



Used

a novel

KATE DUNBAR

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Praise for Used

“USED was amazing. Like seriously amazing. I can't remember the last time I hated to put a book down so I could go to sleep and then immediately pick it up to finish it the next morning. And yet, here we are and that's what I did.”

- *Samantha Chase, New York Times Bestselling Author*

“Heartbreakingly beautiful. This book isn't about angst and pain. It's about a fighter-a survivor-that we all attain to be. The story tears you apart in the best ways and builds you back up in the most beautiful.”

- *Nichole Chase, New York Times and USA Today Bestselling Author*

“USED is a raw, heart-wrenching story of surviving trauma, but it's also so much more. It's a romantic, emotionally gratifying tale of unflinching, all-in love. I couldn't turn the pages fast enough.”

- *Brenda Rothert, Author*

“Rarely have I read a book so vividly described, so rich with emotion, that I felt like I lived it. USED is the kind of book that engages your heart and takes you on a journey that leaves you hopeful and empowered by the end.”

- *Erika Kelly, Author*

Used
By Kate Dunbar

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USED

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This book is dedicated to Michael, the man of my dreams.

Thank you for always being my safe place.

When I'm with you, I am home.

A Note from the Author

USED is my debut novel and was my passion project for five years. It wasn't always easy for me to get the words down, but it offered moments of healing, laughter, heartache, and sorrow as I wrote it. And by the time I typed THE END, it was a journey of freedom. There are adult themes and situations, so proceed with caution if you need to do so.

And if you find yourself in an abusive relationship, there is help.

Don't stay silent.

No matter who your abuser is.

No matter what you've been told.

No matter the lies whispered in your ear.

You are worth wholeness and freedom.

Fight for you, friend.

If you are in a domestic violence situation and need help, the National Domestic Violence Hotline is available for you twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year.

Website: <http://www.thehotline.org/>

Telephone: 1-800-799-7233

1-800-787-3224 (TTY for Deaf/hard of hearing)

Sibling Abuse is much more common than most would expect. Some experts believe it to be “the most common but least reported abuse in the family” (www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/toxic-relationships/202002/sibling-bullying-and-abuse-the-hidden-epidemic). If you are in need of help, the National Child Abuse Hotline is available for you twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year.

Website: <https://www.childhelp.org/hotline/>

Telephone: 1-800-4-A-CHILD

About Used

At the age of seventeen, after a decade of lies, hurt, and severe abuse by her brother Lucas, Sabra Valentine is able to breathe.

Lucas is behind bars thanks in large part to Sabra's quick thinking and self-preservation-even if that's one more secret she has to keep.

Now, seven years later, life is moving forward, and Sabra is starting to heal, live, and love again with her friends and Trevor Collins by her side. He's tall, dark, and sexy, and he doesn't fall for Sabra's games. The future is finally looking bright-until one phone call shatters everything.

Used is a romantic suspense with domestic thriller elements. Please be aware that there are topics which may be triggers for some readers, and this work is meant for mature readers.

I was nine when I lied for my brother the first time.

I'm not sure why I did it. There must have been something instinctual that took over me. A lie or die kind of thing. Not that I would have died if I hadn't done it. I would have paid in some way though. That much was certain.

I always paid if I did something he didn't like. It's the way it was and always had been for as long as I can remember.

And no one was there to protect me. Instead, I was the protector of everyone else—of their emotions, their thoughts, their reality.

The Peacekeeper.

It's tragic.

A house full of terrors, and the monster is your sibling.

But now.

I'm free.

CHAPTER ONE

The beat of the music pulses inside. It's cranked as loud as it can go, and bodies are moving under strobing lights everywhere I turn. The bar smells of sweat, alcohol and desire, mixed with the sweet fragrance of weed someone's lit. I cross the room and fall into the waiting arms of Trevor perched on a barstool. Desire oozes from his every pore. His eyes skim across my body.

The look in them says all I need to know. He's caught in my crazy web.

Play my cards right and this night will be exactly what I want. I close the gap between us, our faces now only inches apart.

Trevor is a patient man. Four years of friendship with six months of playing cat and mouse and finally, tonight, I'll let him catch me. Adoration, shivers of pleasure and mind-blowing sex—for both of us.

I ease myself between his legs, nestle my mouth to his ear, and steal the opportunity to nip his earlobe. "Are you ready to go?" His body comes to attention.

"I thought we were staying for the midnight bonfire down by the lake and snuggling under a blanket together?" He quirks an eyebrow and tosses me a wry grin. "We wouldn't want to miss the celebration. Isn't that what you told me on the phone earlier?"

"I have other plans for celebrating tonight. Which do include being under a blanket." That grabs his attention. "But if you're set on roasting marshmallows—" My arm brushes across his lap. I can feel how *not* interested in roasting marshmallows he is. A small smile creases my lips.

Sabra: One, Trevor: Zero.

Boys are so easy. Push your tits up in a great bra, drop your eyes right before you slide them to their face, and every single one of them folds.

No exceptions.

You don't even have to wear the tight dresses some girls put on. It backfires on you in the long run.

My eyes find Emily across the room. She's in the standard uniform tonight. The tight sparkly strapless dress that barely covers her ass and boobs. Four-inch peep toe heels. Blood red lips and matching fingernails. There's a gaggle of boys staring and surrounding her. She'll bed one of them tonight. But not even one will come back for more. She's too desperate. Too willing. Cunning, but not cunning enough. She'll become possessive. Scare the shit out of whichever boy she thinks she's landed.

And the rejection will crush her.

I, on the other hand, have this down to a science. Tight jeans that hug my ass in all the right places. V-neck t-shirt with an outstanding push-up bra. Strappy black heels high enough Trevor can glance into my cleavage and wish he could bury his face in it. His hands are climbing closer to the edge of that fantastic bra, so I'd say my plans are working out fine.

Boys like a bit of a chase. Give it up the first night they meet you and they've forgotten your name by the next. Turn up the heat each time you see them. Make them feel like you're pushing the envelope

one step at a time. And they keep coming back for more.

I slide my hands down Trevor's thighs and rest them on his knees. These past six months have been fun. But even I know he'll want to go to the next level after tonight.

Commitment.

I'm going to have to take some sort of action to remedy that.

Because while I can admit Trevor is different than all the others. Someone I adore and care about for more than just his body and the pleasure he can bring me. Commitment and I do not get along.

I've seen what a man can do to a woman. Enough to know I want none of it for the long-term.

I hope we can stay friends once this is all done. I know I'm taking a huge risk with him. He's important to me so it's a gamble for both of us. This one is going to hurt. I don't want to admit it to anyone, but I can't ignore that my heart is more than tied up in this boy. It's too bad no one gets forever. Trevor would be the first one on my list if they did.

But that's a chance I'm not willing to take.

Trevor's lips brush the side of my neck and kiss their way down my shoulder. I shiver in anticipation of what's to come. This is something I can always get behind. Something I always want more of.

Boys have to mess it up and try to give me what they think I want in life. A ring on the finger. The house with the white picket fence. Kids. Them.

No. Not happening.

"Are you ready to go?" I stifle a giggle watching his face. "Or are you content with imagining me naked and nibbling me through my clothes?"

The giggling is dumb. But those little touches keep the boys thinking you have no idea what you are doing to them. It separates the sweet and innocent girls from—me. And *I* may know I'm not the kind of girl you take home to Mom, but I don't need *them* to know that.

"You're serious?" Trevor stares at me dumbfounded with those mossy green eyes. "What time is it?"

"Nine-thirty. We've been here for an hour. Plenty of people have seen us, and we've seen them. I doubt anyone would notice if we go now." I turn and take a step back swaying to the music and stare him dead in the eye with a lifted eyebrow.

Trevor loves a challenge. I know that better than anyone since he asked me to dinner every day for 6 months before I said yes. "Or we can stay here for a little bit longer. See what happens later."

He reaches for my hand to pull me back to his warmth, kissing me hard on the mouth. His hands cradle my neck as his fingers wind themselves into the dark waves of my hair. I slide the palms of my hands down his chiseled chest and breathe across his lips, "Just the beginning, Trev—just the beginning." His eyes spark with a fire I know and love. This blaze will not be easily put out. And that's the way I like it.

Sabra: Two, Trevor: Zero

He stands without letting go of my hand. Pulls me behind him straight for the door. Trevor has become a man on a mission. My laugh booms across the dance floor when I see him clear a walkway with his other hand, steering us toward freedom. We can see the night sky out the door in front of us,

stars sparkling across the navy backdrop. I grip Trevor's hand tighter, holding on. Trevor stops dead in his tracks, his pathway blocked by one of the biggest guys I've ever laid eyes on.

"Hey man, long time no see." Trevor drops my hand to do some stupid handshake with a lot of movements to it.

"Hey Bryan, good to see you." Trevor yells over the music. "What brings you all the way here?" He draws back from Goliath and finds me. Pulls me back to his side. "Don't you have a game this week?"

"Nah, we've got a bye. I thought I'd take a break and make a run to check on all of you. See what kind of trouble you're getting into these days." He glances my way. One eyebrow lifts, his eyes traveling the length of my body. "Looks like your type of trouble comes in the form of a beautiful brunette," he adds, holding out a hand. "Bryan Richardson."

I grasp his hand without leaving the cocoon of Trevor's arm. "Sabra Valentine. Pleasure to meet you." His grip is firm, his smile broadening while his dark eyes stare into mine.

Trevor clears his throat. "I hate to do this, but we're on our way out." He claps Bryan on the shoulder. "Give me a holler tomorrow if you're still in town. We can grab a beer. Catch up."

"You're leaving?" Bryan runs a hand across the scruff on his face.

"Sorry, Bro. We've got other plans tonight." He looks at me and links his hand in mine already pulling me toward the door again. "But holler at me tomorrow," he throws back at his huge friend.

"It was nice to meet you," I call out, waving over my shoulder. We slide out the door without a backward glance.



I drop his hand when we get past the bouncer and run through the parking lot, down the hill to the lake. My laughter is ripped away by the wind circling around me. Bits of grass and pine needles crunch under my shoes. The pounding of Trevor's feet against the ground echoes behind me. I turn to look at him while I kick my shoes off before snatching them off the ground. The thick foliage of the forest trees spread out before us. I wiggle my toes against the cool leaves beneath my feet and watch Trevor stalk toward me. His face is flushed. He's not breathing all that hard. But he's not breathing normal either.

"You okay?"

"Of course." Concern shines in his eyes. "Sorry about Bryan. He's a bit of a lady's man ever since

he got drafted right out of college. I hope he didn't make you uncomfortable."

"I'm fine." He must know by now I can take care of myself. "That was nothing." I roll my eyes at him, waving my hands to dismiss the thought. A few steps backward bring me to the nearest pine tree, tall and stately. The first in a cavalry of many. Trevor jogs a few steps closer. His body closing in, one arm resting above my head on the bark while his other hand tugs the heels from my hand and drops them beside us.

He leans closer so his mouth is inches from my own. "Are you sure it was nothing? He seemed to like what he saw."

Wait. What? Is that jealousy I see?

"Bryan's just another guy. I only have eyes for you. You're all I want. Don't be a jealous caveman." I glance into his eyes and bite my bottom lip. My fingers rest against his chest toying with the buttons on his navy shirt. The sleeves are rolled up to his forearms giving me the perfect view of muscle and veins. All of which I want to trace with my tongue.

There's a couple of inches separating our bodies. Heat radiates off him. All I can think about is closing the gap. I let my eyes trail from his chest. His lips. His eyes. Those smoldering green eyes. I hook one thumb in his belt loop before reaching up and brushing the dark hair off his forehead. "But I'm sorry he made *you* uncomfortable. I'd hate for that to get in your head and ruin our night."

His eyes widen, eyebrows shooting into his hairline. "First, I don't know what you're talking about. I don't get jealous." He trails a finger across my collarbone before pressing his lips to mine. "Second, the night is still young." One shoulder lifts. "But if you're tired, or ready to go, I can take you home. To be clear, though, nothing is ruined from where I stand." He leans in for another soft kiss. Runs his tongue across my bottom lip.

I yank his body to mine by his belt loop and crush my lips to his. It's all the invitation he needs. Trevor's hands find their way to my t-shirt. His fingers skim along the edge feathering across my skin. All I want is more of him. Of this.

My hands clench his shirt wrinkling it in my tight grip. I tug on his bottom lip with my teeth and smile. Trevor's lips trail steamy kisses from behind my ear to my neck and shoulder. I unfurl my fingers from the fabric and reach up, curl them in his hair. His face looms back in front of mine. My arms wrap around his neck and he grins at me. His hot and steady hands slide from my back around to my stomach. There's no hesitation in Trevor when his fingers glide to my lace covered breasts, giving them a light squeeze.

"Trevor," I breathe into the quiet. The wind rustles the branches surrounding us. My hands move down his chest, stopping at the top of his jeans. I hook my thumbs back in his belt loops.

"Yeah?" He leans back an inch to look at me. "What is it? You want me to stop?"

"Want you to stop?" Laughter bubbles out of me at the thought. Is he crazy?

"No...I don't ever want you to stop." Trevor's lips go back to my neck, leaving a path of fire as they lick their way to my collarbone. "But maybe we should move somewhere a little less visible?" The hoots and hollers from the back porch off the bar echo down the hill. Shadows and silhouettes of those mingling out there drinking and smoking are easy to make out. And if we can see them, they can see us. I'd rather not provide a peep show if I can help it.

"What?" He lifts his head from where he's been paying special attention to the top of my cleavage

and looks around. Understanding crosses his face. “You want to go back inside? Find somewhere private? Warmer?”

Poor, sweet man. I can tell from the look in his eyes he doesn’t want to go back inside. This has been a long time coming. He’s probably afraid I’m going to change my mind.

Fat chance.

“No.” My hands wave off the idea. “I like it out here—and I don’t care about comfort.” I shoot my most mischievous grin his direction. “But I do mind an audience. Voyeurism is not one of my things.” I tug his hand to my mouth and kiss his knuckles. Then I pull him deeper into the trees laughing. “Follow me.”

“Where are we going?” His voice is gruff and filled with curiosity. He stops and I look back at him. Find him watching me with a half grin, hands resting on his hips.

His tongue darts out, licking his bottom lip. Which of course makes me think of his mouth and all the things I’d like him to do with it. My thighs clench and my body shudders.

Trevor sees my shoulders shake. “Are you cold?” He takes a step closer to me, yanks his shirt out from his stone-washed jeans, and unbuttons it. Moonlight shines off his shoulders, illuminating each movement he makes here deep in the woods.

He is mouthwatering.

“What are you doing?” I ask him with wide eyes, watching the dips and curves of his muscles ripple in front of me. He’s trim, cut in all the right places. His jeans hang low on his hips giving me a view of all those special, private spots.

Crap.

Trevor: One, Sabra: Two

“You shivered. It’s cold out here.” He stops with one arm in a sleeve and one arm out. “You don’t want my shirt?”

“I thought the plan was to get me out of my clothes. Not put more on?”

His jaw drops open. It’s almost comical. He’s never been with someone like me before.

“You want,” Trevor stammers. He pulls his bare arm back in his shirt. “We’re going to do this *out here*?”

I turn and walk again reaching back for his hand. Trevor follows me in a stunned silence. His shirt is hanging open. Smooth, hard muscles beckon to be touched and kissed. My body rotates toward him. “No, not there.” I flourish with my hand to show him a cropping of large rocks overlooking the dazzling lake. “Here.”

The vista is beautiful. Perfect for a romantic setting. Situated right in the middle of all the boulders is the largest rock of all. Completely flat and polished. A red flannel blanket lying across it.

Trevor grabs me by the waist and gathers me into his arms. I can hear him breathing, his nose buried in my hair. “You did this? You’ve had this planned all along?”

“I wanted it to be special.” I squeeze my eyes tight behind his back and hold the groan in.

I couldn’t care less about the romance side of things. Most of the time. Not that I’m caring about those things now. Because I don’t care.

But boys eat this stuff up. Even if they say they don’t, they lie.

Trevor holds me at arm's length. "Sabra, any time I'm with you is special." He gazes into my eyes. "You know that, right? Every time is special."

My hands cup his cheeks, feeling the stubble scrape my palms. I imagine the same rasp trailing up my thighs and clench my muscles before another shiver gives me away. "Yes. I just wanted you to know I felt the same way."

Seriously. What is wrong with me?

Trevor crushes me to him. My head collides with his bare, smooth chest, his heat seeping through my clothes. I circle my arms under his button-down and squeeze. His hands stroke my shoulders and back in circular motions. I breathe a contented sigh and turn my back to him grinning like a cat that caught a canary before I pull him toward the rocks and innocently ask, "You ready?"

He answers by stepping ahead of me and leading the way.

CHAPTER TWO

Trevor moves behind me as we climb through the boulders and follow the path to our destination. He places his hand on the small of my back to help me navigate. I slip on some loose rocks and slide backward. But Trevor reaches around to steady me. Always the gentleman. Always there for me.

I smile at him and whisper a soft thanks. Reward him with the light touch of my lips on his. The kiss deepens, electricity crackling between us, and I pull away. Trevor lets me go but not before he brushes his fingers across my chest. My nipples immediately harden under his touch and his intake of breath lets me know he felt it too. There's no hiding it even if he hadn't felt it. The light of the moon shines bright overhead, illuminating the path before us. And the lace bra, while amazing for its push-up factor, paired with the t-shirt doesn't leave much to the imagination. Which is exactly why I chose it.

Trevor pulls me into his arms when I take a quick step forward and slides his hands back across my chest. This time they stop when they hit their mark. He gives a slight tug on my nipple through the shirt, growling in my ear, "Are you sure we can't stop right here?"

I turn in his arms and grin at him wickedly. "I promise it will be worth it."

"That's what you keep saying. And while I fully believe that statement—think I've proved that over the years—I think it might be worth taking a quick break."

I can't form a reply as the power shifts between us. Trevor pushes his leg between mine, backing me against one of the rocks. It's taller than I am. Than Trevor is. Our own little cocoon of solitude.

His mouth locks on mine. Two hands land on my ass, hitching my hips closer to him. His tongue parts my lips and he teases me. My pulse quickens and I pull away gasping for air. It's all the pause and encouragement he needs, giving him time to grab the hem of my shirt and lift it over my head.

I don't stop him. Who can see us now? This is right where I want him.

I place my hands on his chest, slide them to the top of his jeans, and allow my fingertips to stroke the trail of dark hair leading to uncharted territory. Then I move in, kissing my way up his neck, back to his lips.

Trevor has other plans. He ducks his head, kisses my collarbone heading south, leaving a path of fire. I close my eyes and feel my body tighten, reacting when his tongue finds my nipple through the lace. We may not get to the blanket after all.

I pull away, trying not to seem too eager, but Trevor grips my waist and brings me closer. His tongue slides, sucks and flicks my nipple through the lace bra. My arms make their way around him and I play with the hair at the back of his neck.

It can't possibly get any better than this. His fingers move to the lace cupping my breasts and release me into the air. I feel his warm mouth take in the entire pinkness of my nipple and I'm done. I guess it can get better.

Trevor: Two, Sabra: Two.

His hands roam all over me, rubbing against my bare skin. Through my jeans. My body is short-circuiting. It's wet everywhere that matters. I'm going to explode if I don't get some sort of release soon.

I move my hands down his hips to the button-fly on his jeans. My fingers tremble with the thought of releasing him and being able to touch him. Taste him. His mouth takes turns, moving between my breasts. It curves into a smile against my chest. He stands with one final flick of his tongue, pulls the lace back over my breast, and takes a small step backward.

What the hell?

Trevor's eyes bore a hole in mine. He smirks at my confusion. "I'd say that was enough of a rest. Should we keep going?" He laughs out loud, a full belly laugh, when he sees the grimace cross my face.

"Really, Trevor? You can just stop like that?"

"I'm sure if your mouth had been on me it would be a different story, but you kept your lips to yourself—for the most part—and, instead, mine were on you." He slips closer and whispers in my ear, "Tasting you. Sliding over you. And by your reaction, they were doing okay for themselves. It looks like two can play this game." He takes a step forward. "You coming?"

Damn.

Trevor: Three, Sabra: Two.

"Can I have my shirt please?" I huff at him.

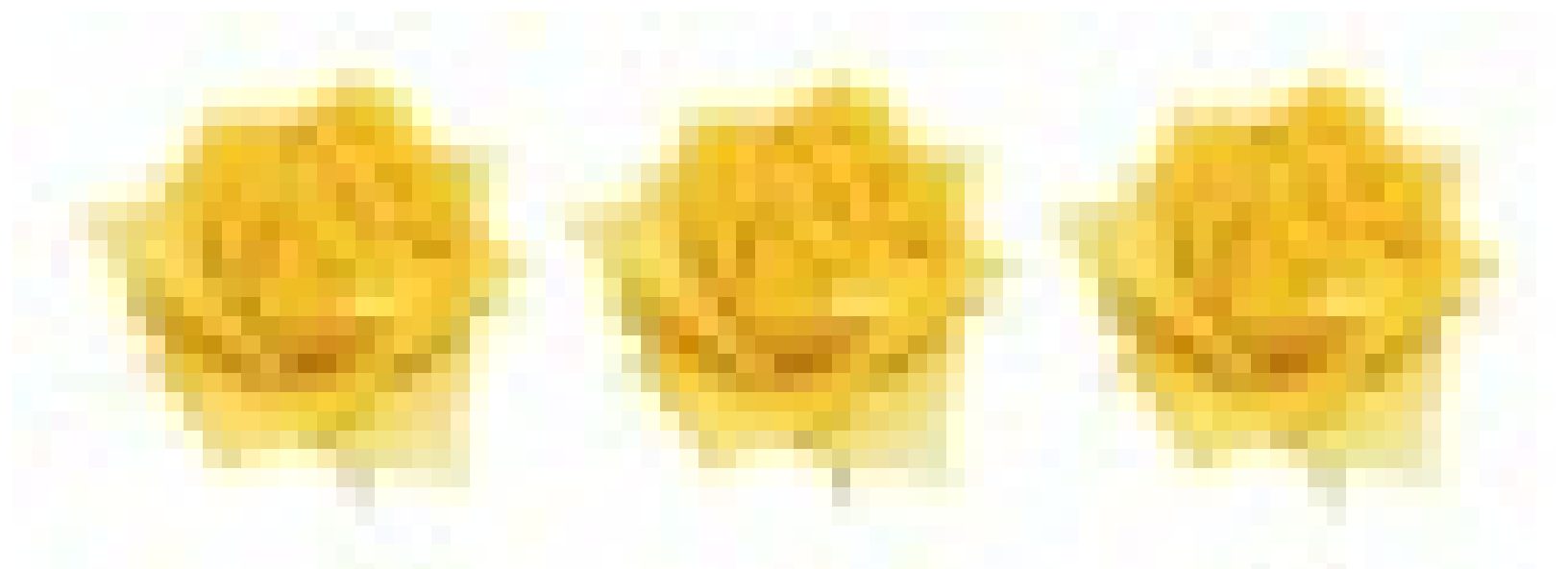
He stoops to pick it up off the ground, crosses his arms with a glint in his eye and chuckles. "No. I think I like you like this. What is it you said earlier? This is about getting you out of your clothes, not putting more on."

The challenge is clear. Trevor might be better at this than I gave him credit for. Fine. I can play this game too.

I sidle up to him. "Fine. Lead the way, sir. And try to keep your hands to yourself." I breathe the last part against him before I brush my lips and chest against his, palming the bulge in his jeans. "If you can."

Trevor moves to grab me. We're racing our way up the last two hundred feet to the top of the boulders and Trevor's doing exactly what I want him to do.

Chasing me.

Three pixelated yellow suns with a soft, glowing aura, arranged horizontally across the top of the page.

It shouldn't take us thirty minutes to reach the blanket, but it does. We can't keep our hands off each other, pausing for a few more breaks. Trevor's shirt falls away somewhere along the way, marking the path for our return Hansel and Gretel style. My shirt is no longer in his hands. At least we'll be able to find our way home.

Trevor sits on the blanket breathing heavy and tugs my hips, standing me in front of him. His eyes never leave mine while his fingers unbutton my jeans. The sound of the zipper sliding down echoes from boulder to boulder. I'm too lost in Trevor's eyes for it to fully register or to care. He leaves my jeans on, grips my hips and yanks me forward, kissing the soft skin usually hidden. His hands glide around my ass and the back of my thighs. I straddle him and sit on his lap. Tiny shivers run up and down my spine.

His hands drift. One climbs to the back of my bra, unhooking it in one swift motion. The other gently cups my breast. His mouth covers my nipple sending shockwaves coursing through my veins. The lace bra falls away to who-knows-where, his mouth finding its way to my neck, traveling up below my earlobe.

"The view is spectacular here," he breathes against my skin.

"The view?" I lean back and glare at him. "I'm halfway naked and you're talking about the vista?"

Trevor stares into my dark blue eyes and takes my face in both of his hands. "I said the view, not the vista, Sabra." He drops one hand to my left nipple and gives a tug. "You."

Shit. That's awesome. How does a girl go back from that?

I can't take it any longer. I push on his chest. Force him to lay back while I continue straddling his hips. His pants are screaming to come undone. The tips of my tits brush across his chest when I lean down. My lips chase them until I'm at the first button of his jeans. I love button-fly jeans on men, and I love taking them off even more. I glance up and see he's propped up on his elbows, watching my every move.

Most women would become self-conscious, but this is my stage. I throw a smile his way and let my lips trail over the bulge in his jeans. My hands follow, taking my time to tease each part of him as I undo each button. And that's when I realize it. He's gone commando.

I watch him spring free from the cloth. "Feeling confident tonight, Trevor?" My hand wraps around his shaft.

He grins at me from under hooded eyelids. “What? I didn’t do anything different tonight than normal.” My hand moves back and forth, slow and steady. I can hear his breathing getting heavier, labored. My tongue slides over the tip, tasting him. He gasps and my own body reacts, feeling him become harder against my lips. I open wider and take in all of him. Allow his shaft to fill my mouth. Pull my lips across him while sucking. I reach the tip and give it a flick with my tongue.

Trevor moves faster than I’m expecting. He flips me so I’m lying underneath him and hovers over me. His left hand cups the back of my neck while the other makes its way to the opening of my pants. I shimmy and wiggle to get my jeans off, desperate to give him access to a new area to explore. I need him to touch and taste every part of me.

He starts laughing and buries his head in my neck. “What is it?” I push against his shoulders.

“You might want to limit your bouncing, or I’m not gonna make it, Sabra.” He lifts his head and looks at my chest. “Your tits are driving me crazy.”

“You mean, this is too much for you?” I wiggle and writhe some more, pressing my body closer. Grab his shoulders with my hands for good measure as I kick off my jeans. He pulls away, grabs the condom I’d placed next to the blanket earlier, and rolls it on.

Safety first. Always.

Trevor slides his hand down my body, inching his way closer to the one place I want him. He finds the promise land and rubs the sensitive spot between my legs, my back arching under his touch. “Definitely,” he murmurs, sliding his fingers into me.

The friction lights a flame in me. I wrap my hand around him and coast down his shaft. He moves himself to the perfect spot and rubs against my center. Reveling in our bodies meeting, I nudge his shoulder, encourage him to roll over, and straddle him when he falls backward again. His tip is at my opening and I pause for a heartbeat before I allow him to slide into me. Fill me.

And then I move. Slow and steady. Letting hands roam and dip and glide over our damp bodies. It’s not long before we fall into a faster rhythm. Each of our bodies bunching and tightening. We hit the edge at the same time and fall over it one after the other. Our muscles clenching and releasing. Reacting to the other. My body is singing, and I collapse on top of his. Listen to his heartbeat slow and thump against my ear.

He moves his hands in circles across my back. “I definitely love the view.”

There’s no going back now.

CHAPTER THREE

I groan as I roll over and peek out from the covers I've burrowed deep beneath. An obnoxious sound fills the air around me. I glare around the room and spot the culprit. My phone. I forgot to turn it off when I dragged my ass back to my apartment and into bed at two in the morning. I glance at the alarm clock and reach across my queen size bed to grab my cell phone.

7 am? Who in their right minds would be calling me this early?

I let out another groan when I look at the screen.

My mother. Of course. Only my mother would think it's okay to call me on a Saturday morning before the birds are up.

I ignore the incessant ringing and flip the switch to vibrate. Toss the phone on the bed and throw myself back on the pillows. She can wait.

The phone stops screaming at me with the flip of a switch and I snuggle deeper into the charcoal grey comforter. My eyes get heavy and my head sinks deeper into my pillow. Until the buzzing takes up residence in my room one more time. What could be so important that she's calling again?

I snatch the phone up and swipe across the screen, pushing it to my ear. "Do you know what time it is, Mom?" I moan into the mouthpiece, the frustration in my voice unmistakable.

"Good morning to you too, Sleepyhead." Deep chuckling comes from the other end of the line. "Did I wake you?"

Not my mom then.

"Good morning, Trevor. Already up? How is that possible? You should have slept like a baby last night."

"At least like a very happy man." The smile in Trevor's voice rings out across the line. "And I am happy."

"Yeah? How happy are you?" I can't help needling him a little bit. Our relationship has always been a mixture of flirting and good-natured teasing. It's easy, which is why I said yes to go to dinner with him after so many requests. And why I'm still in it. I keep waiting for the day he complicates things, but so far, so good. I'm not running away yet.

Trevor starts laughing outright. "Happy enough that I'm calling to give you a five-minute heads up."

"Five-minute heads up? For what?"

"For you to make yourself decent. I'm almost to your apartment. Put some clothes on—or don't—whichever you choose. I'm on my way with breakfast either way. See you soon."

"Wait—what?" I listen to the other line. Nothing. "Trevor, are you serious?" All I hear is the sound of white noise on the other end, and I sit there with my phone against my ear in a daze until I hear the three beeps signaling the end of the phone call. I roll onto my side and curl into the fetal position. Wait for him to call me back and tell me he was kidding. A couple of minutes tick by and my phone buzzes again. I yank it toward me and see a text message from Trevor.

TREVOR: *I'm not kidding. You have 3 mins.*

My feet hit the cold floor as I run to the bathroom and make a list of what I need to do in three minutes. Brush my teeth. Pull my hair back. Touch of lip-gloss. Find my jeans, shirt and a bra. Or do I? Yes, I do. I can't make this too easy on him. A cute one though. Just in case.

I'm running around like a crazy woman, finishing sliding a t-shirt over my head, when a tap on the door echoes through the apartment. I pad over to it. "Who is it?"

"You know who it is. I bring sustenance and coffee." Trevor's voice is light and playful, but he sounds like he's in a hurry. "Open up."

"I don't know—it *is* only 7:20 in the morning." I shake my head at the entryway and lean against it. "The sun is barely up, and my parents always told me you can't be too careful. How do I know it's safe?"

"Really, Say? We're going to play this game so early in the morning?" His voice comes across hard, tinged with a hint of frustration, but I can't help it. I push him a little further.

"Play what game? It's important to be cautious when you're a girl living by yourself. And I'm not the one standing on the wrong side of the entrance."

Trevor sighs through the wood and I hear the crinkle of paper. "Fine, what do you want me to say to prove to you it's me, your boyfriend, Trevor."

Boyfriend? He's never said that before.

"I guess tell me something only you could possibly know. It's either that or I can't open the door." I laugh. "Honestly, my *boyfriend* would want me to be safe."

"Something only I know about you—okay, the bra you wore last night was electric blue lace. The vision of you in it has been stuck in my head all night," Trevor growls. "Now open up."

Game over.

"Fine." I turn the deadbolt and step back to pull the door open. "Good morning, Trevor. What brings you by so early?" Trevor closes the door behind him looking me over. A look of disappointment flits across his face.

"Damn. Five minutes was too long." The twinkle in his eyes tells me he's mostly kidding. "You have way too many clothes on."

"What's this?" I reach for the white paper bag and little tray of coffee cups in his hands, intent on carrying them into the kitchen to find out what that delicious smell is. But he sets them onto an end table next to the sofa and heaves me to him before I can snatch the goodies away. Trevor crushes his lips against mine, gathering me into a tight embrace. After a couple of minutes, he pulls his head back enough to place his forehead on mine and gazes into my eyes.

"Donuts. Coffee. My excuse to see you this morning instead of waiting for tonight."

"Tonight? Do we have plans? I don't remember making those."

"That's because I made us reservations for dinner while standing in line at the donut shop." He raises his eyebrows at me. "Dinner's at 7. I got us reservations at Peppercorn Grille in the Village. I'll pick you up at 6:30."

"Assuming I don't have plans that is?" I raise my eyebrows back at him.

"Do you have plans? Wouldn't you have told me if you did?"

“I tell you everything now?” I stare at him shocked and cross my arms. When had we taken this turn? One night of smoking hot sex and he’s ready to get super serious?

“Sabra, I think we need to talk.” Trevor tugs at my arm and unwinds my hands. He laces his fingers through mine and kisses my knuckles, dragging me toward the couch.

“Are you sure you want to do this right now, Trevor?” Panic rises in my chest, bubbling from my center. I like Trevor. A lot. I’m having fun with him. I don’t want this to end because he wants to get serious and take it to the next level. We’ve been friends for four years. I don’t want a life without him in it. And that should scare the shit out of me, but it doesn’t.

“Yes, now.” He sits on the sofa and wraps me in his arms. I squirm out of his lap and pull my knees to my chest already on the defensive. “Listen, I know you don’t want anything too serious.”

Wait. What?

“You what?” I can’t keep the look of shock off my face. He nods his head at me, running his fingers through his hair. “Okay, good. Although I feel a *but* coming on.”

Trevor smiles at me. “I know you don’t want anything serious right now.” He grabs my hand and shifts a little closer to me. “I’m fine with that. But I want to establish a few rules with you.”

I have no words. I don’t think anyone has ever spoken to me like this before. Or *about* this. And I have no idea where he is going with it.

“I’m not a rules girl, Trevor.” I stroke his cheek with the tips of my fingers and grin. “I’d think you’d know that about me by now.”

“Will you listen? And maybe keeping your hands to yourself would be good.” He places my hand back on my lap and scoots to the other end of the couch, putting a foot between us. “You look delicious in those jeans and, no doubt, even better out of them. Which I’m planning on in just a minute. But first—the rules.”

I suck in a breath and hold it, not letting it go until I feel the burn in my lungs. I don’t know what to think about this. Trevor has always been sexy, but I’ve never seen this take charge side of him until last night. I’m not sure how to respond because my breathing has become a little shallow. My gut is clenching. Butterflies have taken residence, battling it out in more than just my stomach. I feel desire moving through my body. Pooling between my legs. And I’m finding it hard to think of sentences as I watch his lips form words, so I nod and stare at his mouth. The same lips that blazed paths of fire over my body last night. Licked me in all the right places. Turned my insides out.

“So, that’s rule one. What do you think?”

I shake my head and snap out of my reverie. “What?” I inch my way toward him and place my hand on his thigh. “I’m sorry. I got distracted. Tell me again.” Trevor’s jaw tightens. His eyes shift toward my hand.

“You got distracted? I’m telling you the rules to our relationship, and you got distracted? How is that even possible?”

“I started thinking about last night and your lips on me. And that made me start thinking about your lips on me again. And that made me think about your hands on me. And *that* made me think about everything else on me.” Trevor stares at me with his mouth hanging open.

“I swear, you never cease to surprise me, Sabra.” He grabs my hand and pulls me toward his chest. After a few moments, he uses his finger to gently lift my chin and brush his lips over mine.

“Screw the rules. We’ll just wing it.” I smell his minty breath as he moves down my jaw with those magical lips and across my collarbone. Trevor’s fingers grasp the edge of my shirt. All I can think about is that same breath and those same lips scorching my skin again.

I’m losing myself in his touch. His kisses. The sweet words he’s whispering into my ear. I’m lost in him. And then my phone rings, blasting through the room. Shaking us out of the moment. Trevor pulls back to look over his shoulder at the intruder.

You have got to be kidding me. How is it possible the entire world seems to be calling me this early?

I glance at the phone sitting on the coffee table beside us and realize I don’t recognize the number. “I’m sorry. I have to answer this.” Trevor grabs my hand and settles it on his lap. I can feel how much he doesn’t want me to answer it.

“Are you sure it can’t wait, Say?” He smiles his crooked grin and cocks his head to the side. “Can’t they leave a voicemail, and you call them back?”

“It could be my agent. I had that audition yesterday. I just need a second.”

“Fine. I’ll go get a donut hole.” He grins and stands. “And then I’m coming back for yours.”

“Ew, gross.” I snatch my phone and slide my finger across the screen, rolling my eyes at him as he walks into the kitchen laughing. “Hello?”

“Hello, Sabra. How are you, sis?”

I feel him before I hear or see him. The air changes in the room, and I'm instantly awake. All the normal grogginess that comes with waking up in the middle of the night flees in a moment. I don't move though. I can't.

The green glow from the Barbie alarm clock my Daddy bought me for my birthday illuminates the room enough that I can see the outline of my dollhouse. I know without looking that my jeans are in the corner right where I left them when I slipped on my nightie before I went to bed and after bath time. That same nightie is bunched and twisted around me. I want to straighten it, my fingers itching to yank it down and around, but I can't. The movement will alert him that I'm awake. Encourage him. So, I clutch my doll, Baby Sarah, to my chest tighter instead. So tight I can feel her plastic fingers making imprints on my skin. And I listen. Hard.

The click of the door, almost imperceptible, makes my breath hitch. Soft footfalls, nine of them total, make their way across the room. Each breath he takes I feel in my bones, down to my toes, as he stands over me. It's the same thing every night. One twitch and he'll leap. Take the jump. I don't know what he'll do exactly each time, but the hairs standing up on the back of my neck tell me it's not something good.

This is what my Mama has warned me about. But it's with strangers. It's not supposed to be someone who sleeps next door to you. Watches movies with you. Babysits you while your Mama runs to the grocery store for milk. That person should protect you. Let you braid his hair or win at cards when you play war. Beat up the boys who tease you at school.

Not this.

The fear makes me shiver. I can't help it, and all I want to do is cry out. Scream and wail for my Daddy.

But that shiver is all he needs.

"Hey Songbird...move over."

CHAPTER FOUR

No. No. Nooooo...NO. This can't be happening. I yank the phone away from my ear and stare at it. Absolutely not. The air feels thin. My lungs feel like they're about to burst.

"Sabra? What is it?" Trevor stares at me with this look on his face, like he thinks I'm crazy.

Did I say that out loud?

I hit the end button and get up, pacing from one side of my extremely small living room to the other. This is a nightmare. No. It has to be a wrong number. He's in prison. There's a chant happening in my head.

He's in prison. He's in prison. He's in prison.

"Sabra." I flinch as Trevor touches my arm and instinctively move away.

"Don't touch me." The hurt in his eyes is obvious. So deep. I might as well have slapped him. And I don't care. "Don't. Touch. Me." I growl it at him.

He's in prison. He's in prison. He's in prison.

"Sabra, what the hell is going on? What happened?" Trevor paces a step away and turns to look at me. "Who was that?"

"No one. A wrong number. No one at all."

But I know it wasn't. He'll call back. Come back for more. He always comes back for more. Dammit. How is he coming back for more?

He's in prison. He's in prison.

I feel Trevor's heat before I realize he's next to me. "I don't believe that. It was someone." He grabs me by the upper arms and shifts me back against the wall. "You're shaking and white as a sheet. What's going on? Who the hell was that?"

I'm shaking?

He's in prison. He's in prison.

Wait. My mom called...

And I realize why she was calling so early. Dammit. Everything clicks into place. Tremors course through my body. I can't control them. The chant changes in my head.

He's out. He's out. Oh my god, he's out. I. Can't. Breathe.

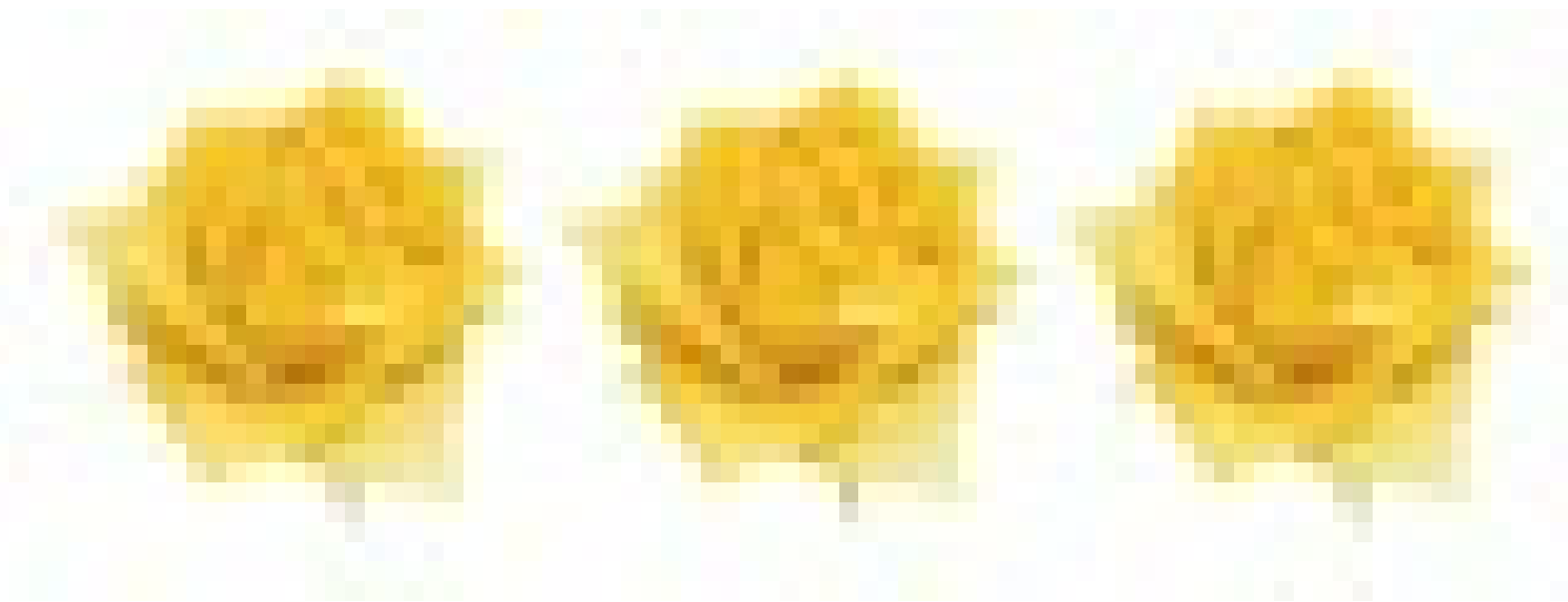
That's why she was calling. To tell me something about him. To "fill me in" as she would say. The panic sets in at a rate like never before. My knees feel weak and the edges of my vision are going dark. Hands grab my arms, and the fight or flight instinct fills me. Fists go flying. Feet start kicking. Claws are out.

Hell no. I will never be in this spot again.

"Let me go." The room spins harder and I lurch to the right. "Let me go!" But those hands hold me tight until I feel the floor jolting out from under me and I'm flying. Praying for oblivion. Praying to die.

He's out. He's out. He's out.

I can't do this again.



The smell of sunshine, fresh linens, and ocean water invade my senses. I feel toasty warm and don't ever want to wake up from this dream. It's bliss. And I'm safe. Warm and relaxed. Nothing can harm me. My heart is full, expanding. It might burst because what is more perfect than sunshine and lying outside on a beautiful day? What is better than feeling content like this?

Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

I'm safe.

A sigh escapes my lips. I crack one eye open, glancing around. And realize the heat and delicious smell is not coming from the same place I thought. I'm not outside. I'm in my room on my bed and that was an awesome dream.

When I shift my head, I see Trevor pressed against my back, arms around me. The heat. This is where it's coming from. His body is peaceful against mine, but his eyes are filled with horror. Fear. Trepidation. And everything comes flying back into my head, thoughts whirling and spinning. Screaming through me as I remember. The room lurches and my stomach flips. I already know there's no way I'm getting to the bathroom in time.

I scramble away from Trevor and the delicious warmth of his body, and throw myself across the room, barely making it as I throw up into my trashcan. Sobs and vomit keep coming until there is no more in me. Nothing left. But it's not just my stomach that's empty, it's me. I'm a shell. Hollowed out. Gutted by one phone call. Amazing how a few words can have that effect so quickly. I sound like a wild animal—moans and growls slipping out from me. Desperation and anger writhing within my gut.

The tears don't stop when the vomit does. All I can do is lie on the floor in the fetal position and pray. I don't even know what I'm praying for. My lips move. My body rocks. The tears stream down my face. But I'm aware of nothing until I hear footsteps making their way across the room, soft and sure. They stop in front of me and there's nowhere to go. My back is against the wall. There's no escaping this.

"Sabra," Trevor pleads with me.

"No, don't touch me." My hands fly out as if they can protect me from him. His muscles. His power. Whatever fury is deep within him that he hasn't chosen to show me or let go over me yet.

Because I know it's always there beneath the surface. Beneath the boyish good looks and charming smile. It's always there. "Don't come near me."

"Sabra, I want to help. Let me help you. Please." I glance at him. Trevor watches me. One hand stretches out toward me, fingers curling, beckoning me to reach out to him. Let him help he says.

I'm beyond help. No one can help me. No one ever helps me.

"No. Leave me alone."

"I won't leave, Sabra." He pleads with me. "Please."

I slide across the carpet until I'm sitting in the corner with my back against the wall and draw my knees to my chest. My eyes watch him stand there looking at me, confusion wrinkling his brow. "Trevor, I don't need your help." I try to steady my voice. "Get the hell out. It's done. Just go."

"What? No fucking way. I'm not going anywhere." He peers at me some more, the shock clear as day with a bit of anger mixed in. And I watch confusion flicker across his features again. Briefly. Enough that my heart tugs toward him. "Tell me what in the hell is happening?" He doesn't understand. My chin drops to my chest and my shoulders sag under the weight of this new knowledge.

He's out.

But Trevor will never understand. No one can. I need to make him understand. And I need him to believe me. My head snaps up and I push my shoulders back, steeling myself.

"Don't make me say things we'll both regret, Trevor. It was fun. *You* were fun. And now it's over. Get the fuck out."

It *was* fun. I don't want it to be over. *He* ruins everything.

My words hit Trevor. They land square in his chest, like in those cartoons when the anvil falls on the coyote's head. The intake of breath and his hand sliding to rub right over his heart tell me I met my mark. And all I want to do is sink against the wall further. Let oblivion take me under and into the darkness again.

He can't know. I need him out. He can't know.

But Trevor isn't moving. He's standing there gaping at me, deciding whether to take me seriously or not. And I know I must put the final nail in the coffin. I need him out and the only way he's going is if I convince him I'm okay—better than I was at least—and I mean what I say.

I throw my weight against the wall so I can push up and rise to my feet. Square my shoulders and look him dead in the eye.

"Last night was fun, Trevor, but that's all it was. I don't do commitment. You know that. I do fun. And now the fun is over, and so are we. Please leave."

Why did that cut me to the core?

"Sabra." Two steps. That's all he takes. Two slow and deliberate steps in my direction. And anger fills me.

He's not listening. No one ever listens to me.

"No." My voice gets louder. "A great, fantastic girl will keep you happy someday. But I'm not her. I wish I could be, but I'm not." Trevor opens his mouth to say something, but I cut him off. "Thank you for the past month, but please, don't make this harder than it needs to be. Don't make a fool of yourself over me. I'm not worth it." He stands there gawking at me in shock, one hand reaching for me

again.

“Just leave. Go,” I demand.

It takes all my strength to get the words out. I lean against the wall to hold myself up because all I want to do is crawl into a hole and have people throw dirt on top of me. Let me breathe in the richness of the soil. Breathe it in until it takes my last breath. Because that would be nothing different than every other day of my life except I feel that way and get to watch the world go by. People living their lives with joy while I suffocate on the truths and secrets I harbor alone.

Trevor steps backward toward the door without turning around or breaking eye contact. Nine steps in all. I count them. I always count the steps.

And of course, there are nine. It's always nine steps that break me. Over and over.

“This isn't fucking done, Sabra. I'm going now, but I'll be back.” He watches me for a long time. Waits for me to change my mind. But I can't. I can't let him get close to me ever again. I gambled too much in the past month already by letting my heart get involved. It can't happen again. He means too much to me to risk. I need to let him go. Set him free from me and the inevitable heartbreak.

“Sabra...” His words stall as his other hand extends toward me, joining the first in a last and final plea. I harden my features and stare him in the eye. Give a slight shake to my head. I can't let him hurt Trevor too. And I know it will happen. He hurts everything.

“This isn't over.” Trevor yanks the door open and walks out into the open space. It's not until I hear the apartment door slam shut that I sprint to bolt the deadlock.

I must keep him out. I can't let him in. I can't do this again. Not ever.

The click of the lock reverberates through my empty apartment, and I realize Lucas has ruined something I was beginning to love. And he's ruined me all over again in the process.

CHAPTER FIVE

Forty-eight hours. That's the rule. I get two days to wallow in self-pity or heal, whichever I need the most when these types of things happen. I would often have to fake being sick when I was younger. Let's be honest, it wasn't too far from the truth. I became a master at faking a fever by the time I was ten. It was the only way to keep the truth from my parents. And they had to stay in the dark. The truth would break them and our family. But it would break me more.

And *that* is why I'm standing in front of this mirror trying to line my blue eyes with shaking hands and not impale one of them. To go to dinner with my family. To celebrate. The prodigal son has returned.

Of course, we should celebrate. Because they don't know. For them, this is a reason to rejoice and kill the fattened calf. They have no idea my soul has fractured. My light has dimmed to almost nothing. All because of the same person they are holding on high. And they can *never* know.

My feet slip into my favorite black heels, and I peer at the red tips of my toes peeping out. It takes twenty minutes to get downtown, which is exactly how long I have before I need to be at Morton's. The place we've celebrated all my highs. Our family's favorite restaurant for special occasions. This is my life. It is what it is. I take one last look in the mirror, grab my keys and purse, and head out the door to my reckoning. The faster I'm there, the faster I can leave.

I open the door of my Mustang and slide across the leather seat. All I can think about is Trevor. I wish he were with me to make this better. He'd calm my nerves and soothe those places in me that are jumpy and fidgety and raw. But he's not here. And he won't be. He can't be. And that is what it is too. I let him go. I had to.

Driving through town, I slow down as I pass cars lining the street, packed in like sardines. This is the resort part of town, nestled higher up the mountain winking down at the lake. Guys dressed in jeans and button-ups and ladies in their catch-me-a-man finest meander down the sidewalks to one of the local bars and restaurants. It looks like things are hopping tonight. I could have made a killing at the lodge in tips behind the bar chatting with customers about their lives. It's one of my many happy places. I get to play a role there and it's almost as satisfying as when I am on the stage.

The streetlight in front of me turns red, making me stop. The crowds are thick at the door of Lousy Louie's, one of my favorite hangouts. They have a live band tonight and the music wafts out into the street. From the size of the crowd, it looks like the perfect place to disappear and get lost. And that's exactly what I want. To lose myself in something. Or in someone. Anyone. Because that has always been what helps me get past everything.

I park before I even realize what I'm doing and walk to Louie's while texting my mother I've come down with something. I can't make it. No, don't wait for me. I won't be there. Enjoy the Shrimp Alexander without me and celebrate this happy occasion. I'll see them this weekend for brunch on Sunday. My mother's quick reply of okay has the stress leaving me in a whoosh. It's time to do what I do best. Let Sabra live.

I hear the music pulsing and pounding as I get to the walkway of the bar, so I straighten my

shoulders and decide. It's time to let go of everything.

Trevor. My brother being home. My parents. Me. It's time to lose myself. At least for a little while.

It doesn't take long for me to find my way through the door after throwing Bobby, Louie's regular bouncer, a wink. "No bar duty tonight?" he asks me as I walk past him.

"I'm on tomorrow." I squeeze him around the waist. "You should come by and see me if you're off."

Bobby looks me up and down slowly with a smile. I've yanked my hair out of its up do and allowed the locks to flow free in what my best friend, Micah, calls *sex pot hair*. "I might just do that. Have fun tonight."

"I plan to." His laughter rings out behind me until it's drowned out by the band on the stage. Micah says when the sex pot hair is out and about, there isn't a boy in town who can resist my charm. I should call Micah and tell her where I am. Make her come and join me. But I know she has rehearsal tonight, and she'll only try to talk me out of this. Or show up and try to drag my ass back home to my apartment. I don't want any of that. Tonight, I want what I want when I want it.

My eyes fall on a broad back in a light blue button up and skim to jeans hugging a perfectly tight and rounded ass. Now that is what I want. And that is what I'm going to have.

I pull the top of my dress down so it shows off exactly what the good Lord gave me and saunter over to stand near the small group chatting. They're trying to hear each other while the music plays. I catch the eye of the tall-dark-and-handsome standing to my right and flash a hint of a smile, licking my lips as he takes a small sip of his drink. Instantly, his eyes dip to my lips. Yes, this could be a fantastic night indeed. The sex pot hair strikes again.

"Hi." Mr. Gorgeous leaves the safety of his friends and leans against the wall next to me. "I'm Danny. Are you here alone?"

"Hi. Sabra. And yes—for now." Wouldn't want him to think I'm easy prey even though I am. What he doesn't know won't hurt him. To Danny, I'm just another girl with perky tits and a pretty face. To me, he's what I want for tonight and only for tonight. "My friend is supposed to meet me here when she gets done with rehearsal."

Lie number one.

"Do you need a drink?"

“Sure.” I peek at his glass. “I’ll have what you’re having.”

“Are you sure?” He looks at me in surprise. “It’s whiskey and Coke. I can get you something more ...”

“Girly?” I supply for him with a quirk of my lips. “I don’t like the fruity drinks. I can keep up with whatever you have to give.”

And there’s the innuendo that lays it out for him. I’m not here to play around.

Danny lifts his eyebrows and shifts his stance as everything clicks. His dark blue eyes travel up and down my body in a slow perusal. I stare him down when they get back to my own eyes and issue a challenge with the smile on my lips. “So ... that drink?”

“Sure. You coming with me?” He throws the question over his shoulder and moves to the bar across the room. I follow him and slide my phone out of my purse to type a quick text to Micah.

SABRA: Change in plans. Don’t wait up for me.

Her response is almost immediate.

MICAH: I thought we were having a girls’ night after your dinner?

SABRA: Yeah ... I ditched dinner. I’ve found something much yummiier instead to eat. Without the family drama.

MICAH: Oh, yeah? Do tell ...

SABRA: His name’s Danny.

MICAH: Danny what?

SABRA: Don’t know and I don’t care.

MICAH: What about Trevor?

SABRA: Trevor who?

Lie number two.

I slide my thumb across the screen and watch Danny finish getting my drink from the bartender, along with a fresh one for himself. He turns around with two glasses to find me looking at him, and a grin spreads across his face like he’s won the lottery. I look at the phone sitting in my palm and press my index finger to the top button to power it down. I’m done with the distractions.

You can’t become lost if you’re easily found. And I’m okay with never being found, except by Danny tonight. I’ll let him find any part of me he wants. I’m ready to lose myself in him for a while. I’m ready to lose myself completely.

I drop my phone into my purse while Danny makes his way over and hands me my drink. His eyes devour me as he watches me take a sip of the sweet whiskey and Coke. The burn as it slips down my throat and into my belly makes me feel alive.

“Want to find somewhere quiet to talk?” Danny looks at me expectantly. He knows what he wants. And in his mind, I’m a sure thing already. I’m one of those girls. “There’s a quiet spot outside close to the lake. Or if it’s too chilly, we can find someplace else. Your place—or mine.”

“Outside is good. Fresh air and quiet is perfect.” I flash him a wide smile and hold out my hand.

“Lead the way.”

And that’s how easy it is. Danny slips his fingers between mine and pulls me through the room toward the deck off the bar. A quick moment of Deja vu passes through me as I remember the last time I walked through a crowded room holding hands with a beautiful man. The night I fucked Trevor above the lake.

Instantly, I feel eyes on me. The hairs stand on the back of my neck. I slow down and take inventory of the room as we walk through it, but I don’t see anybody there I know. No one gives me a second look. So, I shake off the feeling sliding down my arms and giving me goose bumps and let my eyes slide to Danny. He’s staring at me.

“You okay?”

I widen my smile and throw him a look I know can’t be argued with. “Perfect.”

Lie number three.

“I thought I heard someone call my name, but it’s nothing. Ready to show me this perfect place outside?” Danny slides his arm around my shoulders without missing a beat and pulls me to him.

“I’m ready for whatever you are,” he murmurs. And now I have goose bumps for a different reason. The heat I love—the one that feels like home—pools in my belly, and I relax into his embrace.

I stand on my tiptoes and turn, letting my hands glide up his chest while whispering in his ear, “I guess we’ll see …” A laugh bursts out of me when I see his shocked expression, and I pull out of his embrace, walking through the door ahead of him.

Let the chase begin.



A hammock.

He’s taken me to a hammock. Shock, wonder, and dread slip over me like a veil. It’s the last place I thought he would take me. We’re closed off from those at the bar, down by the lake, and hidden deep in the trees. Invisible. No one will find us here unless they know exactly where to look.

“How did you know about this spot?” Danny situates himself on the hammock and stretches his hand out to me.

Can I do this? Can I lay in a hammock with a boy and not allow the memories to take over? I have

no choice. I want Danny tonight, and it looks like Danny comes with a hammock.

Correction: I don't want *Danny*. I want any beautiful man who can make me forget.

Danny's here, and he fits the bill perfectly. I take a deep breath and grasp his hand, crawling into the hammock.

There's no ladylike way to crawl into a hammock. The tight skirt of my black dress rides up past an acceptable spot on my thighs. I work to yank the skirt back down and settle myself next to Danny without flipping both of us from the hammock and onto the ground. His fingers slip over mine when I finally grip the hem of my skirt to tug it down, stopping them. "Do we need to do that? I kind of like where it's at."

Heat floods my cheeks, and the warmth of his chest seeps through the material of my dress. I can already feel my body reacting to his nearness. Danny drops his head into the crook of my neck and inhales as the palm of his hand slides down my thigh and calf. His fingers grab one of my heels and tug it off. He lifts his head, staring at the black pump in his hand. "Fuck me shoes?"

"Are all black peep toe heels fuck me shoes?" I ask.

"Yes, always."

"Hmm ..." He drops the first heel to the ground and pulls the second one off. The soft fall of the shoe seems loud out here away from the noise of town. I lose myself in the feel of Danny's hand gliding back up the outside of my bare leg. He shifts his head without a second of hesitation and touches his lips to mine. The kiss starts gentle. His lips are soft and delicious, moving with the knowledge of one who's done this before. He gently nibbles my bottom lip, and my mouth parts in surprise. Danny leans back and gazes at me with a wicked gleam in his eye.

"Too much?" His hand pauses on my outer thigh.

I thread my fingers through his hair and pull his forehead to mine. "I can handle anything you give me. I thought I already told you that."

"I guess we'll see if that's true." Danny moves his body to cover more of mine and drops his head, raining kisses across my neck, shoulder, and collarbone. The cords of the hammock bite into the back of my legs, and I try to enjoy where I am and who I'm with right now. I try to forget, but the memories are too much.

"Danny," I whisper. It's a plea I wasn't expecting to utter. He doesn't hear the desperation in it. Instead, he hears a moment of heightened passion for him. A push for him to continue and go further. He yanks my V-neck down and frees a breast, capturing the nipple in his mouth while his other hand travels up my inner thigh. My breath hitches when I feel his finger slide between the fabric of my thong, brushing across the sensitive skin. My muscles tense involuntarily, and my hands grip his shirt tightly, yanking the fabric. Trying to get him off me.

I'm transported back to a night I never want to think about. A night when I couldn't get away.

Short puffs of air escape me, and I struggle to put my arms between us, pushing against him. A groan that sounds like a moan leaves my mouth. He takes it as further encouragement and slides his finger through the slickness, pushing into me. My body jerks and twists, hands failing to find purchase.

"No," I cry out.

"Relax, baby. No one will find us here."

“Dan—” His lips close over mine, and he slides another finger in while fisting my hair with his other hand. My body shakes. A tear slips out and down my cheek. I’m stuck. I can’t move, and I can’t not move. I turn my head and gasp out, “No. Stop. Please stop.”

Cold air hits my skin as sweat builds on my hairline and drips down my back. I hear voices yelling but can’t make out what they’re saying. And I hear crying. Moaning. Someone is hurt. I should move and see how I can help, but I’m stuck.

And then I’m not. Strong arms hold me, and the smell of clean soap fills my senses. I’m floating through the forest. There’s a break in the trees, and stars twinkle down on me. I focus on the great expanse of lights shining and can’t help but think I’m safe. Trevor is here.

Wait, Trevor is here? My body moves. “Put me down.”

“No. I’ve got you.”

“I said put me down.” Trevor does the exact opposite even with me shoving at his chest. He holds me tighter. I feel his fingers pushing indentations into my skin, marking me. But I don’t want him to mark me. I can’t do it. Not again.

“Put me down,” I scream.

Trevor slows, coming to a halt behind the deck of Louie’s before he drops my bare feet to the ground. “What the hell, Sabra?” He takes a step away from me. “What’s going on? Were you really going to let that guy fuck you in a hammock?” His eyes flash in anger.

The hammock. Holy hell. Another hammock. What was I thinking? Hammocks and I don’t mix. I ball my hands into fists and stuff them into my sides, turning to look Trevor in the eye.

“Yes. Yes, I was.” The shock and horror that crosses over Trevor’s face makes me flinch and take a step farther away from him. I crumble when I see the hurt and rage flash in his eyes.

“Are you kidding me? Why would you *do* that? Why would you allow him to even look at you, nevertheless, touch you?”

“To forget you.” I whisper the words so softly, I’m sure he doesn’t hear me, but he takes a step back as if I’ve slapped him. Again. He heard me.

Trevor recovers and closes the gap between us. He grabs my upper arms and shakes me.

“To forget me?” he yells. “Are you fucking kidding me? You’re trying to forget me?”

“Yes,” I scream back. “I need to forget you. I need to forget everything.”

“And why in the hell is that okay? Why do you think this is the way to forget?” He drops his hands and steps back from me, letting the cold air envelop me. “Getting with some new guy? You think that will help you forget each whispered word we’ve said? Each touch? Each moment we shared together?” Trevor hangs his head. “Do you even know his name?”

“Of course. It’s Danny.”

He narrows his eyes at me. “What’s his last name?”

“What?” I drop my gaze to my toes in the pine needles and dirt.

“You heard me, Sabra. What’s his last name?”

“I don’t know,” I mutter.

“Awesome. You don’t know his last name. You’re going to let some stranger touch you so you can forget me. Perfect.” He steps closer, and I back up against a pole, holding the deck as he crowds my

space. “Let me tell you something, Sabra. You’re worth more than that.” His hand cups my cheek. “You deserve more than that.”

“No, I don’t.” I shake his hand off my face. “You don’t know. I don’t deserve anything good.” He pushes his body against mine and grips my chin in his fingers, yanking my eyes back to his, and my breath catches.

“Yes, you do. You deserve to have someone who loves you. Who knows your moans and your sighs.” He lowers his voice and tucks a stray hair behind my ear. “You deserve someone who knows you love to be kissed behind your knee. To have your ass palmed. To hear whispers of adoration and sweet nothings in your ear.” He pulls back and puts a small amount of space between us. “You deserve all of it and more. And you’re the only one here that doesn’t see or know it.”

“Trevor.”

“No. You don’t see it, but I know the truth.” My eyes snap to his face, fear flooding through me. “You deserve more. I don’t know what happened to you, but I know you’re worth more than this.” He puts his hands on the bottom of the deck above us, caging me in. “And I’m not going anywhere, Sabra Valentine. I’m in this for the long haul. I told you two days ago in your apartment, and I’m telling you again now.”

Tears stream down my cheeks, but they don’t faze him. He strokes my cheeks with his thumbs and wipes the tears away. “I’m here. Whether you like it or not, you’re stuck with me. I’ll prove to you that you’re worth it. I *will* make you see what I see. And someday, I hope, you’ll trust me with your secrets. Until then ...”

“Until then?” My eyes find his.

“Until then ...” He sighs. “Let’s get you home.” He backs up, leaving me against the pole gasping and shaking with tears tracking down my face.

Trevor leans down to pick my purse and shoes up off the ground and holds them out to me. He didn’t just grab me off the hammock. He grabbed my stuff too. I take them from him and push my feet back into the heels—those damn fuck me heels—and turn to see him waiting next to the path for me.

“What are you doing, Trevor? Why are you doing this?”

“Sabra.” He hangs his head and runs his hands through his hair. “Let’s go home.” Trevor’s shoulders are slumped as he walks down the path to the parking lot. He turns and holds out his hand when he realizes I’m not following him.

Home. I don’t know what that is. The concept is foreign to me. But I know Trevor, and right now, he feels like the safest place in the entire world.

I don’t take the hand he offers me, but I do walk toward him. Which is all I can do. And it’s going to have to be enough. For now.

The sun beats on my body, toasting through a layer or two of skin. Mama told me to get out of the pool and go dry off. I have dance class in about an hour. Ballet. It's my favorite. After she told me to, "Get out of that water right now, Missy Lou," for the third time, I jumped out. We ran down the lawn to the grove of trees where our hidden hammock was, laughing and squealing, my hair flying behind me as she chased me. Mama skidded to a stop when I made it to the hammock, leaping into the middle of it, and put her hands on her hips.

"Okay, Sabra, you have fifteen minutes out here to dry off. Then you must get back to the house to put on your black leotard and pink tights, understand?"

"Yes, Mama. I'll be ready." She crossed over to me and kissed me on the forehead. Then she took off running and laughing down the hill back toward the house.

This hammock in the trees is my favorite place in the whole, wide world. It's a special place my daddy created for me on my sixth birthday. Out here, I create worlds and imagine traveling and draw my secret art. The pictures I tell no one about. The ones I hide in the tree trunk. I'm not sure why I hide them except I like having something for me. Like this hammock. It's all mine. No one in my family comes here unless it's to tell me to get off the hammock and get moving. They tell me that a lot because I'm out here all the time. I close my eyes and relax into the ropes, feeling them press into the skin on my back and legs. This is my happy place.

The hammock swaying jars me. "Hey, Songbird."

And just like that, every muscle tenses, and I can't move. I stare at him and open my mouth to say something, but nothing will come out. Lucas perches on the hammock next to me and places a hand on my stomach. "It's peaceful out here. I can see why you like to come here so much."

"Mama's gonna be here in a minute to get me."

He smirks at me and moves his hand to my thigh, rubbing lightly. "No, she's not. She sent me to come get you and tell you that you have five more minutes."

I sit straight up. "Then I should get going. I don't want to be late for ballet. We're working on Sleeping Beauty today." But his hand moves to my chest, pushing me down while he lays beside me.

"We have five minutes. Lay here with me." And then his hand moves. Slow, but sure. Now the ropes of the hammock cut into me for a different reason. A tear slips out of my eye. My safe place disappears.

CHAPTER SIX

The tension in the car is too much. I feel like I'm drowning.

Fear. Shame. Gratitude. Embarrassment. All of it crashes over me in waves. I have no idea what to do or say to this beautiful man driving me home. The one guy who has always shown me kindness and been a friend to me over the past four years. And now he's saved me from what would have been a huge mistake. If we make it out of this as friends, it will be a miracle.

"Sabra." His voice strains against the silence in the car.

"No." I stare straight ahead and curl my hands in my lap.

"Just ... tell me how to—" His knuckles turn white on the steering wheel.

"No, Trevor. Nothing can fix any of this. You can't do anything. No words are enough, so let it go."

"Fine."

My shoulders relax with that one word coming out of his mouth. I lean my forehead on the window and watch the world zip by. There are no words I can say to him, and its best I don't even try. I've done enough damage tonight.

We're almost to my apartment complex. If I can get out of this car—make it to my door and inside with no more words—it will be a win.

"For now," he mutters under his breath.

My head snaps up, and I stare at him as Trevor pulls into a parking spot near my apartment. A slight frown plays on his lips. He takes his time putting the car into park, his hand lingering on the gear shift between us. I watch him for a second as he stares out the windshield. The furrow between those eyes I love to gaze into deepens. I don't know what to do.

"Sabra." His deep, velvety voice fills the car, seeping into every nook and cranny. Finding its way into the crevices and cracks of me. And I can't have that.

"Thank you for the ride. Thank you for ... everything." I interrupt him before he can say more. Nothing can be said to change anything or make it okay. My thanks isn't enough or the right words, but it's all I have right now. It's all I can give him.

Trevor stops me with a hand on my arm as I reach for the door. "Come on. I'll walk you up."

I take his hand in mine and gently lift it off me, placing it back on the gear shift with a slight smile. "No, Trev, that's okay. There's no need for that. You've done enough for me tonight already." My hand remains on top of his, my eyes lingering on his face. "Really. I've got it from here." I don't want this to be the last moment with him tonight, but it has to be. Because of Lucas.

"Sabra, I don't know what's going on, but something has turned you inside out." He moves to grab his door handle. "I'm not going to let you take yourself upstairs when you're obviously upset and ... scared, I think ... of something." He pauses and shifts to put his hand on my cheek, sliding it to my neck. His thumb rubs gently under my ear while he leans toward me. "I wish you'd talk to me."

I can't stop looking at him. I didn't know they made them like this.

“You know my mom would kill me if she knew I didn’t use my manners.” The smile that accompanies his words is tight. He’s trying to lighten the mood surrounding us. Weighing us down on what has become a dark night with no shining stars. The clouds are thick and heavy.

Kill.

It’s an empty word to him. An attempt at humor to try to lighten the mood again. But a reminder to me of what’s at stake. A word that has followed and haunted me most of my life. A threat I can’t afford to lose sight of if I want to survive. If I want those I cherish and love to survive. It’s all too real to me.

He’s out.

“Trev, I’ve got this.” I smile weakly and try to show him a brave face. “I walk myself to my apartment on my own every day. And I promise to tell Tina you’ve been nothing but amazing to me the next time I see her.” I laugh at the mix of frustration and amusement on his face and shove his shoulder playfully. His hand relinquishes the hold it has on me. “You know she loves me more than you anyway. It’s just ... I want to walk up those stairs and go home on my own. I know you don’t understand what’s happening right now, but it’s important to me.”

I need him to let me do this to make it easier. I need something to be easy right now. Anything. Even if it’s saying goodbye and not easy at all.

Trevor’s face falls, and I can see I’ve hurt him. Again. I keep doing that. But I have to shut him out right now. Put up walls and hide behind smiles. Try to disappear and not be noticed. These are the things I know how to do best. Even if it pushes one of the few people I trust completely away. I don’t know how to do anything differently. It’s what’s best for him. For us.

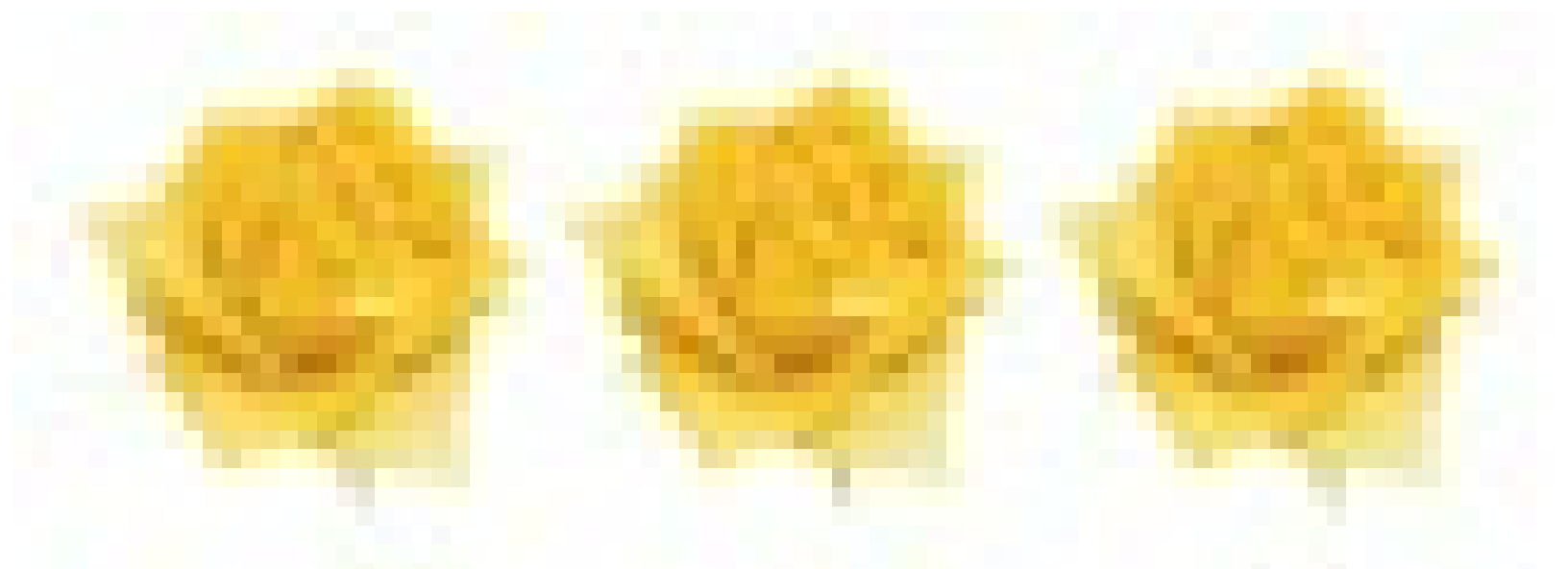
“Okay.” He resigns to my wishes. “Good night, Sabra. Rest well.” He stretches out to brush his finger down my cheek, but I move quickly, stepping out of the car before he can reach me. His touch will be my undoing. I can already feel the sting behind my eyes. The dam threatening to break.

“Good night.” I shut the door, turn to walk away, and stop. A quick pause before I take one more step, but a stop all the same.

A shadow sits on the steps leading to my door. And I know exactly who it is. It’s the same shadow that’s been following me my whole life.

I turn and flash a smile in Trevor’s direction when I hear the passenger side window roll down, giving a wave in Trevor’s direction. This solidifies it. There’s no doubt in my mind I’m making the right decision. I can’t have him following me and jumping into the middle of this. Whatever this is now.

Bracing myself, I take a deep breath and make myself move toward the only person in my life I hoped to never see again. The one human being on this earth who makes me feel cold and dead inside with just the mention of his name. The person I must now face if I’m going to choose to live later.



“You missed dinner.” Lucas doesn’t stand when I get near him or even look at me. He sits there with his shoulders hunched and his head down, eyes on the ground, copper hair glinting in the light. If I didn’t know him better, I’d think he was sad. But I do know him, and this is part of his game.

“I had things to do for school. I’m only a few classes away from graduating with my master’s degree.” I stand a safe distance away from him—an arm’s length—in case I need to turn and run. Years of needing to run have taught me not to get too close. I try to sound strong and nonchalant, but the quiver in my voice gives away my nervousness and fear. “Sorry.”

I’m not sorry.

“More important things to do than welcome your big brother back to the living?” And that’s when he looks at me. Those dark eyes I learned to hate at such an early age—an age no little girl should ever learn to hate anyone—drill a hole into me, waiting for my response. Patient as always.

He smiles with his eyes never leaving mine and stands, stepping in my direction. Towering over me. “What? No hug?” He spreads his arms wide and moves my way again.

Two more steps.

I take a step back from him, keeping myself in the safe zone. “I don’t want to get you sick. I haven’t been feeling great.” My feet shuffle side to side. Back and forth. They do a small dance of their own volition, ready to move at a moment’s notice. “Didn’t Mom tell you? That’s why I missed dinner tonight. I had to go to the store and grab some medicine so I can make it to class tomorrow.”

“You were feeling bad?” Lucas quirks a brow at me and takes another step.

Four steps.

His gaze travels over my body. Lingers long enough to make me even more uncomfortable then moves to my purse and hands. I’m insanely aware of how I must look. “Where’s the medicine?”

“They were out,” I croak, flapping my hands in the air. I can smell the alcohol from the bar wafting off me and say a silent prayer that he doesn’t notice. “They didn’t have what I was looking for.” I still my feet and cross my arms, forcing a small smile while trying to look comfortable. Praying I look relaxed, and he can’t tell when I’m lying to him anymore.

“Honestly, Sabra?” His face turns pink, and the vein in his neck shows. All signs his limits are being pushed. Seven years behind bars hasn’t changed that. “I know you better than anyone on this planet. After all this time, you’re going to try to lie to me?” His voice is even. Smooth. Not a hint of

the anger I know is boiling beneath the calm façade as he takes another step in my direction.

Five.

“Lucas, I’m not lying to you. I wasn’t feeling good.” Fear races through me, and a small bead of sweat courses down my spine. “I got dressed to run some errands and come to dinner. Of course, I wanted to see you.” My words stick in my throat as the nausea builds. I don’t know if I can do this. He opens his mouth to respond, and I hurry on, “And part way through running my errands, the nausea hit me. I’ve been dealing with it all day, but this time it was stronger. I couldn’t ignore it.”

Not a total lie.

“As much as I hated it, I had to make a choice, and I didn’t want to get anyone else sick. So, I chose to go to the store, grab some medicine, and head home.” I run my hands through my hair, trying to smooth it out. “But they were out, so I came home to take a bath and go to bed in the hopes of being a hundred percent by morning.”

Lucas stares at me. His gaze hasn’t left my face the entire time, scrutinizing my every feature as I tell him my story. Looking for any sign I’m not being one hundred percent truthful with him. Waiting for any excuse to punish me. Just like old times.

“Okay,” he says with a sympathetic smile. He seems to believe me, and I try not to burst into tears. Instead, I shift toward the wall to make my way up the stairs toward my door. To escape.

“I’m going to head inside and try to get better. I’ll call you later. We can catch up then, sound good?” Lucas doesn’t move when I slide along and try to squeeze past him. He doesn’t give an inch so that I can get by without touching him. My arm brushes his as I slip by, and my stomach lurches. “Have a good night, Lucas,” I manage through clenched teeth, working to hold down the alcohol and what little I ate tonight.

“Sabra.” Lucas’s hand closes around my elbow, and he pulls me back against his chest. “Let me go upstairs with you,” he whispers in my ear. “I’ll help draw your bath and get you settled. Take care of you. It can be just like it used to be.” The finger on the inside of my arm moves back and forth, burning a path so deep I’m sure there will be a scar.

There’s no controlling the shaking of my body or my voice. “No, Luc—”

“Sabra?” I turn quickly as Lucas drops his hand but doesn’t move away. “Are you okay?” Trevor stands on the sidewalk a few feet away.

“I’m fine.” But I can’t look him in the eyes. I can’t let him see the amount of terror and panic racing through me or the way my hands tremble. I can’t let him think I need help. That he should get involved. So, I clench them in front of me and turn to make my escape, saying over my shoulder, “I promise, I’m fine.”

Confusion flashes in Trevor’s eyes and anger flares in Lucas’s face as he glares at my dearest friend when I look back at them. Trevor looks at my brother and reaches his hand toward him. “I don’t think we’ve ever met. Hi, I’m Trevor. Sabra’s friend.”

No. I suck in a breath and realize I can’t walk away and leave Trevor to deal with my brother by himself. I can’t trust Lucas not to do something stupid. So, I turn around and take a few steps back down, force a smile onto my face, and wave a hand in their direction.

“Trevor, meet my brother, Lucas. Lucas, this is one of my best ... one of my friends, Trevor.”

Lucas stares at me while slowly moving toward Trevor with his hand out. “One of your best

friends, huh?" He grasps Trevor's hand and turns to face him squarely. And there's the one-hundred-watt smile Lucas is known for. The one that places every person in my life under his spell. I can't help but pray to the heavens Trevor can see through it. That he won't fall for it or him. "Any friend of Sabra's is a friend of mine. Nice to meet you, Trevor. How long have you known my sister?"

Trevor takes Lucas's hand in his firm grip and gives it a quick shake. "Four years. We met the first day of classes my senior year." He glances at me and takes a tiny step in my direction. I can hear the questions floating in the air from him and feel the confusion and anger coming off him in waves.

Why didn't he know I had a brother? Or any sibling, for that matter? How have I kept that secret from him when I know he has two sisters—Maggie and Ellie—who adore him and think he's hung the moon? They're two of his favorite women in the world. Where is the fear coming from that has my shoulders scrunched up around my ears and the lines in my forehead wrinkled? Is this the secret I've been keeping from him? What other secrets do I have?

All questions I can't answer right now. Or maybe ever.

"That sounds like a story I should hear." Lucas claps his hand on Trevor's shoulder. "Maybe dinner one—"

"No," I yell at them. Both men swing their heads in my direction with wide eyes as panic sets in. An all-encompassing dread I can't shake off. "I mean, come on, Lucas. There's no need to put the pressure on Trevor. We're just friends." I look into Trevor's eyes and plead with him to understand. "Right, Trevor?"

"Right." He looks uncomfortable and drops his head to stare at the tips of his shoes.

"So ... Did you need something? Why are you here?" I move a couple of steps in Trevor's direction, my eyes tracking my brother's movements.

He looks at my door and back at me with a determined look. "I wanted to make sure you made it inside safely. I couldn't go home without checking on you." He shifts his weight. "I couldn't just leave."

Lucas takes his time looking back and forth between us before taking a step toward me and putting his hand on my shoulder. "You know what, Sabra? I'll let you guys talk. We'll catch up later." The heat from his hand burns through my shirt. I swear there will be an imprint there to match the invisible scar on my arm. Which is exactly what he wants. To burn me and mark me as his for the rest of our lives. The thought of it has my stomach cramping.

"Sounds good. I'll ... I'll call you in the next couple of days."

"No worries. I know where to find you." He steps off the stairs. "See you later, Songbird." Lucas throws a wave my direction, then turns and walks away to the parking lot. The darkness seems to swallow him whole, where he belongs.

My knees weaken and shake harder when I turn to look at Trevor. He follows my brother walking away with a frown, and then he turns his head to peer at me. "A brother, huh?" The blood drains out of my face. "Sabra, are you okay?"

I climb up a couple of stairs, taking two steps to distance myself from him, and throw my hands up. "I'm fine." One more step. "I'm perfect. Thank you for checking on me." I wave at him, forcing a weak smile to cross my face. My door is above me, a beacon calling me to safety and solitude. I turn and walk to it, trying not to run or look petrified. "Have a good night, Trevor."

It feels more like a final goodbye than it does a good night. More final than it did in the car. As if one chapter of my life—the one I most want to stay open—has concluded. The happily-ever-after fairy tale is disappearing, and the nightmare has returned. The part of the story I never wanted to revisit again is here. I'm living the dark moment.

I unlock my door with shaking hands and slip inside, taking extra care to bolt the two different locks I added and turning the lock on the handle. Lucas's parting words echo over and over in my head.

See you later, Songbird.

CHAPTER SEVEN

It's been two weeks since I've seen Trevor. Fourteen days since that horrific night on my stairs. He's called a couple of times, but I've avoided him. I can't avoid the texts he's sent my way to "check in" and see how I'm doing, but I've kept it light and impersonal in return.

The last thing I want to do is answer questions about my brother and explain that relationship to Trevor. I don't want him to look at me differently or watch the pity fill his eyes when he hears how bad it was—is sure to be again if Lucas has his way—so I keep it easy and make it seem like there's no reason I didn't mention having a brother to him. No reason except the hate and loathing I feel deep in my bones.

And so far, I've avoided anything to do with Lucas. I haven't seen a hint of him roaming around my place. There's been no unexpected visits, texts, notes, or phone calls. Unless you count my mother.

Rebecca Valentine has been calling and texting me nonstop to come by the house and "see your brother." She even emailed me once. She doesn't understand. She's never seen it. Both of my parents had, and have, no idea of the kind of pain Lucas brings to my life. To them, it's just a normal dose of sibling rivalry, fighting, whatever.

I've avoided her calls and all invitations to dinner, lunch, brunch, and anything in between by saying school has kept me too busy since starting back.

I never thought I'd be thrilled to proclaim that my day-to-day activities are keeping me from having a social life. Getting my master's degree, acting classes, assignments, bartending at the lodge, and auditions all help me avoid the realities of the rest of my life. I thankfully fall into a blissful sleep every night out of exhaustion. Who knew I'd ever love going to work and school?

I reach for my phone when it buzzes in the back pocket of my jeans, expecting it to be more of the same—my mother. I'm pleasantly surprised when I find Micah's name flashing on the screen.

"What's up, bitch?"

"Bitch? Is that any way to speak to your best friend who has fresh, straight-out-of-the-oven chocolate chip cookies for you? You should be nicer." She laughs. "What are you doing? I'm headed to your apartment." Micah's voice has the lilt of someone filled with joy. Someone thankful to be alive, which she is, given her past. Micah has seen and lived through more than one person ever should and come out on the other side. Knowing her gives me hope.

"I'm not home. I have to finish this assignment from my acting coach because I need it for my next session. Tomorrow." I sigh into my phone. "I can't concentrate in my apartment. It's too quiet, so I'm headed to the library."

Micah huffs into her phone. "The library?" Shock colors her voice. "Are you sick? What's going on? Wait, do you even know where the library is?" Micah laughs loudly.

Her question is a valid one. I try to avoid libraries and any real studying, at all costs, unless it's studying for a show. It's been that way for as long as she's known me. Even when we were roommates, I would find any reason I could not to do homework.

“I told you, my house was too quiet. And yes, I’ve been to the library before, Micah.”

She laughs harder, and I pull the phone away from my ear, rolling my eyes even though she can’t see me.

“But have you ever been to the library for more than making out in the stacks?”

“I’m hanging up now ...”

“No, wait,” she yells into her phone. “Seriously, you’re at the library?” The disbelief in her tone makes me smile.

“Yes, I’m seriously at the library. I’m walking up to the doors right now.”

“Okay, I’ll meet you there. I have things I want to talk to you about. And I need to plan for the recital coming up. I can do that at the library while you work. Do not ask me why I said yes to directing this show. Every kid taking part refuses to practice outside class.” She pauses to take a breath. “Are you okay?”

“Why wouldn’t I be okay?”

Does she know something? Did Lucas ...?

“I saw Trevor today.” Micah interrupts my thoughts. “He said he hasn’t talked to you in weeks.” I open my mouth to tell her I’m fine again and exactly what I think about her talking to Trevor about me, but she rushes on. “Look, I know something happened. And I know you haven’t been ready to discuss it, but I’m still your best friend, Sabra. And I’m here for you. For anything you need, whenever you need it.”

I can’t decide if I want to hug her or strangle her. “Micah, I’m not ready to discuss anything. But you’ll be the first to know if and when I am, okay?”

There’s a long silence at the end of the other line before Micah whispers, “Okay. I get it.”

“You know what I am ready for?” I listen to one more beat of silence before she finally answers.

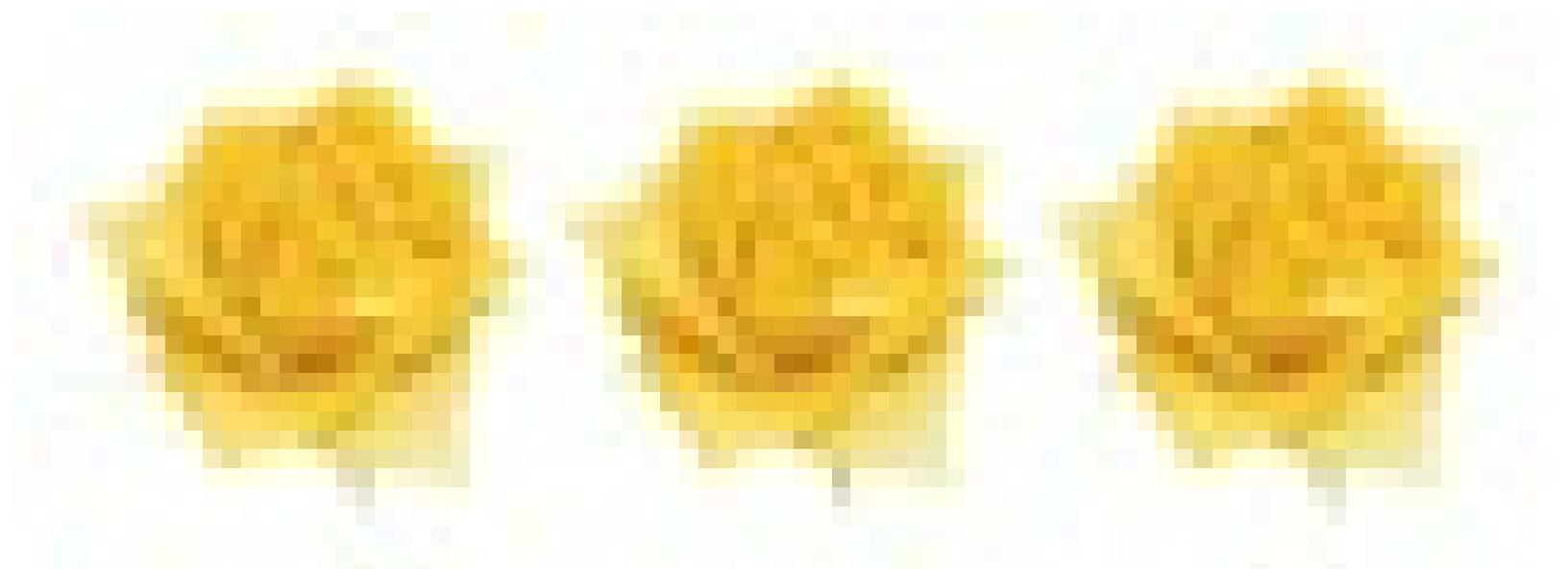
“What?”

“Those cookies. Are you on your way here or what?”

“I’m already in the car headed your direction.”

“Good. Don’t eat my damn cookies on the way.” Micah laughs again on the other end of the line, and I feel the tension between us lift.

“I made the damn cookies, so I’ll eat all the cookies I want.” She snorts. My Micah—the easygoing, roll with the punches friend—is back, letting my aloofness and weirdness slide off her shoulders. “See you in a bit,” she sings into the phone. The melody rings in my ears as she hangs up on me before I can reply.



As I walk into the library, I realize Micah is right. I have no idea what in the hell I'm doing. Where does someone go to work on an assignment when they don't have to look up anything in a book? Or research the life of Edgar Allan Poe as I had to do my freshman year for Literature 101? Now that I think about it, I'm pretty sure this is only the third or fourth time in five or so years that I've been in this library for a real reason. That's just sad. And how have I made it through so much schooling without the library?

The first time was for my Edgar Allan Poe research paper. The second time was for a study group in a science course my sophomore year. We met in the library in a room walled in with glass. It creeped me out and made me rethink this whole school thing. People kept walking by and staring at us like we were fish in a tank. I half expected someone to smooch their nose to the glass and tap on it, hoping we would move. It was the first and last time I was in one of those rooms. The entire study group moved to my apartment every week after that. It was an easy sell when I promised free food and drinks.

And in my senior year, I came to the library and hit the fifth floor. Schoolwork wasn't exactly going on that evening, but I remember a couple of things vividly from that night. One, a boy named Ryan seriously knew how to use his hands—and his mouth. And two, the fifth floor was extremely quiet with limited foot traffic.

I hike my book bag farther up my shoulder, figuring a quiet floor with a small amount of people is probably the right place for me to tackle this assignment. The fifth floor is exactly what I need as long as no couples are in the stacks.

I'm waiting for the elevator when I think I hear my name. I turn and glance around the entryway of the library, then at the circulation desk. The hairs on my arms stand up, and I can't keep my mind from going down dark paths. What if ...?

The elevator bell dings, and I almost jump into the guy standing next to me. The super-hot guy looks at me like I'm crazy and continues to stare at me as we step into the tin box of death.

"Hi," I squeak before he turns his head away and scrolls through his phone.

I swear I can be so stupid sometimes. Honestly, I'm at the library. A public place. What could possibly happen to me here besides dying of boredom? Or getting an imprint of books on your back for an excellent reason.

Pull yourself together, Sabra.

I head to my project hell destiny, but I can't shake the feeling that something is off. As if I'm being watched. Which is stupid again because hot guy got off on the third floor, and I am alone in this elevator.

For months after Lucas went to prison, I would still look over my shoulder everywhere I went. I expected to see him standing around every corner at the house. I'd brace myself when I turned into the hallway that led to our bedrooms. Tighten my body waiting for the inevitable punch to the stomach that was sure to come. The shove into the wall that would greet me as I walked past the open bathroom door. Or worse, the whisper of my name from my own door right before I would walk into what was supposed to be my safe place.

Walking in fear is nothing new in my life, but I haven't felt this way in so long, and it feels foreign to me. Yet I'm becoming reacquainted with it all too quickly since Lucas got out.

He's out.

I find an empty table and make quick work of taking out my notebook, then staring at the blank page. Alex Reynolds, my acting coach, wants a three-paragraph monologue about our favorite toy from childhood. It sounds easy, but my focus is off every time I try to sit and write the damn thing. I can't seem to find the words. Then my phone will chime with a notification, causing me to leap at the distraction. I'm avoiding the topic of not only my favorite doll but also of my childhood altogether.

Because no one wants to hear the truth of my strongest memory with Baby Sarah. Lies would be much easier to write. A story that seems feasible and easy to memorize. I'm an actress, after all. Pretending is my thing. And this assignment is due when I walk into my session tomorrow at five p.m.

But I can't seem to bring myself to write the lie, no matter how hard I try. I can't seem to do anything but remember the last time I held Baby Sarah in my arms. Even my favorite childhood toy has been tainted by him.

“Sabra Renee ... hurry or you’ll be late for the party. We have to leave in fifteen minutes.”

“I’m coming, Mama. I need to get Baby Sarah and my bag. Lizzie said to bring her with me for the sleepover.”

“All right but be quick about it. We have to go.”

“Yes, ma’am. I’m coming,” I yell, running down the hallway toward my room. I slip through the doorway and go straight to my bed to grab Baby Sarah. But she’s not there. The spot where I always leave her is empty.

I glance up when I notice a shadow dance across my comforter and see a rope dangling from the ceiling above my bed. Baby Sarah is hanging at the end of it with a knot tied around her neck. Her head turned at an odd angle.

Gasping, I cover my mouth with my hands and take a step back, right into something solid, hard, and warm. A scream bubbles up, but a hand covers my own hands and mouth, pressing on them.

“Don’t scream. Don’t make a sound or you’ll pay,” he whispers. “This is nothing.”

My body tightens. I stand as still as I can be squeezing my eyes tight and wait for his next move.

Lucas drags me backward toward the door and shuts it with a soft click. “I know what you were planning, Sabra. I read it in your diary.” He pulls my hands away from my face, yanking them behind my back. Pinning them with one of his own.

“What? I don’t know what you’re talking about.” My shoulders tremble. One tear slides down my cheek. But still, I don’t scream.

“So, you weren’t planning on telling Lizzie about me coming in your room last night? That wasn’t part of your plan?” He moves his other hand to cup my face. “Don’t deny it. I read it in your diary this afternoon.” He has me from behind, and his fingers pinch my chin and cheeks. The palm of his hand rests on my neck.

Lucas whispers, hot breath in my ear, “See your Baby Sarah hanging there?” I shake my head with my eyes shut. I don’t want to see her like this. I can’t.

“Open your eyes, Sabra.” Lucas uses his hand to shake my head and more tears slip out. He grips my cheeks harder, and I let out a squeak as I slowly open my eyes.

“You tell anyone, ANYONE, about me coming to your room, and that will be you.” His voice is calm as if he’s discussing what Mama’s making for dinner or how he won his basketball game last night. “You’ll be next. Do you understand me?” He waits. “Answer me.”

He drops his hand to my hip, fingers digging into my side. “I ... won’t.” I gasp and choke down the rising sob. Don’t let him see you cry. I hate when he sees me cry.

“Good.” He pushes me away from him. I dart to the other side of the bed, staring at Baby Sarah still hanging there. “Now be a good girl and get your bag so you can go to Lizzie’s house tonight.”

His face smooths out. There’s no pinch between his eyebrows or frown turned toward me. He’s taking Sarah down. Removing the rope from the ceiling. And I can still see little holes where the nails held it. Reminders for me of what could be. There are always reminders.

I'll be next. *His words ring in my ears.*

"Besides, no one will believe you if you tell them. I heard you when I came in your room last night. Heard your whimper while I was here. Heard your sigh as I was walking out of your room." He pauses and holds Baby Sarah out to me. "You like it when I come visit you, don't you, Sabra?" He smiles. "I can tell."

He shakes Sarah at me and takes a step forward. "Here you go." I timidly reach out my hand, and my fingers go around her arm. But as I'm about to bring her to my chest, Lucas yanks and pulls me and Baby Sarah against him. "Don't forget, Songbird. No one will believe you." He places his hand on my cheek. "Don't make me do something bad," he warns, kissing me on the forehead and brushing a tear off my face. "Be good at Lizzie's."

Lucas walks out without a backward glance. I listen to him whistling as he goes downstairs.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“Sabra? Sabra.” I snap out of it and find Micah’s sapphire blue eyes peering at me. Her hands are on my shoulders, and she looks scared out of her mind.

“What?”

“What do you mean ‘what’?” Her eyes flash like lightning. “Don’t ‘what’ me. I’ve been calling your name for the past few minutes.” Micah looks at me like I have demons flying out of my head. “I stepped off the elevator and saw you sitting here from behind and started singing your name. Loud. Because you know I don’t care about library rules. You didn’t even turn around. Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.” I brush off her concern, flapping my hands in the air so she’ll back up out of my space. “I guess I was concentrating on this monologue,” I say, pointing at the paper in front of me.

A blank piece of paper. Crap.

“Yes, I can see you’ve gotten a ton done and how hard you were working.” Micah scoffs and sits next to me. She starts pulling things from a tote bag next to her and placing them on the table. A thermos, Tupperware, and napkins. “How long have you been here?” She peeks at the only thing on my paper. A title. “And who’s Baby Sarah?”

“My childhood doll,” I reply, watching her continue to yank things out. “Who are you? Mary Poppins?” Her eyes bug out when I say the name of her favorite fictional character.

“No, but I wish.” She flourishes her hands at the spread on the table. “This is my version of a spoonful of sugar.” She opens the Tupperware and hands me a chocolate chip cookie. I don’t know how she did it, but they’re still warm and gooey.

I moan when I take a bite. “Oh my gosh, these are so good. Why are your cookies always delicious? And big?”

“That’s what she said.” Micah unscrews the thermos and winks at me. She hands me a steaming cup of rich, melted chocolate. “Hot chocolate makes everything better.”

I snatch it from her and take a sip. “What exactly are we making better?”

“Life. What else?” Micah nudges my shoulder with her hand. “Now, why do you only have a title? Haven’t you been here for a little while already?”

“I can’t seem to get this monologue started.” I shrug. “Guess I have a mental block for this one. I feel like if I can get it going, I’ll be fine, but I don’t know where to start.” I sigh and flick the pencil lying on my paper. It flies across the table, hits the chair, and lands on the floor just out of reach.

“Seriously, Sabra? How old are you?” Micah stretches and grabs the pencil. She hands it back to me, pulls her chair closer to mine, and points at the paper. “Okay ... so it’s about your favorite doll?”

I prop my chin in my hand and groan. “Yes. It’s supposed to be about our favorite childhood toy. The strongest memory we have about it.”

“That doesn’t seem so hard. Do you already have a memory you want to focus on?”

“I wanted to ...” Micah’s still staring at the paper, but at my hesitation, she turns to me. Water

pools in the bottom of my eyes, threatening to spill over. “I don’t know ...”

“Okay, that’s it.” Micah shoves everything to the other end and lifts herself onto the table next to me, blonde bob swinging around her face, forcing her way into my space. “What in the hell is going on? You haven’t been yourself for weeks. I’ve tried to give you space. Bring you chocolate.” She gestures to the table behind her. “But something is wrong. What’s up?”

I look at my hands and decide if anyone will get it, it’s Micah. “I’ve told you before I didn’t have the best childhood.” I stand and walk to the other side of the table to avoid looking at her, snatching another cookie to shove in my mouth.

“Yes, and you know I understand what that’s like more than anyone. But it’s never affected you like this before. I’ve never seen you like this. Did something happen?” She hops off the table and reaches across it to pick up her own cookie.

I watch her break off a small piece and nibble on it, weighing if I should share the latest news about my brother or if I should try to shake her off. Micah is the only person here who knows I have a brother. Except for Trevor now ...

But she’s the *only* one who knows he was in prison. And that my relationship with him was “not good,” as I explained to her my sophomore and her junior year when we became roommates. I’m tired of handling this on my own and not having anyone to talk to about it. She’s my best friend. If I can’t trust her, then who can I trust?

“Sabra?” My eyes snap back to her face. “You’re doing that whole staring off into space thing again, and it’s freaking me out.” She tilts her head in my direction. “Like watching *Stranger Things* freak-out level.”

“He’s out.”

“Who’s out?” A tear slips down my cheek before she can go further, and her whole body goes unusually still. “Oh.” She moves to stand beside me again. “Lucas? He was released? When?”

I raise my shoulders and hands. “A few weeks ago.”

“Weeks? Why haven’t you said anything to me?” Shock and anger cross her face before understanding takes over. “I would have come to your apartment and brought more than chocolate. We’re of age, you know. I would have brought wine, and it sounds like you could use it.” She snickers and encircles me in her arms, pulling me into a hug. My tears come faster, streaking down my face. I should have known she’d get it.

When I hiccup from trying to hold the ugly crying back, she withdraws, holding me at arm’s length, and throws me a lifeline. “Or weed. I know a guy. He makes the best brownies in town. The best of both worlds ... chocolate and weed. It doesn’t get better than that, does it?”

She drops her hands and grabs her phone from the table. “I’m going to call him right now. I can have that shizz in under an hour. We’ll go back to your house, eat some brownies, and drink ourselves into oblivion. Sound good?”

“It sounds amazing.”

“Great. Pack your stuff and let’s go.” I look at her in surprise. “What? You said it sounds amazing. Let’s go. I’ll totally get high for you, baby.”

“I hadn’t realized I said that out loud.” I watch as she taps away on her phone. And then the giggles start. I can’t hold them back. “Wait. Are you actually getting *weed*?” I throw my last notebook back

into my bag and look around for spying eyes.

“Yep. I texted him. I’ll be at your house in an hour with everything.” She gives me a concerned look. “Are you okay to drive? Do you want to leave your car here and go with me to get the goods?” She wiggles her eyebrows at me, trying to make light of the situation.

Micah doesn’t know how bad the relationship with my brother was growing up, but she knows enough. Her past has given her plenty of knowledge to be able to read between the lines. “Not good” means terrible in our world. She understands enough to grab special brownies and put her own plans and schoolwork aside for this. *For me*. I should have called her after the first phone call that morning with Trevor.

“You’re doing it again ...” She lightly touches my arm.

“Sorry.” I roll my eyes. “I’m fine to drive. I’ll go home and make nachos and pop some popcorn.”

We walk toward the elevator and hop on when we get to it. The doors are already open, like it was waiting for us.

“Weird,” Micah mutters, pushing the button for the lobby. “Pick out a movie too. One of those cheesy 80’s or 90’s movies. Like *Sixteen Candles* or *The Breakfast Club*.”

“Okay.” I laugh. “One night of cheesy nachos, even cheesier movies, and edibles coming up.”

“And wine,” she whispers back at me as we walk into the library lobby. “Don’t forget the wine. It’s important.”

“And wine.” I hug her neck and give a wave, turning in the opposite direction once we’re outside. “Thank you for this.”

“Of course. This is what best friends do. See you in one hour,” she yells over her shoulder as she skips down the sidewalk. I shake my head at my crazy best friend and turn away, toward the parking lot closest to the library.



I can’t keep the smile from creeping onto my face as I walk across the green to my car. The parking lot is a short distance away, but it’s a beautiful fall night. The air is crisp and clean and cool enough that when I pull in a breath it slightly stings my lungs in the best possible way. Like it’s cleansing me from the inside out.

Which is appropriate because a cleansing is exactly what I need right now. What is it those crazy, witchy people use to rid houses of ghosts? The ones on those ghost hunter shows. Sage? Maybe I need

to get some sage and call somebody to come do a cleansing of some sort. I wonder if it works on people. I don't believe in those types of things, but whatever. I'll do anything to keep this feeling I have right now from going away. Micah probably knows someone who knows someone who can get it. She always seems to know someone.

I can't put my finger on what this feeling I'm experiencing is, but I like it. Safety? Happiness? I'm not sure. But telling Micah that Lucas is out and free and—here, somewhere, has lifted a weight off my shoulders in a huge way.

I pause halfway across the green at the fountain in the middle. It's only 8:30 p.m., but the campus is dark except where the lamplights are scattered down the sidewalks. The fountain glows enough, making you feel a sense of security while still having this magical feeling. Maybe even romantic ... if you were with the right person. The number of nights I've spent by this fountain over the past five years is staggering.

I wonder what Trevor is doing right now. It's been a while since I've spoken to him, and I miss him. I miss the way he smiles and how he always seems to know what to say to make me laugh, even when I don't feel like laughing. I run my hand through the water, letting my thoughts wander a bit.

I'm in my own little world, humming a tune from *Hamilton* and enjoying the peace, when a couple walks up and startles me out of my revelry. I peek at my phone and realize I've wasted twenty minutes walking halfway across the green and then standing here at the fountain. Micah is going to beat me to my place with the brownies if I don't get a move on it. And she will give me her special death glare if I'm not ready and waiting with nachos when she gets there. I glimpse at the fountain one last time before heading to my car.

The parking lot is darker in some spots than others, and I can't ignore the notion that someone's watching me again. It's the same eerie feeling I had earlier at the library. I know it's ridiculous, but I keep checking behind me and over my shoulder to make sure I'm alone. That nobody's in the shadows following me. I'd say this is new because Lucas is somewhere out there again—and I don't know where—but the reality is, I'm a woman. I was raised to look over my shoulder, be aware of my surroundings, and hold my keys in my hand.

I see something white on my windshield when I'm a few feet away from my car, the corner of it kicking up in a dance as the wind picks up around me. I slow and come to a stop next to my beautiful red Mustang and stare at the paper waving at me. At first, I think it's a ticket, but I haven't done anything wrong, so that can't be it.

I see **SABRA** written in a sharp scrawl with a black marker, making a stark contrast against the white of the paper. It's folded in half and shoved under my windshield wiper. The corner of it is crumpled and bent as if it was done in a hurry.

Not recognizing the handwriting on the front, I realize it could be from anyone. A friend from another class or—I have no idea. I reach with shaking hands to unhinge the note, gaze intently at my name, and look around me, searching for some sign of who it's from. But I don't see anyone standing nearby or any headlights from cars pulling away. Whoever left it seems to be gone now.

You won't know unless you put your big girl panties on and open the damn note, Sabra.

The note takes up most of the page, written in the same distinct and edgy font. I try to read it standing next to my car, but my eyes have a hard time making it out in the dim lighting. I shove my bag

into the back seat of my car and climb into the driver's side, locking myself in and leaving the overhead light on. Standing in an almost empty parking lot leaves me feeling vulnerable.

I take a deep breath and gawk at the note in my hands, switching the radio on because the silence weighs on me and I can't handle it. I turn the heat on to keep my arms and legs from shivering.

Nothing is out of place when I look around. My book bag is in the back. My purse is on the floorboard of the passenger seat. The doors are locked. I give one final sweep of the area outside around my car and realize I can't delay what I know I need to do, so I bow my head, open the note, and read what it says.

My Sabra~

It's been too long since I've last seen you. I think about you every day and wonder what you're doing. If you miss me as much as I've been missing you.

I saw you earlier in the library, but your friend showed up, so I couldn't say anything. The timing wasn't right to remind you of what we had together. So instead, I left and decided to leave you a note.

I miss you.

I miss the way your eyes flash at me, and the way I can see every emotion on your face when we're close to each other. I plan on us being close again someday.

Until then, I'm forever ...

Yours

CHAPTER NINE

What in the fresh hell is this?

I stare at the note in my hands and glance out the windows again. Turning the paper over, I look for a name—a hint of who might have left this on my car—before flipping it over again. Maybe it's a mistake, and they meant it for someone else? Another girl with a red Mustang?

Get a grip. How many Sabras do you think there are out there?

I put the car in drive and look around the parking lot once more as I pull out of my spot. There's no way I can sit here anymore. The campus sign shines into my window when I drive past it and out onto the main road. "Call Micah," I say, hitting the Bluetooth button.

The phone rings twice before Micah answers the phone. "What's up?"

"Did you leave a note on my car tonight?"

"What? No. What's going on?" She's in her car, and the music that was blaring when she answered goes silent. "Sabra?"

"You didn't put a note on my windshield? As a joke?" My eyes fill with tears threatening to fall. I work hard to hold them back because once this dam breaks, it's going to be a while before I come up for air.

"No. Why would I do that? And I was with you for the last hour." She pauses and silence engulfs the car. "Do you think it was left on your car by mistake?"

"I thought of that, but unless there's another Sabra at the college right now, I don't think that's the case. It has my name across the front, and the note starts with the words 'My Sabra.' It has to be someone who knows me."

"That's weird. Maybe it's a boy in one of your classes? Someone trying to be romantic and mysterious, but they aren't aware of what's happening with you, so they don't know it's going to freak you the crap out. It's probably something harmless."

"Maybe," I reply, shaking my head. She can't see me, but I feel in my gut it's more than that. "But what if it's not? I mean, it mentions being close to me again as if we've been close to each other before. What if it's my brother?"

"Really?" Her voice gets higher. "You think your brother would be creepy and show up at the school? Did it sound like a brotherly letter? I thought you said it started out with 'My Sabra'?" Micah sounds confused. "That makes it sound romantic. Why would your brother leave you something like that?"

Shit.

"No. You're right." I try to recover. Micah can know about my brother and the fact he scares the crap out of me. She can know our relationship was never normal. She cannot know how bad it was and still is. She can't know the magnitude of how he hurt me. I'll never be okay with her knowing the depth of it all. I won't be able to handle the look she'll give me or the thoughts I know she'll have about me. It will do me in. She's my best friend. Sometimes it feels like she's my only friend. And I

can't have anything jeopardize that. I've already lost Trevor. I can't lose Micah too.

"I don't know what I was thinking. I'm so freaked out all the time now that he's out. My thoughts are a mess."

"Sabra, it's okay to be freaked about Lucas getting out of prison. I'd say it's even normal for you to feel that way." Micah honks her horn and yells, "GET OUT OF THE WAY, MORON." A short laugh escapes me. Micah is a horrible driver. "Sorry. This stupid idiot cut me off when I was trying to go through the intersection."

"Yeah, I'm sure it was their fault," I mutter, trying to infuse some humor into the conversation. It's threatening to take a turn in a direction I don't want to go.

"Shut up. This time it was someone else's fault." Micah laughs into her phone. "Seriously, though, I'm on my way to your apartment now with the brownies. I'll look at the note when I get there, but I'm sure it's no big deal. Just some boy trying to be cute. Maybe it was Trevor?"

"I don't know. I can't see him writing me a note. And I'm sure you're right. It's probably no big deal, but ..." I hesitate. Micah's gone to so much trouble tonight, but I just want to be alone. I want to disappear in my apartment, take a hot shower, and scrub this gross feeling off me. I want to turn on HGTV and watch ridiculous, giant people try to buy little dollhouses they think will make them happy. And I want to fall asleep while I make fun of them in my head.

Micah sighs, hearing my hesitation. "But you don't want to do stupid movies and nachos and popcorn and secret brownies now."

"No. I mean, it's not that I don't want to do it. It's that ... I don't know what I want right now." I'm hedging. I know what I want, but I don't want to hurt her feelings. She's done so much for me tonight already.

"Yes, you do. You're just too nice to say it." Micah lets things roll off her back again, like my crazy right now is no big deal. "Lucky for you, I can read even the sound of your voice by now."

"I'm sorry. I'm exhausted, and everything feels like too much." I make it to my apartment complex and sit in the covered parking spot with my car still running. My leg jumps while I talk. I want to get upstairs.

"I get it, Sabra. I do. Let's make a deal, okay?"

"Okay. What do you have in mind?" I'm wary. Micah usually tries to talk me out of my crazy plans, but you never know what's going to come out of her mouth. She has weed-laden brownies in her car right now, after all.

"I'll let you off the hook tonight. But we're going to have our girls' night on Wednesday at your place. Deal?" She doesn't wait for me to reply. "We need a fun night. *You* need a night with friends. Maybe I can call Trevor and see if he wants to join us with some others? Make it a party. Do something all together like old times."

"I'll take a rain check, and we can do it Wednesday night. But I'd prefer it to be just you and me. Can we do that?"

"Fine. But no backing out for either of us. No matter what or who comes up." She giggles. "I mean it, Sabra."

"Based on my nonexistent social life right now, I think you're safe. No backing out."

“Okay.” She sighs again. “Try to get some rest. And call me if you need anything.”

“Night, Micah. Thank you for everything. I’ll text you tomorrow.”

“Night, bitch.”

The phone disconnects, and I listen to the beep echo through my car while I drop my head back against the seat. I’m so ready for this day to be over. The entire last month honestly.

I grab my purse off the floor of the passenger seat and take a quick look around the parking lot before I step out. He’s shown up once. He can show up again.

I think about leaving my schoolbag in the back seat and worrying about it in the morning, but I haven’t finished my monologue yet. And it still has to be in Alex’s hands tomorrow. So, I make the decision to scrap the monologue about Baby Sarah and write about my deep love for my Barbie dollhouse instead. I quickly grab my bag, lock the door, and jog toward the lighted stairway.

No one is sitting on the steps tonight, which is a huge relief. I don’t know if I can handle anything else today. Enough is enough, and I need the universe to work with me right now. And I need a shower the way a Kardashian needs a mirror. I can almost feel the hot water beating on my back.

I make quick work of unlocking the door and take a step to push it open, stopping when I hear a crunch under my foot. Looking at my feet, I notice a single yellow rose on the mat. I’d missed it when I walked up the steps, too busy looking around me to make sure no one was there to think of looking down.

No. There’s no way. Surely, he wouldn’t ... My thoughts are jumbled. I can’t seem to compute what is right in front of me.

A single yellow rose.

My favorite flower since I was a little girl. We grew them in the garden in our backyard, and I could see them from the window of my bedroom. We had a variety of roses, but the yellow ones were special. I would sit in my window seat when I was supposed to be reading and stare at the roses swaying in the wind. My eyes always went to the yellow ones. They brought me such joy. Right up until Lucas chopped them down with the chainsaw.

Our dad told him to cut the tree limbs before he got home from work that day. The house was quiet. My Mama was volunteering at the Cancer Clinic, reading to patients. Lucas knew we would be alone and told me to come straight home after school. Instead, I called my mom and went with Lizzie to do homework together at her house.

I knew he’d be mad and make me pay in some way, but I didn’t think he’d cut off my roses.

He said it was an accident. At least, that’s what he told our parents. The chainsaw had gotten away from his control when he’d yanked on the string to start it, and down came all the roses. But I knew it wasn’t a mistake. He left the stumps as a reminder, glaring at me when I looked out my bedroom window. There was always a reminder.

And the only roses missing were the yellow ones.

I realize I’m still standing out in the open and bend to grab the rose off the ground, intending to throw it directly in the trash. But a thorn pricks my finger when I seize the stem. I glower at the tiny spot now dotted with blood, and the fear and anger I’ve been holding at bay comes roaring out of me.

“AAAAAGGGGGHHHH,” I yell and snatch the rose, throwing it over the railing and into the

bushes by the parking lot. “NO. ENOUGH. YOU CAN’T HAVE ME!”

I rush into my apartment and slam the door, forcing my shaking hands to turn all the locks. Tears stream down my face and drip onto my shirt. My nose is running. And I don’t care.

He can’t have me. I can’t let him get me. Enough. No more.

I grip the television, struggle to move it off the table it’s sitting on and place it on the floor. Then I push the table in front of the door.

Not this time. I am my own person. No more.

I yank and tug the armchair in front of the table. It’s heavy and my arms hurt, but I don’t care. I shove and press with all my might.

No. He can’t have me. No more.

The only thing left to move in the room is the couch, but my adrenaline is crashing, and I don’t have the strength to change anything else. My whole body shakes. I sit in the corner and curl myself into a ball. Sobs escape me—deep, guttural sounds coming from the depths of my soul—but I can’t make them stop. I can’t halt the trembling or the tears. I can only make myself as small as possible in the corner of the couch, pray no one will find me, and cry out to whoever is listening. Rocking. Weeping. Shaking. Begging this nightmare will end and be over for good.

No shower is happening tonight. There will be no sleep.

Instead, I succumb to the fear and stare at the door.

CHAPTER TEN

Five missed calls. Two from my agent and one each from Micah, my mom, and Trevor.

Trevor has called and texted multiple times since the night on the stairs. Truthfully, I never thought I'd hear from or see him again after that night, so the voice messages and texts every now and then have given me hope. I was almost positive he'd decide my crazy was too much for him. It's too much for me most days.

But maybe we'll be friends again someday. The way it used to be before the night by the lake. Before Lucas came back.

Before.

Maybe there is a chance—albeit a slim one—that we can find our way back to each other.

No, I can't have those thoughts. There is no going backward, only forward. Lucas is out there leaving notes and roses and continuing to haunt me. There can never be anything with Trevor. I can't put Trevor in that position.

Lucas has always believed I'm his in some sick way. He still does if the notes are any indication. I can't risk Trevor knowing how tainted, dirty, and—*used*—I am. He can never know I'm not good enough for him. And my brother can never know how important Trevor is to me. Lucas is a live wire who will snap at a moment's notice. I've seen it happen time and time again. And Trevor is too important to risk like that.

I look at the names glaring back at me. Sighing, I hit the number for the person I least want to talk to. No, it's not my mother. It's my agent. She's going to have my hide, and there's nothing I can do about it. I deserve it.

The phone rings once before the drawl of my name crosses the line. "Sabra, you're finally calling me back. I hope you have a good excuse, darling. That audition you missed yesterday was everything. Where have you been?"

"Hi, Eleanor. I know, I'm sorry. I wasn't feeling well, and the audition completely slipped my mind."

That's not true. I watched the clock on the microwave from the couch for hours, knowing I should get up and move. I should dress and go to the audition. Move on with life like I always do and have. Hell, I should've called Eleanor and lied to her. Told her I had the flu so she could call the casting director. That, at least, would've been slightly acceptable even though I'd still be blowing a huge opportunity, and one I'll regret for the rest of my life. But every time I stood, the terror of what might be on the other side of the door would stop me, and I'd sit back down and stare at the clock some more, watching the two blinking dots move steadily.

It was a vicious cycle I couldn't break no matter how hard I tried. And I know it's weird, but those two flashing dots comforted me. They were proof that somewhere beyond the door people were moving about and living life. Someone should have that.

It's been thirty-seven hours since I found the rose and barricaded myself in my apartment. I haven't

slept. I've barely moved. I've watched the hours tick by, jumping at the slightest of sounds outside. Running to the bathroom to throw up twice. Getting a glass of water once. Longing for the day when it was night and for the night when it was day. I found myself back in the same spot in the same corner of the couch no matter what happened, watching and waiting. For something. Anything. A sign to tell me this nightmare was over.

Turns out that something was Trevor. Something happened to me when my phone buzzed with his name. A wake-up call of some kind. A trigger in my brain flipped a switch I hadn't been able to find lying in the fetal position no matter how hard I tried. Once again, Trevor's saving me. And this time, he isn't even aware I need saving. This time, I'm alone with my crazy.

It's been so long since I've heard his voice. The longing and desire for what we had—for him—is stronger than I realized. I thought not talking to him would be easier than the constant reminder of what I'm losing. Of what I'm choosing to walk away from. But not seeing him, not hearing his laugh or feeling his small touches, has been the worst part of all. Which is saying something since everything in my life is horrible and terrifying.

Trevor provides me with a level of comfort and safety I've never had before. I knew I had to talk to him when I saw his name flash on the screen.

Not right then. Not right now. But soon. I need to finish this conversation with Eleanor first.

"Sabra? Did you hear me?" Eleanor's voice is tinged with frustration. There's some full-fledged anger happening here, and the last person you want on your bad side is Eleanor.

"I'm sorry. What, Eleanor? The phone was cutting in and out," I squeak. She'll see through that lie in a heartbeat.

Eleanor Townsend is one of the best in the business. Savvy and brilliant, she knows everyone in Los Angeles, New York, and every major city between. Losing her as my agent would be about the worst thing that could happen right now.

But that's not true, is it?

"Darling, I need you to pay attention. I'm not sure what's going on with you, but you've never been this flighty before. And believe me, I have plenty of clients who will never be where they say they will be or will always be late, but I've never had to worry about you missing an audition or not being prepared. Honestly, we can't start doing that now. We're on the precipice of greatness with you. I can practically reach out and touch the next step in your career, so let's not screw this up, okay, love?" She gives a slight pause. I'm sure it's for dramatic effect as she knows exactly how to speak to her clients to wring the best out of them. "You're either going to go be the star I know you can be or ... you're not. Which will it be?"

"I'm listening, Eleanor. I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize. Fix it and move forward. Do you think we can do that?"

She pauses again. Long enough for me to whisper, "Yes, Eleanor."

"Good. Now, I spoke to the casting director late last night."

"You did?" A smidge of hope unfurls in my chest. This audition would be huge for me. Missing it is one of those mistakes that will follow me for the rest of my life. "What did she say? I feel horrible. I know I messed up."

"Yes," she purrs. "You did. However, she apparently enjoyed your performance in *Our Town* in La

Jolla and wants to see what you can do in this role she's casting right now. She spoke to the director, and she's willing to meet you for another audition. Today at three o'clock in downtown LA."

"Three today? But I have—"

"I know you have to work, Sabra"—she sighs through the phone—"but this is important. I pulled a lot of strings and called in a few favors to get this meeting for you after you didn't call or show yesterday. She's leaving tomorrow for a job in Vancouver, so you need to take this opportunity. It could change your career. Your *life*. And it's a second chance you won't get again with her, or the director, if you miss this meeting today."

Eleanor softens a bit. "Seriously, darling, I'm worried about you. You're not yourself. And you know I adore you, but I need to know now so I can call her and confirm. What will it be?"

"I'll be there. Three o'clock downtown."

"That's my girl," she says with a smile in her voice. "Now, do you still have the email with the script and address I sent you the other day? Do you need me to resend it?"

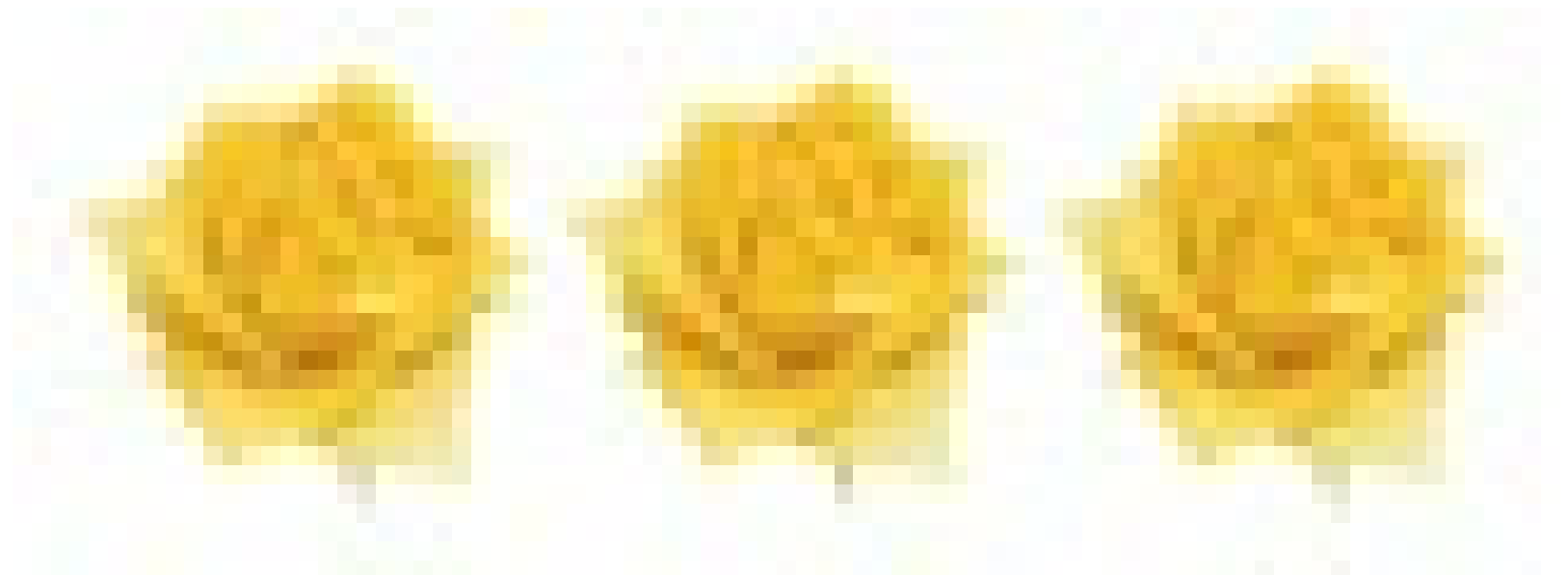
"No, Eleanor. I've got it all." I stand and walk over to the door where my book bag lies with my computer in it. "I'll be there, and I'll be ready."

"Perfect. Call me if you need anything and touch base with me when you're done, okay? Talk soon." She hangs up without a second's hesitation and moves on, heading to the next meeting, I'm sure. Eleanor doesn't waste time. She's the best for a reason.

I reach into my bag and drag my laptop out, powering it up to find the email I need. Driving downtown will take me a couple of hours, and that's if I don't hit traffic. Since this is LA, there's a better chance hell will freeze over in the next five hours than of me not sitting on the freeway for the same amount of time.

Trevor's name stares at me in the missed calls log, and I drag my finger across the screen one more time, resigning myself to having to wait to hear his voice again. I move toward my closet to pick out clothes for the audition. I'll call him later tonight as soon as I get home.

No chickening out.



It's eight o'clock. I spent most of the day in downtown Los Angeles, and I'm finally pulling up to my apartment complex. My boss was not happy when I called to tell him I wouldn't be at the bar tonight. Pissed is a better word for it. *He was angry*. Thankfully, I'm his best bartender, so he puts up with my

crazy schedule. Even if he hates it.

Micah is going to be here any minute for our girls' night in. I want to pull on my pajamas, grab a mug of hot tea, and watch HGTV until I fall asleep, but I promised her I would not back out of this evening. Which means I need to hurry if I still want to call Trevor tonight. And I do still want to call him.

My phone buzzes in my hand as I reach into my purse and pull it out.

MICAH: *Yo, I'm on my way. You'd better be ready for this night.*

SABRA: *I'm ready, girl. You have the goods?*

MICAH: *You know it. Girls' Night In is happening. See you in a few!*

SABRA: *Be safe!*

I push the button to bring me back to the home screen and pull up the missed calls. Trevor's name is still there in black-and-white. I've looked at least twenty times throughout the day to make sure I'm not dreaming. One, because I have no desire to call him out of the blue and feel like an idiot. Two, because I am, indeed, an idiot.

With a slow intake of air, I grab my things from my car and trek up the stairs to my apartment, trying to calm my nerves. I need to freshen up and change into something more comfortable before Micah gets here. Trevor has waited weeks to hear from me, so ten more minutes isn't going to hurt him. I doubt he expects to hear back from me at all.

I can't stop twirling my key chain around my finger as I walk up the steps. It's a nervous habit of mine. My mother was constantly telling me to stop fidgeting when I was growing up.

Stop curling your hair around your finger, Sabra.

People don't like to be annoyed by tapping. Cut it out, Sabra.

Keep your feet still, Sabra. Act like a lady.

I've gotten so much better, but I still have my moments. I step off the last set of stairs when the key ring flies off my finger, hits the door, and falls to the ground. I can hear my mom saying, *I told you so*, loud and clear as I bend to scoop them up. A laugh moves up my throat but stops cold before it can burst out of my mouth when my eyes land on another white piece of paper with **SABRA** scrawled across the front. This time, it's taped to my red door.

You have got to be fucking kidding me.

Last time, I was frightened. Scared to death at what this could be and who could be standing around watching me open the letters or pick up the rose. I'm still scared, but the more overwhelming emotion is now anger. Fury licks through my veins, even if it is tinged with an underlying current of fear.

I rip the note down, squeezing the corners together in my fists and feel the paper crumple in my hands. I'm not going to read this one. It's going straight into the trash as soon as I get inside.

It takes me a couple of tries to get the key into the lock so I can unlock the door. My hands shake from the emotions coursing through me. The door shuts with a loud slam, and I drop my bag in its spot next to it.

Before I left for the audition this morning, I'd returned the furniture to its rightful place. I didn't

want to explain to Micah how crazy I am. It's hard enough to hear my own brain say it over and over every day. I'm losing my mind, and I can live without Micah's voice joining in the throng.

I march into the kitchen and yank out the trash can from beneath the sink, tossing the crumpled note into the bin. It lands with pieces of my name staring up at me. I want to walk away from this. From the notes. The fear. The roses. The anger. My brother. From everything.

But I can't because knowledge is power. And I know throwing this stupid piece of paper away without reading it is a mistake. Throwing it away period is stupid.

My brother is capable of darker thoughts and actions than one person should be able to think or commit. If this is him ... If there is any chance this is coming from him at all—which I feel strongly it is—I need to know how far into the dark he's gone. No matter how hard it is.

And that's why I can't turn and walk away to go call Trevor. My hand slides into the trash can and yanks the note back out again. I open the two sides and begin to read. I can't walk away from the what-ifs. Ignoring them puts you in positions you never thought you'd be in.

And that's all I'm thinking about as I spread the paper on my kitchen counter and read the heavy scrawl. It's written in the same scratchy font and on the same heavy white paper as the one before. And it starts in the same fashion as the first note, too.

My Sabra~

I couldn't stop dreaming about you last night. Scene after scene flashed before me, and in each one, I couldn't take my eyes off you. As always, I couldn't get enough. At one point, you were watching a movie and laughing, only to have the scene change to you snuggled up against me with your head on my shoulder, sighing in contentment.

I love the feel of you against me, the way your skin feels under my fingers. I can't wait until I get to experience you pressed against me again. Right before you leaned up to kiss me, I woke up moaning your name.

I can't wait until the next time I get to see you, even if it is only from afar. For now.

Until then, I am forever ...

My math teacher hates me. Okay, maybe not just me; he hates our entire class. You'd have to be a horrible person with a heart full of hate to give THREE pages of fraction problems for homework in one night. I hate fractions so much.

Last night, I was complaining to my dad about fractions and how learning them was all sorts of stupid and how I bet it was useless information we would never, ever use in the real world. Not like writing or poetry or even speech.

I was munching on one of my Mama's oatmeal chocolate chip cookies. She makes the best cookies. I could eat only those cookies for the rest of my life. And my dad had to go and ruin them by explaining we wouldn't have cookies without fractions.

FRACTIONS!

And so now I sit here staring at the hardest math problems on the freaking planet, but I'm determined to learn them. Because someday, I'm going to need to bake oatmeal chocolate chip cookies like my Mama does, which means fractions, according to my dad.

I'm almost done with the last page, but Lucas is doing something in his room, and it keeps distracting me. I can hear him grunting through the wall shared by our bedrooms.

He's probably working out, trying to become all huge and buff now that he's fourteen and a teenager. Ever since he started his first year of high school, all Lucas cares about is working out and "looking fine" as he says. It's ridiculous. I laugh at him all the time.

But not to his face. Never to his face. I'm not stupid.

He's left me alone for the past couple of months, and I want to keep it that way. I'm sure it's because of Kyla next door. Lucas is all about Kyla and the fact she has boobs now.

I heard my Mama mentioning how Kyla was blossoming into a beautiful young lady to Valerie, her mom, a couple days ago. They were standing out on our driveway, and Lucas was leaning by the door while I read in the porch swing. When I glanced at him, his cheeks were pink and so were his ears. He asked me what I was looking at.

Of course, I said nothing and went back to my reading. I like him ignoring me.

A moan floats into my room. What in the world is Lucas doing? I need to get this homework done. I can't concentrate.

Throwing my pencil onto the ground next to my paper, I pull myself up, walk across the room, and fling open my door. Lucas's bedroom door is open a crack, and I can see his shirtless back through the sliver.

Yep, working out again.

His arm muscles are moving back and forth, pumping, probably with one of his dumbbells Dad bought him this past Christmas. He's been obsessed with them. I roll my eyes. Boys are dumb.

I'm about to call out his name and tell him to keep it down when I hear him moan again. This time, I recognize my name in the sound, and my feet come to a halt. My hand is on his door ready to push it open and ask him what in the world he's doing when I see his back muscles tighten and shudder as the words, "Oh, yeah..." are quietly uttered.

Something's not right. I don't know what he's doing, but he's never worked out like this before. And I don't want to have anything to do with it. Or for him to turn around and see me standing here watching. He'll go crazy.

I turn around and flee down the hallway—back to my room and my fractions—as quickly and quietly as I had come.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

A loud thumping against my front door makes me jump and bang my knee into the kitchen cabinets. “Shit.” I glance at the note lying on the counter one last time before I hobble to the door and peek out the peephole. Micah stands on the other side tapping her foot with her arms full. Taking a deep breath, I throw the locks and yank the door open.

“Hey. What took you so long?” She pushes past me and walks into the kitchen to drop the bags off.

“What? What do you mean? I came right to the door.”

“Nope. I’ve been standing there for five minutes, and I knocked twice. You do realize this keeps happening?” She gives me a knowing look and hauls items out, placing them on the counter. Micah stops with her arm in the air. A large bag filled with brownies hangs over her head as she turns to stare at me. “Is this what you were doing?” She picks up the note, replaces it with her brownies, and reads leaning on the counter.

“It’s nothing, Micah. Don’t worry about it.”

She whips her head around to look at me with flashing eyes and shoots back, “This is not nothing, Sabra. This is definitely something.” Micah stands straighter and turns to me. “You got another one?”

I pluck the note from her fingers and nod my head. “Why are you whispering? And yes, today. It was on my door when I got home from the audition.” I reach into the bag on the counter and pull out a bottle of wine and a container of the nectar of the gods. “You made guacamole?”

“Yes, you can’t have nachos without real guacamole. That fake crap you buy at the grocery store in a bag is not holy or good. It won’t cut it. And don’t change the subject,” she says, grabbing the container out of my hands. “Finish telling me what happened.”

“There’s not much to tell. I was spinning my keys thinking about what to say when I called Trevor back, but when I walked to my door, this was hanging there staring at me. So, I ripped it down and brought it inside to read. And now it’s here in my kitchen and so are you. End of story.”

Micah’s eyes change into tiny slits as she listens to me, her mind spinning. This is when she would normally tell me exactly what she thinks. Instead, recognition flickers in her face.

“Wait. You were going to call Trevor?” She stares at me with her mouth hanging open like a fish out of water. If I weren’t so messed up right now, I’d be doubled over and laughing at her, but I’m not. My humor seems to have left the building tonight.

“Yes.” I shrug my shoulders as if calling Trevor after weeks of not talking to him is no big deal. Because it’s not. At all. He’s just a boy who’s a friend.

A sexy boy who’s a friend who knows how to handle me. And what I look like naked. Lying on a rock.

I throw that thought out the window before I travel down a path I don’t want to be on and walk into the living room, curling up on the couch with my knees tucked under me. “Did you bring a cheesy movie with you?”

“Oh no, you don’t, Sabra Valentine. You don’t get to move on like that. Finish telling me about the

letter. Eat nachos and watch a movie, fine. But you're going to tell me more about Trevor later." Micah tosses herself on the other end of the couch and mock glares at me. "Spill it right now."

"Again, there's nothing to tell. The letter was on the door. I read it. I still have no idea where they are coming from unless it's Lucas. Which I refuse to think about because if I do, you'll be putting me in a white jacket and having someone stick a large needle in my ass right before they haul me away." Micah's eyes widen before blinking rapidly. "Honestly, that's it. I don't know anything more."

Seeing a loose thread on the cushion of my sofa, I play with it, yanking and pulling, instead of looking back at Micah. The silence is deafening, and I wait for her to say something. Anything except tell me what I should do or how I should be reacting. I pretty much want to ignore that any of this is happening altogether. Maybe I don't want her to say anything, after all.

"Okay."

I lift my head. "Okay?"

"Yes, okay." She nods at me. "What else is there to say? You found a note on your door and say it's nothing, then it's nothing. Even if it might be something." I open my mouth to correct her, but she hurries on. "I'm sure you're right. Like you were sure I was right with the first one, right?" She smiles sweetly at me, but I see the shrewd way she's looking at me behind the nice-girl act.

I don't care, so I play along and smile back. "Right. Now, can we make our nachos and stuff our faces? I need sustenance." I get back off the couch and head to the kitchen. "Today has been the longest day ever."

"Sure. And while we make the queso and all the fixings, you can tell me about calling Trevor." She wiggles her eyebrows and takes out a cutting board and knife to dice a tomato.

I groan, throw my head on the counter with my cheek on the chilly granite, and stare at her before I squeeze them shut.

"You didn't honestly think you were going to get off that easy, did you?" She laughs.

I turn my head in defeat, the granite cooling my forehead. "I was kind of hoping so?"

"That's your mistake. We've been friends for years now, and I've let you out of plenty. This is not going to be one of those times. Stir the cheese and tell me everything."

"There's nothing to te—"

"No, Say. I've already heard that speech tonight." She points the knife at me. "Twice. Pick another one. The juicy one."

"Fine. But you're going to be disappointed," I reply, stirring the melting cheese on the stove.

"Try me." Micah slaps me on the ass before turning back to the cutting board.

"Trevor has been texting and calling me off and on since the night he found me at the bar." I don't look in her direction. Instead, I stare at the melting cheese as if it's the most interesting thing on the planet. Like if I take my eyes off it for a second, it will burn, and we will be left with nothing. That's how important this cheese is right now.

"That I know." She moves on to shredding the lettuce. "He told me the other day when I saw him. He looked sad. Have you texted or called him back?"

"Not really. I've sent a smiley face in response or said hi, hope you're good. That kind of thing. But I haven't spoken to him." We put together our plates of nachos in silence and move back to the

living room.

“Okay, so what’s different today?” Micah settles herself on the floor with her plate on her knees. “You said you were going to call him. I thought you didn’t want to make him think there was anything between you and that was why you’ve been giving him the cold shoulder. Why now?”

I take a bite of a gooey chip piled high with deliciousness and chew, carefully thinking about my answer. “I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?”

“No. I don’t know.” There’s no need to tell her about the rose or my days curled on this exact spot on my couch—sobbing. Wishing for someone to find me and take care of me one minute and terrified someone might find me the next. No one else needs to know how I broke. Again. Not even Micah.

I lift my shoulders while my plate perches on the arm of the sofa next to me. “I woke up this morning to missed calls from my agent, my mother, you, and Trevor. And I don’t know ... something snapped in me. I thought it would be nice to hear his voice again. Talk to him like old times.” I look at her and shake my head. “I wanted to hear his voice, so I was going to call him.”

It sounds pitiful, even to my own ears.

Micah puts her food aside and moves to her knees, staring at me. “Just like that?”

“Yes, just like that,” I mumble around a mouthful of the most amazing guacamole and cheese. “But I didn’t get to, and now who knows what will happen? The feeling has passed, to be honest.”

She reaches over and pinches my leg. “Come on, Sabra.”

“Ouch! What was that for?” I rub the spot she attacked and kick my legs out in front of me. “I think that’s going to leave a bruise.”

“Oh, please. Don’t be such a baby.” Micah rolls her eyes better than any fourteen-year-old. “And even if it does, you deserve it for being so stubborn.” She picks up her plate and takes it to the sink in the kitchen with her back to me.

I follow her to do the same and lean my hip on the counter. The note is still there, mocking me. “What did *I* do?”

Micah whips around and throws her hands in the air. “Sabra, that man is head over heels for you. I don’t know what happened because you won’t tell me, but I do know there’s something more than what you *are* telling me.”

“I’m not ready to talk about it.” I turn and press my hands against the countertop. I keep pressing until I’m on the edge of pain, willing myself to gain control again. To not break again.

“I know that. I’m not judging you.” Her voice softens, and she takes a step closer to me. “I’m just saying, I don’t know what happened. But I do know Trevor and the way he stares at you. The way he has always stared at you.” One of her hands lands on my shoulder and the other covers one of my own. “He adores you and would do anything for you. It’s more than obvious to everyone.” She squeezes the top of my hand while I continue pressing down with my head bowed. “Everyone but you.”

I can’t look at her. It *is* more than obvious to everyone, but she’s wrong. It’s obvious to me too. I don’t know what to do with it, though, and that scares the crap out of me.

“I’m not trying to make you mad. You’re my best friend, and Trevor is a good friend. I want both of

you happy. I love you,” Micah whispers, giving my arm a light squeeze before she turns and ducks her head. “Now, are we still up for a movie and ... dessert?” She lifts the baggie full of brownies and spins around to wave them in front of my face. “You know you want to ...”

Relief that this conversation is over, and we can finally move on to something else races through me. I snatch the bag from her hands, feeling the muscles in my shoulder blades loosen. Anything sounds better than discussing this with her. “You’re on. What movie did you bring?”

Micah grabs a DVD box out of her bag and tosses it in my direction. “*Can’t Buy Me Love*. Patrick Dempsey for the win.” I miss it, and the movie clatters to the floor. Micah scoops up the box. “Wow, Sabra. You truly have no athletic ability at all.”

“No, I don’t. Although I was pretty flexible in the library on the fifth floor one day.” I laugh at the way Micah shimmies her hips and groans while walking to the DVD player to pop the movie in.

“You’re gross.”

“I know.” I snuggle into the couch and take a giant bite of brownie. “And Micah?”

“Yeah?”

“I love you too.”

She grabs a glass of wine, sits next to me, and lays her head on my shoulder. Taking a sip, she whispers, “I know. Now shut up, watch the movie, and eat your brownie.”



“Micah.” I roll over on the couch so I’m lying flat on my stomach with my face turned toward my best friend. She’s curled on the floor under a blanket with only the top of her head peeking out. The movie credits roll across the television screen. I reach for her knee and give a small push. “Micah.” I’m trying to be quiet in case she’s asleep.

“Oomph.” She barely moves her head in my direction. “Why are you yelling at me?”

“I’m whispering. Are you awake?” I nudge her knee again. “I think I should call Trevor *now*.”

“No, I’m not awake. And you are *not* whispering, Sabra.” Micah grabs the throw pillow next to her and tosses it at me. She misses and hits the end table. The lamp topples over, and the light bulb goes out, causing me to dissolve into giggles. The kind that never seem to want to stop.

Those brownies were some strong stuff.

“Go to sleep.” Micah rolls over onto her back and throws one arm over her eyes. The only light in

the living room with the lamp out is the blue screen of the television and the little bit of glow coming from above the stove in the kitchen.

“Nuh-uh. I can’t stop thinking about him.” I shove myself into a sitting position and stretch for my phone on the table next to me. “I’m going to call him.” Gravity is a bitch, and the room is spinning. I reach for it twice because the room, and my body, won’t behave.

“What time is it?” She yanks the blanket she has tucked around her to her chin and glares at me. “Put your phone down. Wait until morning, you whacko.”

“One o’clock. And I can’t,” I whine. “I haven’t talked to him in *so* long. He should know. I should tell him ... things.” I try to stand. My body feels heavy and clumsy, and I fall back on the cushions again. “All the things.” My head flops on the back of the couch, and those damn giggles start back up. “Don’t you want to call him with me? I’m going to call him.” I roll my face back to where Micah is still snuggled on the floor. “Tonight.”

“Whatever. You do you, girl. I’m going back to sleep.” She turns away from me. “Just remember in the morning”—she yawns— “I told you to wait.”

I sit there for a few minutes staring at Trevor’s name on my phone and listen to Micah’s breathing get heavier and more evened out. I don’t care what she says. She doesn’t know. Trevor adores me. Micah said it herself. He’ll be thrilled to hear from me. I’m going to call him.

Angling first one leg out in front of me and then the other, I push off the couch like a pregnant woman until my whole body is upright. It’s swaying, but I’m standing. I laugh some more and tiptoe down the hallway toward my bedroom, putting a hand on the wall to steady myself. If Micah could see me now, she’d be cackling her ass off. Wait. Micah can see me. I should go get her. What time is it again?

My phone says 1:11 when I pull it up in front of my nose. I should make a wish.

I wish Trevor would answer the phone and be happy to hear my voice and not upset because he’s on a date and I’m interrupting his sexy time.

What if I’m interrupting his sexy time?

I shut the door to my room and collapse face down on my bed with my phone in my hand. My thumb is doing a tap dance on the side of the case. There’s nothing to twirl on a phone.

I’m about to drift off to sleep when I hear a deep voice say, “Hello? Sabra? Hello?”

I look around my room in a panic and glance at the screen of my phone. Trevor. I called Trevor. Shit.

“Sabra? This isn’t funny. Are you there?” I can hear the worry in his tone.

“Hello?” I say, placing the phone against my ear. “Trevor?”

“Sabra.” Relief colors his voice. “Are you okay? What time is it?”

“I’m fine. Did I wake you? I’m sorry. My thumb hit your name on accident. And it’s 1:11. At least, it was last time I checked. I made a wish. Did you make a wish?”

“You what? You made a wish?” His voice doesn’t sound as groggy now. It sounds deep and delicious and travels through me to all the right places.

I snuggle into my covers and press the phone to my ear as if that will get me closer to him. “Yes. I made a wish.” I yawn in his ear. “I wished you weren’t having sexy times with that girl.”

“Sexy times? What girl?” he chokes out. “Who are you talking about?”

“I don’t know her name. Whatever girl you had a date with tonight. I didn’t want to interrupt your sexy times with her.” I clap my other hand over my eyes. “That’s not entirely true. I’m okay if I interrupt you.” I try to whisper this last part, but Micah said my whisper is broken. “You should kick her out.”

“Kick her out of where, Sabra?” Trevor chuckles. His laughter rumbles right down to my toes and makes them curl. “Have you been drinking?”

“Kick her out of your bed, of course. It’s rude for you to talk to me with another girl in your bed.” My eyes grow heavy, and the phone is hard to hold. “And a little. I had a glass of wine with Micah tonight. We had a girls’ night in.”

“Sabra.” My name snaps across the line, making my eyes pop open. I like it when he’s bossy. “Let’s get a couple of things straight, even though I don’t think you’ll remember them in the morning.”

“I’ll remember. I remember everything you’ve ever said, Trevor,” I mutter.

“Then I need you to remember this. First, there is no other girl in my bed. There has been no other girl since you.” He waits while I process this information.

“Okay, that’s good. She would have been mad at you for answering the phone during your sexy time.”

Trevor bursts out laughing. “Probably. And second, it sounds like you had more than one glass of wine, Say. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” I lift my arms above my head to stretch before putting the phone back to my ear. “I truly did only have one glass of wine, but I had two brownies. They were delicious. They made me feel so relaxed. I haven’t felt this good in ages.”

“I see,” he replies, amused. “You ate some brownies, huh? Was there anything special about these brownies?”

“Yes?” I whisper. “They’re not illegal anymore, but shhhh, don’t tell anyone.”

“Don’t worry. Your secret’s safe with me.” He hesitates. “*You’re* safe with me, Sabra.”

I take a quick breath and squeeze my eyes shut. He always says the best things. He always makes me feel safe. Trevor is always protecting me and coming to my aid. “You’re my knight in shining armor.”

He doesn’t even try to hold back his laughter anymore. “What? Now I’m your knight?”

“Yes, in shining armor.” I nod my head and grab at my phone as it slips out of my hand. “You. You’re *my* knight. No one else’s. Not even the girl you took on a date tonight.”

“Sabra, I told you, I didn’t—”

I keep talking over him and don’t listen to what he wants to tell me. My mouth won’t stop moving. “I love you, Trevor. No matter what. I’m sorry I’m used and broken and messed up. But I love you. I always will.”

The silence lingers on the other end. I think I can hear him breathing, but I’m so tired, and my eyes won’t stay open any longer. “Good night, Trevor. It was lovely to hear your voice again. Rest well.”

“Sabra, wait.” There’s a desperation in his voice that makes me open my eyes for a second.

“What? I’m so tired, Trevor. Can we finish talking in the morning please?” I yawn into the phone

again. “Thank you for calling me.”

“Sabra, I didn’t ... You know what? Never mind.” He sighs into the phone. “Good night, Say. Have sweet dreams.”

“You too.” I drop my phone onto the covers next to me and turn to my side, sink deeper into my pillows and blankets, and let the darkness engulf me.

CHAPTER TWELVE

“**R**ise and shine, sleepyhead,” a shrill voice sings out, and my body jumps up and down like I’m sleeping in a freaking bounce house. My head pounds as if someone is slamming me with a hammer. On repeat.

“What? What are you doing? And why are my blinds open?” I squint and try to look around the room. Micah stands over me with a pillow in her hands on my bed, grinning like a maniac. “Are you about to kill me? I’d let you right now. Put me out of my misery.”

“Oh, no.” She laughs. “You have to get up and face this day. No way am I letting you miss class and all this day has to offer you.”

“What are you talking about? Go back to bed,” I mutter and snuggle back under my covers. “I’ll do class tomorrow. Today’s not good for me.”

Cold air hits my warm skin when Micah rips the blankets off my body and a pillow lands on my face, all while continuing to laugh like a whack-a-doodle. “Oh, I think today is going to be a superb day for you. You’re not going to want to miss this.” She leans over and smacks my bare leg. “Come on, girl. Up and at ’em.”

I straighten out my tank top and prop myself on my elbows, giving her my best death glare. “What in the hell are you talking about?”

Micah has my phone in her hand and waves it in my face. “I’m talking about this.”

I’ve got nothing, so I stare at her.

“What? Are you telling me you don’t remember your extra-special phone call last night? The one you made right before you went to bed, it seems?” She plops down next to me and sits cross-legged.

“I didn’t make any phone calls.” But my voice trails off as flashes of me on the phone lying in my bed run through my mind. “Oh no.”

Micah grins at me like the Cheshire cat. “Oh, yes.”

“No. I went to sleep. I couldn’t have.”

“You did. And he’s already texted you this morning.” She smiles wickedly. “I hope you don’t mind, but I might have peeked.”

“You what?” I sit straight up in bed wide awake now. “How did you get my password?”

“Oh please, don’t act like you have some super-secret password on your phone, Sabra. Your birthday? Seriously? You do know the FBI or CIA are never going to hire you, right?” She rolls her eyes and hands my phone to me. “Do you want to know what he said?”

“I think I can read it for myself, thanks,” I grumble at her.

“I’m sure you can, but it would be so much *more* fun for me to tell you.” She drops backward on the bed and turns her head to face me. Her hair looks perfect already, and her eyes are sparkling.

I hate her.

“Why are you so bright-eyed and bushy-tailed this morning? You made as many stupid mistakes as

I did last night.” I drop the phone on my pillow, throw my legs over the bed, and stomp to my bathroom to pee.

“No way. You *totally* made more mistakes than I did. Your call history proves it. You called him at 1:14, Sabra. I wonder what he’s thinking this morning,” she yells through the door. “Oh, wait. I know what he’s thinking this morning because I’ve already done my morning reading on your phone.” She’s hysterical.

I pull the bathroom door open with way more force than necessary, planning to march to my closet and get dressed for class. But I stop short because Micah is standing in my way, holding my phone out to me.

“Don’t you want to know?”

“No. I don’t.” I shift around her to slide my closet doors open and stare at my clothes. “I’m sure I made a fool out of myself on the phone with him.” I yank my favorite pair of jeans off the hanger and step into them. “And it’s your fault. And those stupid brownies, which you brought over here, so it’s all your fault.”

“You don’t remember your conversation?” She sits on the edge of my bed.

“Vaguely. I remember talking to him. And the sound of his voice.” It was so good to hear his voice again. “But that’s about it. I don’t recall what we talked about.”

“It couldn’t have been all bad,” she says.

I glance at her while I button the top of my jeans and grab a mocha-colored cashmere sweater off another hanger. “Why do you say that?” The sweater glides over my head, muffling my words before it pops out of the neck hole.

“Because he wants to see you.”

“What?” I lunge for her hand holding out my phone to me once again. “He said that?”

“Yes. He asked what you had planned for today, so I assume that means he wants to see you.” She nods at me with a smirk on her face. “I guess he could just be asking.”

I slide my finger across the screen and tap the messages icon, watching his name pop up as I sit next to Micah. To tap or not to tap, that is the question.

“Read it,” she demands and nudges me in the side with her elbow.

I bite my lip and tap on Trevor’s name.

TREVOR: Hey Sabra, it was great talking to you last night. What do you have going on today?

“How do I respond to that?” I ask, tossing my phone next to me. “What am I supposed to say?”

Micah looks at me like I’m nuts. “You could answer his question.”

I roll my eyes at her. “Yes, but then what?”

“Wait for him to reply?” She stands and walks to the door. “Don’t overthink this, Sabra. You called him last night for a reason. Reply and see what happens,” she calls over her shoulder. “I’m going to get dressed. You have class in forty minutes, and I have my first dance class to teach. We need to hurry.”

“Micah,” I holler down the hall after her. She turns around, and I watch her eyes widen before a

smile breaks out across her face.

“It will be fine. It’s Trevor. You know him, and you like him. A lot.” She laughs at me and waves her hands in a shooing motion. “Finish getting dressed for class and answer his question.” She walks away and turns into the living room where I can’t see her anymore.

Answer his question. I can do that. One quick sentence. That’s it. I pick my phone back up and tap out a quick message to him.

SABRA: Hey, I have class this morning and work tonight.

I hit send and throw my phone back on the bed like it’s going to scorch me before running into my bathroom to do my hair and makeup. I refuse to sit there and wait to see if he replies like a starry-eyed schoolgirl. Even if I am technically still in school. I’m twenty-four and getting my master’s. I’m a school woman, dammit.

“Are you ready to go?”

I jump and brace myself against the counter. Micah stands propped against the door watching me. She looks amazing, of course. Nothing on her face even hints at drinking wine, eating marijuana brownies, and staying up way too late. I stare at the dark circles under my eyes that no amount of *Bye Bye Undereye* concealer is going to cover.

Awesome.

“Yes, let’s go before we’re both late.” I slip my favorite Toms on my feet.

“Here.” She picks my phone up off the bed and hands it to me again.

“Thanks.” I start to slip it into my back pocket.

“He replied to you.” She leans toward me. “In case you were wondering.”

I stand there like a statue while I watch Micah head to the apartment door and pick up her bag and purse. Taking a deep breath, I hold my phone in front of me and bring it back to life with a slip of my finger. Trevor’s message is blinding me.

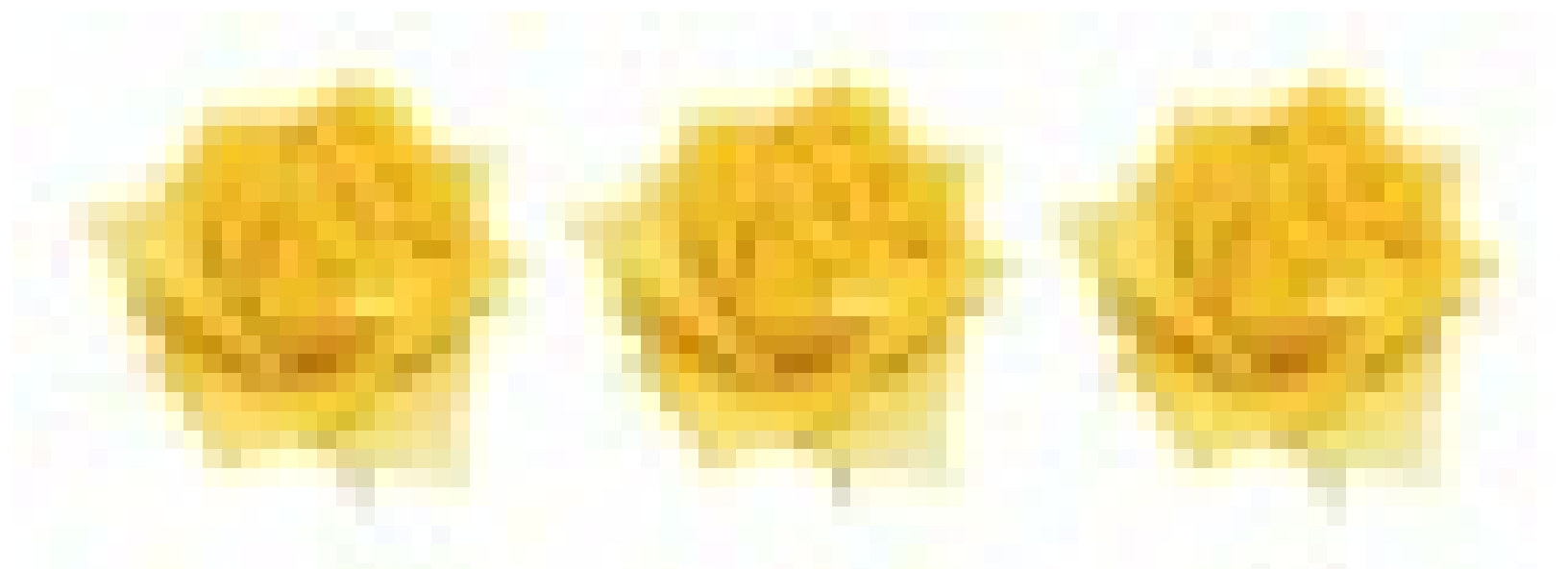
TREVOR: Awesome. Want to meet for coffee? 2pm at the Coffee Haus?

He wants to see me.

Micah yells down the hallway at me, ready to get to the dance studio. “Are you coming?”

I wait a second before hitting the reply button and typing out one little word to him.

SABRA: Yes.

Three pixelated yellow suns are arranged horizontally at the top of the page. Each sun is composed of a grid of yellow and orange squares, giving them a low-resolution, digital appearance. They are set against a light blue background with a subtle grid pattern.

The line's to the door when I push inside the Coffee Haus and look for Trevor. I haven't been here for a while, so I forgot how crazy it is in the afternoon once the bulk of classes let out for the day. People lean against walls waiting for their lattes, frozen drinks, and teas to be made. I watch their eyes dart from table to table in hopes one will open by the time the barista calls their name.

My own eyes land on a table filled with three young underclassmen girls. They're hunched over in their seats whispering to each other and giggling. One of the girls, a pretty redhead with porcelain skin, looks over her shoulder with a wide grin before she turns back to her friends, and they dissolve in laughter again. I can't help but look behind them to see what they're gossiping about. My own grin threatens to split my face when I spot Trevor lounging in a leather armchair behind them.

He's slumped in the chair as if he owns the place, legs stretched out in front of him and head tilted back with his eyes closed. He still looks young enough to pass for an upperclassman at the college instead of the associate professor he is here. The smirk on his face tells me he's awake and tuned into what's happening in front of him. There's an empty armchair with a worn leather briefcase in the seat next to his. A small round table between the two chairs holds two cups with steam rising out of them. I can't blame the girls. Those jeans hug his legs in all the right places and the untucked button up with the sleeves rolled up to his forearms gives some serious arm porn.

I watch the redhead get up and shuffle her way through the crowd toward him. He hasn't seen me yet since his eyes are closed, so I hold myself back and watch with interest at what's about to happen. Either this poor girl is going to get her heart broken or I am. I should find out if this is a mistake now.

"Excuse me?" The beautiful porcelain doll girl nudges the knee of the leg outstretched in front of Trevor. "Do you mind if I take this seat?" Trevor's head slowly lifts, and his eyes open into slits.

"I'm sorry?"

"This seat. I was hoping I could steal it from you?" She bats her eyelashes at him and waits for a beat before putting her hand on the strap of his bag so she can move it to sit.

"Oh, sorry, that seat's taken this afternoon. I'm waiting for someone who should be here any minute." He puts his head back and closes his eyes again.

The poor girl looks dejected and put out. She clearly did not get the reaction she was hoping for. "Are you sure? You've been here a while." A bubble of laughter escapes her. "Maybe they stood you up."

“Martha,” her friends hiss at her, motioning for her to come back and join them. They see sweet, delusional Martha striking out. Other students close enough to hear are now gawking at the exchange. Trevor lifts his head again and stares at the girl who won’t take no for an answer.

Martha waves them off with a shake of her head and decides to sit on the arm of the chair instead. “I’m sorry. That was rude. I can’t imagine a girl being stupid enough to stand up a guy as good looking as you are.”

Trevor sits up straight in his seat and looks at her with wide eyes and a slightly open mouth. The poor guy is in shock.

I start to walk over and put him out of his misery from having to deal with her when I hear Trevor say, “Martha, is it?” She nods and smiles at him with a sweet blush filling her cheeks. “Martha, I’m sorry, but you can’t take that seat. I’m waiting for someone important.” Trevor pops up when he sees me standing a couple of feet away, watching the exchange. “And here she is now. See? She didn’t stand me up.” He holds his hand out to me and winks.

“No, I’d never do that to you, Professor Collins.” I squeeze his fingers in mine while looking pointedly at her. This girl needs to get off my chair.

“Of course not. I’m sorry,” Martha stammers and slinks away, back to her table and friends.

“It’s okay, Martha,” Trevor calls out. He turns to me and smiles. “I was here early to make sure I could snag two chairs. I didn’t want to give you any excuse not to stay.” He leans toward me and whispers in my ear, “I’ve missed you, Say.”

I pull back a smidge and stare in his eyes, our fingers now intertwined. Goose bumps break out on my arms. I let go of his hand and move to sit but soften it with a smile as I slide back into the armchair. “I’ve missed you, too, Trevor.”

He grins at me again with a twinkle in his eye and leans over me with his hands on the arms of the chair, caging me in and encroaching in my space. “Did you? Do you want to tell me how much?”

“Not even a little.” I laugh at him, not wanting him to have the upper hand. “I think your head is big enough without me blowing more hot air into it, *Professor*.”

Trevor takes a step back and slaps his knees with his hand while I throw my hand over my mouth, realizing what I said to him. He bends over at the waist, laughing and wiping his eyes with the back of his hand. “That’s what she said.” He looks at me with a mischievous smirk and whispers, “Those things can be arranged again, Sabra,”

I smack his arm and spit out, “That’s not what I meant.” Burying my face in my hands, I groan. “I’m so embarrassed.”

Trevor reaches over and pulls my hands off my face. “Don’t be embarrassed. We used to joke like this all the time. This is us, Sabra. We’re allowed to be us.” He picks one of the cups up off the table between us and hands it to me. “Earl Grey with one sugar packet, yes?”

“You remember the tea I drink and how I like it?” I grasp the cup and lift it to my lips. The smell of Earl Grey tea alone makes me relax. “I don’t recall telling you that.”

“I pay attention when it comes to you. I always have.” He sits back in his seat and takes a sip of his coffee while he looks pointedly at me over the rim. I know his coffee is black and, in my opinion, disgusting. But it’s all he ever drinks, and he likes it for some insane reason.

“Thank you for the tea, Trevor.”

He puts his cup back on the table and props his forearms on his knees, making his shirt stretch across his back. I want to reach out and trace the lines of his muscles beneath the thin cotton fabric.

“You’re welcome. Thanks for meeting me this afternoon.” His eyes don’t look away from mine. “Now ...” He places his hand on my thigh and gives me a pat. “Tell me everything I’ve missed over the past couple of weeks. What’s going on with you these days?”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

It's a simple question—one any friend you haven't spoken to in weeks would ask—but I don't know how to answer it. Instead, I sit there and stare at him, thinking back to when these same questions from him would have been so easy to answer.

Oh, you know, classes, work, and auditions. Same ole, same ole.

I went on a date last week with this guy from my psychology class. All he did was discuss his mother. Someone needs to analyze that.

Micah is trying to talk me into going skydiving with her again. I'm not sure she's getting the message that my answer is NO.

"Sabra?" Trevor smirks at me. "You okay?"

"What? Oh, yeah, I'm fine. Why do you ask?" I pick at nonexistent lint on my favorite jeans until I feel his warm hand reach over and still mine.

"Because you seem nervous. And I don't know why that would be."

I lift my head, getting lost in his eyes.

"It's just me, Say. Still your best friend."

My shoulders fall back as the heaviness weighing them down lifts, and I exhale audibly. "I know. But I'm not sure I know how to do this now. It was so easy, and we ... I ... whatever. It's complicated now."

"It doesn't have to be." He lets go of my hand and sits back in his chair. One of his hands slides down his face and around to his neck before he looks at me seriously. "I've missed you. I've wanted to see you and talk to you. And now, we're doing that." He smiles and leans toward me again. "Nothing complicated about that, is there?"

"No." I shake my head at him. "It's just—" My phone buzzes against my backside, and I slide it out of my back pocket, turning it over to see the name "Eleanor" flashing at me. "I'm sorry. It's Eleanor."

Trevor nods at me and waves a hand in my direction. "Go. Do your thing. I'll save your seat." He winks at me.

"I'll just be a minute. Stay away from the kiddies." I stand and head toward the door, sticking my tongue out at him. "Hello, Eleanor?"

"Hello, darling," she replies.

I step into the crisp air, feeling the cold seep through my sweater.

"I have news."

"Okay. Is it good news? Do I need to sit?" I head toward a bench placed along the sidewalk just in case. I should sit. Today's been a day. No telling what she's about to throw at me.

"No." She laughs. "This is good news. I spoke to the casting director."

Those six words make all the air whoosh out of me. I've been waiting for this call, wanting and willing it to go my way. A hint of good to come during the crazy. And here's Eleanor, telling me she

has good news after she spoke to the casting director. This could be it.

“I’m listening. What did she have to say?” I plop my rear on the bench and wait for the other shoe to drop.

“She wants to see you again. And this time, the director is in town to be there too.”

Silence falls across the line, and I wait for her to say more, but nothing comes. I withdraw the phone from my ear and give it a quick once-over to make sure we didn’t get disconnected. Nope, still there.

“She wants to see me again with the director? What does that mean, Eleanor?”

“Exactly what I said, love. They want you to come back to LA for a second audition. This time, more people than just the casting director will be in the room. About five to six people from what I understand, including the director and an actor they’re looking at for your romantic counterpart. They’ve narrowed it down to you and two others.”

“There’s only three of us now?” I squeak out. I was sure I’d blown it that day. I mean, I thought I’d done fine in the actual audition, but I was almost positive the only reason she was seeing me was as a favor to Eleanor.

“I told you she was impressed with you in La Jolla and interested, Sabra.”

“I know you did, but I thought I’d blown it.” I slide my fingers through my hair and twirl the ends of a chunk over and over. “This is huge news. Thank you so much, Eleanor. I’m thrilled.” I stand and do a little spin next to the bench, trying to hold in the excitement and stay professional on the phone.

“Don’t thank me yet. You still have a second audition to go,” she replies. The sound of traffic and honking rings out in the background of our call.

“Are you in LA? Who’s honking at you?” I pace up and down the sidewalk.

“I’m in New York for the week, but I spoke to Christine, and she’s going to meet you at your audition. I’ll send you all the details in an email this evening, but the audition is Monday at ten a.m. If you have class or work, you’ll have to skip it again.”

“That’s fine. I’ll work it all out. They’ll understand.” I walk back to the bench but can’t sit. Nervous energy pours out of me. “And Christine will be there too? That’s great.”

“Of course. I’m sure she’ll be calling you later today. She’s not going to have you go into one of your biggest auditions without her there. And this one *is* huge, Sabra. You’ll need to pay special attention to the instructions laid out in the email, darling.”

“Yes, I understand.” I look through the windows of the Coffee Haus to where Trevor’s sitting. He’s looking straight at me, his eyes questioning, but a smile on his face.

“I have to run. I’m late for a meeting, and I can’t find the damn car that’s supposed to pick me up. If you have questions before Monday, call or email me. Do you understand?” Her voice goes in and out as the hustle and bustle of the New York City streets muffle her words.

“I’ve got it. I’ll make sure I’m ready.” I walk toward the Coffee Haus again. “I’ll let you know how it goes on Monday,” I squeal into the phone. So much for professionalism.

“Talk soon, darling.” She chuckles. “Have a good day.”

My hand lands on the door to push it open when it swings inward and I go soaring forward, planting my face into something warm and solid. Arms fly around me to keep me upright, and my

hands land on two globes that are both soft and firm at the same time.

“Hello again to you too,” Trevor mutters into my ear. His strong hands steady me and brush my hair back behind my ears.

I let go of his butt, throwing my arms out to the sides and pushing my breasts harder into his chest. Did I just grab his ass? I take a few steps back to give myself and his delectable, chiseled body some breathing room and stammer, “Sorry about that.” My eyes stay on the ground. There’s no way I can look him in the face now that I felt him up.

“Sabra.” His voice closes in, and the heat coming off him wraps around me.

“Yes?” I slide back a baby step and let the hair fall in my face again, but Trevor puts one finger beneath my chin and gently lifts my head. He bends until we’re eye to eye.

“Nothing to be sorry about.” He slides his fingers around my neck and tunnels them in my hair. A shiver dances down my spine with the touch of his hand at the base of my neck.

Traitor.

“Did Eleanor have good news?” He glides his hand down my arm to grab my fingers again. This is the second time we’ve ended up holding hands.

I forget about my embarrassment as the elation rockets back through my body. My cheeks feel like they’re going to split from the smile on my face. “Yes. I have a callback, a second audition for the movie I told you about. It’s on Monday. And my talent manager is going to be there with me. I’m so nervous. And excited.” I laugh at his wide eyes. “I’m a lot of things, I guess.”

Trevor moves closer to me, crowding my space as we stand in the doorway. “There’s my girl. I do love that smile.”

I pull my head back farther to see his eyes. The view of his strong jaw and beautiful lips from where I’m standing are a temptation I have to remind myself I can’t have.

“Excuse me?” We turn to see Martha and her friends standing behind us. The sweet redhead has morphed into a fire-breathing dragon, rolling her eyes and motioning to the door we’re still blocking. “We’d like to get out of here?”

“Sorry, Martha.” Trevor flashes his panty-dropping smile and spins us out of the way without releasing me. “We got lost in the moment.”

Martha and her cronies flounce out the door with their noses in the air.

“Wow.” I lean my forehead against his shoulder to hide my laughter.

“So, we should go celebrate,” he declares with a light in his eyes.

“Celebrate what? I haven’t gotten the job yet, Trevor.” I take a step back, but he grabs my hand and hauls me against his chest.

“No, but you will. I know it. So, what do you want to do? Anything you want. It’s on me.” He smiles wickedly. “I’ll even let you grab my ass again.”

“Trevor.” I move away and try to act mad while not-so-secretly enjoying his attention. “I said I was sorry about that.” I pout in his direction.

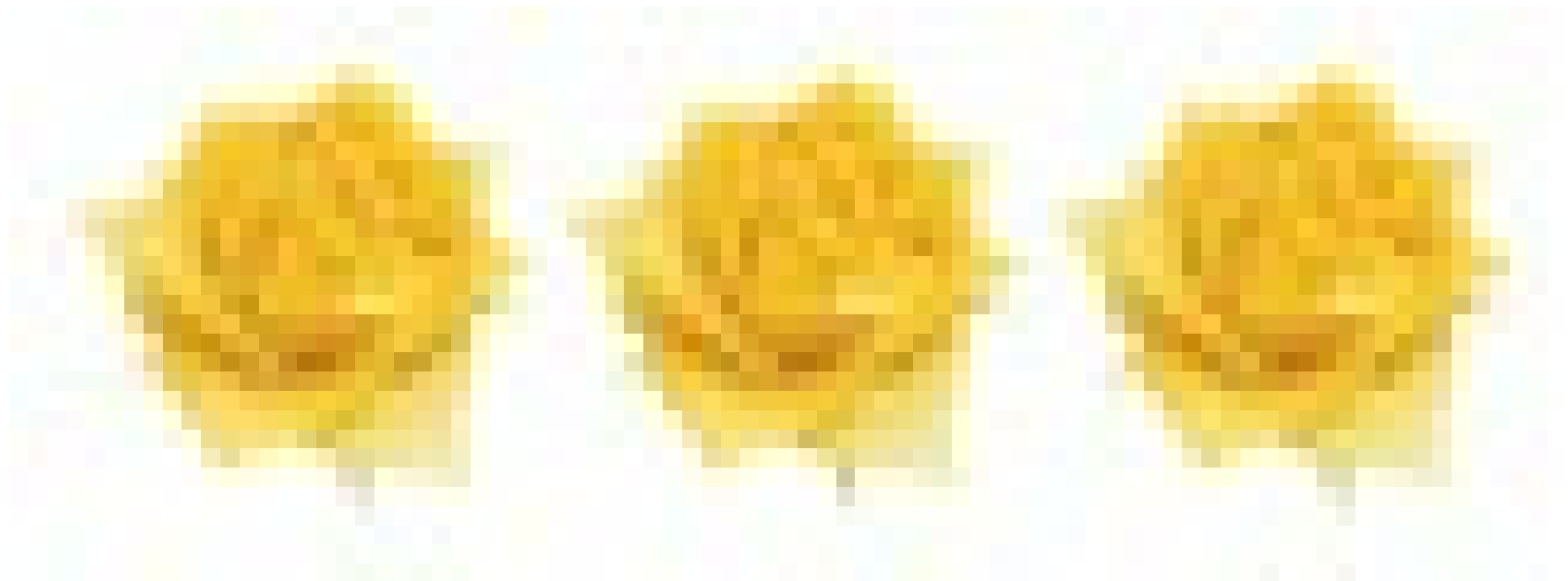
“I’m kidding.” He yanks on my hand to tug me closer and slides his arm around my shoulders, walking us out the door of the Coffee Haus. “What’s your pleasure?” He points us in the direction of the parking lot.

I glance at him and say in a singsong voice, “Okay. I could use a mani-pedi.”

Trevor’s head swivels in my direction with wide eyes, but he doesn’t miss a beat. “Then a mani-pedi it is.”

“You would go do that with me?” I chuckle at the look of determination on his face. “I was kidding. I didn’t think you’d actually go for it.”

“Sabra, I told you I’d do anything for you, and I meant it. I’ll even get my toes pedi’d for you.” He shrugs as we walk to his car. “Now lead the way, superstar. Tell me where to go.”



“I can’t believe I let you talk me into this.” Trevor shakes his head and stares at his toes. His feet are stuffed into hot pink, flimsy flip-flops, and I can’t help laughing at the dark blue nail polish glittering at me as I sit with my fingers under the UV light. He’s sitting next to me with his head in his hands covering his face.

“First, you didn’t have to go along with it,” I say, tapping my own magenta toes under the table. “And second, I don’t know why you said yes when she asked you if you wanted to choose a color.” Laughter bubbles out of me. It’s been this way all afternoon. I’d forgotten how much I laughed when I was with Trevor.

“I didn’t know what to say when she led me over to the wall of nail polishes and told me to pick one. Also, she was hard to understand,” he huffs under his breath and slaps his knees with his hands. “I thought it was something I had to do.”

I clear my throat and try to catch my breath. “You didn’t think it was weird someone would *make* you choose a color? And out of *all* the colors on the wall, you didn’t think to choose something the same color as your skin tone if you had to choose one? Like a nude? You went with *glittered navy blue*?” I gently tap my fingernails to make sure they’re dry before standing and staring at him.

“What are you doing,” he asks me, panic filling his eyes. “Where are you going?”

“My nails are dry. We can go now.” I walk toward the door with a wave at my nail technician. “Thank you, Alicia. See you next time.”

“Oh, honey, yes,” Alicia replies in her thick Southern drawl, pointing at Trevor who is now standing beside me. “And make sure to bring that hunk of gorgeous with you next time too.”

I look over at Trevor and see red creeping up his neck. “I sure will. Maybe you can talk him into pink next time,” I holler at her, snickering.

Alicia laughs at me and waves back.

I put my hand on the door and smirk. “Are you ready, or would you like to stay here longer? I’m sure Alicia would be happy to discuss waxing your eyebrows.”

His hand lands on mine before I can push through to go outside. “Wait. I can’t go outside like this,” he grumbles, waving his right foot in the air. “What will people think when they see me in pink flip-flops?”

“That’s what you’re worried about, Trevor? Your toes have blue glittery nail polish on them. I think that ship has sailed.” I snort and push past him into the clean air and beautiful blue skies.

Trevor looks in both directions before darting through the door and running to his truck, pink flip-flops flapping all the way to the driver’s side. And I can’t help it. I sit on the curb and slump over laughing. My breath sticks in my throat, and I bend forward to put my head between my knees. I should pull myself together, but I can’t. I’m going to pass out.

“Get in the truck, Sabra.” Trevor has pulled the car out of the parking spot and moved closer to where I’m sitting on the ground.

“I can’t get up. Or move. Or do anything but laugh.” I cackle. “Seriously, Trev, you may have to leave me here. It’s okay, though. I can die happy with the vision of you running in those things dancing in my head.”

“You know you’re not funny, right?” he asks through his window.

“Oh, I’m a little funny.” I beam at him and hold my fingers an inch apart. “You know what I think?”

“What?” He’s wary, and he should be.

I’m still snickering, but I try to cover it behind my hand. “I think you may need to get out of the car and carry me. I don’t think my legs will hold me up now.” I slump over to the side. “I’m weak from all the laughing.” I burst out in more giggles and practically lie on the concrete.

“Oh, yeah?” Trevor’s smile turns mischievous, which shuts the giggles right up. I see the gleam in his eye and sit up straight. I’ve seen that one before. The one right before he’s about to do something naughty.

“Nope. Never mind.” I stand and take a step toward the car, but Trevor is faster than I am. He opens the door and stalks toward me. Those pink flip-flops don’t slow him down.

“Oh no, Say. I promised you *whatever* you wanted today, and that’s exactly what I meant.” He takes another step forward. “You want to be carried? So be it.”

I take a step backward and fall as I trip on the curb behind me, but Trevor grabs me and yanks me toward him with one hand while lifting me over his shoulder with the other.

“It’s *your* day, after all.”

“Trevor,” I shriek at him. “Put me down.” He saunters around his car in those fuchsia shoes with me tossed over him like a sack of potatoes as if I weigh nothing. And my ass is in the air for all to see. Awesome.

“Sure, I’ll put you down,” Trevor replies as he hoists me even higher onto his shoulder, causing me to squirm when he puts his hand behind my knee. I look around and see a few people stop on the sidewalk, watching us and whispering to each other. “On one condition.”

I grunt. “What’s that?” His hand creeps up the back of my thigh and smacks one of my cheeks

enough to sting. “Hey!” I peek at the onlookers. They’re all laughing at the scene we’re causing.

He chuckles and rubs his hand back and forth where he spanked me. “I’ll put you down when you agree to have dinner with me. Tomorrow night.”

“Tomorrow? But my audition is tomorrow. It could be late in the evening when I get back.” I hit his back with my palm. “Seriously, Trevor, put me down and let me walk.”

“Nope.” He turns in a circle, laughing and waving at everyone who is now openly gawking. Then he leans his hip on his truck with me still on his shoulder and raises his voice. “You have dinner with me tomorrow night or we stay here like this. I could do this all day and all night.” He drops his voice. “I don’t mind having your parts this close to my face.”

Is he flirting with me?

“Oh my gosh, Trevor.” I half-heartedly hit him in the rear this time.

“Go to dinner with him,” some brunette hollers at me. “I’d get me some of *that* for sure.” She high-fives her friend, and they continue into the little boutique next to the salon.

“What will it be, Say? Dinner with me, or do I need to start walking down the road in these ridiculous shoes while you ride my shoulder?”

His laughter makes me bounce up and down on him, and my body clearly doesn’t mind this in the least. Warmth spreads through my limbs and chest, pooling in the places I shouldn’t be thinking about right now. I’m going to have to have a talk with my body. The turncoat.

“Fine. Dinner. Tomorrow night,” I gasp out at him. He pulls me backward, and I do a slow slide down his body. When we’re lined up perfectly, and I can feel how much this has affected him too, he lets go of me and opens the car door.

“Awesome. I’m glad we could come to an agreement.” He gestures at the open door and passenger seat with a lopsided grin. “After you, beautiful.”

“You are incorrigible. You know that, right?” I fall into the seat and yank my legs in while I glower at him. “What am I going to do with you?”

Trevor leans into the car and crowds my space through the open door. He grabs the seat belt, bends over to buckle me in, and gazes into my eyes. “I can think of a few things.”

He straightens himself, gives me an eyeful of the one location I shouldn’t be looking, and shuts the door. But not before I notice the prominent bulge in his jeans. And I can’t keep the smile off my face.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“Sabra, are you prepared to put your master’s work on hold for a year if you get the part? Does that bother you?” The casting director peers at me over her red cat-eyed glasses. She has dark hair with a white stripe down one side, and it’s pulled back in a loose chignon. She’s gorgeous in a “she could be the perfect evil villain in a movie” kind of way, and she has a kind smile. It’s a knowing smile like she has a secret. Her name is Wendy, but I can’t stop myself from calling her Cruella in my head.

I smile back at her. “Yes, I’m prepared for that. School will always be here to come back to when I’m ready, but this opportunity is only here once. I mean, well, you know what I mean.”

Perfect, Say. Way to wow them with your words.

“Great. In the directions we sent, we asked you to not only be ready to do a reading with Joe ...” She nods her head in the direction of the extremely good-looking guy sitting across the room from me. His muscles have muscles. “But to also be prepared to do some physical interactions with him. Are you comfortable with that?”

I glance at Joe again and work hard to keep my features blank and neutral. Because Joe is hot—the melt your butter kind of hot—but his eyes have been raking me up and down since I walked through the door. There’s no doubt I’m naked in his mind, and who knows what these interactions are going to be. The movie is a romantic comedy, so I’m expecting a kissing scene and maybe more. He seems like a sleaze ball. An intensely *good-looking* sleaze ball, but a job is a job—sleaze ball or no.

“Sure. None of it bothers me,” I lie through my teeth.

“Perfect.” The director stands and walks around the table. He’s been leaning against the wall behind Cruella watching our conversation with shrewd eyes. “Joe, can you come meet Sabra, please?”

Joe stands, strolls over to me, and extends his gigantic hand. He’s much bigger than I thought he was, and even though I’m tall, I feel tiny next to him. I place my hand in his to shake only to have him lean down and kiss my knuckles.

“Ma Cherie, it is a pleasure to meet you.”

Gross. That was wet.

He looks at me with squinting eyes, still bending over my hand, and I intuitively know he doesn’t think I’m up for this task. I tug my fingers out of his hold, and instead of wiping the slobber on the back of my jeans like I want to, I do what I do best. I act.

I cup his cheek in one swift movement, rubbing my thumb along his cheekbone. “You do know how to charm a girl, don’t you?”

I run my hand along his neck and let my fingers play with the hair curling at the back. His eyes light up in surprise as he watches me play the game he started. My eyes shine back at him with a challenge. One I intend to win, even if he thinks I can’t meet him toe to toe.

This man likes a good challenge. I’ve seen it before. He wants to see how far he can push me, and

he doesn't think I can handle whatever he gives, or that I can match his talent. I quirk one eyebrow at him and smirk. Bring it, big boy.

“Okay, you two.” The director laughs and takes two steps backward until he perches on the table behind him. He looks at Cruella and waves back and forth between us. “I see chemistry is not going to be a problem.”

She gives him a knowing smile.

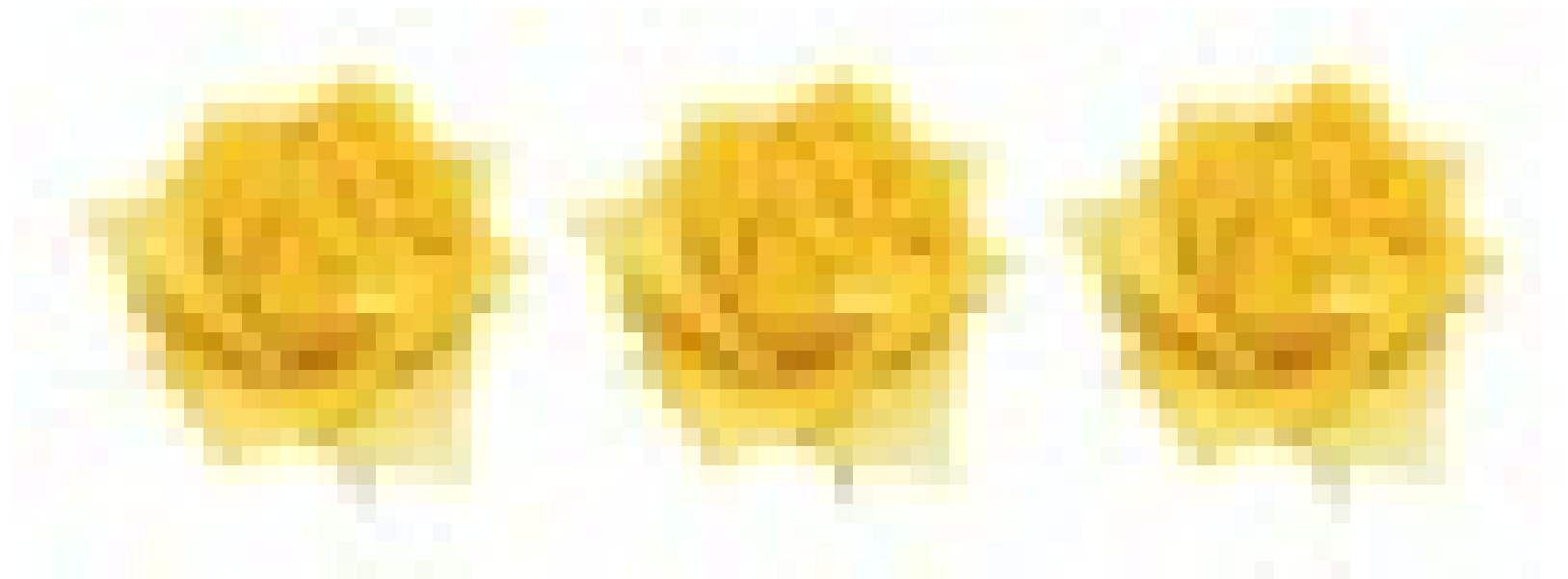
A grin lights up his face as he points at the script in his hand. “Let's take it from the top, shall we? Right where the hero is walking down the street and the heroine opens the door of the coffee shop, bumping into him and spilling her coffee on his chest.” He waits a beat for us to get in position. “Everyone know where we are? Ready to go?”

“Yes,” Joe and I respond together.

He swings his head in my direction, chuckling. Then he puts his game face on. His eyes shutter, and the muscles in his face soften. Joe looks like a different man. One every girl in the country is going to swoon over on the big screen. I plaster a soft smile on my face and know—it's go-time.

“Great, you can begin when you're ready.” The director nods in both of our directions.

I stride toward Joe, steeling myself for whatever lies in store for me this morning and intending to knock them all on their asses.



“Thank you so much,” I say, shaking hands with Wendy and the director.

“No, thank you.” The director looks me in the eye before turning to my talent manager. “Give my regards to Eleanor, Christine. I'll be in touch. Always good to see you.”

“You too, Rob.” She leans in and does the double kiss thing I've never understood. “We'll talk soon.”

Christine grabs my elbow and steers me toward the door. “Give a little wave to him, dear,” she mutters under her breath. I do as she says right before we walk out the door and into the sunshine. We keep walking down the sidewalk and toward the parking lot together before she stops and stares long and hard at me. “How do you think it went?”

“I think it was okay. Joe was a little challenging, but he quickly realized I was up for the task.” I laugh as I remember his wide eyes when I threw in an impromptu kiss during one scene.

“He’ll learn ...” Her eyes look over my shoulder. “You know what? It seems he might learn sooner rather than later.” She smiles at me. “I’ll call you this afternoon, and we can discuss it further. It seems someone is waiting for you.”

“What? Who?” I whip my head around.

Joe waves at us from where he’s standing on the corner, shuffling his feet.

“No way.”

“You might have been more than a *little* convincing, love.” Christine chuckles. “Don’t forget to call Eleanor and fill her in. We’ll chat later. Until then, have fun.” She wiggles her eyebrows at me, gives Joe a wave over my shoulder, and turns to go to her car.

Crap. What am I supposed to do now? I hitch my purse further on my shoulder, push my chest out, and march toward my own car looking straight ahead. I read somewhere that when you come face to face with a predator, you shouldn’t look him in the eye. This feels right in this situation too.

Keep my head down. Ignore the crazy hot macho pig. Get in my car and go home.

“Sabra?” Joe calls after me.

Shit.

“Yes?” I stop and watch him jog up next to me. “Did you need me? Did I forget something in the room?”

“No, I was wondering if you had plans this afternoon. Maybe we could go grab a bite to eat?”

I start walking in the direction of my car again, but he keeps pace with me.

“We could look at the script together some more?”

Wonders never cease. Joe is a real boy, after all, and his nerves are showing. It would almost be cute—endearing—if he hadn’t been so oily for the first thirty minutes of the audition.

“Go over the script? But the audition is done.” I stop walking, turn to look at him, and spread my arms out. “Do you think they’re going to want to see us for another audition?” I widen my eyes and feign panic, letting one hand cover my mouth.

“No, I don’t think so. I feel confident you’ll get the role, and we’ll be working together more. I thought it might be nice to”—he pauses to clear his throat and looks around— “get to know each other more.”

“That’s sweet of you, Joe. Thank you for having such confidence in me and my audition, but I don’t want to jinx it.” We’re steps away from my car. Five, maybe six feet to freedom. “I do appreciate the offer, though. It’s really, *really* sweet of you,” I repeat and turn to hurry to the promise land. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“What? Sabra?” Joe puts his hand on my arm and tries to turn me to look at him. “Hey, you’re white as a sheet. Are you okay? Do you need something?”

Shaking my head, I run my free hand through my hair and try to calm down. “No, I ...”

“I see.” Joe spies what’s caught my attention and takes a step back, dropping his hand quickly. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know you were seeing someone.” He frowns at me. “I mean, of course you are. You’re beautiful and smart.” Joe grabs my hand and gives my fingers a squeeze. “He’s a lucky guy, Sabra. I hope he treats you nice.”

“Thanks,” I mutter and turn to watch him jog away in the direction he came.

I don't want to look again. This can't be happening. I'm in downtown Los Angeles, for crying out loud.

I turn back around with my eyes closed, knowing I can't ignore what's right in front of me. My eyes blink open despite the trepidation skating down my spine, and I stare at the windshield of my car. The world around me spins, and I steady myself with one hand on the roof of my Mustang.

Because he's been here. I reach over and yank two yellow roses out from under my windshield wiper. There's no note, but I don't need one.

Lucas has been here. I'm not safe anywhere.

I toss the roses on the ground and peer through the windows of the back seat to be sure.

He's been here.

I open the driver's side door and slide into the seat, locking myself in the car. My hands shake so badly, I can't get the key in the ignition, so I drop my head on the steering wheel, count to one hundred, and practice my deep breathing techniques. After a few minutes pass, I get the car started and pull out of the parking lot. I drive for an hour, continually glancing in my rearview mirror, before my heart rate calms down.

I'm almost home when a shrill ring blares through my car and shakes me out of the daze I'm in, making me jump. I swerve a bit, hitting the bumps on the side of the road, while I fumble to hit the button on my steering wheel.

"Hello?" My voice sounds weak.

"Where are you? Are we still on for six thirty?" Trevor's voice echoes through my car.

"I'm about five minutes away from my apartment," I reply and exit the highway.

"How did the audition go?"

"Who knows? It was interesting, and I think I did okay, but you know how these things go." I look over my shoulder and change lanes. "It's been a long day." I'm not sure if I want to talk to anyone right now. Being alone in a bubble bath and crawling between my sheets sounds lovely.

"No way, Sabra." Trevor's voice grows louder, ping-ponging through my car. "You promised."

"What are you talking about?" I try to sound indignant. He's caught me and knows I was about to beg off our dinner date.

"I think you forget how long I've known you." He chuckles into the phone. The sound of his laughter warms me a little. "You're not getting out of dinner with me. I have plans, and they involve you."

"Is that so?" I smile despite the hollow feeling I have in my chest. "Do I get to know what those plans are?"

"Of course," he quips. "As soon as I pick you up at six thirty, I'll loop you in." The smugness in his voice is infuriating—and adorable—which makes me waffle on if I should punch or jump him once he gets to my door. "I think you'll like it, though."

"Yeah? And you're sure you know what I like?" I try my best to sound doubtful and give him a hard time.

"I'm positive I know what you like, Sabra," he says in a low, husky voice. "The question is will you let me show you again." He clears his throat. "But that's not the plan for tonight."

I'm punching him, for sure.

"I'll be at your door at six thirty. Dress casual. Maybe wear those black jeans of yours. The ones that hug your ass just right."

"Are you kidding me, caveman? Now you're picking out what clothes I should wear?"

I pull into my parking lot and shake my head, even though he can't see me. The grin on my face hurts my cheeks, and I realize he's chased my blues and fears away in a five-minute conversation.

"We can discuss what clothes I want to take *off* you, but I don't think you're ready for that conversation yet." He pauses a moment. "Anyway, it's almost time. I'll be there in twenty. Bye."

"See you soon." The Bluetooth disconnects, and I dash into my apartment.

I rush to my bedroom closet as soon as I'm back inside and shed the clothes from my audition. He told me to dress casual and mentioned my black jeans, but I'm not feeling them tonight. They're skinny jeans, and they do make my butt look great, but I've been in this tight pencil skirt and white blouse all day. All I want is something comfy. If I could go without a bra, I totally would. Trevor would love it, but that's not going to happen tonight.

Grabbing my favorite pair of yoga pants and a long tunic t-shirt that says, "*I'm not stubborn, my way is just better*", I shimmy into them. I yank a brush through my hair and pull it into a low bun at the nape of my neck. A touch of blush, some shimmery lip-gloss, and my casual trying-not-trying look is complete.

I'm sliding my bare feet into my favorite pair of ankle boots when there's a knock on my door. It's Trevor's knock, and I love how I instantly know it's him. I peek through the peephole just to be safe and can't help but smile at his disheveled hair and the way he's smirking at the peephole as if he knows I'm looking at him.

I fling open the door wide and stand there, looking him over. He's wearing worn jeans with a bare spot on his knee. They look so soft I want to give them a quick rub, but that would be awkward. His button up is mussed like he's been wearing it all day with the sleeves rolled up to his forearms and the tail of it only halfway tucked in. He looks adorable. The perfect, hot young professor every college girl wants to bed. I wonder if we should stay in and forget dinner.

Trevor doesn't give me a chance to suggest it before reaching to pick up my purse from the floor by my feet and grabbing my house keys off the hook by the door. "You ready? Have everything you need?" He looks me over. "You're perfect. Come on." He yanks me outside and into a quick embrace before he locks the door and starts toward the stairs, my purse still in his hand.

"In a hurry, Trevor?" I try to keep up with his long legs.

"I don't want the food to get cold." He opens the door of his truck and the most delicious smell smacks me in the face.

"Pizza?" I clamber into the driver's side and slide across the bench seat.

"Yep," he says, climbing in behind me and putting the car in reverse. "Dinner by the lake." He peeks at me before pulling out of my apartment complex. "You up for it?"

"It's perfect." I relax into the seat.

He reaches over and puts his hand on my thigh, giving it a little squeeze. "Thanks for having dinner with me, Say. I've been looking forward to this all day."

“Thanks for inviting me.” I smile at him and twine my fingers with his. This man. He always knows how to get under my skin in all the right ways.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“This is amazing,” I say and lie back. We’re on a blanket next to the lake, and all I can see for miles above me is glittering stars and a smattering of clouds skating across the night sky. An empty pizza box is all that separates me from Trevor.

“It’s a pretty perfect night, isn’t it?” He turns his head toward me, but I can’t see his eyes. The only light we have is from the moon when it’s not covered by clouds and a small battery-operated lantern on the edge of the blanket. The wind rustles what’s left of the leaves on the trees above us, and the water laps at the sides of the lake. It’s soothing, and if I weren’t a *Four Seasons* type of gal, I could almost see why people camp outdoors. Sort of.

“It is.” I nod in his direction. “Thank you for bringing me out here. And the pizza and the conversation. It was exactly what I needed.”

“Sabra.” He moves the pizza box to his other side and slides closer to me. His hand plays with the ends of my hair for a little bit before he continues. “I think we need to talk.” His fingers brush my cheek when he pulls his hand away and settles it in his lap.

“Okay.” My voice sounds small. I pull myself up and sit cross-legged, facing him on the blanket and trying to place walls around my heart. I knew this conversation would come, but I was hoping it could wait a bit. “What about?” It’s easier to play dumb. Maybe he won’t go there.

He laces his fingers with mine and turns his whole body, mimicking my sitting position. Besides our joined hands settled between us, only our knees are touching. “I think you know, Sabra.” His breath puffs out and little bits of shadowed hair fly up before settling back down again on his forehead. “We’ve never played games with each other before. Can we not start now please?”

I tug on my hand, trying to pull free from his grip, but he only holds tighter. “Let me go, Trevor.”

He pulls our hands close to his chest, causing me to lean into him, and holds me there. “Say, I’ve already told you, I can’t.”

“Trev, I don’t want to do this tonight.” I look at the ground. “Please don’t ruin a perfect night. Truly. Please don’t do this.”

He tips my chin up with his free hand until I’m forced to look into his face. “Fine, Sabra. I will let your hand go for now, but I’m not letting *you* go. Do you understand?”

I stare at him, trying to gauge how serious he is, but I already know. He’s never been one to waver where we’re concerned. That’s always me. I don’t deserve him, but I can’t put any words together to explain it all to him. Talking about everything and telling him what he deserves to know is not something I can do right now, so I nod at him and hope it’s enough.

“Say the words, Sabra. Tell me you understand,” he pleads with me, but there’s no opportunity to get any words out because he keeps going. “I know we’re not there yet. Things are happening with you. Things you’re dealing with that you haven’t and aren’t ready to tell me about yet. And I don’t like not knowing, but I’m here. You don’t have to tell me everything until you’re ready, but please don’t shut me out again. Please let me be here for you. For whatever you need.” He pauses. “I’m here, Say.”

A tear slips down my cheek, and I brush it away before it can fall. “I know you are, Trevor, and I’m so grateful for you and our friendship, but I can’t commit to more. I care about you—so much—but I don’t have it in me to do more than one day at a time.” A shudder works through me. “I’m sorry,” I whisper. “I know you deserve more.”

“What? I deserve more?” He lets go of my hand and hauls me onto his lap like I’m a ragdoll, tucking me under his chin.

He smells delicious. I turn my head into his chest and inhale deeply.

“I’m not sure what’s going through that pretty little head of yours, Say, but I’m the one who gets to decide what and who I want.” His hand strokes over my hair and down my spine until it stills on my lower back. “And I want you,” he mutters into my ear.

“I don’t know what to say.” I lean back enough to see his strong jaw and his full lips quirk into a lopsided smile.

“You know, I kind of like it when you run out of words.” He squeezes me back close to him.

“Nice, Trevor,” I mumble into him.

His chest shakes as he gives a full laugh that echoes through the air, scaring an owl in a nearby tree. We both turn our heads to watch the dark shadow with a huge wingspan take to the sky.

“How about we take it one day at a time?” His hand traces my spine again, up and down. “No pressure. No long-term commitment, except we’ll always be honest with each other. We’ll take it slow and see where it goes. Can you do that?”

Can I do that? I *want* to be able to do that with him. I take a huge breath and let it out long and slow. I nod into his chest.

“What was that? I can’t hear you, Sabra.” He grabs my upper arms and pushes me away from him, just an inch. “Say the words.” His warm breath skates across my cheek.

“Okay.” I nod again and give a small smile. “I can do that.”

His hands squeeze my arms in response to my words, and his eyes drop to my mouth. I watch his tongue dart out to lick his bottom lip. I want him to kiss me. I miss him.

But he doesn’t kiss me the way I expect. The way I’m longing for him to. Instead, he crushes me back to his chest, kisses my head, and rocks us back and forth for a few minutes in the blissful silence beside the lake. I feel safer than I have in weeks.

Trevor pulls back after a few minutes of holding me and looks me in the eye. “I adore you, Sabra,” he says low and deep. “But if I don’t take you home right now, I can’t keep my promise and take it slow.”

I nuzzle his jaw before kissing him on the cheek. “I want to keep you honest,” I mutter into his ear. Then I stand and give him my hand so I can help him to his feet. “Take me home, Trevor.”

He reaches down and grabs the lantern and blanket with his free hand while I pick up the empty pizza box.

“And thank you.”

“No, Sabra, thank you.” He beams at me.

And that’s it. My heart bursts into a million joyful pieces shining out of every part of me. His words constantly own me. I can’t tell him, just in case. But I know if someone could see all the pieces

inside me, they would rival the blanket of stars shining above us.

Trevor walks around his truck and opens the passenger door for me while I grab my purse off the floorboard of the back seat. "Need help?" He holds out his hand.

"I've got it." But I grab onto his hand anyway and jump to the ground. "You don't have to walk me up, you know."

"We've been over this before." He laughs. "Yes, I do." He tugs me closer to him so he can let go of my hand and slide his arm around me as we walk. "And it gives me an excuse to do this."

I look at him and survey the twinkle in his eyes as he stares at me with the largest smile I've seen on his face in a while. "You're goofy. You know that, right?" I tease him and poke him in his side. Which only reminds me of his tight abs and how much I like touching him.

Down, girl. Do not go there tonight. Hold yourself together.

"Sabra." Trevor growls at me in a warning tone.

My eyes snap to his and take in his set jaw. A vein stands out in his neck.

"Yes, Trevor?" I ask with wide eyes. "Something wrong?" We climb the stairs to my apartment with him close behind and our hands intertwined between us.

"Don't play innocent with me, Sabra Valentine." His voice rumbles behind me as we step onto the landing and he spins us, pinning me against the railing. "If you keep looking at me that way, I'm never going to leave you tonight."

"But what about your promises?" I bite my lower lip to keep a threatening smile from bursting out.

"What have I done?" He groans and buries his face in my neck, tunneling his hands in my hair. Turning us, he walks me backward to my door until my back presses into it. He slides his hands down my sides, around to my ass, and pushes himself into me in all the right places.

My arms circle his neck, and my fingers tangle in his hair. "The right thing, Trev. You always do the right thing."

He puts a little bit of space between us, his chest moving faster than normal. My breaths match his when I let my arms fall to my sides.

"Not always, Say." He cups my face with both of his hands. "And if you don't open the damn door right now, walk inside, and lock it, all promises are off. I *will* have my way with you tonight." He tilts

my head and leans down to place the softest, gentlest kiss I've ever known against my lips. "And that's a promise." He lets go and turns me around to the door before taking a step away from me.

I make fast work of unlocking the door and step inside but pause to turn and look at him before I close it and end this night for good. I'm not ready to end it.

"Trevor." I step outside toward him again.

"No, Sabra," he says, determination and agony etched on his face, warring with each other. "I made you a promise, and I intend to keep it." He grins at me. "At least for tonight." He turns and walks down the stairs.

I stand there leaning against the doorjamb and watch him move to his car. "Good night," I say to his back.

"Good night, Sabra," he hollers over his shoulder. "Rest well."

I lock the door, change clothes, then wash my face and brush my teeth. The smile doesn't leave my face. It doesn't disappear when I crawl into bed or when I snuggle under my covers. I drift off to sleep with stars behind my eyelids, whispers of promises echoing in my ears, and the future dancing in my head.

I look myself over, twisting and turning in the full-length mirror on my closet door. This new black bikini looks good. Brady isn't going to know what hit him. At least I'm hoping he'll notice me today. Brady's in the eighth grade and a year older than I am. I've been trying to get his attention at school, but he's so focused on his friends and baseball that nothing seems to work. Today, I am determined to make his head turn in my direction. It's my special day, after all.

With one last spin in the mirror, I slide my cover-up over my head, slip on my flip-flops, and head downstairs to make sure everything is ready for my friends. My mom and dad are letting me have an end of school pool party to celebrate the last week of seventh grade. It's also an early birthday party since my birthday is at the end of summer and everyone is always gone on vacation.

I notice my mom has everything in place when I walk through the French doors and onto the covered patio. Tons of food and a cooler full of drinks are off to one side sitting in the shade. A table on the other side of the patio has a giant submarine sandwich and a beautiful, pink two-tiered cake I can't wait to cut into today. The bakery promised it would taste like a wedding cake, my favorite flavor.

It's NOT because I want to marry Brady. I don't ever want to get married. Getting married means you have to do things I don't want to do with anyone. Ever.

But I would like to have my first kiss with a boy. One I like and—No. I'm not thinking about any of that today. This is a special day. My special day. And Lucas is not here to ruin it because he's doing volunteer work at the local food bank. It's his punishment for skipping school last week, which is fine by me.

I like it when he's gone.

When the doorbell rings, I jump and run inside. My mom is on her way to answer it, but I bump into her in the living room.

"Mom," I hiss at her. "This is my party."

She laughs under her breath at me. "Fine, Sabra. Go be the hostess. I'll just ..." She looks around the room and at me with one eyebrow raised. "Make myself scarce?" Her face falls a little when I nod my head at her as I make a beeline for the door. But I don't have time to think about that because my friends are here.

Let the party begin.

More and more friends show up and make their way to the backyard, giving hugs and passing gifts to me as they walk in. We spend the afternoon eating, laughing, and being together.

The whole day passes in a whirl. I'm talking to everyone. Everyone except Brady. He's always with his friends horsing around in the pool. I glance at the clock and realize there's only one more hour left before parents will get here to pick everyone up.

Except Lizzie. She's spending the night with me. I love it when Lizzie spends the night. It makes me feel safe.

"Hey, Sabra." I look up and into the deep brown eyes of Brady Thompson and melt at the sight of him standing beside me. "Can I join you?"

I smile at him and move over in the hot tub to give him room. "Sure. Come on in."

"Thanks." Brady glides into the water and sits next to me with his thigh touching mine.

We're all talking and laughing, but I can't concentrate. All I can think about is our legs touching. I really want him to hold my hand. I saw in a movie once where this girl wanted a boy to hold her hand, so she placed her hand palm up on her thigh in hopes he'd grab it. I wonder if I should try that too.

I feel Brady's pinky link mine as soon as I move my hand to try, and shivers race up my arms. I don't want him to see how excited I am, so I peek at him under my long eyelashes to see him smiling into the water. I knew he likes me.

"Hey, Brady." The one voice I didn't want to hear today calls across the patio. "I didn't know you were going to be here." Lucas walks toward the hot tub with an easy smile on his face, but his eyes tell a different story. They're narrowed. Zeroed in on where Brady's and my hands are locked together.

"Oh, hey Lucas," Brady drops my hand like a hot potato. He shoots straight up to move to my brother. I feel the loss when he jumps out of the hot tub and meets Lucas on the patio. "Yeah, Sabra invited me." He shrugs and glances in my direction while I give him a weak smile.

"Cool." Lucas draws out the word, looking in my direction. "You know what? I've been meaning to tell you about the wooden bat my dad had custom-made for me this past fall. Want to see it?" He claps his hand on Brady's back as Brady wraps a towel around his waist. They turn toward the house.

"Yeah. Where's it at?" He gives me an apologetic smile and follows Lucas through the French doors into the house.

I've lost Brady to baseball again. And Lucas. He's always causing me to lose something, and I'm so mad I could spit. I've had enough of him always getting in the way and ruining things for me.

I hop out of the water and grab my beach towel, wrapping it around my body while walking into the house. Low voices skate across the living room from the kitchen so I creep in that direction, but I stop as soon as I can make out the words.

"What are you doing, Brady? Are you interested in my sister?" Lucas's voice sounds menacing and scary. I peek around the corner instead of charging into the middle of them. I know that voice almost better than my own.

"No, man." Brady's voice shakes. He's holding his hands up in the air between him and Lucas, waving them back and forth. Lucas has him pushed against the door of the pantry with one hand wrapped around his neck. "She's a cool girl, but she's not my type. Sabra is just a friend."

My heart sinks. He was holding my hand. Anger and sadness come rushing through my veins. How dare them!

I take a step to break up their discussion and let them know exactly what I think about this whole mess, but I stop again when I see Lucas squeezing Brady's throat. "Good. Because she's not going to be with anyone. She's MY sister." Brady's eyes go wide, and his face turns two shades darker. "You hear me? Tell all your friends at school, Brady. Sabra is off limits."

Lucas releases Brady's throat and throws a punch into his gut, making him double over while

working to catch his breath.

I stand there watching in horror. I don't know what to do. The vein in Lucas's neck bulges, and his face is red. Heavy breaths puff out of him.

Brady takes off toward the front door through the dining room, but Lucas lifts his head, looks over his shoulder to the spot right where I'm standing, and smiles an evil grin I've never seen on his face before.

"She's mine."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Last night, I slept the best I've slept in weeks. No bad dreams, none of the tossing and turning, and zero voices playing in my head over and over. I'd say it was the most amazing thing that has happened to me, but Trevor's arms around me with my back pressed against the door takes the top spot. It's going to be hard to beat that moment unless he shows up and has his way with me. And I wouldn't be opposed to that.

Today is for class and work, though. I don't have time for hanky-panky. It's why I'm up and moving long before my nine thirty class. I grab my favorite lipstick, F-Bomb, out of the tray on the counter and glance at the clock reflection in the mirror. The glaring red numbers read 8:30 at me. I glide the deep red across my lips, fluff my dark waves, switch off the lights, and walk to my closet to grab my favorite pair of black ballet flats.

Running early doesn't mean getting to class early. It means the universe thinks I should stop and grab a hot tea at the Coffee Haus. If I hurry, I can get my drink *and* be on time to class. My professor won't know what to do with me.

Dr. Evans is old. Not my parents' age old, but ancient old. I took this psychology class because it's a requirement for my master's degree, but also, so I could understand other people's personalities. It's good for my backup plan of being a psychologist. It's also good for my acting skills to help me know what to do no matter the character or situation thrown my way. Psychology 301 has been more than that, though. It's the most uncomfortable and fascinating class I've ever taken.

The class begins with Dr. Evans hobbling into the room with a can of Coke in his hand. He greets us, hangs his fedora on the coat rack to the left of the whiteboard, and slowly turns and looks every single one of us in the eyes before he lifts the tab on his can. He sets the can on the corner of the desk after taking his first sip and turns it clockwise three times.

You'd think there was a little something-something slipped in it by the expression on his face when he takes the first drink. The look of pure pleasure could be a commercial in and of itself. Then he looks at us and smiles. "Let's get down to the business of souls today, shall we?" He's quirky and has a twinkle in his eye all the time, except when he's staring us down in the beginning.

I should love this class, and I do love Dr. Evans. He's fascinating and brilliant. But I'd love him more if he'd teach straight out of the book instead of doing what I like to call "method teaching."

During the second week of class, we were studying tics people might have and why. Dr. Evans told us what the most common tics were and that the percentage of people with tics in North America could be as low as three percent and as high as twenty. He looked around the class with a wry grin on his creased face. The twinkle was shining bright at us that day.

We each had to reach into his hat and pull out a piece of paper with a tic written on it. For the next few days, we were to live with that tic. Two days of trying to put ourselves in the shoes of others and taking notes of what we experienced in ourselves but also out in society. It was to be at the forefront of our minds. We had to keep a journal and write down our thoughts three times a day. The entire class has been this way with each lesson more hands-on and experimental than any other class I've

ever taken besides my theater courses.

With only a few weeks left before holiday break, Dr. Evans made an announcement last time we were together. We'll be studying the minds of the clinically insane for the rest of the semester. It sounds fascinating, but it scares the shit out of me. I've had enough insanity in my life, and with Dr. Evans, you never know what he's going to ask you to do.

I grab my keys off the table, throw my book bag over my shoulder, and dash outside to head to class. It's my favorite kind of day where the sun shines bright and little white puffs of clouds are scattered across the sky like cotton. I notice the doormat has shifted, sitting crooked instead of straight, as I rummage through my bag to grab my sunglasses, so I use the toe of my left foot to slide it back to its proper spot while I slide my glasses on top of my head with my left hand and the key in the lock with my right. I'm a regular circus act, but I'm a sideshow running ahead of schedule and to her hot tea goodness.

Maybe I should be late so Dr. Evans doesn't have a heart attack.

Once I've locked the door tight, I turn to run down the stairs to my car and my happy place. I can hear the Coffee Haus calling my name from across town. My Mustang glints in the morning sun from its parking spot. There are no notes or roses on the windshield this morning, only a hint of the remnants of early morning frost left along the edges glimmer up at me. Everything is as it should be.

Trevor is teaching this morning, so there's a chance I could bump into him, but I don't want to depend on fate to work its magic. A grin tugs at my lips as I turn and reach into my back pocket for my cell phone to text Trevor a short, good morning message. I want to see if he has time to meet me for a quick drink before his first class.

A flash of red on the wall opposite my front door catches my eye. I turn my head and stare at the crimson glaring at me. My hand stalls at my side.

No. No freaking way.

My keys fall out of my hand with a clatter, and my bag slides off my shoulder, landing on the ground next to me with a thud. A message that could only be meant for me stands out against the stark white of the stucco written in the same hue as blood. Drops slide down the wall from each letter.

I SEE EVERYTHING.

Holy shit. He's been here. While I was sleeping, or showering, or swiping F-Bomb against my lips thinking about Trevor, Lucas was here making sure I didn't forget. Leaving a reminder for me.

He's always watching. He's always here. What in the hell do I do with this?

I step closer to the words, stopping when I realize it's still wet and dripping. My chest tightens, and I turn in a circle, scared Lucas will pop out of one of the doorways down the alcove. My eyes rove through the parking lot and back down the hall to the other stairway at the end.

I back up against my door again slowly, make my way to the end of the hallway, and wake up the phone in my hand, letting my thumb hover over the emergency button. My muscles are tight and ready to turn and run in the opposite direction. One tear tracks down my cheek as I try to calm the shallow breaths making my chest tighter. The edges of my vision get fuzzy.

I can't comprehend what I'm looking at as I slide past the words glistening at me. When I finally reach the opposite stairs, I peer down to find them free and empty. I yank my phone up in front of my

face, punch in the number to the management office, and whip my head around in fear, looking for anyone standing nearby—or behind me—as the phone rings in my ear and I make my way back to my apartment. I need help.

“Timber Ridge Apartments, this is Alice. How can I help you today?”

“Alice? It’s Sabra from apartment 4212,” I gasp out, snatching my bag and keys off the ground. My voice cracks, and I try to clear it before I continue. “I need to report a case of vandalism.” I take the steps two at a time and jog toward my car, clicking the button on the key fob so I can slide in quickly. My head turns every direction, staring into shadows and between parked cars on my way. Is he still here? I need to get out of here.

“Hi, Sabra. A case of vandalism? At the apartment complex?” Her voice fills with doubt. “Where? I’ll have Ralph go look.”

My phone switches to Bluetooth when I place the key in the ignition and turn the car on. “It’s right outside my door on the wall. Someone painted on it with red paint.”

There’s silence on the other end of the phone before Alice murmurs, “Well, that’s weird. We rarely have anything happen around here. There hasn’t been a reason to call the authorities for anything in over ...” The sound of papers shuffling in the background comes over the speakers in my car. “Yes, it’s been over a year since even a complaint of loud music.”

“I’m sorry to bother you with this.” I clamp down on the sob threatening to spill out.

“No, no, dear, don’t apologize. Are you okay? You sound shaken up.”

“I’m fine. It just scared me. The message is slightly ominous.” I clear my throat again and try to sound braver than I am. “I don’t know why someone would do such a thing.” I mean, I do, and I know who did it. But I can’t tell Alice that.

I look in my rearview mirror for any cars that might be following me into the school entrance as I pass the welcome sign shouting MOUNTAIN VIEW UNIVERSITY to the world.

“Oh Sabra, I hate you had to start your morning with something so terrible,” Alice breathes out at me. She’s a beautiful fifty-something woman with bright red hair, green eyes, and a kind face, but she looks much younger than that. I’ve always admired her smile and zeal for life. “What does your day look like? We’re going to need to call the police for a case of vandalism. They might have a few questions for you.”

“I’m headed to school right now. I have one class, and I’ll be working at the lodge this afternoon until tonight.” I hear a drawer open and close.

“And can you tell me what words were on the wall?” My heart squeezes at the concern in her voice. She’s no more than an acquaintance to me, but she clearly cares for the people who live in the complex. There are still kind people in the world.

“Yes.” I pull into a parking spot and shift the car into park with trembling hands. “It said I SEE EVERYTHING.”

There’s a gasp and then silence on the other end of the line for a moment. “Wow. I can see why that would throw you for a loop.”

I lean my forehead against the steering wheel and sigh back at her. “Yes.”

“Okay, I’ll get Ralph out there to look at it, and we’ll call the cops immediately so they can come

out here as well. As soon as we know more, if anything, I'll give you a call. I'll have to give the police your phone number in case they need to speak to you, okay?"

"Of course, that's fine."

"Try not to worry about this, Sabra. We'll get it worked out." There's a pause and I hear more papers shuffling. "It was probably some teenagers playing a dumb prank," she consoles me.

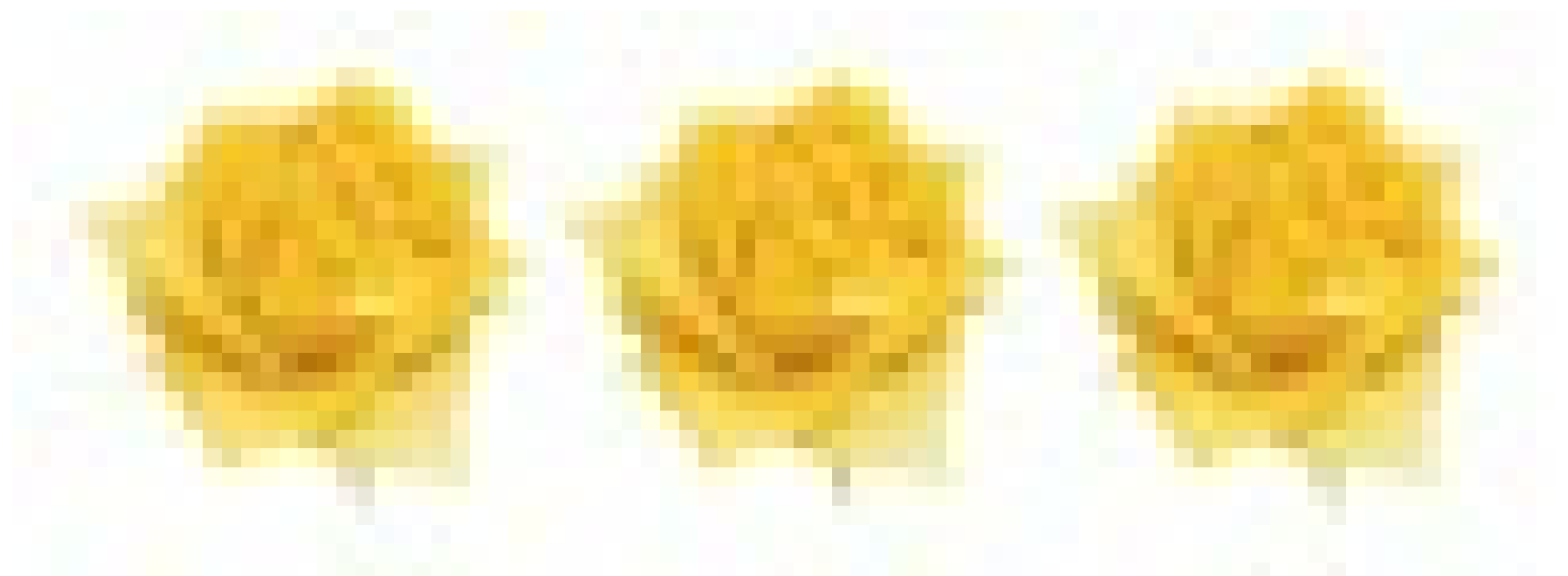
"I'm sure that's it," I say, trying to sound upbeat. Inside, I want to die, though. "Thank you, Alice. I appreciate it. Have a good day."

"You too."

I turn the keys still in the ignition, slide them out, and open the car door, reaching for my book bag. It's already nine ten, and my class starts in twenty minutes. There's no way for me to make it both to the Coffee Haus and then across campus in time now.

Yanking my bag through the car, I slam the door and listen to the beep of the locks going into place before marching toward Psychology 301. My emotions shift, turning into a mix of fear and anger.

I have a front row seat to what clinically insane looks like. Any doubts Lucas was done with me are long gone now. He's not going away, no matter how much I want him to disappear. He's back, and he still wants me. The question is where and when will he show next?

Three pixelated yellow suns are arranged horizontally across the middle of the page. Each sun is composed of a grid of small squares in various shades of yellow and orange, giving them a low-resolution, digital appearance. They are set against a light blue background with a subtle grid pattern.

"Ms. Valentine," a raspy voice calls across the room, and I pause packing my books, spirals, and pencils to look in the direction of the white board. My professor leans against the front of the desk watching me with shrewd eyes.

"Yes, Dr. Evans?" I grab the last of my things and drop them in my bag before walking toward him.

"Are you feeling okay, Ms. Valentine?"

"Yes, sir, I am. Why do you ask?"

Dr. Evans walks around the desk and starts erasing his notes from the board, preparing the room for the next class of students who will soon be entering through the doors. "I couldn't help noticing today's lesson didn't seem to capture your attention like normal. Usually, you're furiously scribbling notes." He smiles at me over his shoulder before wiping over the last words on the board. "If I were a betting man, I'd put money down you only wrote a few words in that notebook of yours today instead of the few pages you normally do." He turns to look at me pointedly. "Which leads me to ask again, is everything okay, Sabra?"

The kindness and concern in his face is overwhelming, and my eyes sting behind my eyelids. I'm so tired of crying.

"Thank you for your concern, Dr. Evans. I'm fine. I haven't been sleeping a lot this week," I confide. "I'll call Kirby and grab the full notes from her when I see her next."

"I'm not worried about you getting the notes, Sabra." Dr. Evans slides back around the desk and peers at me.

I duck my head and look out the door anxious to get away only to find Trevor standing outside waiting for me. He lifts a cardboard cup and waves it in my direction. I smile at him, drawing Dr. Evans's attention.

"Seeing that I've made you appropriately uncomfortable." He chuckles and looks back at me. "I'll let you get to Professor Collins. But Sabra ..." He waits until I look him fully in the eyes. "Do try to get some rest this weekend. You've done an outstanding job this semester. I want to see you finish just as strong. Understand?"

"Yes, sir. I understand." I nod at him and take a step toward freedom. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." He waves me off with one hand and goes back to cleaning the room and gathering his things.

Trevor hands me a still warm cup. I step up to the spot where he's leaning against the wall, and he bends to kiss me. "Everything okay?"

The smell of Earl Grey hits me as I take a sip and wrap an arm around his waist. "Fine. Dr. Evans had a question for me. Nothing to worry about."

"Still enjoying the class?" He pushes the door to the stairwell open, allowing me to walk ahead of him, along with a few other students who rush through when they see an opportunity to slide ahead. Once he catches up with me, he pulls the strap of my book bag off my shoulder and tosses it over his own. "So? Still liking it?"

"Yes, I am. It's interesting." I step off the last stair. "Today, we watched documentary and video clips of people suffering from several types of disorders. Schizophrenia, psychosis, delusion, insanity, hallucination ... you name it, and we saw it today. It was a bit overwhelming, to be honest." I pull my jacket tighter as we walk outside into the chilly air and then turn to him.

"Say." Trevor wraps his arms around me and crushes me against his chest, surrounding me with his warmth. "You okay? Did it get to you?"

"What?" I watch concern flash in his eyes. Everyone seems to be able to see right through me today.

"The videos." He peers into my eyes. "Did they freak you out?"

"No, I really am good." I laugh at him and squeeze his side with the hand not holding my favorite drink. "I think I need a nap."

"I think that's a great idea," Trevor whispers in my ear. "Your place or mine?"

I push him in the chest, laughing at him, and take a step backward. "For some reason, I don't think much napping will be going on if that happens, Trev. And besides, I have to get to work and try to catch up on my assignments. I'm behind and need to get caught up."

"Fine." He grabs my free hand and starts walking again. "Your loss."

“What are you doing here anyway? Aren’t you supposed to be teaching a class across campus right now?”

“The air went out in the building, so all the classes were canceled this morning. Figured I’d take the opportunity to head to the Coffee Haus and get my girl her favorite drink.” He winks at me, murmuring, “And it was a good excuse to see you.”

“Thanks.” I smile at him again. “It was a lovely surprise this morning.”

“I also had a question to ask you. And you know, I hadn’t seen your pretty little ass in a bit.” He laughs, running his hand over a cheek before guiding me over to a bench nearby. We’ve made it back to the fountain in the center of campus.

“Hilarious,” I deadpan. Sitting, I look at him standing next to me, shifting his weight back and forth. “Okay, what’s up, Trev?”

“What do you mean? Why does anything have to be up?” He sits next to me and throws his arm around my shoulders, keeping our fingers linked together and resting them on my chest where my heart is beating.

I turn my head, so my face is buried in his neck and inhale while humming at him. “You’re acting mysterious, Trevor.” I snuggle closer to him.

The water cascades over, creating a cocoon of sound and surrounding us while I’m tucked away in the safety of his arms. It soothes my raw nerves. I push up to kiss the underside of his jaw and feel his scruff rasp across my face. “I can’t decide if I should be worried or not.”

“If you keep doing that, Sabra, something is definitely going to be *up*.” He shifts over, grinning at me, and puts a little space between us.

“Okay, you have my attention.” I lift an eyebrow at him and wait.

“What are you doing this Saturday? Do you have plans?” The look of hope in his eyes melts my heart.

I mentally flip through the next two days. “No, I’m scheduled to work today and Sunday. This is the one weekend of the month I have Friday night and Saturday off. My plan is to get caught up on all the things by Sunday night.”

“Can you manage to do it all tomorrow night and Sunday and save Saturday for me?” He dips his head and places his forehead on mine. “I’d like to take you out, but I’ll need you from sunup and into the night for my plan to work.”

“Wow, Trevor,” I breathe at him. “Are you sure you can handle me that long?”

He smirks at me. “I keep telling you I can handle whatever you want to give me.”

Warmth spreads through me and deepens in my core as his words wash over me. I can think of a few things I’d like to give him.

“I’m yours.” I lean in and brush my lips across his. “At least for Saturday.”

“I’ve been waiting a long time to hear you say that, Sabra.” He smiles and tugs me up to stand with him. “And you’re mine for more than Saturday, but we’ll discuss that later. Be ready at six thirty a.m. on Saturday. I’ll pick you up.” He smacks me on the behind and drops my hand. “I do love your ass,” he murmurs, eyeing my backside appreciatively.

“A.m.?” I gasp, watching him walk backward in the same direction we came while grinning at me

like a cat who ate way more than one canary. “Have you lost your mind, Trevor?”

He laughs at the stunned expression on my face. “Wear layers, Sabra. And don’t be late,” he yells over his shoulder, turning to jog to his office.

I stand there, watching him disappear down the sidewalk until I hear the bells in the clock tower ring. I’m going to be late for work again if I don’t get a move on.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The exhaustion is real. I plant my butt in the leather seat of my car and turn the key in the ignition, flipping the knob all the way to red hoping the car will warm quickly. The temperature dropped this afternoon. I can feel the cold air in my bones, making me even more tired than I already am. This day has been over-the-top ridiculous.

My phone buzzed as I was walking out of work with a message from Alice. They had news for me, and she wanted to know when I would be home so Ralph could meet me at the “scene of the crime.” My nerves are stretched as tight as they can go. The body aches, from clenching my muscles and trying to push through my long to-do list all day, pulse through me.

It’s been nice to have short bursts of distractions here and there, but the thought of Lucas is never far away. He’s always present. One step ahead of me and consuming my thoughts. I keep asking myself what he wants. But I know the answer to that already. It’s always been me.

The only moment I haven’t struggled to erase Lucas from my mind was when Trevor was front and center. Those moments were bliss. A time of respite from my churning thoughts and worries. He always calms me. It only takes a simple touch like his hand on my back guiding me, a finger on my cheek, or his lips brushing against mine. Trevor seems to know what I need before I do, and I wish he were with me now.

I pull my phone over and type out a short message to him, so he’ll know I’m thinking about him.

SABRA: *Thank you for making a special trip to the Coffee Haus and bringing me tea today. It was a sweet surprise. Looking forward to Saturday.*

TREVOR: *It was my pleasure. All worth it to see your smile. You’re going to love what I have planned next.*

SABRA: *You won’t even give me a hint?*

TREVOR: *Nope. Just be prepared for the RIDE of your life. ;)*

SABRA: *Don’t make promises you can’t keep, Trevor...*

TREVOR: *I keep all my promises. Get some sleep tonight.*

SABRA: *I will.*

I toss my phone into the passenger seat, slide the gear shift into reverse, and pull out of my spot to head home, trying to mentally prepare myself for what I’m about to hear. A flash of brown catches my attention as I’m about to turn out of the parking lot, and I slam on my brakes, causing the car behind me to do the same. The guy driving the SUV waves his arms at me in the rearview mirror, giving me a one-finger salute. Grimacing, I crane my neck to try to see what caught my eye, but nothing’s there. You are paranoid, Sabra.

I watch in my rear and side view mirrors for anything unusual—something out of the ordinary or a car following me—while I sit in traffic and stop at red lights on the short trek home. I know it makes

me crazy, but I can't get the thought out of my head. Something terrible is right around the corner.

My car jerks when I slam it into park as soon as it glides into my assigned parking spot and I cut the engine. Ralph's sitting in his parked work truck next to the curb of my building, trying to stay warm while he waits since the wind popped up. I hop out with my bag in hand and watch Ralph clamber out of his truck to head in my direction.

"Hi, Ralph. I'm sorry you've had to deal with this today."

He shakes his head at me and waves a hand, shooing my apologies away. "No, no, little lady. We won't have none of those I'm sorry statements coming my direction. This is my job." He puts his sun-weathered hands on his hips. "But Sabra, we're a little concerned here."

"That's what Alice said in her message. That there were some *concerns*." My fingers run through my hair. "I'm a little freaked out myself. What's going on?"

Ralph turns and leads me up the stairs to the landing in front of my door, telling me the latest news. "We called the police, and they came out to look over the area. You know, take pictures of the vandalism and whatever else they do." He tosses his hands out wide before crossing them over his chest. "I thought it was important after I realized that wasn't no paint on the wall."

"What?" I stop a few steps below him.

He steps on to the landing and looks back at me.

"What do you mean it wasn't paint? I saw it there this morning."

Ralph turns to me, nodding. "Oh, I know what you saw, but I also know it wasn't paint. The police confirmed it when they came too. They're going to be coming by to talk to you after this." He motions to my apartment door. "Are you coming up here?"

Not sure if I want to continue but knowing I can't ignore what's in front of me, I climb the last couple of stairs. "If it wasn't paint, what was it?" I take the last step and come up next to him when Ralph dips his head in my direction.

He looks me directly in the eye. "It was blood." The frown on his face deepens. "You okay, Ms. Valentine? Sabra?" A warm hand grabs my elbow and helps me sit against the railing. "You look mighty pale. You gonna be all right?"

"I'm—" But I don't know what I am. And I don't have the words to finish that sentence. Because I'm not fine. Not at all. Who could be fine when they find out someone has written a gross message to them in blood? On a wall of their home.

Wait. What kind of blood?

"Ralph." I look over at where he's crouched beside me. One hand holds on to the railing, steadying him. "What kind of blood was it? Does anyone know?"

He stands, walks over to the wall, and slides his hand over the spot where the message was this morning. The words are gone, but if you look hard enough, you can still see the outline of them. A different shade of white compared to the rest of the stucco. A reminder. Of course.

"They're not sure yet, but they think it was animal blood. The two policemen who came took a sample of it. They snapped a bunch of pictures before giving me permission to clean it all up. Said they'd be in touch with more information before they took off." He turns in my direction.

I use the railing to pull myself back up and stand on shaky legs.

“You don’t know why anyone would do this? Someone trying to scare you?”

“No, I have no idea,” I lie to his face, walk over to my door, and pull my keys out of the side pocket of my bag. “Are we sure it was meant for me?” I ask, hoping against hope a mistake has been made.

His face fills with pity. “There’s no one in 4213 across the way, and the cops talked to everyone else in the building.” He steps in my direction. “All signs point to you. Although technically, I guess it could have been meant for anyone. Are you going to be okay tonight? Do you have someone you can call to come stay with you?”

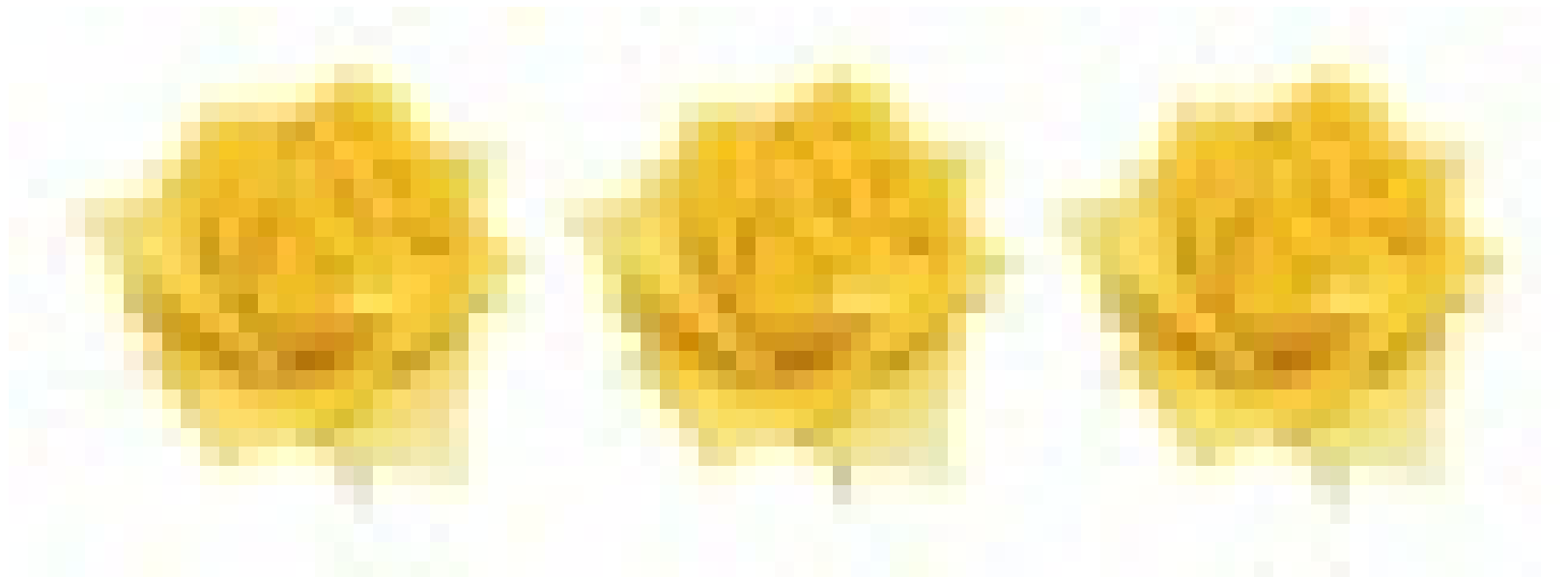
“No, no.” I slip the key in the door and twist. “I’ll be fine tonight. Thank you for all of your help.” My eyes take a last look at the hint of words still etched into the wall across from me as I wave my hand toward them.

“Not a problem. The police are going to be patrolling extra the next few days until we figure this out. If you need anything, you call the management emergency number, you hear? I’m on call tonight, so it will go to me directly.” He gives me a small smile and wave as he turns to go back downstairs. “Say the word, and I’ll come running.”

“Have a good night, Ralph.” I shout at his retreating back to make sure he can hear me while he’s walking downstairs. “And thank you again for everything.”

“No worries,” he hollers back over his shoulder when he hits the bottom of the steps and strides to the back of his truck. “We’ll get this figured out. You stay safe, you hear?”

I stand there and watch him move things around the bed of his truck. He latches items down more securely before hopping in the driver’s side and pulling away from the curb. I notice an ax next to a rake and hoe fastened to the side. In a daze, I stare at the outline of the words once more before stepping into my apartment and locking myself in.



I wake with a start. The red glow from the clock next to my bed shines through the room, causing weird shadows to lurk in the corners and creep on the walls. 10:30 pm flashes at me when the numbers change.

I crawled into bed early, around eight forty-five, so I could try to shake off all the events of today and the impending doom I felt lingering over everything. And sleep finally took over, but whether from the exhaustion of the day or of the past few weeks, I honestly can’t be sure.

Unfortunately, this night is turning out to be one of the longest of my life, which is saying something given everything. I'm trying to sleep, but every time I close my eyes, all I can see is Lucas's face with an evil smile. Or him looking at me with an ax in his hand.

My phone vibrates against the nightstand with an incoming message. I slide my eyes over to it and see Trevor's name pop up. The space between the nightstand and where I'm lying in bed feels like a mile when I reach over to grab my phone. Trevor's text came in two minutes ago according to the timestamp, which means this is what must have woken me from the horrendous nightmare I was currently having on repeat.

TREVOR: Hey, you still up?

SABRA: Barely. I decided to call it an early night. What are you up to?

TREVOR: Wanted to check on you before I do the same. How was your day?

SABRA: You know, about the same as every other day. I can't complain.

TREVOR: That's good. For Saturday, make sure you wear comfortable clothes and bring a sweater or lightweight jacket.

SABRA: Okay. And you're still not going to tell me where we're going?

TREVOR: Nope. You'll have to trust me.

SABRA: I do.

TREVOR: Good. Rest well, Sabra. See you soon.

SABRA: Good night, Trevor.

I give up on sleep after tossing and turning for thirty more minutes and throw the covers off me. There's no use lying here waiting for something that's obviously not going to happen.

My assignment from psychology and another monologue from my acting coach is practically laughing at me. I swear I can hear it snorting from the living room. If I'm going to go with Trevor all day Saturday on our mysterious date, I should pull my ass out of bed and get it all done while I can. At least this way, I'm ahead of the schedule I'd planned earlier in the day.

Going back to sleep promises more of the same anyway. Lucas taking over everything. I hate the way he infiltrates every aspect of my life these days, even my dreams. It was easier with him in prison.

I pad into the living room and yank my laptop out. Setting it on top of the arm of the couch while the screen fires to life, I take my time to wander into the kitchen, make a mug of tea with the perfect amount of sugar, and grab a bag of Chex Mix to munch on while I work. I have three articles to read and take notes on for Dr. Bell's class and a monologue to write. We had to pick a specific time in the theater's history to focus on and I chose the Greek tragedies. Might as well stick with the theme of my life.

Settling in to start the final bits of research needed, I see a notification pop up on my screen announcing an incoming email. I'd normally ignore it, but I'm hoping to hear something back from Eleanor. I've been checking my email like a crazy person. I click over to my email and throw my head back onto the cushion of the couch with a groan.

My mother has stopped calling me every day. She's apparently gotten the message that I'm not going to answer the phone when she calls. Calling me three times a day with no answer helps to get the point across, I guess. I have no desire to discuss anything with her, but now she's taken to emailing me every three or four days. This one is a little early since I heard from her yesterday. The Valentine family is living out our own tragedy.

I pick my head up, move the mouse to open the email, and prepare myself to read all about her latest book club shenanigans or Junior League luncheon. Her letters rarely have anything I care about in them. But I stop short when I see the subject line of this one.

Lucas.

The arrow hovers over that one word as I stare at it in shock. She thinks I want to know. That I care about anything when it comes to my brother. I've avoided everything she's mentioned in all her previous emails, including family dinners, the latest from his parole meetings, and the huge deal my father landed for his company. I've only replied to one of her messages in the past five weeks, and that was to tell her I would be going to Thanksgiving with Micah.

It was a lie. I spent Thanksgiving by myself eating Chinese food and watching old musicals. It was the best Thanksgiving I've had in years. And I'd do it again.

Every time I allow something to do with Lucas to enter my world, I end up crying and scared, sitting on my couch for two days straight. Determination heats the back of my neck, and I click on the subject line and drag the email to the trash folder. Going one step further, I press DELETE ALL TRASH and watch the number next to the folder disappear. There's no regret or panic filling my chest or making my shoulders tight. This was the right decision for me. The only decision.

I feel lighter.

Freer.

Cutting all things out concerning Lucas and going on with my life as if he doesn't exist is exactly what I need to be doing. He's stolen enough from me already.

I move back to the World Wide Web and throw myself into my research until I have everything I need. Then I move on to the articles for Dr. Evans.

I'm halfway through the second article on people suffering from delusion when my head gets heavy and my eyelids drift closed. This time, when I close my eyes, Lucas is still there, but he's standing on the edges watching while Trevor and I sit on a bench holding hands. The last thing I remember are Trevor's lips touching my own before falling into a deep sleep.

“What did you say to me?” Lucas stands across the laundry room from me with his hands fisted at his sides. I can feel each loud breath he takes, his chest pumping, deep in my gut. The look of hatred shining in his eyes causes a wave of fear and nausea to roll through me as I pin my back tightly against the door to the garage and grab the handle.

“You heard me.” I stand my ground and square my shoulders, but I don’t let go of the door. I’ve already unlocked it and made sure the garage door is up so I can get out.

He takes a step closer crossing his arms over his chest and narrows his eyes. “Say it to me again, Sabra.” Two more steps. “I dare you.”

I twist the door handle and yank it open. Feeling the cool air of the night wash over my neck and back and drying the beads of sweat dripping down. “You are not welcome in my room ever again,” I whisper, taking one step out into the garage, eyes never leaving his face. You don’t turn your back on Lucas. “Don’t come in it again, Lucas. I mean it.”

He tracks my movement and matches each step I take. Mirrors me before a nasty smile crosses his features.

“And what are you going to do if I don’t listen to you, Sabra? Who is going to keep me away? You?” The click of the door to the laundry room echoes through the garage as it closes behind him.

I move to the center of the garage floor. It’s empty right now. Mom and Dad have gone out to dinner with the next-door neighbors for a date night, leaving Lucas in charge. They know not what they do.

“Dad will.” I lift my chin at him and shift one more time toward the garage door.

Lucas stands beside the tools on the far wall. He slides his hand across the handles of the rake, hoe, shovel, and more.

“I’ll tell him. Everything.”

His head snaps up at me. His hatred is scary, but his fury is petrifying. He grabs the handle of the ax lying on the workbench tightly in his hand and lifts it, measuring the weight of it and running his thumb across the blade. All the air in my body flies out of me. He lifts his eyes back to mine, and I know I’ve pushed him too far, but I can’t move. I need to move.

With deadly calm, Lucas says, “I’m going to count to five to give you a head start.”

My eyes widen and blink in rapid succession.

“Run, Songbird.”

“What?”

He swings the ax in a circle in front of him with each number.

“One. Two. Three.” He pauses and slides in my direction. “You aren’t running. Maybe you like getting caught by me, after all.” He chuckles. “But you won’t like it when I get ahold of you tonight. Four.” The ax circles the air between us again. “I’m going to teach you the lesson you deserve.” He grins at me again. One final swing of the ax circles between us. “RUN!”

I don’t know where I’m going, but my feet start to move. I turn and flee out the garage door and into the open field between our house and our neighbors at the same time as I hear the word five

come out of his mouth.

“You think you can outrun me?” Lucas yells behind me, feet shuffling through the grass. Measured steps with long strides coming closer and closer. “You are mine, you little bitch.” He’s not running. Just a determined march with long legs while I run with all my might.

I pray Kyla is home when I see the light on in our sixteen-year-old neighbor’s kitchen, and that I can get in before Lucas catches me. I pound on the back door, hearing the guttural cries and moans escape me, and scream, “Kyla, let me in! Open the door!”

“I’ll kill you, Sabra. I’ll cut you into tiny pieces and hide them in the woods before you can tell a single soul.” His words carry across the field on the wind.

“No, Lucas! Stop!”

“I’ll never stop, Sabra. You. Are. MINE.” He picks up his pace and starts running toward me with the ax raised. He’s a few steps away. One leap with a swing of the blade and he’ll have me.

I shut my eyes and wait for him to do the one thing I’ve been waiting for all these years. He’s going to kill me. He stops in front of me, his breath whooshing into the eerie quiet of the night. I hear him take one more step.

The door snaps open, and a hand yanks me roughly inside. I stare at Kyla’s horror-filled face as she slams the door and latches it. There’s a phone in her hand raised so it’s seen through the glass.

Lucas shakes his head, laughing, and moves back into the dark while I collapse, slide down the wall, and curl up with tears streaming down my cheeks.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

A pounding on my door makes me sit straight up with a gasp. I look around and see papers strewn around me on the floor by my couch, left over from my cram sessions the past two nights. I must have fallen asleep while working again. My heart leaps into my throat when I glance at my phone screen and the knocking starts back up. The numbers flash 5:15 a.m. at me.

“Sabra,” Micah’s voice says through the door. “Open up.”

I open the door after a quick look through the peephole and watch her barrel through with a bag hanging off each arm. “What are you doing here? Do you know what time it is?”

“Of course, I know what time it is. But judging from the way you’re looking at me, you forgot what day it is.” She gives me a once-over from the top of my head to the tips of my toes.

“What in the world are you talking about, Micah?” I move back to the couch to curl up again. “I’m too tired for riddles right now. I worked until twelve thirty on this project last night, after working a full day at the bar, so I could go on my date with Trevor and not feel guilty about it.” I stop mid-sit and snap my head around to stare at her. “Oh lord, my date with Trevor is today.”

“I’m glad you could catch up with me,” she tosses over her shoulder and walks down the hallway toward my bedroom. “Aren’t you happy you have me as a best friend? Who else would get up now to make sure you’re pretty for your important day?” She sticks her head around the corner to stare at me pointedly. “Are you coming in here or not?”

“That depends. What are you planning on doing to me?”

Micah rolls her eyes, laughing, and moves in the direction of my bathroom. “Operation Glam Casual, of course.”

I walk into the bathroom to find Micah pulling out curling rods and bottles of different kinds of spray from one bag and a huge makeup kit from the other. “And what exactly is Operation Glam Casual?”

Micah plugs in something that looks more like a torture device than anything else. “You know, we have to make you look amazing but like you aren’t trying all at the same time. It’s important you’re ready for anything. And as your best friend, it’s my job to make sure you do this right.”

“Micah,” I hedge.

She leans and lifts the fabric on the leg of my yoga pants.

“What are you doing?”

“Checking to see if you need to shave. Do you need to shave? Did you take care of all the bits and places?”

“Oh, my gosh, Micah. I’m going on a date, not having sex with Trevor today.”

She quirks an eyebrow and abandons everything she brought with her to face me head-on. “That you know of.”

“I think I’d know if I was planning to have sex today.”

“You can never be too safe or prepared. Besides, it’s Trevor.” She walks farther into my bathroom and turns on the water. “This day has been a long time coming.”

“I showered last night,” I call after her. “Before I started working on my projects and fell asleep. I don’t need to shower.”

“Did you shave all the bits?” she asks again as she comes back to the vanity area.

“Not that it’s any of your business, but yes. All the important places are hairless.” I huff and throw myself on the bench in front of my vanity. “What’s next on your list?”

“Hair and makeup,” she singsongs before she runs back to the shower and turns the water off. “Now, you sit there and let me work my magic. Trevor won’t know what hit him.”

“Micah?”

“Yes? Close your eyes, I need to put this primer on you.”

I do as she says and wait while she dabs stuff all over my face.

“What were you asking me?”

“Remember that time you helped me get ready for the spring formal last year?”

“Yep. You looked gorgeous if I do say so myself.” She works on my eyes.

“Yes, but do you think we could *not* do my makeup like that? Maybe take it a little easier and go more natural this time?” I shouldn’t poke the bear while her claws are so close to my eyeballs, but I can’t risk having cat eyes and blood red lips like last time.

Micah pauses what she’s doing. “You didn’t like what I did last time?”

Taking a gamble, I peek out at her and mutter, “My date mentioned that it was nice of me to go with the Las Vegas theme of the dance. He said I looked like one of those showgirls.”

“What?” Micah throws the brush on the counter and pops her hands on her hips. “That boy was such a douche canoe.”

“Yes, I’m sure it had nothing to do with how dark my makeup was and everything to do with how stupid he is, but you know, to be safe.” I shrug. “How about we go the lighter route this time.”

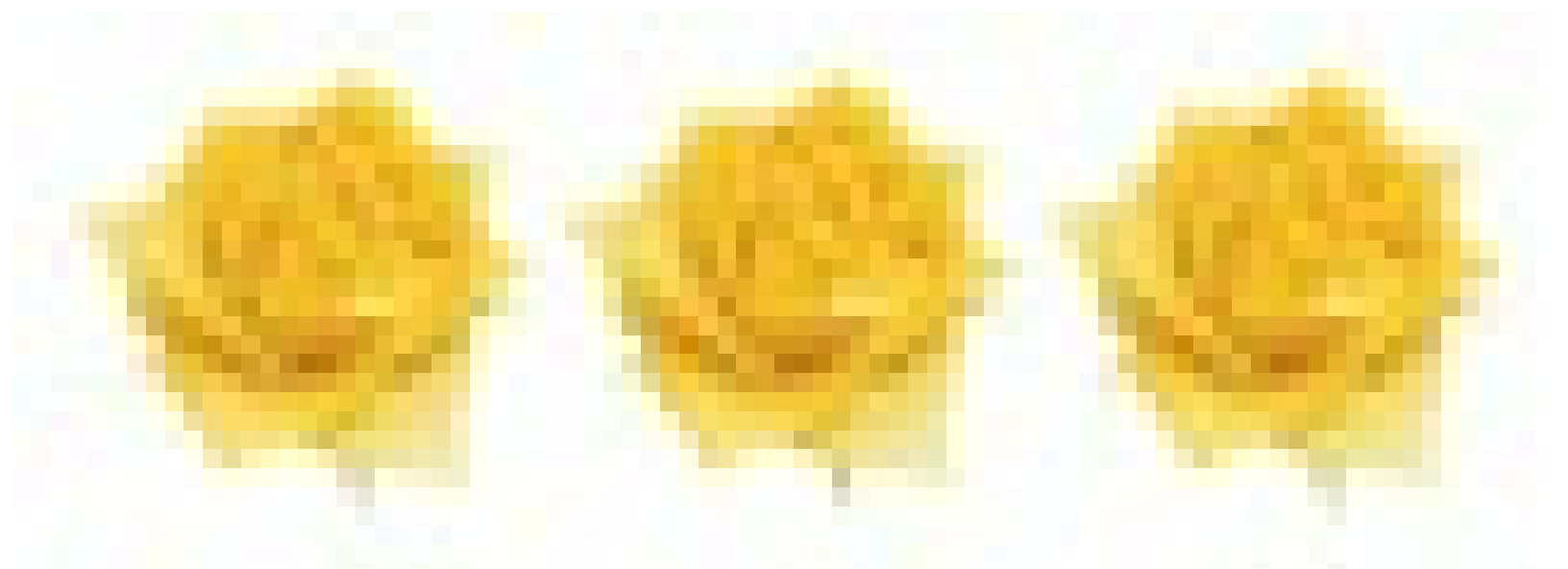
“Fine.” Micah sighs. “Girl next door and beach waves it is. Happy?”

“Very.” I smile at her and close my eyes again. “Now, do your damage.”

“Trust me. Trevor’s going to need to take safety precautions just looking at you when I’m done.” She laughs and lines my eyes. “Oh, and I almost forgot. I took care of making sure you’re protected too.”

Small foil wrapped squares fall in my lap. “Are you kidding me, Micah?” I can’t stop the laughter bubbling in my chest.

“No glove, no love, baby.”

Three pixelated yellow suns are arranged horizontally at the top of the page. Each sun is composed of a grid of yellow and orange squares, giving them a low-resolution, digital appearance. They are set against a light blue background with a subtle grid pattern.

“Santa Monica?” I sip the final bit of my Earl Grey tea and stare wide-eyed out the window. Trevor is not a stupid man, so a steaming Styrofoam cup sat next to my seat when I slid into his truck before the sun came up. We’ve been driving west for a couple of hours now. I realized there was a chance we were headed to the beach about thirty minutes ago as I followed the signs on the highway.

“Have you ever been before?” He holds my left hand on his thigh and picks it up to kiss my knuckles before putting it back down.

“Not since I was a little girl. Maybe eight or nine? My dad took me for a special Daddy-Daughter day. We started the day at the Venice Beach Boardwalk and ended it on the Santa Monica Pier. I don’t remember much about it except it was a perfect day.”

Trevor pulls into a parking spot in one of the park-and-go lots near the beach—not far from Third Street—and turns to look me in the eyes. “What made it perfect?”

I shrug, feeling a tad bit vulnerable, and drop my eyes. “It was just me and my dad. I had his undivided attention. I didn’t have many of those moments growing up since he worked so much.” I peek at him through my eyelashes and see a small smile twitch his lips as his eyes never stray from mine.

“It sounds like I have a lot to live up to today.” He drops my hand and lifts my face so I can’t do anything but look into his eyes. “Would you rather go somewhere else, or are you okay making some new memories here with me?”

“Trevor.” I laugh at him. “I’ve been waiting for this day all week. You don’t get to back out of your plans now. Let’s go do all the things you want to do.”

He quirks one eyebrow and leans into me until his lips are almost touching mine. “All the things?”

His breath skims across my lips. It takes everything in me not to lean in and take a quick taste of him. I reach up, brush my thumb across his lower lip, and nod, falling deeper into his gaze.

“All the things. And don’t forget you promised me a *ride*.”

“Oh, you’ll get your ride, Sabra. You can count on that.” He grins and opens his door. “Let’s get to it then.”

He breaks the spell and pulls back, throwing a smile in my direction as he slides out of the truck and walks around to my door. I watch him closely as I climb down, expecting him to back up and give me room to walk past him. Instead, he moves tighter into my space, shuts the door, and pushes me

against the hard metal, one hand pressing against the side of the truck on either side of me.

“Did you think I was going to start this day without a taste of you?” Trevor gazes at my mouth as he whispers the question, and I lick my bottom lip in anticipation. His eyes darken a bit before he leans in and presses his mouth to mine.

It’s such a sweet, light kiss. A perfect start to what is promising to be a perfect day. He shifts a step closer to me. Our chests meet and rub against each other with delicious friction, causing my body to automatically respond. Trevor slides his hands in my hair and his tongue in my mouth. He tangles us together and knots us in a way I’m not sure I ever want to be untied from.

He pulls away and leans his forehead to mine. “We should get going. I have plans for us.”

“I hope more of that is in the plans.” I tilt my head and slide my lips lightly back over his. “A girl could get used to lots of steamy kisses.”

I smile as he puts both hands determinedly on my biceps before taking a step away from me.

“We’re taking it slow. Remember, Sabra? I made a promise, and I intend to keep it.” He grabs my hand and pulls me toward the street. There’s a farmer’s market up ahead. The tops of white tents flap in the balmy breeze past an orange and white barricade.

“How long are you thinking of keeping that promise, Trevor?”

He steers me in the direction of the market. “Long enough for you to know I’m in it for you and you alone.”

He glances into my eyes before crossing the street and guiding me to the entrance of the farmer’s market. The aisles are packed with tons of people hopping from booth to booth, grabbing samples, smelling stunning flowers, and getting fresh eggs from local farms.

I let him lead me down the first aisle in a stunned silence as I try to process the fierceness in his proclamation and take in all the sights and sounds at the same time. It seems things have crossed over onto another level now, and I’m not sure what to do with that discovery. I catch him staring seriously at me when we slow and come to a stop.

“You okay?” He bends so he’s at my eye level. “You seem a little freaked out.”

“No.” I shake my head. “I’m not sure what to do with that information yet, and I’m trying to process it.”

“I notice you aren’t bolting and running for the hills.” He wraps an arm around my shoulders and pulls me to a booth of strawberries the most vivid shade of red. “That must be a good sign, right?”

I don’t answer. Instead, I let his warmth and scent engulf me. I’ve never felt as safe as I do when I’m with Trevor. And he’s right. For the first time in my dating life, the idea of commitment is not making me want to run away screaming. What in the hell does that mean?

He reaches over my head and grabs a strawberry sample, but I keep my arms wrapped around his back and tilt my head so I can see the underside of his jaw and the light stubble there. He pops a bite of the juicy goodness into his mouth. His scruff calls out for me to reach up and smooth my hand over it, press my lips to the strong line, and trail them back to his lips. I don’t do that, though.

Trevor grabs another sample of strawberry and holds it out to me. I take a bite of the juicy goodness and can’t help the moan that rolls through me while I chew and swallow. He watches me watch him taking deep breaths.

“Not sure what it means, but I know I’m willing to ride it out.”

His eyes go wide, and a grin I know I want to see every single day splits his face before he steers me away from the strawberries, farther down the aisle, and deeper into the market. I would pay money—hand over every dollar I ever make for the rest of my life—to see his smile light up my world.

“Babe? I’ll take it. And you know.” He wiggles his eyebrows at me. “I’m always up for a good ride.”

“Good grief.” I swat him lightly on the arm. “You did promise me the ride of *my* life.”

“That I did.” He grins at me again and turns me to the stall right in front of us. “And we can discuss the *ride* later. First, we should eat something to keep our strength up.”

I can’t even throw a barb back at him because I’m too busy drooling over what I’m seeing. A French bakery in the Santa Monica Farmer’s Market, complete with the most scrumptious looking croissants and mouthwatering smells, beckons for me to come closer.

Trevor places his hands on my shoulders, rubs his thumbs up and down my neck, and winks at me when I peek over my shoulder at him. “I know what my girl likes.”

I nod and look back at the sweet, tempting treats in front of me while we get in line and wait our turn. Almond and chocolate croissants. Muffins of every imaginable flavor. Bear claws and eclairs. All of it calls my name as I look through the Plexiglas.

“Do you know what you want?” Trevor whispers in my ear.

“I can only choose one?” I go over each delectable item sitting in front of me.

“No, Say. You can have it all.” He pulls my back to his front and kisses me on the head. “You only need to say the words, and it’s all yours.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“I can’t believe we bought all this food.” I look around at the bounty of fruit, bread, and cheese spread out on the blanket. A blanket Trevor remembered to bring in the truck, along with a cooler holding chilled wine—a crisp Pinot Grigio, my favorite.

“How often do we get to do this?” Trevor grabs my hand and tugs me into his lap, settling me between his legs, my back to his front. He picks up one of the largest strawberries I’ve ever seen, holds it to my lips, and watches me take a bite out of it. A low hum rumbles out of him as he turns his head to look at me fully before he finishes the strawberry off. His eyes never leave mine as he chews and swallows.

We’re sitting high up in Palisades Park overlooking the beach and Santa Monica Pier. Trevor walked us down the trail in the park carrying everything while I followed, staring at his bulging biceps. I offered to help carry something, but he frowned and rolled his eyes at me. So, I decided I would do what he wanted and stare at him and all his manliness. Obviously.

The man has serious arm porn, and I want to take a bite out of him. I run my hand down his leg and over his calf muscle, feeling the rumble of his voice vibrate through my body.

It’s peaceful here. The park is busy—especially since it’s a Saturday. So many people are out walking their dogs or rollerblading through the park, and there’s no real privacy here. Trevor found a spot away from the bulk of people. We’re sort of hidden by a tree, but not. No one is paying attention to us, though. I sit and watch them all scurry past, oblivious to anything else around them. Earphones in their ears, dogs on their leashes, and eyes focused on wherever they’re headed. It must be nice not to worry about looking over your shoulder all the time.

Trevor shakes me out of my thoughts when he hands me a piece of crusty bread smeared with goat cheese and points at the beach and the water beyond. “See the waves breaking against the sand?” He wraps an arm around my chest and buries his face in my hair. “Do you see how steady and sure those waves come?”

“Yes.” I turn my cheek to rest on his chest and watch the waves crash again and again with him. “I could sit at the beach, smell the salt in the air, and watch the water for hours.”

“We can.” He shifts and snags a bite of my bread and cheese. I watch his Adam’s apple bob when he swallows. “We can sit for hours doing that because the waves are reliable. They’re steady and strong.”

I try to turn so I can see his face, but he holds me in place against his chest and offers me a sip of my wine.

“Those waves have the power to move things. Reshape the earth. Even break down walls.” His voice trails off, and his hand glides down to rest on my thigh.

I turn, placing both my legs over one of his, and take a long look at him. I’m not straddling him, but it would only take one short movement to have me there. “Something on your mind, Trev?” I take another sip of my wine.

Trevor grabs my glass, pulling it out of my hand. He sets the wine to the side and grips my waist. His fingers bite into my sides as his right thumb moves soothingly. “I have things I want to say to you, Sabra.”

He tugs me closer to him. I’m inches away from our bodies lining up perfectly. My hands go to his shoulders to support me perching on his lap. “Words that have been on the tip of my tongue for longer than I can remember.”

“Are you sure it’s safe to go into those waters, Trevor?” I squeeze his shoulders and lay my head against his chest.

“Babe.” He moves his hands to my cheeks, cupping my face and tilting it back to him. “Is it ever safe to go into the water? There’s always risk involved.”

“Yes, but,” I try to interrupt him, but he continues as if I never uttered a sound.

“The waters are never one hundred percent safe, Sabra.” He shifts me, moving my legs on either side of his so that I’m straddling him now.

My core lines up perfectly with his, feeling every ridge and bulge. I wonder at the fullness of him against me. His hands grip my hips again, sending sparks shooting through me with each movement and word he says.

“You always run the risk of a wave knocking you over.” His nose and lips trail down my jaw and neck. Shivers fly down my arms and back and pleasure pools in all the right places.

“You can get swept away by the undertow and lose yourself to the push and pull of the currents. Or something beneath the waves can touch and grab you, affect you in some way, catch you off guard, or hurt you when you least expect it.”

One hand slides up my back, tunnels into my hair, and gathers it off my shoulders, giving him more access to my neck. Trevor kisses down to the hollow at my throat and inhales deeply.

“The water and the waves, even the things within the water, have the power to change our course. To change us.” He lifts his head and his eyes bore into mine. “You are like the waves, Sabra.”

I still at his words. “What?”

“You are like the waves. What I feel for you, the seductive charm you have ... it’s powerful.” He leans in and brushes a kiss against my lips before falling backward onto the blanket, taking me with him. I lie on top of him with my knees on either side of his hips. “And I want to continue to lose myself in it. To be swept away from the push and pull of it all. To be affected by it. By you.”

He seems to peer into my soul, waiting patiently for me to process it all while he brushes my hair back. “Sabra, lose yourself with me. Ride the waves with me.” He pulls my head down to lie on his chest and rests his other hand on my backside, stroking softly. “I know there are scary unknowns out there but trust me to hold your hand through the ups and downs. Through it all.”

I press my hands on his chest to push up, causing other parts to move in the most delectable ways, and I stare back at him, considering his words. Can I let go like he’s asking me to and ride the waves? Do I have it in me to trust someone with my emotions like that? With all of me? What will happen if I allow the waves to crash over me and I end up broken and bruised? What will happen to me if I don’t take the risk?

I lean down and brush my nose against his, close my eyes, and whisper one little word in a rush of air.

“Yes.”

“Yes?” Trevor’s entire body tightens with his hands squeezing against my back. “You’re sure about this? Be sure about this, Say.”

“I’m sure about this.” I nod my head and look at him. “But let’s still take it slow, okay? One step at a time? I won’t lie to you. The water, and the things in it, still frighten me. But I’m willing to take the risk today, and a little more each day it seems, with you by my side.”

The smile that splits across Trevor’s face is one I’ve never seen before. I thought I knew every expression of his already, but this smile with pure joy radiating out his eyes is unlike anything I’ve ever known from him. It rivals the sun and the rays reflecting off the water below us, and I want to be the only person who puts it there until the end of time.

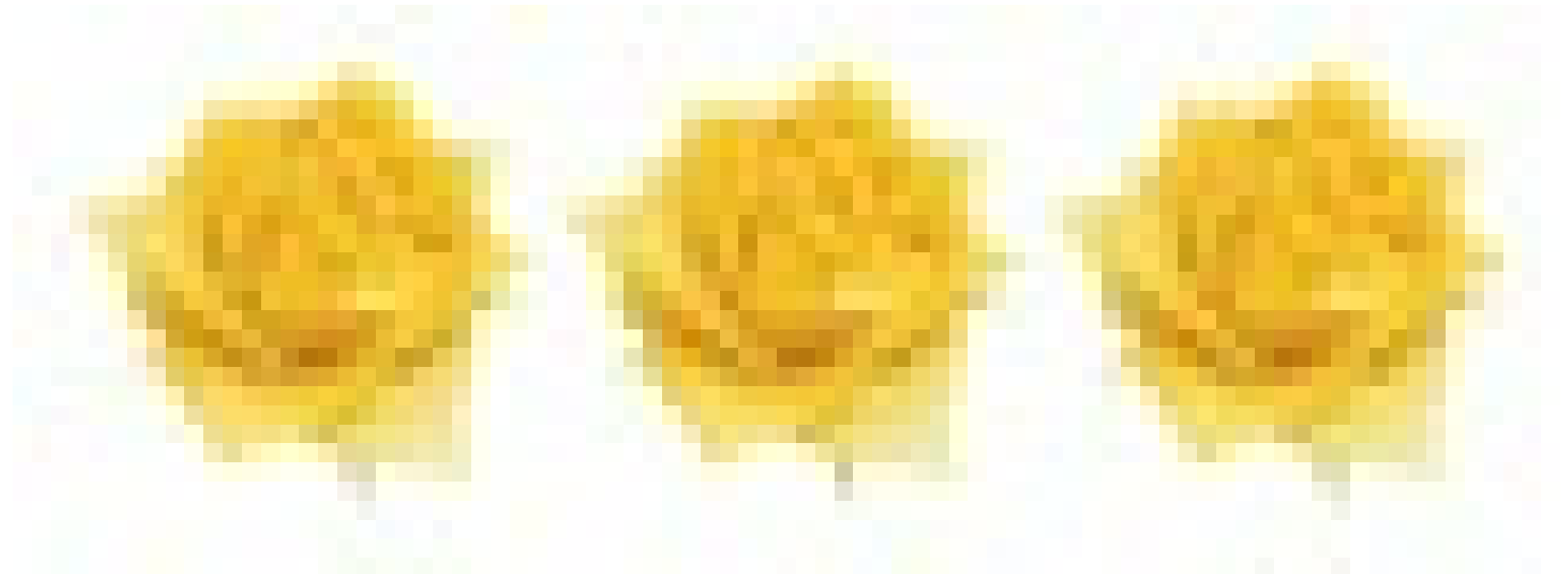
“I’ve waited a long time to hear those words come out of your pretty, little mouth, babe.” His hands slide around and up my sides stopping under the swell of my breasts. “You may have made me the happiest man on earth. At least the happiest man in Santa Monica.” He teases me as his thumbs brush against my curves.

I twist out of his grasp and laugh, lying with my head on his chest. “Slow, remember Trevor?”

One of his hands palms my right cheek and squeezes. “Slow, Sabra. I promise. You’re safe with me.”

I drop a light kiss on his lips and look deep into his eyes. “Thank you for always trying to understand and for being patient with me. I’m not good with this, and I know I must frustrate you sometimes. But I’m trying. I promise to keep my heart open to you.”

“You don’t owe me any thanks, Sabra. This? What we have right now?” He kisses me on the forehead and rolls me over so he’s looking down on me. “This is easy. Caring for you. Wanting you. It’s deep in me.” He touches his hand to his chest right above his heart, leans down, and starts a slow, bone-melting kiss. My body begins to revolt and scream *fast*, but then he pulls back. “It’s easy.”



“Are you ready for part two of our date?” Trevor wraps up our leftovers and packs them in the cooler he brought. We’ve spent the past hour finishing off the wine, nibbling on everything we bought at the market, and making out under this tree. It’s now one of my favorite spots in all the world.

My saying yes to Trevor seems to have unleashed a side of him he hadn’t allowed me to see yet. He’s always been kind, loving, and gentle, but now I see a reverence in his eyes when he gazes into

mine and an intimacy in his touch and kiss. The embers that had been lying low in me—screaming to be allowed to burn brightly—are awake and growing with each caress and slow, lingering kiss he places on me. Desire rolls between us and licks its way across my skin as he fans it into flame more and more.

I stand and grab the blanket off the ground to fold it in a nice, neat square, grinning. “Part two? There’s more?”

“You didn’t think we’d come all this way and only have a picnic, did you?” he asks with one eyebrow cocked at me.

“I figure your speech wouldn’t have gone over the same way without the waves actually crashing.”

“All right, smartass.” He laughs and smacks my bottom before picking up the cooler and grabbing my hand. “Just for that, I’m not going to go easy on you at the pier. You’re going to have to win all on your own.” Trevor leads me to his truck, and we toss everything inside.

“Oh, yeah?” I stop and look at him with my hands on my hips. “Were you planning on letting me win? Is that the only way you think I can kick your butt?” I try to force the smile off my face and glare fiercely in his direction.

“Is the expression on your face supposed to intimidate or scare me?” He pulls me into his arms.

I resist him by pushing against his chest, crying out, “Yes, you should be terrified of me. I’m going to kick your ass.”

“Huh. You should keep working on that,” he mutters against my cheek. He slides his lips over mine and makes me want to climb him like my new favorite tree. Good lord, I’m in so much trouble with this man.

“Sabra?” Trevor nuzzles my neck and sends shivers through me as I loop my fingers through his belt buckles and hold on with all my might.

“Yes?” I gasp.

“Last one to the Ferris wheel buys the cotton candy.” He pushes away from me and runs toward the pier. His laughter flies back to me on the wind as I shake off my kissing stupor and take off after him.

“Trevor, wait!” I yell at his back. “Ow! Hold on!” I slow and grasp my ankle.

“Sabra, are you okay?” Trevor jogs back to me and makes me lean my weight on him. We’re halfway down the pier. I can see the Ferris wheel looming a short distance away, winking at me as it churns around steady and strong.

“I think so. I must have tweaked it when I was running.” I glance at him from under my eyelashes. “I’m sure it’s no big deal. Let’s keep going.”

“No way. I’m not going to race you now.” He looks at me like I’m crazy, and I grimace at him.

“But I’m ruining your plan. What about the Ferris Wheel?” I gesture to the iconic location across the pier.

He turns his back to me. “You’re not ruining anything. Jump on.”

“What?” I laugh and shove a hand against his back. “No way.”

“You heard me.” He looks over his shoulder and gives me a no-nonsense look. “Jump on before I yank you over my shoulder like last time.”

“You wouldn’t dare.” I gawk at him open-mouthed.

“I would,” he says and turns around. “I’d be perfectly happy to have that fine rump near my mouth again.”

“No,” I yell, laughing uncontrollably. “Fine. I’ll ride on your back.” I sigh before climbing on board.

“Perfect.” He smirks. “We can discuss all the other parts of me you can ride later.” Trevor takes off down the pier with a slight bounce in his step toward our destination.

“I should have seen that one coming,” I groan into his shoulder blades.

“That’s what she said,” he crows and laughs all the way down the path.

When we’re about 100 feet from the entrance, I hop off his back and take off to the ticket booth yelling, “Sucker!”

“You cheat!” Trevor hollers after me. It doesn’t take long before he catches me, wraps his arms around my waist, and lifts me up, spinning me around in the air. “You’re going to pay for that.”

“Promises, promises, Trevor.”

He turns to the guy in the ticket booth with a glint in his eye and says, “Two please.”

We’re lucky because there’s no line and we hop on board a few minutes later with a passenger car all to ourselves. I move to sit across from him, but Trevor grabs my hand and pulls me to his side. “Oh no, you don’t. You owe me,” he mutters into my hair.

“It’s not my fault you’re so easily scammed by a pretty girl.” I push against his chest, but he holds on as if his life depends on it. I know a losing fight when I see it.

He’s on me as soon as we’re in the air and away from prying eyes on the platform. His hands burrow into my hair while his mouth crashes down on mine. He reaches with one hand and pulls my legs into his lap, turning me to give him better access. His tongue slides across the seam of my lips, and I open to him, letting our tongues tangle together while my hands hold tight to the front of his shirt.

I slip my hands to the bottom of his shirt, move them under the fabric, and stop right where the beat of his heart pulses under my palm. His heat sears through me.

Trevor drops his head and trails his lips across my neck, sucking on the pulse point before dropping kisses down the exposed skin. My V-neck top like an arrow pointing to the promise land.

One of his hands pulls out of my tangled locks and skates down my arm. He softly cups my breast as his thumb rubs across me.

“Trevor,” I moan, grab his hair, and lift his lips back to my own. Devouring him isn’t an accurate enough description of what happens next when I lift, straddle his lap, and rock on him while we kiss. The friction of him against me wakes the fire in me again.

“Want you,” he gasps into my ear as I move my hands to his belt buckle and suck gently beneath his ear.

“Yes.” I move to undo his belt buckle, all reasonable thought flying out of my head.

“Sabra,” Trevor groans and puts his hand on top of mine, stopping the unbuckling and snapping me out of it. “I can’t.”

“What?” I look around us. We’re almost back to the ground, and all I can think about is feeling him in my hands again.

“I want this. I want you,” he whispers against my lips and lifts my hands, holding them behind my

back. “I want these.” He sprinkles tender kisses on the top of my breasts peeking out of my shirt. “But I promised you slow, and I’m going to keep my promises to you,” he proclaims in a stronger voice. “Always.”

He releases my wrists, cups my cheeks with his hands, and kisses me softly before deepening it again. Then he quickly pulls back and sits me back beside him, keeping his hand on my thigh. “Even if it kills me.”

I stroke his cheek with one hand and smile at him, hoping he can see the adoration in my eyes. “You amaze me, Trevor. Every day.” I kiss him hard as our passenger car hits the platform. “Let’s go home. I want to order in Chinese food, snuggle in your arms, and fall asleep next to you. Can we do that?”

He pulls me in for a hug once we get off the platform. “Are you sure? There’s a part three on the beach if you want it?”

“I think I’d rather go home with you and have part three there if you don’t mind?” I grin at him. “I might even have to release the girls and throw on some comfy clothes.”

“With a promise like that, what are we waiting for?” He drags me to the parking lot, and I’m still laughing when we get to his truck. But my laughter dies when he pushes me against the door and crowds my space in the most delicious way. “You know, I’m always happy to help if you need it.”

“I’ll have to keep that in mind.” I wink at him and climb in the truck when he opens the door.

“Your wish is my command.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

“Are you sure you’re good with Chinese?” We pull into my apartment complex and drive around to the parking spots closest to my door.

“Of course.” He swerves into a spot, shuts off the engine, and opens his door. “I’m good with whatever. What do you want to order?” Trevor walks around the truck and opens the door for me, offering his hand to help me climb down.

“I’m kind of in the mood for something spicy. Maybe Kung Pao chicken?” I link hands with him and cross the parking lot. He hasn’t stopped touching me in some way or another all the way home. “Can you handle some heat tonight?”

“Why do I think you’re not talking about—?”

“Excuse me, Sabra Valentine?” Trevor and I stop walking and look at the railing of the balcony outside my front door. Two cops are standing there watching us closely. They are opposites. One has a pale complexion, light hair, and blue eyes, and the other has dark skin, even darker hair, and mocha-colored eyes that evaluate and unnerve me to the core.

“Yes? That’s me,” I say. “Can I help you?”

“We were patrolling the area and thought we would check in on you after the incident earlier this week. But when we came to your door, we found something. We’d like to discuss it with you to be sure it’s nothing. Can you come up here, please?” Tall and built, the police officer pulls his hands from his sides and rests them on top of the railing. What I see in his hand, standing out starkly against his dark skin, stops me in my tracks and knocks the air out from me.

Three yellow roses.

No.

“Sabra? What’s going on?” Trevor’s voice floats to me, but it sounds like it’s coming from far away. “Sabra?” He turns me toward him and places both hands on my upper arms.

“What?” I blink rapidly at him and try to clear my head.

“Why are these police officers here? What’s happening?” He stares at me in confusion.

But I can’t worry about that right now. The two cops continue to watch us, waiting for me to say something. I grab Trevor’s hand, pull him in the direction of the stairs, and begin to climb. “I’ll explain everything later. I promise.”

Trevor grunts in response and continues to take each step beside me. We take the last stair, and the blond officer holds out his hand. “Hello. I’m Officer Dowden, and this is Officer Toliver. We’re sorry for taking you by surprise. I’d gather you’ve had enough surprises this past week.”

“Yes, it’s been quite eventful.” I stare at the flowers in Officer Toliver’s hand. “What is this about?”

“I’d like to know the same thing,” Trevor mutters beside me.

“I’m sorry. Who are you?” Officer Toliver looks Trevor up and down and holds his hand out to

him.

“Trevor. Trevor Collins. I’m a friend of Sabra’s.” He takes the hand offered to him for a quick shake. “And I think I’ve missed something.”

“He’s my boyfriend,” I say lamely and look at them all.

“Your boyfriend?” Officer Dowden asks. “There was no mention of a boyfriend in your file. All the information given to us made a point to mention you were single.”

“It’s new,” I say quickly. “It—”

“What she’s trying to say is it became official a little bit ago,” Trevor jumps in to help. “I’m sorry. What is going on?”

“We were patrolling through the complex tonight because of the vandalism case from earlier this week and wanted to look at the hallway again since this is where it happened. We thought we’d do a quick check-in on Miss Valentine while we were here.”

“Wait. The vandalism occurred here?” Trevor turns to me and scrunches his eyebrows. “Are you in trouble, Say? Why didn’t you say something to me?”

“I didn’t want to worry you. I’ll fill you in when we get inside. I’m sorry.” I turn my attention back to the officers. “You said you found something that concerned you? What did you find?”

I know exactly what they found. I can see them shining out of Officer Toliver’s hands like a beacon of light trying to blind me.

“We weren’t sure if we should be worried or not honestly.” Officer Toliver’s eyes bore into mine. He’s looking for anything to be wrong, and it’s unnerving. “Now that we know you have a boyfriend, maybe it’s nothing, but these yellow roses were sitting on your doormat.” He rubs his free hand over the top of his head looking sheepish.

Officer Dowden jumps to his rescue and says, “They seemed out of place, and we thought we shouldn’t be too careful after the incident. I’m sorry if we frightened you.”

“Here, these are apparently for you.” Officer Toliver tries to hand me the flowers and looks at Trevor. “Sorry to spoil the surprise.”

“Those aren’t from me.” Trevor glances in my direction, and both officers turn to look at me again.

“I don’t know who they’re from,” I say. “But I don’t want them.”

“That changes things,” Officer Dowden mutters. He pulls out a pad of paper and pen from his shirt pocket. “Do you know who they *might* be from?”

“No, but this isn’t the first time I’ve found yellow roses on my doorstep or my car.” My voice shakes, and I squeeze my hands together in front of me.

“What?” Trevor raises his voice. “Why is this the first I’m hearing about it?”

I square my shoulders and look him in the eye. “I didn’t want to worry you. I thought it was nothing.” A tear escapes my left eye. “Besides, what if they were from you, and you were trying to be sweet and romantic or something? I didn’t know what to do.”

“Trust me, sweetheart, if I’m going to do something sweet and romantic for you, you’ll know it’s me. I like the payoff.”

“You’re absurd.” I glare at him.

Officer Toliver clears his throat, effectively ending our conversation. “I’m sure there’s a lot for

you two to catch up on, and we won't keep you much longer. But Miss Valentine, is there anything else going on you need to tell us? Anything at all?"

I look around the hallway, pausing to stare at the spot the notes have been, and shake my head slowly. "No, not that I can think of."

"And do you have any idea who might be doing this?" Officer Dowden crosses his arms over his chest and waits, watching my reaction. "Is there anyone who might be mad at you or want to scare you for any reason?"

I dig deep and rely on all those acting skills I've been working on for a decade. Pushing my shoulders back and raising my head, I look him in the eye. "No. I have no idea who would want to do this to me."

"Okay." Officer Toliver nods his head. "We'll add this to your file and continue to patrol the area regularly. Don't worry. We'll figure this out."

"Until then," his partner says, "if you think of anything, please let us know."

I nod my head in his direction and try to pull my thoughts from the one place I don't want them to go. Because I know this is Lucas. The notes. The flowers. The fear. All of it lines up to equal classic Lucas.

"Sabra?" I look to find all three men watching me closely again.

"I'm sorry, what?" I shake my head. "This is all a lot to take in."

"I was asking if you were going to be okay," Officer Toliver says. "Maybe you shouldn't be by yourself tonight?"

"I'll stay with her tonight." Trevor puts his hand on the small of my back. "I've got her."

"You okay with that plan?" Officer Dowden asks.

"Yes." I sigh. "That's perfect with me." My eyes find Trevor's, and although he's smiling at me, the confusion is still there tinged with a bit of frustration too. I'm going to have a lot of explaining to do.

"We'll get out of your hair," the blue-eyed officer says.

Officer Toliver waves the roses in our direction and turns to walk down the stairs. "Call us if you think of anything else."

"Will do." My voice shakes. "Thank you."

I turn and look at Trevor. He's staring over my head with his eyes drilling a hole in my door.

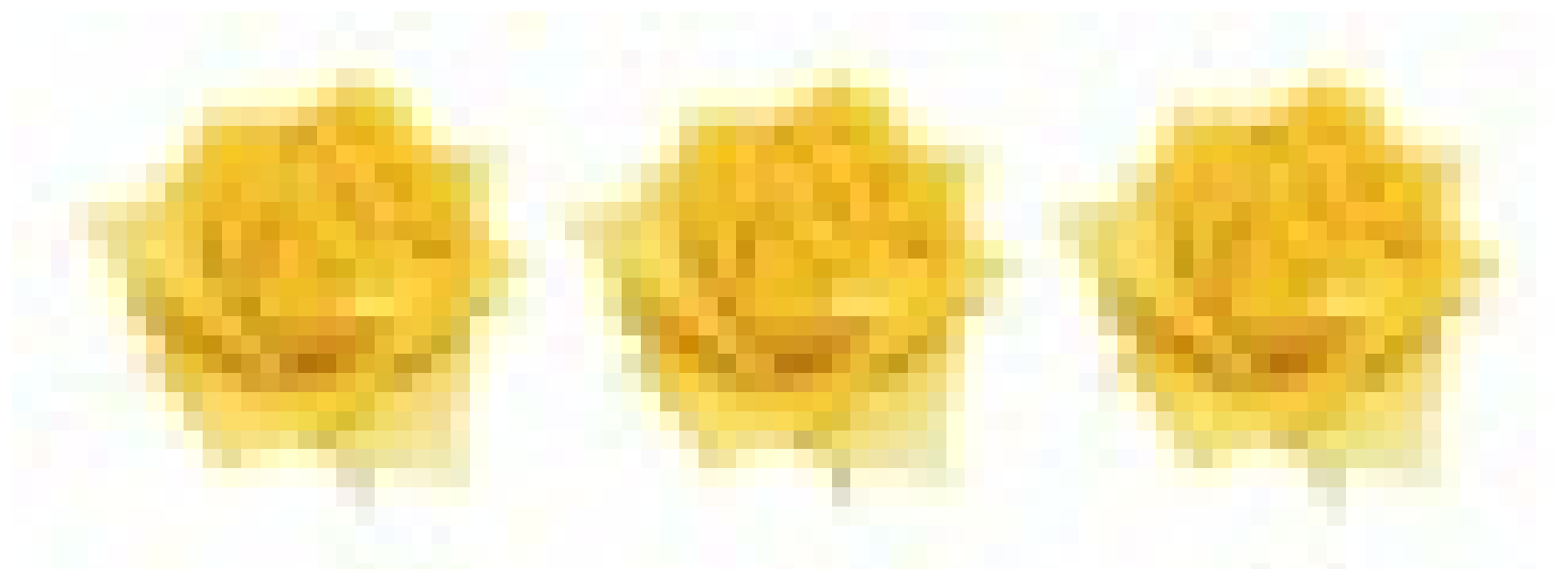
"Trevor." I reach over and take his hand.

"Not right now, Sabra." He squeezes my hand within his own, but a muscle clenches in his jaw. "You're going to need to give me a minute."

"Okay." I stand there not knowing what to do or say.

"Let's get inside and order dinner." He shakes his head slowly and looks into my eyes. "Then you can fill me in, okay?"

"Yes, okay. Sounds good." I unlock my door and step inside with Trevor behind me.



“You were going to fill me in on everything that’s been happening this last week?” Trevor sits on the floor next to me with his plate of sesame chicken on his knees. This is his second trip to the kitchen. The past forty-five minutes has been quiet. We ordered dinner and made small talk while we waited for them to deliver it.

I tried to talk to him about everything, but he asked me to wait until later because he was still processing it all. I agreed and went about pulling down plates, opening a bottle of wine, and making sure everything was ready. The need to stay busy and not think too hard about what will happen when I lay everything out for Trevor trembled through me. Almost everything. He doesn’t need to know *everything*.

“Yeah, okay. A few days ago, I woke up and was leaving for class.”

“What day was it?” Trevor interrupts me.

“Thursday morning.” I watch something flicker across his face.

“But I saw you Thursday. I brought you tea.” He puts his plate on the floor in front of him and turns to lean on the couch next to me. One hand rests on my knee with his thumb rubbing circles. “Why didn’t you say something when I saw you, Sabra?”

“Honestly, I didn’t know what to say. It freaked me out, but I hadn’t heard back from anyone to know much more than there was a message written in red across the wall in front of my door.” I take a deep breath. “It wasn’t until later I realized I was right to be freaked out.”

“What do you mean a message written on the wall? Was that the vandalism the cops were talking about?” His hand stills on my leg. “And what do you mean you realized you were *right* to be freaked out?”

“I don’t know where to start.” I pull my knees to my chest and try to make myself as small as possible.

“Start at the beginning.” Trevor moves to sit next to me on the couch and pulls my balled-up form into his lap. “I want to know all of it.”

“I don’t think I’m ready to give you all of it yet, Trevor.” I glance at him from underneath my lashes. “It’s a lot.”

“Sabra.” He pauses and waits until I lift my eyes to look him directly in the face. “I want all of it, all of *you*. Nothing you say to me will change that.”

“I hear you say that Trevor, and I want to believe it. My heart clings to those words in ways that would probably scare you and have you running for the hills if I could articulate it properly. Hell”—I laugh— “I’d run from myself right now if I could.”

“Babe, I don’t think you’re hearing me.”

“I hear you. I’m just not sure you know exactly what you’re saying.” I lift my hand and run my fingers through his hair. “I want to believe it. Honestly, I want to hold these promises you’re throwing out to me like a lifeline, but you don’t know everything.” I see he’s about to interrupt me again and rush on. “And I can’t give you everything yet. Maybe not ever.”

“Why?”

“What do you mean?”

He cups my cheek. “Why can’t you give me all of it? Don’t you trust me? After all these years, especially the past few months, can’t you see that I mean what I say?” His thumb rubs along my cheekbone, and he stares deeply into my eyes. “Even more so when it comes to you? I would do anything for you.”

“I do believe that,” I whisper back at him. “But there are things I haven’t come to terms with myself. And I’m not ready to say them out loud. My past is ugly. I can give you some of it, and maybe someday, all of it. I don’t know. But for now, this is where I’m at.”

He watches me closely as he thinks through everything I said. “Fine.”

“Fine?”

“Yes, fine. I’ll take what you’re willing to give me.” He reaches between us, picks up my hand, and links our fingers. “But babe, I need to tell you something before you share it all with me. You need to know this.”

“Okay.”

He catches my words with a quick kiss and continues talking. “Everyone has a past. All of us. Some are filled with laughter and joy, and others are filled with dark, frightening things. But no one moves forward without something behind them. While I don’t like thinking about the things behind you being dark or frightening...” He pauses to take a deep breath.

“Trevor, you don’t need to—”

“No, let me finish.” He leans down and rests his forehead against mine. “While I don’t like the thought of that, I’m also not going to let things that happened in our past define our future. You mean the world to me. My focus is the here and now and moving forward with you. Are you hearing me, Sabra?” He waits until I nod and brushes away the tears pooling in the bottom of my eyes.

“I want a present and a future with you, sweetheart. We can’t ignore the things that have happened or were done to us in the past. They have helped mold us into who we are today. And I love who you are today, Sabra. But we *can* take the steps to move in the opposite direction and embrace the next things. I want to do that beside you. If you’ll let me. Okay?”

Tears stream down my cheeks, and I burrow into his chest, leaving wet spots on his shirt. “Are you sure?” I whisper. “I don’t want to—”

“I’m sure, Sabra. I’ve never been surer of anything in my life.” He squeezes me to him tighter before pushing me a little bit away and looking in my eyes again. “There is nothing you can say that

will make me ‘run for the hills,’ as you put it. I want everything you’re willing to give me.”

I stand, walk across the room, and run my hands through my hair before turning around and facing him. “Okay, but I need you to know I’ve never shared this with *anyone*.” I wait for a reaction, but his face remains blank and calm. “Not even Micah.”

“Micah doesn’t know any of it?” He moves to stand.

“No, stay there.” I throw my hands out in front of me and watch him settle back into the corner of the couch with his hands up in surrender. The same corner I’ve curled up in staring at the door, waiting for Lucas to find me. “I need a little bit of distance while I tell you this.”

Trevor leans over with his feet on the floor, braces his forearms against his knees, and clasps his hands together. “I’m listening. Give me everything you can.” He lifts his head to look me in the eyes, steady as can be. “I’m not going anywhere.”

I slide down the wall opposite him and pull my knees back to my chest, taking a few deep breaths to steady myself and my pounding heart.

“It started when I was eight ...”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

I stop talking, and the room is eerily quiet except for my sniffing. I try to gain control of my emotions and not fold under the pressure of all the words I've handed him while I wait for his response. I told him everything and left out nothing. He said he could handle it and wanted all of me, and this is all of me. The good, the bad, the used, and the broken.

But I realized something as I told him my story. I'm also healing, piecing myself back together shard by shard. What was once shattered is now whole and living again, albeit with corners chipped off and missing. I was lost before, but now I'm finding myself and allowing myself to be found by others. By Trevor.

I've held my story in for so long I didn't realize the entirety of my journey. It didn't end with Lucas going to prison. Chapters were still being written. They're continuing to be put on the page. No one has written the end yet. The tears move to the ugly crying stage when I have this epiphany.

Trevor's head snaps up when my sobs escape, but he doesn't move to me. I could stop here. It'd probably be enough for Trevor. A look of torture crosses over his face as I speak each word. Emotions and pain etch into his body and cut me deeper than any words he could speak or say in return. It wouldn't surprise me if it were all too much for him.

I pause and try to calm down. Breathe and ask him if he wants me to continue.

He looks up with his own tears pooling in the bottom of his eyes and tells me he is here. He's not going anywhere. He wants all of me.

So, I give it to him. I finish with getting the phone call from Lucas that morning with Trevor sitting beside me. The roses. The notes. The message on the wall. I give it all to him and pray it won't break him. Won't hurt what we've started together.

And now I sit here staring and waiting for him to say something. Anything at all.

Trevor looks at me. The tears are still there, but there's an emptiness in his expression. He wipes his eyes and drags his hands through his hair. Then he slowly stands and takes a step in my direction.

"Sabra." His voice croaks, as if his throat is raw from holding in everything he's feeling. "Please let me come to you."

I hesitate and watch him, trying to decipher what he's thinking and feeling, but all I see is a man broken for my sake. A man I've tried to run from. A soul I've tried to push away. But he's always there—waiting—and I keep slamming back into his arms.

"Please, Say," he rasps.

My head nods once, and he falls to his knees in front of me. His arms wrap around my waist and gather me to his chest.

I don't know where the tears come from because I've been crying for an hour, but a new dam breaks. Guttural moans and sobs wrack my body against him. I realize as I'm calming down—his tear-drenched shirt gripped in my hands and my body still shaking—that he is shaking too.

"I'm sorry. So sorry," he whispers above me while he rocks us both back and forth. "I'm so sorry,

Sabra.”

I cup his face and tenderly brush away the lone tear track on his cheek. “Shhhh ... Trevor, it’s okay. I’m okay.”

“I can’t ... I don’t know how to make this better.” His warm breath plays against my thumb as I rub it along his bottom lip.

“You can’t make it all better. Nothing can make this better. It goes deeper than that.” I shake my head at him and wipe another tear off my own cheek. “But you, at this moment ... you staying is enough. I was afraid you’d stand up and walk through the door without a backward glance once you knew. But you’re still here, with me.”

“I promised you I would be here, Sabra. Nothing you say can make me walk away.” He pulls back, cups my cheeks, and tangles his fingers in my hair. “I meant every word I said to you earlier.”

“I wouldn’t blame you if it were too much. It’s a lot for anyone to take, I know.”

He grips my hair a little tighter before loosening his hold. Then he stands while picking me up and cradling me in his arms. “It is a lot, but it’s a part of you. And I meant it when I said I want all of you.” He sits back on the couch, settles me on his lap, and lays my head on his chest while his own falls onto the back of the couch. “I have something to tell you, too.”

“What?”

A moment passes before he pulls his head up and sighs. “The notes were from me.”

“*What?*”

“They were from me.” He looks around the room and then back into my eyes, squeezing me tighter against him. He holds me in a vice grip as if he’s scared I’m going to run away. “I was trying to be romantic, and I figured you would guess they were from me. If I had *known*.” Another gasp leaves him as his head falls back again. “I’m so sorry.”

“But the roses ...”

“Were not from me,” he answers. “But I promise you, we will find out for certain who’s doing this and take care of it. And I’m sorry for my part with the notes. I didn’t know.” He lifts my hand to his mouth and kisses my knuckles. “Please forgive me.”

“Trevor.” I lay my head in the crook of his neck and kiss him where his pulse pounds against my lips. “You didn’t know. There’s nothing to forgive.”

He lifts and shifts me so I’m looking straight at him with my legs on either side of his hips. “Are you sure? I would never do anything to hurt you. To scare you or to threaten you.” He tunnels his hands back into my hair and stares deeply into my eyes. “You are everything to me, Sabra. Tell me you know that.”

“I do.” I nod and place a small kiss to the corner of his lips. “I do, Trevor.” I kiss over his pulse point again and up his neck, breathing in his ear. “Thank you for listening and not running.” I nip on his earlobe, whispering, “Thank you for wanting all of me.”

“Sabra,” he growls out from clenched teeth. “I’m barely holding myself together here.” His hands stroke up and down my spine.

I nibble his jaw, kiss him on the opposite corner of his lips, and smile, breathing out. “I want you, Trevor. *All* of you.”

His hands still. “Are you sure? We can wait. It doesn’t have to be now.”

“Yes. It does.” I rock on his lap and push my lips to his while swallowing his moan. “I need this. I need you.”

He’s tentative at first. His hands roam down my back again while our kiss moves from sweet to seductive. I feel every reaction his body has against mine, and the warmth spreads through me, pooling in my core.

Trevor moves his hands into my hair and tilts my head, deepening the kiss further. I pull back and yank his shirt out of the front of his pants and see his eyes go molten on me. He picks me up and cradles me to his chest again, walking me down the hallway to my bedroom.

“What are you doing?” My hands unbutton his shirt while I rain kisses on all the places I can reach.

“I’m not making love to you on your couch, Sabra.” He pushes my bedroom door open with the toe of his shoe. “I’ve waited a long time for this moment, and I want you in a bed. I plan on letting you know exactly what I mean when I say I want *all* of you.”

“Oh.” The word rushes out of me.

He lays me in the middle of the bed and lifts the hem of my shirt while sprinkling kisses across my abdomen. Licking. Sliding higher as I squirm under his touch. He pauses his assault on me and looks up with a twinkle in his eye. “Yes, *oh*. I plan on making you say oh right along with my name tonight.” He goes back to the path he had abandoned.

“Is that so?” I scoff. He lifts my shirt up past my bra and sits back to stare at me.

“Shhhh ...” He waves his hand and presses his fingers over my lips. “Give me a minute.”

I lie still, watching and waiting as he tenderly slides the back of his fingers up my sides and the curve of my breasts.

“You are beautiful, Sabra.” He brushes his knuckles over my lace bra, making my nipples tight.

A gasp escapes me, and I arch my back toward him.

“You like that?” He slides his fingers back and forth, watching my body move and beg for more of its own volition. When I’m not sure I’m going to be able to take anymore, he undoes the clasp and leans down to pull me into his mouth.

I can’t keep the groans inside me as he worships my body. Licking, biting, soothing away the raw and jagged edges I have.

“I will never have enough of you, Sabra.” He gasps as I slide my palm over the bulge in his pants and give a light squeeze. “I want all of you. Always.”

“You have me.” He slides my pants down, and I lift my hips to make it easier. My jeans fall on the floor, and he smiles at me sweetly before placing kisses on the inside of my thigh. I lift onto my elbows and watch him. “Take them off, Trevor,” I order.

He hooks his fingers in the side of my panties and grins. “These? Are these what you want off?” He slides them down my legs. “Always so demanding.”

I sit up when he gets to my feet and push him back until I’m straddling him. “No, babe, I want these off.” It takes me a moment to get his pants undone and see him in all his glory. And I’m reminded of the first time I was in this position as I watch him stand beside the bed and let his pants drop to the

floor.

He stops me when I reach out to take hold of him. My mouth waters at the sight of him, but he pushes me back firmly. “No, not this time, Sweetheart.”

“What do you mean?”

“I know you and how you like to be in control.” He covers me with his body and slides his fingers down, slipping through the slickness, and dips inside me. When he adds a second finger, my eyes roll back into my head. “Tonight is about me and you, Sabra. Together.” He shifts and glides down my body. “Just you and me.”

His warm breath skates across my bare skin before I feel his mouth close over me. I’m lost in him. Falling apart against him. The earth moves and shakes in ways I’ve never known before.

When I come down off the mountaintop and catch my breath, I open my eyes. Trevor rolls on a condom. He kisses me, climbs my body, and asks one more time. “Are you sure, babe? I can stop right now if it’s too much for you.”

He’s all I want right now. All I want in the future, and maybe even forever. I wrap my hand around him and guide him to me. “I want you, Trevor. Right now.”

He doesn’t wait for more as he slides into me and fills me, starting a steady rhythm. The fire between us slowly builds and expands again. His hands and mouth worship me exactly as he promised. Touching. Sucking. Licking any part of me his hands and mouth can find.

His body tightens under my hands, breath rushing out of him. When he moans my name against my chest, my body breaks spectacularly again, coming down the precipice with him. Stars burst behind my eyes.

Trevor rolls us so I’m lying on top of him. His hands take up their march—slowly moving up and down my spine again—with my head resting on his chest. After a few moments, he gets up, walks to the bathroom, and comes back with a towel for me. He slides between the sheets and tucks us in for the night.

My face nuzzles his neck as he wraps his arms around me. “Trevor?” I whisper against his chest before kissing him right above his heart.

“Yes, love?”

“You’re everything to me, too.”

“Rest well, Say.” He squeezes my sides and reaches down to pat my bottom. “I’m here, and I’m not going anywhere.”

I lie with my ear pressed against his heart and listen to the steady thump until his breathing evens out. I feel safest here in his arms. Holding me. Loving me. I succumb to the sleep calling my name, knowing no one can touch me with Trevor by my side.

“Sabra?” My mom’s voice echoes down the hallway before a soft three taps rap against my bedroom door and she pokes her head through. “Are you up?”

“Yes, ma’am,” I say over my shoulder and turn to look at her. “I’ve been up for about an hour.”

“You couldn’t sleep?” She opens the door wider, walks toward me, and perches on the corner of my bed. “It’s a big day for you, I know.”

I nod and turn back to the mirror to finish powdering my nose before looking through my lipsticks. I can’t believe I’m starting high school today. The butterflies are having a war in my belly, and I keep sliding the palms of my hands against my jeans to try to wipe away the sweaty and clammy feeling. Is it this nerve-wracking for everyone?

“I remember my first day of high school.” My mom walks over to stand behind me. I can see her in the mirror, short bob and makeup done perfectly. She’s one of the most beautiful women I know. I hope I’m as caring and lovely as she is when I’m forty-three. “You know, I met your father the first day of my freshman year. He was sitting behind me in English and kept kicking the back of my chair, trying to get my attention.”

I laugh at her and glide a soft pink lipstick against my lips. “And you turned around to tell him to cut it out and fell head over heels on the spot.”

She laughs with me and runs her fingers through my hair.

“I don’t think that’s going to happen for me, Mom. I don’t want a boyfriend or to fall in love.”

“Oh.” She scoffs. “You just wait, Say, some boy is going to come along and sweep you off your feet one of these days.”

“He’d better have a big broom,” I quip before I toss the tube of lipstick back in a box on the vanity and stand.

“Do you know what you’re going to wear?”

“I think so.”

“You have about thirty minutes before you need to get going. Make sure you come say goodbye before you and Luc leave.” She stands in my doorway for a second longer before turning around and walking out, shutting the door behind her.

“I will,” I mutter under my breath and try not to throw up. Lucas and I will be in the same school this year. He’s a senior and thinks he’s the shit.

I have one more year to worry about him before he leaves for college. One more year of looking around corners and making sure my door is locked. I can’t wait for him to be gone.

I start to walk over to my door to turn the lock and pause when I hear the knob rattle.

“Sabra?” Lucas whispers through the door.

“What?” I run to the door with soft feet and press my hands to it listening carefully. “You can’t come in. I’m not ready yet.”

I can’t do this. Not today.

“I just—”

“Lucas?” My father’s voice booms up the stairs, interrupting whatever Lucas was about to say.

“Yes?” Lucas hollers back from outside my door.

“What are you doing?” My dad’s voice is getting closer.

“I was going to check on Sabra,” Lucas replies. I hear his footfalls against the wood floors in the hallway.

“Let’s give her some space this morning, huh? It’s a big day for her, and I’m sure she’s nervous enough.” Three small smacks ring out sliding under the crack in the door as if he’s patting Lucas on the back. “She doesn’t need her big brother adding to it.” He laughs. “Come and have breakfast.”

“Yes, sir.” Lucas’s voice gets smaller as he walks down the hallway.

I lock the door quickly, sit on my bed, and look at my shaking hands. Thank heaven for my dad.

One more year.

I can do this.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“Babe?” Trevor walks down the hallway and into my bedroom. It’s been a week, and he hasn’t left my side except for the absolute necessities, even coming to the lodge and sitting at the bar while I work most nights. He would have sat my final with me if I’d have let him.

I’m finished with classes for the semester now, and we’ve had a lot of time to go over things together. Soft conversations. Whispers in the dark while he holds me close. I think it’s made us stronger. Closer. I never imagined this could be the outcome, but I love it.

“Are you almost ready to go?”

“Let me finish this email, and I’ll be all set.” I glare at the arrow hovering over the send button and twirl my hair around my finger. “Am I doing the right thing? I don’t want to hurt anyone.”

“I can’t tell you that. Only you know the answer for what’s best for you ultimately.” He leans against the doorway with his arms crossed over his chest. “But what about not hurting yourself? Isn’t that important too? And do you think you can go back to that house with him in it... even for a few days?”

“No, I don’t think I can.” I stare at the arrow for a few more seconds, click my mouse over the blue button, and watching the yellow notification pop up saying my email has been sent. I just broke my mom’s heart.

Christmas is one week away. This morning, I woke up to an email from my mom and a voice message from my dad asking what my plans were for the holiday. How many days would I be home? Did I know Lucas had made Christmas Eve brunch reservations for the whole family? We’re all set to go to the country club like old times.

I broke down in tears reading my mother’s email. It shouldn’t have surprised me like it did, but I’ve been busy. I hadn’t given much thought to Christmas and Lucas being back. I didn’t want to think about what that would mean for me this year. I’d already spent Thanksgiving alone, which was fine, but I didn’t want to spend Christmas alone.

And of course, Trevor was having none of it. He invited me to join him and his family for the holiday instead. Hello, zero to sixty.

I explained I couldn’t come home with him for Christmas yet, but he told me he would stay with me then instead. We argued over that one. I’m not going to be responsible for him being away from his family or have his mother hating me before she even really knows me. No. Way.

He shut me up with a kiss that curled my toes and dialed his mother behind my back, only stopping kissing me when she answered. Trevor doesn’t fight fair.

After a long phone call with Tina, Trevor’s amazing mom, and neither one of them willing to take no for an answer, it seems I’m going to the Collins’ home next week for three days. And meeting the family. *All* the family. I want to puke.

So now, because I’m a coward and don’t want to hear the heartbreak in her voice, I’ve sent an email to my mom letting her know I won’t be home for the holidays—or in the foreseeable future—if

Lucas is there. I'm not comfortable around him for reasons I'm not ready to talk to her about yet. And I need her to go along with me right now, even if she doesn't understand or it makes her uneasy. We can all be uncomfortable together.

Except for Tina, apparently. Trevor is almost positive she's already picking out our china pattern and making a deposit on the church. Which doesn't make me uncomfortable at all, of course.

Trevor walks over to me and sits on the edge of the bed. "I know that was scary and a horrible to do, but I think you did the right thing, Say."

I shut all the windows on my laptop and close it while he rubs circles on my back.

"She may not be happy about it, but she loves and wants the best for you. That's one thing you said you always knew. Your mom wants you to be happy and healthy, you know?"

"I know she does. It's the one thing she has always said over and over to me growing up." I slide off the bed and bend to grab my heels. "And I mentioned that to her in the ... hey!"

"Sorry." Trevor smirks when I turn around to face him. "You know what? No, I'm not. I shouldn't lie. You can't stick your rear in the air, tempting me like that, and not expect me to do something about it." He stands and pulls me into his arms. "Especially not in this dress." His arms tighten around me, and he bends down, placing kisses below my ear. "You look stunning, and you smell awesome too. I don't know if we should go to this party, after all."

"No, you don't," I moan and push against his chest. "It took me an hour to get ready and make myself look this good." I turn in a circle, twist out of his grasp, and cross the room to put some space between us. "We're going to this party, and you're going to behave." My feet slide into my heels before I sashay out the door. "And you're going to like it."

He laughs behind me. "I'm going to like watching you all night and knowing you're coming home with me," he mutters, grabbing the keys off the hook and opening the door so I can walk through it.

Trevor is careful, making sure I see him lock the door before he grabs my hand and pulls me to the stairs. He steps in front of me, takes the first step before I can go down, and turns so we're almost eye level.

"In case you weren't clear on my meaning earlier." He wraps my arms around his neck. "You shouldn't plan on sleeping when we get home tonight. I'm going to do all kinds of dirty things and muss you up properly." He plants a slow kiss on me to make sure I get his drift. We stand there lost in the moment and in each other. He looks smug when he pulls back from me.

"Is that so?"

"Yeah, that's so." He lowers a hand to my cheek and gives it a squeeze. "I'm going to take a bit of time with this right here."

I smile at him and run my fingers into his hair before kissing him again, my body rubbing against his and causing his body to react. I don't need to say anything. He knows how I feel. I give his hair a little tug and end the kiss. Then I sidle past him with a smile.

"Promises, promises."

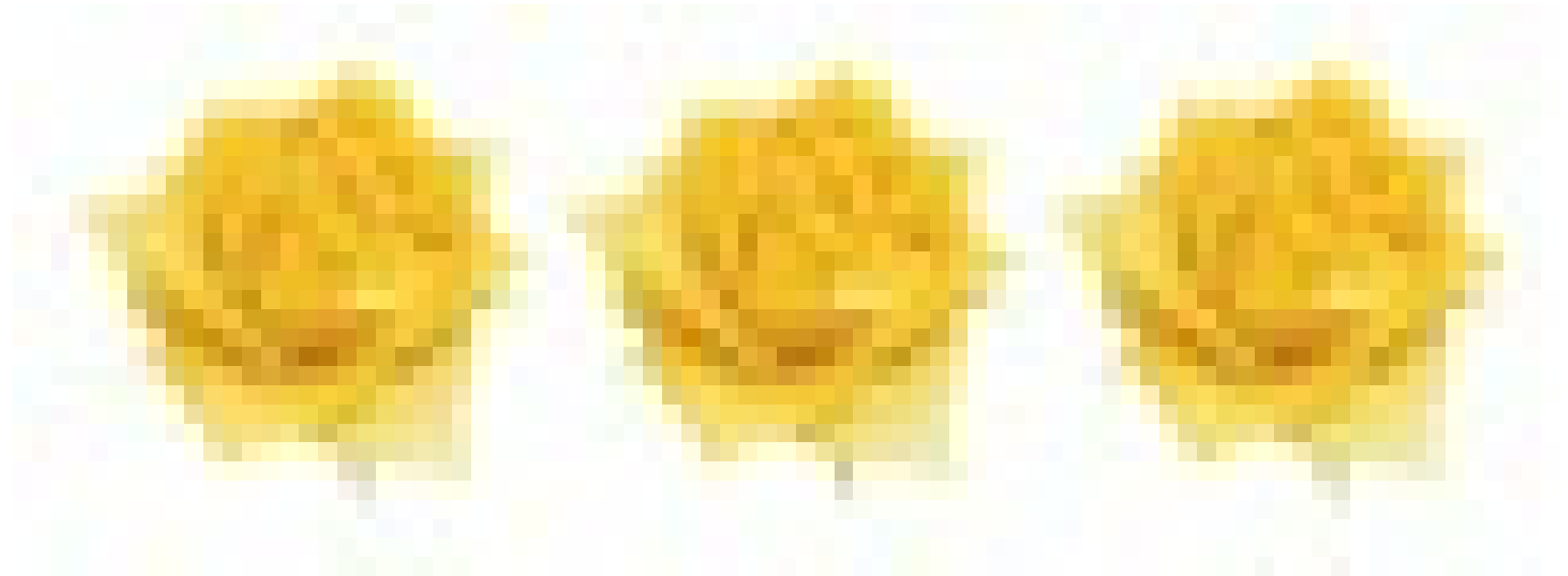
"Yes, it is." He opens the door of his truck for me. I yank my skirt up a little so I can climb into the seat. His hands circle my waist, and my feet come off the ground. "Need a boost?" He's hunched over me with his mouth at my ear. Anyone watching would think horribly naughty thoughts. My body comes to attention.

I shift to sit and pull my dress back down. “I think your hands have done plenty already tonight. Thanks.” His face falls, and I snicker behind my hand while I watch him walk around the front of the truck and climb into the driver’s seat. “Let’s go. I don’t want to be late.”

“You’re excited about tonight.”

“I love parties. And I love Christmas. And I love—” I stop. Because I can’t go there yet. No matter how much my heart is bursting to tell him, the risk is still too big to go all the way there. “And I love everything about tonight.”

Trevor doesn’t turn to look at me or say anything in return. He peers at the road, continuing to drive with his hand on my knee. A small smile plays at his mouth, the crinkles beside his eyes growing. He loses the battle and grins widely but never says a thing.



“No, not the blue one!” I yell across the room at Trevor. “Get the shiny gold bag! Trevor!” He’s not listening to me. At all.

Trevor keeps on moving to the gigantic blue gift bag that is too big to even sit on the white elephant gift table. He’s a man on a mission, no matter what I holler at him.

“Trev! Babe!” The room goes silent.

“Did you just call him babe?” Kirby calls out from another table.

“Yeah, have you been holding out on us, Collins?” Cooper, one of Trevor’s buddies, throws a napkin in his direction and misses.

Kirby jumps back in. “Seriously, spill it, you two.”

“Inquiring minds want to know.” Soft-spoken Lauren pipes up from my left, flashing a mischievous grin in my direction.

“Oh my word,” I moan into my hands. My face burns, and I know it’s bright red.

“You’re the one who went off and called him babe at the top of your lungs.” Micah laughs from across the table. “What did you think would happen?”

“I clearly didn’t think,” I whisper to them both. Lauren giggles and ducks her head when I glare at her.

“*Babe.*” Trevor makes his way back to our table with a distinct swagger. He’s enjoying this a little too much. “I guess it’s time we let them all in on our secret, don’t you?” A smile splits his cheeks, and

it's beyond ridiculous.

"Oh yes, please tell us all the dirty little secrets." Micah doubles over and puts her head on the table, wiping her eyes.

I'm going to take her out in her sleep later. When she least expects it.

"There are no—" I say, but Cooper interrupts me.

"So, you're a thing." He raises his fist to bump Trevor's before he gets back to our table with the absurd gift bag still in his other hand. "No wonder you're never available to go shoot hoops or grab a beer lately."

"Sorry, dude." Trevor turns from him and looks me directly in the eye. "But Sabra's insatiable. She monopolizes me. *All* of me." He smirks and laughs loudly.

"Trevor," I shriek over all the laughter.

"And who can blame her when she can have all this?" He spins with his arms out to his sides, walks over, and plops the enormous bag in front of me.

"You're going to pay for this. You know that, right?"

He sits next to me and pulls his chair extremely close to mine. Trevor smiles even bigger. "Promises, promises."

My head snaps in his direction, and I watch his shoulders shake with mirth.

Micah calls out, "Enough already. Just open the damn bag or get a room!" More heat crawls up my neck, and I turn to glare at her. "What? You didn't want them all to know you're doing it?" She looks at me with wide eyes.

Dear lord, now would be a good time for the earth to open and swallow me whole.

I turn back to Trevor, gritting my teeth. "Can we please open the bag so the next number can go?"

"Sure." He shrugs nonchalantly. "Dig in."

There's a twinkle in his eye still. I can't decide if it means more trouble is brewing or if it's left over from the absurdity that took place a few minutes ago.

I yank some of the tissue paper out and push my hand to the bottom of the bag until I feel fabric of some kind. Fisting the smooth material, I pull it out and shove it into Trevor's chest, forcing him to grab it. His smile goes even wider. Immediately, I see the mistake I've made.

Trevor unfurls the satin and lace and stretches it across his body. "Sabra," he teases. "I adore you, but I don't think this was meant for me." He stands and turns in a circle again with a red satin nightie lined in white fur held out for everyone to see.

I slap my hands over my eyes and shake my head while Trevor and everyone else laughs. The sound booms through the room. With a stealth he doesn't see coming, I stand next to him and tug the nightgown out of his hands.

"I don't know, Trev," I say in a singsong voice, shaking the scrap of material at him. "Tonight is about revealing all our secrets, after all. Maybe you should tell them yours, too."

I toss the nightie in his face and grab my phone before bolting out the door of the room and into the lodge bathroom, yelling, "Number seventeen, it's your turn!"

Trevor's laughter rings out louder than anyone else's in the background.

I'm standing at the sink washing my hands when the door opens and Trevor saunters inside.

"You can't come in here. This is the girls' room."

"You were proud of yourself back there, weren't you?" Trevor crowds my space and cages me in with his hands on either side of me, holding the counter. He nudges my legs apart and glides one of his own between them. "I think I'm going to have to remind you of a few things, Sabra."

"Oh, yeah?" I wrap my arms around his neck and press my chest into his own. "And what's that, *babe*?"

His hands move to my waist, and a laugh escapes me when he lifts me onto the bathroom counter. The heat from earlier is gone. Now there's a burning traveling through my entire body as his hands slip and slide over my curves. His eyes are darker. The smile on his lips wicked. Liquid fire runs through my veins and pools in my center when one of his hands runs up my leg and under the skirt of my dress.

"Trevor," I groan into his mouth. "Maybe we shouldn't start something we can't finish."

"I can finish it, sweetheart." He takes the kiss deeper while his hand creeps farther under my skirt. "You just have to be able to take everything I give you."

A laugh outside the bathroom door and Micah's voice saying, "I'll just be a minute, Logan," has us splitting apart faster than if my dad had walked into the room. Micah barrels through the bathroom door with a secretive grin on her face as I'm hopping off the sink, straightening the skirt of my dress, and fixing my lipstick in the mirror.

Trevor leans against the wall of the bathroom with his legs crossed at the ankles and hands in his pockets. Cool as a cucumber as always.

"Hey." Micah's step falters when she spots Trevor in the bathroom. "Everything okay?"

"Yep." I grab a paper towel to wipe my hands off after rinsing them in the sink for no real reason.

"I was checking on her." Trevor pushes off the wall. "I'll wait for you outside, Say."

"Go ahead and go back to the party," I call after him. "I'm going to step outside on the balcony for some fresh air really quick."

He hesitates, turning when he's almost through the door and catching it with his hand. "Are you sure? I can wait and go out there with you." Concern radiates off him, making my heart swell inside me.

"No, I'll just be a minute." I look over at Micah. "Tell him he worries too much."

"You worry too much, Trevor," she hollers and walks into a stall, shutting the door.

"And that's my cue to get out of here." He smiles at me. "I'll see you in a minute."

I follow him out the door, grab his hand, and give it a squeeze. "Thank you for coming with me tonight. I'm having so much fun."

"There's no place I'd rather be." He pulls me to him for a tight hug. I love the feel of his arms around me. "Hurry back." He drops a quick kiss to my lips and turns me toward the French doors leading out to the balcony.

I throw a smile over my shoulder at him and step out onto the balcony, taking a deep breath of fresh, clean air as I walk over to the railing. This is my happy place.

Growing up, I would come here to get away from it all. Hours would pass with me reading,

drawing, or writing plays I thought were going to get me to Broadway. I'd munch on the lodge's famous zucchini bread and drink a hot tea in one of the Adirondack chairs snuggled in a blanket. This is one of my safe places. I should've brought Trevor out here with me to share this spot with him.

A shadow moves below the balcony, catching my attention as I turn to go inside. I squint into the trees to try to make out what it was. A gasp flies out of me when I realize a person dressed in all black is walking toward me below, softly calling my name. The voice I've tried to avoid for months floats up to me. I take a step back, squeeze my eyes shut, and shake my head, grabbing the railing as the world spins around me. Tendrils of fear and darkness snake around me and threaten to suffocate me.

He calls out with a smile in his voice, strong and sure. "Hey Songbird, did you miss me?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“What—” The words stick in my throat. I clear it several times before I can continue. “What are you doing here?”

“I wanted to talk to you for a minute.” He flashes a smile at me and stuffs his hands in his pockets. “Can you come down here?”

“How did you know I was here?” The laughter from inside drifts through the doors, and I allow it to wrap around me for a second. I’m not alone. “They’re expecting me to come back inside.” I reach into the pocket of my dress to pull my phone out. “I only came out here for a minute.”

“Please, Sabra.” His shoulders hunch over with the words. He drops his head and scuffs the toe of his shoe through the dirt and pine needles littering the ground. “I promise it will only take a few minutes. Mom called me upset tonight. I think we should discuss it.” He looks back at me. “She sounded frantic.”

“What?” My heart drops and my stomach squeezes. A wave of panic rolls through me. “Is she okay?”

“I don’t know,” he says quietly. “I’ve never heard her like this before, and I’m worried.” Lucas takes his hands out of his pockets, runs them through his hair, and turns around to look at the trees.

I watch him cautiously not sure if I should run or stay. He seems genuinely upset and different. Quieter.

He turns back around to look at me and sighs loudly. “Please, Sabra. Come here and talk to me for a minute.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea. You can tell me what you want from there.” I know he hears me because he places his hands on his hips and frowns. The phone vibrates in my hand, and I look at it. There are three missed calls from my mom and a text message from Micah.

MICAH: Are you coming back in here? Trevor looks lost without you. LMAO

I smile at the ridiculousness of my best friend.

“Fine.” Lucas’s voice drifts back to me. “I know when I’m facing a lost cause.” He paces away from me and into the trees before turning back around and imploring me one more time. “You know, I’d hoped things would be different when I got home. There’re obviously things we need to discuss and work through. Now’s not the place or time for that, of course.” He pauses and rubs a hand down his face. “I thought you’d want to hear what I’d been seeing with Mom the past couple of months. She’s not herself lately, and I don’t think she’s well. Even though she’s not talking about any of it, of course.”

Lucas bends over with his hands on his knees and stands that way for a long moment before standing and turning back toward the forest line. He seems different. Softer somehow. “We can talk about it another time.” He takes another step toward the thick foliage. “I’m sure it will be fine. Sorry for bothering you.”

A roar rushes through my ears when he steps into the woods. “Wait!”

He pivots and stands as still as a statue, watching me slide my phone back into my pocket and walk toward the stairway leading to the lawn, and beyond that, the forest below.

“I’ll talk to you for a minute.” I take the stairs slowly, cautiously. “But it can only be for a minute or two. Trevor will be out here to join me soon.”

“Sure.” Lucas smiles over at me. “Of course.”

“Tell me about Mom.” I walk across the lawn toward him. “What has you so worried?” My heels sink into the ground, making the journey slower than normal.

“She called me tonight crying. Which isn’t so different from any of the other times in the past few weeks. She’s been crying a lot.” He looks worried and frowns at me.

“Why? What’s wrong with her?” The question slips off my tongue as I yank my foot up and stop to look at the railing of the balcony.

Lucas ignores me and takes a step in my direction with his hand out like he’s going to try to help me.

“No, no. I’ve got it.” I put my hand out to stop him. “Why is she crying so much?”

“Honestly?” He pauses and watches me closely. “She misses you. And she wants us to be a family again. Tonight, she was yelling about you not coming to Christmas and how it was my fault. I couldn’t understand half of what she was saying. She kept ranting about you emailing her and saying you’re celebrating with Trevor instead.”

My shoulders go rigid when I see the dark glint in his eyes.

His lips purse before he expels a long, hard breath. He wipes his face of emotion and takes another step in my direction. “Things are getting serious between the two of you, huh?”

“I don’t want to discuss that with you,” I reply curtly and take a step backward. My heel catches on a hole in the ground, and my ankle twists beneath me. My hands wave in the air trying to find something to grab as my knees buckle and I’m falling to the ground. A glint of metal catches my eye when my phone falls out of my pocket.

Lucas closes the distance between us and grabs my arm, pulling me to him. My back is to his chest as he squeezes me tightly to him and whispers in my ear, “Is this how it’s always going to be, Sabra?” He leans to the side and picks my phone up.

I try to push away from him. “Trevor should be here any minute.”

“Yes, I’m sure he’ll be here soon.” He pockets my phone and steps backward toward the line of trees behind us, dragging me with him. “Unfortunately, for him, we won’t be.”

“What?” I kick my feet out and dig my shoes into the ground, ignoring the pain shooting up my left leg. “What in the hell are you doing, Lucas? Let me go!”

He slaps his left hand over my mouth. It muffles my words. Then he shakes me so hard my teeth rattle. “You always were too soft-hearted for your own good, Sabra. I guess I should say thank you for making this easier on me.”

Tears streak down my face and beneath his fingers. I taste the saltiness slipping into my mouth as I desperately work to shake him off and yell for help. He drags me farther and farther into the forest. The lights of the lodge become smaller and smaller.

“No!” I cry out when his hand releases for a moment. “Don’t do this.”

“Shhhh” He shakes me again before lifting me and moving faster. “I’ve got you, Songbird.”

“Lucas,” I moan and push my head back on his shoulder. He squeezes me tighter to him before roughly turning me around, gripping my hair in his fist, and yanking my head to the side.

“Help! Help me!” I scream at the top of my lungs when his hand leaves my face. “Please help me! Some—”

Lucas’s fist connects with my cheek. It whips my head back and knocks the breath out of me. He reaches into his back pocket and pulls out a roll of duct tape as he throws me to the ground.

I shift and start to move away from him, but he grabs my left ankle and wrenches me back to him. I scream out in pain as darkness crowds the edges of my vision and stars dance across my eyes. One of my nails scrapes through the dirt, tearing through the pine needles and roots.

“See what you made me do, Sabra?” He straddles my body.

I raise my right leg to kick him in the crotch, but he drops himself on top of me and pins my arms with his knees.

“You never could play nice, could you?” He spits on the ground beside my head. Lucas rips a strip of tape off the roll. He bends and runs his nose along my jaw before placing the tape over my mouth and kissing me on the corner. “Don’t worry.” He flips me over and drops his weight back on top of me.

I struggle against him, moaning and writhing, as he grips my arms and hands behind my back. Sticks and rocks scrape my cheek while he wraps the tape around my wrists and chuckles.

He leans over and the front of his body presses against me. His erection digs into my lower back. “I’ll teach you how to play correctly,” he whispers.

My head shakes harder, viciously. I whip my head backward and nail him in the chin.

“You bitch!” He leaps up, stands over me, and kicks me in the side. “You’ll pay for that.”

He grabs my wrists and tugs me into the air, throwing me on my back. I stare at him in horror when he lands down hard on me again. This time fury shoots through his eyes and spittle gathers in the corners of his mouth. He squeezes my cheeks together before shoving his other hand into my hair and pulling with all his might. My head flies forward before he shoves it back onto the ground.

Pain shoots through my body. Blissful darkness takes over me.

The last thing I see is him smiling at me.

Three pixelated yellow suns with a soft, glowing aura, arranged horizontally across the top of the page.

“Rise and shine, sleepyhead.”

Something cool and damp skims across my brow and soothes the sting and jags of pain shooting through my face. I open my eyes and blink several times to get them to focus on what’s in front of me. Lucas’s face looms before me with a sick smile. A bruise blooms across his cheek and nose. Metal bites into my skin and I cry out, trying to throw my hands out in front of me before realizing I can’t move my arms or legs.

“What have you done?”

“Don’t worry, Say.” Lucas wets a washcloth in a glass bowl and wrings it out before wiping my cheek again. His hand trails down my neck and collarbone. “I’ll have you cleaned up in no time.” He sweeps the washcloth across my chest as he stands over me. His eyes roam over my body. I’m lying on something hard. “Can’t have you soiling your pretty, white dress, can we?”

“Lucas, don’t do this.” I frantically look around the room. “Please don’t do this.”

He leans down and looks up, aiming his finger above me. “Don’t you like your new dress?”

My eyes track what he’s pointing at. Terror seizes my body, and I can’t breathe. A mirror attached to the ceiling reflects an image of me chained to a table. I’m wearing a long flowing white dress with a sweetheart neckline. The slit on the side of the skirt goes to my hip. My bare leg peeks out of the dress showing off a swollen ankle. Dark bruises dot my skin up and down my shins and thigh. My hair has been brushed and pulled into a braid. Yellow roses circle my head.

I open my mouth to scream, eyes wide and petrified, when Lucas slaps a hand over my mouth. “I wouldn’t do that if I were you.” His face gets closer to mine, and he squeezes my cheeks while he turns my head to look in the direction he wants. “Don’t make me do something we’ll both regret, Sabra.” He reaches over and picks up a long carving knife. The light shines on it before he drops it back on the small table beside us. “I think you’ve caused enough damage tonight, don’t you?”

Lucas grabs a roll of duct tape from next to the knife, rips off a strip with his teeth, and mashes it over my mouth. He pushes off the table and steps away. His hand drifts down my side as he walks to where my feet lie chained together. He slides the fabric of the skirt over revealing more of my bottom half and smiles at me with a gleam in his eye.

I track every move he makes, trying to keep my body from shaking. The room spins and goes in and out of focus. A hand pushing on my injured ankle snaps me back into the reality of my nightmare.

“No, no, Songbird. Can’t have you going back to sleep and missing all the fun.” He pats my ankle again. “Listen to me carefully so I don’t have to do any more bad things to you, okay?”

He waits for me to peer in his eyes before continuing. “There’s no screaming allowed. The neighbors might be a little upset if we wake them. We need to be extremely quiet while we get reacquainted.” He pauses and lifts his hand to rub the back of his neck, looking into the corner of the room briefly. Lucas picks up the washcloth again to wipe off the dirt from my leg. He makes slow circles down the outside and back up the inside until he reaches my inner thigh.

“We both know you can stay quiet when you have to, so I don’t think that will be a problem, do you?”

I can’t stop watching him. My eyes dart from the mirror above us to where he stands at my feet.

“Sabra,” he barks. “Answer me.”

I shake my head. Then I find a light on the wall over his shoulder and stare at it until black spots dot my vision, and I’m forced to look away. My gaze goes back to the mirror above me, and I find Lucas watching me carefully. One hand skims back and forth along the bottom of the table.

“Maybe,” he draws out the word. His tongue darts out and licks his bottom lip. “We should do a test. See if you can still stay as quiet as a little mouse. Isn’t that what we use to call it? You remember don’t you, Sabra?” The palm of his hand rubs against the bottom of my foot and up and over the top before he stops with it back on my ankle.

“Now don’t make a sound,” he whispers. Then he presses his body weight down. A scream rips out of me from the white, hot pain shooting up my leg. He lets go of my foot and shuffles back to my head, picking up the knife again.

“Oh, no,” he tsks. Lucas slides the blunt edge of the blade across my cheek. The metal reflects my face back at me. I watch a tear fall into my hairline. “That won’t do at all, Songbird,” he croons into my ear, pulling the knife down my chest and resting it between my breasts. “You’re going to have to do better than that.”

He lightly scratches my skin with the blade and a sting licks across my chest. Warmth trickles down my legs before dripping sounds out in the room.

“What did you do?” He glances at the table and floor. “Your dress!”

Lucas paces across the room and back again, running his fingers through his hair. He grips it tightly before turning around and coming back to me to assess the fabric of the dress, now wet and yellow in spots. Moisture spreads to the hem and the smell of urine permeates through the room.

He marches over to a closet and opens the door wide for me to see in. White dresses fill the dark space. Long. Short. Lace. Cotton. An entire rod full of stark white dresses waiting to be worn.

“No worries.” He calmly shifts the dresses aside to look at each one. “We’ll clean you up and put a new dress on you.”

His voice is steady and soft when he pulls out a lace one. It’s completely see-through. “This one?” He looks at me in the mirror and grins wickedly. “No, we’ll save that one for a little later, I think.” Lucas places the disgusting dress back on the rod and pulls out a simple cotton maxi with a low V-neck. “This one is perfect. You’ll look beautiful.” He turns to me and walks back to the table. “Don’t you think it’s perfect, Songbird?”

He stops walking with the dress in his hands when we hear fists pounding on a door.

“Sabra! Are you in there? Open up!”

Trevor.

Trevor’s voice rings out, yelling as he searches for me. Close, but not close enough.

“Mmmmpppphhhh!” I yell through the duct tape over my mouth. Chains rattle together as I throw my body around. The wood table shifts as I try to move as much as possible. Something cold and round crushes against my temple. I go still when a small click sounds in my ear. Looking in the mirror, I see Lucas standing next to the table with a gun pressing into me.

“I’m really sorry you’re making me do this, Sabra,” he sighs.

Cold steel smashes into the side of my head, and the room goes black.

Music seeps through the walls and bodies are coming in and out of every door of the house when Lizzie drops me off at eleven. We went to the championship basketball game and out to eat with some of our friends afterward. From the looks of it, the rest of the high school came to my house.

My mom and dad are out of town for a few days, and they left Lucas in charge. He's not here much now that he's in his first year of college, except to do laundry or get money. Although, from the way Dad was screaming at him before they left town, it doesn't sound like he's been spending a whole lot of time in his classes either. He came home this weekend specifically to "take care of me" and go to the basketball game with his buddies.

Laughter and shouts ring out across the driveway. It sounds like this party was high on his list too. I haven't had to see him much because I've been at Lizzie's most of the time, but I knew I needed to come home tonight. Lizzie's mom was asking me when my parents would be home and giving me funny looks. A definite sign I was wearing out my welcome.

With nowhere else to go, I decided to pull on my big girl panties and face whatever greeted me when I walked through the door. And even though I wasn't expecting this, maybe this is a good thing. It means Lucas is preoccupied with someone else and drunk.

I slip through the front door and slide past bodies pressed against walls or huddled in groups.

Lucas stands in the doorway of the kitchen watching the party in full swing. Two kegs sit next to the Kitchen Island and bottles of every liquor imaginable line the back counter. Plastic red cups dot the furniture and litter the floor. If my parents knew what was happening right now, Lucas would be a goner.

I spot two kids from school leaning over the coffee table and lines of white powder when a familiar voice calls my name from across the room.

"Sabra." I turn my head away from the madness and find Lucas walking toward me. "Did you have fun at the game?"

"Yeah. What's going on, Lucas?" My hands sweep out in front of me. "Do Mom and Dad know this is happening? What about the neighbors?"

"I told them I was going to have a few friends over." He looks around the room again and sneers. "They'll all be gone in a few hours. Most of them still have curfews."

"Mmmkay." I nod at him as he turns his attention back to me. "I'm going to go hide in my bedroom and read."

A smile spreads across his face, and the hairs stand up on the back of my neck. "You do that. I'm sure it will be quieter there." He chuckles with a quick glance up the stairs and tosses a wave at me. "Have fun." He walks away, leaving me standing there wondering if I'm missing something.

I shrug it off and take the steps two at a time—squeezing around a couple making out in the stairwell—and jog down the hallway to my room. The door is cracked open, and a groan falls from my lips. Two horny teenagers better not be getting it on in my bed.

The door swings back and bangs into the wall when I slam my hand on it and march into my bedroom looking around. So help me, if anything is missing, Lucas will pay for it.

"Sabra." A tall, lanky guy from school with dull, brown hair and zits around his hairline stands from my window seat and smiles. "I thought you were never going to get here." His words slur together slightly, and he puts a hand out to steady himself against the wall.

"What are you talking about? And what are you doing in my bedroom, Eric?" I toss my purse on my desk and turn to look at him shifting back and forth on his feet. His pupils are so big, you can barely see a ring of green around them.

Awesome. He's high as a kite.

"Lucas said I should wait for you here. That you'd be home soon." He brushes past me to push my door closed. I walk up behind him and watch him struggle with the lock, muttering, "Got it."

"What are you doing?"

He turns and stares at me with his back against the door.

"Eric?" My voice sounds higher as panic bubbles up, and my stomach turns. I don't want to be in this room alone with him, especially with the way he's looking at me. He pauses briefly on my boobs and leers. My arms quickly cross over my chest.

"Come on, Sabra," he cajoles and takes a step toward me with his hand out, swaying side to side when he moves. "Lucas said you might be nervous but not to let that fool me."

"Not to let what fool you?" I walk to the other side of the bed trying to put some distance between us.

"You know," he draws out the words before dropping his eyes to my chest again and licking his lips. "He told me it's just a show. That you do this all the time. He said you're 'broken in'." He laughs and does air quotes with his fingers, but his left hand doesn't make it all the way up in the air.

I frantically look for an escape route out of my room the whole time he's talking, but he's standing between me and the door. And while he's wiry and doesn't have anything on the football players at school, he's still bigger than I am.

I watch him continue to move toward the end of the bed and toward me like a predator stalking his prey. If I can get him to round the corner and take a few more steps... I jump onto the middle of my queen size bed when he's an arm's length away from me and use it like a trampoline to try to catapult to the other side and bolt for the door.

"Oh no, you don't," Eric yells. His hand grips my thigh, and he yanks me back toward him.

My jean skirt slides up, revealing a sliver of my underwear. My body lies face down on the quilt my grandmother made for me. I work to turn my body over so I can get my fists around to fight him off.

He throws his body weight on top of mine and pins me to the mattress while I buck my hips to knock him off me and to the ground. "This doesn't have to be a fight, Sabra," he slurs in my ear before grabbing and pinning my hands above my head with one of his own and laying his head next to mine. His legs straddle my quaking body, and I feel him pressing into my back.

Nausea rolls through me. I twist and turn my body under his, kick my legs out, and try to nail him in the back, continuing to fight.

I don't know how to get out of this. I'm stuck. And he did this to me.

“What do you want, Eric? Let me go!” I scream into the room hoping someone will hear me. Anyone. But the music’s too loud. It drowns out anything happening in here right now.

“Only what Lucas promised me for the drugs.” He slides his free hand under me, grabs my breast, and squeezes. Pain slices through me.

“Ow!” A tear slips down my cheek. “What he promised you? What are you talking about?”

Lucas is sick, but there’s no way he’d do this. Boys have never been able to get close to me when he’s around. He couldn’t have known this would happen.

“As payment.” Eric grabs my body and flips me over and sneers at me.

I kick, yell, and scream. My hands briefly come loose as he starts unbuttoning my blouse with his other hand. I knock my fist into his right cheek, but he isn’t fazed.

He grabs my hands in his own again and glares at me before he starts laughing. His body rocks on top of mine. “He promised me you.” He laughs. “His own sister. Said you were used.” He sways back and forth when he leans toward me with his hot breath puffing in my face.

I feel his grip loosen on my hands a second time, but his hold tightens again when I try to pull away.

“Like I said, he said you were used and not to worry about it,” he slurs with his lips inches away from my own. “That you did whatever he wanted.” He sways again and leans closer to say something else, but his body slumps on top of mine and pins me farther into the mattress.

“Help!” I scream at the top of my lungs. “Someone help me!” I push with all my might. Eric’s body rolls off me and to the side. I scramble across the room, lean my shaking body against the wall, and inch toward the door as I try to catch my breath. Waiting for him to come after me, I’m careful not to turn my back on him.

But he doesn’t move. He’s passed out on my pink and purple bedding. I don’t check to see if he’s breathing. Instead, I walk to the door as quickly as I can on wobbly legs, unlock the door, and bolt down the hallway. Tears stream down my face as I run out of the house. My legs carry me toward the grove of trees knowing only one person will think to look for me here. I fall to my knees sobbing and crying out in anger when I spot the hammock.

Why is this my life?

I hate him.

Long after the tears dry and my moans quiet, I stand and move to sit on the hammock. The moment my hands touch the rope, though, I stop and drop to the ground instead. I crawl on my hands and knees, curl into a ball under the hammock, and cry myself to sleep.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The shrill ring of a phone shrieks through the air around me, causing the pounding in my head to thump in my ears. The room blurs and spins in front of me for a few moments before coming in and out of focus. I blink my eyes open, and a wave of nausea rolls over me. A ball of vomit shoots up my throat and stops before it gets to my mouth. I think I'm dying.

"Why the hell does he keep calling? Leave us alone," Lucas yells. A crash reverberates through the room, and the piercing sound suddenly stops.

I move my head to the side and watch a blurry Lucas dressed all in white walk across the room.

He bends to pick something up from the floor. "Everyone is set on making me do things I don't want to do. The police. The judge. The other inmates. Family. Everyone has their way they want me to do things."

I close my eyes when I see him turn his body in my direction and try to breathe steady and deep despite the shooting pain radiating through my limbs and head.

"I'm not doing it anyone else's way now. They can all go to hell." He shuffles closer to my side. "Especially this one. Stepping in and trying to take Sabra from me ... I'm going to have to kill him." His mutters get louder the closer he gets to my makeshift bed. "I'll cut his throat and drop him in the lake."

A sound like something being dropped in water draws my attention to my left side. Water droplets splash onto my cheek and mix with the sweat dotting my brow and sliding down my temple. Cold fingers brush along my forehead. It takes everything in me to lie as still as I can and not flinch away from his touch.

"Don't worry, Songbird." He straightens the collar and sleeves of what I'm wearing. "We'll always be together now. I'm not going to let anyone get in our way. I'll take care of *Trevor*."

Fear runs through my body.

Lucas pats my left hand, which is tied to my right and lying on my stomach. "No one will ever come between us again," he says. "I have a plan. And anyone who gets in the way of it will pay."

I squint my eyes open when I feel him walk away and wait for them to adjust to the dim lighting. The queasiness threatens to overtake me. I roll my head to the side until I spot what made the splash. My phone has sunk to the bottom of the glass bowl sitting on top of the small table beside me. A washcloth still folded over the side of the bowl has started to dry along the edges.

"I'll kill them all." Lucas's voice floats across the room to me.

I move my head to look in the mirror above me. The long white maxi dress covers my body now. My feet peek out of the bottom of the skirt, and the chains holding me to the table are gone. The deep V-neck of the dress shows too much skin, and I want to yank it up. My bra is missing. Silver duct tape still covers my mouth and yellow roses still ring my head.

"Each one of them a special death. Hanging. Gunshot. A slit throat. Drowning. Strangling. An ending all their own if they try to cross me."

A couple of tears drip out my right eye, and my heart pounds in my chest. I stare at my hands in the reflection. He's used duct tape to bind them together, one wrist over the other. Moving my wrists confirms there is no breaking out of the restraint.

I slowly move my head back to the side and find Lucas in the corner of the room walking around a Christmas tree. He's finishing stringing the lights and starts humming "Carol of the Bells."

My mother used to hum that Christmas carol all the time starting on Thanksgiving Day. She would put up our tree while the rest of us napped our turkey coma away. We'd wake in the late afternoon still wiping sleep from our eyes and find our way into the living room where a huge and glorious tree decked in red, green, and gold would greet us. Christmas music would be playing in the background. Mama would hand us each a mug of hot chocolate and challenge us to a game of cards sitting on the floor. We'd play long into the night and snack on leftovers in the twinkle of the lights.

Why does this room look so familiar to me? I take inventory with as little movement as possible, scrutinizing each wall and peering into each dark corner. Suddenly, I know there will be sliding glass doors out to a balcony on my other side. I glance to the right, and the vertical blinds confirm what I already know.

A gasp races up my throat, and I swallow it. I squeeze my eyes shut and try to hold my mind together. It feels like it's fracturing.

This is my apartment, except it's not. Everything is opposite. But the only way that could be is if ... no. He wouldn't dare be that bold. Couldn't be that stupid to move this close to me and into my apartment complex.

Lucas is evil, but he's not stupid. He's sick, but he also always makes sure his T's are crossed and his I's dotted. He'd never be so reckless. Unless he was desperate.

The room looks like my friend Janie's apartment. I can't shake the feeling I've been here before. Janie lived across the breezeway and down the hall from me—close to the other set of stairs—before she transferred to a college closer to home in Atlanta. This looks just like her apartment except her living room walls were red. The walls here are white.

I hear Lucas opening boxes and containers. I track his movements with my eyes in the mirror until he disappears. Then I move my head until I find him again and start over.

Lucas pulls out Christmas decorations and places them on the tree. Beading and ornaments, all of it glows brightly against the shine of the white lights. Everything except the flowers is stark white. Yellow roses dot the tree, scattered throughout the pine needles.

"I can't wait for you to wake up and see my surprise for you, Songbird." He reaches into a box and pulls out a white dove. "You're going to love it."

Lucas hangs the ornament high. He brushes his fingers across the bird's wing, making it swing from the branch. He opens another container and hangs the balls in random spots on the tree. They glitter as if they're covered in snow.

"We'll sit together in front of this tree on Christmas Eve, and I'll tell you everything that's happened over the past seven years. I have so much to fill you in on, my dear Sabra. I've imagined this moment for so long," he murmurs to himself and places the last ornament on the tree.

I watch him pick up the plug, walk over to the wall, and push it into the outlet. White lights awaken and shoot drops of dazzling radiance across the room. Lucas pauses to take in his handiwork. He

chuckles to himself and straightens something out on the tree. The needles rustle when his hands hit them.

He's still muttering to himself, but a roar fills my ears. His words aren't clear. I can't stop looking at the wall. Specks of red paint peek out from the sides of the white outlet cover.

Dear lord, I know where I am. Alarms sound in my head. Missing pieces click together. I know exactly how the message on the wall came about so easily, and the roses mysteriously appeared. Everything is suddenly crystal clear to me.

"And after I've fed you dinner and the last drop of wine is drunk, I'll finally have you as mine," he continues speaking to the tree.

Lucas is psychotic. He's going to push me farther than I've ever been before. This will be it. I'm going to die because of him.

The room spins and blurs again. I see him turn back in my direction. Black shadows invade the edges of my vision. My eyelids droop, and I can't fight the exhaustion. Fear overtakes my body as I hear him say one last time.

"You're only mine."



"No, there's no need for you to come here." Lucas yells into his phone again. He paces back and forth in front of the Christmas tree across the room. "Mom." He sighs and takes a deep breath. "Sabra came here because she was upset." His voice becomes calmer, steadier, and stronger.

There's a pause while he listens to whatever she's saying on the other end. "I don't know why she chose me." He raises his voice slightly at her. "She texted me from the lodge and asked me to come get her. Said she needed to get away and wanted a safe place." He shrugs his shoulders as if she's in the room with us. "I didn't ask questions. She's my sister."

I glance into the mirror above me and notice the chains are still missing. There's duct tape over my mouth and around my wrists, but the chains are still gone.

"What do you mean they found one of her shoes in the forest by the lodge? Who found one of her shoes?"

He spots me watching him closely, puts one finger to his lips, and walks over to a table where the same silver gun he held against my head lies. Lucas picks it up, twirls it in his hand, and smiles at me as he tries to get off the phone with our mother.

“I don’t know, Mother,” he rasps out in exasperation. “I only know she was upset, and she came to me. It’s been a long time since she’s come to me for anything, so I wasn’t going to question her about it. My job as her brother is only to be here for her. To protect her.”

Lucas throws his head onto the table and lays it across the arm holding the gun. He stares at me while I survey myself in the mirror again. A loud clatter draws my attention back to the corner of the room where Lucas sits. He’s crawling on the floor, scrambling to grab the gun. It fell from his fingers and slid across the floor.

My eyes open wide. This might be the only moment I have to try to save myself. I can’t lie here waiting for someone to rescue me. I’ll die in the process. Lucas is going to kill me.

My elbow hits the glass bowl on the small table next to me as I throw my body to the side and fall to the floor. Muffled screams ring out through the room. Pain shoots up my injured left leg, but I can’t focus on it. I need my mom to hear me.

“Huuullllpphhh!” The muffled yells sound like groans and grunts instead of words, but I keep making them as loud as I can and pull myself to my knees.

Lucas chucks his phone against the floor and throws himself at me. He grabs me around the waist as my feet begin to find purchase against the wood floor. The weight of his body throws me off balance, and I crash back to the floor with him partly on top of me.

But I’m not going without a fight. This is one battle I won’t back down from.

I find a large piece of the glass bowl lying on the floor and grasp it in my bound hands. Taking a deep breath, I throw my arms toward Lucas’s face. Glass slices through his skin. Red drops land on the back of my hands and blood slides down his cheek. He falls back a few inches, his hands flying to the cut.

“You bitch!” He screams at me and lunges.

But this time, I swing my right foot around and catch him in the ribs with my heel. The tape across my mouth comes free on one side.

“Nooooo!” The scream rips through me as his hand grabs my forearm and squeezes tight.

Lucas reaches into his back pocket and pulls out a switchblade. He pushes the button and smiles wickedly at me as the knife springs into action. He raises it above his head and swipes down.

My leg kicks out again, and I catch him in the same cheek causing the blood to gush out more. The knife lands in my shin. I wail from the fire spreading down my leg, but I don’t stop moving.

I scramble away from Lucas and use my legs and arms to army crawl across the floor.

He starts to move and stand. He reaches out to grab my ankle, but I pull my foot out of the way and continue to slide on my hands and knees to the door. He stands, and I see his shadow in my peripheral vision.

I grab the doorknob and pull myself up as I unlock the handle. My fingers slip and slide over the metal.

Lucas laughs behind me. His breath moves my hair.

“Help,” I moan into the room. “Help me.”

Lucas slides his hand into my hair and jerks me backward. He turns my body around and slams it into the door. The anger in his eyes burns, and his face contorts in fury. Hot heavy breaths pump his

chest. His other hand closes over my neck and squeezes, cutting off my air supply.

My hands push against his chest as I fight for air. I keep kicking with my good leg and ignore the pain. Battle for the power to triumph over the darkness creeping in and around the edges of my vision.

Lucas slides his leg between mine and presses his body closer. He never lets go of my throat. Instead, he bears down harder as I gasp for air. Lucas's face blurs in front of me.

This is it. His face will be the last thing I see.

My bound hands claw at his chest. He loosens his hold and slides his lips across my cheek. "You're mine, Sabra," he breathes across my face. A wicked gleam flickers through the anger in his eyes. "You'll always be mine."

He slides the palm of his hand down my throat and rests it in the valley between my breasts. Lucas pins me to the door and shifts his legs to the outside of mine, chuckling. His body shakes and vibrates through mine. "It's me or nothing," he whispers.

I lift my eyes to his and stare. One beat. A second. A third. His shoulders relax, and he strokes my cheek with the back of his hand.

"Then I choose nothing!" I screech out the words, lifting my leg with every ounce of fight I have in me to knee him in the groin as hard as I can and shove him away at the same time.

Lucas collapses to the floor groaning, and I fly into action not caring how much pain I'm in. I don't notice the blood spots all over my white dress or look over my shoulder.

The door slams open as I twist the knob and hobble on one good leg down the hallway, screaming at the top of my lungs. "Someone help me. Please. Anyone. He's going to kill me."

My ankle buckles when I take the first step, but I grasp the railing and hold myself up. I push myself down the steps, slipping against the concrete, and feel it rip through the soles of my feet. "Help me!"

I make it to the last three steps and hear a voice in the distance yell my name, "Sabra!"

My head snaps up. Trevor's standing behind a row of police cars in the parking lot. My legs give out, and I fall down the last steps, landing hard on my knees.

"Come back here, you whore." Lucas's voice tears through the air behind me with the pounding of feet on the walkway. "I'll kill you. I'll shoot holes in you and watch you bleed in front of me."

I try to get up and keep running, but Trevor's voice cuts through the rest of the noise.

"Get down!" he screams across the expanse. "Sabra, get down!"

I watch the policemen, dressed all in black, shift with their guns trained in my direction and throw my body flat against the ground to the side of the stairs. I use every bit of strength I have and army crawl into the grass, tears and dirt mingling together.

"He can't have you." Lucas's shouts are drowned out as the police aim their firearms on him and pull their triggers. Loud pops and bangs explode through the air, and I lie there sobbing and shaking. Praying for help and reprieve as the gunshots fade on the wind.

"Don't move." A deep voice booms above me, and I pull my legs into my chest, curling into the fetal position.

"No, no, no," I wail into the air around me. "I don't want to die. Help me!"

"Shh ... I've got you. We've got you." The voice dances over me. Strong hands pick me up and

start carrying me away.

“Put me down!” I flail my arms in every direction, trying to find some leverage or purchase against the chest I’m being held against.

My eyes frantically search for anything to help me get away until they land on two men placing a sheet on top of a body dressed in white. Blood pools around it, and when I see the switchblade in his hand, the fight rushes out of me. My eyes land on Lucas’s vacant eyes for a few seconds before the workers straighten the fabric, and his face disappears underneath.

“Miss Valentine, it’s me, Officer Toliver. I’ve got you.” The arms don’t let go. They hold me securely. “You’re safe now. We’ve got you, and you’re safe.”

My eyes fly to his face and take in the dark skin and dark eyes. He looks grimly at me, but I see kindness shining out under the concern.

“I’m safe?” My body shakes uncontrollably in his arms. Tears track down my cheeks. “It’s over?”

He nods. “It’s over. I’m going to take you to the ambulance, and Paul and Maria are going to check you out, okay?”

I hear him, but I stare at him blankly. There’s nothing in my head except a rushing sound. Niagara Falls roars through my ears.

“Sabra?” he calls out to me and sets me on a stretcher. Red and blue lights flash across my skin and the white dress, mixing with the splashes of blood.

“Miss Valentine.” Gentle hands help me lie down and a soft, high-pitched voice washes over me. A pair of scissors cuts through the tape around my wrists. “I’m Maria. You’re safe. We’re going to take good care of you, okay?”

I nod my head at her and stare at the lights.

A voice thunders across the parking lot. “Sabra!”

“Trevor.” I struggle to sit up and turn in the direction it came. “Trevor,” I cry out again.

“I’m here.” His voice flows over me before I see his eyes. Soft hands cup my cheeks. “I’m here, and I’m not going anywhere. You’re safe.” He stares at me with tears pooling in his eyes. “You’re safe.”

“Yeah, dude, I’ll be there at ten with the cash. Meet me in front of David’s house.” Lucas sticks his head into the refrigerator holding his phone and comes back out with a stack of turkey and cheese in one hand and mustard in the other. “Nah, man, you don’t need to worry. As long as you have the stuff, we’re good.”

I shift in my seat on the couch in the living room and watch him over the book I’m supposed to be reading for English. It’s a Saturday night, and I’m supposed to have this book finished by Monday. I’m behind because of the school musical. It closed last weekend, so I’ve been playing catch-up from the rehearsals and shows all week long. That means sitting at home on a Saturday night to push through the pages. I’d go out with my friends if I didn’t think Mr. Thomas would throw a pop quiz at us in class on Monday. Lizzie wants me to go on a double date with her and her new boyfriend, Tommy, and one of his friends. But a hundred and fifty-three pages are calling my name, so my love life is going to have to wait.

Lucas holds his phone between his shoulder and ear and makes a double-decker sandwich big enough for three people. He flunked out of college because he never went to class. Now he’s living back home.

“Yeah, 5224 Miller Road,” he confirms and takes a huge bite. “Yep, see you then.” His eyes pop up and catch mine. He drops his phone on the counter and takes another bite. “What are you looking at?”

“Nothing. Going to a party tonight?”

“Yeah.” He shoves another bite in his mouth. “Wanna come? I’m sure we can find you someone fun to hang out with there.” He looks back at me with a smile that screams more warning than invitation, making my blood run cold.

“Nope, I’m good.” I shake my head and dismiss him, closing the book in my hand. “I’ll be upstairs if Mom needs me for anything.”

“Sure,” Lucas mutters at my retreating back.

I turn to close the door and lock it as soon as I walk into my bedroom and pull my phone out of my pocket. It’s been torture since Lucas moved back home. He’s always here watching, lurking, and sneering. Jewelry and cash have gone missing from my purse and vanity. I lock my door every night and move a chair in front of it to feel safe when I sleep. I’m continually looking over my shoulder and around corners. My insides shake all the time. I feel desperate for space. For peace. For freedom. It’s exhausting.

The phone screen comes to life. I stare at it and think hard about the thought running through my head. After a moment, I pull up the search engine to find the phone number I need. Can I honestly do this and get away with it?

It’s risky. Dangerous. Crazy. But they do it in the movies and television shows all the time. I don’t know if there’s a right way or wrong way, so I do what every sixteen-year-old does when they need information. I Google it.

Peace fills me as soon as I find what I need. The seven numbers shining at me from my phone screen represent hope. My body relaxes, and the shaking calms. It’s a sign I’m doing the right

thing.

Because it's time to take back my life. To fight for myself. I punch in the numbers with steady hands and wait for someone to answer on the other end.

"Anonymous tip hotline, how can I help you?" A deep man's voice comes across the line and waits for a reply.

I sit there breathing into the phone and rethink my decision. I stare at the bulletin board on my wall filled with pictures of my friends until the knob on my door rattles.

"Hello?" the voice on the other end says again.

Footsteps walk away and down the hallway.

"Hi," I murmur into the phone. "I need to report a drug deal I know is happening tonight. Ten p.m. at 5224 Miller Road ..."

I brush my hair and pull it back when I hang up the phone and change into black pants and a black top. I wait in my room, reading off and on, until I hear Lucas's car engine start. Then I run to my window, watch him pull out of the driveway, and stare at his taillights driving down the road until they disappear when he turns at the corner.

The clock on my nightstand says 8:45 in bold red numbers. I slide my feet into a dark pair of flats and grab the keys to my car. I'm pushing my luck, but I can't stop myself from going to see what happens. The person at the hotline assured me someone would check it out, and the authorities would be there. I'm drawn to the situation like a moth to a flame even though I know I could get burned worse than I ever have before.

Tonight, I'm either taking flight and finding the freedom I seek, or I'm getting my wings clipped for good.

I park around the corner and down the street from the party, making sure I'm in the opposite direction that Lucas should be coming. Then I climb out of my car and walk to the house on the opposite side of the street. I stick to the shadows and find a place to hide before Lucas arrives.

I should be fine. It will all be fine.

There's a large bush in the front yard of the house diagonal from David's. I climb into the flowerbed and sit behind the leaves, peeking out, and watch for Lucas's car. I have the heebie-jeebies knowing bugs are trying to climb up my pant legs and eat me, but I sit still and fight the urge to run. This is something I need to do.

At 9:55, Lucas's car pulls up in front of the house across the street. He sits there with the engine running and doesn't get out of the car. A bead of sweat trickles down my back.

My eyes flit from his car to my watch and back again. I watch the numbers change slowly on my wrist and pray this is the moment everything changes. That this is the night I'm free from the invisible chains that bind me.

Movement catches my attention. I watch someone walk out of the house toward Lucas's running car. His body's a shadow with the light from the open door behind him. The window on the driver's side rolls down and a hand slides out, waving the person into the passenger seat.

The glow from the overhead light illuminates Lucas's face when the door to the car opens. My breath catches in my throat. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out the cash as the door closes

and the light turns off again.

It doesn't take long. My watch says 10:03 when the door opens again. The guy steps out of the car with a smile on his face.

"Thanks, man. Let's do it again sometime." Lucas's voice floats across the street to me. The other guy waves his hand in the air, turns, and steps onto the sidewalk.

Red and blue lights come from both sides of the street, blocking Lucas's car in. Several officers jump out of their cars. "Police! Put your hands up!" Guns are trained on both young men. The guy on the sidewalk drops to his knees with his hands in the air. Another officer yells for Lucas to get out of the car slowly and place his hands on the hood.

Lucas opens the car door, slides out, and stands. He turns to the cop closest to him and starts running. The policeman throws himself on top of Lucas, and they both come crashing to the ground. Arms flail. Fists fly. More police circle the scuffle and pull the two men apart, throwing Lucas onto the hood of his car.

The officer stands there holding his arm to his chest. His hand lies at a weird angle.

I crawl down the flowerbed to the opposite end of the house and stand in the grass as I watch the officers pat down Lucas and his friend. They pull cash and envelopes of white powder from each boy's pockets. Handcuffs are placed around their wrists.

Tears stream down my face as I watch them put Lucas in the back of a car and drive away, but they aren't tears of fear or sadness. These are cleansing tears.

Ones of hope, peace, and freedom.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

“I’m sorry, what?” My mother’s voice carries through the cracked door and into the hospital room where I’m currently lying. She’s out there with my dad. They’d been whispering quietly with the doctor until now.

“I said, we’ve examined Sabra, and there are no signs of rape or sexual trauma.”

“But why would you do that? He’s her brother.” Her voice rises with every word spoken. “I don’t understand.”

“Mrs. Valentine.” The doctor pauses for a second. “I’ve seen a lot of things in my line of work over the past twenty years. Sabra has been through more than most of us can even imagine in the past thirty-six hours. She’s going to need you both as she tries to navigate through it all.”

Thirty-six hours. It didn’t feel like a day and a half passed in the apartment. It felt like a minute and a year all wrapped in one.

My dad clears his throat. “Has she said anything to you about what happened in there?”

It’s what everyone wants to know. They’re all asking the same thing. Everybody walks through the door and fires questions at me. They want me to talk out of fear, curiosity, and desperation. And yes, they care for me, but it feels like there’s more to it. There’s a need in them to know the details. But I’m not ready to give it to them. I’m not ready for any of it.

“No, she hasn’t said a word to anyone except to ask the nurse for some water. And to ask for Trevor.” He sighs, and someone shifts their feet, but I can’t tell who it is. “I think she’s suffering from a bit of shock. We see it all the time with trauma victims. She’ll get better, but you shouldn’t expect Sabra to be normal or back to herself for quite some time. She’ll need time to heal. And that includes more than the physical ailments she walked in here with.”

He pauses while my parents ask him a question I can’t hear. “She has a badly sprained ankle, and the knife wound in her leg was deep. She has five stitches in her leg, and we wrapped her ankle. Those things will heal quickly. The same is true for the dehydration. We’re working on all of it.”

The salt-and-pepper haired doctor with the kind eyes steps in front of the doorway. “But she suffered more than the physical in that apartment with her brother. There are deep mental and emotional injuries at play. You will need to make plans to help her with all of it in the coming days.”

“We understand, Dr. Davis.” My father’s low voice drifts back to me.

I turn my head away and squeeze my eyes shut as one tear escapes and slides onto my nose. Reaching up, I catch it with the back of my hand. Lucas hurt more than me. He hurt our whole family.

“I hope you do,” Dr. Davis replies. “This is a difficult time for all of you. I know you must be overwhelmed with all of it. Losing a child on its own is never easy, but to add all of this magnifies the questions and horror tenfold. Sabra is going to need professional counseling over the coming months. And you are going to need to prepare yourself for anything that comes out of the process. In my experience, what we see and find out in the hospital is only the beginning.”

Footsteps echo down the hall, and I turn my head to look at the door again. I don’t want them to

know any of it. I've done my best to protect everyone else from it for years. My thoughts and feelings spin out of control. I don't want to discuss it—or him—ever again.

"Hi, Trevor." My father drops his voice as a new shadow joins them in the frosted glass window on the door. "We're finishing up with Dr. Davis right now."

"How is she?" he asks.

"She's going to be fine," Dr. Davis answers. "Over time, she will be fine."

"You should go in." My mom's voice cracks. "She's been asking for you."

My dad's arm goes around her and rubs her arm. I know it's him because of his shoulders. He's always had the broadest shoulders. Ones I've cried and leaned on. Ones he lifted me to stand on when I couldn't reach.

"Shh Rebecca, she's going to be okay. Everything is going to be all right in time."

"But why hasn't she asked for me? She should want me right now. I'm her mother." Her watery voice shakes before a sob drifts through the door.

I close my eyes and turn my head toward the window. The sounds outside the door add to the mess already inside me.

"I'm sorry," Trevor's strong, steady voice rumbles over the cries. "I'm so sorry for everything that has happened, Mr. and Mrs. Valentine."

"You saved my daughter's life, young man." My father clears his throat again. "We will always be grateful to you for that."

"I should go check on my other patients," Dr. Davis cuts through the conversation. "I'll be back in a little bit to see to Sabra again."

"Thank you, Dr. Davis," Trevor says. "It's okay if I go in there now?"

"I think it might be just what she needs right now. A friendly face might help her." The doctor turns and walks away from the group. His shoes squeak against the linoleum with each step until the sound fades away.

My father's voice sounds stronger when he says, "Go see our girl, son."

Three knocks sound on the door. I turn away from the window and watch Trevor's head poke through the opening with concern etched across his face. He pauses and walks over the threshold, closing the door behind him, but he doesn't move closer to me. He stands there with his back to the door and watches me carefully. His eyes roam over every inch of my body lying under the thin sheet and scratchy blanket on this uncomfortable bed with all the buttons.

I stare back at him and wish he would move closer to me. Reach out and hold my hand. Say anything. The silence is deafening.

"Hey." Trevor's voice is soft from across the room. "How are you?" He finally—*finally*—takes a step in my direction and crosses to a chair next to the bed.

Eight steps.

He pauses next to the chair and takes a deep breath. "Can I sit with you? I'd like to be next to you and touch you."

My eyes widen. I nod my head at him before he sighs in relief and takes the last step to me.

Nine steps are all it takes to get from the door to me. Nine steps to relief and peace.

It's not lost on me.

He perches on the edge of the bed and reaches over, threading his fingers with mine, but he's not close enough to me. I pull his hand until he moves farther onto the bed and lies with his head next to mine on the pillow. Tentatively, he wraps an arm around me and burrows his face in my hair, breathing deep.

I turn in his direction and face him. Lean my forehead against his as he's always done to me in the past. Emotions fly across his face, and I stare at them all in fascination until they stop on the one that conquers all the others.

Fear. Peace. Horror. Joy. Confusion. Relief. Love.

His face softens when it lands. The grip around my waist tightens. Trevor reaches up and places a soft kiss on my forehead. "I missed you, Say."

Those four words break apart the wall that had been surrounding me—protecting me—for the past few hours. A sob rips out of my chest, and I press myself closer to him. My tears soak his shirt while he lies there and holds me, waiting for the storm to pass.



Lying in the safety of Trevor's arms, I don't say a word for what feels like hours. He doesn't move except to stroke his hand over my hair or rub my back. Even after the tears stop flowing, I don't move away from his embrace or try to take back some space. His warmth and calm seep into my bones. The shaking inside me finally stops.

A nurse walks into the room to check my vitals and walks right back out when she sees us lying there in the bed together. "I'll come back later," she whispers.

We don't move through any of it.

Trevor holds me like he never wants to let me go. I have no idea how much time passes as we lie here in each other's arms.

"You know ..." His voice breaks through the silence. "I'm not going anywhere. If you want to talk about anything, I will always listen. I will always be by your side." He hesitates. "But if you never say another word to me about any of it, I will always be here too." He pulls back to look me in the eyes and says again, "I'm not going anywhere, Sabra."

"I know." I stroke his jaw with my fingertips. "But I'm not ready to give any of it away yet. No one should have what I have."

It's the first meaningful words I've spoken since arriving at the hospital, besides asking for Trevor. He stares at me—his eyes searching mine—before he nods his head and crushes me back to his chest.

"I'll be here when you are," he murmurs into my hair. "I'm ready to take it from you when you're ready to give it, Say."

"Thank you." A few minutes pass before I lean back and peer into his face. "Will you tell me what happened on your end?"

"Are you sure you want to hear everything right now? We have plenty of time. I'm perfectly happy lying here holding you." His voice cracks, and he smiles at me. "I wasn't sure I'd ever get to feel you in my arms or see those blue eyes looking at me again. We don't have to rush through anything."

"No." I push myself into a sitting position. "I can't get the questions in my mind to stop, so this might help."

He sits up and moves to the chair next to my bed, grabs my hand, and squeezes it between us. "I don't want to upset you, Sabra. I don't want to make the wrong move here."

"Please. I need to know."

Trevor looks dubious. He holds his breath and lets it go on a loud exhale. "Tell me to stop anytime you need me to."

I gaze at him and wait.

"You were gone a long time. At first, I was trying to give you some space. Micah told me she had texted you when I started to get worried, but you hadn't replied to her. We decided we'd give you a few more minutes. If you hadn't replied by then, I was going out to get you." He looks at me with so much regret in his eyes. His voice catches. "You have no idea how much I wish I'd gone out there right then. I should have come to check on you earlier."

"You couldn't have known, Trevor." I rub circles on the back of his hand with my thumb and nod at him. "Go on."

"Micah and I waited a few more minutes. When you didn't come back, we went out to the balcony, but you weren't there. We looked all over the lodge for you. Checked in the different bathrooms and meeting rooms. The concierge said he'd seen you go out on the balcony, but that was the last he'd seen of you. Micah went back out on the deck while I finished talking to the concierge, and we heard a scream. She'd looked over the railing and saw your shoe lying in the pine needles. We'd missed it the first time."

He rubs a hand down his face. "I knew something was wrong immediately. I mean, there was no way my girl was leaving one of her shoes behind." He laughs sadly and looks at me.

I don't move.

"Anyway, I took off running to my car and came to your apartment to see if you were there. I knew you weren't. Deep in my gut, I knew something was wrong. But it was the only thing I could think to do." He drops his head and stares at the floor. "I was terrified I'd lost you. I pounded on your door for five minutes yelling your name, and I knew—"

"I heard you," I mutter.

"What?" His mouth drops open, and his eyes go wide. "You heard me?"

Nodding, I look at the window and then back to the ceiling. There's no mirror here.

“Yes, I heard you from where he had me chai ... from where he had me. I tried to yell or be loud enough to get your attention, but he stopped me.”

“Damn,” Trevor murmurs. “You heard me.”

“It was the best sound. In a moment of feeling alone and desperate, your voice cut through it all, and there was at least one moment of hope.” I hiccup through a dry sob and rub the palms of my hands into my eye sockets. Watch the stars bloom behind my eyelids.

“Sabra, we can talk about this later.”

“No, I want to know.” I grab his hand again and tentatively smile at him. “I’m okay.”

“You’re better than okay. You’re here, but—”

“Trevor,” I bark at him. “I need to know.”

He raises his hands in the air with our hands still beautifully entwined. “Okay ... so while I was at your apartment, Micah called your parents without me knowing. Something she said must have triggered your dad. Personally, I think it was the shoe.” He smiles and nudges me, trying to make light of the dreadful situation. “He called the police.”

“When I realized I wasn’t getting anywhere at your apartment, I remembered Officer Toliver. I had his card in my wallet, so I pulled it out, called him, and told him what was happening.” Trevor pauses and shakes his head at me. “The man jumped into action. He’s partly how we figured out where you were. He asked me to come to the station, so I went and met with him. I had—” Sadness crosses his face. “I had to tell him everything I knew, Sabra. I’m sorry. But I had to find you.”

My mouth falls open. “But my parents.”

“They don’t know it all. I made sure of it.” He leans in closer to me. “It’s your story to tell them, no one else’s. But you were missing, Sabra. I had to do anything I could to bring you back to me.” His fingers tighten around mine with a squeeze. He waits for me to respond with a look of desperation on his face. “Please try to understand.”

I close my eyes and nod. Count to ten. “Go on,” I urge him with my eyes still closed and imagine Trevor sharing my secrets with the stoic Officer Toliver.

“As I was leaving the police station, your parents walked through the door. I remember they were holding hands.”

I open my eyes and look at him with curiosity.

“It’s funny the things you notice in time of crisis, I guess. Anyway, they stopped Officer Toliver and said they had information to give regarding a missing woman by the name of Sabra Valentine.” He grunts. “It took everything in me to stand still and introduce myself to your dad instead of shake him and throw a punch into the wall.” He looks at me sheepishly and ducks his head. “I was scared out of my mind, and I knew right then your brother was involved.”

“It seems your mom had been trying to call you both for the better part of two hours with no response. As soon as Officer Toliver heard that information, he found out where Lucas lived so he could send a unit to go check it out. But when your mom said he’d moved into your apartment complex a couple of months ago, everything clicked into place and the precinct flew into action.”

“She said she had been trying to tell you, but you would never call her back, and she wanted to tell you over the phone. To talk to you instead of tell you over email.” He shrugs and gives me an

apologetic look. "I don't know what to say."

"What else is there to say? Nothing can change it." I twirl a piece of my hair. "What happened next?"

Trevor stands and sits back on the edge of the bed. "They took your parents into a room to try to call Lucas again while Officer Toliver left with a couple of other police cars to head to your apartments. I stood there not knowing which way to go for a minute or two. I didn't want to get in the way." He reaches over and brushes his fingers down my cheek. "And then I thought 'Fuck it' and jumped in my truck to follow."

"She talked to him." My eyes find his and hold. "He was talking to her on the phone when I decided to fight."

"I'm so sorry, Sabra. I'm sorry you had to go through any of this. But I'm glad you made the choice to fight." He leans down and brushes a kiss to my forehead.

"I had something worth fighting for. A lot of things."

His eyes soften.

"The fight was for more than me."

He looks at the door and back at me again. "I should let you get some rest." He cups my face in his hand and rubs his thumb along my cheekbone before standing. "I'll be in the waiting room if you need anything. Try to get some sleep."

"No." I grab his hand. The shaking starts back up. "Don't go. Please," I beg and tug his hand to my chest. "I don't want you to leave me."

"Oh, Sabra." He sighs and pulls himself back onto the bed, lying beside me. "Babe, haven't you figured it out yet?" His hand tangles in my hair, and he places a small kiss against my mouth. His breath lingers there warming my skin. "I'm never leaving you again. You're stuck with me."

A small smile quirks my lips on one side. I snuggle into his chest, and his arms tighten around me once more. My hands grip his shirt between us.

"Promises, promises," I whisper into the hollow of his throat before I plant a kiss there and drift off to sleep listening to his heartbeat.

I stare straight ahead at the back of my brother's head. My mom sits next to me with tears running down her face, her shoulders shaking, while my dad sits on the other side of her, his jaw tight and expression hard. The wooden benches in the courtroom are uncomfortable. It takes everything in me not to squirm or reach up and twirl my hair while we wait.

The judge walks back into the room and all eyes go to him. Lucas and his attorney stand in front of us. The room goes deathly silent. My hands shake in my lap. I see the judge's lips moving but can't compute what he's saying over the ringing in my ears.

Lucas's head drops as I hear my mother gasp. "Ten years?" She turns to my father and throws her hands up. "Ten years!"

"Becca." He stands to talk to the lawyer before a police officer walks over and places handcuffs around Lucas's wrists. It's the second time I've watched this happen now.

Six months ago, on a dark, cloudless night, I put this plan into motion. He had too much cocaine in his possession that night between what they found in his pockets and what was in the trunk of the car. Add to that an assault on a police officer, and he's going away for a long time.

A peace washes over me. I feel like I'm watching everything happening from above. My hands still in my lap, and I breathe deeply.

Lucas turns around and stares at me as the officer leads him away. His eyes never leave my face while he's walking across the front of the room to a side door. He turns his head to look over his shoulder, and I stare back at him.

There are no tears in my eyes as he walks through the door.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

“That’s the last of the boxes.” Trevor’s voice booms through the door, and I look over my shoulder. He walks into my apartment with his shirt off. Rivulets of sweat drip down his chest.

It’s been a long three months living with my parents while I recuperated and healed, and I’m ready to move on with my life.

“How are you feeling?” He walks over to me and takes my hand in his.

I turn to look at him with a broad smile splitting my cheeks. “Free. Happy. Right.” I shrug. “All those things.”

He smiles back at me and pulls me to his chest. “I’m proud of you, babe. And I’m seriously ready to get out of here and have you where you belong.”

“Oh, yeah? And where would that be?” I wrap my arms around him, palming his ass cheeks.

“Home with me.” He picks me up and swings me around in a circle. My squeal rings through the empty living room. “But I’d also settle for in the shower, on the couch, and in my bed.” He wiggles his eyebrows at me and gently settles me on my feet, making sure I have my balance. “I don’t care as long as it’s with me.”

“We should get going. It sounds like you have big plans for us tonight.” I turn to walk through the door and head to our overstuffed cars, but he grabs my hand and tugs me back to him.

“Sabra,” he says softly. “In all seriousness, are you doing okay? You’re good?”

“I’m good,” I assure him and drop a kiss on his cheek. “It’s been hard. Between physical therapy, having to *really* talk to my parents, and trying to pick up the pieces of my career because I missed out on the movie deal. It’s been a lot, of course. And I know there’s some ways to go with my parents, especially my mom, but I’m still good.” I reach up to cup his face and scrub my palm against his scruff. “There are still amazing things on the horizon.” I sweep my arms out, indicating the empty apartment in front of us. “And this is the beginning of all that.”

Trevor moves back into my space and runs his fingers through my hair. “And you’re sure you want to move in with me? You can handle this?” One of his hands leaves my locks and points at his body.

“Trev, I can handle anything you want to give me. I don’t know why I always have to tell you that.” The smile that splits his lips and the wicked gleam in his eye are all the answer I get before he picks me up and spins me around, pushing my back against the wall.

“We’ll see about that, babe,” he breathes against my lips before his own come crashing down on mine.

I wrap my legs around his waist and hold on tight. Open my mouth as an invitation for him to take the kiss deeper. Tongues tangle. Hands roam. I lose myself in him. Every taste of him is never enough.

Trevor’s hands slide under my t-shirt when a voice breaks through our moment.

“Oh my lord, get a room.” Micah’s cackle reverberates through the empty room. She walks down the hall to check my bedroom one last time.

Trevor quirks an eyebrow in my direction and helps me down. My body slides against his since he doesn't back up to give me room. He's such a pain in my ass sometimes.

"Are you sure you want to keep her as your best friend?" he mutters into my ear.

"I heard that," Micah yells, walking back into the room. "Just remember, bonehead, she was mine first." She pauses and puts her hands on her hips. "No kidding, I will hurt you if you hurt her." She glares at Trevor and points her finger at him. "And I'll enjoy it." She flounces out of the apartment and trips on the doorjamb.

"Stop laughing," she hollers from outside before we hear her clamoring down the stairwell.

"Come on, babe." Trevor grips my hand in his, pulling me to the door. "Let's get you out of here."

I take one last glance around and let him lead me to the door to close a chapter of my life for good.

Trevor's hands snake up my front as I'm locking the door and brush against me.

"Are you going to be this handsy all the time now?"

"Maybe." He turns me around. "I can't help it if I like you. And you wore these little black tight thingies with this t-shirt." He leans down and kisses me again. "You started it."

"First," I say, pushing on his chest. "These are leggings, not tight thingies. And second, I'm disgusting right now, so this is all on you. You're obviously a pig."

He laughs and drops kisses along my jaw. "Yes, I am. And it's a good thing you like me dirty."

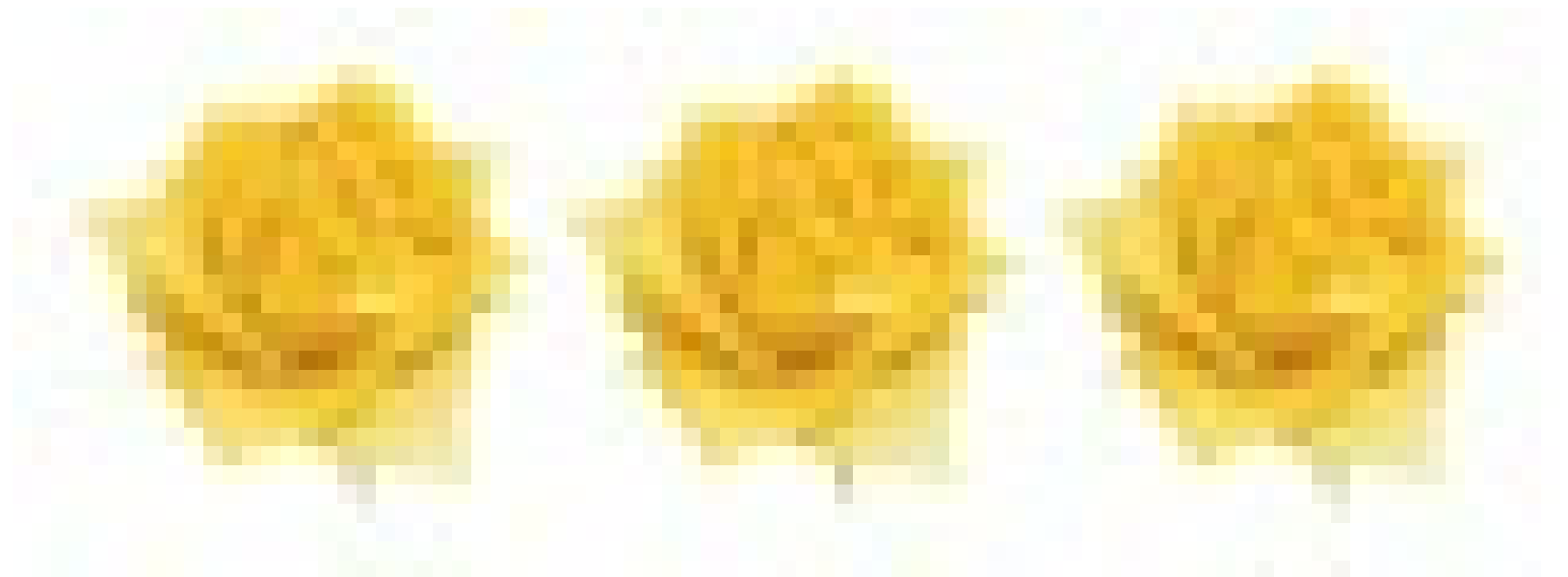
"Ohmigosh." I swat his arm and pull away from him. "Let's go, caveman."

"Yes!" He pumps his fist in the air and follows me. "It's about time I have you around all the time to cook and clean for me." He swats my ass after stepping off the last stair and takes off running to his truck. "Last one home has to clean the bathroom," he hollers before leaping in the driver side and starting the engine.

I get into my red Mustang and can't keep the giggles and joy from bubbling and overflowing into the quiet of my car.

Everything's going to be okay.

I'm going home.



"That was delicious." I moan and fall back on the blanket we've placed on the floor in the middle of Trevor's—our—living room. A half-eaten pizza sits in the box on the corner of the blanket, and

Trevor lies next to me, rubbing his belly. "I was starving."

We're surrounded by boxes on every side of us. It reminds me of when I was little and would use boxes, furniture, and blankets to create a fort in my room. The coziness of it all and Trevor by my side makes me feel safe and warm.

Trevor leans on his elbow and looks at me. "I'm still hungry."

"What?" I laugh at him incredulously. "You ate five pieces of pizza."

"I'm not talking about that kind of hungry." He reaches over, grabs my waist, and slides me closer to him. The blanket under us drags with me on my side.

"I thought you were exhausted?"

He answers me by rolling over and taking me with him so that I'm lying on top of him. His hands grip my thighs and spread them until I'm straddling him. I push on his chest with my hands and look at him.

This man is everything I have ever wanted. Patient. Caring. Irreverent and funny as hell. Driven. Unrelenting and insatiable. Gentle. Kind. Loving. All of it makes up the man perfect for me.

I rub my body against his and drop a slow, hot kiss below his left ear.

"It seems I'm not as tired as I thought I was," he murmurs before sliding his hands over my sides and into my hair. His lips capture mine and begin a slow exploration. Tongues tangle together before he rolls us back over again.

Trevor takes his time dragging his lips down my neck and across my collarbone. Sucking and nibbling. Every once in a while, he glances up to find me watching him go on his journey across my body. He scoots down and raises my t-shirt to sprinkle wet kisses across my stomach before sliding back up again, and I prop myself on my elbows to get a better view. There is nothing better than seeing this man feast and get his fill.

He looks at me with tender eyes and brings his lips back to mine. "I'm so glad you're mine, Sabra, but I want you to know something." He pauses and presses his hand to my face. "You're yours, too, Say."

I still underneath his touch and wait.

"I love you." His fingers touch my opening mouth. "No, I'm not finished." He smiles and replaces his fingers with his mouth.

After a sweet kiss, he pulls back and takes a deep breath. Trevor sits and pulls me into his lap with my legs on the outside of his. Chest to chest. Face to face.

"When you were missing, I felt it in here." He taps his chest over his heart and leans down to kiss me over my own. "You complete me, Sabra. And I want to walk through this life with you."

"I want that, too, Trevor. With everything in me." My eyes roam over his face.

"I know." He smiles. "I know you love me by the way you look at me. I can feel it in your touch and hear it in your voice. The fact that you feel for me even a fraction of what I feel for you sends me soaring and makes me feel like I can conquer the world." He rubs his hands back and forth over my arms.

"But I also want you to know the love I feel for you is deep enough and strong enough for me to respect you. To let you make the right decisions for you. You're mine, but you're yours." He gazes

into my eyes. “It’s important to me that you get that. I’ll never control you or ask you to do something you don’t want to do because I love you.”

He leans back on his hands and waits while I ponder everything he’s said to me, biting my lip.

“Babe,” he groans after a couple of minutes go by. I feel him getting harder beneath me. “You can’t sit on me, biting your lip all sexy like that, and not say anything.”

“I’m sorry.” I laugh. “I was trying to find the words that would express everything running through me right now. The joy I feel. The desire and love.” I lie on his chest and squeeze his sides before sitting back up on him. “I’m afraid if I move too quickly, a seam might burst, and it will all float away into the stars above. Out of my reach.”

“I’ll always be right here, Sabra. You only need to take hold when you want me.” He grasps my hand in his and places it over his heart. “This is yours. All of me is yours.”

“I know. I’m home when I’m with you.”

He wraps his arms around me and leans back, taking me with him. His kiss starts slow and gentle before quickly moving to hot and needy.

We lose ourselves as clothes fall away and lips whisper sweet nothings. Moans fill the room. Our bodies cling to each other through shaking hands and quaking muscles. The fire burns between us, but this time it’s different. Molten lava slowly glides through my veins.

This is what love that can’t be quenched feels like. The desire to meet another’s needs before yours. Their own desire to do the same. The act of choosing them in every situation and placing them above you without demanding to be served. This is true love.

“Trevor.” Fire rips through me and stars burst behind my eyes.

He smiles and watches me break apart.

Walls fall around me. Love lights up the room.

“Welcome home, Say.” He pulls my lips back to his own. “Welcome home.”

**Don't miss Micah's story
coming to retailers soon!**

Acknowledgments

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About the Author

Kate Dunbar is a wife, mom of three, and obsessive tea drinker who loves a great story. She's passionate about people and learning what makes them tick. You can find her eavesdropping, people watching, and living her best life wherever the winds take her. For more information about her books and upcoming events, visit www.katedunbar.com.

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