor for me as well, sir. So I guess I’m still invited to your retirement party on Friday?”

Tom laughs, nodding. The party’s been Elena’s big project this past week other than helping me with this presentation, and she’s even roped herself an assistant, Hannah. “Of course. Just don’t let me see your back while I’ve got the knife for my cake.”

I laugh and head down the hall back to my office. It’s a little after quitting time, and I feel a slight pang in my chest when I don’t see Roxy, but I understand. She’s busy, and she’s gone home. No reason for me to stay either.

I head downstairs and get in my car. It’s early, but I figure I can stop by Club Jasmine on my way home and see how things are going. Nathan’s really enjoyed being hands-on with it, although Andre’s doing a great job as our assistant manager. And of course, Nathan will want to show me the new numbers after Roxy’s most recent performance.

I don’t even get in the door before Nathan’s coming across, grinning ear to ear. “Yo, man, what did I tell you? The exec called. He wants to see Roxy’s show live.”

I stop, a stupid grin on my face. “You serious?”

Nathan nods, laughing. “Hell yeah, man! Looks like we’re gonna have a star on our hands.”

I shake my head and head toward the bar. “That’s amazing. When’s he coming?”

“Two weeks from Saturday,” Nathan says. “Just think about it, Jake. Roxy performing at our club, it’s so going to raise our status to have our own in-house pop star. We gotta get her signed to something ASAP. My God, the money’s going to roll in!”

I’m not sure if I like Nathan’s idea. I get it, he’s thinking about the business, and he doesn’t realize the feelings I’m having for her. If Roxy gets her big chance, I want her to be free to do what she wants. If she’s content with performing on the weekends, even better. “Two weeks? That’s great, man. We’ll have plenty of time to promote it and Roxy will have time to rehearse. She’ll be amazing.”

“Hell, she always is. By the way, is everything going okay with Sophie? I

know you were stressing when you two left Saturday night. I still feel like shit that it happened. John and Andre are already going through the door staff, making damn sure we don't fuck up like that again."

"She's better. She's still sort of pissed at me, but she's coming around I think. We're talking some more, and I'm gonna make sure I have some more one on one time with her."

"Yeah, well, if you need to back off here to do time with her, you do it, okay? I'll keep the Club on lock for you, Jake."

I nod, making up my mind. "You know, I think I might do just that. Email me the numbers if you want, but I'm gonna skip tonight."

ROXY

"Jake seemed happy today," Hannah says as I use my hip to bump open the door of our apartment. I stroll in and kick off my heels, immediately stretching my toes out to their widest, unsexiest stretch and padding around in what I call "Hobbit Style."

"That's because we've decided to not hide our relationship," I announce cheerfully, walking to the kitchen, rooting around for that bottle of herbal tea I put in the fridge this morning. It always helps before I start my vocal exercises.

"What?" Hannah says, kicking off her shoes. She must have really put some oomph into her left leg, because I turn to watch as her heel lands dangerously close to Mr. Felix, but an instant later, he's safely under the couch with his tail hanging out under the end. Hannah, however, is staring at me in shock. "What the fuck?" she asks, placing her hands on hips. "You have a lot of 'splainin' to do."

I flip the cap on my tea, taking a deep swig and swirling it around my mouth before answering. "What? You had to know that I was still seeing him. After all this time, the number of times I was at the club late, all that."

Hannah rolls her eyes. "I figured. I just didn't want to argue with you over it. I hope it doesn't cause a problem at the office."

"Whatever happens, happens. It's not like we're gonna start screwing on his desk in his office during work hours," I say, though thinking about it, that would be fucking hot.

"Mmmhmmm," Hannah says, unconvinced. "I notice you added in

‘during work hours’.”

“Seriously. I just mean we’re not going to deny it if anyone asks. We don’t care who sees us.”

Hannah gives me a look. “I can smell the hormones from here. You‘d better get a grip on them.”

“Look, it’s more than just great sex. I really care about him. He’s the first guy in a long time who’s made me feel this way. He’s more than just a big wallet with a big dick. I give zero fucks that he’s my boss.”

She gives me a neutral look. “You don’t have to convince me. I have your back no matter what. I’m just looking out for—” she says before she suddenly jumps up, looking panicked when her phone buzzes. “Oh, shit! I’ve gotta go.”

I frown, confused. “Huh?”

Hannah doesn't respond, snatching up her purse and jamming her feet into the Nikes she keeps next to the front door. She yanks open the door, and I’m still confused. “Hannah!”

Before I can move, she rushes out of the apartment, slamming the door behind her. “The fuck was wrong with her?” I mutter in puzzlement. The way she looked at her phone and rushed off was bizarre. I look over at Mr. Felix, who’s just starting to emerge from under the couch. “You got any ideas?”

He gives me a look. “Yeah, that’s what I thought. Face it, Felix, be glad you’re a cat because bitches be crazy.”

I finish off my tea and rinse out the bottle. I’m just putting it in the rack when there’s a pounding on the door. I wipe my hands off. It must be Hannah. She must have forgotten something.

“What did you forget, your pocket rocket?” I ask, about to grill her on her odd behavior, swinging open the door. It’s not Hannah, and my breath catches in my throat. There, standing in his suit, looking hot as hell with a happy smirk on his face, is Jake.

“What are you doing here?” I rasp. Never mind the fact that I was thinking about dropping by the club to see him so we could roll around a little bit in the back. It’s the first time he’s come to my place unannounced. I guess I should expect more things like this since we’re officially ‘out’, but I just wasn’t expecting it after Hannah’s weirdness.

“I brought this for you,” he says, “Caymus Special Cabernet Sauvignon. It’s a very special wine for a very special person.”

I take the bottle from his hand, looking at it. I know the winery. My

stepfather has some, and I'm shocked that Jake just dropped a few hundred dollars for a bottle of wine. "Thank you, but what's the occasion?"

Jake grins silently for a moment, drawing it out. Just when he's starting to really get me anxious, his handsome face breaks off into a huge grin. He steps in and grabs me in a big hug, swinging me around before setting me down. "That record executive is coming to see your show in two weeks. How's that for an occasion?"

I gawk, nearly dropping the bottle of wine between my shock and the huge hug. "You're shitting me!"

Jake shakes his head, stepping inside and closing my front door behind him. "Nope, just came from the club where Nathan told me face to face."

I manage to set the bottle down, glad that Hannah and I have a table next to our front door, before I let out a squeal of happiness and jump into Jake's arms, kissing him hungrily. "You amazing, wonderful fucking man! You did this for me!"

Jake kisses me back. His tongue is hot in my mouth as we stumble toward the couch. I can hear Mr. Felix run out. I guess he knows what's going to happen, but I don't care. Jake picks me up in his arms, and I wrap my legs around his waist.

"No, you did this all yourself," he says as his hand cups my ass and squeezes. His fingers slide lower, and I can feel the tip of his middle finger sliding lower and lower. "You have the talent and the heart. I only gave you the canvas to paint your masterpiece on."

"You're a poet yourself," I smirk, gasping when his finger comes to rest on the edge of my pussy. "Mmm . . . and your canvas is my body."

"My Angel," Jake growls, sitting down on the couch, letting me straddle his lap. I can feel the bulge of his cock pressing into me through his suit pants, and I can't take it anymore.

"I fucking want you," I snarl, yanking his tie down and ripping his shirt open. "Now!"

I'm torn between trying to get his pants open and the hungry, passionate kisses we're exchanging, but my body is burning, needing him. I don't know where the fuck Hannah went, but right now, I don't care if she walks in while I'm impaled on Jake's cock!

"Come on," I growl in frustration, fumbling with his belt buckle. "Get them the fuck off!"

Jake chuckles, grabbing my wrists before I rip his pants open. "Damn,

you’re acting even more cock hungry than the night we first met.”

I growl demonically, staring into his eyes. “You ain’t seen nothing yet. Your Angel’s gone. Just a cock hungry devilslut is left.”

“Bring it the fuck on!” Jake moans into my lips, his hands getting his belt open and his pants undone. I can see it in his eyes. Tonight, I’m going to get exactly what I want, when I want it, and oh, my God, what I need is—

Bang! The front door to the apartment flies open just as I wrap my fingers around Jake’s cock through his boxers, about to pull it out.

“Good lord, I ain't seen something like that since Johnny came back from Vietnam and we got to get down and busy for the first time in a year,” a familiar voice says. I jerk my head up to see my grandmother, Ivy Jo, smirking. “You could club a baby seal with that thing!”

I feel like I’ve been punched in the chest. I can hear Mindy’s unmistakable voice calling out, “Grandma, cover your eyes!”

Jake jumps off the couch and pulls his pants up. I rise to my feet in shock, my eyes going wide with recognition at the women in front of me and the barking dog at their feet.

“Mama?” I whisper in horror. “What are you doing here?”

“Layla and Rita couldn't be here,” Mom says, sitting on the couch and gesturing at me, “but they send their regards.”

I nod, still half numb. I'm not thrilled that my cousin and aunt didn’t come, especially Aunt Rita, but I’ll live. If I can live through my grandmother seeing me about to yank my boyfriend’s boxers off, Rita not being here is small potatoes.

I'm just glad to see Brianna, Mom, Mindy, and Grandma all in the same place. All four women are seated on the couch wearing pleasant expressions with the exception of grandma, who is scowling murderously at Bertha, my mom’s dog. She takes her everywhere, it seems. “That’s okay, I’m sure I’ll see them,” I begin to say when furious barking and yowling interrupts me. “Shit.”

“Why the hell did we bring that furball with us, Mary Jo?” Grandma complains to my mom while Bertha chases Mr. Felix around the room. Hannah is doing her best to separate the two, but she’s giving Bertha looks that says she agrees. “We didn’t even bring the grandbabies out of the hotel room, but you bring the dog.” She rises to her feet, brandishing her wooden cane as a weapon. “I swear, I’m gonna crucify that ball of fur!”

“I’ve already told you a million times,” Mom says pleadingly. “Leah needed her sleep and the sitter didn’t want Bertha to disturb her and Rafe.”

“That’s why you should have left her at home!” Grandma growls. Instantly, her expression changes like someone flipped a switch. “Bah gawd, that cat’s beautiful. What’s his name? Reminds me of my precious Esmeralda.”

“Mr. Felix,” Hannah supplies before I can answer. She suspiciously had come back with my family and is now standing off to the side watching us, having given up trying to chase Felix and Bertha around. Felix has had enough of the canine, and he turns on her, giving her one good swipe before he jumps on top of his play tower. Grandma is entertained, at least. “Go on, Mr. Felix, box that hoe!”

“Grandma” I say with a gasp, shocked by her words. “Where’d you learn to talk like that?”

Grandma doesn’t turn her head away from the soon to emerge Animal Planet smackdown, but she at least gives me an answer. “I’m on Instagram.”

“Which reminds me,” Mindy says wryly, keeping her voice low enough that Grandma can’t hear. “I need to take her phone from her. She’s been putting up pictures she has no idea that she’s putting on there. I’m scared she’s gonna end up with a picture of her bags. And not the grocery store kind either.” Dressed in shorts and a floral shirt, Mindy looks like she’s ready to step onto a plane for summer vacation in Hawaii, but most of all, she looks happy.

“Get ‘em, Mr. Felix!” Grandma crows, cheering them on with her cane in her hand. “WORLDSTAR! WORLDSTAR!”

“Worldstar? What the hell?” I ask.

Mindy facepalms. “Oh, God, yes. She’s on YouTube watching those damn videos, too.”

“Damn, she’s like a ninja with that cane,” Jake remarks with a chuckle, and I have to give him an apologetic *sorry, my family is crazy* look. He gives me a small shake of his head, and I feel myself relax just a fraction. After what they walked in on, maybe we needed this to ease the tension.

“Mama, sit down!” Mom pleads. “You’re embarrassing Roxy in front of her friends!”

“Oh, don’t stop on my account,” Hannah says with a laugh. “This is the most fun I’ve had in weeks. And it explains so much about Roxy.”

Mr. Felix lets loose a yowl that comes from the depths of his saber-

toothed ancestors, and Bertha whines a little, backing up. “Hannah, please get him! I don’t want to have Bertha going to the vet.”

Muttering under her breath, Hannah walks over and grabs Mr. Felix and disappears down the hall. I hear the door shut, and Hannah comes back out, minus Felix.

Now that the commotion has died down, Grandma’s eyes fall on Jake. “So who’s this handsome young man?”

“Ladies, this is Jake Stone,” I say, blushing but still proud. “My boyfriend.” It feels good to be able to call him that. Glancing at Jake, I can see he feels the same way. “Jake, this is my mom, Mary Jo, my sister, Mindy, her best friend, Brianna, and my Grandmother, Ivy Jo.”

“It’s a pleasure,” Jake says. Getting up, he crosses over and shakes hands with each of them, giving Grandma one of his heart-melting smiles. “I see where Roxy gets both her sassiness and her beauty from. Did she get her voice from you too?”

“My daughters sure know how to pick ‘em,” Mom says proudly as Grandma giggles, of all things. “Handsome and a bit of roguish charm too.”

“So Jake, what do you do?” Brianna asks. Like Mindy, she’s added some weight, but it looks good on her also. I’ve only met her a few times, but she and my sister are practically inseparable these days.

“I’m the Regional President at Franklin Consolidated,” Jake says. “The corporation I work for absorbed it.”

“He’s Roxy’s boss,” Hannah adds.

“Hannah!” I protest, but Hannah gives me a look that says *suck it up, buttercup.* She’s right.

“Oh, don’t worry about it, honey,” Grandma says. “Getting down with the boss has been going on since . . . well, long before my time. And I went to school with Abe Lincoln.”

I laugh, shaking my head. “Please forgive her,” I plead to Jake. “She probably hasn’t taken her meds yet.”

“I heard that,” Grandma growls.

We all pretend we don’t notice Grandma as each of the women takes turns asking Jake questions. They ask him what his favorite color is, his favorite food, even what movies he likes to watch. I start to feel warm sitting next to him, and I’m not even the one in the hot seat.

To Jake’s credit, he’s the consummate gentleman, answering each question with patience and a pleasant smile on his face.

Mindy is in midst of a particularly tricky question when Hannah interrupts. “Uh, excuse me. I don’t mean to be rude, but Jake, would you like to give these ladies’ husbands a tour of the Club? Gavin, Oliver, and John are waiting at the Pancake House just down the street from Jasmine,” says Hannah innocently. “They said they were hungry.”

I look at her suspiciously, remembering how she ran out. “You were in on this!”

Hannah manages to look guilty but doesn't say anything.

Jake chuckles. “I’ll be fine. I’ll meet up with them and let you guys play catch-up.”

I cross my arms and scowl. I know what this is. They're gonna interrogate Jake.

“Don’t let them intimidate you,” I tell him in his ear. “Gavin’s huge, but he’s actually a nice guy.”

“Are you kidding?” he says with a smirk. “I was born in the jungle. I can handle myself. It was nice meeting you ladies. I’m sure I’ll see you again?”

“You sure will,” Mindy says. “We’ve got nowhere to go, and if we do, I’m going to be back.”

When he’s gone, I place my hands on my hips and scowl at everyone.

“Now, which one of you is going to tell me just what the hell you were thinking, surprising me like this?”

ROXY

I pace back and forth, nervous energy filling my legs as I try to clear my head. I came to Club Jasmine early just for this purpose, to try and get my head right.

It’s not working. “Come on, this is just another performance, just another performance,” I mutter to myself for what has to be the thousandth time.

“Roxy.”

I don’t pay the voice any attention as I keep trying to go over stuff in my head. “Quick little talk with the crowd, then *Shake It Off* . . . no, shit, we decided to change the lineup to show my range . . .”

“ROXY!”

I stop as two hands grab my shoulders and I look up to see Mindy shaking me, staring into my eyes. “What?”

“You’re freaking out,” Mindy says, giving me a smile. “Come on, you’ve been going over this for an hour now. You know your set backward and forward. Even that old school track you’re putting in for Mom.”

“Hey, I’m not old school!” Mom complains. “I mean, Madonna’s still touring!”

“Yeah, and looking more worn out than I do!” Grandma adds. “Roxy, your sister is right. Sit down. If you keep this up, you’re going to wear out your legs!”

I take a deep breath and sit down, Brianna moving over quietly to help with my hair. While she does that, Mindy sits down in front of me and starts doing my makeup. “Okay, now listen,” Mindy says quietly. “I can see what’s going through your head. You’ve been trying to give yourself a pep talk, saying if this goes badly, it’s no big deal. But you see, you don’t need that talk. It isn’t going to go badly. Look to your right. Let me get your cheek.”

I turn, seeing Grandma. She’s gotten herself dressed up in an outfit I can only call geriatric hoochie mama. Mom looks a bit more conservative, but Mindy herself looks like she’s about ready to tear up the stage as one of my backup dancers . . . if I had backup dancers.

“All of us here know you’re going to knock them dead. All the men know it, which is why the only one sweating is Nathan, and that man seems to sweat everything.”

I chuckle. She’s right. “He’s made his money being a worrywart.”

Mom gets up and comes over to me, kissing me on the forehead. “I’ve always been proud to have two wonderful, beautiful daughters. And I’ve never been prouder of you than tonight, Roxy. You look amazing, but most all, you’re showing the world your heart. Do that, and they’ll love you just as much as I do.”

I blink, moved. “Mom . . . don’t make me cry. Mindy just got my makeup done!”

“She’s right, Roxy,” Grandma says. She gets to her feet, coming over. “You look beautiful, and you’re going to be the hottest thing since Brenda Lee.”

There’s a knock at the door, and Brianna stops messing with my hair long enough to open the door to my dressing room. She gives a low whistle, and I turn around to see Jake step in the room. He’s dressed to the nines, a full tuxedo with bow tie, looking like he’s ready to be the next James Bond. “Well, well, you dress up nicely.”

“Thanks,” Jake says, giving Hannah a wink. She’s been a godsend, playing it cool at the office as I’ve gone through ten days of absolute performance boot camp. She even did the laundry the past two weekends.

Jake comes up to me, looking me in the eyes with those soulful, love-filled eyes that make my life complete. “You look beautiful.”

“Second-best looking girl in the room,” Mindy teases, fixing the last crystal on my face. “There. Now you look like a superheroine.”

“I feel better,” I admit, looking up into Jake’s eyes. “So the guys are ready?”

It was Jake’s biggest gift for this important performance, flown from Summerfield last Sunday, my old backup band from Trixie’s, The Roxxers, Jeff, Gregg, and Wes. We’ve been rehearsing together for the past week, getting back in sync just like we used to be. “They’re ready.”

“Then it’s time to go,” I say, giving Jake a kiss on the cheek. “We’ll kick some ass out there. You get these bitches to their seats, okay?”

I head backstage, where I see Jeff, Gregg, and Wes already in their performance gear. I smile, but Gregg, who is rail-thin with short hair, looks concerned as he gestures at Jeff, a tall blond with spikey hair. “Dude, I’m worried about the pyro.”

“What? We’ve worked this to the bone!” Jeff complains. “Practices were great with it.”

“Yes, but that was in an empty house with half the security staff standing by with fire extinguishers,” Gregg retorts. He’s always been the more level-headed one while Jeff wants to blast out. “With a packed house, if things go wrong, it’ll be a nightmare.”

“Nothing’s going to go wrong,” Jeff says dismissively, getting a little heated. “Rox needs to impress the record exec tonight, don’t you, Rox? And pyro’s part of that. We had it perfect from the first rehearsal. There’s nothing to it.”

I place my hands on my hips, biting my lower lip. I want to use the props, but now that the heat of the performance is on, it’s only adding to my anxiety. “Let’s just not use them,” I decide. “It’s too risky and we don’t need it.”

“But . . .” Jeff starts to protest.

“No pyro, and that’s final!” I snap, harsher than I intend to.

Gregg grins as Jeff looks like he wants to argue, but he looks away when I scowl fiercely at him. “All right, Rox, it’s your show. No pyro.”

“Thank you,” I say, feeling butterflies flitter in my stomach. “I’m sorry,

guys, I didn't mean to be bitchy. I'm just nervous, and I really didn't need the bickering right now." I motion to my bandmates, and we huddle, saying a quick prayer. Just like old times.

We're just finishing when I hear Nathan take the mic on stage. "Club Jasmine . . ."

The DJ, who's going to be taking over after the concert, hits my 'introduction music', and the crowd starts to roar. Nathan lets the sound build for a few moments, and I can see through the side curtain as he grins. "Tonight, we've upped the ante for you. First, let's give a hot Club Jasmine welcome to The Roxxers!"

There's a roar of applause as my bandmates take the stage.

I feel like I'm going to faint as Nathan's voice booms.

"And now, the woman you've all been waiting for. The hottest sensation to hit this part of the country in a decade. She puts the pop in pop princess, the work in twerk. Ladies and gentlemen, and special guests . . . she's baaaaa-aaaaaaack!"

The crowd's roar is like a physical wave, and I can feel it filling my body with energy. *You can do this, girl. Everything's going to be fine.* "ROXY!"

Nathan walks off stage, and as he passes by, I grab his arm. "Nathan!"

"Yeah?"

"Nix the pyro! Tell them, no pyro!"

I don't have time for more. The crowd is chanting my name, but I see Nathan give me a nod, and I feel a bit of relief. The moment I step out on stage, I'm swept away. I grin, all of my nervousness falling away as I wave to the crowd. "Club Jasmine, let's get Roxed!"

The crowd roars again as Wes starts the synth notes for *Toxic*, and I stalk toward the front of the stage, my ass swaying side to side as I start.

Everything goes perfectly. I have them in the palm of my hand by the chorus, and I work it, spinning and twirling while singing my heart out. I've been training *hard* for this, and all those morning runs and dance practices after work have paid off. I'm not winded at all when the final notes hit, and the crowd eats it up.

"Thank you!" I cheer, not even pausing as Gregg switches over to the percussion introduction to *Rockabye*. This is a new one for me at Club Jasmine, and the crowd loves it, especially as Jeff does his reggae-style verses while jamming on the bass guitar. I planned this song for the fact that it is a duet. It gives me a chance to catch my breath before going high-energy

for the next few songs.

It's the performance of my life.

I walk to the center of the stage, blinded by the spotlight, sweat trickling down my forehead and sides. Despite being sweaty as hell, I feel more alive than I've felt in a long time, energized by my performance. "Club Jasmine, are you having fun tonight?" A resounding *yeah* roars back at me. "I can't hear you!" I yell, cupping my ear. "Can I get a hell yeah?"

"Hell yeah!"

I laugh. "All right, this next song is for some very special guests tonight," I tell the audience as I look out into the crowd. Through the glare, I can make out the women I love, all of them looking at me with pride in their eyes and smiles on their faces. "I won't embarrass them by saying their names, but they know who they are."

I turn my back to the crowd and raise my mic hand in the hair. "Hit it!"

The song starts, and I start jamming, dropping it low to the floor and bringing it back up again, pumping myself up for this high-energy song. Just as I'm about to sing the opening bar, I'm surrounded by a shower of sparks that blots out the entire stage, and a loud popping noise assaults my ears.

Followed by the blaring of a fire alarm.

"Everybody OUT!" the DJ screams, and suddenly, I realize someone used the pyro anyway and started a fire! I'm frozen in shock as I watch the audience descend into chaos.

Flames are racing up the curtains and there's a rush of screaming people trying to get out the doors. I let out a cry when something falls near me, flames whooshing from it. Almost numbly, I see Gregg, Jeff, and Wes abandon their instruments to head for the fire exit on the side of the stage.

After a moment, I shake off my shock and start to head that way. But before I can cross the stage, one of the speakers falls, sparks and flame erupting in front of me as it hits the stage. Crying out, I hurl myself out of the way just in time.

I roll off the stage to land in the middle of what feels like a stampede, people kicking me, and I can feel someone stumble, stepping on my back as they rush for the exit. I scream, worried that the next step is going to be someone breaking my leg or worse, when suddenly, strong arms are around my body, lifting me up. It's Jake, and he pulls me toward the exit as the flames continue to grow.

We get outside, Jake setting me down as thick, black smoke rolls out the

doors of Club Jasmine. I look around, trying to find my family, and at first I'm panicked. I see Mom and Mindy at first, then everyone else. Except Grandma. "Where's Grandma?" I look around frantically, my heart pounding within my chest like a jackhammer, growing dread twisting my stomach.

"I'm here!" a familiar wavy but powerful voice crows. "It'd take more than this to knock me out! Now set me down, you big gorilla!"

I see Oliver, Mindy's husband, with Grandma in his arms. "Sorry, I took the other exit. Everyone was headed to the same one."

"What the fuck was that?" calls a fresh voice, hacking. "Honestly, what the fuck were you thinking?"

I turn to see an older man, his eyes ablaze in fury. "Who—"

"I'm the person you were trying to impress," the man hisses, coughing. "I came to watch you sing, and you try to put on a pyro show like you're a goddamn pro wrestler? Fucking amateur hour!"

I can see Jake wants to say something, but Nathan comes up, grabbing him, and he's running back into the building, Gavin and Oliver on his heels. I want to rush after them. They're trying to save the building, I guess, but I'm frozen as the man rants. "I swear, between the bad stripper dancing and the horrible caterwauling . . . I didn't think it could get any worse!"

"You know what, you bastard? Take your bullshit and shove it!" Mindy yells, getting in his face. "It was obviously a fucking accident!"

The man gives her a look and turns on his heels, stomping away. He disappears into the crowd just as the sound of fire engines approaches, and Mindy holds me as I feel like I just destroyed my life. Everything was going great. Until that.

"Oh, my God, Min, I can't believe this," I sob into her shoulder. I'm too weak to look over to see which one of my bandmates looks guilty, though I have a pretty good idea which one it is. But it doesn't matter. I feel like I'm responsible for this. "This is all my fault."

"Shh," Mindy reassures me, stroking my hair until a new set of arms wraps around me. It's Jake, and he drops a fire extinguisher on the pavement before he pulls me into a hug.

"We got everyone out. The fire's mostly under control and it looks like no one is hurt," he says, coughing lightly. "But the roof . . . the roof . . ."

"The club?" I whisper, and Jake shakes his head slowly. I feel my heart break. I'm sure he hates me. I burned down his dream! "Jake, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to—"

Before I can finish, Jake’s phone rings and he pulls it out. He listens, his face going white underneath the streaks of black. “No . . . no!”

“What is it?” I ask as Jake hangs up, and he starts to walk away. I follow him, grabbing his arm. “Jake! What is it?”

“There’s been a . . .” he whispers, seeming to lose his voice, his eyes unfocused. “Sophie . . . she’s been in an accident.”

JAKE

The cabin of Hannah’s car is silent as we make our way to the hospital. I’m riding in the back because, as a heaping helping of extra suck on tonight, my car was parked in the back of Club Jasmine . . . right where a back window blew out and turned my Maserati into a wreck.

This night has been something nightmares are made of. It started off with so much promise, with the chance for a brighter future for Roxy, for Club Jasmine. Now, the club’s a wreck and from what I hear, Roxy’s career might have gone up in flames right along with it, and to top it off, I’m terrified about how Sophie is doing because they wouldn’t tell me much on the phone.

“Jake, I’m so sorry,” she says quietly. After getting the call, I turned over everything at the club to Nathan while Hannah drives Roxy and me to the hospital. “You must hate me.”

The guilt in her voice tears at my fucking heart. She’s said it about a half dozen times as we ride, and each time, I haven’t responded. To be honest, I don’t know what to say. Instead, I look out the window, wishing that Hannah could drive faster.

“Jake . . .”

“Don’t worry about what happened right now,” I tell her quietly, reaching out and taking her hand. “Everything is going to be okay.”

Even as I say it, my stomach twists in knots. Things aren't going to be okay. The club being burned hurts on a lot of levels. We’re going to lose a lot of money over it. Sure, we had insurance, but that will cover repairs, maybe. It won’t cover the operating losses, the fact that nobody’s coming through the door, or that I owe the staff something during the time the club’s closed. And there’s no insurance in the world that’s going to cover the damage to Club Jasmine’s reputation. There’s no guarantee that even if we do get it repaired quickly, people are going to come back.

I just hope Nathan won't lose his shit. He's really taken personal pride in it, and it's the first business venture he's done that bears his real fingerprints and isn't just transactions being shuffled around on a computer.

Honestly, though, my number one concern right now is Sophie. If something bad has happened to her . . . I feel like hell. I said I was going to start spending more time with her. But outside of breakfast and our school rides, we haven't had a lot of time. Now she's in the hospital after an accident of some kind, and if something's happened to her, I'll never forgive myself.

We reach the hospital, and before Hannah's even got the engine shut off, I jump out of her car, storming toward the doors and practically charging through them. The safety glass slides open at what seems like a snail's pace, and I turn sideways to slide through as narrow a gap as I can, crossing the reception area to the desk. I barely notice that Roxy's caught up as I plant my hands on the desk so loudly that the guy on duty jumps slightly. "Where's Sophie Stone?" I pant, knowing I look like a dirty, crazy man. "I'm here to see her."

"Are you of relation?" asks the staffer. The logical side of my mind tells me that he's just doing his job, but there's another side of me, the scared, instinctive brother side, that wants to grab him by the scrubs he's wearing and jack him against the wall.

Instead, I bite down on my words and reach into my tuxedo jacket, finding my wallet. "I'm her brother," I say, showing him my driver's license. "And I'm her legal guardian. Now where is she?"

The guy looks, then nods. "She's in the ER, one of the exam rooms. I'll have someone come to escort you."

"I'm not waiting," I growl, rushing down the hallway, Roxy hot on my heels. I see a sign for the ER and turn, sliding slightly in my dress shoes on the linoleum. I see the doors up ahead, and as I reach them, a nurse steps out.

"Mr. Stone, come with me," she says, not fazed at all to see a man in a soot-stained tuxedo come running down the hallway. She leads us through, not saying much until she stops outside an exam room. "She's in here. We're waiting on some tests."

I nod and slide the curtain back, relief sweeping through me as I see Sophie. Thank God she's awake, leaning back on the exam table as another nurse finishes wrapping up a gauze bandage around her head. She's got the bandage and a bruise on the side of her face, but other than that, she honestly doesn't look all that bad.

“Okay, Miss Stone, just lie back and wait for the docs to come back with the results of the tests,” the nurse says. Seeing me, she gives me a professional smile. “Just a precaution. The doctors had your sister do some head X-rays. They should have them back shortly.”

She leaves, and I walk over to the side of Sophie’s exam bed, worried. “What happened?” I ask, wincing inside at the anger in my voice. I don’t want to sound angry. I’m just worried. “Sophie?”

“I got into an accident,” she says, sulking. I reach for her hand but she brushes me away. “I’m fine, they say I just hit my head pretty good. The doctor thinks I might have a mild concussion. They’re letting me go if the X-Rays look okay.”

“Shit, I’m so sorry,” I whisper, wanting to hug her but not wanting to be rejected again. Instead, I’m forced to cross my arms over my chest to keep from reaching out. “I’m just glad you’re okay. How’d it happen?”

Sophie turns her head and stares at me tight-lipped. With each passing second, the dread in my stomach grows. “Please don’t do this. Tell the truth, Sophie. Were you driving? Were you . . . drinking?”

Sophie’s lip curls, her eyes flaring in hurt anger. “No, but Jax was,” she admits. “It was just one beer though!”

Her admission hits me like a punch in the gut. “What?”

“Jax!” Sophie half yells. “We were going out. He took a wrong turn and hit a pole.”

Anger flares in my chest. I can’t believe this. A dark thing twists deep in my heart, an evil thing that I can’t control, and I grab the railing on Sophie’s bed, squeezing the metal so tightly that it starts to creak. “I thought I told you not to see him anymore!”

“Yeah, well, you also told me you were going to spend more time with me, remember that?” she shoots back. “So sorry, Jake. I got bored when you kept going out all the time. You’re never around lately,” she says, not looking at Roxy but making her point. “He was giving me the attention I want. He at least would listen for longer than the ten minutes it takes to make eggs and hash browns!”

I almost see red, and my hands pull harder, the railing on Sophie’s bed whining in protest. I hear Roxy gasp in hurt, and I stare at Sophie, my jaw clenched so hard my teeth ache. I could’ve lost my sister because of this fuck nut. I warned him last time, and then he goes and drinks before taking her out? I want to choke him with my bare hands.

“I don’t give a fuck . . .”

“Hey,” Roxy says softly, trying to place a calming hand on my shoulder, but I shrug her off, my temper on the edge of losing control.

“That guy doesn’t give a shit about you!” I hiss at Sophie. “I could’ve lost you tonight!”

Sophie stares at me coldly, unmoved. She looks at Roxy, then looks away. “You have a woman in your life. You don’t need me anymore.”

Her words hit me like a ton of bricks. And it fucking hurts because lately, it’s true. I’ve been putting everything first but Sophie. “You know that’s not true,” I whisper. “You’re one of the most—” I catch myself. “You are the most important person in my life.”

Sophie snorts. “Don’t lie to yourself, darling big brother. I’m at least number four or five on your list. But it’s okay, I know I’m a burden.”

I open my mouth, about to yell at her, but Roxy tugs on my arm desperately. “Not here, Jake. This isn’t the time or the place for this conversation.”

She’s right. Fuming, I spin on my heel and stalk out of the room. When I get out, I slam my fist against the wall, Sophie’s words echoing around in my head. She can’t understand. All of this has been for her, too!

I turn to storm down the hallway. I need a drink, and I saw a Coke machine on the way here. Roxy is on my ass though, and I can hear her rushing to catch up with me. “Hey, wait up!” She grabs me by the arm, and I stop. “I know you’re mad and upset after everything that happened, but your sister has a point—”

“That I put you before her?” I growl, staring at Roxy. “Yeah, she has a point. That I’ve just risked everything, rolled the fucking dice on my future, her future, Nathan’s future, everyone’s future on some stupid fucking fireworks. And I watched it all go up in smoke. I risked it all because I let my dick overrule my brain. Everything’s all fucked up right now. We’re all fucked up. I’m all fucked up. And to be honest, I don’t want to hear any shit about how terrible of a brother and guardian I am!”

Roxy’s face goes white, and I hate myself for what I just said. I shouldn’t be talking right now. There’s so much emotion running through me that I don’t even know what I’m saying. “If that’s how you truly feel.”

She turns and runs down the hall, bursting through the double doors and knocking an orderly out of the way. “Roxy,” I yell, trying to chase her. “Wait!”

“Mr. Stone?” a voice calls behind me, and I turn to see a doctor with an obviously concerned expression on his face standing outside Sophie’s exam room. “Is everything okay?”

I can see that the doc wants to talk about Sophie, and as much as it tears my heart out of my fucking chest that I can’t run Roxy down, I turn and slump against the wall. “No, everything’s not okay,” I whisper, rubbing furiously at my watering eyes. “But what’s going on with Sophie?”

The doctor starts talking, but I’m having trouble focusing on what he’s saying.

I shouldn’t have said what I said.

Now both of the women I love most hate me.

ROXY

“It’s all my fault,” I wail, my eyes burning as I rock back and forth on my bed in my sister’s arms. “I nearly got you guys killed.”

Mindy brushes my hair out of my eyes and gives me a comforting look. “Hush, baby girl, we’re all fine. I think Grandma even had fun.”

“But I wrecked the club!” I cry. I don’t bother telling her that it was one of my band members who caused the fire, because it had been my idea to practice with the pyro in the first place.

Mindy rubs my back, shaking her head. “So? They’ve got to have coverage. Nathan strikes me as the kind of guy who’d make sure of that.”

“And Jake hates me!” I sob, collapsing as I ignore her attempt at practicality. I feel warm arms wrap around me, and I turn, burying my face in my sister’s chest as hot, bitter tears scald my eyes. “He practically said that I’ve wrecked everything!”

“Hush,” Mindy says, stroking my hair. I have to hand it to Hannah. She knew exactly what I needed when I fled from the hospital, nearly sobbing already. She sent a few text messages, and less than ten minutes after we got home, there was a quiet knock and Mindy was there, changed out of her club wear. Without a word, she bustled me into my room, stripped me down, and helped me into my fuzziest, fluffiest pajamas.

Now, she’s doing what she does better than anyone in the world—comforting me. “It’s going to be okay, Roxy.”

Mindy hugs me tighter, and I hold her close. “He hates me though. I’m

sure Sophie hates me, too. I took him away from her, and that's why she was out with Jax."

"Give him some time," Mindy reassures me. "As for Sophie . . . I think we both know she didn't see this Jax just because Jake wasn't spending time with her. An older guy showed her attention and she liked it."

I sob. "I still fucked up everything. I feel so fucking shitty."

Mindy pushes my head back, looking me in the eyes with a stern but loving expression. "Don't you dare put all of this on yourself, Roxy. Sophie's young and was taken advantage of. If anyone is to be blamed, it's that perv Jax. I'm of half a mind to have Oliver and Gavin pay him a visit."

"It'd just make everything worse." I sigh, laying my head back on Mindy's chest. "Min . . . I'll never get another chance. I thought that this was going to be my big break. I'm so sorry, Mindy."

"Sorry for what?" Mindy asks.

"That you came out here to see all of this mess."

Mindy chuckles and kisses me on the cheek. "Roxy, I seem to remember dragging you through a nest of lies for an entire week, all the way to the altar of a wedding, only to tell you that the whole thing was a charade. If that's not an absolute mess, I don't know what is."

"True, but you didn't burn anything down," I protest. "And you still ended up marrying Oliver."

Mindy laughs softly. "Baby, I don't care if you blew up half the city. You're still my baby sister and I fucking love you. You hear me? I fucking love you. And if Jake really loves you, he'll get over his anger. He'll realize that he's wrong and come here crawling on his hands and knees to apologize for talking like an ass to you."

"I just don't know . . . I really don't," I whisper. "It feels like my life is over."

"Well, if it is, then I'm ending your life in style. I noticed it before—you've got some Chocolate Cherry Garcia in your fridge, and I'm thinking the two of us need to carb up before catching some Zs. Oliver already knows I'm going to be staying the night, so you can't chase me out."

I swallow my fresh tears, nodding. "Okay . . . if you say so."

"I do. Now let's go get some chocolate."

JAKE

“What?” Nathan yells into the phone. “Listen, you stupid bitch, I already fucking told you four times that it was an accident. You know what? I’m done talking with you. Put your fucking supervisor on the line.” He shakes his head, growling deep in his chest. “What do you mean they’re unavailable? I don’t care if you have to route this to the fucking CEO. And yes, I’m saying it’s a fucking accident! Huh? Go fuck yourself.”

Nathan slams down the phone, shaking his head angrily. “Jesus, and I thought those assholes at the SEC were bad. These insurance pricks make the SEC and IRS look like Mr. Fucking Rogers goes to Sesame Street.”

I sit in my chair, gripping the glass of mineral water I’ve been sipping, wishing it were something stronger. We’re sitting in the back room of the club on two of the smaller couches that were saved from the mess that was the VIP section.

The fire gutted a lot of the main room of Club Jasmine. The bar is a total loss, the marble top cracked and soot-streaked. As Nathan put it the first time we walked in yesterday, “Holy shit, there’s a fuckton of damage.”

We’ve already started, financing everything through our own names and funds. It’s not much right now. I can hear the workers out front, a half-dozen guys clearing out the mess. While they do that, Nathan and I are back here, running numbers and trying to get the insurance company to get off their asses. If they don’t, a good chunk of our fortune is gonna go down the tubes and it’s all going be because of . . .

A hard, bitter lump forms in my throat at the thought. I won’t let that angry, stupid fucking idea enter my head again. It’s not true. I’m just grateful that Nathan isn’t playing the blame game. Still, despite Nathan being my bro, despite all we've been through, I’d happily tell him to go fuck himself if he tried. I’m dealing with enough between Roxy and my sister.

“Shit, man. I really hope they come through,” Nathan says after a moment in a calmer tone. When I don’t say anything, he glances at me and sighs. “It’s gonna fuckin’ hurt if they don’t.”

“Did they?” I ask, already knowing the answer. I’m just still in a haze. I should be at Franklin Consolidated, but I talked with Elena this morning. She’s going to send all the files I need to look at electronically and keep me up to date on what I need to be there for. Right now, that place is the least of my damn worries.

Nathan snorts. “Fuck, no. They’re dumb as hell. They’re saying they want the fire marshal’s report, and I told them five times I don’t have it. For fuck’s

sake, I talked with the guy this morning, and he said that even a rush job would take him another week to get together. In the meantime, I've given them the video footage. We just need to get the fucking repairs underway."

I rub my face, feeling the unfamiliar rasp of stubble. I forgot to shave this morning. My head is pounding with a headache that should be in the fucking *Guinness Book of World Records*. Looking around the room, I sigh at how depressing it all is. I don't even know why I came in. There's nothing for me to do. At least Nathan can do his trading with his tablet. I can't do half of my fucking job sitting back here.

But while Franklin is my job, Club Jasmine was my dream. My way out. It was the thing that said I was working for myself, not for some nameless, faceless mass of shareholders and some board of rich assholes who wouldn't understand what I've had to do to get to this point. Club Jasmine might have been just a nightclub, but it was magical when it was open. It's my baby, and I feel compelled to check on it. Every day we're closed is like a knife in my chest . . . and other than bleed money, there isn't a damn thing I can do about it.

"How's Sophie holding up through this?" Nathan asks after a moment. "I mean, the situation between you two."

"She's not talking to me," I say. "I was making progress before the accident. I mean, I thought I was. Sure, I'd spent a lot of time with Roxy and getting this place ready, but . . . now she's down again. Maybe I said some things I shouldn't have. I got so mad when I found out she was with the same asshole who brought her in here."

"You want to pay the fucker a visit?" Nathan asks. "I gave him a little speech before I let him go, but maybe he needs a little more convincing."

I think about it, then shake my head. "No. I'm still debating on it, but if I do, I'll handle it myself."

Nathan snorts, shaking his head. "Teenage girls, man. Shit, even when we were teenagers, I preferred them older. I wouldn't wish that death sentence on anybody. All hormones and Lifetime Channel bullshit."

Despite my sour mood, I have to chuckle at his crude way with words. "Sophie's actually not that bad. In fact, up until now, she's been practically an angel. I guess it was gonna catch up with me sooner or later."

"Actually, I'd say you've done pretty damn good with this."

I turn to Nathan, so exhausted and hurting that I speak my mind. "Nate, about the fire . . . I mean, you've gotta blame me some."

“Bullshit,” Nathan says with a harsh laugh. “I’m not a damn child. I agreed to the fucking pyro idea. Hell, I’ve spent days kicking myself over it, too. Roxy told me as they were getting on stage that they wanted to nix the pyro. I swear I passed it along. I even talked to the stage tech. He says the same. Nobody can find the damn pyro tech though. Someone didn’t get the fucking message.”

“Sounds like there’s more than enough blame to go around and we all get to take a bite of the shit sandwich,” I whisper. “Thank you for telling me.”

There’s a knock at the door, and I get up, swaying as the room spins. Nathan’s up in a flash, patting me on the arm. “Yo, you go home, Jake. I got this shit. You go take care of Sophie.”

I nod as Nathan leads me to the door. Opening it, we see John, who’s been acting as crew chief. He looks different in his old army pants and combat boots, good for the work at hand. “Nathan—”

“Just a moment, John,” Nathan says. “Call Jake a cab, and then tell me what’s on your mind.”

John nods and disappears, and I give Nathan a grateful but exhausted nod. “Thanks, man. I owe you.”

Nathan shakes his head. “Don’t sweat it.”

We pull up to the address that I got from Sophie’s phone, a medium-sized house in what looks like a middle-class neighborhood out in the burbs. Luckily for me, Jax is already sitting out on the porch with a blonde girl on his arm, talking, laughing, and carrying on like he didn’t just almost kill my sister. I know I told Nathan I was still thinking about this, but I can’t stop myself.

Seeing him laugh and joke around makes me even more mad. I jump out of the car and shut the door just a little too hard before telling the cabbie to wait, stalking up the sidewalk to the house.

Be careful, a little voice warns in the back of my head. *You don’t want to do anything that you’ll end up regretting.*

“What’s up?” I ask casually as I walk up.

Jax’s grins slowly fades from his face as he recognizes me, and he turns a little pale. “Nothing much,” he says finally, a cool note entering his voice. “Just chilling with my girl, Erica.”

I sneer. “Your girl, huh?”

He nods, trying to act hard when I know he’s a scared little bitch. “Yeah,

my girl."

That little smirk pisses me off and I can't help it. Without warning, I snatch him up by the front of his shirt and slam him against the wall.

"Hey!" Erica cries, getting up from her seat, startled by my violent behavior. "Stop it!"

I ignore her, set in getting my point across. "You might not have been legally drunk, so the cops might be done with you, but you could've seriously hurt Sophie. I'm just going to say this once. Stay the fuck away from my sister or I'm going to come back here, and next time, I won't be so nice. You won't need a *girl*, because you'll be missing a set of balls," I growl menacingly in his face. "You understand me?"

Jax gasps, his face turning a dark shade of red as he nods violently. "Yes, I understand! I won't touch her, I swear!"

I hold him in place for a moment longer, letting him feel true terror, then let him go. He comes away with a gasp, grabbing his throat. "Good," I growl. "I don't want to have to come back here again."

"What the hell was that for?" Erica demands as I step away, running forward to wrap her arm around Jax's shoulder as he wheezes.

"Dude's an asshole, and I've had enough of him getting my little sister into things she shouldn't be in," I say. "Ask him about last weekend."

With that said, I turn and walk back to the cab. Behind me, I hear her demand of Jax, "What the hell is he talking about?"

As I get in the cab and he starts the engine, I witness the two arguing, gesturing wildly at each other. The cabbie turns back and gives me a questioning look, but he doesn't say a word. Before we pull off, I see that Erica's had enough. She slaps Jax across the face, spins on her heels, and walks off.

Chuckling, we drive off, and I can't stop the smile that forms on my face.

The apartment is silent as a tomb when I walk in, and except for the hum of the fridge in the kitchen, I can't hear anything.

"Sophie?" I ask, pulling off my suit jacket and draping it over the empty sofa. The remote for the TV is untouched, right where I left it this morning to check the news, and I grow more worried. I dropped her off this morning but sent a driver to pick her up after school. I didn't hear anything about a problem, but still . . .

I check my home office. Sophie uses my desktop computer from time to

time. Nothing, and I grow more worried. Walking down the hallway, I stop outside her room, relief rushing through me as I hear something inside. I almost decide to let her be, but instead I knock softly. “Sophie?”

There’s no answer, and I’m about to turn away when there’s a soft reply from the other side. “Come in.”

I open the door and see her stretched out on her bed, watching one of the stupid *Real Housewives* shows. Way too much unneeded drama for me. “Hey.”

“Hey,” she says, sitting up, and to my relief, turning off the TV. “You’re home early. For you, at least.”

I think of making a wiseass remark, but instead I stop. This isn’t the time for it. “I came home because I wanted to see how you were doing. Whatcha been up to?”

Sophie flops back, waving a hand at the TV. “Just watching TV. Jax tried to call me but I didn’t answer.”

I step into her room, sitting on the edge of the bed and raising an eyebrow. “Why not?”

Sophie looks embarrassed, and deep down, I see a little bit of hurt, too. “I saw him with some chick at a party on Instagram. I know of her. She’s a total skank.”

“Oh,” I say quietly, glad that Sophie figured out that Jax is no good for her but sad that she’s hurt.

Sophie reaches over, putting a hand on my arm. “I’m sorry, Jake.”

She starts trembling, and I pull her up, giving her a hug. “I’m sorry too, Sophie. Because you’re right—you’re my sister and I should have given you more attention.”

Sophie hugs me back. “I should’ve listened to you. You were right. He’s a piece of shit.”

I hold in my grin. I’m happy I paid the little fucker a visit, though she doesn’t need to know that. “We all make mistakes,” I reply. “I think I’ve made one or two in my life.” It feels good to be hugging her again, like we’re back on the right path, the two of us against the world like it’s always been.

Sophie chuckles, and I notice that I haven’t eaten. “You hungry? How about I make dinner for us?”

“I could eat,” Sophie says, letting go. “I’ll help.”

We go out to the kitchen, where I pull out some kale and bell peppers while Sophie roots around in the fridge. “Pork chops?”

“Anything would be delicious for me,” I reply, washing the greens. Sophie nods, and silence falls over the kitchen. I want to make sure everything is smoothed over, but I don’t know how to start. Finally, I clear my throat. “Sophie, you’ve always been my number one priority, and as much time as the club and work take me away, I do it for us so that we can have a good life. I’m trying to do right by Mom and Dad and give you the life they’d want for you. But I don’t know what I’m doing, so I need you to help me here. Talk to me because I sure as fuck don’t know the first thing about teenage girls.”

Sophie takes out the kitchen knife and starts butterflying the chops. “I know you’re trying your best, Jake. You’ve done well by me. I mean, you took me to get my first training bra. How many brothers can say that?”

I chuckle, shaking my head. “Yeah . . . but seriously, Sophie, you are number one to me. Listen, I’m gonna promise you now that I’m going to spend more time with you. Just the two of us, like it used to be.”

“But what about Roxy? Have you talked to her?” she asks.

Just hearing Roxy’s name hurts, and I shake my head. “After I left your room, I said some pretty stupid shit to her in the hallway. I basically told her that all of this was her fault. I don’t think she wants to hear from me.”

Sophie sets the knife down, turning to look at me. “You haven’t tried to talk to her since? What the hell are you waiting for?”

“Oh, I tried,” I say quietly. “She’s not picking up her phone, and she wasn’t in the office today.”

“And you just give up?” Sophie asks, turning back and picking up the knife. She butterflies the other chop, shaking her head. “That’s not like you, Jake. You could do more.”

I glance over at Sophie. She’s dead serious. She puts the knife back down and goes to get the skillets. “You think so? And you’re okay with that?”

“Me?” Sophie says, looking down. “Of course I am. I said some things I didn’t mean, too. I was talking out of anger and I’m sorry. I’m turning seventeen soon, Jake. I’ve got a year and some change of high school left, then hopefully I’m going to college. You need someone you can spend the rest of your life with. If you think she’s it, stop wasting time. You deserve it.”

She’s right. No more waiting for her to answer the phone.

ROXY

“Get up, Roxy!” I hear someone say. In the near week that I’ve been calling off work, I’ve rarely left my room, preferring instead to spend as much time as I can wrapped in the blackness of my blanket and sleep.

I groan from underneath the covers, barely awake. “Leave me alone,” I moan. “I took a shower yesterday!”

“No!” snaps the voice, whom I finally recognize as Mindy. “I’m not going away. I have to leave in a few days and you’re being disrespectful to your family. Now get up!”

I look at Mindy, but my tirade dies on my lips as I see her. She’s standing there, her hands on her hips, pissed like I haven’t seen her in a very long time. “Look at you. You look a hot mess. You’ve fallen apart. I already checked with Hannah. You won’t go to work. You haven’t eaten in three days. And why?”

“Because I—”

Mindy cuts me off. “Because you feel sorry for yourself! I know you feel bad about what happened, but you can’t let it control your life.”

Her words hit me hard, and I look down, catching a whiff of myself. I *am* a fucking mess. I feel so horrible, guilty and ashamed that my family came all this way to see me, and here I am avoiding them because I can’t deal with the shame and hurt I feel. “Mindy . . .”

Mindy won’t relent. “The past five days, every time we called, you wouldn’t answer. I called your home phone and even talked with Hannah, trying to get you to come to the hotel. Then I come by today, only to find out that Hannah hasn’t even been able to get your ass out of bed? Your room smells like the zombie apocalypse, and I’m not putting up with it anymore!”

I feel like the worst person in the world. I swear I’ve almost had a mental breakdown over what happened. Starting a fire in the club, feeling responsible for Sophie getting in a crash, the music guy telling me I was done, and I feel like I’ve lost Jake. I’m just ready to give up. “I’m sorry,” I whisper, tears trickling down my cheeks. “I just feel terrible for causing a shit storm.”

Mindy reaches down, pulling me to my feet. “Well, we’re changing everything starting now. Do you know what today is?”

“What?” I ask, and Mindy wipes a tear from my cheek with her thumb, just like she used to do when we were kids.

“The day you said you were going to the studio to record that song you wrote.”

I immediately shake my head, trying to pull back. “No way, not that. What’s the point? That’s a waste of time.”

Besides, the man I love and wrote it for won’t even be there. He’s never going to hear it. It hurts to even think about Jake. When Mindy says I haven’t eaten, that’s why. I think about Jake, and my stomach hurts so much that I can’t even imagine food.

“Yes, you are. You’re going to shower and eat, and we’re heading downtown to record that song.”

“There’s no point!” I protest. “You heard that asshole. That was my one and only chance!”

Mindy grabs me by the shoulders, looking into my eyes. “The point is, you owe it to yourself. Do it for you. Fuck everything and everyone else. You go in there, and you put that thing on disc for you. Or so help me God, I’m going to introduce you to realms of pain you can’t even imagine!”

Her corny line breaks through, and I smirk. “Oh, how’s that? I’ve already heard you sing.”

“Yeah, but you’ve never heard Gavin sing,” Mindy says. “Don’t make me get ugly on you.”

You better bring it, boy,
I’ve only got tonight
I’m leaving town tomorrow, I can’t stay the night
Have places to go, Catching an early flight
If you want me to stay, you gotta come correct
My heart’s almost yours, take that final step
Heartstopper, Heartstopper
Can you feel it in my chest?
Heartstopper, Heartstopper,
Fingers on my breast
Your touch is electric,
Has been from the start
Give it to me, baby,
Or I’ma stop your heart.

I let out a breath, gasping for air as I sing the last note and the club banging beat plays in the background. I don’t know how they got the music mixed so perfectly so quickly, but it’s amazing.

Maybe I’m wasting my time. Maybe this is nothing more than a final

middle finger to anyone who's doubted me. But for the past hour and forty-five minutes that I've been in the recording booth, I've felt a change coming over me. All the worries and pains I've been going through fell away. It was just me, the music, and my heart.

"That's the one!" Oliver shouts in elation to the studio engineer, a nerdy looking blond guy with tiger-striped wide-rim glasses sitting beside him in the system room. "You got what you need. Get to work!"

I tilt my head, watching as Gavin and Oliver start chatting together excitedly while the studio engineer gets his computers together. Scowling, I pull off my headphones and talk into the mic. "What the hell are you two so excited about?"

I seriously don't know what these two are up to. They're nearly buzzing as they come into the studio.

They both grin at me like a pair of mischievous school boys, not saying a word.

"Spit it out!" I beg as their smiles become infectious. "Or I'ma make Mindy come up in here and sing Barney."

They both laugh at me, but Oliver is the one to speak. "Gavin and I have decided to invest a little in you using what I like to call 'fuck you money'. Tomorrow, in ten different time slots on the local radio, *Heartstopper* is going to be played."

"Yeah," adds Gavin. "Not only that, but we're going to release it on iTunes, Amazon, all that. You don't need a label to self-publish."

I blink, shocked. "You two . . . you're batshit crazy!" I exclaim heatedly. "You realize this isn't going to sell shit, right?"

"Who cares?" Gavin says with a shrug. "This isn't about the sales."

"I care!" I protest. "Guys, I tried iTunes already. I put a whole album on there. It sold exactly one hundred copies, and I suspect five of them were you guys!"

"Seven," Gavin says matter-of-factly. "I wanted it to be a round number."

"See!" I say. "You prove my point!"

"Girl, stop with all that fussing. You're amazing," Mindy, who's been out in the hallway and talking with the sound guy, says, coming in. "It's going on there or so help me God, I'm going to turn into Iggy Azalea and treat you guys to my first rap song."

I throw my hands up in immediate surrender. "Oh, hell no. You win!"

Everyone in the studio laughs and Mindy says, "Girl, I promise you,

Leigh’s going to be singing all the lyrics and copying her auntie’s twerk routine by lunch tomorrow.”

I grin, the first one I’ve had in awhile. It feels unfamiliar on my face—that’s how down I’ve been over the past few days. “Well, someone has to teach your daughter some life skills.”

Everyone laughs while we close up the studio, turning in the keys to the front desk.

“Mindy,” I say as we leave the studio. “Wait up.”

“Sure,” she says, waving Oliver and Gavin on. “You two go. We’ll see you at the hotel.” The guys leave, and she turns to me, smiling. “What’s up?”

“I can’t go back to my job,” I say, shaking my head.

“Is it the job or is it Jake?” Mindy asks, and I shrug. She pulls me in for a hug, and I gotta admit, it feels good. “I see. Well, if you find that you can't, why don’t you quit your job and come back home with us?”

“After what happened, I feel so guilty. I can’t face Jake. I just can’t. Not only because of the club, but it will just be so awkward after what we had going.”

Mindy nods. “We can help you back on your feet. Hell, I might even have a job for you in the cafe.”

When I think about it, what is here for me if there’s no Jake? Work is going to be so awkward. I just can’t imagine it. I want to go to Jake, but now I can’t bear to look at him, not after destroying his hard work and his relationship with his sister.

“I think I might take you up on that offer. Give me the weekend to think about it.”

JAKE

Coming into the office Friday morning, the first thing I do when I get off the elevator is look over at Roxy’s desk.

Empty.

Again.

I sigh and go into my office, setting my briefcase down on my desk before slumping into my chair. I rub at my temples. It’s only eight forty-five and I’ve already got a headache. I know why, too. Sure, Sophie’s talking to me and the club’s cleaned out now, but there’s an aching hole in my chest.

The same hole that's in a cubicle just outside my office.

Elena drops off something for me to look over. I don't really give a damn. A familiar figure goes by the office, and I look up, but it's just Hannah. I can't stand this any longer. I pick up my phone. "Elena?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Have Hannah Fowler report to my office immediately, please."

"Of course, sir," Elena says in that tone of voice that says *Great, he's doing something crazy again. FML.*

Still, Elena's a professional, and fewer than five minutes later, Hannah knocks on my office door. "You wanted to see me, sir?"

I nod at the chair. "Relax, Hannah. I think you know what this is about. How is she doing? I haven't seen her all week and she isn't answering my texts. I miss her."

"There isn't much I can tell you," Hannah says. "Mindy dragged her out of the apartment Wednesday, and she hasn't been back since. Honestly, I'm sort of glad she's out for a while. Her room was getting funky."

I nod, and it breaks my heart to hear that. "Do you have any idea what she's doing?"

Hannah shakes her head. "Sorry. She sent me a text last night saying to keep my ears open and that she'd have more information for me today, but that's it."

I swallow, leaning back. "Okay. Well, if you see her, talk to her, whatever . . . tell her I'd like to get in touch?"

"Of course," Hannah says. "Will that be all?"

"Yes, thank you," I say, when suddenly, my office door opens, and Elena's there.

"Turn on the radio!" Elena says, running over to the old-fashioned FM radio that came with my office. "You have to hear this!"

She switches on the stereo, punching in 97.3, the local pop station. She cranks the volume and turns, giving me a look as the DJ goes on. " . . . *so after the recent fire, Roxy decided she needed to say she was sorry for the incident. And as a thanks to her fans from Club Jasmine, here's the song that she was going to debut a week ago.* Heartstopper."

I jump to my feet as the background track that I'd heard only once before starts bumping and thumping on my stereo. Seconds later, Roxy's pure, sensual voice fills my office.

It’s been too long, gotta get out
Hittin up the new spot with my girl
Lookin’ sexy as hell, workin’ the floor
Hoping to give this place a whirl
Nothin’ working so far, I’m getting desperate
I can’t stand this creep, where is my Superman?
He’s late, but I don’t give a damn.
One glance in his eyes, and I know what I need.
Gimme mouth to mouth, because he’s a total Heartstopper.
Heartstopper, Heartstopper
Can you feel it in my chest?
Heartstopper, Heartstopper,
Fingers on my breast
Your touch is electric,
Has been from the start
Give it to me baby,
Or I’ma stop your heart.
We head to the back, his lips on my neck
My knees shaking, my eyes rolling back
I feel like I’m drugged, everything’s a blur,
And I can’t believe when I grab his . . .
The bed’s right there, he pushes me down,
I bite my lip, I’m not like this,
But I won’t stop, can’t stop,
I have to have his kiss.
Heartstopper, Heartstopper
Can you feel it in my chest?
Heartstopper, Heartstopper,
Fingers on my breast
Your touch is electric,
Has been from the start
Give it to me baby,
Or I’ma stop your heart.
He’s looking at me, and I know he’s feeling the same
This isn’t a dance, this isn’t just one night.
Somehow it’s become more than a game,

He pulls off his shirt, I can't believe the sight.
I'm leaving town tomorrow, I can't stay the night
Have places to go, catching an early flight
If you want me to stay, you gotta come correct
My heart's almost yours, take that final step
Heartstopper, Heartstopper
Can you feel it in my chest?
Heartstopper, Heartstopper,
Fingers on my breast
Your touch is electric,
Has been from the start
Give it to me baby,
Or I'ma stop your heart.

The final notes fade away, and I stare at the radio as smooth silence drifts over the radio for a few seconds before the DJ comes back on. "*Wow. You know, I've been in the radio game for a long time, going on twenty years now, and I haven't heard a song this hot from a new singer in—well hell, I'm going to get in trouble with my bosses, but fuck it, let's play that every hour!"*

"That's Roxy?" Elena says. "I mean, I heard she was a singer but . . ."

Suddenly, my cellphone rings and I pick it up. It's Nathan. "Nathan, not now."

"What the fuck do you mean, not now?" Nathan says in my ear, sounding as breathless as the rest of us. "Roxy was just on the radio."

"I know," I gasp, looking around my office. My body is burning, my chest tight and my stomach twisting. I know what I need to do. "But I need to think."

"Look, just listen up for a moment," Nathan says, laughing. "I just got off the phone with the insurance company. They got back to me, and they're cutting us a check. All of it, full policy value."

"That's great, Nathan, but right now, I need you to do something else," I say, grabbing my suit coat and pulling it on. Elena and Hannah are still staring at me, trying to figure out what the hell I'm doing. "Is there anything we can do to escalate the cleanup? Triple the amount of workers if we need to, get the club cleaned and patched up. If we can't do that, then we're doing this thing in the fucking parking lot in front of the fountain. That still works, right?"

“Uh, It works, but what are you talking about?” Nathan asks.

“I’ve got a woman I need to win back. And she’s got a concert to put on. Roxy’s going to sing *Heartstopper* live for her fans. No matter what.”

I hang up my phone and head for my office door. As I reach the handle, Elena calls out. “Sir!”

“What?” I ask, turning back.

“There is a board meeting in forty-five minutes,” Elena says. “You’re supposed to be there.”

I button my suit coat, nodding, and head back, grabbing my laptop and briefcase before I turn back around. “I forgot, but I’m still leaving. Tell them I had something very important to attend to. If they don’t accept it . . . well, they can fire me.”

ROXY

“And now, that local artist who’s shooting up the charts. She’s reached number twenty-five on the iTunes download charts already . . . here’s Roxy with Heartstopper!*”*

I look over at the radio, shaking my head as I reach over and turn it off. While I’m amazed and shocked that my song has gained so much traction, I don’t need to listen to it again. I suspect that most of the buzz in downloads is from locals who saw me at the club, but it still feels good.

Mr. Felix is sitting in my lap, purring. It helps, even though I still feel a little down. Looking around the apartment, it’s hard. In packing my stuff up, this place just doesn’t look at all like the apartment I’ve shared with Hannah.

Some of the things are the same, the voice in my head says. *This sofa is the place you and Jake first had sex.*

I run my hands along the cushion, sighing. Setting Felix aside, I glance at the clock. It’s nearly five thirty now, and Hannah said she’d be home around six. I promised her that I’d get some delivery Chinese food for us to share. I feel like hell, running out on her, but she said that she’s already got people lined up to share rent with her. I think she’s trying to make me feel better about it, but I hope it’s true.

There’s a knock at the door, and I set Felix aside. Going over, I look through the peephole to see that it’s Mindy, and I open up. “Hey, Min, what’s up?”

“What’s up?” she asks, grinning. “I just heard you on the radio again, and you ask what’s up? I see you’ve got the jaded pop star act down already.”

I smile slightly, letting Mindy in. She looks around, whistling. “Wow, you got packed quickly. Is Hannah upset?”

“No, she says she understands, and we’re going to have some girl time later. I mean, I still haven’t turned in my resignation to the office. I’ve got another three days of vacation time built up.”

“That’s good,” Mindy says. “So where is your stuff, anyway?”

“I packed up what I’m going to take. It’s in my room. Feels strange to be living out of a suitcase again. Well, partially. I gave Hannah a lot of my office clothes. If I ever have to put on a professional pencil skirt and those damn heels again, I’m going to scream.”

Mindy chuckles, nodding. “The advantages of owning a cafe. I wear New Balances to work most days. The only heels I have I wear when Oliver and I __”

“TMI!”

Mindy laughs. “Come on, let’s get the hell out of here.”

“Where?” I ask. “I mean, I promised Hannah dinner!”

“Send her a text. She’ll understand. And if she is upset, tell her Oliver Steele will pay for her to go out to dinner tomorrow anywhere in town.”

I can’t help it. I smirk. “More of his ‘fuck you’ money?”

“Something like that. Come on, the whole family’s waiting for you.”

I wake up with a start, surprised that I dozed off. Part of it was that I’ve been getting over my depression, and part of it has been that my body clock is still so screwed up. I blink, looking around. “Where are we?”

Mindy, who’s driving, glances over. “Ha, you don’t recognize it?”

I sit up some more, looking out the side windows. Unfortunately, Mindy’s got some of those dark tinted windows and it takes me a minute. “We’re heading downtown. I thought you said we were getting together with everyone. The hotel’s out near the airport, right?”

“Right both times, but I didn’t say that the rest of the fam was at the hotel.”

I’m immediately suspicious, my shock growing as we make a right turn and I see Club Jasmine. “What the hell are we doing here?”

“Trust me,” Mindy says, parking out front. The amount of work that’s been done is amazing. There’s still some scorch marks on the front, but all of

the fire smell is gone. Mindy leads me up the steps, opening the door. It's dark inside, and I blink, trying to adjust to the gloom. "Well, here we are."

"Mindy, this is so not cool," I complain. "I mean, why remind me . . ."

"She's baaaa-aaaaaack!" an electronic voice booms out of the darkness, and suddenly, stage lights blossom. The floor is still a mostly scarred wreck, but they've swept and cleared out an area in the middle, where the bare concrete is surrounded by lights.

Hannah steps out of the shadows, grinning. "Our guest of honor has arrived. Have a seat."

"Mindy, what is going on?" I ask as the lights come up and I see Mom, Grandma, Brianna . . .

"Hit it!" Hannah says as Mindy leads me over to a chair and sits me down. Hannah moves out of the light as bumping dance music starts up. There's a silly little curtain, nothing more than a rope with a sheet hung over it, and Hannah giggles as she gets on the mic again. "Welcome to the Club Jasmine Gentlemen's Revue!"

Suddenly, the curtain twitches, and Bertha comes running out, yapping furiously. "Goddammit, Mary Jo, if you don't stop dragging that thing with you everywhere, I'm not going with you anywhere anymore!"

Mom gets up and chases Bertha down while I lean over to Mindy. "What the hell is this?"

"Just enjoy. Think of it as more fuck you money," Mindy says, patting my shoulder. "Trust me, you'll enjoy it."

Mom gets Bertha under control and sits down, grumbling to Grandma. "You know, you've had pets too."

"Whatever," Grandma says. "Bring on the flesh parade!"

"Up first," Hannah says, trying not to laugh, "is our very own superstar, former All-Pro running back, Gavin 'Anaconda' Adams!"

Brianna, of course, claps the loudest as Gavin emerges, clad in what I can only call a stripper's version of a Navy uniform. Skintight white pants are underneath his cheap white tunic as he adjusts the bill of his cap. Lifting a microphone to his lips, the music changes, and I groan.

Gavin starts to sing *Up Where We Belong* by Joe Cocker, and even Brianna has to clap her hands over her ears.

"I love you, but never again!" she screams as Gavin shrugs and drops his microphone. Ripping off his tunic top, the music changes into a techno/club remix of the classic Joe Cocker song, and he gives his wife a lap dance that

leaves Brianna in a fit of laughter before he sashays offstage.

Mindy's laughing her ass off as Brianna wipes her forehead with a hand towel. She looks over at Mindy and me, chuckling. "I didn't marry him for his singing."

Hannah chuckles, shaking her head. "And now, for our second act . . . Oliver Steele!"

Oliver comes out, and my jaw drops as he comes out dressed in perhaps the most ridiculous outfit I've ever seen him in, a leather set of hot pants and a motorcycle vest. "What the hell do you and he get up to?" Grandma asks. "That sure as hell ain't what I expected!"

Mindy's beet red as Oliver picks up the mic and starts singing *Do You Really Want To Hurt Me?* As he sings, he dances, and he's even worse than Gavin, Mindy blushing and laughing uproariously as he caterwauls his way through the song. "Brad would love this!" I laugh as Oliver peels off his vest to show off his chiseled torso.

Mindy's flushed herself as Oliver retreats behind the curtain, and Hannah takes a minute to laugh. "Don't quit your day jobs. Either of you."

"So who's next?" Grandma asks. "I love those men, but damn if my ears aren't bleeding."

"Next . . . a very special performance," Hannah says. The music slows, not the silly club mixes, but I've heard this in clubs before.

The voice I hear next shocks me. I've never heard it like this before.

I watch in pure amazement as Jake comes through the curtain, stripped to the waist, his body gleaming under the lights as he approaches me with pure love in his eyes, singing *Take My Breath Away* by Berlin.

The song finishes, Jake saying nothing as he lowers the microphone, and I feel tears in my eyes. "Jake . . ."

"HIT IT!" a booming voice comes from the back, and suddenly, Gavin and Oli are back, having changed clothes, thank God, this time with Nathan joining them as they suddenly break into the Backstreet Boys' *I Want It That Way*.

"My fucking ears!" Mindy screams in laughter as Gavin and Oliver both sing their parts. Nathan's even worse, but he's a good sport as he swings his hips in front of Grandma and Mom.

I barely notice, my eyes on Jake as he sings, reaching out for me. I lift my hand to his, not even realizing it until he pulls me to my feet. I look in his eyes as he sings the final lines.

The music fades away as the other ladies clap, but I can't do anything but look at Jake. "Roxy, my sweet, beautiful Angel," he says softly, wrapping his arm around my waist. "I can't live without you. When I heard your song . . . I'm sorry. I was wrong. I was an idiot . . . please don't leave. Stay here. Stay with me. I need you. I love you. I didn't mean what I said. You were blameless. I was angry and scared for Sophie and took it out on you."

I nod, putting my arms around his neck and pulling him into a soft kiss. His tongue caresses mine, and I hear cheering behind me. I turn to see Mindy and Brianna in their husbands' arms while Grandma and Mom wipe away their tears. Even Hannah is wiping away a tear or two, and Nathan looks like he's got some allergies going on.

"Looks like I'm staying," I tell Mindy, who grins and gives me a thumbs-up.

"But what about the apartment?" Hannah mock whines. "I've got two potential roomies wanting to see the place tomorrow!"

"Well, I've got a spare bedroom," Jake says, "and Sophie would love to have you around."

"Deal!" Hannah says, grinning. "Roxy, you've got twenty-four hours to get your shit out!"

There's laughter all around, and Nathan disappears to the back to return with four bags of Chinese food. He starts divvying it out, and I turn to Jake, looking into his eyes. "You'd really want me to move in?"

"I want to start with you moving in," Jake says quietly. "And Mindy already told me you want to leave Franklin. If you still want to, that's fine. You can pay your share another way."

"How?" I ask.

"Next Saturday, we're doing an outdoor concert for Club Jasmine. Know of a hot pop act who can work the stage and has a song that's rocketing up the charts who can sing her ass off for us?"

I blush, giving Jake a raised eyebrow, and he nods. "Only if you want to," he adds.

I nod and jerk my thumb over my shoulder at Nathan. "Talk to my manager," I say, giving Jake a huge smile. "He's the brains of the outfit, remember?"

JAKE

I grin at the happy, exuberant guy looking back at me in the mirror, stunned at the image. I can't help myself and start humming *Heartstopper*, even dancing a little, popping my hips. The world seemed so dark a few days before, and now everything is looking up again.

"Oh. My. God." Sophie laughs quietly behind me, and I turn around. "Next thing I know, you're gonna pull out those hot pants and start doing the YMCA."

For this first time in my life, I think I blush. Sophie comes over and pats me on my chest, grabbing my tie and pulling it around my neck. "Now you're dressing me?"

"You always take forever with your tie," Sophie teases. "And this is your special tie."

I glance down at the cornflower blue tie and lift my eyebrow. "Really?"

"Sure is. You only seem to wear it when you've got stuff planned or you're really happy. So which is it?" she asks as she starts wrapping the silk around itself. "I think I know."

"What?" I ask, and Sophie laughs.

"My big brother is in loooove!" she teases, tugging on the knot that's magically appeared. "Now, fix your collar, and you can fix me some eggs. And I don't want to see that with your hips ever again!"

This is what being in love gets me, I think as I tug at my collar and find myself snapping my fingers as she walks out. *Doing things I would never do. It's pretty awesome.*

I thread my belt, and as I adjust my fly, Sophie sticks her head in again. "Hey, eggs?"

I look up, glad I had things mostly done. "Don't you ever knock?"

Sophie shakes her head. "You leave your door open all the time. Nothing to knock on."

"Huh," I think. Point, Sophie. "Okay, well, how'd you like some bacon in your eggs?"

"Always up for the fine swine," Sophie says with a grin. "I'll help."

The first half of the day flies by, and as I get ready for the monthly meeting with the advisory board and corporate, I still feel like I'm walking on clouds. Elena knocks on my door, and I call her in. "Yes, Elena?"

"Miss Price has asked to see you," she says, smiling a little. She knows, but she seems to actually be pleased by the whole thing. Maybe Elena's a

romantic at heart. “Shall I show her in?”

“Please,” I answer, but before Elena can, she’s practically pushed out of the way as Matt bursts into the room, along with Byron and Maria Bennett, the woman corporate sent down to talk face to face with the Franklin Consolidated board today. She’s from human resources and was going to talk about the changeover of retirement and health insurance plans next fiscal year.

“There he is!” Matt says, stabbing a finger at me. “I told you he’s been breaking Rule 34(b) of the Corporate Code of Conduct!”

I sigh, giving Maria a look. “What’s he talking about?”

“Don’t try to play innocent!” Matt says, his reedy voice grating on my ears. “They’ve been carrying on an affair. As the regional president, that’s a clear conflict of interest. I’ve watched them!”

“Watched me do what?” I ask as I see Roxy slide in the back of the office, her eyes blazing. I hold up a hand, and she nods, keeping her peace. “Have any of you seen me or Miss Price do anything unprofessional in the office?”

Sure, it’s a gamble—we did have the elevator . . . and the supply room—but nobody was there either time. Matt blusters, then points at Roxy. “She’s singing at your nightclub, and you two have been seen cavorting there!”

“Is this true, Jake?” Maria asks. “You know the rule applies regardless of time or place.”

Anger burns in me, but before I can respond, Roxy steps forward.

“It doesn’t matter,” she says, staring Matt in the eyes. “I was just asking to see Mr. Stone so I could personally turn in my resignation. This was my last day here. So you see, no conflict. On the other hand, I can think of some people in violation of Rule 72(f) . . .”

I don’t even know what the rule is, but Matt and Byron, who’s just been a spectator, both immediately look guilty. Maria gives them a once-over, then she shakes her head. “Matt, I think you and I need to have a talk later about wasting HR’s time with baseless accusations. Jake, I’ll see you in the boardroom in fifteen?”

“Sure,” I say, giving Matt and Byron a raised eyebrow as Maria turns on a heel and walks out. “You two . . . I suggest you both start polishing your resumes. I think Franklin Consolidated could use some manpower reductions. Now get out of my office.”

They leave, Elena laughing softly as she watches them. She gives me a

nod and leaves as well, closing my door behind her. Roxy looks adorable as she shifts from side to side, giving me a shy smile. “Sorry, I hadn’t really planned on doing that. But since we talked about it, I figured I’d drop the bomb a little more dramatically.”

“Well, that’s how you divas are,” I tease, crossing my office to take her hand. “So, you get invited to move in, and now you’re going all Hollywood on me. What’s next, gonna want that condo in Beverly Hills?”

Roxy laughs, stepping in closer. “No, I want to sing for love. Jake, I’m gonna sing at Club Jasmine because I love it. You and my family are the number one priority in my life, and singing is number two. I don’t care if I get a Grammy or sell a single CD. I’m going to sing because I love it, make the music I like, and sing the music I want. Whatever happens, happens.”

“So, me and your family are tied at number one?” I tease, and she lifts my hand, kissing my knuckles.

“Mindy likes you, so yeah, you’re tied. She already asked me when you’ll officially join the fam.”

I blink and grin. “Tell her we’ll see, but it might be damn soon.”

Roxy grins back. “Well, then, you go do your executive ish, and I’ll go clean out my desk. See you later at home?”

Without waiting for an answer, she turns and walks out, swaying her ass and humming *Heartstopper* under her breath. I grin and would probably still be grinning if Elena didn’t knock on my door again. “Sir? The meeting?”

“Oh, yeah,” I say, grabbing my report folder. “You have everything prepped?”

“Of course. Have a good meeting, sir.”

I stare at my computer, wishing the meeting had gone more quickly. Everyone and their brother on the board had questions about the new retirement system. Of course they would. Most of them are over fifty-five. I’m surprised they didn’t ask if that came with a golden ager discount at the local steakhouse.

Everyone left—even Elena said goodbye as the sun went down—and now I’m left trying to handle this last bit of busy work before I go home.

“What are you still doing here?”

I look up, seeing Roxy at my door. “Just wrapping up a last email. What about you? Figured you’d be out the door long ago.”

“Cleaning my stuff out took longer than expected,” she says. “Hannah

insisted on running out and getting red velvet cupcakes for the floor to share as a parting gift. Everyone but Matt and Byron got one. So . . .”

She pulls the plate out, and I see a pair of red velvet cupcakes with what looks like vanilla frosting on top. “You want to share?”

I smile as I click and send off my last email, shutting down the system and closing up. “Looks delicious.”

She brings the plate over and sets it on my desk. As she crosses my office, I watch her seductive smile and the way her hips sway as she walks in her high heels. “I thought you said you hated pencil skirts.”

“One more day won’t matter,” Roxy says, handing me a cupcake. “A toast. To the future.”

“May it be as sweet as this,” I say, touching cupcakes with her. I take a bite, but I’m distracted as Roxy’s sensuous lips wrap around the soft, rich cake and she bites down, crumbs dropping down onto her chest and a smear of frosting staining her lips and cheek. “You missed some.”

I lean in, kissing Roxy and licking the sweet vanilla frosting off her mouth before pulling her closer, letting our kiss deepen more. “Mmm, well, it’s almost the fantasy,” she teases when our lips part. “I’ve wanted to be seduced by my boss ever since seeing you.”

“Well, isn’t it lucky for you that your resignation form won’t get turned into HR until tomorrow morning then?” I reply, reaching up and cupping her breast through her blouse. “So you still work for me, *Miss Price*.”

Roxy moans as I squeeze her left breast, massaging the soft flesh as she presses herself up against my body, my cock quickly hardening in my pants as she grinds against me, and I growl, kissing down her neck as I feel the few crumbs of leftover cupcake smear against my dress shirt. To hell with it. I need her now, and I turn her around, pushing her against my desk as I lift her up to sit on the edge. “Oh, sir,” she whispers as she runs her fingers through my hair. “God, I’m glad I’m quitting this job. I’d need this every night if I stayed.”

“I’m glad too,” I growl as I pull open her blouse, buttons flying everywhere. Fuck it, someone will clean it up later. Roxy’s breasts rise and fall with her gasping breath as I feast my eyes on her flushed skin, and a naughty thought comes to me. Reaching next to her, I take the uneaten half of my cupcake and smear the frosting over her breasts and bra. Roxy grins as she realizes what I’m doing.

“Hungry, sir?” she asks, her words torn from her throat as I lick and suck

at her skin. The sugary frosting adds to the sweetness of her skin, and I suck her nipples clean through her bra, biting and pulling on them as Roxy cries out gently, her fingers pulling at my hair as she fights the sensations swirling through her. “Sir . . . oh, fuck, Jake . . . oh, God.”

I kiss back up to her lips, stroking her hair and looking in her eyes. “Roxy, I love you.”

“I love you too . . . but my fantasy isn’t done yet,” she jokes, pushing me back. Taking me by the hand, she leads me over to my office chair and pushes my shoulders down, making me sit before she sinks to her knees. “Now, Mr. Jake Stone, sir, I think I need to show you just how devoted I am to my boss.”

My hands tremble as Roxy has me grip the arms of my chair and pushes me back, leaning back as she undoes my pants and takes out my throbbing cock, cooing as she takes it in. Turning around on her knees, she grabs the other cupcake and lets the tip of her tongue swirl through the frosting for a minute before she scoops the rest of it off with her fingers and traces them down my cock, covering my pulsing skin with the creamy white sweetness.

“An appetizer before dinner,” Roxy says, reaching out with her tongue and tracing up the whole length of my cock. I moan. Her touch is electric as she swirls her tongue all around my cock, licking it glistening clean before spreading her lips and swallowing me.

“Oh, God, baby,” I moan as she slowly sucks my cock deeper and deeper between her magical lips, rolling my balls between her fingers as she scratches her other hand down my chest. Feeling Roxy work her lips up and down my thick cock, I lean back, relishing the warm, wet prison of her lips as she pleasures me. “That’s it, show me what you love, Roxy.”

She bobs her head up and down, soft whimpers and moans coming from her chest when I put my hand on her head and force more of my cock down her throat, taking over. I don’t jam myself down her throat. I just don’t let her up until she’s gagging, choking on my cock before I pull her off and pick her up, kissing her lips hard and lifting her.

I put her down on the edge of my desk, pulling her skirt down hard enough that I hear fabric rip. Fuck it, she didn’t want to wear this thing again anyway. Roxy gasps as I pull her panties down and rub the head of my cock between the wet, pink lips of her pussy. After all the teasing and erotic torture of her lips and tongue on my cock, I can’t hold back, and I thrust into her with a single long thrust. I bury myself deep into her, and Roxy grabs my

forearms, hissing in pleasure and digging her fingernails into my skin. The pain is delicious, and I grind against her, feeling her clit rub against the base of my cock as I stare deeply into her eyes.

Pulling back, I lightly put my hand on Roxy's throat as I thrust again harder, our hips slapping together as she wraps her legs around me. I don't squeeze. I just pound her pussy harder with the throbbing heat of my cock, both of us soon gasping and crying out as our hips slap together sharply.

"Fuck me, baby, oh, fuck, yes," Roxy groans as she squeezes me, massaging my cock as she tries to give it back to me. I thrust harder and faster, long strokes as I swirl my hips, grinding inside her tight body until I'm trembling, lost on the edge again. Roxy sees my eyes roll back and scratches my forearms again, digging her thumbs in and pulling me back from the edge.

I grunt my thanks as I let go of her throat and push her knees up and apart, hammering her body on top of my desk as hard as I can. Sweat runs between our bodies as our hearts race, and I give everything I can to my angel, shuddering as she starts to tremble.

"Roxy . . ." I barely get to gasp before I'm on the edge again, and this time, there's no holding back. With a hard gasp and a scream that I'm sure can be heard all the way to the parking lot, I slam my cock as deep as I can into her as I come, filling her. Roxy wraps her legs around me and throws her head back, crying out her own climax as her pussy squeezes me tighter, drawing out my orgasm.

When I can focus again, I gather Roxy into my arms, holding her trembling body as my cock softens before slipping out of her. I kiss her soft lips again, Roxy wrapping her arms around my neck and burying her head in my shoulder. "I'm going to miss this office."

"Yes, but now we have a whole apartment to explore," I remind her.

Roxy thinks, then starts laughing. "An apartment, huh? We've never had sex in bed at your place."

I laugh, holding her close. "Nope. Weird, isn't it? I hear some people actually like it that way."

"Fucking perverts," Roxy jokes, unwrapping her legs from around my waist and standing up. "Next thing you're going to tell me is that you're going to want to actually start naked too."

"It does happen."

Roxy shakes her head, laughing. "What sort of weird shit are you getting

me into?”

ROXY

The day is exactly as I’d dreamed it’d be for the past six months. It seems impossible that I could have such a picture perfect day, but I do. The sky is blue, the weather warm but with a light breeze off the ocean for our ceremony, and now . . . now comes the cherry on the sundae.

“You ready?” Mindy asks me as we wait in the back of the hall. She can’t believe that I’m doing this, but ever since Jake got on his knee in front of all of Club Jasmine and asked me to marry him, it seemed like there was only one way that I could start off our reception.

“I’m almost ready,” I say, adjusting my top. Sure, I’m singing a pop song on my wedding day, and sure I’m doing it in front of a ton of people who have seen me shake my ass in a lot less, but that’s what’s going to make this special. I fidget with the long skirt, tugging on my garter. That’ll come after the song, and I’ve already promised Nathan that I’d have Jake try to toss it in his direction. He is my business and investment manager, after all. “How are Mom and Grandma?”

“Grandma’s happy as hell that you banned Bertha from the church and the reception,” Mindy says with a laugh. “John’s consoling Mom, but she’ll be fine. Hey, you sure you want to do this before the cake cutting and all of that other stuff?”

“Why?”

“Well, it is kind of untraditional,” Mindy says, turning red when I give her a raised eyebrow. “Okay, okay. I know, I’m the last person in the world to talk about non-traditional. But a musical revue before the reception begins?”

“The reason is simple,” I say with a chuckle. “Once that cake is cut and the champagne starts to flow, I plan on dancing my ass off with my husband and then seeing if we can get to some baby making.”

“Planning kids already?”

I nod. “You know that Jake and family are more important to me than my singing. Although, Club Jasmine would flip the fuck out if I made an announcement that I’m pregnant.”

Mindy laughs and kisses me on the cheek. “I’m so happy for you, Roxy.

I'll go take my seat."

Mindy leaves, and I quickly warm up my voice. There's no need to stretch out. This performance is like only one other, and I'm quickly ready. I nod to John, who gives me his quiet little smile and nod before he opens the door and I enter the reception hall.

All the lights are off, the only illumination coming from dual spotlights, one on me, one on Jake as he sits in a chair in the middle of the dance floor. The tune is familiar but slowed down, acoustic as I start singing. "It was too long, I had to get out, hitting up the new spot with my girl."

Of course, I adjust the lyrics just for this performance. Jake smiles as I serenade him, and there's a few whistles when I straddle his waist, the high slits on my skirt allowing me to do so. "Heartstopper, Heartstopper, can you feel it in my chest? Heartstopper, my husband, showing me the best, your touch is electric, I was yours from the start. You gave it to me, baby, and now you have my heart."

Jake pulls me closer and kisses me tenderly, his fingertips just resting on the curve of my jaw as our assembled friends and family applaud. I can hear my old friend from Trixie's, Brad, in the background blowing his nose, his distinctive lisp reaching out over the crowd as he cheers me on, "Yaass bitch! Work it!"

The reception starts, and true to my promise, Nathan catches the garter and Hannah gets to catch the bouquet. Later, I'm stunned as the caterer brings out a five-foot-tall cake. "What is this?"

"This is your stepfather insisting that he gets to do something for you," John says from the far side of Mom, smiling. "Enjoy."

There's enough cake for triple the amount of people who are there, and I make the caterer promise that they're going to send large chunks home with everybody who works at the hall today. I just can't imagine seeing this much cake go to waste.

Speeches are hilarious, as everyone from Grandma on down has something to toast me with, and I'm quickly left red-faced as Brad tells everyone about my first time in Trixie's. "So here was this sassy little thing getting up there and doing the world's worst twerk and singing her ass off. Thankfully, she had two things going for her. First, she could actually sing. Second, and more importantly, she had me to show her how to move her ass. Jake, you can thank me later, and Nathan, I want my one percent!"

The dancing starts with another surprise, as Jake says he's got something

special for me too. Oliver and Gavin get up as well as they set up three chairs in the middle of the floor in a wide triangle. “My bride, will you, Mindy, and Brianna have a seat, please?”

I glance at Mindy and Brianna, but they’re clueless as we sit down. Jake, Oliver, and Gavin disappear for a minute, and I start to get worried when the lights dim again and the music starts.

“Oh, my God,” I groan as I hear the familiar grinding electronic bass beat. “They’re not.”

“They sure as hell are!” Brianna says as Jake, Gavin, and Oliver come out dressed as male strippers. They’ve got the moves down pretty well too, and *Magic Mike* is left in the dust as Jake grinds on me, turning around to rub his ass in my lap before taking my hands and making me grab his crotch. My body’s on fire by the time he moves off, and I feel sweat trickling down my neck to disappear between my breasts as the three guys reach for the waistbands of their banana hammocks before stopping and giving the three of us naughty smiles. Jake shakes his head, and the three of them dance for us a little more, Gavin actually hitting the splits. “Whoa, I didn’t know he could do that!”

“It’s useful,” Brianna says, her voice sounding breathy as Gavin bounces back up. The song comes to an end, and while the three of us heartily applaud, Brad is having a fit behind us. I bet he’s thinking he’s died and gone to heaven watching the three handsome men.

Dinner starts, and as we eat, I lean over to Jake. “So tell me, my husband, just what inspired that?”

Jake chuckles. “Well, the guys knew you were going to sing for me, and they wanted to return the favor. Unfortunately, we all know that Gavin and Oli—”

“Those two boys can’t sing to save their lives!” Grandma cackles.

After dinner, the dancing starts, and I feel like I’m in heaven as Jake takes me in his arms and we have our first dance as husband and wife. “So when did you know?”

Jake thinks, then smiles. “I knew I wanted you long-term the first time you sang *Heartstopper* for me. But marry you? When I first heard you on the radio. It was like from that instant, it wasn’t just about giving you your dream. That was when I realized you are *my* dream. I’d do any and everything possible to stay by your side, to have you with me. I knew I wanted to be more. I wanted to be your husband.”

“You waited another two months to ask me, though,” I tease as we slow dance.

“I wanted to have a chance to ask you on stage,” he says, grinning. “Took the workers that long to complete the repairs.”

“I—” my eyes are drawn over to a commotion where someone’s trying to teach Grandma how to breakdance.

Jake takes my chin in his fingers and turns my eyes back to him. “Hey, I thought I was doing a good enough job of dancing?”

I feel the thick bulge of his cock press up against my hip, and I tremble, grinning. “You do more than enough to keep my attention.”

“Cheers, you two,” says a voice behind us, and I turn to see Hannah standing there with several glasses in her hand, one of which she holds out to me.

“What’s that?” I ask, taking the glass from her.

“A little surprise,” Hannah says behind a little sip. She gives Jake a look. “Can I talk to your bride for a moment? I know y’all were getting your bump n’ grind on, but it will only take a sec.”

Jake chuckles, stepping away. “Sure.”

Hannah winks at him as I give her a playful scowl over the rim of my drink. “This had better be good for sending my husband away like that.”

“I’ve decided to quit my job at Franklin,” Hannah announces suddenly, causing me to gawk in shock. “I just . . . watching you, Roxy, I realize I want to be more than an office drone too. And with you gone, it just isn’t fun anymore. I’ve already talked to the landlord. I’m gonna move out and downsize to something more affordable, chase my dream.”

“What is it?” I ask, and Hannah grins.

“Not too sure yet, but I’ve always wanted to travel the world and take pictures. Maybe I’ll figure it out along the way. I’ve managed to square away a little nest egg until I get it sorted out, I think.”

I raise my glass, and we toast each other. “Well, then, to Hannah Fowler, who’s going to be the sassiest bitch traveling the globe.”

“And to Roxy Stone, who’s the baddest bitch on stage. I love you, babe.”

I sip my drink and look across the floor. Jake has already found a new dancing partner in his sister, Sophie. She looks gorgeous in her pink gown, her arms wrapped around her brother’s neck, staring up at him with love. I can’t hide the smile on my face. I’m never going to be her mother, but big sister? I feel like that already.

“I love you too, babe,” I say, returning my gaze to Hannah. “And hey, don’t be a stranger, okay?”

“Damn right. I’m couch surfing with a pop star!”

I laugh and take a longer sip of my drink. “Yeah, well, this pop star is going to finish her drink and then find her husband so she can go consummate this union. You’ll never guess what we’re taking to the honeymoon.”

“What?” Hannah asks, and I grin.

“I’ll send you pics,” I say, giving her a wink.

At that moment, the music cranks up. Unlike the normal moldy mix of old pop classics that are ‘safe’ for some of the older crowd to listen to, Jake and I flew in our DJ from Club Jasmine, and as the bass fills the floor, we’ve got plenty getting down and dirty. This is my wedding, after all, and I give absolutely zero fucks if someone doesn’t like it.

Laughing, I stand there, bobbing my body to the music, watching the room as Hannah waltzes off in search of a dancing buddy. I’ll let Jake get in a few more moments with his sister, knowing that after they’re done, he’s mine for the night.

For the next several minutes, my heart is filled as I take in all the people I love under one roof, having the time of their lives. Mom is dancing with John, Brianna with Gavin, and Mindy with Oliver. Even Hannah has finally found a guy to grind on, Oliver’s younger brother, Tony. It’s weird. They don’t even know each other, but they look like they’re having a good time together.

All feels right with the world.

Feeling like it’s time, I make my way over to my husband, desire heating my core. Jake looks up and separates from Sophie as I approach, a giant grin on his face.

“Hey, Jake, you big stud,’ I say softly, wrapping my arms around his neck. “Take me to bed or lose me forever.”

“Your wish is my command.”

Jake pulls me closer, growling lightly as he sweeps me off my feet, and to the hoots, hollers, and cheers of our family and friends, he carries me from the reception hall and into the rest of our lives.

Enjoy these books? Check out the others in the series. Each are interconnecting standalones.

Other books in this series:
Irresistible Bachelors (Interconnecting standalones):
Anaconda || Mr. Fiance || Heartstopper
Stud Muffin || Mr. Fixit || Matchmaker
Motorhead || Baby Daddy

EXCERPT: DIRTY LAUNDRY

I’ve got the best job in the world–get dirt on the hottest country star on the charts, Keith Perkins.

I’m supposed to learn all of his Dirty Laundry, his deepest and darkest secrets.

***Without* sleeping with him.**

Easy enough, right?

Wrong.

I mean, just looking at him makes me wonder what those big, rough hands could do to me. With a voice that’s one part velvet and one part growl, it’s hard for me to sass him when he melts me into a puddle with a single look.

And when he sings?

All bets are off.

He owns the stage . . . and maybe some naughty parts of my body too.

But he’s notoriously single and notoriously private.

Given his status as a walking sex god, neither makes sense.

Something is amiss, and I’m going to figure out exactly what it is.

But if I’m not careful, I might just become his **dirty little secret.**

ELISE

"Yes, sir. I'm on it, sir. By Monday, of course." I sigh, rolling my eyes as Donnie, my boss, somehow manages to both ream me out for not delivering yet and make me feel like I can totally accomplish my latest assignment.

I'm not sure how he manipulates people so well, but he does. It's a gift, I guess.

Hanging up, I look at myself in the mirror, making sure my disguise for today is in tip-top shape. I'm not famous, but my face is known enough that I want to be sure I'm not recognized. My blonde hair is tied up under a dark brunette wig that falls down in perfect mermaid waves, my usually slightly made-up face is fully done like I'm some YouTube makeup tutorial, and I'm dressed in casual clothes that scream money in quality, not flash. I've got on the one pair of designer jeans I own, a perfectly slouchy tee, and a fluffy soft hand-knit cardigan.

With the addition of my huge sunglasses and heeled booties, I'm off . . . looking just like one of the other millions of twentysomethings, out for coffee and to run errands. Which is exactly what I need, nondescript from the masses.

It's nowhere near my normal look, but that's what makes it a great disguise. Glancing at my watch, I realize I'll need to take a cab if I'm making my first observation point on time. At least I can turn the receipt in for reimbursement because taking cabs all over the city is definitely above my pay bracket.

I hope Donnie isn't going to be a prick on the expense report this time.

After a quick ride, I order a coffee and a blueberry muffin before sitting down at what's become *my* table over the last week, taking out a notebook full of scribbled notes. To an interested observer, I'm working on a movie, or maybe a TV show, or something similarly vapid. I assume an aura of 'don't-fuck-with-me' and pretend to work, which makes a great cover because I am actually working, just not on what it seems.

Keeping my head still behind the shades, my eyes move left and right, not missing a thing. From the obviously morning-after coffee date, to the mom juggling two kids while bribing them with muffins that look just like mine and will put those two into sugar overload in ten minutes, to the old man reading the paper. I've worked long and hard on these skills. They're more

vital to my career than the ability to type quickly.

It's not long before my target appears. Keith Perkins, the country music star who's topping charts and winning awards left and right. He walks in to order his morning cup o'joe. He's not really in disguise, just wearing jeans and a t-shirt, but the missing cowboy hat and tennis shoes instead of boots seem to be all the disguise he needs to go about unrecognized in this town. Then again, this isn't a big country town. I bet he couldn't pull this off in Nashville without getting mobbed.

He tells the barista his name is Kevin instead of Keith, but I don't think she even looks up. In fact, I know she doesn't look at him, because if she did, she'd be drooling like I've been for the last five days since I started my assignment.

There's something about the way he moves, like coiled power waiting to spring into action, that makes me hum with anticipation. Combine that with a build that's tall and wide-shouldered, with powerfully built arms and a tightly muscled waist that's so narrow that he can't wear normal jeans without squeezing his thighs and leaving his waist baggy . . . the man's walking sex on a stick. He's infused with energy in such a way that you can't help but wonder what he could to with it.

Or what he could do to me with it.

I shake my head, a small smile tilting up one corner of my mouth. As if. That's never gonna happen. I'm not the sort who gets wooed and swept off her feet by handsome stars who then proceed to wine and dine me before making my toes curl. No. With my job, I have a better chance of my name ending up pinned on a voodoo doll than my body being pinned to a bed.

My job is to follow Keith and watch that fine ass and dimpled smile as much as possible to find out his secrets. Once those secrets are in hand, I'll write a damn good story for the online gossip rag I work for. It's not my dream gig. Hell, I've hated it at times, but it's interesting and pays the bills. I wanted to be a real investigative reporter. I wanted to follow in the steps of Woodward and Bernstein, exposing the back-alley machinations and dirty laundry of those who really deserve it. Those in power who are trying to fuck the average Joe.

Too bad most of the reporters on that gig are just as dirty as the assholes they're covering. So I get to watch and report on celebs. But it pays the bills, so here I am lusting after the mark I'm following in preparation to expose all of his dirty laundry to readers who circle like vultures. Sometimes, I feel

sorry for people like Keith. He's not into drugs or acting like a jackass, and I've even listened to his music. It's music to make you feel good. And make my panties wet, but that's his voice. He could read his grocery list and I'd be all ears.

Knowing his routine, I start to gather my things, ready to follow out a few seconds behind him. As he walks out the door, questions run through my head, mental preparation for what's coming. *Where are we going today, Keith? The recording studio? Maybe the quiet spot at the gastropub you like to write at that has those bacon cheeseburgers that I have no idea how you eat and still have a six-pack? No jelly there. Or maybe just some errands? I could really use some errands so I have more to complete your picture.*

He doesn't answer, of course, but I carry on the conversation with myself as if he does. *Sounds good, I can learn more that way. Maybe after your errands, you can take me home and fuck me stupid? Make that tight ass of yours good for something . . . pounding into my needy pussy. How's that for a plan, Keith?*

God, I need a man.

It's been months since my last boyfriend, the bastard. While I'm known for being a spontaneous, up for anything kinda girl, I don't sleep around and have pretty discerning taste. Which, of course, is how I find myself fantasizing about Keith's ass as he walks down the street, sort of looking down as he walks, maybe to hide his face from the public or maybe because he's got his own internal dialogue going. It's too much to hope he's thinking about the sexy brunette in designer jeans and sunglasses he saw in the corner of the coffee shop and how he'd like to take her home and make all her dreams come true, but fuck it, I'm allowed to fill in the blanks here.

He pauses in front of a store and looks back, so I step over to a potted plant in front of a store as cover, jostling the sidewalk traffic flow as a younger guy on rollerblades yells at me, "Watch it, bitch!"

I scowl, not wanting the attention, and quickly bury my face in my phone but sneak looks out the side of my sunglasses as I catch my breath.

Focus, Elise. Get your brain out of the gutter and do your fucking job!

Suitably chastised by my own more responsible half, I continue on, following Keith into . . . a grocery store?

Wouldn't have expected Mr. Fancy Country Singer to be buying his own food. With online delivery and personal assistants running rampant around this town, I just never imagined him buying his own jars of basil pesto. Still,

the fact that he does is cute, sweet, and maybe even a bit humble. I like this down-to-earth potential tilt to my story, so I sneak a few pics of him pushing his cart around the store, an old-fashioned piece of paper in his hand as he goes over his grocery list.

Following at a distance, I grab a few things totally at random as cover while I try to scope out what he's buying to see if there's anything interesting that'll tell me his secrets.

Bread . . . boring, it's not even fancy, just plain old wheat bread. Steaks . . . no surprise, although I wish I could afford a nice rib-eye every now and then. Speaking of USDA prime beef, God, I could take a bite of his biceps. Yummy. Milk . . . so 1990. Wait, not milk. He's buying milks, two different kinds of milk . . . skim *and* whole, a half-gallon each. And the skim milk is that special type for people who are lactose intolerant.

That's unusual, right? I mean, if you drink milk, you're not likely to go for two drastically different fat contents. Unless he cooks? Maybe the skim is to drink and the whole is to cook?

Hmm, could be. But then, why the lactose intolerant one? I've tasted it myself, and no matter what the makers say, it's crap compared to the real thing.

I keep following as he walks . . . into the feminine hygiene aisle. *Jackpot.*

Why would a notoriously single man, one whom women literally throw themselves at and are routinely rebuked, be buying tampons and pads? Because he's not single anymore! The little news ticker in my brain rolls by . . . *Hearts break all across America as Keith Perkins confirms he's off the market, ladies. News at ten o'clock.*

He's stockpiling his house. By the looks of the third box of goodies he tosses in the basket, he's got damn-near a full medicine cabinet in there. I sneak another pic for proof and follow him up toward the front of the store.

Choosing the line behind him, I consider maybe taking a chance to say something. It's risky, but I might be able to tease some nugget of information out of the potential encounter. After setting his items on the conveyor belt, he looks at me.

I smile my biggest, flirtiest smile, expecting him to see stars. This smile has gotten me into more private rooms, parties, and information trades than I could say . . . unless you're paying.

But from Keith, nothing. Not even a returned smile. His eyes slide over me and then back to the conveyor belt as he watches the little display show

each item as it's rung up.

How rude!

The whole encounter, Keith ignores me and barely speaks to the cashier. Most of the noise is grunts and mmm-hmms coming from him in response to the cashier's chatter. She doesn't seem to know who he is either. I get that we're not in a country town, but do none of these people listen to country music? Or music period?

You wouldn't think he'd be able to take off his hat and be incognito, but apparently, he can. Clark Kent, eat your fucking heart out. He pays—cash, I notice—and grabs his bags, disappearing out the door in a hurry. Shit, did he make me?

I pay for my mismatched bread, soda, and candy bar and hustle out behind him, wishing I hadn't grabbed that bag of tater tots as part of my cover for going down the frozen food aisle because it wasted precious time telling the cashier I'd changed my mind about them. I'm so busy looking left and right down the sidewalk, trying to find his bald head above the crowd, that I don't notice when he steps out right in front of me.

His chest is like running into a brick wall, bouncing off a slab of iron hard muscle that barely gives. I cry out in surprise, more of a startled squeak really, but before I fall, he captures my arm in a tight grip. For a split second, we're in tight proximity and I can feel the thrum of hot control resonating from him, and it makes me drunk. Suddenly, I'm aware of where my hand is, and it's cupping something big, warm . . . and I bet it would get even bigger if I had a chance. I feel my face heat and am momentarily thankful for the caked-on makeup to hide the flush racing along my cheeks.

The makeup can't hide the shiver that rushes through my body though, straight to my core as I'm reminded once again how fucking sexy Keith is. "Oh my gosh, I'm so sorry," I finally squeak out in a voice that's about an octave higher than I normally have. "I wasn't watching where I was going."

It isn't until I'm finished that realization hits me, and I start praying this was accidental. The last thing I need is his figuring out that I'm part of the press and that I've been following him.

Keith looks down at me, no small task considering I'm five seven in bare feet and usually feel part Amazon by the time I get high heels on. Even in running shoes, I can stand eye to eye with the average man.

As I look up, though, I realize I could wear my highest heels and he'd still be taller than me, still be able to bend me over and fuck me senseless. God,

every thought I have of this guy is about sex. Either I'm really that desperate to fuck, he's that sexy, or both. Either way, I need a new vibrator. Hello, Amazon Prime, you are amazing. Two-Day shipping? Yes, please!

Luckily, my traitorous eyes are covered in sunglasses so he can't know what I'm thinking, but regardless of whether he can catch my vibe or not, he doesn't seem impressed.

"Well, maybe you should watch where you're going then," he half growls, steadying me for a moment. "This isn't the sort of place for daydreaming."

Without another look, he strides off down the street. I stare at him, too shocked to even stammer a reply.

What an asshole! I think for a split second before I realize that yeah, I was following him, but he didn't know that for sure!

A tiny thought jumps through my mind, reminding me how hard his body felt, how strong his grip on my arm was as he kept me from falling. And yes, the feeling of what's inside his jeans, even if it was only for a microsecond. For a moment, I'm torn. Should I keep following him? Or now that he's had eye-to-sunglass contact with me, would that be too suspicious? I decide the risk isn't worth it. Besides, I think I have exactly what I need.

There's a woman in Keith's life. It isn't me, but that doesn't mean I'm not going to tell the world about it.

Get ready, Keith. Your dirty laundry is getting hung out to dry.

KEITH

"What the fuck, Todd?" I explode into my phone as I do my damndest not to hurl my computer across the room to shatter into a million pieces against the wall. "Have you seen this shit?"

Through the phone, I hear Todd, my manager, trying to placate me. "I know, Keith. And I'm sorry. I'm looking into it as quickly as I can."

Quickly? I'm paying Todd a lot of money to make sure this isn't something that needs to be handled quickly. In this particular matter, I've made it clear that this should *never* be an issue. "Todd, the headline is 'Keith, who's the girl?'" I fume as I keep reading. "Fans want to know who's captured the heart of the rogue country star. Why would they even think there's a girl? I'm not dating anyone. Everyone knows that."

Todd sighs, and in my mind, I can see him now, sitting at his antique oak desk, the little vein in his left temple pulsing to his heartbeat. “That’s just it, man. Everyone knows you don’t date, and that’s . . . odd for a celebrity of your success. I tried to get you to do some image work . . . show up for a few awards shows with another star, but nooooo, you didn’t want to hear it. So people get curious.”

I’ve heard all of this before, but I hate being fake. There are too many wannabes and fake ass people in this business for my liking as it is. I refuse to be one too.

“Well, fuck everyone’s curiosity. My private life is my own. I sing songs, I make records, ones that have won some pretty sweet awards. I put on concerts, and we’ve done some damn good shows, I think. But that’s it, I’m not available for public comment on my private life. I don’t ask what they do with the life-sized posters I sign for them, and they don’t get to ask what I do in my home.”

Todd clicks into business mode, no longer trying to appease me, beginning the same conversation we’ve had over and over again for all the years we’ve worked together. I didn’t hire him because he’s a friend but because he knows the damn business. “Keith, there’s nothing to be ashamed of here. You went grocery shopping and bought supplies for your daughter. Maybe it’s time you tell the truth.”

I inhale deeply, counting to ten before I let it out, willing it to calm me. It’s maybe only slightly successful. “We’ve talked about this. No. Carsen is only twelve years old, and I want her to have as normal a childhood as she possibly can. If people know about her, she’ll get hounded nonstop. She’ll need a security detail to go to school, for Christ’s sake, and never be able to grow up on her own. Never mind the fact that people are going to do some simple math and figure out that I fathered a child when I was still in high school. That’ll start a whole other heap of questions, ones I don’t want to fucking go into. The public isn’t entitled to know about her, to have an opinion on what she’s wearing or how I’m raising her, or fucking bring up her mother. No.”

I can hear the resignation in Todd’s voice. We’ve had this argument too many times. “I know. And I understand. It’s gonna happen at some point, though. She can’t stay hidden forever.”

I chuckle darkly. “The hell she can’t. If Hannah fucking Montana could pull it off for years, so can I.”

Todd groans. “That was a fictional Disney show. And let’s face it, I doubt you want your daughter doing what Miley Cyrus is doing in the real world now.”

“I know it’s fictional, dumbass. But I’ll make sure Carsen has her fairytale Disney ending. She deserves that.”

“Fine, fine, I can see I’m getting nowhere with you,” Todd says, the exasperation with me obvious. His tone changes to one intended to be more placating. “Really, Keith . . . is Carsen okay after all of this?”

“Some bitch reporter made my little girl’s first period into an expose about how I’ve supposedly got some new fucktoy. Ten million people now know what brand of fucking maxi pads I bought for her!” I growl, pissed off. “How do you think Carsen is doing?”

I hear Todd gulp and have a little mercy on him. He’s kept my situation secret for nearly five years, a century in celebrity terms. “Sorry, man.”

I shake my head, sighing. “No, it’s okay. She’s doing fine, mostly. She didn’t realize that the feminine shit was what brought up the questions. Thinks it’s just the usual speculation.”

Todd hums, and I can hear the steel in his voice. He’s a damn good manager, a good man overall, really. “I’m gonna fix this. I’m not sure how, but I’ll see what I can do.”

“Do your best. And do it fast, Todd.” I grunt as a goodbye before I hang up. As soon as I do, I realize Sarah, my older sister, is standing in the doorway and likely heard everything I just said.

Sarah’s leaning against the doorframe with her arms crossed, her long brown hair hanging down nearly to her waist, the same color as mine if I didn’t keep my head shaved by choice. “Little rough on Todd there, weren’t you?”

I can see the disapproving look in her eye, reminding me so much of Mom. We both got our height and physique from her, although thankfully, I inherited Dad’s wide shoulders, or else I’d look like a ripped string bean.

“Not really,” I reply evenly. “It’s his job to handle things, to make sure nothing like this happens. But it did, so now he can fucking fix it. Fast.”

Sarah sighs, giving me an amused eyebrow. “Why didn’t you just call me? I could’ve gone to the store and there wouldn’t have been an issue. You know, if I go buy maxi pads, nobody gives a shit.”

I sigh, feeling trapped. On one hand, I know she’s right. On the other hand, every time I’d have to do it, I’d feel like the world’s shittiest father. It’s

a no-win situation. “I know, Sarah. And you know how much I appreciate everything you do . . . for me and for Carsen. But I’m her dad, you know? She needed something, and it’s my job to provide it, so I went to the fucking grocery store. It shouldn’t have been a big deal.”

I plop to the couch, elbows on my spread knees and my head hung low. It’s been hard, raising a little girl without her mother, no help from her grandparents, and only my big sister to turn to. I can’t even ask more from Sarah. She’s a beautiful young woman with her own life to live. It’d be unfair for me to demand she be even more of a surrogate mother to Carsen. And no matter what . . . “I just didn’t want to be a failure of a father.”

Sarah sits beside me, putting an arm around my shoulder like she did when we were little and I had to turn to her for comfort in the bad times. “You take good care of her, Keith. No doubt to anyone who knows you two how much you love that little girl. She has everything she needs right here with you, but you don’t have to do it alone. I love that girl like she’s my own. Damn-near raised her right along with you, remember?”

I place my hand on hers, patting it. “Thanks, Sarah. I know you love her, and I don’t know what we’d have done without you all these years, but I hate that something that should be simple, like getting groceries, just isn’t anymore.” I sigh. “Hell, maybe I need a break. Just step away from the spotlight for a few years until Carsen gets older?”

Sarah shakes her head. “No chance in hell. You have worked your ass off to chase your dream, Keith. ‘All those years’ you’re talking about? I remember them too. I remember you working days at shitty job after shitty job before singing nights. I remember my working a full-time job and bringing Carsen to some seedy places to hear you sing when she was just a toddler. I remember you holding her to your chest with one hand, writing songs with the other while you hummed her to sleep at night.”

I smile slightly, remembering those nights too. “She couldn’t sleep as a baby unless I was holding her.”

“And she still loves you just as much,” Sarah reminds me. “So all that hard work? You made it, Keith. You got your dream, and you need to grab onto it with both hands and hang on tight for as long as the ride goes. Because you know what the rap god says.”

I nod. Sarah’s always been more into hip hop than I am, but I know the lyrics. “When the run’s over, just admit it’s at an end.”

“And in the meantime, get as much as you can out of it,” Sarah adds. “So

yeah, it's awkward right now, and the fact that something happened that is beyond your control is killing you . . ."

I try to interrupt to disagree, but she talks over me. "Please, Keith. You're the biggest control freak I've ever met. And this hit you out of left field and you don't like it. But suck it up, buttercup. It'll blow over, and trust Todd to make sure it does. In the meantime, you know you've got a moment, maybe two or three. Hang onto them and give you and your daughter the rest of a life together afterward."

I huff, knowing she's right. "Fine. You're right. As hard as I've worked to make a career singing, I'll give it all up in a split second if it's bad for Carsen though. You know that."

Sarah smiles, reaching up and rubbing my head like she used to when we were kids. "Of course you would. But look around you, Keith. She's fine, goes to a great school, has great friends, lives in a gorgeous house like nothing we could've ever imagined when we were kids, and is happy."

I smile, looking around. You could probably fit our childhood home in just this room. Hell, this house has more bathrooms than we had rooms back then. We've definitely moved up in life since those days.

"Thanks, Sarah," I finally say, leaning back and relaxing some. "You know how to make things sound right."

She nods, and I'm struck by how far we've come, brother and sister against the world. Needing a lighter moment before those childhood memories take over my brain, I tease her a little. "You sound just like Mom."

She grins, sticking her tongue out at me. "Well, thank you. I'm choosing to take that as the compliment I'm sure you intended it to be."

I laugh, giving her a side hug. "Yeah, definitely a compliment, Sis."

ELISE

I can't quite be sure, but it feels like I'm floating into work as I walk down the sidewalk. It's only been two days . . . but what a two days. I knew that story was going to be hot. I was ecstatic when Donnie agreed to give me the top header with the biggest page square footage and a big byline on our site's homepage. I've already snapped screen grabs of it for posterity. It's tabloid trash, but one day, those disguises and stalker skills are going to land me my dream job as a real investigative reporter.

I'm not picky, obviously, considering what I'm doing now. But I would like to do more than tabloid celeb hunting. Still, it was some damn fine surveillance if I say so myself. Well, other than when I ran into Keith. That was some newbie shit there, but he didn't seem to figure out I was a reporter, at least. If anything, he probably thought I was just a fan girl trying to get an autograph or maybe cop a feel . . . which I certainly remember, even if that was a tidbit I couldn't publish in order to cover my ass.

Wonder if he's still trying to figure out who at the grocery store scoped him out for the expose?

I pause for coffee, greeting my coworkers Maggie and Francesca as they linger around the pot waiting for refills. They look like a study in opposites. Maggie is tiny, a deceptively curvy blonde who rocks the nerdy-librarian look while maintaining an appearance much younger than her twenty-five years. She's a little shy but a total sweetheart once you get past her armor.

Meanwhile, Francesca is an exotic and willowy brunette who carries the practiced presence of her younger years in pageants. She never fails to mention she was second runner-up Miss Teen New Jersey. No wonder I detest the bitch sometimes.

So they're polar opposites in personality, with Maggie being more shy and reserved to Francesca's extroverted cockiness, but coffee is the eternal common denominator.

Francesca sips her coffee, toasting me slightly. "Congrats on the country singer story, Elise. Got everything you could want with that one."

The words are right, but there's a cattiness to her tone that's always there with her. She's always a bit chilly with anyone she perceives as a threat and sometimes an outright bitch if she doesn't get her way.

I pour myself a mug and make sure to keep my voice neutral. "Thank you. It was hard work so I'm glad it paid off."

She laughs, putting more meaning to words than I'd intended. "Oh, trust me, I do plenty of hard work for my stories too," she says as she almost disgustingly slurps down a mouthful of coffee, hinting at her meaning. "It pays off in some ways more than others."

With a wink, Francesca refills and sashays to her desk. I shake my head as Maggie half chokes on her coffee as she finally gets the meaning. Leaning in closer, she stage-whispers. "Did she just mean . . .?"

I smirk, giving Maggie a glance. "Of course. She's totally been fucking Donnie to get the prime stories. Has been for months. Why do you think her

reports are always from fancy parties, galas, and red carpet events? Hello, preferential treatment. You seriously didn't know?"

Maggie blushes a little and shrugs. "Well, I knew she was doing something to get Donnie's attention, and the rumors are always flying. But she's so casual about it, just throwing it out in conversation."

I grin, smacking Maggie's arm. "You're so cute when you go Dorothy Gale on me. Remember, hun, this ain't Kansas. Besides, I can't say I'm jealous. I'd rather work for my stories than get them by giving Donnie blow jobs under the desk. Can you imagine the dust bunnies under there? And eww on sucking his gross dick. I like my facials at the spa, thank you very much."

I half-feign a full-body shudder of disgust, and Maggie laughs. "Ew. Now I'll have that image in my head all day. Thanks a lot, Elise. You suck!"

I grin, blowing Maggie a kiss. "Well, in the right circumstances, yes, I do suck. Even been told I'm pretty good at it. But I think we've established that it's not happening here."

I scan the room with a pointed finger. "Yup, not happening, not happening, not happening, and never, even if he was the last male on Earth and we needed to repopulate the species. So . . . what are you working on now?"

Maggie laughs again, brightening my day. I love making Maggie laugh and blush. She's so easy since she's a bit innocent, and I've got no shame in my game and generally give zero fucks. "Nothing great. I'm currently looking into a senator who's supposedly cheating on his wife. But I've been undercover as a copy-making volunteer in his office for two weeks and haven't seen anything other than a man who works too many hours. Seems like a bust."

"Sorry about that. At least he's not cheating. Hell, that alone would likely make me vote for him, considering the options lately."

Maggie grins, nodding. "Yup. He's even polite. I've been wearing my cutest tight skirt and blouse whenever I go by, and he keeps looking in my eyes."

"Maybe you don't have the equipment that entices him?" I ask, making Maggie laugh. "What? He wouldn't be the first politician to reach across the aisle for entertainment."

"Nah," Maggie says, smiling. Waving fingers at me, she walks off. "See you later, babe."

Refilling my coffee to the top, I head to my desk too but am sidetracked

by Donnie's yelling. "Elise! Get your ass in here!"

Damn, you'd think a great prime story would at least get me twenty-four hours of peace, but apparently not. I consider saying as much as I sit in the chair across from Donnie, but when I see how red his face is, I decide to leave it be. Fuck it, I don't need the headache. "What's up?"

Donnie's in a pissed off mood for some reason. "You've got proof on the Perkins story?"

I nod, confused but answering anyway. "Of course. Pics of him in the store, putting things in the shopping cart, including maxi pads in the hygiene aisle, and then again at the register for a close-up. Why?"

Donnie sighs, running his fingers through his thinning, greasy hair, and again I'm reminded why I could never get to the top the way Francesca does. I might be a girl who enjoys sex, but I've got standards. Donnie ticks none of my boxes. "I just hung up with Perkins' people. They want a retraction and correction."

My jaw drops open. It happens in our business from time to time, but it's never happened to me. I'm too damn good at my job. "No way. I followed him legally, pics are in public places, thus legal, it's obviously him, and I didn't say anything that could be libel. It's all true."

Donnie smiles, relieving me a little bit. "I know. That's what I told the guy who called too, but I just wanted to check."

"I appreciate that you had my back," I tell him honestly. Donnie's a sleazeball, but he's a dedicated sleaze. He won't back down from a story he prints unless he has to, and that usually involves lawyers. "So, what now? We're obviously not pulling the story, right?"

Donnie shakes his head, reaching for the bowl of jellybeans he keeps on the corner of his desk and popping three into his mouth. "No, actually, when I told him that wasn't going to happen, he had another idea that's pretty interesting. He proposed a series of interviews, probably three or four at least —but maybe more—with Perkins himself."

Perkins himself? At the words, my pulse quickens. I can't seem to keep my thoughts about him not tied up in how fucking sexy he is. "Really?"

Donnie nods. "They're doing some damage control and wanting to write their own narrative about his life. Control the narrative, you know?"

"That sounds great!" I exclaim gleefully, and not totally professionally. "When do I meet with him?"

Donnie laughs, almost like he's amused I'd ask. "I'm thinking Frannie

can take this one, Elise."

My jaw drops. Oh, hell no! Giving the best initial slots to Francesca because she's giving you her slot? I get that . . . but to take a story from me? "Like hell! This is my story . . . a follow-up from my expose. It should go to me and you know it, Donnie."

He narrows his eyes at me, not liking that I questioned him, but I'm right. This is my story. A small piece of me wants to stamp my foot and yell *Mine*! but since that's not likely to get me what I want, I quickly figure out a different tactic.

"Donnie, look. This story should go to me, and I know you . . . appreciate Francesca's work," I choke out, almost gagging to have to say that, "but she's going to be busy with red carpet events for the next two weeks when those new blockbusters come out. You know those comic book movies make big bucks and get big stars at the premieres."

Donnie makes a humming sound in the back of his throat, seemingly in no hurry to hand down his decision while I'm waiting on pins and needles. Do I need to bring up the fact that the whole office knows Francesca's using her . . . assets to get ahead with head? Finally, Donnie speaks. "Okay. You can do it. Interviews with Perkins, and I want all the dirty details, ins and outs of his life, all of it. Can you do that?"

I nod, relieved. "Of course!"

Getting up to leave before Donnie changes his mind, I stop at the door when he calls my name. "Hey, Elise? Just FYI . . . Perkins is pissed as fuck for the story because everyone knows he's majorly private. And he'll know who you are from the byline. You might have six feet three inches of raging cowboy to deal with. Be ready. And get those secrets."

I nod, my mind focusing on the words *inches* and *raging*. "Yes, sir."

KEITH

"I can't believe you think this is the best way to deal with this," I growl at Todd through the small screen on my phone. He cringes slightly at the vehemence in my voice, even though he's a thousand miles away and probably thanking the fates for inventing FaceTime. It's not really his fault. It's the upper management at the record label that decided on this hair-brained scheme. He just has to play the messenger, and he's the only person

available for me to take out my frustrations on.

So I do, copiously. I need to hit the gym and relieve some of this stress. “Really? How is an interview going to make my life more private? Sing songs, play music, go the fuck home . . . that’s all I ask.”

Todd sighs at the repeat of the mantra that’s been the driving force for my career for the last few years. Yeah, I tour, but always in the summer when Carsen and Sarah can come along. During the school year, I play one-shot TV appearances or so-called “secret shows” where it’s marketed as a last-minute gig and usually stuffed with radio personalities and listeners who win tickets. It works for me because I’m usually only gone for a weekend before getting back home to Carsen and my quiet life.

Todd calls it ‘keeping my name out there’ . . . like I need more promotion. I’ve got the career I’ve always dreamed of if the nosy paparazzi would just leave me the hell alone.

“Do we need to do this when I can be there to wrangle you?” Todd asks, deciding to just say fuck it and ignore my protests. “Or can you do this on your own and not be an ass? This is happening, like it or not. The label’s already told the paper, and if you back out—”

“Then the shit really hits the fan,” I growl. I’m this close to calling his bluff. What stops me is the fact that if I don’t talk to this paper, the label will, and not everyone there understands my need for privacy. “Fine, fuck it. I’ll be a fucking gentleman.”

“Good,” Todd replies. “So make sure that you represent yourself in a way that won’t make the label folks shit their pants. Okay?”

I sigh, feeling like a deflated balloon. “I’ll be fine. You know I can bullshit and be charming when I need to be. I get it . . . follow the party line. No woman in my life, obviously. Stick to promoting the new album and next tour. Nothing too personal.”

Todd winces, and I can feel the other shoe about to drop. “Well, not exactly. We sold them on the idea that this is an all-access interview series, and—”

I cut him off, nearly losing my shit again. “All-access? How the hell am I supposed to keep Carsen a secret if it’s fucking all-access?”

Todd rolls his eyes. “As I was saying, we call it all-access because then it seems like you’re giving them everything, but then you corral them some. There are going to be personal questions. Answer them as honestly as possible without giving anything away that you want kept secret.”

“And if they pry into areas that I don’t want to talk about?” I ask.

“It’s called playing coy, for fuck’s sake. Every actress in Hollywood has been doing it since they invented film! You give a smile, a deceptive answer, and let your charm deflect. But by telling them and viewers that it’s you completely uncensored and open, they’ll hopefully quit asking questions. Especially when they see you’re just a nice guy who wants to keep to himself, living out his dream of country music.”

I laugh. He’s got a few points. “That actually *is* true, so I think I can sell that. Okay, honest . . . to a point. Charming and genuine. Promote. That it?”

Todd claps his hands together, satisfied. “I think that’s probably a tall enough order for today. You good? Really?”

I take a big breath, trying to focus. “Yeah, Todd. I’m good. Thanks for talking me off the ledge. You know I hate attention like this already, and with Carsen, it’s hard to keep from freaking the fuck out.”

Todd, who’s kept my secret well, nods. “I know, Keith. Everything you do is for Carsen and for the music. That always shines through, even when you’re being an ass. That’s why I’m still working with you.”

I laugh. “Naw, that’s not it. You just like those platinum albums on your resume and my pretty-boy face.”

Todd barks out a laugh, getting up from his chair. “Yeah, that’s it, of course. Your mug. Speaking of, you’d better get cleaned up. The reporter will be there at four. Dinner service arrives at six for you two to take a break, and then interview number one ends at eight. I’ll help you arrange a few things for steering, but if you think you’re good, I’ve got a decent trio that’s looking at becoming a bunch of solo acts.”

“Why?” I ask as I run through a mental list of what I need to do . . . starting with locking Carsen’s room. Thank God she’s got her own bathroom.

“Same shit as always. One thinks she’s better than the others . . .”

“Damn. Good luck,” I reply, thinking about one thing. In four hours, a reporter will be asking me questions, digging into my past, my thoughts, and my heart.

It sounds like hell.

As soon as I hang up with Todd, I work like a madman, calling in for an emergency cleaning from my housekeeper as I scrub every trace of Carsen from the common areas. After that, I plaster a smile on my face and get dressed to kill, hoping that at least my country boy charm can carry me through some of this train wreck.

When the doorbell rings promptly at four o'clock, I force myself to inhale deeply a few times, attempting to calm my nerves. The most important thing is that Carsen is over at Sarah's for the night and I've got a plan in mind for an 'all-access' grand tour that goes nowhere near her room.

You never know just how eagle-eyed and sneaky reporters can be. Carsen's door is locked, so if the reporter checks it, she'll probably think I've got some red room of pain hidden upstairs. But honestly, I'd be better with that than if she exposed Carsen.

I open the door and am immediately struck stupid. The woman standing on my front doorstep is gorgeous. She's tall and lean, but with curves in all the right places, barely contained in the slim-fitting dress she's wearing.

Her blonde hair is pulled back in a ponytail, fully exposing her high cheekbones and the graceful length of her neck. Her blue eyes hold a hint of amusement at my obvious freeze, and something tickles the back of my mind. She seems familiar, but I think I'd remember a woman this beautiful, even if I only glanced at her for a moment.

"Mr. Perkins?" she says after a moment. "I'm Elise Warner from The Daily Spot. I'm here for the interview."

I nod, but I'm still checking her out, if I'm honest, blood rushing to my cock instead of my brain, so it takes a second for what she said to sink in.

"Wait. Did you say Elise Warner? As in the reporter who started this whole clusterfuck in the first place?" I fume, and she nods. "Oh, fuck this."

Before I even think about it, I slam the door and walk off into the house. She should know to leave it alone, walk away and maybe send someone else. Someone I don't want to crucify for fucking with my life. But does she?

Of course not.

Instead, she starts ringing my doorbell over and over like a damn five-year-old. *Ring-ring, ring-ring*.

I snarl in frustration, turning around halfway down my hallway, and stalk back, yanking the door open. "What?"

In her defense, she doesn't look cowed by my grumpy assholeness, instead lifting her chin up defiantly. "You're right, Mr. Perkins. I am the one who reported that you seem to have some interesting things happening in your life. That's my job . . . to report on things our readers find interesting. And now it seems our jobs align. Mine to interview you and you to be interviewed . . . by me. Or perhaps there was some misunderstanding with your record label? Maybe you should call them? Or I could, if you'd rather."

I narrow my eyes, taking her measure. She's bluffing, but somehow, she hit on the one thing I don't want to do—call the label and tell them I'm not doing this. That happy bunch of assholes would probably just put out a fucking press release saying I'm off the market and probably start selling tickets to some fake engagement party they set up for PR. Instead, Todd's voice echoes in my ear. Charm her, tell some stories, get on with life. *I can do this. I can wrap her around my little finger, no problem. It's gonna suck big hairy balls, but I can do this.*

"Fine. Come on in."

I leave the door standing open and walk to the living room, not even checking to see if she follows. But she does, of course, closing the door with a soft click, and then her wedge heels swish on the tile floor until quieted by the rug.

She gestures to the chair opposite where I've claimed the expanse of couch, and I simply raise one eyebrow, but she takes it as permission and sits down daintily before taking out her phone, a small notebook, and a pink sparkly pen. Seriously?

"Okay, Mr. Perkins, I'd like to go over my thoughts for the interview series first so we can make sure we're on the same page. Is that okay?"

She smiles like she's trying to soothe an angry bear, and hell, I guess she kinda is. I lean back, letting my arm stretch out over the back of my couch, relaxing a bit.

"Keith."

Elise, who's checking her notes, looks up. "Excuse me?"

I chuckle, rubbing at my head. "For the love of fuck, call me Keith. Not Mr. Perkins. That was my dad."

I see her mouth twitch a bit and she mouths, 'for the love of fuck' before shaking her head, seemingly amused at my random turn of phrase. Still, she blushes just slightly, and I find it . . . well, she looks even hotter now. "Okay, Keith. And please call me Elise. Does that sound like a plan?"

I nod as graciously as I can muster, which is basically not at all. Hot or not, she's in my private territory, and I'm doing my best to just be polite. "Sure."

"So, I'm thinking that you're obviously an enigma and your fans want to know more about you, especially since you tend to shun the spotlight. That's really rare in this day and age, when most stars can't seem to hog the spotlight enough."

“I like having my privacy, that’s all. Always have.”

Elise nods, leaning forward. “And I think a series of interviews will give us a nice peek into your life. I understand your point of view.”

“Is that so?”

Elise gives me a heartstopping smile, nodding. “I know you don’t believe me, but yes. So maybe a past, present, future setup or something more along the lines of your professional life and personal life mixed in with tidbits about your history in each? All in all, just a bigger, better picture of who you are. It’ll satisfy the fans and keep reporters like me, but with a lot less morals, off your doorstep. I’ll know about the structure as we see where the interviews naturally lead. Anything you want to add or that’s off limits?”

My first thought is that everything is off limits, but I know I can’t say that, so I simply nod in agreement before I think better of it. “Actually, Elise . . .”

The name sounds sweet on my tongue, making me remember just how damn sexy she looked all fired up, standing in my doorway and calling me on my shit. Her cheeks are still a bit flushed from the fiery exchange, and now that she’s leaning toward me, I can see her voluptuous breasts pressing fully against her dress.

It helps, and the idea that was hatching in my head a moment ago suddenly seems a lot more possible. I turn on the charm, dropping my voice a bit. “Elise . . . this is obviously not by my choice. I’m very much a private person, and I like to be in control . . . of my image, of my music, of what I do and don’t do . . . honestly, I like to be in control of everything. So these interviews chafe against that by their very nature. How about we make a deal, you and me?”

I don’t miss the way her breath hitches when I mention being in control. Deliciously interesting. She licks her lips, her little pink tongue darting out, and I have a flash of her tongue licking me all over. My cock twitches, and I realize . . . maybe this won’t be as bad as I thought.

“What kind of deal did you have in mind?” she asks, her voice a bit breathy. I smile, knowing I’ve got her on the hook.

“Let’s make a deal that for every question you ask me, I get to ask one back. You want to know me, but that’s very one-sided. Of course, I won’t be writing a tell-all expose of your private life like you seem to want to do about me. So the least you can do is make this a little easier, a little more conversational and less of an interrogation. What do you say?”

She bites her lip, thinking about it, and I want to soothe the bite with my tongue. Or shit, maybe bite her lip myself while she fucks herself on my fingers. “I don’t know—”

“I’ll keep it just between us,” I reassure her. “Just think of it as a little pain to go with the pleasure. What do you say?”

Part of me hopes she says yes to the deal so that I have an upper hand. Part of me wants her to say no, and then I can show her out the front door and not do the interviews at all. But the biggest part of me, or maybe just the *hardest* part, wants her to say yes because I want to push her, see what she’ll share, how honest she’ll be when I poke and prod at her deepest secrets.

Honestly, if she left right now, I’d be jacking off to thoughts of her on her knees sucking me off within seconds, not sending up praise at the lack of interviews.

Curious for her answer, I wait silently, eyes locked on hers.

Let’s see who wins.

ELISE

This is not going how I thought it would at all. I was expecting a bit of country boy charm, some hospitality, and maybe some pat interview answers. I figured I’d have to work to get deeper, tease out Keith’s personality for the articles. I was prepared to dig, to have to wiggle my way into his trust so he’d relax and be real with me.

What I didn’t expect was his huge body, clad in jeans and a white button-down shirt that seems to be molded to his bulk, looking so damn sexy when he opened the door. I guess I should have. I ogled his ass for an entire week to get that scoop.

For some reason, the bare head and feet made him seem casual, comfortable until he’d realized who I am. He definitely lit up then, anger flashing in his eyes, and I got a hint of the cold fire in his core.

It’s that cold fire that seems to draw me in. I don’t feel like I’m in control, but instead, we’re jockeying, wrestling for who gets to take charge.

He’s clearly doing these interviews begrudgingly, which makes his deal all the more unusual. I don’t think for one second that he wants to know a damn thing about me, some annoying reporter digging into his private life when he wants desperately to keep it private.

And so we're in this little silent war, my body saying one thing while my professionalism says another. After all, why would he want to ask me questions?

I realize the answer. He told me as plain as day. It's a control move. His way of showing that even in a situation beyond his control, he's in power here. So we keep wrestling, doing our little dance and seeing who gets to be on top.

But really, is that so bad? To let him demonstrate some semblance of being the boss here, if it gets me what I want . . . him to answer my questions. Right, that's why I'm thinking of sweaty bodies pinning each other to the floor, or a bed, or . . .

Fuck it. It's not like I have anything to hide with my boring life, so he can fire away with his questions.

Decision made, I meet his dark eyes to see fire flashing there. So much anger . . . at me or at the situation, maybe both? Or is what I'm seeing as anger just passion?

I straighten my back, keeping the stare contest going. "Tell you what, Keith. I'll agree to your deal . . . *If* you answer honestly and fully any question I ask and help me write an interesting, exciting story about you. You do that, and I'll return the favor. Complete and full honesty to any question."

He studies me, and I can feel him visually taking my measure as an opponent before he gets up, towering over me as he offers a hand. I shake it, noticing that his large hand engulfs mine. "Deal. Fair warning, Elise. You just made a deal with the devil for your soul."

I grin at his dramatics, but there's a little swarm of bees in my belly concerned that maybe there's more truth to what he's saying than I'm expecting. I expected Keith Perkins to be a little bit of a bumpkin, a good ol' country boy who might be a little hostile but still stunned by the chic city girl with smooth verbal skills. Instead, he's controlled, and he's obviously a damn sight smarter than I've given him credit for . . . and that makes him all the more attractive. And a hell of a lot more dangerous.

We settle back more comfortably in our seats, and I pick up my phone, starting the voice recorder before setting it on the table in front of me as he sits back down with the grace of a tiger in his lair. He doesn't react to my recorder, but I explain anyway, covering my ass. "I hope you don't mind. Recording the sessions is just part of the deal, to make sure I'm correct with any quotes." I give him a slight death glare, remembering how his label

wanted a retraction and correction as if I'd been incorrect about my reporting.

He doesn't say anything but gives me a look of tortured pain. I figure since he's not arguing, I might as well run with it and charge ahead. "So first, let's get the basics out of the way . . . the Wikipedia version of who Keith Perkins is. Tell me about yourself."

He sighs, rolling his eyes, and I know it's exactly the kind of question he's had to answer a million times before. But I need it direct from the source for the articles, and it helps break the ice a little, gets him talking on comfortable ground.

Finally, he starts. "My name's Keith Tiberius Perkins. I'm a musician, a singer-songwriter. I'm thirty years old, born and raised in Idaho in a tiny town nobody's ever heard of, including some of the people who lived there. As soon as I graduated high school, I left home for Boise to play in local dive bars and clubs. I even had to use a fake ID to get in because I was underage. As far as my mom was concerned, I might as well have run off to New York City or even hell, judging by her reaction. But I learned, worked hard, and after a few years, moved to Nashville to play in hole-in-the-wall dives there with every other dreamer. Got discovered one night, signed a contract with my label, and now here I am, years later, hit songs and awards later, doing interviews I hate."

I grin. He'd been doing so well until the end there. I do wonder, though—why leave Nashville? They'd worship him around there. What brought him to this area of the country, not exactly New York but still, not quite the center of country music?

"Sounds like you're living the dream, huh?"

Keith smirks, then remembers where he is and grows serious again. "Yeah, I worked hard for a lot of years on my music. Still do. That's all I want to do . . . write songs, sing them for people, and go home. Alone."

"Damn, dude, like a dog with a bone. Let it go. I get it. I'm in your man cave that's the size of a McMansion, but I'm really not trying to be a bitch here."

He shoots forward in his chair, giving me a fierce look, and I realize I said that out loud, not in my head. "Excuse me?"

Shit.

Backpedaling, I try to smooth over the accidental out-loud monologue. "Sorry for saying that out loud, but not for thinking it."

I smirk at him, virtually daring him to puff all up in anger again.

Instead, he sits back in the couch, pointing a finger at me and dropping his voice to a sexy commanding growl. “My turn. Tell me about yourself, Elise Warner.”

I smile, liking this game. If a bullet point list of all things me is what you want, I’ll give it to you, asshole. You’re not in control of things yet.

“I’m Elise Warner, twenty-six, grew up here in East Robinsville, and went to school at State where I got my journalism degree. Did some small-time reporting for the local paper before getting hired by *The Daily Spot*, where I write celebrity tabloid crap but get to keep my investigative skills fresh. And this interview series is a big deal for me, so don’t fuck it up. Please.”

He huffs out a surprised laugh. I don’t think he was expecting me to be so honest or so confrontational with him. By his smile, I think he likes it, too. He quickly asks the same follow-up question I did. “So, living the dream? Is this what little Elise wanted to do when she grew up?”

I shake my head, letting the ‘little’ comment slide. I’m all grown up, buddy, and you damn well know it. “No, not really. I like investigative reporting, but I wish I could do something more . . .”

Unexpectedly, I stumble for words, searching for something big enough to explain my heart while Keith looks on, interested. “Go on.”

“Just, I want something more impactful,” I admit. “Fight for the little guy, expose the bad guys, that kind of thing. But that’s a hard gig to come by, so I’m working my way up. If I was in your story, I guess I’m still in the dive bars in Boise but working on that big move to better things, chasing the dream.”

He hums, seemingly thinking about what I’ve said. I want to keep the ball rolling, to capitalize on the bit of sympathy I seem to be getting from him, so I decide to address the elephant in the room, the main reason I’m here.

“So, your professional life is golden, all you could’ve dreamed of. What about your personal life, Keith? What’s happening on the dating front? Who are you buying maxis for? Who’s the milk for, Keith?” I ask with a conspiratorial tone.

He growls, literally growls at me like an animal. It’s like nothing I’ve ever heard, and on some primitive level, I’m scared and know I should run for cover from the apex predator with his sights on me. But on a deeper, instinctive level, my blood just started singing through my body, pulsing at a focal point behind my clit.

Holy shit. Maybe it's a little caveman-ish, but it's fucking sexy as hell too. Unconsciously, I squeeze my crossed legs tighter, needing some pressure for relief. But he notices. I expect him to start yelling, but instead he just smirks and leans forward again.

His voice is quiet, gravel as he answers, seemingly puzzled by me. "You're forward, aren't you? No finesse or foreplay. Just jumping into the question you know is most likely to set me off. No, I'm not dating anyone, nor am I looking to. Maybe the supplies were just so I can be a gracious host. Need a tampon, Elise?"

I can't help but defend myself a bit. He's somehow getting to me despite my best attempts to get under *his* skin. The score is definitely in his favor right now. Needing to get back in the battle for control, I fume. "No, fuck you very much. It's the reason this all started, that speculation, so why not address it from the start? Besides, foreplay is for people who don't know what they want, who need to warm up to the idea. I get the feeling that neither of us is like that. I know what I want . . . your secrets. And you know what you want . . . to not tell me. I'm not going to trick them out of you. Just bold honesty."

He tilts his head, searching my face for something. "Okay. But there's one thing you're wrong about."

I raise an eyebrow in question. "What's that?"

Keith smiles, but it's a predatory full baring of his teeth, more threatening and conquering than humorous. "Foreplay isn't for people who need a warm-up. Foreplay can be the best part if it's done right."

He pauses, and I know I'm breathing faster than I should be, considering I'm just sitting on a couch talking, but damn, can he talk. Every word is measured for effect, and I feel more bare than if I'd even answered a question.

The answer is written all over my face, my body. "And are you good at foreplay?"

Keith nods, his smile changing slightly, becoming as seductive as it is confrontational. "Bold honesty, huh? Very. Okay, Elise . . . tell me about *your* dating life."

It's not a question, it's an order.

I want to be bratty back, call him on his bossiness, but I realize that would be counter to my mission here, so I give in and willingly share. "No, I'm not dating either. I work too damn much, and my last boyfriend was an ass. I'm

not hung up on him or anything. It's been months ago and was casual at best, more like fuck buddies than a real relationship. But I'm just . . . no, not dating."

He grins, a real one this time. "Point proven. Fuck buddies don't need foreplay. Just get in, get off, and get out. You're just not used to getting more. So much more that it becomes a necessity, an integral piece of the bigger action, not something to be rushed through or skipped." Every word he says is seduction, meant to make me squirm for him and I'm fighting the urge, forcing myself to be still.

I bite my lip, considering his words, my body screaming that it wants more, too. "Well, you may be right. But tell me, Keith. For someone who's not dating anyone, you sure do have some insight into the inner workings of the human mind and body. How'd you get so . . . smart?"

I stumble at the last second because I almost said sexy, and I'll be damned if I'm giving him that kind of ammunition, but he seems to know that 'smart' wasn't my first word choice judging by his cocked eyebrow. "I said I'm not dating. Never said I was a saint."

Before I can ask a follow-up question, the doorbell rings and Keith rises from his seat to go answer it. I can't help but watch him as he moves with graceful power toward the hallway, returning a moment later leading a guy wearing black pants and a white chef jacket toward what I can only assume is the kitchen. I follow, drawn by both professional and personal curiosity.

As the cook tells Keith about the menu and warming times, I hang in the doorway, taking in Keith's no-muss appearance. His jeans have ridden down low on his lean hips, showing the waistband of his underwear as he reaches up and his shirt hem raises with his arms.

Wondering if he's a boxer brief kind of guy, I let my eyes dip down to his crotch and see a nice bulge that makes me picture him dropping those pants and taking his cock out for me. As my eyes drift back up, I see that his arms are crossed over his chest, showing off biceps that strain against the white cotton of his shirt and make his shirt ride up to expose a tiny sliver of his stomach. I have to admit to myself that want to run my hands over his abs, feel and caress each ridge.

When the cook takes his leave, Keith turns to meet my eyes. "Hungry?"

There's an undertone to his voice, an awareness of the fact that I was just checking him out. But I see a gleam in his eyes. He's checking me out too, which just increases my desire. Before I can tell myself not to say it, I answer

him honestly. “Starving.”

There’s a rumble in his chest, but he seems to remember his game plan before I remember mine, still lost in some fantasy of him bending me over the kitchen counter and licking his dessert out of my soaking wet pussy. He opens a cabinet door, grabbing plates, then glasses and silverware. “Follow me.”

After serving up healthy portions onto the plates and a quick warming in the microwave, we sit at the table in the kitchen nook. There’s tension between us now, but it’s not awkward. If anything, it feels good, flavored with the little intimate touches like using a microwave. It’s like Keith’s saying I know you find me sexy. I don’t need to bend over backward to impress you more than I do naturally.

It’s natural and heady, like I’m a stick of dynamite and he’s waving a lit match around, and I’m dangerously close to begging him to light me up because everything in me says that he damn sure could.

I try to get my head back in the game, reminding myself that no matter how fucking sexy Keith may be or how horny I am, that’s not happening. I’m a reporter, and my name isn’t Francesca, goddammit!

I need to be professional, get him to answer some fresh questions, dig a little deeper into who he is. Discovering his secrets, writing a great article series . . . that’s the goal here. Not getting my pussy licked before getting a creamy ending to my fantasies.

Keith seems to read all of my dirty, naughty thoughts, but he chooses to let me simmer in my need and goes over to the fridge. “Wine?”

I nod, curious that he didn’t offer me a beer. “Just a half glass. Still on the clock, you know.”

I wish I hadn’t said it the moment it leaves my mouth. It’s a reminder that regardless of any flirting we might have been doing, and how fucking hot Keith makes me, being here is my job. My job to tell all the things he’d rather keep private.

It’s like a bucket of cold water has been dumped on our whole interaction, and I can see it in the sudden increased tension across Keith’s jawline.

Dinner and the rest of our evening proceed with conversational questions and answers, but not nearly as personal and telling as our earlier talk. There’s none of the burning taunting now, just a polite aloofness.

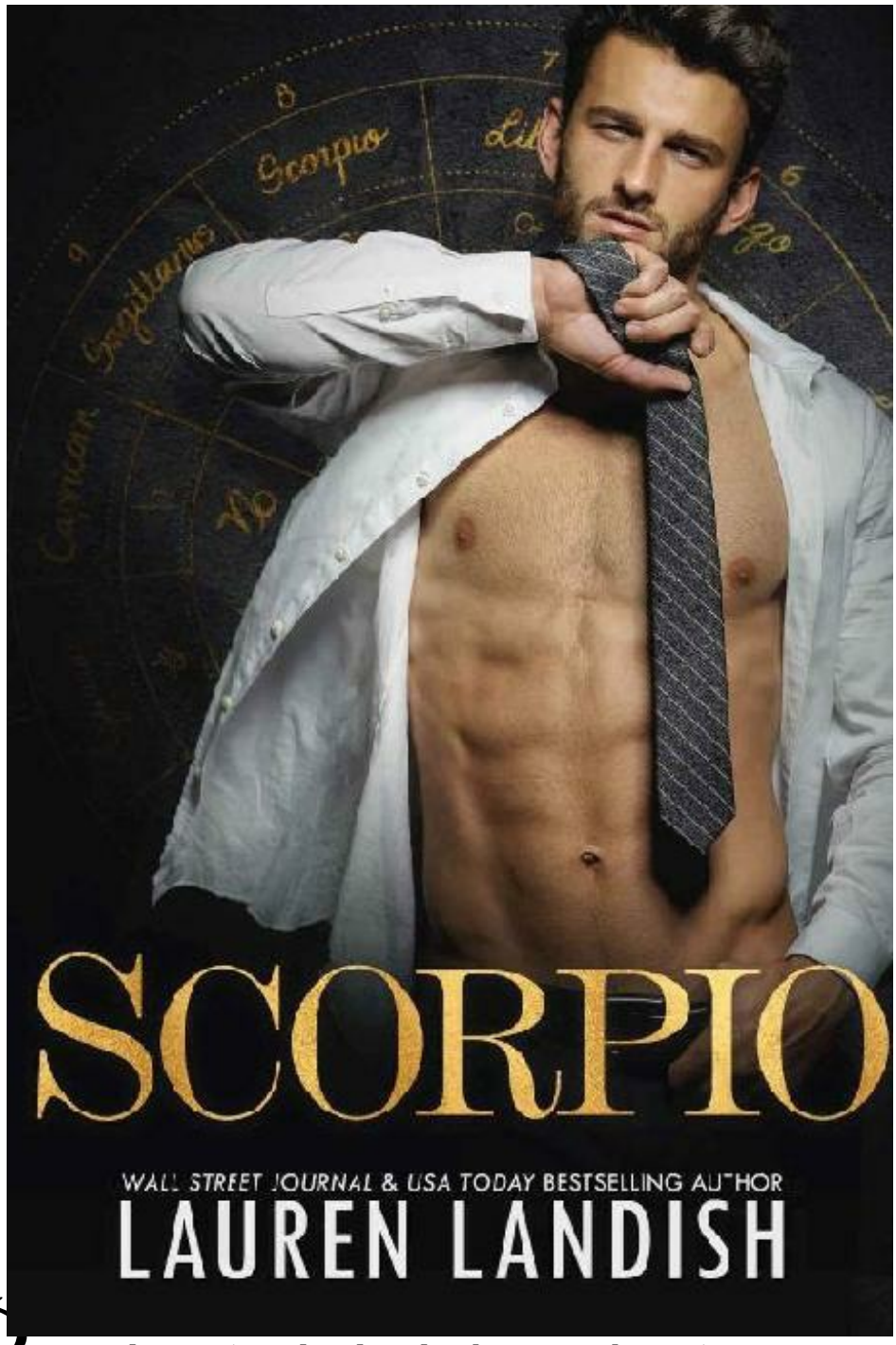
It feels colder, robotic even as he answers in what amounts to one word,

sometimes one-syllable answers. And though I could write a whole book about how hot Keith is in person, how commanding his presence is, I'm not sure that's exactly where this all-access story needs to go.

That fact feels like . . . my secret.

Want the rest? Get it HERE!

COMING SOON!



Prologue (unedited and subject to change)

Madison

Love. From the dawn of time it's been with us, our silent companion down through the millennia.

It seems strange that such a simple word, four simple letters, play such a role in our lives; our history.

Wars have started over it. Men and women have fought and died for it.

We have holidays about it, we spend billions of dollars when it blooms… and billions more when it dies.

There are some who say that love is fated. That forces beyond our control somehow whisper in our daily lives, that they push us like the wind pushes a sailboat. We can steer against them sometimes, but if you fight the wind long enough, some hurricane's going to come around and break you in half.

To avoid those storms, to avoid getting broken up on the rocks of life, you need to guess what the future has in store for you. They say that the winds of fate can be measured, that you'll have clues before you meet that someone who's supposed to be your soulmate. That somehow, some collection of the stars, planets, and maybe your own handprint can reveal your happily ever after.

Tell that to Romeo and Juliet. Those star-crossed lovers sure were able to foretell what their fortunes were.

Nope. To me, horoscopes, fortune telling, or predicting the future is baloney, something people like to put a little bit of faith in because we're all sometimes overwhelmed by the chaos of life. It's just nice to believe that there's some greater power controlling things, and that maybe we can somehow figure out what that plan is.

But you want to know what reality is? Reality is the old saying… you sow the wind, you reap the whirlwind. You can't control it, you can't predict it… and when love happens, it might just haul off and smack you in the face. There's not a damn thing you can do about it.

This is our story.

Coming soon!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Other books by Lauren:
Get Dirty Series (Interconnecting standalones):
Dirty Talk
Dirty Laundry

Irresistible Bachelor Series (Interconnecting standalones):
Anaconda || Mr. Fiance || Heartstopper
Stud Muffin || Mr. Fixit || Matchmaker
Motorhead || Baby Daddy

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