

Accidental Hero

WALL STREET JOURNAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR
NICOLE SNOW

ACCIDENTAL HERO

A MARRIAGE MISTAKE ROMANCE

NICOLE SNOW

ICE LIPS PRESS

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Published in the United States of America.

First published in May, 2018.

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Note: This special edition includes two more full length alpha male romances, Surprise Daddy and Stepbrother UnSEALed. Accidental Hero is a full length novel and ends at about 30%. Enjoy!

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DESCRIPTION

Accidentally engaged. Then he dared me to make it real.

It was one freaking kiss with a stranger.
I wasn't looking for a hero the day Brent Eden charged into my life.
He saw a damsel in distress facing humiliation.
We played pretend. Swore I was his. Baited sweet chaos.
Blew apart *everything*.

My dating disaster? Gone.
Our kiss? Electric. Divine. Toe-curling.
His mistake? Oh, boy.
Dropping the ultimate F-bomb: fiancé.
Especially when my gossipy cousin tells the whole family.

Forget how he's badass personified.
The ink. The leather. The abs. The smirk.
The lightning eyes and the growl I can't resist.
Nothing changes the fact that he's my favorite student's father.
I'm risking it all for this charade. And I'm losing.

The closer we get, the deeper I fall.

The louder he vows to protect me.

The more we come undone.

Even my questions have questions.

What if I'm not the only one who needs saving?

What if our marriage mistake gets way too real?

WALKING MASTERPIECE (IZZY)

I have to bite my lip at how the silence excites me.

This is *exactly* what I've dreamed about for years. A room full of talent. Bright eyes and young souls eager to impress, bleeding creativity.

Every student deep in concentration, glancing towards the drawing on the easel next to my desk only long enough to confirm the next swoosh of their pencil. I hadn't known what to expect when I accepted this position, other than it would bring me one step closer to my goal. Plus a little more money.

Oh, and it's the perfect escape from the weekly family dinners. Losing those gossip-fests is worth more than the income boost any job brings.

Working with this room full of remarkable young artists is way more fun than listening to mom's tongue-in-cheek 'encouragement.'

Or entertaining cousin Clara's dire warnings about how I'm destined to wind up with a house full of cats and die in my eighties, still a virgin.

That's my future. Isabella Derby. AKA crazy cat lady.

The fact that my family believes that's the path I'm on and insists on reminding me so often never fails to piss me off. No matter how many times I hear it.

This is the twenty-first century. Supposedly. I don't even own a cat, and I'm twenty-three.

Twenty. Three.

Not fifty-three, and pining about what might have been. I have *years* before I need to worry about getting married. I have ambitions. Always have.

If only everyone else in my life would see that and leave me the hell alone.

If only they'd notice accomplishments besides landing men and wracking up babies.

“Ms. Derby?”

I rise from my chair and walk around my desk, happy to have something else to focus on besides my sad, nosy relatives.

Stopping next to her, I look down at the girl and smile. “Yes, Natalie?”

She’s what some would call a child prodigy. Only ten, she has the talent of some people five times her age. Not just in fine arts either.

Her enrollment papers says she’s in eighth grade. Most kids her age are still fourth graders. I kneel next to her. “What’s up?”

She gestures to my drawing at the front of the room. “Um, I just noticed...the dog you drew doesn’t have any eyelashes.” Her shy voice comes out in a whisper. “Is it all right if I add some on mine?”

“Of course! Your personal muse is always welcome in this class.” I look at the drawing on her easel, picturing exaggerated Minnie Mouse eyelashes.

Wrong idea.

My breath literally stalls in my lungs at the detail in her creation. This little girl wouldn’t be caught dead making anything unrealistic. The collie she’s drawn looks like it’s ready to leap into the room. Just like everything she does.

It’s more like a black and white photo than a drawing. Especially one done by a child.

Every feathery line she’s sketched brings the dog to life in ways I can’t even describe.

Hell, it’s almost better than *mine*. And it took me a Master’s degree and years practicing to get where I am.

I glance between her dog and mine. Forget *almost*.

Hers is far better. A masterpiece.

I choke up as I watch the eyes on her dog come to life as she carefully pencils in a few soft lashes. “Keep going. You’re doing a great job!”

“Thank you,” she whispers.

The way she’s biting the tip of her tongue demonstrates how fully she’s concentrating. I smile again, then stand, making a round of the whole room.

Only six students here this evening. The others are all high school kids. Natalie’s dad had to pull some strings to get her into this class, meant for kids at least in their freshmen year.

That's what I was told. Since this is my first year with the district, I'm as unfamiliar with the students and their families as I am with the staff. That'll change in time, I'm sure. We're only three weeks into the school year.

The other five drawings look much like I expect. They demonstrate passion and promise, but honestly, there isn't another one that comes anywhere close to Natalie's.

I wonder if her talent comes from her father. The man I try *hard* not to think about every time she steps foot in my class.

If the last two weeks are anything to go by, he'll be here soon. A good twenty minutes before class ends. He'll stand in the back of the room with a spiral notebook, open it up, and let his big, rough hands touch the paper.

The first night, I thought he was making a list or notes. But last week, I had a strong feeling he was drawing. Sketching right along with his daughter and the rest of the class.

We'd started the dog last week, drawing the base after I'd gone over my quick anatomy lesson for animals. Tonight, I showed the students how to make the fur have shades of white, black, and gray.

A small, senseless part of me wonders if Natalie's dad will join in without even hearing my lesson. An even crazier part wants to see his drawing.

It could be a masterpiece like hers.

He certainly is. And that's the problem.

Mr. Tall-Dark-and-Brooding is every forbidden male archetype stuffed into one ripped package.

Mysteriously sexy by default. Imposing by gravity. Protective by virtue.

He's the kind of man I'd love to bring to a family dinner.

Just once.

That's all it would take. He'd render Clara speechless and end mom's needless sympathy looks in one blow. He'd shut them down and then some.

Every Derby woman would be too busy gasping for breath and fanning themselves to give me any crap.

Honestly, I know the feeling. It was my reaction the first time he walked in. And the second.

At least I hid it well.

The military patches on his black leather jacket were no surprise. He has that

air.

Straight back, chest forward, chin up. Disciplined. Hard.

Every move he makes, every glance, has a purpose.

Remember what I said? Every *forbidden* archetype.

The ones good girls are warned about, but never stay away from.

God. I shouldn't be having these thoughts.

Not about a student's father. He's probably married. And if he isn't, *why the hell not?*

But I didn't see a mother listed on Natalie's emergency contacts. That makes me feel slightly less guilty about the impure thoughts stirring in my head. It also concerns me.

I hope she isn't being pushed beyond her limits. Flogged on to greatness by a headstrong father who believes his child should succeed in everything, no matter the cost.

I know the burden.

Just as I arrive back at my desk, the hair on the back of my neck tingles. It's almost like there's a sixth sense before the Walking Masterpiece shows up. I close my eyes briefly, preparing myself for the sight I'll see after the door creaks open.

My heart jackhammers by the time I turn around, air stalling in my lungs.

Right on time. Sure as shit.

It's him.

Brent Eden. His hair is the same wavy black as his daughter's. Natalie has his eyes, too.

Emerald green.

His are colder, though. More seasoned. More cautious.

His features add to his presence. A tiny faded scar here, an inked muscle there, a calloused hand. Things a normal person wouldn't notice unless they're gawking at him like me.

Beautifully rough finishes for a man cut from Heaven's most twisted fabric.

The thick trimmed beard circling his jaw must feel as dangerous as it looks. Delicious torture on any woman's skin. Especially mine since it's as virgin as the rest of me.

Fucking-A. Last week's after-dinner talk with Clara clearly messed with my mind.

Left me focused on things I've never worried over before. Namely, finding a man to take home to mother. And maybe to bed while we're at it.

What the hell am I doing? I pinch my thigh. Ogling a man who's nothing but trouble, apparently.

He eases the door shut and quietly moves along the back wall, taking the exact same spot where he's stood the past two weeks. Leaning against a desk, he unclips a pen from his notebook's cover and then flips it open.

Look away, Izzy.

I sense he'll look up any second. Naturally, I can't. It's like someone telling you to not think about a pink elephant.

There's too much gorgeous mystery in front of me. Too much temptation.

The heat rushing to my cheeks tells me I've been caught staring even before my eyes travel all the way up to meet his. *Damn!*

"Ms. Derby?"

Tad Gomez calls my name, one of the older students, but a snail could beat me turning around.

Brent's gaze is intense. Heated. Almost like he's challenging me not to look away.

I'm not a daring person. I just don't want to lose this staring contest. But duty calls.

Lifting a brow, I rip my gaze off his, and scuttle towards Tad's seat.

I'm grateful for the few seconds I have to find my voice. "Having trouble?"

"Yes, ma'am. I can't get the nose to look 3-D. Not like yours."

I point towards Tad's drawing, which is good, but as he said, a little flat. "It's the angle. Here, let me show you."

He nods, handing me his pencil. I lightly outline how to angle the nose downward in order to give it depth. "See? One little change works like magic."

"Yes, Ms. Derby. Yes, I do. Thanks!" He takes his pencil back and continues filling in the outline.

"Light strokes, remember. They'll flesh it out even more."

Barely touching the paper with the edge of his pencil, he nods bashfully. "Thanks."

"You're welcome, Tad. Keep it up. You're off to an awesome start."

He pushes his thick glasses up his nose. "I really like this class, Ms. Derby."

Such a sweet boy. How could I do anything but smile? "We all do."

The door squeaks again. This time, it's Ester Oden's mother. She works as a custodian at the school and stays late in order to drive Ester home after class. I smile at her as I make my way around the room, checking on the progress of each student, offering a helpful hint and words of encouragement.

It feels good to do my job. And to find a perfect distraction from the man I shouldn't be staring at.

"Five more minutes," I say, once I'm back at my desk.

There are no audible groans, but I can sense each student's disappointment, knowing this week's class is almost over. I'm honored they don't want to leave.

This, right here, is the reason I sunk a lot of time and money into getting my credentials. It's why I spent years doing every part time job in the known universe. It's what I've dreamed about, working at the most prestigious academy in the Phoenix area.

"Ms. Derby?"

"Yeah, Ben?" I reply. Ben Pritchard is a typical teenager. Tall, thin, and a bad case of acne.

"Is it all right if I snap a picture of your drawing at the end of class so I can work on mine later?" he asks, holding up his cell phone.

"Go for it! But no Snapchat filters on me, and you'd better believe I'm watching. Only warning I'll give." I bite my lip and shake my finger, making them laugh.

I nod towards the others in the class and step out of the way, assuring them they can all take pictures. I hear the digital *click-click-click* of their phones and a few snickers.

Then my gaze, all on its own, drifts to the back of the room. Brent's head is down this time, thankfully.

He's sketching again. Furiously.

I have a different reason to bite my lip. This time, not so playfully.

There's something admirable in his focus. Something sexy.

I'm waiting for him to look up, after the older kids are done taking pics. At ten, I doubt Natalie has a cell phone. I assume he'll want to get a picture for her.

He never looks up, though. Never throws his eyes my way. Even though I sense him wanting to behind his determined, subtle smirk.

I suck a deep breath and hold it, hoping it eases the heat coursing through my system. I glance at the clock and then smile at my students. "Okay, guys and gals! Time to start putting your stuff away. Please bring your completed drawing back to class next week."

Every student, except Natalie, finishes taking pictures of my drawing, either before or after they've packed up their belongings. While saying goodbye to each of them, I start gathering my things, too, but leave the drawing on the easel.

What gives? Why isn't Brent getting her a picture?

He's still lost in his own world. Sketching quickly. Frantically. Like he's desperate to finish something before leaving. My curiosity turns into pure adrenaline.

I can't stop myself. "Mr. Eden? Would you like a picture?"

When he looks up, his gaze is so intense my heart nearly stops mid-beat.

"Oh, I'd like that! Please, can you, Daddy?" Natalie asks, turning to him.

I'm glad she doesn't witness me melting into a puddle of nerves.

His bright eyes shift. The smile transforming Brent's face is for his daughter, but it steals my breath.

I've watched lots of men smile. I've seen it, sketched it, noted how a thin quirk of the lips can change a full appearance.

But this man, this beast, goes from hardcore army badass to giant teddy bear in the blink of an eye.

He can't hide the adoration lighting up his eyes the second Natalie calls him Daddy.

At least I've learned one thing tonight: this man lives for his daughter.

Guilt twists in my guts again when I remember my earlier worries about him being overbearing. Not now. It just doesn't seem likely.

"Sure, sweets. One second," he says, closing his notebook.

My heart starts working again. It beats harder with every step he takes toward the front of the room.

I've been this close to him before. Once. The first night, when he'd dropped Natalie off and introduced himself.

I tried like crazy not to freeze up, and failed miserably, barely muttering my name.

Can't let that happen again. I won't embarrass myself a second time, no matter how many feels this handsome enigma shoots through me.

Pretending I'm unfazed by his presence, I say goodbye to Ester and her mother before they walk out the side door. Then, in my scattered state of mind, I accidentally knock a stack of papers off the corner of my desk.

"Oh, f – fiddlesticks!" I say, catching myself.

God. I'd nearly dropped an f-bomb in my flustered state. My tongue is my biggest vice sometimes. I'm still sanding away the rough language I picked up too much of in college.

Natalie shoots forward. "I'll help, Ms. Derby!"

I kneel down beside her and start gathering the papers. "Thanks, Natalie. I certainly can be clumsy sometimes. Must be getting late."

Must be. Or else I'd totally have to admit I've been drooling over her father for the better part of the last ten minutes.

"We all have accidents," she says. "Don't stress."

I smile, nodding slowly. This girl sounds far too old for her age, which causes me to glance up at her father.

He's raised her to be polite. Kind. Intelligent.

He shrugs when he sees there isn't room to step in and help, walking over to pick up the backpack she's left on the floor.

I take the papers Natalie collects and stack them on top of the pile I've formed. "Thanks for your help again, Natalie. You're too awesome."

"Ready, sweets?" Brent asks.

"Coming!" Natalie flashes a big grin. "See you next week, Ms. Derby. Can't wait to finish my drawing."

"Looking forward to it," I answer, flinching slightly at not being able to come up with something more original.

Brent nods at me while laying a hand on Natalie's shoulder and guiding her

towards the door.

I nod back. I think. I'm too embarrassed to say for sure.

Woof. I'm so ready to slump into my chair before I leave the building.

I need five or ten. Just a few precious minutes to let my body, mind, and pulse find their baseline.

I doubt there's any time. This is the only evening class near closing time. Oscar Winters, the janitor, who doubles as our evening security guard, is already waiting for me to leave so he can lock up and go home.

Sighing, I set the stack of papers on the corner, hoping the regular teacher in this room, Mrs. Wayne's substitute, isn't overly upset tomorrow morning that they aren't in the same order. Then I start packing my things in my carry-all. I'm so busy trying to get out of here I don't even see him enter.

"Finally! Why the hell have you been ignoring my calls and texts?"

The voice vibrating in my ears makes me shudder like a spider crawling up my spine. A huge, unwanted, hairy one.

Crap. Not this guy again.

I huff out a breath of air before glancing up. "What are you doing here, Preston?"

All five feet and nine inches of Preston Graves stands just a few feet away like he owns the place. He probably thinks he does.

He's that arrogant. If you could take a picture of a blind date gone bad, it would look like this man.

Bleached blond hair, blue eyes, and obscenely rich. He's also the biggest prick I've ever met.

He looked better in the pics he'd uploaded to the matchmaker app. I was actually excited when it said we were compatible, mainly because I knew mom would approve. Well, and because he didn't look quite as phony with a good filter.

Then we met, and he opened his dumb mouth.

"Isabella, don't play coy. You know why I'm here: you haven't responded to a single one of my messages. You're ignoring me." He leans a hand on the corner of the desk. "For your information, Preston Graves does not like being ignored."

That's how he talks. Third person. It's overly unnecessary and fucking annoying.

Correction: he's overly fucking annoying.

"I've been busy," I say.

I mentally wonder how crazy my intruder is. Could he stop me from reaching for my phone if push comes to shove?

"Excuses, excuses. Who do you think you're dealing with, dear? No one's ever too busy for me. What's the real deal keeping you away?"

Gag me with a fucking spoon. "The school year just started."

I force a weak smile. It does nothing. Call me an idiot for letting the dating app scan my real employer. I'm an even bigger fool if I think it'll help get me out of this madness.

"And?" Preston taps his polished shoe impatiently, scratching his head.

Ugh. Is he dense or just insufferable?

I'd told him when I cut our date short that I didn't have time to see him again, but he obviously thought I was lying. Why he'd want to chase a liar, who knows.

Time to take a different route. "Preston, look, you shouldn't be here. It's a secure environment, this academy, whether it's school hours or not. We have rules."

"Nonsense. Nothing's too secure for Preston Graves. My Uncle Theo sits on the board of the largest banking chain in Maricopa county. Security's practically my middle name. It's lovely you follow the rules, Isabella, but you've got nothing to worry about as long as –"

Oh, please, *shut up*, Gaston. It's too much like my favorite fairy tale with none of the charm. I stop listening.

It's time to end this right now.

"Do you have a pass, Preston? Did you show it to the guard in the hall?"

"The janitor, you mean? The man who's vacuuming a few classrooms away?" He turns his nose up, walking around the desk, dragging a manicured hand along the edge. "Very funny, Isabella. You're on fire tonight. Why would I waste the time? When Preston finds something he wants, *nothing* stands in his way." He stops right in front of me. "Nothing and no one."

My heart leaps into my throat. This puffed up joke of a man is getting old and weird fast. I don't like the glint in his eye. He's a mega-creep, too. Not just socially clueless.

I think I know a psychotic asshole who was born with a silver spoon in his

mouth when I see one. Knew it from the night I was dumb enough to go out with him.

I just didn't think he'd go to these lengths for another chance. Never imagined he'd bother me here.

I freeze, trying to think without making it too obvious. I don't dare glance around.

That would be the worst thing: letting him think he has me scared.

But he does.

This looney tune has my heart crawling up my throat.

"Are we done playing now?" He steps closer, an eerie warmth on his face. "I know you like Preston, Isabella. Everyone does. You just have a rather curious way of showing it."

A shiver ripples through my entire body. I have nothing to defend myself, and shoot a sideways glance at the desk, scanning for something that might work.

Nothing. Not even a sharp pencil.

I'm screwed. Estimating how loud I can scream when everything changes.

Preston falls backwards, grabbing the edge of the desk so hard it moves, scraping the floor. Then I see Brent Eden. Nostrils flaring, he has a hand on the back of Preston's starched shirt collar.

Preston twists his neck, taking in the man holding onto him. "W-Who are you?"

"Nothing and no one," Brent says, echoing his earlier words.

Though I never condone violence, right now I wouldn't mind seeing Preston knocked on his ass.

He tries shaking off Brent's iron grip. "You're making a big mistake! I'm Preston Graves the third and –"

"I don't give a fuck," Brent growls, tightening his hold.

Wow.

Preston squirms, panic in his eyes. "But...this is crazy! Isabella and I are dating."

Brent's green eyes settle on me. My heart's still in my throat, but I manage to shake my head for a split second.

This courtship ended after the first and only date Preston Graves will ever get

from me. One date too many.

“I don’t think so,” Brent says, eyeing me suspiciously.

“Yes, we are,” Preston insists. “Tell him Isabella!”

Even if I could find my tongue, that’s the last thing I’d admit to.

A mischievous glint flashes in Brent’s eyes. “She can’t be dating you. She’s dating me.”

Wait. What?!

I nearly choke on my own breath.

Preston tries harder to get loose. “Impossible!”

Brent spins Preston around so they’re face to face. “Then you probably also believe it’s impossible we’re engaged. And that I’ll beat the fuck out of any man who comes within twenty feet of my fiancée.”

I’m no stranger to F-words, but that one, on his lips, makes me want to pass out.

He gives Preston another shove and before I know it, Brent grabs me, one hand on the back of my head, and smashes his lips against mine.

I’m gone.

Heat consumes me so swiftly the world melts. His lips are all fire. The blood surging through my veins might be lava.

My lips part – they never have a chance – and his tongue sweeps into my mouth.

Hot. Bold. Amazing.

Brent’s other arm wraps around me, holding my body tight against the length of him. It’s like an ice cream cone up against a space heater. My entire body melts down from the inside out.

Holy hell. This is the kind of kiss every girl dreams about. The take-me-out-of-this-world kind.

I’m so engrossed several moments flit by before I remember he shouldn’t be kissing me.

We aren’t alone. I barely know him. He’s my student’s father.

A dozen other realizations bum-rush my dizzy brain, including Preston’s voice.

I pull out of the kiss – regretfully. Still too worked up to stand on my own, I

lean against Brent, taking a few seconds to let the real world return.

“No one dumps Preston Graves!” He says numbly, his anger slowly returning. “And that stupid app guaranteed *three* dates. Three!” He holds up his fingers, as if I don’t know how to count.

Hell, after that kiss, maybe I don’t.

“I can sue. Sue them, and you. Both of you!” He prattles on, stomping a foot like a child not getting his way. “You’ve made a big mistake, Isabella Derby. You and your thug boyfriend. I’ll take every penny you have and – and her teacher’s license. Just watch me. Preston Graves can do that!”

Brent’s upper lip curls slightly as he shakes his head. “Preston Graves better get the fuck out of here before he needs to sue for medical expenses, too.”

“Hey! Is there a problem here?”

I push away from Brent’s side as Oscar Winters and Natalie walk through the door. The poor girl looks bewildered, probably wondering what the hold up is with her dad.

“Yeah. Big problem,” Brent replies, pointing at Preston. “Did you let his man in the building?”

“No.” Oscar’s face falls, realizing the seriousness. He might not have Brent’s rogue good looks, but he’s a big man. Over six feet tall and two hundred intimidating pounds, Oscar walks towards Preston. “How did you get in here, sir?”

“Dear God, are you *all* clueless? Preston Graves can go anywhere he damn well –”

“No, he can’t,” Brent interjects. “I don’t know how he got in the building, but I saw him sneaking out of the men’s room. Didn’t like the look on his face. I followed.”

“You’re in the wrong place. Let’s go.” Oscar grabs Preston’s arm. “I’m truly sorry for this, Ms. Derby. It won’t happen again.”

“I hope not,” Brent says seriously. “Safety’s in your hands.” He nods towards Natalie. “That shouldn’t be taken lightly.”

“Never, Mr. Eden. You’re absolutely right. Believe me, I’ll find out how Mr. Graves found his way in. It won’t happen a second time.” Oscar tugs Preston towards the door, none too gently.

Preston appears to have lost some of his arrogance as he crosses the room, at the mercy of two powerful men. But he’s still wearing a this-isn’t-over glare I don’t like one bit. I roll my shoulders, pretending to stretch. Really, I’m

hiding the shiver.

Brent's hand slides off my shoulder and down my back. Amazingly comforting.

"Get your things," he says quietly. "I'll walk you out."

"I'll take your sketchpad!" Natalie says cheerfully, ready to chip in.

Her smile suggests she saw plenty, probably through the small glass window in the classroom door. It also says what just happened hasn't bothered her in the least.

My cheeks go bright red. I'm more thankful than ever she's mature for her age. At least I don't have to worry about any gossip that could get me in deep, deep doo-doo.

Still fighting off a nervous tremble, I say, "Thank you." Then I look at Brent. "That's not necessary, but thanks. Again. I can find my own way out, Mr. Eden."

"No. You're coming to your car with me," he insists, grabbing my carry-all off the desk. "This everything?"

He's no nonsense through and through. The hint of irony in his glare tells me not to argue. So I don't.

"Everything," I echo, stepping forward and taking my sketchpad from Natalie. "Thank you."

"You're welcome, Ms. Derby." With another large grin, she leans in and whispers, "Thank you, too. Dad likes being a hero. Doesn't get to do the whole white knight thing as often as he'd like."

"Nat." There's a hint of a warning in Brent's tone.

Natalie shakes her head slightly while her green eyes twinkle. "He's a good knight, too."

Unable to disagree, I nod.

"Where's your backpack, baby girl?" Brent asks.

"Oh! I think I left it in the hallway when you told me to go get Mr. Winters," Natalie answers.

"Go get it. We'll wait right here."

"Okay, Daddy!" There's a skip in her step as she hurries towards the door.

Once again, I'm searching for my tongue as I walk towards the door with Brent by my side. I need to tell him thank you, but I'm afraid I'll sound like a

bubbling idiot.

“One question: what made you go out with a man who calls himself by his own name?” Brent asks once Natalie’s out of earshot.

Kill me. He’s trying to lighten this insanity, I’m sure. Still, full-fledged embarrassment burns my cheeks. “Fuck if I know.” I flinch then and bite my tongue.

That’s *not* how a teacher speaks. Especially a preschool teacher who does evening art classes for older kids.

For a second, he cocks his head. Then, to my utter amazement, he laughs. It’s a nice sound. And it breaks the invisible ice surrounding me. “That’s a damn good answer, Ms. Derby.”

“Well...thank you,” I say sheepishly. “I knew I made a mistake. I thought we were done. Tried to let him down easy. Never, in my wildest dreams, did I think he’d show up here.”

He lifts a brow as we step into the hallway. “Is Preston Graves in your wildest dreams?”

“Hell no!” I flinch again at my own language. “I mean, *no*. Gross. He was a match-up from a dating site. One I won’t mention because I’m very dissatisfied.”

“How many times did you date him?”

“Once.” I shake my head. “Actually, it was more like a half-date. I didn’t even make it through reading the menu at the place in Scottsdale before I knew I had to cut things short. It had already been too long.”

My comment reminds him we’re probably wasting time, too. He starts walking and I follow.

Natalie is waiting by the main entrance door with Oscar. It’s a long corridor. Brent sees them, but doesn’t seem to be in a hurry.

“What did you do?” he asks.

“I laid a twenty on the table to pay for my glass of wine, gave the waitress a big tip, which she highly deserved, and lied.”

“Lied?”

“Yes. Lied. I told him it was nice to meet him, which it wasn’t, and then I said I was sorry, but I simply don’t have time to date right now.”

“When was that?”

“Almost three weeks ago. He stopped texting me last week when I didn’t respond, so I’d hoped it was finally over.” It’s embarrassing telling him all this, but it’s the truth, and he deserves that much after coming to my rescue.

Preston’s creepy encounter shook me up more than I want to admit.

“I have no idea how he got inside, Mr. Eden,” Oscar says as we approach him and Natalie. “The doors were locked. I let everyone in and out and didn’t see him once. I always double check. I’m sure of it!” Oscar looks at me, frustration lining his brow. “He’s gone now, Ms. Derby. I escorted him to his car and watched him drive away. I’ll gladly do the same for you.”

“We’re good, Oscar. I’m her escort,” Brent says. “Did you search him for a key fob?”

Oscar’s face falls as he shakes his head. “No, sir, but I’ll make a full report of the security breach. As you know, the academy takes security very seriously.”

Brent turns to me. “Could he have gotten your key fob?”

“No. It’s right here.” I pull the badge around my neck out of the top of my shirt. My I.D. card and the key fob dangle off the end. “It hasn’t been out of my sight since I got it two weeks ago. Jesus. This doesn’t make any sense...”

Brent nods, turning back to Oscar. “I suggest you find out who lost a key fob recently and make everyone aware what Preston Graves looks like. Make sure they understand he’s not allowed on the premises.”

Oscar nods. “Of course, sir, I’ll do that. I’ll stay late. Get the report in the system before I leave.”

A million questions race through my mind, but I hold them until after we walk outside. The heat still coming off the nighttime pavement makes me want to fan myself. We’re off high summer, the hottest time of year, but not to the point where the nights are really comfortable.

Once we’re walking down the long concrete walkway leading to the parking lot, I ask another question I’ve been holding in. “So, uh, Mr. Eden...are you a detective? A cop, maybe?”

“No.”

“He works with cops all the time,” Natalie says. “He owns his own company.”

I wait for either one of them to add more, but they don’t, and I’m too tongue tied to keep probing. Or too scared.

Though he came to my rescue, gave me the hottest, most memorable kiss of my life, there are red flags popping up all over. This whole thing is bad news.

He's a student's father. The academy has rules against teacher-family relationships. Pages upon pages of ironclad rules. As the most elite private academy in the county, the wait list to become a student, or to get a job here, is as long as Route 66.

Landing this preschool position was pure luck. Same as the very part-time accelerated art class I'm filling in for.

I can't fuck it up. Cannot. Will not.

Not even for drop dead sexy men with beast eyes and beards who kiss like they mean business.

"That your car?" Brent asks.

Lost in thought, I glance up, nodding. Classic Mustang convertible. Old. Not at all what anyone would expect a teacher to drive. "It was my dad's."

He doesn't respond physically or verbally, just keeps walking. At the car, he opens the door and looks inside before stepping aside.

"You should lock your doors."

"I usually do." I'd been running late, trying to get back in time for the evening class and hadn't, but won't make that mistake again. I take my bag from him and pull out the keys, then put the carry-all and my sketchpad in the backseat. I make sure to include Natalie as I say, "Thank you both. For everything."

"Nah, it was our pleasure, Ms. Derby!" Natalie talks like she's forty instead of ten. I smile like mad. She steps forward and wraps her arms around my middle. "Please don't be embarrassed. We were really happy to help tonight."

Something inside me flutters as I hug her back. It's not everyday you run into good people.

Our hug ends, and as she steps away, she twists to look at her father. "Weren't we, Daddy? Happy to help Ms. Derby?"

The transformation on his face happens again. "Yes, baby girl," he says. "Thrilled." His smile fades as he looks at me. "Our truck's right over there. We'll wait until you drive away. Unless you want us to follow you home?"

"No!" I flinch at my immediate response. "I mean, that's totally okay. You've already done more than enough. Much more. Thank you."

Completely unsure what to do, I take a step forward, but pause, not sure if I should shake his hand, or, well, hug him. Some crazy part of me shouts *hug*.

Fine. I step forward and give him a quick thank you squeeze.

His statue stiffness tells me I should've went with hand shake.

Crap.

I really am an idiot. But it's not like I have experience handling gorgeous men who pretend-kiss like it's the end of the world.

"Goodnight, guys!" I spin around and jump in my car, slamming the door shut, before I make this more awkward.

I wait until they turn around to walk across the three parking spaces between his truck and my car before leaning my forehead against the steering wheel. Mortification overwhelms me.

Heat does, too. Inside and out. It's been a brutal summer. Hot and windy, the autumn break can't come soon enough. Southern Arizona isn't a humid place, but the dry, hundred degree plus days wear on a body and soul.

I crank the window for fresh air and glance out the opening. There's a car rumbling up beside mine. Not Brent and Natalie's.

My heart leaps in my throat, but then slides back down where it belongs when I realize who it is.

Clara. *Damn!*

After everything went haywire tonight, I spaced on our plans to meet here so she could drop off one of her famous pies.

It's too late to stop the chain reaction. I see Brent gesturing furiously at Natalie to get in his truck as he starts walking back towards me. Opening the door, I climb out, hands in front of me. "Whoa, whoa, it's okay! Nothing scary. This is just my cousin, Clara."

Clara doesn't miss a beat. If she was a curious cat, she'd have lost about all nine lives by now. "Isabella Derby!" She's already shaking her head.

Oh, God. Here it comes.

Holding out her hand, she walks straight toward Brent. "Who on Earth is this fine specimen?"

I run. Around the back end of her car, to her side.

I'm too late to stop anything. Natalie is already answering, "He's our hero tonight!"

Seriously. Where's the hole in the ground? The kind that can swallow a person whole, when we need one?

"Hero?" Both of Clara's eyes are wider than an owl's as she looks at me and blinks. "Isabella *Derby!*"

Forget the hole in the ground. The brutal smile on her face makes me wish I had one in my head.

This night truly can't get any worse.

I love Clara, but she's the biggest gossip in the family. And I'm not sure Derby blood was ever compatible with privacy.

"He's just...the father of one of my students. Nothing to worry about," I say, adding so much emphasis it hurts my tongue.

Her smile turns coy as she turns back to Brent. Sticking out her hand even further, she says, "Well, well, it's truly a pleasure. Clara Derby, Big Daddy. How do you do?"

Brent shakes her hand with an uneasy smile. I just close my eyes and pray for this day to be over. It's cursed. From the very second my alarm went off this morning.

"Nice to meet you, Ms. Derby." I hear him say. Then, "I'm afraid I have to run. Good seeing Isabella with a friend."

He gives me a knowing glance. I die once under his striking eyes, and again when I hear how my name sounds on his lips.

"Brent," I whisper. His name, rather than Mr. Eden, tastes wonderful in my mouth, too.

"Goodnight, Ladies."

My eyes snap open and I watch him walk to the truck. Clara's mouth drops.

I want to laugh. As painful as this is, it's so ridiculous it's kinda surreal.

Nerves. Has to be. Yet, in my defense, the way he didn't give Clara what she wanted, a name to Google, is comical.

He climbs into his truck and starts the engine.

Clara turns to me, mouth still hanging open and eyes wide. Her silence only lasts a nano-second.

"OMG!" she hisses. "He's to die for, Izzy!"

I can't agree. Well, I can, but I won't.

I still can't believe I forgot about her stupid pie.

Fuck. This is turning out to be the night of unwanted company to the nth degree.

Clara's long dark hair whips in the wind as she turns to his truck and then

back to me. “Where? How? How long? Is he your dating site match-up guy? Why didn’t you tell me you’d matched a ten out of ten hunk, lady?”

“What? No, no, no, and no!” I try to wipe out all her rapid fire questions at once.

“You’re terrible for holding out on me. I thought we were family! You never said how your date turned out – mighty good by the looks of him. I mean, *it*.”

I shake my head. “Clara, it’s late. I should be getting home.”

“I brought you a pie! Coconut cream.” Clara winks, reaching in the door she’d left open, her car still running. “Your favorite. I made a couple for dinner, and everyone agreed I should drop one off since you missed out. You’re welcome, cuz.”

Just great. I don’t even like coconut cream pie that much.

Like most everything about the family dinners, I pretend I do to keep the peace. Then, a solid escape opportunity dawns on me. “Awesome!” I snatch the pie from her hand, feigning joy. “Better go before this melts. Have a nice night, Clara!”

“You really need a new car, Izzy. One with modern air conditioning.”

“Someday, when I can afford it.” I hold up the pie and smile as if I can’t wait to bite into it. “Mmmm, supper! Thanks again.”

I’m half way to my car, when her question stops me.

“Does your mama know about Big Daddy?”

I spin around as my stomach hits the ground. “Nope. And that’s the way it’s gonna stay because there isn’t *anything* to know.”

“He’s still sitting there. Watching.” She smiles, nods toward their truck, and does a small wave.

“He’s just being polite.” I start walking again. “And we’re being rude, Clara. He has a little girl to get home to put to bed. He’s waiting for us to leave. Making sure we’re safe.” I leave it there so I don’t have to mention, much less think about Preston again.

“So...no mother? No wife? I mean, if you’ve got to deal with her, there are always ways around the drama. You can’t let that stop you!”

“Clara.”

“Okay, okay! I’m just curious.”

“Nosy, you mean,” I mumble, climbing in my car. As the engine purrs to life,

I wave. “Thanks again for the pie.”

She gets in her car and pulls away. I follow. Brent follows me. I try to let out a huff of relief, but there’s none in me. I follow Clara’s tail lights to the highway.

Thank God.

I cringe. Hoping he doesn’t plan on following me all the way to my place in Tempe. Knowing Clara, she’s already considering how to turn around and follow him home. My mind starts spinning faster than the nighttime traffic whipping down the four-lane highway.

A small sense of relief seeps out of me when I look in my mirrors again. Brent takes an exit. And I don’t see a car that looks like Clara’s anymore.

Then reality hits home.

Jesus! This night could’ve been an even bigger disaster.

If Clara ever hears what Brent said to Preston, about us being engaged, I’m toast.

And so is he.

There’s no drama in the known universe like Derby drama.

And me, being a single crazy cat lady for the rest of my life, has been the main family tragedy for months.

Who knew the fix could be even worse?

PAINT IT ALL BLUE (BRENT)

It's hotter than blue blazes, but not even the sweat pouring down my back can kill my focus.

What the hell was I thinking? Kissing that shy little teacher last night?

I know what I'd been thinking: that I'd like to fuck her.

Thinking with my dick. Thinking like a sex starved maniac who's been too busy working his ass off to haul any woman into bed for far too long.

That's what I try to tell myself. Anything to dismiss the lust fogging my head.

If only it were as simple as sex alone.

Seeing that slick-dick bastard sneaking out of the bathroom pissed me off royal. Got under my skin like a rattlesnake bite before I even got wind of the nasty way he spoke to Blue.

I can't stop the grin forming. *Blue.*

I've come to call her that because of the bright blue streaks in her dirty blonde hair. It's just one side, and just a few strands. More like the emo girls a decade ago than full on punk rock.

They make her look rare. Magical. Damnably hard to resist.

I remember walking her out into the parking lot, the lights glowing overhead. When they caught her face just right, her gray eyes nearly matched the soft ocean stripe in her hair.

Maybe a shade lighter.

Almost like they're speckled with blue diamonds. Like she's blue to the soul, even when she was standing in front of me with her motor mouth cousin, cheeks flushing hellfire red.

That woman was something, all right.

Something unique. Something sexy. Something beautiful.

I've made a point to meet every one of Natalie's teachers. I'll keep doing it, too, right up to her college professors. Until last night, no teacher of hers ever left me hanging by my own blue balls.

Beyond hanging. More like consumed. Strung up.

Blue's been in my wet dreams for the past couple weeks, even before last night. Ever since Nat's art enrichment class started, and I first laid eyes on her, I've lost my frigging mind.

Something that can't keep happening if it leads to madness like last night.

Hell, *especially* if it's like last night. Getting up close and way too personal for our own good.

Slamming the truck door, I hit the key and flip on the air conditioning. It'll take a minute to cool everything down, and then one more to make the sweat stop pouring off me.

This job has been a sonofabitch. Most asbestos removal gigs are.

They also make bank. I hadn't even imagined the amount of money there was to be made in hazmat cleanup five years ago, when I had little more than a tool belt and a will to work long dreary hours.

It's paid off, and will continue to for years.

As the temperature inside the truck drops, I reach over and pull my notebook out of the glove box. After meeting Ms. Derby that first night of art class, I'd gone out to the truck and made a quick sketch of her while Nat wasn't looking, still getting her stuff together.

That's when I'd started calling her Blue, too, in my own twisted mind.

I flip through the pages. Stare at my creations. Each sketch I've drawn since the first night has gotten more detailed.

They all started out with her wearing clothes. The off white blouse and black skirt I've seen on her several times.

Amazing how every sketch winds up with her naked. And in some interesting positions.

Fuck.

That kiss last night, the heat of her lips, the way she pressed up against me, keeps replaying in my mind. She'd tasted as good as I'd imagined. Felt even better.

A dangerously fine young woman. A siren for a man who hasn't had a good solid fuck in eons.

Things could've quickly gotten out of hand last night. Had we been someplace else. Had Nat not been there. Or the pissant who got us up on each other in the first place, Preston Asshole Graves.

A faint shadow has me looking up, shoving the notebook back in the glovebox. I'm barely able to hide my dirty secret before the job site manager, Juan Lopez, pulls open the passenger door.

"Removal's done, Boss. We're just about free and clear." Juan takes off his hat and wipes the sweat off his forehead with the back of his hand. "We'll have the rest wrapped up within the hour."

"Good. That's what I just told the owners." I shake my head. "Why some people think they can cross the yellow tape's beyond me." The two owners who'd just driven away had tried every excuse in the book to get inside the plastic shrouded area of the building my crew worked all day.

"Thanks for coming down," Juan says. "I told them they couldn't come in, but all that did was make them insist on speaking to you."

"Never a problem, Juan. Some people just don't understand the danger. I was in the area, anyway, bidding on another job."

Juan grins. I can practically see money in his eyes. "It's been a good summer."

"And it'll be a better fall. Especially now that we're the number one crime scene cleanup company in the area."

Juan puts his hat back on. "You'll never hear me complain about working too much."

"I know, and I appreciate that."

"These fat paychecks are thanks enough." Juan slaps the seat. "Gotta get back in there. See you later, Brent."

"Stay cool," I say as he shuts the door. Noting the time on the radio, I glance up and watch Juan walk away.

I'm happy to pay him top dollar. Because of him, I can afford to be the kind of father Nat deserves. Not just money wise, but time wise, too. I'm able to drive her to school every morning and pick her up each afternoon.

Shifting into reverse, I back out of the parking lot and head for the highway. Blue should be too busy this evening for more run-ins.

This isn't just about her. I need to speak to the Principal and make sure the key fob that Graves asshole somehow snatched gets found and deactivated.

Natalie's safety always comes first.

I'll pull her out of school in a heartbeat if they can't guarantee this fuckery never happens again. It may be one of the most prestigious schools in the state, but their rankings don't mean shit if safety isn't sacrosanct.

There are bad people in this world.

Bastard Phil, for one.

The thought of that bald headed monster breathing down my neck for the hundredth time fills me with rage, but I can't fret over him. Nothing good will come from a trip down memory lane, either, or stepping on the many landmines lingering in the present.

I call the school to set up a meeting with Bob Jacobs. Fifteen minutes.

Whatever.

Being a father has taught me plenty. In the past, I would've taken care of Preston Graves myself. Gladly.

Probably would have run him out of town. But for Natalie, I follow the rules.

For her, I'm a good man.

Most of the time.



TRAFFIC IS MINIMAL, and I arrive with time to spare. I circle the parking lot once, looking for a faded blue Mustang convertible.

It's parked on the far side of the lot. I have half a mind to check if her doors are locked.

Personal safety, security, is another thing that was never an issue until Natalie was born. The events of the past couple years have blown it up tenfold.

I drive back to the visitor parking area and find a spot. Despite the evening heat, I grab my leather jacket and slip it on. I'm not ashamed of the ink on my arms, but out of respect for Nat, I cover my tattoos at certain times.

People can be judgmental. Kids can be downright nasty. As a father, it's my responsibility to never let judgments about me taint her.

At the door, I buzz the intercom system and state my name before being let in. The office is around the corner to the left. A dark-haired woman behind the desk points to the door on the right and tells me Mr. Jacobs is ready.

He's an older man, mid-fifties or so, round and balding, but smart. I recognized that the first time I met him. I got a good sense about him at our first meeting, too, but that has little bearing on the reason for my meeting today.

"Welcome back, Mr. Eden," Jacobs says as I enter the room. He's standing behind his big wooden desk covered with framed family photos. "I'm glad you called so we can discuss what happened last night."

Not seeing any reason for pleasantries, I yank the door shut behind me. "And make sure it isn't repeated, you mean."

"Of course." He points to a chair. "Please, have a seat."

While stepping towards the chair, I ask, "How'd Graves get in the building? Anybody figured it out yet?"

He nods, as if accepting my straight to the point question. "Most of Mr. Graves' family are academy alumni, I'm afraid."

Taking a seat, I give him a look that says that's no answer. "Bull. Don't tell me alumni have key fobs."

"No, no, certainly not." He sits in his well-padded leather chair. "Mr. Graves' cousin, Grace Wilkens, works here. She wasn't aware her key fob was missing until arriving at work this morning. When she heard about the breach last night, she came to me and said Preston stopped by her house yesterday. He must have taken her fob then. He's been questioned, but denies ever having it."

"Sure he does," I bite off, trying like hell not to roll my eyes.

"Please, you needn't be alarmed. I personally made sure the fob was deactivated. So, wherever it is, it's no good here anymore. Also, we've informed Mr. Graves he isn't welcome anywhere near our premises."

"And his cousin? If she can't keep track of a damn fob..." I let my words trail off, knowing he catches my drift.

"Grace Wilkens has worked here for over fifteen years. Practically a model employee with no prior disciplinary incidents. She eagerly cooperated to the fullest in our investigation this morning. Said Mr. Graves has some...dire psychological issues."

I blink my agreement.

"Regardless, Ms. Wilkens feels terrible about the whole thing. I have no concern her new fob ever goes missing again." He squirms slightly in his chair. "I'll be speaking with Ms. Derby as well. Just as soon as her afternoon

classes end.”

My spine stiffens, but I make sure he doesn’t notice. “Ms. Derby? Why?”

“I know she’s fully aware of the rules, but perhaps you’re not.”

“Rules?” *What fucking rules?* I wonder, shaking my head slightly.

His jowls wiggle as he pulls up an imitation smile. “Well, Mr. Graves indicated that although he’s been dating Ms. Derby for some time...she might also be dating you.”

Shit!

What in the hell was I on last night? What insanity possessed me to kiss a stranger and call her my fiancée?

Besides the fact I’ve thought about fucking Blue since meeting her, I mean. I read every publication the school sends home, including the new teacher bios. The little black and white photo they’d had of her in their newsletter hadn’t done her justice.

Jacobs is still waiting for an answer. I shrug. “Even if that were true, I can’t see why it’d be anyone else’s business.”

He shakes his head. “It would, I fear. We have *very* strict rules at this academy, Mr. Eden. Every employee agrees to conduct themselves to the highest standard at their time of hire. That includes maintaining nothing more than a purely professional relationship with our students, their families, and other employees.”

Fuck. I should have known.

I may have buried myself on this one. Just hope I haven’t dug Blue’s grave, too. “You just went to bat for that Wilkens lady. Tell me, how well do you know Ms. Derby?”

“I must admit, not very well,” Jacobs answers. “She’s a new teacher this year for our preschool expansion. As you know, she began filling the evening art classes for Mrs. Wayne, the regular art teacher. Like all of our instructors, Ms. Derby came highly recommended. Her presence on our payroll vouches for her character, I’d like to believe. However –”

No. Fuck ‘however.’

Nothing he’s telling me is new information. “And how long have you known Preston Graves?” I ask.

His chin wobbles as a frown forms. “I was Vice Principal while he was a student.”

His expression says it all. Preston Graves was a flaming asshole then, too. To drive my point home, I ask, "And how long have you known me?"

"I believe it's been roughly five years since you first enrolled Natalie, correct?"

I nod before saying, "Given the history you just indicated, and the experience you have from working here for so many years, let's think. Do *you* believe a woman like Ms. Derby would be dating a man like Preston Graves?"

He places both hands on his desk and leans forward, his eyebrows flicking up. "I was certainly surprised by Preston's claims."

"All of them?" I ask.

"Yes, all of them."

Not admitting anything is my best tool right now, and I use it. "Natalie and I were leaving last night when I saw Graves sneaking out of the bathroom. Then I heard the way he spoke to Ms. Derby. He tried to scare her. Intimidate her. I stepped in like any man would. Had to get him off her."

"Your assistance is very much appreciated. The safety of our students and faculty always comes first." Jacobs shoots a nervous glance around the room before asking, "Did you know Ms. Derby before she started teaching here? Before Natalie was enrolled in the art enrichment class she took over?"

"No. Not till three weeks ago, when I dropped Nat off for her first art lesson. First time I met Ms. Derby. Last night was the first time we said more than hello." By this point, I'm ready for this entire situation to become little more than my word against Preston Graves.

If push comes to shove, that bastard won't stand a chance.

The bell rings loudly then, interrupting us. Classes dismissed. I stand.

Jacobs gets up as well and extends his hand across the desk. "I appreciate you clarifying details, Mr. Eden. I give you my promise there won't be any further security breaches here."

"I'll hold you to it." I shake his hand tight and bid him farewell, but by the time I reach the door, my conscience gets the best of me. I can't leave yet. I turn. "None of last night was Ms. Derby's fault, Principal. Reprimanding her would be out of line."

He walks to the edge of his desk, a small sigh escaping his throat. "I'm of similar opinion, Mr. Eden. Thanks again for your input."

I leave, nod to the receptionist, and walk into the hall where dozens of kids are rushing for the door.



NAT SPIES me as she rounds the corner. My heart swells at how her eyes light up.

I'd never known how deeply one human being can care for another until I'd met this little girl ten years ago. That moment changed my life.

There are times I still wonder what Cindy would think. She'd sworn I'd never be able to think about anyone but myself.

The sad part is, she was right. Once upon a time.

Not anymore.

"Hi, Daddy!" Her arms wrap around my waist.

"Hey, baby girl." I kiss the top of her head before letting go. "How was your day?"

"Aced my English test! So, pretty good."

There's a smile on her face, but no shine in her eyes. I wait until we're outside where it's not as noisy before asking, "But?"

She shrugs. Whatever it is, she's holding it in.

Damn.

The desire to kick the hell out of whoever's alienating her hits hard. It takes effort to squelch it. Some days, I wonder if I should have agreed to let her skip whole grade levels.

She's only ten.

The other kids in her eighth grade classes are older, some by four years. There's a huge difference between kids at those ages, which makes her light on friends. The separate classes don't give her much opportunity to play with kids her own age. I've offered to talk to the school about that, but she doesn't want me to.

I get it. The school can't force kids to make friends, but I hate the idea of her not having anybody close. No one except me. I fucking loathe it. She deserves *better*.

"Are we going straight home?" she asks.

"Yeah. Unless there's something you need?" I tickle the back of her neck, under her ponytail where I know it'll make her giggle. "Like ice cream."

She scrunches up her shoulders against my tickles. "We have ice cream sandwiches at home. And I really want to work on my dog drawing. I'll need

to borrow your phone to see the picture.”

“Maybe we should get you your own phone? I think the day’s come,” I suggest, thinking that might put a spark in her eyes.

She gnaws her cheek, considering it, but then shakes her head. “Nah. There’s no one I’d call.”

My gut churns as if I’ve just been sucker punched. “There’s always Grandma,” I suggest.

“Why? We already video chat on the computer,” she answers, climbing in the truck. “Plus we’ll see her in a couple months anyway, whenever they move back down for winter.”

I nod, hiding my uncertainty.

My parents, who’d cared for Nat when she first came home from the hospital and I was still in the army, live their summers on a lake in North Dakota. Then spend winters in a townhome not too far from our house, in the older section of Scottsdale. At least, that *was* the norm until recently.

They haven’t come down for more than a week or two in the past few years. Not since Davey died.

A tragedy in more ways than one. They’re practically the only people Natalie associates with besides me and a few of my close friends.

“All right then,” I say, giving up. “Home it is, and no phone for now. Let me know if you change your mind.”

She nods, buckling her seat belt. “Yep. We’re good.”

“You’re a pretty easy kid. You know that, baby girl?”

“Because you’re a pretty easy daddy.”

Her smile makes me feel better. I should give it more time. Let her figure this out. She’s a brilliant kid, and sooner or later the rest of the world will figure it out.

“We make a good team, just the two of us,” she says.

“Sure do.” I start the truck and we head for home.

As I’m turning into the driveway, I ask, “Any requests for supper?”

“Spaghetti!” she answers immediately. “With garlic toast. I know there’s some in the freezer because I asked Julia to add it to our grocery list.”

“Whatever you want.” I hit the garage door opener and pull the truck inside. I’m grateful our cleaning lady does most of the grocery runs so I don’t have

to.

I'd bought the big house five years ago and had it remodeled shortly afterward, including the pool out back. At the time, I imagined Natalie having friends over, and focused on fun things for them to do. That still hasn't happened.

Someday, I tell myself. Give her fucking time.

As soon as the hamburger meat and garlic bread are set on the counter to thaw, Natalie takes my phone and heads up to her bedroom to get cracking on her sketch. I go to my office to create some bids and process billings.

My mind has a hard time staying focused lately. Especially when half the damn evening keeps coming back to Isabella Derby.

All sorts of questions creep in. I shove them aside, but they're relentless.

It's bullshit. Everything about this.

Not just how cute she is, with her honey-blond hair bouncing off her shoulders and those gray eyes shimmering in the pale light.

She's too hot to stay single. That part confuses me. She'd only gone on one date with Preston. He's too annoying for any woman to date twice.

What I can't figure out is why she'd be so hard up for dates in the first place.

In my mind, those match-up sites are scams. Not a fair assumption, maybe, but fuck fair.

I know people who've found their spouses online. However, their final outcomes are yet to come.

That's where the real scam comes in. Not even marriage guarantees a life together.

People change. Sometimes that works for everyone. Sometimes it doesn't.

Sometimes people die before the change ever happens.

I push away from my desk and walk to the window. It's a beautiful, clear evening out there, but inside, it might as well be monsoon season.

I remember what happened to Cindy. She'd wanted the Happily Ever After when we hooked up. I was in it for here and now.

That taught me a lesson. One I'll never forget.

"Two goddamned weeks," I mutter, resting my fist against the glass. If I'd just been discharged two weeks earlier, Cindy might still be alive. Natalie would have a mother, someone else to love her, even if things were never meant to

be between us.

Bitter fucking irony. Sometimes, it makes me sick.

“Dad?”

I spin around, dashing the sadness on my face. “Present,” I joke numbly.

Natalie walks into my office beaming. “It’s time to start supper.”

Though she has my eyes and the better parts of my attitude, she’s got a lot of her mother, too. Cindy liked everything on time and in order. That was only one of the many things that drew us apart, and one of the things I’ve changed since.

Purposefully. Children need structure. So do hazmat crews.

“I’ll be up soon.” I walk to my desk to shut down the computer. “Go wash up.”

As we do most nights, we cook supper together.

My mind wanders to Blue again while our Bolognese sauce simmers. The school has rules, which is fine. I have no interest in dating her.

I just want to take her to bed. Relieve some of this tension kissing her had kicked up last night.

Of course, dating and fucking are equally forbidden. Both spell trouble with a screaming capital T.

“I wish I had art class tonight.”

I spin around, half wondering if I’d mentioned the class out loud. “Why’s that?”

“Because I love it!” Natalie says, dumping a bag of salad in a bowl. “I like Ms. Derby and can’t wait for her to see my dog drawing.”

I turn back to the stove and stir the sauce. “I’m not sure I’d get too attached, Nat. She’s only a substitute for the regular art teacher,” I say, not wanting her to get her hopes up of having Ms. Derby all year.

I don’t need that kind of hope either. The faster I forget about that little blonde with blue streaks begging for my fingers, the better off I’ll be. It’ll also save a few bucks in cold showers.

“I know.”

The noodles start boiling. As I’m turning down the heat, a crash sounds.

Front door. Which instantly has my nerves on edge.

It better not be that vicious prick again.

Bastard Phil should've heeded my warning. I told him what would happen if he ever showed up on my porch again, and I wasn't fucking bluffing.

"Wow, it's getting late for company! I'll see –"

"No, Nat. Let me." My tone is harsh. I can't help it.

Natalie frowns. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," I say. "You watch the noodles. Don't let them boil over. Keep an eye on the timer. I'll go see what that was."

She agrees with a nod, but still looks at me cautiously. I rarely tell her no, especially not so rudely. But when it comes to this, I'd rather be clear than polite.

Fuck the Black Pearls. I warned Davey to stay away.

They're one of the biggest crime syndicates in the state.

He didn't listen. And now, his problem is mine.

On my way to the front door, I make a quick detour to my office. Grab the nine millimeter I keep in the safe behind a picture on the wall, and slide in the clip while making my way back into the hall.

I listen carefully, making sure Nat's still in the kitchen. I don't want her to catch me sneaking around with a gun in our own damn house if I can avoid it.

In the foyer, I tuck the weapon into my waistband and stand off to the side, peeking through the half-moon window in the top of the door.

I can't see anything. Anyone. Not even a shadow.

Can't wait forever.

I yank open the front door and step out, glancing around.

That's when I spy her.

Her!

Blue.

Actually, she's red faced, sweeping black dirt into a pile with her hand.

"I'm so sorry," she says, barely glancing up. "I accidentally knocked the plant off the table by the door. The pot broke. I'll replace it."

Not Bastard Phil. Thank Christ he's taken my warning seriously for now.

Seeing her pisses me off almost as much for a different reason. Mainly

because she's the last person I need right now. The hard-on I've fought all day reminds me why.

"I'm truly sorry, again. Just tell me where you got the pot and –"

"Julia bought it." I stand over her. "Cleaning lady," I add watching how the tension on her face smooths out.

Congratulations. You're boned, I hear a voice in the back of my mind say, laughing the whole time. Not if I have anything to say about it.

She pats the pile of dirt, green leaves, and broken pottery, she'd created on the porch. "Oh, um, do you know where she bought it?"

"No."

Nodding, she stands. "Well...could you ask her?"

"No." I'm harsher than I need to be. The depressed look on her face gets to me. "Lady, I don't give a shit about a broken pot. But I *do* need to know what you're doing here."

"Oh, of course, I, well, I –"

Even her stutter is adorable. I watch her lips moving too long.

Pure torture. I huff a breath, waiting for her to untie that sweet tongue and get the words out.

"Natalie. I brought some supplies for Natalie to use," she says at last. "For her dog picture, I mean. It was the best in the class. I just wanted to make sure she had the right stuff."

"What kind of 'stuff,' Ms. Derby?"

I whip around at the sound of Natalie's voice.

"You *really* think my picture's best in the class?" Her green eyes sparkle. "The very best?"

"Yes," Blue answers, kneeling down in front of Natalie. "Here's to you, queen. I brought you some drawing books. They're more advanced material, old ones I used in college, and some colored pencils."

"Really? Wow! Thank you." Laughing, Natalie's eyes are still glowing when she glances up at me. "Ms. Derby can stay for supper, can't she, Dad? Everything's just about ready." She turns back to Blue. "It's spaghetti night. I just took the noodles off the stove."

I easily read the look in Blue's eyes. She's wondering why I would let a ten year old cook.

None of her fucking business.

Who does this woman think she is? Showing up here after last night? Breaking my shit and leaving me with another hard-on I'll be fighting all week?

If it wasn't for the smile on Nat's face...damn it all.

"Thank you, but I can't," she says, clearly reading my mind. "But here." She stands up and hands a cloth bag to Natalie. "There's the stuff I promised. Also," she unzips her purse. "Let me pay you for the pot right now. So clumsy."

Since I rarely use the front door, I have no idea where the pot even came from, but assume Julia put it there. I give her some creative leeway so Nat doesn't have to grow up in a man cave.

"Forget it, Ms. Derby. Your money's no good here."

"Well, then, um –"

"Please, Daddy, can't she stay?" Natalie asks. "There's more than enough food. And it isn't *that* late."

Agony. I can't lie in front of Nat.

There's always more than enough food, unfortunately. Despite every instinct screaming 'don't,' saying no to Nat is as impossible as ever.

She rarely asks for anything. I'm also interested in knowing what's really going on here. Why Blue felt inclined to bring Natalie art supplies when she could just wait until the next class.

"Be my guest." I step aside and wave for Blue to enter the house. Nat beams like the Phoenix sun.

"No, that's all right, really, I just –"

"My Natalie would really love you to stay for dinner, Ms. Derby. Please." I touch her shoulder and give her a soft push forward. "There's more than enough. My ma's sauce recipe."

"Okay! That sounds lovely, but –"

No. No buts. She's not getting out of this if I couldn't.

"I made a salad, too, and garlic bread," Natalie chirps, taking Blue's hand and tugging her inside our house.

SPAGHETTI NIGHT (IZZY)

How did I wind up here? He'd had a gun in his pants.
I saw it. A black pistol.

It's not there now, but only because he stepped into a room off the hallway while Natalie led me into the kitchen. Who answers the door with *a gun*?

I should have left. If I hadn't gotten jumpy, hadn't knocked over that plant with my bag, I'd be halfway home by now. No one would've ever known I was here.

I'd never admit it out loud, but Clara isn't the only Derby with the nosy gene. Last night, I spent some time online. There wasn't a lot in search for Brent Eden, other than a very impressive website for his business dealing with hazardous waste clean up.

Hazmat spills, dirty jobs, and crime scene clean ups are his living, true. But do men need a gun for that? I wouldn't think so.

He's not on any social media sites, but his name did come up in an obituary. A brother, David Eden, who died three years ago. He'd been young, only in his late twenties. The obit didn't give a cause of death.

I'm not sure it matters. That mystery isn't the reason I'm here.

"What would you like to drink, Ms. Derby?" Natalie asks sweetly, holding the fridge door open. "We've got milk, OJ, grape juice, or water."

Brent stands on the other side of the large marble topped island, placing serving bowls full of food on the table. I'm trying very hard not to look his way.

Every time I do, my eyes wander to his lips. Heat wells inside me, recalling how amazing, how easy, how natural they felt on mine. Then I remember the gun.

Dear God.

“Um,” I clear my throat. “Water will be fine, Natalie. Thank you.”

“How ‘bout a lemon slice in it?” Natalie smiles, already reaching for a yellow lemon in a small bowl.

Who is this kid? My own freaking mom doesn’t offer lemon water. The teacher in me can’t help but worry a little. “No thanks. I like mine plain and ice cold.”

She smiles and fills a glass with ice, then water from the dispenser on the front of the fridge. “You can go ahead and sit down.”

I glance towards Brent, who gestures towards a chair. I help carry the glass of milk that Natalie had already filled, and set it near the plate he points to, then take a seat on the other side of the table. Natalie carries two glasses of water to the table, setting one near his plate and the other near mine.

“This is so fun! It’s been forever since we had company,” she says.

“Have a seat, baby girl,” Brent says.

Considering I skip as many family dinners as possible, and live alone, it’s been ages since I sat at a table and ate with other people willingly. “It smells fabulous,” I say. At least that part’s true. Still makes me more nervous than I recall being in a very long time.

Partly because of the way Brent keeps watching me. He knows I’m not just here to drop off art supplies, and he’s right.

He also has my insides tied in knots. I’ll never forget last night’s kiss.

It’s been on my mind all day. Especially while Principal Jacobs questioned me about Preston and then Brent. Preston told Jacobs what Brent said last night, about us dating. There was a good solid hour this afternoon where I thought I’d be fired for sure.

Until Jacobs said he’d heard another story. Brent personally assured him we’re not dating.

Hence my reason for being here. To thank him all over again for saving my butt a second time.

Dread storms through my stomach while we slowly pass food around. I fill my plate and eat, telling Natalie how delicious it is between bites.

All the while wondering how I’ll ever drop the other bomb.

How do I warn Brent about my family?

After I got home from work this afternoon, I got a phone call from mother. Clara did her homework and then some. Found out who Brent is. The name on the side of his truck gave it away.

Then, like the annoying sister I never had, she told mom about seeing us together in the school parking lot.

Of course, she elaborated. *A lot.*

Said she'd caught us in a passionate embrace. She denied that when I called her, but the damage is done.

It's too late to fall back into a normal life. Not with Derby women hot on the trail, like hounds specially trained to track down every last whiff of cupid. I cringe, imagining the day either mom or Clara herself show up on Brent's doorstep.

Asking his intentions.

Asking when the wedding will be.

Jesus.

Pure humiliation washes over me. I shouldn't have come here, really.

But I can't have him stuck in the middle of a Derby family clusterfuck.

Clara won't be satisfied with just a name and a quick glimpse of my Not Fiancé. She'll dig deep to learn more. And she'll succeed.

Hell, she probably already has his address, phone number, birth date, and, knowing her, his net worth.

"What kind of books did you bring me?"

I snap out of my funk and glance across the table, smiling at Natalie. So young, yet so mature.

I shouldn't have, but I asked her pod teacher about her today. I pretended it had to do with her art, how impressive it is.

Not that I needed an excuse, however true. Mrs. Gates was more than willing to tell all. Natalie Eden is extremely smart, but struggles to keep up emotionally. She's been in the same school since kindergarten. Skipping grades has made it impossible for her to continue friendships, and difficult to build new ones.

My heart goes out to her. Kids, without even realizing it, can be so mean. Rich kids from powerful families can easily feel intimidated by someone with her brains and talent.

I wipe my lips with my napkin before saying, "I'm glad you asked. One's about drawing animals. It covers their anatomy, how to do form for things like birds, whales, turtles, you name it. The other book, that's for drawing people. I also put some charcoal in the bag if you'd like to experiment with it on your dog drawing."

"Of course!" Her green eyes pop. "Wow, thank you! I saw some charcoal drawings online this afternoon. They looked almost three-dimensional."

"That's exactly what charcoal can do when used correctly. Add depth to a picture."

"Awesome! I can't wait to try it."

Brent points to her plate. "You clean your plate, and I'll let you out of dish duty tonight."

"Deal!" She grins, twirling a fork full of spaghetti. "You're the bestest, Dad." She winks at the obvious shift in grammar.

They've got a good thing going, these two. Makes me remember how strong a connection can be between a girl and her father. And miss it.

She asks me several more questions about drawing while eating, and I answer. Brent doesn't say much, but his eyes say he's thinking plenty. He's a master at keeping my nerves on edge.

By the time he excuses Natalie, who nearly bolts away, it feels like I'm sitting on pins and needles.

She's barely out of the room when he sets down his fork. "Ready to tell me why you're really here?"

I almost choke on a lettuce leaf. It takes several sips of water before it goes down and I can breathe.

"I know it's not about fucking art supplies," he rumbles, thunder in his throat.

I nod and sigh, having no idea how, where, to start. "You're right, Brent. It's not. Although your daughter is very talented. No exaggeration."

"I know."

"Right. I'm sure you do."

He leans back in his chair and crosses his massive arms across his broad chest. Waiting impatiently. "Did you get fired today or what?"

"Fired? No!" I take a quick gulp of air. "Because of you, no less. Thanks for telling Mr. Jacobs the truth. I really, really appreciate that. This job, teaching at the academy...it's been my dream since I was in the ninth grade and

Marlene Scott won State with her landscapes. She went to school at the academy and I was public educated. Her drawing was like nothing I've ever seen. Right then, I decided I wanted to teach art at the academy." Heat leaps into my cheeks. I realize I'm not only babbling, I'm sharing secrets I've never told anyone.

"Teach? Why? At that age, I'd think you'd have dreamed about going to the academy and learning to draw like this Marlene yourself."

Relieved he wasn't put out by my rambling, I shake my head. "You've heard the saying, 'those who can't do, teach?' That's me. I'm not an artist. I love art. Love how it's created, how it pushes buttons on the soul, but I'm not talented enough to ever create beautiful masterpieces. And I'm sure I'd be miserable in LA, New York, Paris...it's too much. I'm an Arizona girl, born and raised. I've known it for years. And I'm okay with it. Watching others create masterpieces is my dream. That's why I took the full time job teaching preschool at the academy. It was a foot in the door. Hopefully someday, when there's an opening in the art department, I'll be first in line."

His brows furrow in thought. A sexier gesture than it should be.

"I know how it sounds: crazy. But it's what I've worked at forever, and for just a little while today, I was afraid I'd lost it all. Then Mr. Jacobs told me you'd assured him we aren't dating. He also said there'll be no repercussions against me for what Preston did." The elation that hit hard in Mr. Jacobs' office this afternoon returns. "I can't thank you enough, Brent. Seriously."

I can't say Brent smiles, but there's a...well, almost a grin. "I'm glad it worked out for you."

I bite my lip, knowing I have to mention the other thing that happened today.

He lifts a brow. "There's more, isn't there?"

I nod pressing a hand against the knot in my stomach.

"Well, spit it out," he says.

"The woman in the parking lot last night, my cousin Clara...this is embarrassing. She sort of told my mother we're dating."

He laughs.

I don't know what I expected, but this isn't it. "It's not funny."

"Yeah, it is."

"Why? This was *your* idea, remember? When you told Preston we were – you know." I can't bring myself to say engaged.

Can't.

The shine leaves his eyes, turning them cold and barren. "I had good reason. The asshole was threatening you. I had to get rid of him. Don't take it so personal. Nothing could be more absurd than you and me dating."

A touch of anger flares inside me. So that's it – I'm not good enough for him? I'm about to call him out for being a ginormous ass, when I consider the other possibility. The coldness in his tone makes me wonder if the idea hit a sore spot somewhere. I know there's no wife, but a girlfriend is a real possibility. Am I treading on another woman's turf?

Maybe the cleaning lady does more than just sweep his floors?

"Why's that? Because of Julia?"

This time, there's a bitterness in his chuckle. "Julia's twice as old as you, married, and a grandmother of six. She cleans this house twice a week and picks up groceries."

For some stupid reason, that makes me relax. "Oh."

"I have Nat." He stands and picks up his plate. "She's the only girl in my life, and that's how it'll stay. No time for other bullshit."

I jump to my feet, pick up my plate, and carry it to the sink in the center island. "I told both my mother and Clara that we aren't dating, but they don't believe me."

"That's interesting, Isabella." He takes my plate and sets it in the sink. "And totally not my problem."

Ouch.

I spin around, collecting Natalie's dishes. Then the frustration boils over. "I know that, Brent, but I just wanted to let you know. Give you a heads-up in case they contact you."

"How would they contact me? Why? I didn't even tell your cousin my name."

"She Googled the name on the side of your truck."

There's a sneer on his face when he takes the dirty dishes from my hands.

I pull the serving dishes off the table and carry them over. "Look, I'm sorry. I know it's the last thing you need." Although I've never let anyone know the entire truth, I feel inclined to explain. "It's my mother driving this insanity. She's kinda been trying to marry me off for the past couple years. And Clara? Ugh. She's anyone's partner in crime where there's drama involved."

“Why do they care? Don’t these people have lives of their own?”

Ignoring the rude edge in his voice, I shake my head. “Don’t know for sure. Mom won’t admit it, but I think it’s because she won’t marry her boyfriend until I’m married first. Some weird parental sense of duty and protocol or something like that.” I turn back to the table after handing him the spaghetti bowl.

“My father died ten years ago. For the past five years, mom’s dated George. He wants to get married, but she says she can’t until I’m settled. In her mind, settled means married.”

I bite my lip, realizing how ridiculous this sounds. Thank God for family, right?

At least they’ve helped me get the crazy part down before I even get my first cat.

I walk back to the table for more dishes. He follows, too, but leans down and picks up my purse and then takes my arm.

Whoa. I’m too stunned to do anything besides let him lead me down the hall.

At the front door, he says, “I don’t mind getting rid of pricks like Preston. Happy to do that any time, but I’m not a damn stage prop. You’ll have to find some other sucker to play your fake boyfriend, Isabella. We’re done.”

Snapped back to reality, I grab my purse from his hand. “That’s not at all what I wanted! Not what I’m asking now. I just wanted you to know in case they contact you. A friendly warning. Nothing more.”

I’m almost choking. Appalled he thinks I was after that. After him since he’s shown his true colors.

I’m nobody’s prop either. Especially not for a man who’s treating me like a worn out doormat.

I tap the center of his chest with my fingertip. “Don’t flatter yourself, Eden. You’d be the last man I’d ask if I was looking for a boyfriend, fake or any other kind. Besides being arrogant, dating you would get me fired. Trust me, there’s no man on planet Earth worth fucking up my dream for. Not now. Not ever. I’ve worked too long and hard.”

His glare shoots right through me. “Are you done?”

He’s challenging me, which only pisses me off more. Big time.

“No.” I march around him. “I’m going to say goodbye to Natalie and then I’ll be overjoyed to get out of your face.”

His hand clamps down on my arm, but at the same instant, Natalie appears at the top of the stairway off the foyer.

“Are you leaving, Ms. Derby?”

Even before his fingers slip off my arm, I say, “Good timing! I was just coming up to say bye.”

“Oh, good, I want to show you what I’ve done with the charcoal. It’s amazing.” I hesitate and she frowns. “I won’t keep you long, it’ll only take a second?”

I don’t bother looking Brent’s way at all before moving toward the staircase. I walk up the steps and down the hallway with my chin up. His badass attitude doesn’t intimidate me.

I’ve seen how this little girl’s smile transforms him.

The space on the second floor reminds me just how big the house is. It’s nice, too. Newly remodeled from the looks of things, and upon walking into Natalie’s bedroom, I have to pause long enough to catch my breath.

It’s not only huge, it’s like a child’s dream room. The four-poster bed is up on a platform, topped with a frilly pink canopy, and besides the massive white furniture, complete with mirrored dressing table and shelves full of toys, there’s a huge side room. Her easel is set up there, where evening light shines in through several big windows. A reading nook takes up one corner, complete with a padded window seat, lined with pink and white pillows galore. Another corner has a desk, with more shelves, this time full of books, and a computer with a screen bigger than most television sets.

“I shaded the dog with the charcoal,” she says, standing on the other side of the wooden easel. “Come see!”

The white carpet feels so plush it’s like walking on air. I cross the room to the easel. Once again, my breath stalls. “That’s outstanding.” It’s all I can say.

The dog looks so real, I can’t help but touch the paper. “Truly amazing, Natalie. You’re a natural.”

“Thank you.” She glances towards the doorway. “Come see, Daddy.”

I step aside as he crosses the room, fighting to ignore the tension.

“That’s fantastic, baby girl,” he says.

My jaw drops. “Just fantastic? It’s utterly amazing. Out of this universe.”

Anger flashes in his eyes. “Yes, it is, and you’re leaving.” He grasps my arm, whispering under his breath. “Say goodbye.”

His grip is harsh yet gentle. I can't blame him, I suppose. I crossed a proverbial line, downplaying the praise for his daughter, and even I realize it. "Goodbye, Natalie! See you next class."

She steps forward and wraps her arms around my waist. "I love, love, *love* the supplies. Thanks again, Ms. Derby, and for having supper with us."

He lays a hand on Natalie's shoulder. "Ms. Derby has to leave now, baby girl, and you need to get ready for bed."

Natalie releases me and he gives my arm a hard tug.

By the time we reach the staircase, I manage to break his hold. Increasing the speed of my departure, I hurry down the steps.

"Goodbye, Ms. Derby."

I ignore him, pulling the door shut behind me hard.

In my car, I consider taking a moment to collect myself, but that'll only piss me off more. I need to get away from this place.

What an arrogant asshole. He's the last man I'd ever consider dating. Right up there with Preston.

I back out of the driveway and head up the street, still fuming.

When my cell phone rings, I consider ignoring it, but can't. Plucking it from the outside pocket of my purse, I hit the answer button and then the icon for speaker.

"Hello, dear!"

"Hey, mom," I answer.

"How was your evening with your new man friend?"

"How wha –"

"Clara said she saw your car at his house."

I should've known. Clara has nothing better to do some nights than go on her drives around town. I guess tonight she decided to drop by the place listed on Brent's business registry. "He's *not* my man friend, mom. He's the father of one of my students."

"Well, I can't wait to meet him, whatever he is. I'm so happy for you. This is a big step, Isabella."

My sanity is the price of mom's happiness, and it's not something I can deal with right now. "I'll call you back, I can't shift gears and drive at the same time." Without waiting for a response, I hit the end call button.

Hitting the gas, I speed up and change gears, taking some frustration out on the curves leading out of the development faster than I should, but I need this.

I need to be in control of something.

Have power over a road going somewhere I can actually comprehend.

For a few sweet moments, I have it. Control. Until the flashing red lights in the rear-view mirror appear and a siren wails.

“Fuck!”

BLANK CHECK (BRENT)

I don't think I've ever counted the days between one Tuesday to the next like I have the past week. Yesterday, when I picked up Natalie, I had to fight the desire to walk down the opposite hallway to see Blue.

It's art night again. That simple fact makes every hour seem twice as long.

Today's cleanup job doesn't help. It's for law enforcement.

Not a crime scene, but a body nonetheless. An old man who'd lived alone and died. His body was stuck in the house for a week before someone called it in. The stifling heat is sickening, and the smell, well, respirators can only do so much. The coroner had it worse when he turned down our offer to let him borrow one.

Everybody's glad we'll be done within the hour.

My phone vibrates in my pocket. I wave at Juan as I pull off a glove to take the call. I told him I was waiting to hear about the asbestos job we'd finished last week. Convinced this is it, the nod that the job passed inspection, I step outside and yank off my mask.

I swipe the answer icon and take a breath of fresh air while pressing the phone to my ear. "Brent Eden."

"Hello, Brent. It's Clara. Clara Derby?" Like I don't remember. "I met you last week with Izzy."

"Izzy?" It takes a second before it hits like a ton of bricks.

"Isabella Derby! My lovely cousin."

Blue? Concern instantly grips me. "Has something happened —"

"No, no, nothing's happened. Izzy's fine. Or will be once she stops beating herself up for getting that speeding ticket after leaving your house the other night."

I shouldn't smile, but can't help it.

Blue was hopping mad when she left the house.

Sick man that I am, I was more frustrated than I'd been for sometime. And turned on.

She's had my blood lit neon red since meeting her, true. But the way her eyes sparked when she got all huffy, shit, let's just say there's something damn sexy about a woman who's all riled up.

"That's understandable, though," Clara continues, "considering how worried Izzy is about her mother. A serious diagnosis does that. Listen, I just want you to know how happy we all are that she's found someone. I'm sure you get it, being a father yourself? A parent's greatest desire is to see their kids happy, and when our days become short, that's even more critical."

She pauses. Sighs. "Oh, goodness, I'm rambling. *Please* don't tell Izzy I just told you everything. She'd be upset. Anywho, I just wanted you to know how much Aunt Cleo wants to meet you. The whole family does, really."

My mind spins in circles. Diagnosis? Shortened days? What the fuck?

Why hadn't Blue told me the truth? Then again, who wants to admit they're desperately looking for a boyfriend to appease their dying mother?

Blaming crazy family drama, that's a lot easier.

At least it explains why she went out with that twisted prick, Preston.

"Brent?"

"I'm here. Go ahead." I run a hand over my face, wondering what's coming next.

"Well, I just called because it might help if you tell Izzy getting a ticket can happen to anyone."

I may have been born at night, but it wasn't *last* night. Cousin Clara's calling for more than a damn speeding ticket.

Too bad I can't help her. If I hadn't already decided to stay away from Blue, as far as possible, I'd definitely draw the line at bait left by nosy cousins.

"You're right. Tickets can happen to anyone." I'm not leaving the door open. I turn around on the rickety old porch at the sound of a car pulling in and stiffen as it parks next to my truck.

Talk about timing. What the fuck is *he* doing here?

"Clara, thanks for calling." I cut her off.

Suddenly, this woman and her gumption, trying to orchestrate more trouble with Blue, is the least of my problems. This is a mess, but it's not pure evil. Not like the demon in front of me.

Tucking the phone in my pocket, I cross the concrete and then the hard packed dirt of the neglected front yard, never taking my eyes off Bastard Phil as he climbs out of his car.

I round his front bumper, fighting the urge to kick it in. "I told you once, jackass. Remember? Are you out of your mind or are you just fucking stupid?"

"I saw the deputies leave." Phil smiles. "Think what could happen to your reputation if they knew you're in with The Pearls."

"I'm *not* in with you assholes," I growl. That's all I say because I know the worst thing I can do is show any vulnerability.

Every Black Pearls member thinks he's God. They believe they're so powerful the law means nothing. The only thing they understand is money, and they don't care who gets hurt while they're busy collecting it.

"Go the fuck home. We're not in business. No goddamn deals." I cast an eye over his customary black jeans and t-shirt, almost like a uniform. and his fuzzy black chin strip.

"We know, Eden," he sneers. "You aren't sloppy like little Davey."

My teeth clench at the mention of my brother.

"Big brother couldn't save him. That must still keep you up at night. Knowing how he –"

I snap, grab him by the front of the shirt, and slam his back up against my truck. "I've told you before, you sonofabitch. Stay the hell away from me."

"I will, with pleasure, just as soon as you pay Davey's debts. The ones Davey swore up and down big brother would pay."

Sadist bastards. All of them.

This is his latest ploy. Refusing to take his bait is getting harder and harder. I want to pinch my eyes shut so the furious headache settling into my temples stops, but I don't dare take my eyes off this asshole.

Christ. The idea that Davey's last breaths were spent asking for me, begging for me to help him, hits hard every time I think about it.

That's what big brothers do. They get little brothers out of scraps, big and small, and sometimes lethal.

Knowing I couldn't that night guts me with a dull knife.

But I will.

Someday.

Soon.

I yank him forward and throw him toward his car. "Get the fuck out of here! Last warning."

He brushes the front of his shirt like my fingerprints left dust on him. "Can't do that. Not till we make a little deal. Then I'll go away."

The desire to ring the bastard's neck makes my hands itch so hard I curl them into fists. "I'm *not* making any fucking deals with you."

"Aw, you sound so sure, Eden. Won't take much. Not for a smart, well connected businessman like you. And, since I'm such a standup guy, I'm willing to negotiate. A hundred grand of cash laundered through one of your hazmat jobs. Easy. Shit, or maybe you'd be more interested in a shipping arrangement? You've got the wheels. Least a dozen cube trucks that can haul anything without causing a single deputy to blink an eye." Phil winks. "Ain't I right?"

"Fuck. You."

He lets out a glib chuckle. "Shame the Grizzlies have all gone limp. Too damn interested in their kosher businesses these days. Your old Grizz buddies could've helped you make this go quick and smooth." He nods his head towards my truck. "I've seen the patch on the inside of your jacket. The little one you hide behind all the army crap on the front. You were a Grizz in your younger days. Ain't I right again, *Monk*?"

My teeth clench together when he says that name. Some of my best friends are from the days I was a full patch member of the Grizzlies MC. The motorcycle club still operates up and down the West Coast, based out of Redding.

They went through a lot of turmoil cleaning up their act. I saw the writing on the wall and quit before there was no getting out.

Still, once a member, always a member. Especially with good men like Blackjack, their national Prez, in charge of things now.

I haven't tried to erase everything from that part of my life, and never will.

Bastard Phil's also clueless. Doesn't know the Grizzlies haven't gone soft. They've matured and learned to operate on the quiet side since they ran the cartel back over the border. They gave up their drugs and gun running for

gambling, bars, and peep shows to keep the money flowing.

I turn to walk away. “Get the fuck out of here!”

“Come on, Eden, not so fast! I’d think you’d be interested in making a deal. Fuck, I was all ready to sit down and discuss one the other night. Then I saw you had company.” The bastard lets out a low whistle. “Lucky man! Real shame that cute little blonde with the blue shit in her hair had to go and get herself a ticket, too. Saw her practically on the verge of tears while Dawson had her pulled over, writing it up.”

How the hell does he know that? My spine quivers. These assholes usually make themselves scarce when there’s a squad car around, especially a police captain I’ve known for years. I force myself not to turn around and grab him by his throat until his eyes bug out of his head.

“That’s a pretty sweet Mustang she drives. Car like that could break down any time.” He snaps his fingers. “Just like *that*. On a lonely stretch of road. These Arizona nights get dark quicker, and cold in a few more months. Poor little thing like that could yell and holler and plead, but no one would hear her stranded in the dark. No one.” He shows his teeth like a demented chimpanzee.

Enough.

I pivot and take a step, putting my face so close to his I can smell his filthy breath. “You must’ve been hit in the head with a fucking stupid stick.”

He blinks once. Using only my chest, I ram him against his car, snarling like a bear. “Threatening me is the last thing you want to do. Understand?”

His eyes bulge and his upper lip quivers.

Finally, it’s sinking in. And we’re not done yet.

I reach down and grab the knife out of the sheaf hanging on his side. Shoving the tip hard enough under his chin that the skin indents, I twist it. “Now, get the fuck out of here before I castrate you with your own blade.”

His Adam’s apple wobbles against my knuckles as he nods. I step back, giving him room to open the car door and climb in, all the while holding the knife in the air, clearly letting him know I have no intention of giving it back, and every intent to use it as promised.

Dirt and rocks ping the Buick’s underside as he hits reverse and guns away. I watch him back out of the driveway. As the tires squeal on pavement, a cold and ugly jolt hits my spine. The last thing – the very last thing – I need is for the Black Pearls to pull Blue into this nightmare.

I'm already worried sick for Nat. It's too fucking close to her, too near to me, and all thanks to an uncle she barely knew.

I throw the knife at the ground. The sharp blade penetrates the hard dirt deep enough to stand straight.

"Son-of-a-bitch!" The curse burns my throat.

Whether I like it or not, it's happening. Those bastards will rope anyone in for leverage, and they know I know it.

They also know I have a headstone to visit, and I'll *never* tolerate adding another. "Fuck!"

I grab the knife out of the ground and throw it in the bed of my pickup before heading back towards the house.

I spend most of the day wishing Davey had listened. Even though I know that's a moot point and a waste of energy, I wish to Heaven, Hell, and everything in between.



THE DARK THOUGHTS are still with me when I pull into the school lot to pick up Nat.

The bell has already rung and kids are flying out the door like the Hoover Dam just burst behind them.

Nat sees me and starts running down the steps. Despite the heaviness inside me, warmth wells in my chest. Seeing my daughter does wonders to lighten the storm.

She always has a smile on her face when she sees me, but it's bigger today. Brighter.

"Hey, sunshine," I say as she opens the door.

"Hi, Daddy!" She tosses her bag on the floor. "Finally. I thought the bell would *never* ring."

I wait until she's inside and has the door closed before asking, "Why's that?"

"Art class tonight! Don't tell me you forgot? I can't wait to show Ms. Derby my dog drawing. I know she'll love it. Oh, and supposedly we're trying landscapes tonight!"

If I could take a picture of her right now, I would. I don't know if I've ever seen her so happy. "Landscapes, huh? How'd you find out?"

"I saw Ms. Derby at recess. She let the cat out of the bag." She stretches the

seat belt around her waist and buckles. “Watercolors, Dad! I love watercolors.” A more serious expression crosses her face. “Hey, um, if it’s not too much...could we order pizza? Or maybe even eat out for supper?”

Her request is a rarity. “Sure, baby girl. What’s the hurry?”

“Well, I have to be back here by six thirty. I wanna squeeze some time in to Google watercolor paintings and techniques. I’ve already read up on it, but today, I’m doing it.”

“You’ll do great, Nat. You’re always prepared.”

If this girl inherited any of the slacker genes I had at her age, I’ve never seen a single hint.

I back out of the parking space and pull into the line of vehicles waiting to exit the lot. “You shouldn’t be so nervous over what you don’t know yet. Remember, part of this class is teaching *you* the techniques.”

“Oh, I know, and Ms. Derby will. She’s the best ever! But I like to skip ahead. Have a bit of insight beforehand.”

That’s my girl. An old soul. I think she was born with more knowledge than most eighteen-year-olds. And she has a never ending appetite for more.

I roll past a blue Mustang and have to work to pull my eyes off it. “All right. Which is it then? Pizza or eat out?”

“Pizza!” she says instantly. “I can research while it’s being delivered.”

This girl. Damn if it doesn’t make me smile.

Inching the truck forward while another car pulls onto the busy road, I flick the blinker. “Okay. What kind?”

She’s unzipping her backpack. “Surprise me.” Digging deep in her bag, she adds, “But no anchovies or sauerkraut, please.”

I cock my head. “Have I ever ordered a pizza with anchovies or sauerkraut?”

She’s still digging, now in a side pocket. “No, but only because I always remind you not to. I know you, Daddy. Someday you’ll give it a try just because I didn’t tell you not to.”

Little shit. I just might have to do that to her someday for fun.

There’s an opening in traffic, so I pull out. “What are you digging for?”

“A friendship bracelet. I can’t remember which pocket I put it in.”

Even though the term leaves little doubt what it is, I ask anyway. “Friendship bracelet?”

She huffs out a sigh. "It's like...a piece of jewelry one either gives or receives from a friend."

I grin at how she sounds like she's reading right out of Webster's biggest and oldest book. Hope also rises up inside me. "Where'd you get it?"

"We made them during pod today."

What she calls pod is a close second to what was called homeroom when I was in school. My heart also tugs slightly at the idea she's digging it out to give to me.

Damn. I'd be honored, of course, but I wish she'd give it to a real friend from school.

"Here!" She holds up a few pieces of jute twine braided together and decorated with colorful beads.

"That's pretty." I'm rather indifferent to the style, actually, but do my best to support her in everything. "You did quality work."

"I know. I'm quite proud of how evenly I was able to space the beads." She tucks it in her pants pocket. "I want to remember to take it with me tonight."

"Tonight?"

"So I can give it to Ms. Derby, of course." She does a little pout with her lips like she can't believe I didn't know.

Shit.

My heart sinks. I take a deep breath, carefully choosing my words. "Ms. Derby? Wouldn't you rather give it to a friend from school? Someone your age?"

"Ms. Derby *is* from school." She's looking straight ahead, out the windshield. "And I don't really have any friends my age."

Right. I look at her softly, hoping I haven't kicked up too much crap she'd rather not touch.

Still, this issue keeps bothering me more lately. "It's your bracelet to trade with whoever, Nat. Just curious. You must talk with some of the kids at school? Visit with some more than others?"

"I talk with plenty of kids at school, yeah. But it doesn't mean they're friends." She gives me one of her Doctor Know-It-All looks. "Just like you talk to a lot of people who aren't exactly friends."

I continue trying to be diplomatic. "Nat, Ms. Derby's your teacher. That's all I'm saying. I'm not sure what she'll think."

“I thought about that,” she says seriously. “But technically, she’s not *my* teacher. Not for the day classes. And she’s only filling in for Mrs. Wayne for eight weeks because Mrs. Wayne’s son, Forrest, got in trouble this summer. Guess he was court ordered to do community service. Mrs. Wayne has to drive him to his assignments every Tuesday night because Mr. Wayne, besides being the chemistry teacher, is the JV football coach and they play on Tuesdays.” She shakes her head while continuing, “Us Arizonians love our football! Lord knows Mr. Wayne couldn’t drive Forrest around.”

Her gossip makes me smile. I knew Blue was only filling in, but hadn’t heard the particulars. “Juicy. How’d you find all that out?”

“I just told you, I talk to a lot of people at school.” She leans back and crosses her arms. “Which brings up another subject.”

Almost afraid to ask, I glance her way. “What’s that?”

“How would you feel about hiring Ms. Derby to privately tutor me? After she’s done subbing, I mean. She’s way better than Mrs. Wayne. I’d learn so much more, so much faster, with private lessons.”

“I’ve already paid for the accelerated art class you’re taking.” I try not to bite my tongue.

I’m searching for excuses. It’s not the money, honestly, business is great.

It’s Blue. Having her in my house. With Nat.

Barely a stone’s throw away from teasing my dick seven ways from Sunday.

And a convenient target for Bastard Phil, if the evil prick doesn’t listen.

“I know. I don’t want to waste your money. I’ll do both.” She grins coyly. “I’m sure Ms. Derby wouldn’t charge like the academy does. You’d probably be saving a few pennies after Mrs. Wayne’s class ends.”

Fuck. I wish money was the real issue. Then it’d be a hard limit.

Knowing her, she’s too well aware it isn’t. Looking for some sort of a round-about answer, I say, “What about something else beyond Mrs. Wayne’s class? Something creative – music, vocals, guitar? You love country, baby girl. Bet you’d be damn good at it. All work and no play –”

“Art is my play, Dad. It keeps me from getting dull.” She shrugs. “Don’t stress. You don’t have to answer right now. Just think about it. I still have four more classes with Ms. Derby after tonight, so it’s not like there’s a crazy rush or anything.”

Maybe that’s the problem. It’s like I’m trapped in a slow moving train wreck.

I don't think I've ever had a person hurled at me from so many directions as Isabella Derby. Need time to process. Figure this crap out. Time to change the subject.

"So, where're we ordering pizza from? Any requests?"

She rolls her eyes. "We both know Mike's is the only place that makes the crust you like."

"But you like that other place better. The one with the cheesy-bacon breadsticks?"

"I don't want any breadsticks tonight. Too many carbs."

I shake my head, clenching my jaw. Why the hell is my ten year old daughter suddenly freaked about carbs? "You don't need to worry about carbs, baby girl. You're only ten and you're beautiful."

My gaze hardens. I wish she'd go on, let me know if somebody's making her self-conscious. So I can hunt them down and have a real fucking friendly heart-to-heart.

"I know. But...you're kinda getting around the age that you should be."

I snort, my anger drifting away. "You saying I'm getting old?"

"Nope, just aging." She smiles at me. "But don't worry. It happens."

I'm not worried about pushing past my mid-thirties or the carbs. I wish life was that dull.

My anxieties are tangled on mean looking assholes toting guns, up in my face, and a woman I like drawing naked far too much. Every sexy, spitfire shade of Blue knocks around in my brain during the rest of the drive home.



NAT OPENS her door after I park the truck. "Can we shoot for pizza around five thirty? That'll give us time to eat and get back to school."

"Perfect." I climb out and meet her on the step going into the house, wondering why she's waiting. "Anything else, Nat?"

"No." She wraps her arms around my waist. "Other than I love you."

My heart melts. I return her hug. "Love you, too, sweets."

She heads up to her room, and I go to my office, where I call in the pizza and then start working on the billing for this morning's cleanup. I remember a time, not so long ago, when a dead body was the worst part of the day.

Bastard Phil comes to mind, front and center. His threat against Blue. How

close I came to choking him lifeless, leaving him to rot beneath the scorching Arizona sun.

So does Davey, and the last time I'd seen him alive. I grit my teeth, hating it like hell.



Years Ago

“COME ON, big bro, one more game.” Davey taps the end of his cue stick on the edge of the table. “I’ll go easy on you this time.”

I laugh, chugging the last swallow of my beer. “You, go easy on me? I just won three out of five. I’m kicking your ass up, down, and sideways, brother.”

“One more will tie us up.” Davey loads coins in the slots in the corner, wiping sweat from his forehead while the mechanical reels spin. No luck. The dimples he’d been known for since birth appear in both cheeks. “Even Steven. Come on,” he turns back to me.

“We’ll never be Even Steven. We know how this ends.”

I mop the floor with my little brother. He gets pissed. Maybe he makes a scene if he’s knocked back too many drinks.

We both storm off pissed, brotherly anger eclipsing our personal woes. It’s such a predictable distraction we do it every week or two again.

“Quit wasting time. Let’s go, Monk. Even fucking Steven,” he insists while racking the balls, centering the black eight ball.

I cringe a little, hearing my old name from the Grizzlies. Those days are behind me.

“Not only even in pool. This time next week, our bank accounts will be squared up real nice.” He laughs. “Actually, mine will be bigger.”

That hits more than a nerve. My new hazmat company’s success annoys him.

I don’t know why. Ever since the time he was born, he’s been trying to out-do me. I’ve let him at times, little things, hoping it’d knock the chip off his shoulder. So far, it hasn’t.

Damn it, Davey. Life’s too short for these games.

“What’re you talking about? New photo gig?” I ask.

He shrugs and levels his cue stick on the white ball. “Not quite. My ship’s

about to come in, though. Just you wait.” He shoots. The colored balls smack together, scattering across the table.

Between my business and taking care of Natalie, I don’t have a lot of time for gossip.

Still, I’ve heard the whispers. Davey, hanging around a crew he shouldn’t. One that’s too damn close to the underground I left behind.

I eyeball my brother, an electric unease needling the back of my neck.

Just this morning, I’d gotten wind of it again, after asking our ma to watch Natalie, and before I called Davey to join me for beers tonight.

Since he finally touched the subject, I say, “What ship’s that? A jet-ski?”

He laughs, still plunking colored balls in pockets one after the other. “A yacht, bro.”

I wrap a hand around his pool stick, preventing him from shooting again. “And where are you getting this yacht?”

His signature grin appears. “Jealous? I figured you’d want in.”

“Fuck no.”

Anger snaps in his eyes. “You should be.”

“What the fuck are you thinking? The Black Pearls?” I don’t even know if it’s true, but I drop the name.

The nervous glance he shoots around the room tells me what I’ve heard aren’t rumors. *Shit.*

“Davey –”

“Don’t. Don’t even get your mouth running. *I know* what I’m doing, Brent.”

“Bullshit, you do. You can’t.”

He pulls his cue stick out of my hold. The look in his eyes makes me think it’s already up his ass. “You think you’re the only badass in this family? Only guy with friends in low places? The only one who gets to make scratch doing shit he really shouldn’t, and then go hiding behind the hero-in-uniform and father-of-the-year act? Sorry to tell you, you’re not.”

He’s been jealous of the Grizzlies for years. Again, for no reason.

For fuck’s sake, I gave it up, and I’m glad. I got out because I had a daughter to think about and it was damn good timing, too. If I hadn’t, I might be long dead from the club’s infighting, or maybe another casualty of their California war with the Mexican cartels.

I plant myself between him and the pool table. “Davey.”

“No. It’s your turn to listen: you aren’t the only one who deserves a good life. I’ve fought like hell for years just to have my piece, and now, it’s coming.”

Fuck his bad attitude.

It’s gotten out of hand lately. Almost like all his rage and jealousy and quiet venom has hit a perfect storm. I wish I knew why.

I love my little brother. I’m pretty sure he feels the same, but damn it.

Sometimes, I don’t know who he is anymore.

“If it’s really about money, come work for me. I’ve told you from the beginning we’d make a good team. There’s plenty of work. Plenty of money. Good, clean honest living.”

“I don’t want your table scraps.”

“No leftovers, Davey. I need the help. A partner.”

I’m digging my grave, offering Davey a stake in what I’ve built. Fucking up is in his blood. But I’ll do it in a heartbeat, without hesitation, if it reduces the chances of him winding up in a coffin.

He flashes a sarcastic snarl. “Oh. Yeah, sure. *My* help.”

Now, I’m pissed. “Dammit, David. What the fuck’s your problem? Talk to me!”

“Nothing.”

I know better, but I won’t get an answer tonight. Instead I go straight to the point. “Whether you believe it or not, I’m trying to help. You don’t know what you’re getting sucked into. The Black Pearls are the lowest of the low. There’s no easy out once they’ve roped you in. Back out now. While you still can.” Growling, I yank my checkbook out of my pocket and slam it on the pool table. “Whatever money you need, you’ve got it. Right here.”

I want to add a stipulation, that he has to guarantee he’s cut it off with the Black Pearls, before I give him a cent.

No, not yet. The contemplation in his eyes, the look that he’s seriously considering my offer, holds me back.

I hold my breath as he reaches for the checkbook, hoping it’s not too fucking late.

There’s always more money. It’s replaceable. Unlike flesh and blood.



Present

DISORIENTED BY THE PAST, it takes a moment before I realize the doorbell's ringing, echoing through the house. Pizza time.

Rubbing the tension out of the back of my neck, I stand, walking toward the hallway.

Nat runs down from her room while I'm paying the delivery guy. "I'll set the table," she says, walking past me.

Needing to leave this stupor, I nod. "Thanks, sweets."

She has plates and silverware on the table and is filling two glasses with milk when I carry the pizza into the kitchen.

"Yum! That smells good."

"Yeah," I agree, giving her a serious look. "Must be the anchovies."

"Very funny." Nat giggles, wrinkling her cherub nose.

We both sit and scoop slices straight out of the box.

She bites the tip off her piece before setting it on her plate. "I like it better when it's cut like this, in triangles, rather than squares, you know?"

I nod and finish chewing. "Unless it's a square pizza."

"The only square pizzas are those cheap ones Julia refuses to buy."

"They used to be round," I say. "Your Uncle Davey and I would have them as after school snacks. He'd have pepperoni and I'd have sausage. Those were the days."

Those days are gone.

"You each ate your own pizza?" She blinks in surprise.

The memory makes me chuckle as I take another slice of pizza. "Yeah. Some days it was two each. Growing boys."

"Jeez! Where'd you guys find the room?"

"I honestly don't know. But we did." A memory of my brother and I having friends over and raiding the kitchen flashes in my mind. "Teenagers can eat like a pack of piranhas. Just about anything, and still be hungry. We used to eat cookies as fast as Grandma baked them."

"Poor Grandma."

“Poor Grandpa, you mean. There were never any left for him.” I grin, remembering how pissed dad would get over having his sweet tooth denied.

We both laugh.

“If you’re talking peanut butter, nobody had a chance.” She knows my favorite cookies all too well. “How about Uncle Davey? What did he like?”

“Chocolate chip. He’d eat the batter before it was even baked sometimes.” My smile vanishes.

She laughs again, but then her eyes grow serious. “You’re missing him today, huh? I’m sorry, Daddy.”

I nod. “Yeah.”

“I miss him some days, what little I can recall. Then I remember what you told me. How missing him’s okay, and so is remembering how lucky we were to have our time with him.”

“I did say that, didn’t I?” Everything after Davey’s funeral is still a fucking wash in my brain.

“Right after he died.”

My throat tightens and I reach for my glass of milk. She does, too.

I’m trying to figure out what’s different today as I watch her empty her glass. Acting more grownup isn’t unusual, but right now she looks more grownup, too.

It’s got to be the hair. “What’s going on up there, Nat?” I ask, waving a finger around my own hairline.

“It’s called a messy bun.” She twists so I can see the back of her head, how her hair piles up and sticks out in all directions. “All the female artists online wear their hair like this. I thought I’d try it out. Do you like it?”

Can’t hide my frown. “Give it a few more years, baby girl. It’s too adult. Brush it out and put it back in a ponytail before we leave, please.”

“Aww, seriously?” she asks.

I nod. “You’re too young. Not joking.”

I’ll be the first to admit she’s spoiled. She’s my only child, and probably always will be, but even she knows the difference between being spoiled and misbehaving.

I’ve made that clear since she was little. Just as she knows the difference between discipline and punishment. If more adults and children understood

that, the world might not be such a dark, fucked up place.

She doesn't say anything more, and though the sadness on her face makes a knot form in my stomach, I remain silent. I hate disappointing her.

Not everything about being a parent is fun, or clean, or easy.

Too bad. I wouldn't trade it for the universe.

We finish eating, shifting gears to lighter subjects. I cleanup and load the dishwasher while she goes upstairs to get ready. By the time I'm done in the bathroom across the hall, she's back in the kitchen, near the door that leads to the garage, a neatly combed ponytail replacing the bun.

"Need me to carry anything?"

She holds up her sketchbook with one hand and the small backpack she uses for art class with the other. "Nope, I've got it."

"Did you put a bottle of water in your bag? It's been damn hot today and I don't want you getting dehydrated." I've lived in Arizona for ages, but the constant need to guzzle water never ends.

"Yeppers. I'm not gonna turn into a mummy."

I chuckle. "All right then, I'll get the door." I pat her head while reaching for the knob. "I like your hair this way. Thank you."

Her smile says 'no hard feelings.' "You're welcome. I like yours, too."

Considering it's cropped about as short as it can get, I just laugh.

It doesn't take long to get to the school, and because we're early, Blue is just climbing out of her car when I park next to it.

Natalie rolls down her window. "Ms. Derby! Can I walk inside with you?"

"Of course you can, Nat." She doesn't give me a second look.

Before I have the truck shut off, Natalie plants a quick kiss on my cheek. "See you later, Daddy."

The next second, she's out the door, stepping up the sidewalk beside Blue. Instinct has me grabbing the door handle, but watching the way they're chatting, and smiling at each other, has my hand slipping off it.

I've always known that someday, no matter how hard I try, I won't be everything my girl needs. There'll come a day when she needs a woman's guidance. Someone to learn from and model after.

I just never thought it'd be *this* woman. One who gets me between nail spitting mad and hard as goddamn granite.

They both have their bags slung over one shoulder, carrying their big sketchpads. If I'd let Nat keep the messy bun she'd liked so much, even that would be the same, except for the difference in coloring.

No wonder I had such a gut punch reaction. It reminds me too much of Blue, and with everything else going to hell, that's a distraction I don't need.

I keep watching. My breath lodges in my throat as Natalie digs in her pocket, pulling out the friendship bracelet.

I know what I'd told her about handing it off to a friend her own age, but a part of me silently prays Blue won't deny the gift.

Of course, she doesn't.

The air seeps out of me as she bends down and hugs Natalie, and then holds out her hand for Nat to tie the bracelet around her wrist. They exchange smiles, heading inside.

The class runs for two hours tonight. The past few weeks, I've done errands, coming back just long enough to spend a few minutes sketching Blue in the back of the room. I start the truck, but only for the air conditioning.

I pull the notebook out of the glovebox and flip to an empty page.

All on its own, my hand sketches out the scene I'd just witnessed. The two of them smiling like old friends.

The next two hours, I do little more than think. Mulling over Blue and her family issues. Brooding on what's happening with the Black Pearls. Tossing around what I have to do and how.

I shut off the truck and open the door, fully understanding the time has come to implement the plan I've put into place.

I can't wait forever. Can't let the Pearls chew another piece out of my family. Or a certain blue haired spitfire who's gotten closer than I ever should've let her.

Soon, it'll be high time to put an end to this fucking mess once and for all.

THRILL OF THE CHASE (IZZY)

I twist the new bead bracelet on my wrist as I walk around the room, examining the landscapes being created from the soft pastel watercolors.

Once again, I'm amazed by the talent of these kids, and also excited. Their futures are endless, if they don't get lost along the way.

It's a sad reality life happens for a lot of people, and the cost is dreams. But some of them will make it, I know. Some will go on to do great things. Some will be artists in their own way, whether that means working off easels or giving this world a brighter coat of polish.

My eyes wander across the room to Nat.

I probably shouldn't have accepted the bracelet, but nothing shy of an apocalypse would have stopped me. Not after she pulled it out of her pocket, a nervous smile on her face.

The hope in her familiar green eyes was heavy. So was the respect. I'm not used to being anybody's hero, but isn't that what I signed up for? To change lives? To make these kids live, bigger and better and more beautifully than I do.

I'd watched her briefly on the sidelines again today. She sat on a bench next to a landscaped saguaro cactus behind a fence, reading a book during recess today.

The empathy I'd had compounded ten times over.

This girl needs friends, and though I may not be the answer, I can help. *Have to help.*

I'd like to blame it all on her father, and his overprotectiveness, but that's hardly it. I can even empathize with him being a single parent.

That's never easy. I watched my own mom struggle after dad's sudden death. Not just financially, but physically and emotionally.

That doesn't mean I like Brent Eden any more than I did last week. He might be swoon-worthy, but he's also a colossal asshole.

A handsome, demanding, straight up imposing jackass.

Assuming I wanted him to keep playing my boyfriend, my fiancé. *Dick.*

I'd gone to his house to explain that was the last thing I wanted. Or needed, for that matter.

The soft ding coming from my desk tells me I forgot to turn off my phone. I normally wouldn't consider looking at it, but class is almost over. These kids are engrossed in their projects and don't need anything from me right now. They're busy putting their unique twists on the simple landscape I'd painted last night as an example.

Sitting down, I pull the phone out of my bag and swipe the screen. After turning the volume all the way down, I click on the text icon.

Mother. Ugh.

We're still on for the zoo this weekend, aren't we? I'm so looking forward to it, Isabella. One o'clock sharp! Meet you at the front gate.

I nibble my cheek, scrolling through about a billion animal emojis stacked in a messy line after the first text.

Oh yeah! And please PLEASE ask your new man friend and his little girl to join us. I'm dying to meet them.

Nope.

I push the phone to the edge of the desk, having no intention of responding, and press a hand to my forehead. I try like hell to stop Brent's face from forming.

Epic fail. I'm daydreaming muscle, ink, and emerald green a second later. Red-faced as ever.

This has gotten out of hand.

No matter what I say, Clara twists it around. Tells mom what a happy couple we are, and how she just absolutely knows he's *the one* for me.

How she's never seen me this happy.

How it's just a matter of time until wedding bells are ring-a-ding-dinging.

Actually, I think that's the new bead bracelet clicking softly on my wrist as I fight the urge to strangle her.

Brent would be beyond pissed if he discovers how far along my mother

believes our 'romance' has become.

The swoosh of a door opening has me glancing up. Sure enough, it's him.

Mr. Eden, in all six foot something of his paradise flesh.

I was hoping he'd stay in his truck for once.

Maybe let me walk Natalie outside later. Without ever having to interact with him.

Without having to feel stripped bare by his piercing looks.

Silly idea.

We still don't have to interact, though. There's nothing that says I have to.

Except my eyes won't behave. Try as I might, I can't pull them off him.

His arms are like tree trunks. His chest could hold the world. His beard could send my body places I don't dare imagine.

Hate, frustration, and shame are no match for this man's insane gravity.

Worse, he's walking forward. Straight to my desk. Never breaking the gaze that loudly, boldly tells me he'd like me up against the nearest wall.

Crap!

My heart thuds somewhere near my chin. My toes curl, tingling. So do my knees, my thighs, my –

No, no, and no. Time to focus. Keep it together.

I wish. Hell, even my hands, which I squeeze together, burn. His eyes are so flipping mesmerizing. Penetrating.

Like he can see straight into my head and know, without a doubt, I've been thinking about him. Nonstop.

Losing my mind. For days. Weeks.

Without saying a word, he slaps a hand on the desk and pushes a slip of paper towards me.

"What –"

He turns crisply before I can get out a single word, so I reach for the paper and jump to my feet. A total mistake because my Jell-O knees make my legs buckle.

I try to keep myself from falling by grabbing the edge of the desk, and manage to knock over the tin can pencil holder, which topples and hits the floor with all the grace of a cannonball.

So does the stapler, tape dispenser, and my cellphone.

Bravo, Ms. Derby. Every kid in this academy will be laughing behind your back tomorrow, guaranteed.

Sighing and slightly frantic, I scramble around the desk and drop to my knees to pick everything up, ignoring the baffled looks several students throw my way.

He's bent down, too. His royal highness. Already has the can upright, pencils clattering back inside as he drops them in one-by-one. "Were you born clumsy? Or is it just that kind of day?"

His husky whisper sends heat through my veins, my cheeks, and another throbbing part of me I won't acknowledge. Which just pisses me off more than his tactless question.

"No!" I hiss.

"Could have fooled me." He shrugs. Like nothing happened.

Bastard.

I grab the pencil holder in one hand and the stapler in the other, lowering my voice to a mouse whisper. "Were you born an asshole? Or is it just *that* kind of day?"

"Some say I was." He's smirking now. Awesome.

"Well, they're absolutely right." I put the can and stapler neatly on the desk. I'll check it over later to see if anything's broken or missing before Mrs. Wayne returns.

He replaces the tape dispenser and my phone, and with a wink that nearly knocks me back down on my knees, turns and walks to the back of the room.

I stand there, trying to disguise just how hard my legs are wobbling. My eyes flick to the clock.

At least tonight's torture is almost over. Shame to think it started so well.

Taking a deep breath, I say, "Ten more minutes, everybody."

Forcing myself not to look at him, I sit back down. In the chaos, the slip of paper had gotten flipped over.

It's a number. A phone number. I glance up.

He gives a single head nod.

I shake my head, having no idea what he expects.

Every second we're in the same room is pure agony. Now, he wants to do it over the phone, too?

"Ms. Derby, can you come here please?"

I stand, making my way over to Ester, and answer her question about dry-blending two colors.

Then I address the class. "Your pictures need a few minutes to dry before you take them off your easels. Does anyone have any last minute questions that weren't covered earlier, or came up while you were painting?"

Tad asks about brush sizes. As soon as I answer him, Rosa wants to know about canvas versus paper. That leads to a conversation lasting until it's time to leave.

"Great job, guys and gals! I'll pass out feedback for each of you about the dog drawings you handed in soon. If you have watercolors at home, you can certainly continue working on your landscapes. Bring them by next week and I'll review them."

"What medium will we be using next time?"

I smile at Natalie, knowing she'll like the answer to her question. "Oil pastels."

A soft mumble of excitement ripples through the room as the students collect their things and dart for the door.

"Daddy, can we wait and walk Ms. Derby to her car?"

I freeze for a millisecond, then shake my head. "That's not necessary, Natalie, but thank you."

"Sure we can, baby girl." Brent's voice is as soft as it is defiant.

Somebody shoot me.

There are still a few students filing out of the room, so I'm careful. Reserved.

Well aware what could very easily slip out of my mouth. Like telling him there's a special underground place to go, with plenty of fire and pitchforks.

I ignore Brent walking up behind me and head for my desk. The piece of paper is there and I snatch it up. Whatever he's playing at won't work with me.

Spinning around, I hold the note in the air. "Did your phone number change from the one on file with the school?"

I might be imagining things or having a moment of wishful thinking, but the

skin behind his soft scruff seems to turn slightly red.

“No.” He steps forward. Closer.

“You want this one added to her file as an emergency number then? I’ll need a name.”

A narrowed glare says he’s not impressed. “That’s my cell.”

“Okay. Noted.”

He leans in to whisper-growl. “The school already has that number. It’s not for them. I want *you* to have it, Blue.”

Holy hell. How can one sentence be so tantalizing and maddening all at once?

I circle around my desk and drop the paper in the trash can. “Sorry. Already have all I’ll need on my class roster.”

He’s right behind me and plucks it out. Glancing over his shoulder at Natalie filling her backpack, he whispers, “Come on. I want you to have it personally.”

A jolt of heat shoots through me that isn’t entirely anger, but I pretend it is and quietly snap, “Personally, I don’t need it.”

“You might.”

“Nah.” Shaking my head, I slide the attendance sheets, my classroom notes, and my phone into my bag. “We’re good.”

“What if you breakdown on the side of the road or something?”

I zip my bag shut, tilting my head. Jesus. Why does he look like the building just started on fire behind me?

“I have road-side assistance for that like a normal person.”

“Bull. What if they don’t respond, Blue?”

Flipping the bag’s strap over my shoulder, I glance over to make sure Natalie stays preoccupied.

Then I shift slightly to step around him. “I sure as hell won’t call you, Brent.”

He grabs my arm. “This isn’t a game. You need help, you’ll call.”

Although he’s taller, broader, and probably three times stronger than Preston, he doesn’t unnerve me. The badass persona he wears is only for show. I’ve seen him melt on sight in front of his daughter.

That may not mean a lot to some, but, oddly, it tells me I have nothing to fear. With him, I know I’ll get the teddy bear. Not the grizzly.

“No. I’m a grown woman.” I lock eyes with him, a fierce smile pulling at my lips. “Seriously, what’s this all about? You sound *ridiculous*. Like you’re my chaperone, or something.”

“Are you two ready?”

Crap. We both turn to Nat, who’s standing near her chair with a grin stretching ear-to-ear.

It’s not too late. I could refuse to walk out with them, but that would hurt her far more than him. She doesn’t deserve that. “Coming, Natalie. I just have to get my sketchpad.”

“I’ll get it,” Brent says. His voice is ice.

He still has a hold of my arm. I stiffen every muscle I can, so ready to shake him off.

Sure, I’m a lot weaker. He could drag me across the room without breaking a sweat if he chose, but I want him to know I’m not into these hands. Not like this.

Not even if I’ve imagined them doing devilish things to my body.

With a final glance I can’t quite read, he lets go, walking around the desk to collect my sketchpad off the easel.

I walk toward Natalie. “Sooo, how’d you like painting with watercolors?”

“Loved it!” she answers brightly. “I have some at home, but I was never sure how to get it right. Now that I know how to use them, I have a dozen things floating around in my head just begging to be painted.”

“Dozens? Busy girl!” I stay next to her and we start for the door. “Tell me a few of your ideas.”

“An Arizona sunset, for one.” She sighs heavily. “For all we put up with here, the views are incredible. You’ve seen our house? Well, I can see the desert out the windows for miles some nights. Camelback mountain in the other direction, too. So pretty. I just want to keep it forever.” Her face reddens. “That sounds silly, I guess. Right?”

“Not at all,” I assure her. I mean it, too. “Spoken like a true artist.”

She beams as we walk out the door. Big Daddy’s right behind us, making my spine quiver. Regardless, I keep going. “You did a wonderful job on your landscape tonight. I know you’ll paint a spectacular sunset.”

She and I chat all the way down the hall, pausing only long enough to bid Oscar goodnight as we exit the building. He’s a lot more active tonight,

redeeming himself after the Preston intruder incident.

At my car, I unlock the driver's door, toss my bag in, and turn to take my sketchpad from him.

He hits a button, unlocking his truck, and then another to start it. "Go climb in, baby girl. Need one more word with Ms. Derby."

Great. Because I have two very choice words for him: fuck off.

Natalie gives me a quick hug and then spins around to open the pickup door. I hold out my hand, but he keeps the pad at his side.

He lays a hand on the hood of my car. "How often do you have this thing serviced?"

Taken aback, I shake my head. "I know how to handle my car. Why?"

"It's old. Could breakdown any time."

He sounds like Clara, and mother. I'm fuming.

"Surely, they pay you enough that you can afford a new one?"

What next? Is he going to ask me what I'm wearing to bed?

I reach over the open car door separating us to grab my pad. "I'm fine. Don't want or need a newer one, thank you very much. Are we done?"

For the record, I don't make enough, but he doesn't need to hear it.

He steps back, just out of my reach. "I could get you a good deal on one over at Rooster's. I've bought a lot of vehicles there. They're good. Affordable. Solid warranties. Stand behind everything they sell."

He's acting so sincere, so genuine, that my anger slowly melts away.

Now, I'm just confused. If he isn't trying to get under my skin or into my pants, what's going on?

"Thanks. I'll keep that in mind when the time comes for a different car." I pat the top of the car door. "This one needs to last a bit longer though. And I really need to get going."

Mainly because I could go soft on his nosy ass, and that can't happen.

He steps around the door, and me, laying the sketchpad in my back seat.

There's a tingle in the air and up my spine. My only escape is to climb in the car and shut the door.

Thank God and all that's Holy, the engine starts right away. Last summer, it tested me by not engaging on the first try. Or the second. I'll have to get that

looked at.

He's still standing there. I wave, push in the clutch and shift into reverse.

Though a part of me wants to shift through the gears as fast as possible, I don't. I've learned my lesson there. Driving fast doesn't make for an easier escape, and it costs money if something goes wrong. Captain Dawson had no mercy when the time came to dole out my ticket.

There's always traffic, and I have to wait for an opening to pull out of the parking lot. I force myself not to check my mirror, to see if he made it onto the road as well.

It's pitch black by the time I get off the highway and onto the roads leading into Tempe, and then to my building. Even though the headlights behind me aren't all the same, there's no way to tell if one set is from his truck or not.

A sense of disappointment washes over me. Which is silly.

No, *beyond silly*.

It's fucking stupid.

I'm being stupid.

He's the father of one of my students. Having any sort of feelings towards him would be the fastest route to getting fired. And if I want to find out how fast I can pulverize my own heart, a reckless night with Eden is the swiftest way to do it.

I pull into the apartment complex, driving around the first building to the back, where my assigned parking spot sits next to the dumpsters. I never know what my car will smell like in the morning. Whoever invented air fresheners needs a medal.

There's a small man made hill with palm trees around it on the other side of the garbage, and a well-used street at the top of it. I swear people toss stuff out as they drive by, trying to hit the dumpsters, but never do.

When I first moved in, I picked up the trash daily. Now, after discovering that was being taken advantage of, I leave it to the maintenance crew.

Unless something lands on my car, which has happened a time or two.

With my bag over one shoulder, I open the door and climb out. As I'm reaching in to grab the sketchpad, I get the sense I'm being watched. I take it and turn around.

Third floor up the adjacent building, I spy someone on the balcony.

"Good evening, Mrs. Butler," I say with a wave.

She waves back from her chair next to the metal railing. “Hello, dear. How was your day?”

“Good. How was yours?”

“Oh, I’m a bit under the weather.” A glowing red tip moves in the darkness, and she lets out a cough. Tobacco smoke rolls up my nose. “It’s hard as blazes to breathe in this heat.”

I think the two packs she works through each day have more to do with that.

“It’ll be October soon,” I say hopefully. “And cooler!”

“That’ll be nice.”

I wave again. “Have a nice night.”

“You, too, dear.”

At the door, I use the fob on my key chain to let me in, and then climb the three flights of stairs. The air is stifling hot. It’s an old building, prone to retaining the daytime heat.

I shift the keychain in my hand, positioning the apartment key, anxious to unlock the door as quickly as possible and step into my air-conditioned cave.

The rush of cool air feels heavenly. I enter, close the door behind me, and embrace the sweet relief.

Letting out a long sigh, I turn on the light, dropping the keys in the dish on the counter and kick off my shoes. “Home sweet home.”

I laugh at my own words. It’s not much.

A tiny kitchen, separated from the living room, with a counter that’s barely big enough for three appliances. One of the doors off the living room leads to the bathroom, and the other, my one and only bedroom.

I can’t help but think about Brent’s spacious house as I step forward.

Another sigh escapes. This one, longing.

“Make it a goal, Izzy. Not just a dream.” I smile. Those words hold weight.

I have no idea when mom first said them to me. Sometime in the chaos after 9/11, and war, and dad dying, probably. They’ve become my mantra ever since.

As annoying as she is, like any good mother, she’s left some golden nuggets.

I drop my bag and sketchpad on the coffee table, then plop down on the couch. Someday, I’ll have a house like Brent does. All my own. Without any

worries about a subversive, sexy, brooding beast inside.

My eyes settle on the sketchpad and the piece of paper taped to the front of it.

Wait. That wasn't there before...was it?

I carefully remove it, wrinkling my nose.

His phone number. For personal reasons.

Asshole. Sneak. He only let me think I'd won a small skirmish.

I don't even know why I'm smiling. If I do, I definitely don't want to admit it.

I let it drop and grab my phone, finally finding the courage to respond to mom's text.

Yes, of course I'll be at the zoo this weekend.

And yes, Brent and Natalie will be joining us. I barely stop myself from typing it out.

"And come Monday, you'll be fired," I tell myself.

Disgusted, I wad the paper into a ball and toss it on the table.

The only thing worse than bad ideas is making them reality.

SURPRISE, SURPRISE (BRENT)

The past few days have left me feeling lower than that fuck boy, Preston.
Stalking a woman. For her own good. To protect her.

With my daughter in the truck next to me.

Christ. How did I get here again?

Davey's jealousy. Bastard Phil's threats. A thousand heartaches.

They all cascade in my mind so fast, so fierce, it's hard to even focus on the day-to-day.

"Aren't these the same buildings we drove past last night?" Natalie asks, gesturing out the passenger window.

"Yeah," I admit. "Good eye. I'm just checking to see if my crew got started over here today."

It's a white lie. We don't have a job anywhere near Blue's apartment, but I can't stop myself from driving past her place once a day. Every evening. Making sure her Mustang stays where it should be, parked out back.

"Why don't you just call and ask them?" Nat flashes me a confused glance.

Sometimes, I wish she was just a little less whip smart. A tiny bit less observant.

"No need. Just wanted to check with my eyes since it's on our way home."

She yawns. "I hope we don't have any shopping tomorrow night, I've barely had time to paint."

Nat's sick of the busy week and I can't blame her.

I've made up excuses every afternoon when I pick her up from school.

New tires for the truck. New shoes for her. Haircuts for both of us at a new

salon. Ice cream twice, and she's bored of it.

Whatever takes us out near Tempe.

I have to make sure she's home, safe and sound, by nightfall.

So far, Bastard Phil hasn't shown up again. He's out there, though. Watching her.

I know it.

I know this can't keep happening either. Dragging Nat around every night until damned near seven or eight o'clock. "Well, I have a surprise for you tomorrow."

"What?"

"Can't tell you."

"Daddy! Why not? You know I hate secrets."

Because I'm not sure how I'm going to pull it off. Since I can't tell her that, I say the obvious, "Because then it won't be a surprise. And I won't get to mess with your pretty little brain."

She bursts out laughing, stomping her shoes softly on the mat under them. "You're so bad sometimes."

I catch a glimpse of Blue's car, next to the dumpsters at the bottom of the hill. Satisfied and relieved, I push my foot a little harder against the gas pedal. "Ready to head home?"

"More than ready," Natalie says, covering another yawn.

Blue hasn't called. Of course not.

I should've swallowed my pride. Apologized for what I'd said about not being a prop. Rather than just giving her my number, I should've said I'd stand in anytime as her fake boyfriend.

It wouldn't have been hard. My way of thanking her for being so good to Natalie.

There's no denying the last part. Every day, Natalie comes home with another Ms. Derby tale.

Seeing her in the hallway or at recess or an assembly. Chatting about Vincent van Gogh and Salvador Dali. Blue gave her some paint brushes, too, which Nat has barely had a chance to use.

Damn. I'm so close to taking care of the Black Pearls, too.

Just need a little more time to get everything in place. I sure as hell don't need this extra hitch. Of them threatening to hurt Blue.

Well, too fucking bad. I won't let them.

Also don't have time for this cat and mouse shit.

"Don't think I'll forget the surprise," Nat says, chin up, folding her little arms.

Mind made up, I tell her. "Tomorrow morning, baby girl. Promise."

I just hope I can convince Blue to go along with it.



THE SUN ISN'T UP YET when Natalie throws open my bedroom door. "Rise and shine, it's surprise time!"

I laugh and throw a pillow at her. She's got all the zest for life I used to have plus Davey's non-stop energy.

She dodges swiftly and pounces on the foot of the bed like an overgrown cat. "Where, Daddy? Let's see it!"

Her eyes are shining so bright they almost glow in the early light of dawn peeking through the window.

Enjoying her excitement, I yawn and stretch. "Nat, you know the rules: Daddy doesn't talk before coffee."

"Yeahhh, and it's a total lie because you *just* talked. Or spoke. You just spoke, I mean!"

I jump up, grab her, tickling her sides. "Which is it, little lady? Talked or spoke?"

She laughs, squirming to the edge of the bed. "Either or. Doesn't matter! You're just distracting me. What's my surprise?"

I climb out of bed and stretch again, taking my time to walk towards my bathroom.

"Dad!" She lets out a groan. "You're killing me here."

I walk into the bathroom, but spin around before closing the door. "We're going to the zoo today."

"We're – really?!"

"Yes, really." I close the door as her squeals fill the house.

A short time later, showered and dressed, the smell of coffee brewing fills the air as I walk into the kitchen. Natalie's at the island, eating a bowl of cereal.

There's a second bowl, the box of cereal, and a gallon of milk sitting in front of another stool.

I wink at her as I collect a cup and fill it with coffee. Dark, dense, and bold enough to strip paint. Just how I like it.

She sets down her spoon, eyeing me critically as I lean back against the counter to take a drink off my cup. "So, what's up?"

"What's up with what?" I ask.

She crosses her arms. "Well, something, obviously. You don't even like the zoo."

I knew she'd question it. She's smart, and I've never hidden my distaste for gawking at caged animals. "No, I don't. But you do."

"And we've already had our annual visit. July, remember?"

How could I forget? The pavement was hotter than the surface of the sun.

Annual is right, too. Or close enough. I take her once or twice a year because she likes critter watching. I snag the first excuse that crosses my mind. "Figure I owe you, Nat. For being so good about tagging along while I looked for truck tires this week."

"Which you *still* haven't bought."

Because I don't need them. I shrug. "I'll have to order some. No one has the right set. If we ever go up to Flagstaff or Utah for camping later this year, we'll need them for winter."

"Still doesn't explain the sudden zoo trip." She shakes her head. "You'd rather go anywhere else."

I cross the room and ruffle her hair. "Well, kiddo, sometimes we all have to do things we don't want to do. Compromise." I'm not referring to the zoo.

This mess with the Black Pearls is something I'd rather not have to contend with, but don't have a choice. There's also no negotiating my way out of it.

She's frowning when she looks up at me. "Like not being able to wear a messy bun, you mean?"

I'd forgotten about the hair incident, but since she brought it up, I give her a hug. "You were really good about that, peanut. Sometimes I don't give you enough credit for how well-behaved you are. But I do appreciate it."

Her smile brightens as she hugs me hard. "For you, anything."

I kiss the top of her head and let her go. Taking another sip of coffee, I say,

“How about I let you bring a friend with us to the zoo?” Before she can say she doesn’t have any friends, I add, “That friendship bracelet you made. Whoever you gave it to, you can bring them along.”

She goes stock-still and glances around the room, looking everywhere but me. “Whoever? No matter what?”

The bracelet hasn’t come up since the day she showed it to me. She has no clue I know she gave it to Blue. “You heard me.”

I take another drink of coffee and play along. “Get me their phone number and I’ll call their parents, make sure it’s all right.”

She climbs off the stool and shoots a nervous glance at the floor, and then the door. “Well...I’ll have to get that together. How long do I have?”

I have no idea what Blue’s plans are before meeting her mother at the zoo, so we need to get to her place well before then. “I figured we’d leave here around ten, pick up your friend, and grab some lunch. Get to the zoo around one o’clock.”

“Gotcha,” she says, heading out of the room. “I’ll be back.”

I refill my cup as I hear her feet racing upstairs. She’s off to do the same thing I did.

Google Blue.

There’s an address and apartment number listed, but no phone number. Unless my daughter is a better sleuth than I am. Honestly, it’s not a complete impossibility.

It’s later when she walks into my office. She’s dressed in denim shorts and a pink T-shirt and has her hair pulled back in a neat ponytail. “I can’t find a number for my friend, but I have her address. Do you think it would be all right if we just stopped by? Maybe asked her to join us?”

I inwardly smile at the shy quiver in her voice. It’s always there when she’s walking a tightrope with what I’ll let her get away with.

I usually don’t use people to get what I want, but in this case, I’ll take it. “Sure. You ready?”

She nods, and I can tell she’s nervous.

I lay a hand on her shoulder. “Don’t worry, I’ll convince her parents to let her join us.”

She nods again before running for the door to the garage.

Once we’re in the truck, she hands me a slip of paper with the address I

recognize as Blue's. She's quiet on the way, wringing her hands together. I'm not sure if she thinks I'll be mad to learn who she wants joining us, or that she's nervous Blue will say no.

As I turn onto the road leading to the apartment complex, her frown deepens.

"Are we looking to see if your crew started that new job again?"

"No," I answer. "This is the address you gave me." Down the hill I see Blue's car parked in the usual place. A weird thrill zips through me.

"Oh. Um. So this is it?"

"That building right there." I click on the blinker.

She scratches her head, releasing a big sigh. "Dad...I have to tell you something."

"Oh? What's that?"

"Well, that friendship bracelet?" She squirms in her seat.

"Go on, sweets."

"I said I was going to give it to Ms. Derby...remember? I know you said I shouldn't, but you didn't say I couldn't, so I did." She tenses, bracing for my reaction.

I bite the inside of my bottom lip to keep from smiling and pull into a visitor parking space in front of the building. "You mean the friend we're here to pick up is Ms. Derby?"

She cringes. "Yes."

I nod, trying to look like I'm seriously contemplating what she just said, rather than wondering if Blue will refuse to go.

I know she'd say no to me, but am pretty confident she won't say no to my girl.

Who could say no to that face? I sure as hell can't.

"Fine. Whatever. Only one thing to do." I pause, letting out a long sigh, leaving her in playful suspense. "Ask if she wants to spend today with us at the zoo."

She beams. "Oh, Daddy, you *are* the best! The absolute best!"

Luck is with us. An older woman leaves just as we enter the building, so we don't need to buzz up to Blue's apartment to be let in.

At her door on the third floor, I stand to the side, where she won't be able to

see me through the peephole and tell Natalie to knock. She's short enough that Blue should only be able to see the top of her head.

A moment later the door opens. Just as Blue peeks around the edge, Natalie shouts, "Surprise!"

Surprise is right.

Blue's eyes are wide and her mouth drops open. She's brutally fucking adorable.

The messy bun sits on her head again. Her gray eyes shimmer. She's wearing a bright blue, short, sleeveless sun dress, and no shoes. Even her feet look good. Then they draw my eyes to parts of her I'd love a whole hell of a lot more.

My dick jerks. Suddenly and inappropriately. Just imagining how I could twine this woman around me, run my hands across her, plunge in hard and deep and find out exactly how she sounds when she comes...

Fuck. Stop.

The thought vanishes the second she starts stammering.

"What the...what are you doing here?" she glances up at me. "Jesus. You're both here, aren't you?"

"In the flesh." I hold my arms out, striking a goofy pose that makes Nat laugh.

"We're here to ask you a question!" Nat chirps.

Blue smiles at her, but there's plenty of skepticism in her eyes. "Okay. Let's hear it."

Natalie claps her hands together. "Do you want to go to the zoo with us today, Ms. Derby? Please? Daddy said I can bring a friend along and you...well, nobody else can talk about how to draw the animals we'll see."

The door across the hall opens and an older man pokes his nose out. The scorn on his face instantly irritates me.

"Hello, Mr. Barrett. Sorry to have bothered you." Blue waves at him and then gestures at Nat and I. "Come in. Hurry."

We step in, and I shut the door behind us. "Friendly neighbor," I growl.

"Fish!" Natalie shouts "You have fish tanks?"

Blue nods. "You can look. Go right ahead."

Natalie rushes forward while Blue levels a nasty glare at me.

“You read my mother’s text?” she hisses.

It hurts not to smile. I barely had her phone long enough to do anything in the chaos last Tuesday, but an army man never loses the precision and speed screamed into him by Drill Sergeants.

Pleading the fifth, I say, “Nat loves the zoo.” Nodding to where she’s enamored by the two large tanks taking up the far wall of the living room, I add, “She loves all kinds of animals.”

“How could you do this? Such. A. Dick.” Poisonous darts are practically shooting out of her eyes, yet she keeps her voice low. If it wasn’t for Nat, I could do a lot with her and the best part of my anatomy. “How could you use your daughter like this?”

“Like what? Taking her to the zoo? A place she loves?” My nostrils flare.

“Don’t play stupid. It’s no more believable than your bad boy act.”

“What bad boy act?”

She rubs her forehead and then throws her hands in the air. “You *know* what I mean. You also have no idea the can of worms that’ll open if we go to the zoo together.”

She’s wrong. The can of shit is already ripped in two, and it doesn’t give me a choice. I have to protect her. “Well, find a way to let Nat down easy. I’m *not* going to the zoo with you. Don’t care what kind of guilt trip you start.”

She frowns, defiant as ever. The raging desire to slam her up against the nearest surface and gag that smart mouth with my tongue howls in my blood. *If only.*

“You’re going with us today. We’ll have a nice time. You, me, Nat, and Mama Blue.”

“Are you for real?” She blinks a few times and then buries her face in a palm.

I shrug. “Am I?”

She takes a step backwards, and not fully sure what she’s going to do, I grasp her wrist with one hand. As softly as I can.

I haven’t had to swallow my pride in some time, but there’s no other option. Not now.

Not if I want to keep her safe.

Want isn’t a question either.

This is a fucking need. I *have* to keep this woman safe, secure, and smiling.

Even if she wants to slap my face around like a beach ball.

“Look, Izzy, I shouldn’t have said what I did the other night. That was rude. No question. You’ve been so good to Nat. Befriended her. She’s happy every afternoon when I pick her up. She’s found another person she likes connecting with. That’s something.” I shrug again. “I know about your ma, your family, how crazy they get over the whole boyfriend thing. It’s the least I can do. What harm can come from me pretending to be your date for a day? Getting them off your back?”

She pinches her lips together while shaking her head. “You have balls, I’ll give you that.”

If only she had any idea what my balls are really like.

“Don’t flatter yourself too much. You’d know what I mean about *balls* if you’d met my mother.” She slaps her forehead. “Look, even if I wanted to accept, I can’t. I worked too hard to land a job at the academy. I won’t just blow it, and one pretend date is all it’ll take. I’m just digging my grave deeper.”

I ignore the grave comment, knowing how real it is.

Fuck, I’d forgotten Principal Jacobs and his silly rules. Although, in the scheme of things, it doesn’t mean jack shit. I’m determined.

“No one at the academy has to know. You won’t tell them, I won’t either, and neither will Natalie if I ask her not to. What’re the chances of seeing someone, anyway? And even if we do, there’s plausible denial. I’m only your boyfriend, fiancé, whatever, to dear old ma.”

“Brent...”

“It’s the zoo,” I say, growing frustrated. “You’re there. We’re there. No big deal.”

“My freaking *mother* will be there. That’s a mammoth deal.”

Up until this point, I hadn’t realized how serious I am about this. Not just her safety, either. Natalie has her heart set on this, so I have to make it happen. “We’ll tell her we have to keep it under wraps because of the school. She’ll understand, won’t she?”

I see the wheels start turning. She’s torn.

The whole ‘I should, but shouldn’t.’

I know. I’ve been there, done that.

I’m living it since she came into my life damn near every day.

“Later, make something up. Some reason why it didn’t work.” The way her cousin Clara talked the other day, her ma’s practically on death’s doorstep. I morbidly wonder if our fake out will outlast her. “You want to make her happy, don’t you?”

Blue rubs her forehead again, then her temples. After a long silence, she lets out a huff. “All right! Whatever. I’ll meet you near the gate at one.”

“Actually, I promised Nat we’d do lunch first. The three of us. If you’d be so kind.”

Right on cue, Nat turns away from the fish tanks. “Are we ready? I’m getting kinda hungry.”

Quietly sighing, Blue opens the closet door, slips her feet into a pair of sandals, and closes it. “Ready as I’ll ever be.”



WE HEAD out and stop for lunch at a chain restaurant. If this was a real date, none of which I’ve had since well before Nat was born, I’d have stopped at the local Mom and Pop place I know.

Best burgers in the nation, their sign proclaims. For this place, it’s actually true.

But I can’t do that today. Word could spread. The place is always packed thanks to how good it is.

Blue doesn’t need interlopers any more than I do.

She doesn’t want the school to know. I don’t want the Pearls to notice.

I just want to find a way to keep her sheltered until this ends. Besides, if those twisted fucks think we’re closer than we are, she could become a real liability. The twenty-four hour kind.

We arrive at the zoo shortly before one, and while I search for a parking space, Natalie tells Blue how much I hate zoos.

“You do?”

I find a spot and pull in. “I don’t hate them, exactly.” I shoot a glare into the back seat, where Nat grins back at me. “I just don’t like the whole caged-up aspect.”

Blue’s face pulls into an adorable thoughtful expression as she looks me straight in the eye. “For you or the animals?”

Damn. She’s too good at reading me.

Better than I thought. The army. The tents. The isolation. It was like being a caged animal. “Both.”

The service turned me around, despite its harder points. Sandblasted my wilder edges and forced me to fly right. But shit, the years in Iraq were not an experience I’d ever want to repeat.

“Look at that woman!” Nat says. “The one by the gate with the hat on. Is she a movie star or something?”

We all look in the same direction, at the woman wearing a long bright top and matching pants. They’re loose and flowing, the exact same shade of red as the big bow on her hat and the frames around her plastic sunglasses. The only thing not red is the big white purse hooked over one shoulder.

“No,” Blue says with a sigh. “That’s not a movie star.”

“How do you know?” Natalie asks.

“Because that’s my mom.” Blue tenses, exhaling another breath.

Stunned, I ask, “*That’s* your mother?”

I’m not sure what I expected. A thinner, frailer woman with a walker or something. This lady looks perfectly healthy and alive.

“That’s her. Cleo Derby.” She opens the passenger door and glances at me. “Ready to back out yet?”

I laugh. “Hell no.”

“Your funeral.” She shrugs. “Let’s get this over with.”

“Get what over?” Natalie asks.

“Introductions,” I say, climbing out of the truck.

Cleo Derby is her daughter’s total opposite. Her nails are long and painted the same shade of red as her lipstick, and despite my first impression of her flaming red outfit, she wears it with the elegance and poise of an actress. Just like Nat said.

She’s graceful, too, and genuinely happy to see Blue. Even though she kisses the air on both sides of Izzy’s face rather than her actual cheeks. The joy in her soft face doesn’t lie.

The introductions are brief, thankfully. Cleo’s head-to-toe scrutiny leaves me feeling like a slab of steak at the meat market being judged on its marbling.

Her response to Natalie is a hit to my ten-year-old daughter.

Cleo places both hands on her knees as she leans low to look Nat in the eye.

“Oh, my. You just might be the prettiest little girl I’ve *ever* seen. You have your daddy’s eyes. Green like the hills around Portland. Used to spend my summers there growing up.”

“Thank you,” Natalie replies. “And you’re as beautiful as a movie star.”

Cleo presses a hand to her chest and sighs, grabbing Natalie with the other one, hugging her ferociously. “Oh, aren’t you a child after my own heart!” With her arm still around Natalie, she twists them both about face. “Come along, dear. You and I are going to get along stupendously today.”

I buy tickets for all four of us, and as I’m divvying them out, Cleo points at me.

“In my day, we called those bedroom eyes,” she says to Blue.

“Mother!” Blue hisses.

Cleo shrugs. “Just saying.”

“So, which way are we going first?” I ask.

“The lions!” Natalie and Cleo say as one, and then laugh, beaming at each another.

“Lions it is.” I lay a hand on Blue’s back to ease her forward and follow the other two, who are already several feet ahead.

Cleo Derby is so far from what I expected, my question bursts out before I can stop it. “What exactly does your mother have?”

“Have? What do you mean?”

I can’t put that cat back in the bag, so I might as well let it loose. “Her condition.”

Blue’s brows knit together and confusion flashes in her eyes. “Condition? You mean her sleep apnea?”

“Sleep apnea?” I’ve heard of that, but was thinking more along the lines of cancer. Heart failure. Something dire.

“That’s the only thing she’s been diagnosed with, and that was last year.” Blue stops and crosses her arm. “It’s actually pretty serious if it doesn’t get taken care of. Mom claims she sleeps like a baby with her little machine, though.”

I watch how Natalie and Cleo march forward, not caring if we’re following or not. “Good.”

“Spill it, Eden,” Blue says. “Who told you about mom’s health? When? And why?”

I have no reason to hide it, even if I feel like a jackass for being duped. “Your cousin, Clara, called me last week. I can’t remember exactly what she said. Mentioned a serious diagnosis, parents wanting their children to be happy. Days being short.”

“Fuck her!” Blue snorts under her breath. “That sounds *exactly* like Clara. Sneaky little drama queen. Well, at least we can drop the act. I get it: because I’ve been so nice to your daughter, you decided to play my fake boyfriend so my mom can die happy. Clear as day.” Her tone grows harsher with each word.

I’m silent.

“Wow.” She shakes her head, then nods slowly. “Just wow. Like, I knew your badass persona was just for show, but I didn’t know you were *that* much of a sucker.”

She spins around.

I grab her wrist. “Blue.”

She pulls her arm out of my hold. “Blue what? You really blew it this time? Blew your cover? Or maybe there was nothing to blow to begin with.”

I’m hesitant to admit much more, but I can tell she’s ashamed. Of her family and me.

Fuck, I’m to blame for this, too. “Blue. That’s you, woman.”

Her laugh comes out forced and raw. “Nice! Do I look that depressed constantly?”

“No.” I run a fingertip along the blue stripe in her hair. “It’s this.”

She nods. “Another mistake I made.”

“Bull. You want to know the truth, I love how it goes against your cheeks when they light up siren red.”

Her eyes get a little bigger, and she whispers, “Ready for the real truth?”

I nod.

“Okay. I bought some hair dye at the dollar store. While I was mixing it, the cap flew off. By the time I was done cleaning up the bathroom, I realized I had a big glob in my hair.” Her facial features are comical. Just like her hand gestures. “I washed it out, but it was too late.”

“Was the dye blue?”

“No. Ash blonde. Must mean something a lot different in the country where

it's made. You get what you pay for."

Turning my head, I let out a short cough, quelling the laughter tearing up my throat.

"Oh, it's all right, you can laugh. I did."

I give her a solid stare, eye-to-eye, just to see if she's lying. She's not.

"What else could I do? I wasn't going to pay a fortune to have it fixed." She puts both hands on her hips. "Actually, you're the first person to even mention it. Or notice."

She waves a hand towards where her mother's red outfit stands out among the crowd. "Not even mom said anything. And she spent years in fashion, selling cosmetics for a living."

I release the chuckle torturing my throat.

Damn, she's adorable. And funny. And likeable.

Very likeable.

I'm starting to get hard again. *Fuck me.*

"Well, I like it." I grab her hand. "Come on, Blue, let's catch up to those other two before we're completely left in the dust."

Her fingers wrap around mine. I can feel the tension slipping away from her as I lead us, dodging our way through the crowd. It's been a long time since I've held a woman's hand.

Something about it, the warmth of her palm against mine, maybe, makes me feel alive. My blood goes molten.

"It's about time you two caught up," Cleo says.

She and Nat are near the lion enclosure, but they aren't gazing into the pen.

"Look!" Cleo points to the next exhibit over.

It's the giraffes. A man and woman nearby, dressed in wedding attire, are having their pictures taken with the tall, sleek animals in the background.

"Who the hell gets married at the zoo?" I ask, dumbfounded.

"Oh, it's the latest craze," Cleo says. "You'd be mighty surprised."

"The zoo's the *last place* Dad would get married," Natalie chimes in.

I give her a knowing smile.

Cleo pulls down her big sunglasses and looks at me over the rim. "Well, it's not the location, but the timing, isn't it? There's no time like the present,

Romeo.” She winks at me before turning to Nat. “Zebras next?”

Natalie does a solid fist pump “Zebras!”

Off they go again. I’m surprised I didn’t choke.

I glance at Blue slowly.

She laughs. “Good luck. You’ll never keep up with her. After the cosmetic counter, the zoo is mom’s favorite place on Earth.”

I glance in the direction they’ve gone. That lady has so much energy it’s almost scary. I hope she knows to stop for shade. She might be protected under that crazy hat, but Nat...

“She’s harmless. They’ll be fine,” Blue tells me, as if reading my mind.

“Yeah, I can tell.” I take her hand, lacing my fingers between hers as we slowly start walking. “You get that from her.”

“What? Craziiness?”

“No. Passion. It shines on her face like yours does when you’re teaching art on Tuesday nights.” I’m usually not so open and honest, but I’m comfortable, because of her.

“Fair point.” Taking a sidestep, she bumps my arm with her shoulder. “I suppose now would be a good time for me to apologize for what Clara said. God. I can’t *believe* she called you. I’m going to wring her neck one fine day.”

“Why bother?”

“Why?” Confusion ripples in her voice.

I lean closer, next to her ear. “If I was you, I’d wait till the moment when it’s going to embarrass her the most. Then remind her how she said your ma was dying. Patience.”

She turns slowly and looks up at me, her eyes glittering in the sun. “I like the way you think, Eden. Deviously.” Her smile grows wider.

Good word for every wicked thought hitting me like lightning.

The desire to kiss her hits hard and fast. Her lips look too inviting. Too delicate. Too helpless.

I haven’t forgotten how sweet they tasted since the first night, when I kissed her with everything I had in front of Jackass Moneybags. How smooth and slick and hot they felt under mine.

I don’t realize we’ve stopped walking until someone jostles her and she

stumbles. I grab her around the waist as she collides with my chest. Seeing her head back with those soft gray eyes looking up at me stalls my breath.

I tell myself she's giving me permission.

Permission to kiss her.

I pull her closer, feel the heat of her body against mine.

It feels so fucking good. So right. So taboo it makes me sweat.

I dip forward, the sound of her sigh echoing around me, before I catch myself.

Fuck.

Trouble is, this isn't right. The only reason I'm here is to keep some psycho from hurting her. One far worse than that prick, Preston. Bastard Phil won't stop at just scaring her, begging for another date.

I take a step backward, pretending I don't see disappointment in her eyes. Like I don't feel it either. Disoriented inside and out, I ask, "Which way to the zebras?"

"Right over there."

I don't look at her. The dryness of her tone says more than words.

"Next to the tigers. Bears are on the other side."

"You know this place well." I stick my hands in my pockets as we start walking, needing to put a bit of distance between us. There's too much at stake for me to lose focus now.

"Well, I should." She sighs. "I've come here once a month like clockwork for as long as I can remember."

"Izzy!" Cleo waves a frantic hand. "Izzy, Izzy, come here right this second!"

I glance around, and thankfully, don't see another wedding party. Cleo Derby's none too subtle in her awkward hints. She's holding something.

It's not until we arrive and she shoves it at Blue that I realize it's a cell phone in a flowery case.

"It's Megan!" Cleo yips. "She's *finally* getting married in two weeks. In Flagstaff!" She pats Blue's arm. "Oh, darling, isn't this just perfect timing? You'll have a date for this one. Won't have to go stag like you did all your other cousins' weddings."

I watch Blue's face go from pale to red, and I sense the pressure she's under. The embarrassment, too.

“Don’t worry, Brent,” Cleo says. “You’ll have a delightful time, and so will little Natalie!”

“Flagstaff?” Natalie says. “Daddy, we can stay at the ranch. We haven’t been in so long. Please, Daddy, please say we’ll go!”

I’m cornered. Goddamn.

The dread and sorrow on Blue’s face as she glances up at me tugs at something inside me demanding attention. Can’t dismiss it any more than I can the urge to protect her from Preston and the Pearls.

“You’re in luck, baby girl. We’ll go.”

While Cleo and Natalie squeal and hug, Blue hangs her head. I’m not sure whether she’s shocked numb by my quick agreement, or still tangled up in shame.

Grabbing her hand, I don’t say anything. Just nod. That wipes the worst of it off her face, and soon, we’re walking again.

They say timing’s everything. It’s never been truer in my life. It’s damn sure never fallen into my lap so easily and obviously.

I’ve needed the perfect excuse to hit the ranch. To finish the scheme there I’ve started.

One that’ll take the Black Pearls down once and for all.

FLIRTING WITH DISASTER (IZZY)

I can't help but watch the clock.

I've never done that before. Not during art class. The students are busy working with oil pastels. It's free form, whatever they'd like to create. Mainly because I was too out of it to come up with a fresh sample for them last night.

Been out of sorts since Saturday. After mother's nuclear bomb announcement of Megan's wedding, and Brent's attendance shocker, my mind has been mush. Pulverized.

The hundred plus text messages from mom hasn't helped either. I hope – no – I pray, beg, and plead she'll hold true to the promise she made Brent and hasn't told Clara anything.

Any. Thing.

My cousin has called, as usual, jabbering a mile a minute about Megan's wedding details. How they had to move the date up because her fiancé has an internship in Alaska. He's studying to be a doctor, apparently – one more fucking thing I have to contend with – so they'll be moving to Alaska right after the wedding. Cash-only gifts.

Fucking-A.

Fortunately, the only thing Clara worries about for now is the frosting melting on the wedding cake she's baking because it's an outdoor wedding. In Arizona.

Good thing wedding cakes are mostly for show.

I should be thankful for the distraction. With all this going down, she hasn't had time to obsess over who is or isn't attending.

She hasn't mentioned the zoo, either. Fingers crossed it stays that way, and mom doesn't slip a peep about my date.

After the zoo, we'd gone out to eat together. Twice in one day.

That's when Brent told mother that we had to keep our friendship under wraps because of Nat and my job. I wasn't there. I'd helped Natalie to the restroom with an upset tummy and gave her some Pepto, so I don't know exactly what was said.

Worse, I haven't even seen him since he dropped me off that evening.

Maybe that's why I can't peel my eyes off the clock. He should arrive shortly to pick up Nat.

I've thought long and hard. It's time.

I'm going to insist we end this sham. Before it does more damage. There's no reason – none – for him to go to Flagstaff.

Mother may have made it sound like I'm perpetually dateless, and maybe so, but bottom line is, so what?

This thing between us – this jaunt through Heaven and hell – it's a burden. I've lived my whole life without dreaming of some gorgeous man charging into my life and promising me happily ever after.

That's mom. Not Isabella Derby. She's the one who reads a dozen wild romance novels every month.

The familiar click of the door opening has me glancing up.

Brent.

Here we go again.

I could brace myself a thousand times, and it still couldn't stop the instant reaction in my blood. My pulse kicks higher, some kind of crazy flutter mode.

He's really hero material. Like something out of those dirty books with his chiseled looks, inviting scruff, and screaming green eyes. I'll admit it: sometimes I read the novels mother sends home with me.

The ones with shirtless hunks and women who are halfway unraveled hanging on their arms. Brent Eden may be the spitting image of a cover model – possibly the world's hottest – but damn.

This is no romance. And I'm no damsel in distress.

I'm a grown woman who got in too deep, who let her fantasies off their chain, and who desperately needs to end this sweet chaos before it ruins everything.

He shuts the door quietly, but rather than staying at the back of the room, he heads forward. Straight for me. Tension shoots up my neck as his eyes capture

mine in an ornery glare.

What the hell now? What has his badass attitude flaring today? I've already told him I see right through it.

Unless...

Crap!

Clara must have called him. Again.

He arrives at my desk around the same time I decide that's just as well. If he's annoyed, sick of this, exhausted with *me*, then maybe it'll be easier. This whole thing ends in the next half hour.

"Where's your car?" His voice is hushed, but harsh. "I drove around the entire building and didn't see it."

That gets my attention.

Then I remember why he didn't spot it. With everything else going on, I'd forgotten the bad news for a short while. "It wouldn't start," I tell him. "Had to get a ride."

He puts both hands on my desk and leans closer. "It was here this afternoon, Blue. When I picked Nat up from school."

I sit back, not impressed by his attitude, even if the growl in his voice touches something primal deep inside me. I shake my head. "So? It started just fine then, but when it was time to come back for class, it wouldn't start."

"How'd you get here?"

This is nuts. I can't imagine why he cares.

Giving a half-snort, I point to my cellphone. "Uber. Duh. What else?"

"Uber?" He chokes off a curse. "You've gotta be more careful, babe. You don't know who those people are. Could be anyone. Why didn't you call?"

Resisting the urge to bite my lip, I stare through him instead. This isn't happening.

I'm *not* about to say I considered it. Even though I did.

Right before I called him an asshole for putting a curse on my car last week by saying it could breakdown anytime. It finally did. And with everything else I've put up with from this man, a girl's entitled to be slightly superstitious.

Pushing away from the desk, I stand. "Why would I call you? I'm not helpless. You just keep thinking I am." Before he can respond, I address the

class. “Ten more minutes!”

Knowing how quick he is, I dodge around him, and spend the next ten minutes drifting from student to student. So far, nothing’s happening like I planned, and the last thing we need is a scene in front of the kids on top of it. He’ll have to cool his heels until class finishes.

He’s still standing next to the desk when it’s dismissal time. A pissed off wall of muscle.

God. For the first time I wonder if his badassery isn’t so much for show as it is a revival of sorts.

A throwback to the time he’d been a hardcore rebel? Or his army days?

Whether by choice or circumstance, and though his life is far tamer now, the aggression was so instilled in him, he can’t stop it taking hold.

The students wrap up and I make a few brief closing remarks. I feel bad watching them shuffle out the door. It’s the first night I haven’t given this my all, no thanks to the frustrated beast stewing in the corner.

This can’t keep happening.

Soon, Natalie’s the only student left. I have no choice but to return to my desk and pack up my things. Doesn’t mean I have to say a word to Mr. Broody. I tap my phone’s screen a few times and lay it down, summoning a ride. It’ll take at least ten minutes for someone to get here with the academy being tucked back on slower roads.

I don’t say anything to Brent.

Until he speaks.

“I’m giving you a ride home, Izzy. I canceled your Uber.”

The transformation inside me is instant. From just annoyed to psycho-bitch mad.

“You...what?” I rip my phone from his hand and fight to keep quiet enough so Natalie can’t hear.

Sure enough, my ride’s canceled. Before the penalty fee even hit. I didn’t even see him do it.

He. Can’t. Keep. Getting. Away. With. This.

“Eden...just who the fuck do you think you are? Jesus!” I’ve spent hours of my life with this man and I still don’t have a clue. “Look, you might be able to keep your daughter in arm’s reach at all times, but that doesn’t extend to me. You’ve got no freaking right to even *attempt* it.” My wrists tremble as hot

blood pumps through them.

If this man had a season, he'd be Phoenix, high summer. Always.

He's staring, his green eyes weapons, not temptations this time around. The tiger glare says he's beyond pissed. So does the strength in the hand that takes my wrist. It's amazing how swiftly he can do it without actually hurting me.

I really don't give a damn. "Let. Go." I seethe.

He doesn't release me, but his hold eases. "Okay. Whether you hold my hand or not, it won't change the fact you're riding home with us."

"I'm not!" I hiss. To prove my point, I add, "I've told you before I won't lose my job over you. Over this. You're making it too hard. Now, please, let go before I –"

"What? Scream? By the time Oscar walks into this room, you'll be so tongue-tied on my mouth you won't even know he's here." His lips part ever-so-slightly, warm and feral and weirdly inviting.

Insane. That's what this is.

"You wouldn't dare?" I hate how it comes out a question.

He steps closer, his lips barely an inch from mine. I was hot and bothered before, and now it's getting worse for very different reasons. "You know damn well I would. Haven't stopped thinking how good you tasted since the first night you said more than 'hello.' How bad you wanted it last weekend, Blue. Fuck, how bad I needed it."

My eyelids flutter.

I officially hate him. And I hate wanting him ten times more.

His breath mingles with mine, stirring something hot and carnal inside me. Just like at the zoo, when I thought he was going to kiss me.

It's a deep, physical ache. A self-destructive want.

A need to have his body on mine so intense it's every insanity known to man.

Tonight, it's even worse. I wanted it then, Saturday, but I need it now. *Need*, like he said.

Even though I'm furious.

He dips his chin. His bristles barely graze my cheek. They're softer than expected. More delightful, too.

My breath catches in my throat.

“I dare, Isabella Derby. Dare to tell Nat she can squawk to the whole world we went to the zoo together. That you’ve been to our house for supper. That you’ve been on my goddamn mind like a wet dream stuck on repeat. Morning, noon, and night.”

Holy hell.

Forget insane. This is suicidal. Every last bit of it.

The consequences of anyone hearing about us hits me like a water balloon. His touch becomes kryptonite.

I snap my head backwards so fast I nearly lose my balance. My feet hit the chair. The harder I try to keep from falling, the harder it is not to. My near tumble couldn’t have lasted more than a second or two.

Time is no match for him.

Before I can even blink, Brent has my arm and he’s grabbed my waist with his other hand, keeping me upright. I’m breathing like I just ran a marathon.

A second later, I realize exactly what part of his body presses against my stomach. *Oh, hell!*

I push at his chest, flailing with my free arm. “Was this your goal since the beginning? Getting me fired?”

“No.” He releases my waist and takes a step back before dropping my wrist. “I just want you to see the danger, taking rides from strangers.”

Ridiculous. I shove everything into my bag. “In case you don’t know, I teach preschool, Brent. Stranger-danger’s a key part of the lesson plan.”

He grabs my sketchpad. “Then you need to practice what you preach.” Turning, he says to Natalie, “Ready, baby girl? We have to give Ms. Derby a ride home tonight. Her car’s out of commission.”

“Awesome!”

Seriously, what did I ever do? To deserve all this?

I sneer at the grin he flashes my way, but then smile at Nat. Guilt hits like a brick.

It’s the same feeling that whacked me yesterday at lunch, when she’d snuck a subtle wave my way after looking to make sure no one was watching. She shouldn’t have to keep any secrets. Or worry whether or not she’ll look like a teacher’s pet.

One more reason to stop this sham. ASAP.

Only, that seems impossible tonight.

The ride to my place is tense. The air seems electric in the front seat. If Natalie senses anything, she's very good at hiding it, chattering away about tonight's oil pastels.

As soon as he pulls into my building's lot, I tell him he can park out front, but of course he doesn't. Instead, he drives around the side, insisting he's looking at my car before leaving.

Apparently, mechanical precision is another one of his many talents.

He quickly determines the starter needs to be replaced, and soon a tow truck arrives to haul my Mustang to the shop.

I don't say much. I'm too strung up on how hard it is to get rid of him when he keeps saving my ass.

Also, because I'm not about to ignite another argument in front of Nat.

Also, also, because it'd be more than another argument. We're a few choice words away from a dynamite explosion.

I wish it ended there.

A pickup with his company name on the side pulls into my parking spot as soon as the Mustang disappears. He says it's mine to borrow tomorrow.

Screw it. I can't hold my tongue.

"You really *are* trying to get me fired, aren't you?"

"Wrong, Blue." He takes the keys from the man who climbs out and holds them to me. "It's not a favor. You either drive that, or I'll drive you to and from school, just like I do Natalie. Your choice."

Some choice.

So ready for this day to be over, I throw up my hands. "Whatever. You win. I'll drive the damn truck."

Grabbing the keys, I tell Nat goodnight and make my escape.

Later at home, try as I might, sleep won't come. Predictable.

It wasn't the fear of someone at school noticing what I drove, or Megan's wedding, or even his caveman attitude that keeps me awake.

It's how frightfully close he came to kissing me.

How badly I wanted that to happen.

How badly I still want it.

Want it. Against every warning and shred of common sense and decency.
Against everything I think I am.



ANOTHER DAY BLURS BY. I'm driving his loaner truck home after a day of finger painting, cutting enough apple slices to feed an army of fifteen four year olds, and singing about tiny spiders and big mouthed frogs.

Paradise. It'll be years before I work my way up to teaching art full time for the older kids, but it's a nice start. It's hardly the reason I'm bothered, impatiently clicking my nails against the steering wheel.

My lips still quiver every time Brent Eden invades my mind.

I need to get over this. Really.

And I need to find a way to get him to back out of Megan's wedding. I don't trust myself in close proximity with him. It's no good. I've only seen what happens a dozen times.

I'm no good in close range with this beast of a man.

Not now, not next week, not ever.

My Mustang sits in my parking space when I pull around my apartment building. I park the truck next to the dumpster as a man climbs out of my car.

It's the employee from last night. Juan, I think. His friendly smile brightens his brown eyes. Knowing it was his cousin's shop my car was towed to, I open the door. "Sorry for the wait! Didn't expect it done so soon. If you tell me how much I owe, I'll cut you a check right now."

He hands me the keys. "You'll have to settle that up with the boss. It's on his tab, I think. I'm just the delivery guy this time." He winks.

Shit. I don't want to settle anything with his boss, yet can't hold that against him.

Sighing, I turn over the truck's keys and thank him. After Juan drives away, I search the inside of my car for a receipt showing the work done.

Of course, there isn't one.

When Brent canceled my Uber last night, he'd also punched his phone number into my phone, but I'm not about to call him.

Or text him.

It takes willpower, but I refrain.



BY NEXT WEEK'S art night, I've gotten three estimates for replacing a starter and have the average amount of cash needed for the job in my purse.

Whenever he comes to pick up Nat, it's his. And I have my entire speech laid out. All about how he doesn't need to attend Megan's wedding this weekend.

I'm also a nervous wreck.

Truly can't believe the mess I'm in.

Between mother and Clara and their endless phone calls and texts – nine out of ten mentioning *him* – I'm praying for an onslaught of the flu. Or appendicitis.

Whatever helps prevent me from having to go anywhere this weekend.

Not having a date when everyone thinks I do is guaranteed hell.

The students are painting with oils tonight, the most difficult medium we've used. Because of that, their assignment is abstract, which leaves me too much time to once again watch the clock.

I haven't seen or heard from him in a week, and somewhat expected to, considering I've talked to people about Natalie. I've had her schedule changed slightly. For her own good.

She needs to be around kids her age. I want to encourage it as softly as I can, but the time has come.

That, right there, probably pissed him off, too.

Fuck, the door!

I keep my cool. Don't turn around. Just keep meandering from student to student, commenting on their work. Pretending the devil himself isn't at my back.

My peripheral vision checks to see if he's walking toward the front of the room. So far, no.

Small favors.

"Five more minutes," I say, heading for my desk.

He's still in the back of the room. Lingers there even after I dismiss class.

Natalie packs up her stuff and heads for my desk, rather than her father. "Dad says we'll pick you up right after school on Thursday." Her smile is murder.

I cringe inwardly. The thought of telling her no, it's too much, and I level a glare at him.

After digging out the envelope with the car repair money, I flip the bag over my shoulder. “You should have your dad carry your sketchpad tonight. Oil paints take a long time to dry.”

“Oh, you’re right! I’m being super-duper careful, Ms. Derby,” she says proudly.

“I can see that. Here, let me take your bag. I’ll give it to your father.”

She hands over the bag and we both walk to the back of the room. I hand him her bag and the envelope.

He takes both, frowning at the offering.

I say nothing as I walk out the door. Not verbally. Silently, I tell myself I’m not lost in his scent.

It’s a lie.

His cologne is faint. Subtle. It goes to my head. How can a simple smell make this harder?

Once outside, I take a deep breath, hoping another scent will override his. Of course, it doesn’t.

“Four-thirty okay?” he asks.

It takes me a moment to catch my bearings and know what he’s referring to.

He shrugs. “I’d like to get to Flagstaff before dark, Blue.”

I shake my head. “I’m not leaving until Friday morning, and really, you don’t need to...” I pinch my lips together as Nat spins around and looks up at me.

One look. I’m gutted.

“Already told your ma you’re riding up Thursday evening with us.”

Once again, I cringe, lowering my voice. “Well, my hotel room’s locked in for Friday and Saturday night.”

“You don’t have a hotel room.” His eyes narrow.

“I’m sharing one with mom,” I lie softly.

Actually, George is sharing her room, but mother wants everyone to think they’re just friends. It always amazes me how hard she tries to keep her own drama under wraps.

“No, Blue. Your mom, plus Clara, are staying with your aunt. Janice, I think. Clara and Megan’s mom.”

My chin drops. “How –”

“Cleo. You’re the only one who doesn’t call or text.”

Frustrated. Mortified.

Enraged.

Right now, they’re the same emotion, sending a dull pain to my temples. I rub them swiftly. Now I know why mom and Clara stopped asking about him the last couple days.

They don’t have to. They’re talking to Brent privately.

Can it get any worse?

Oh, yes.

Riding two and half hours next to him sounds heavenly hellish.

So much for backing out. Or saving face. Or pretending I haven’t totally lost my mind to this smirking man-beast, who reads me so well my blood boils.



HE PICKS me up Thursday at four-thirty sharp, and soon we’re heading north out of town. Along the way, Nat describes, in full vivid detail, the dress Brent bought her to wear to the wedding, and then the old ranch that was once his grandfather’s.

We arrive near dusk and settle in. I’ve never been so worried in my life.

This is crazy. *I’m* crazy.

“Isn’t it awesome?” Natalie asks, standing on the front porch of an old farmhouse with both arms spread wide. “Finally here! My favorite place in the whole wide world.”

“I can see why.” The peeling white paint gives the single-story house a rustic look. So do the old fashioned Bermuda shutters that have saved the windows from intense wear and tear by the wind and odd dust storm. Several full-grown trees have also protected it from the elements.

It’s easy to see a kid running wild around here.

“Come on!” she says, waving a hand. “I’ll show you where you’ll sleep.”

Sleep. Very funny.

As if I’ll ever be able to sleep in this strange little place with Brent freaking Eden one room over.

Speaking of, he’s already unlocked the door and stepped inside ahead of us. Lights flicker on in every window.

“I’m ready for the grand tour. Lead the way,” I tell Nat.

The inside isn’t as rustic as the exterior. The old oak floors creak, but every room seems neat and clean. The kitchen hangs off the back of the living room. A good-sized bathroom and two bedrooms round out the other side of the place. One with bunk beds, and another with a double bed.

“You can sleep in this one!” Natalie says as we enter the room with the double bed. She grabs my hand. “That’s not the best part, though. Let me show you my *favorite*.”

I follow her back through the living room and around the kitchen. She takes me out the backdoor and onto a screened-in porch.

She points towards a play kitchen set. “I’ve always loved it here. Let’s open the windows and it’ll cool right off.”

Together, we open all the windows. By the time we walk back into the kitchen, Brent is busy unloading a cooler, putting the contents in an old, but sturdy refrigerator.

His grin makes my stomach flutter. “Taking it in?”

“Yes,” I answer, bending down to hand him the last couple items from the cooler. “Nat showed me her favorite place.”

“The old porch.” Nodding, he takes a bottle of mayo and package of lunch meat from me. “It was mine, too, when I was a boy.”

Our hands touch. Our eyes meet. I’ve been here no more than ten or twenty minutes, and I already feel beguiled by some sorcery.

A tingle zips up my arm. Air lingers somewhere in my chest. Not quite caught, but not flowing freely, either. My whole body feels the same way.

Snagged.

Trapped in emerald green.

Searching for a way to break the spell, I ask, “What about now? I see why you like this place.”

“He and Uncle Davey used to dream about moving out here and having all kinds of animals like their grandpa did,” Nat cuts in, digging into a grocery bag on the table. “But then Dad went in the army and Uncle Davey died.”

It’s the strangest thing. Almost like watching a shield, a barrier, slide across his eyes, taking the shimmer with it, the second those words are out of her mouth.

He takes a couple last cans from me and puts them in the fridge. He never

answers my question.

“Yippie! The stuff for s’mores!” Natalie’s squeal echoes off the walls. “Can we make some tonight, Daddy?”

“Yeah, sweets. Hold up a few. Let me get a fire going first.” He closes the cooler’s lid. “Which can’t happen till we get everything put away and organized.”

“We’ll help,” Natalie chirps. “Won’t we, Ms. Derby?”

The formality seems completely out of place here. “Of course,” I say, “And while we’re here, you can call me Izzy.”

“Izzy?”

“My nickname. What everyone in my family calls me.”

“I have lots of nicknames, too! All from Daddy. Nat. Baby girl. Sweets. Kiddo.”

I glance at him. He nods once.

There’s something so flipping handsome about a man who treats his daughter like a princess and tries to hide it.

Still, a weird dread I can’t quite put my finger on wells inside me at this entire pretense.

Handsome or not, he’s not my boyfriend. Never my fiancé.

It’s not just duping my family, it’s deceiving myself.

I don’t want a pretend relationship. I don’t want anything.

Because with him, even one more kiss might leave a smoking ruin.



HALF AN HOUR LATER, everything’s put away and we’re outside under a canopy of stars, roasting marshmallows over a fire crackling in a big ring of red stones.

“Dad says s’mores are too sweet.” Natalie licks the remnants of her fourth s’more off her fingers. “Can you *believe* that?”

“No.” I only had a single big one, but enjoyed it immensely. “No such thing as too sweet in my book.”

“Right?!” Natalie says. “That’s what I say, too.”

We sit back in old metal chairs. Mine creaks as I lean closer to her. “I think that’s just a guy thing. Being too hung up on sweet.”

“Yeah,” she agrees, a crooked smile crossing her face.

Across from us, Brent sits quietly, listening to our chatter. The flames cast shadows across his face, making his eyes brighter. “You two are ganging up on me,” he growls jokingly.

Before either of us can respond, a loud meow rings out.

“Shadow?” Natalie freezes for a second, then jumps from her chair. “Dad, it’s Shadow!”

She shoots around behind me. “Here kitty, kitty!”

I do a slow turn. We’re in the middle of nowhere. I haven’t seen another house in the last ten miles. I turn to Brent. “You leave a cat up here? Alone?”

He takes a drink off his metal cup. “You really like thinking the worst of me, don’t you, Blue?” Setting down his cup, he nods towards Nat, who sits on the gravel driveway petting a cat. “Shadow belongs to the neighbors down the road. Always prowls around at night. Usually takes him a day to figure out we’re here.”

“Oh. Sorry. I didn’t mean –” I cut it there, changing the subject. “How often do you come up, anyway?”

“Try to make it once every month or two. Been more like three or four lately. Too busy. Nat loves this place, though.” His eyes are on his daughter. The adoration in his eyes is breathtaking.

That was the first thing I’d noticed about him and it’s still the same as the first day he walked into my class. How much he cares.

“Daddy, I’m taking Shadow inside to feed him!” Natalie arrives with a huge gray cat in her arms. “Want to pet him first, Izzy? He’s so sweet.”

I run a hand along his back, recognizing the thick, short blue-gray hair and golden eyes. “Wow, a Chartreux. Kind of a rare breed.” I smile softly, memories flooding back.

“The neighbors breed them. Good mousers,” Brent says.

“I know. My mother had one years ago.”

“Really? What happened?” Natalie asks.

As gently as possible, I say, “Life. She just got old and died.”

“That’s sad.” She kisses the top of the cat’s head while the animal paws at her face. “I’m going to feed him now.”

Nuzzling him the whole way, she walks into the house. “Daddy bought treats

just for you, Shadow. You're gonna be a happy, happy boy."

I smile. One more confirmation Brent's badass persona is just that.

A façade he tries to hide behind. Only a kind soul buys treats for an animal that isn't even his.

It also returns the same question that's been nagging me for weeks.

Why does he try to hide? Pretend he's something he isn't?

Why do I keep going along with the sham?

He's looking at me as I pull my gaze off the house as the door closes behind Natalie. "Tell me something, Brent. Why are you doing this?"

He stretches over the side of his chair, grabs a log, and throws it on the fire. "What?"

A thousand tiny, bright sparks fly into the air, falling back into the pit as the flames spread upward, consuming the new log.

"Oh, I don't know," I say sarcastically. "Buy treats for a cat that's not yours. Pretend to be my boyfriend. Let my mother and cousin text and call you. Act like it doesn't annoy you." That last part should win him an acting award.

He glances at the house. "For her."

Heavy.

I nod. "Okay, the cat treats, I get. But not the rest."

His gaze goes to the fire and he keeps it there. "Nat likes you. Simple."

Not quite. I'm not buying it. "I'm sure she likes all her teachers, but I bet you didn't kiss them and go to their cousin's weddings."

Shrugging, he takes another drink. "Felt sorry for you after Preston, Izzy. That's the long and short of it."

Way to strike a nerve. Sympathy? *Please.*

I might be thankful he helped me out of a jam, but it doesn't explain anything. "Preston hasn't contacted me since." I stand. "And I don't need anyone feeling sorry for me."

He grabs my wrist, before I can stomp away. "Wait. I started the whole thing by telling Preston we're dating. Guess I feel obligated –"

Obligated? Jesus.

He's too good at torpedoing my heart in one word.

I rip my arm away. "Wow. Sorry I asked. I don't want anyone feeling

obligated. Ever.”

He doesn’t chase after as I storm off toward the house. None of this should be my fault, yet the burden is there, pressing me down. Leaving me so fucking confused. I feel like I’m caught in a maze that doesn’t have an exit, or a map, or an end.

“Isn’t he pretty?” Natalie asks as I walk into the kitchen.

She’s sitting on the floor petting the cat as he wolfs down treats.

I kneel. “Yes, he is.”

“I wish I could live here all the time. Shadow could practically be my cat.”

“Maybe you’ll get a cat like him? Keep him at your house in Phoenix.”

She shakes her head, a frown appearing. “Dad’s allergic at home.”

“At home?”

“Yeah. Shadow doesn’t bother him here because there’s enough fresh air.”

That makes about as much sense as everything else that’s been happening. I suppress the urge to let out a snort. “Does Shadow come visit every day while you’re here?”

“He never goes home. He’ll hang around every day until we leave.” She scoops the cat who’s finally had his fill into her arms. “He even sleeps with me.”

Happiness shines on her face. “Every night. It’s comforting.”

No lie. Within fifteen minutes, she and Shadow are snuggled up in bed, both fast asleep by the time I shut off the light. I enter the other bedroom and stare at the double bed, trying not to wish things were different.

Until the idea of him sleeping in the short and narrow bed above Natalie hits.

I have to apologize for getting pissed so easy.

He’s still by the fire, and glances over his shoulder as I walk down the steps.

I sit down in the metal chair beside him. “She’s asleep.”

“With Shadow?”

“Yep.” I pick up a small stick and throw it in the fire. “I’ll sleep in that room with her. You can have the guest room.”

“Why?”

“It’s your house, Brent. You should have the bigger bed.”

He leans back in his chair. “No.”

“I have to.” I level a knowing look his way while saying, “Heard you’re *allergic* to cats.”

He wipes a hand over his lips but can’t fully hide his smile.

I grin, letting him know the truth is out.

“Blue, you tell my daughter that and I’ll –”

I laugh. “You’ll end up with a cat, is what you’ll do. Here and in Phoenix.”

“I might at that.” He takes a swig of his drink and hands it to me. “Cheers.”

It’s a peace offering, I realize, so I take it.

There’s a challenge, a quiet smirk in his eyes, as I lift the cup to my lips, without even asking what’s in it.

Big mistake. The whiskey straight up burns my throat. It’s like napalm going down.

I barely have a chance to swallow before a coughing fit explodes in my lungs.

My eyes are watering by the time it’s over and I catch my breath.

Laughter lines his voice. “Shit, are you all right? Didn’t mean –”

I nod. Furiously. “I...I’m more of a tequila girl, I guess. My dad liked bourbon.”

He flips open the lid of the small cooler beside his chair and yanks out a can. I catch it as he tosses it my way, needing something to cool the fire in my throat. Twisting the can to see the label, I ask, “What’s this?”

“Margarita in a can.”

My lips twist. I blink, surprised. “You drink canned margarita?”

“Wrong. Had a feeling you would.”

My face heats. Oh, God. Every look he gives me might be divine. Or divine punishment.

“Never tried it, but hey, there’s a first time for everything.” I pop the tab and take a drink. Strawberry. Surprised, I take a second taste, confirming it’s good. “Pretty decent! Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

We sit in a companionable silence for a few minutes, slowly sipping our drinks. “This really is a nice place. I’m not just saying it.”

“Nat loves it.”

“Bet she’d love it even more if there were animals here.” The alcohol rush must give me a bit of liquid courage because my next question plops out before I can think twice. “Hey, what happened to your brother? Davey?”

Despite the fire and the heat of the summer night, a chill ripples my arms at the grief that crosses his face.

It wasn’t just my imagination earlier. Every mention of his dead brother shuts him down.

“He died, Blue. Nothing else to say.”

Damn. Unsure what to say next, I take another sip of margarita.

He tosses a fresh log on the fire. “So did Nat’s mother.” He glances my way. “That was your next question, wasn’t it, Detective Derby?”

I shrug, dropping my face to hide the fierce red on my cheeks. Slowly, I nod. There’s no use hiding it. I’m drunk and nosy and we both know it.

“Aneurism during child birth did her in. She never knew if Nat was a girl or boy.”

“God, I’m sorry. No ultrasound?” I want to slap myself over the stupid question. Blame it on the canned tequila and slushy strawberry mix.

“Don’t know if she ever did one or not outside what’s required to check for health issues. Always said she wanted the gender under wraps till the baby came. I was in the army. Overseas. We’d dated on and off for a couple of years.”

I’m still looking at him. Slowly, he sucks a mouthful of whiskey, and swallows loudly.

“Cindy didn’t approve of the shit in my younger years. Running around with a motorcycle club. Said turning into anybody’s old lady didn’t appeal to her, and I can’t say I blame her. It’s a rough life. Club had its problems, too – big fucking problems it’s taken years to straighten out. I saw the writing on the wall and joined the army. Things were still shit between her and me. When I found out I was going to Iraq, I broke it off for good. Then I was home on leave a year or more later. We were both lonely. Nat was conceived. Told her we’d figure it out after my tour was over. That we’d get married.” He takes another swallow off his glass. “Nat was born two weeks before I put in for my discharge papers.”

I’m shocked he’s spilled so much, and don’t want him to regret it. “She’s a very lucky girl to have you. My dad was in the army, too. Overseas. Could’ve

gotten out before things really ramped up, after 9/11, but he said he owed them another term. He couldn't walk away in a crisis. Wound up in the wrong place, wrong time. He didn't come home after a Taliban ambush. I was in my early teens. My mother was a wreck, but eventually, we adjusted."

Brent's eyes burn right through me. It's an equal trade, at least, confession for confession.

I shrug. "We survived. Somewhat, anyway. I think what happened to dad, to her, is the real reason she wants me to find Mr. Right so bad and get married." I shake my head and finish my drink. "To know the love of a man. A husband. Before it's too late."

"You don't want that?" He takes my empty can and hands me a full one.

I open it and take a long pull. "Maybe someday. Right now, I just want to teach."

"Art."

"Art. That's what kept me sane after dad died. I could lose myself in it. Pretend I was somewhere else. Forget everything."

"We all need to do that sometimes."

"Right." I pretend to scratch the bridge of my nose so he doesn't see the tears.

Brent holds his cup towards me, offering solidarity. I click my can against it.

"To the struggle. And fuck tragedy, too," he rumbles.

I nod. "Fuck tragedy."

I take another long swallow and then look at my can. "These are really good."

"Wouldn't know, Blue. I'm a whiskey man. Sometimes beer."

"Oh, come on. Here, try a sip." I hold it out to him. He's incredulous. "Our little secret. One taste. Nobody ever knows."

I lean over to hand him my can. Brent just smiles.

My head feels a little woozy, but it's the uneven ground that catches me off guard. The chair tilts and I'm not fast enough to stop it.

He's quick. Keeps it from falling all the way over and I jump to my feet. My can slips out of my hold, and I kneel down to grab it. The contents splash all over a notebook, which I instantly recognize as the one he's always had in the back of the class.

Too curious not to, I flip it open, before he can snatch it away. My breath catches at the images he's drawn.

A woman's body. Naked. Fabulously detailed.

I'm in the midst of appreciating his skill when I see what's printed across the top in big blocky man letters.

BLUE.

That's when I notice the woman's face.

Holy flaming hell.

Pure fire rushes my cheeks. I flip the page. And the next.

There are several more nudes.

All of me. I flip one more page and a new sense of warmth fills me.

It's me again, but this time I'm dressed, hugging Natalie. I recognize the scene. The day she gave me the friendship bracelet.

Growling, he rips his notebook away. "You weren't supposed to see that!" He tosses it on his chair.

No longer content with being his secret model, I look up at him. "Why? They're good."

Good, if I ignore the fact they're living proof this man has been undressing me with his eyes in screaming detail since day one.

He traces the side of my face with one hand, his eyes locked on mine. Every thought I'd warned myself to avoid rushes forward.

Him kissing me. Me, returning his kisses. His caresses.

Touching. Kissing. Giving. Getting.

"You, Blue. You're what's good. Not those damn drawings."

My heart kicks into high gear and my chest goes tight. I've never wanted to be kissed so badly, to be touched like now.

"Don't be silly." The air between us crackles.

Electric. Charged. Intense.

I want to beg. Plead for him to just put his lips against mine.

One. More. Time.

He nods, never looking away. "Too good," he echoes, forcing his point.

"Hardly." I step closer, laying a hand on his chest. The beat of his heart thuds against my palm.

"You're wrong, Eden," I whisper. A crazy warmth folds around me, sinks

through my skin, inside me, swift and ever growing. "I'm done being good." I take one more step, so our bodies are almost touching. "Tell me I'm bad. Tonight. Just this once."

"Blue."

I've lost it. And it's too late.

"No. Kiss me, Eden. Just fucking kiss me already."

The animal glint in his eye swells.

In a flash, he grabs my hips, pulling me forward, closing the gap between us. My nipples harden, pressed against his hard chest. I tilt my hips, rejoicing at the feel of his hard cock, deliciously close.

When his lips seize mine, all thoughts abandon me, except for one word.

Yes.

Maybe two words.

God, yes!

I wrap my arms around his neck and let desires that have kept me awake for weeks flow. His lips are softer, his tongue hotter, wilder than anything I've imagined. My pussy aches. So wet, so tense, if he doesn't give me something soon I might die.

There's no more space between us, but we're not close enough.

I want more. Crave it.

His hands roam under my shirt, up my back. Heaven. I rub against him, arching upwards, as his hands grasp my butt, pulling me against his cock all the more firmly.

Fantasies don't compare to the desires leaping forward when he kisses a trail down my neck. He pulls my T-shirt up and kisses my breasts, tonguing inside the top of my bra.

I gasp at the pleasure and squeeze my thighs together.

Throbbing heat. Soaked. Frantic.

Confused when he stops, I freeze, unable to move as he pulls my shirt back in place.

"This is fake, Blue," he says. "Fake and fucking dangerous. Remember that."

He releases me and turns away.

"Go to bed, Blue. Go now. Before I fuck you right here on the ground."

There's a crack in my desire.

Just enough to send all the conflicted feelings streaming back. Wiping my very red face, I turn.

I get up and stumble backwards. Have to blink back the tears of frustration needling the backs of my eyes. Recalling how my knees work, I head for the house.

In the bedroom, I close the door, still breathing too hard.

Still wanting more.

Asshole or not, he's right. It's *fake*.

Fake and dangerous.

I grab my overnight bag and head for the bathroom, but as I undress, all I can think about is him.

His hands. His mouth.

Every glorious inch of him.

Heat swells my pussy again, begging for more. I turn on the water and step in the shower. Leaning back, I let the warm water flow over my breasts, imagining it's his lips. I run my hands over myself, rubbing my nipples and then down lower.

Lower.

Tentatively, I slide my fingers between my folds and settle on my clit. The pressure makes my breath catch. I never bring myself off this hard and fast.

Maybe because I'm imagining it's not my hand working my sweet spot, but Brent's.

I find a rhythm and pick up speed, pretending I'm not alone. I'm getting good at that.

Getting good at this.

I plant my other hand on the wall, letting hot water cascade down my back as I throw myself over the edge.

Coming!

And all I can see is him.

Between my legs. Pinning me down with his hands, fucking me with those tiger eyes, taking half my soul as he plunges in deep again and again and –

Oh, hell.

I'm breathing so hard. Shaking. My thighs hurt. I keep Brent's image in my mind as I slide my finger deep inside me a few more times, sweet relief fading to numb.

The rush hits like a monsoon. Sudden, fierce, mysterious. An explosion that leaves me limp, leaning heavily against the wall.

It keeps me sane, but strangely unsatisfied. Unfulfilled. And too horny.

It also leaves me lonelier than ever.

SHOW AND TELL (BRENT)

The sweat dripping off my brows makes my eyes sting. I wipe my forehead with the back of my hand and finish screwing the final wire onto the detonator.

It's not the reason I'm sweating. The detonator isn't connected to anything.

Not yet.

Can't just blame it on the heat, either, even though this windowless old shack is hotter than the devil's diner.

It's her.

Blue.

I've sweat bullets since sending her into the house last night. Ever since she left my dick harder than the flag pole at Iwo Jima.

I wanted her like I haven't wanted any woman in years.

Wanted it worse because I knew I couldn't have her, too. Even though she'd wanted it just as bad.

Pure torture.

Both of us are drowning in our own flesh and there's nothing we can do about it.

I go to sleep hard. Wake up harder. Brain, body, and soul tangled up in Blue.

Fuck, I couldn't even face her this morning. So I woke up before dawn and left while she and Nat were still sound asleep.

Assembling this very illegal, high powered weapon of death is preferable to spending another morning staring at those lips. Fixing my eyes on her ass when she's turned around. Pushing every growl down with coffee, paint-stripping strong, hoping it'll keep me from thinking how bad I want that ass

under me for two fucking seconds.

My lip curls back in a snarl. I shouldn't be doing this. And neither should she.

"Damn it, Davey!"

My shout echoes off the building's walls and worn rafters. Very fucking worn. Should've collapsed years ago.

I set the screwdriver down and pick up the detonator to give it a closer look. This little remote will take lives. Set off a blast that could clear a city block.

End this shit once and for all.

Rubbing my face, I choke back an apology. I'm not even sure who it's for.

It's easy to blame Davey. To wish he'd listened and stayed the hell away from the Pearls, but it won't bring him back. Won't change anything.

Honestly, I'm just as pissed off at myself as him.

I'd vowed to change. To become everything Natalie would need in a father. And I have.

Had, rather.

Until the Pearls poked their evil fucking noses in my life. That left me with no choice but to return to the man I'd left in the past. Turn into something I don't want to be.

I'll pay off Davey's debt, all right. Just not with cash.

By the time I'm done with the Black Pearls, there won't be enough left of them to bury.

Justice *will* be served.

I set the detonator in an old army ammunition box and stash it in the far corner, along with the rest of the supplies I'd bought, bartered, and damn-near stole from salvage yards and skeezy looking gun runners from here to Tucson. Trained by some of the best, the years I spent being a tactical and explosive expert in the army has its benefits.

After strategically layering the old lumber to look like a misshapen pile of driftwood, rather than a hiding spot, I put the tools in the toolbox and carry it out to my truck.

Bastard Phil knows I was in the army. Believes I was in disposal and clean up – skills I built my business on post-Iraq. Luckily, he's just like everybody else. Doesn't know that in order to clean up a mess, you have to know how it was made in the first place.

There are parts of this mess I don't understand.

Like Davey. Why and how he got snarled in a web woven deep and tight by the Pearls.

I might never know all of it, true, but I've accepted that because the how or why doesn't matter. Not as much as it ending.

All of it.

I let the air conditioner cool off the cab before I put the truck in gear. The trap is set, or close to it. Actually planting the explosives can't happen till I figure out how to lure the Black Pearls out here. There's an old road that runs along this side of the small mountain separating the ranch from the decaying shed.

It's the perfect set up. I just have to figure out the enticement to get them here.

Everyone. The head honchos and their minions.

Having not been used for years, the trail that leads back to the ranch is rough, and I take it slow. Which gives me ample time to contemplate my other issue.

Blue.

Damn it. I've never been attracted to someone like I am her. From the moment we met.

Never wanted anyone so bad. Not even Cindy.

I don't even know how to pursue someone like Blue without destroying her.

She's clean. Honest. Innocent.

I sense that in her every waking moment we're together.

Innocence.

Shit, I've never had to pursue anyone. These looks plus the patches I've worn, Grizzlies MC and US Army alike, pull pussy like no tomorrow.

Cindy was the one who chased me down, and I let her catch me. It was fun. Good at times. That's what we were both after. A good time. For the moment.

When she told me she was pregnant, we both took it seriously, figured we had to find a way to make it work.

She would have held up her end of the bargain. Deep down, she was a good person.

Just wasn't good for me.

Never got into my head. Under my skin. Not like a little teacher I've spent far too many hours pissing off, and too many more drawing naked.

I crack the window, needing a breath of fresh air. I'd nearly flipped my shit when she found my sketches. Thought for sure I had a slap or two coming, after she had proof what an obsessed pig I can be, but fuck...it's like they just made her want me more.

Fuck.

I don't know what this is. Can't comprehend it.

I've had other women. Before Cindy and in between our on-again off-again relationship. Life made sense then. Had no need for a full-time woman lodged too deep in my life.

It's the one familiar thing I wish I could bring back with everything else going to hell.

The Black Pearls may have forced me to become the man I'd left behind. One whose only focus is on the here and now, but I can't let that spill into the rest of my life.

Can't let two maddening problems fuse together. Can't let them multiply.

The last thing Nat needs is me dragging women into her life, only to have her watch them leave.

Exactly what I'm doing to her with Blue. Her fucking teacher, no less.

A fireball of anger rolls across my stomach. I squeeze the steering wheel harder.

Fuck the Black Pearls. They've gone too far. Threatening Blue, bringing us face to face with our demons, that's the final straw.

The truck's Bluetooth system firing up breaks my concentration. It's Blue calling. Concerned, I hit the answer button. "What's up?"

"Hey, Dad!"

I may be mad at the world, but the sound of Natalie's voice still makes me grin. "Hey, baby girl."

"Where are you?"

Remembering the hike I'd promised her, I say, "I drove out to check the hills to see how far we can go this morning. On my way back now."

"I was hoping you remembered!"

"Course I did."

"Well, Izzy and I have pancake batter ready to fry. The bacon's done and the scrambled eggs are ready to go in the pan, so we're wondering when you'll be

back.”

A hard bump rattles the truck before the trail evens out as it starts to run along parallel to the old fence. “I can see the ranch,” I tell her.

The screen door creaks in the background before she says, “I see your dust plume. Great timing! We’ll start the pancakes and eggs.”

“Sounds good. I’m hungry.”

“We are too. Love you.”

“Love you, baby girl.”

She clicks off, ending the call, and I let out a long sigh.

I’ve fucked up too many times lately. Have to put a stop to this before it goes any further.



I ARRIVE at the house a few minutes later and smell the bacon and pancakes the second I get out.

Unfortunately, it all tastes as good as it smells. Had it been burnt, I would have had more reasons why Blue can’t spend another night at the ranch with us.

Natalie isn’t going to like that no matter what, so delicious food really doesn’t hold credence.

Natalie talks non-stop about the hike while eating. She already has on her boots and jeans, and practically gobbles down her food. “Izzy can come with us, can’t she, Dad? I already told her she could.”

“And I already said no thank you,” Blue answers.

She’s barely looked at me since I walked in the house.

I shouldn’t have kissed her last night.

I knew that, and it took all I had to stop it from becoming more than a kiss. Even later, when I found her sleeping in the top bunk, I was aching hard. Dick practically begging to get wet.

“I’m going to clean up the kitchen while you two go hiking,” she says.

“And then you have some paperwork to do,” Natalie says solemnly.

“Sure do,” Blue says, smiling softly at Nat. “The academy being closed for the long weekend gives all you kids a four-day weekend. But teachers still have work so everything’s ready when you return on Tuesday.”

Nat shakes her head. "I don't want to be a teacher when I grow up. You never get a day off." She smiles at me. "I like Daddy's job better. It might be stinky and gross, but he gets free time."

"That's the trade off," I say, standing. "Ready to hit the hill?"

A hint of guilt rolls through my stomach at leaving before the kitchen is clean. Natalie and I have been on our own from the beginning. We're used to cleaning up after ourselves. But I also sense Blue wants us gone. Me, especially.

"Have fun," she says. "Don't forget to take plenty of water."

I don't have to reply. Nat speaks for both of us, assuring Blue she's packed nearly a gallon's worth of bottles in her backpack, along with a bowl for Shadow, who always tags along on our hikes for the first leg or two.

We're barely off the steps when she says, "Isn't Izzy the best, Dad? Those pancakes were delish!"

I hold my tongue. 'Best' isn't the word I'd use for the black magic around this woman, turning every damn drop of my blood molten.

Blue's still inside, well within earshot, and I'm struggling not to turn around, hoping to get another glimpse at her. She has on a flowered dress that leaves a good portion of her sleek legs bare, as well as her sun-kissed shoulders. There's not a single part of her body that isn't stare worthy. Not a square inch of her I don't want to tame with my tongue.

"I know you thought so, too," Nat says. "You ate four. I've never seen you eat four pancakes before!"

Guilty. "I was hungry. Long morning," I mutter, which is an excuse and the honest truth.

"She's fun, too." Nat steps around a big boulder and watches as Shadow jumps onto the rock. "I know you like her, Dad. I've seen you looking at her when she's not looking at you."

Nat turns, a wicked smile on her face, reaching up to stroke the purring animal's chin.

Shit. Like this can't get any worse.

My breath sticks in my throat.

I'd been careful about that. Extremely careful. Hiding.

"There's nothing to be embarrassed about."

"I'm not embarrassed, Nat. This isn't something you should be talking

about.” I take a hold of her upper arm as she steps over a wide rut. “Bl-Ms. Derby is your teacher.”

“Well, yeah!” She jumps over the next rut. “And I know the academy has rules about teachers fraternizing with students and their families.”

I live with this kid, have her entire life, and know she’s extremely intelligent. Still, her matter-of-fact tone catches me off guard now. She’s my baby girl, and growing up way too damn fast. “How do you know? Do you even know what fraternizing means?”

She rolls her eyes. “It means socializing outside school, Dad. Jeez.” With one hand on her hip, she asks, “Would you like me to spell it, too?”

That’s not like her. “Are you being smart with me?”

Her chin falls. She turns and starts walking again. “No. I just don’t understand why you don’t want me to like her. What’s the big deal? It’s not like Principal Jacobs is here eavesdropping.”

Parenting is the toughest assignment I’ve ever had. Ever will. “Nat, that’s not the point. I’m not saying we can’t like her. Just trying to save you from being upset. We’re helping her out this weekend, a one time favor, but after...” Having no clear explanation, I shrug. “The only place you’ll see her is in school.”

She stops walking and stares up at me with a quiet anger I rarely see.

“Why? I won’t tell anyone.” She spins around and stomps forward.

Flustered, I follow, trying to come up with an answer she’ll accept. She might be smart as a whip, but she’s got a lot to learn about the world’s many fucked up complexities.

Without looking back at me, she says “You’re always telling me I need friends, Dad. Well, you need them too, you know.”

“I *have* friends.”

“You mean Juan? Collin? The people you work with are employees, Daddy. They aren’t your friends, just like the kids in my class aren’t my friends.”

My heart takes a hard tumble. Damn it, that’s not the same. “Nat.”

“I like Izzy, Dad.” She plops down on a rock. Elbows on her knees, she sets her chin in her palms, gazing up at me. “She’s fun. Easy to talk to. You get along with her better than you admit, too. And I can talk to her about stuff I can’t with anybody else.”

Stuff? I sit down beside her and take a deep breath.

I'm not ready for this.

Not now.

"We have our fun, and you can talk to me about anything."

She picks up a pebble and throws it. "No, I can't."

Although I'm scared shitless as to what the answer might be, I ask, "Like what?"

"Like how old a girl is when they start wearing a bra, or using deodorant, or _"

"You can ask grandma all that," I say, a shock rolling through my blood.

"No, I can't." She throws another rock. "She'll start blubbering and tell me I'm growing up too fast."

That hits the nail on the head. But, I'm sure if I talk to my mother first, she'll be able to approach the subject less emotionally. When the time comes.

It certainly hasn't. Right? "Nat, listen, you're only ten and –"

"And in eighth grade. Four years from now I'll be fourteen and graduating high school. Then what? College? Trying to get my driver's license while the other girls are old enough to drink?"

The shimmer in her eyes as she looks up at me stops my heart.

"Kinda scares me, Dad. It *really* scares me."

I wrap an arm around her, hug her tight, and tell her the truth. "That scares me too, baby girl. Doesn't matter, though. We'll figure it out like we always do."

Always. I'd crawl over broken glass in Chernobyl for this girl to keep her smiling.

Shadow jumps up on her lap and she twists to snuggle the cat close. "Just so you know...I haven't asked Izzy any of those things, but I know she'll have the answers if I do. She's already helped me so much."

"Helped you with what?"

"Things."

Needing to know, I push her harder, "What things?"

"She saw me at recess one day, reading, and then talked to my pod teacher. So now I have fitness with the fifth grade instead of the eighth. It's fun. I like it, and I like how I have the same lunch period as those kids, too. Izzy gave me some books girls in that grade are reading, so I have things to talk to them

about.”

It doesn’t sound like much, but I can tell how much they mean to her. “That was nice of her.”

Her eyes hold unshed tears when she looks up at me. “Please let her be my friend, Dad. Let her be yours, too.”

I’d give this girl the world if I could, but I also have to be cautious what I promise. “I can’t make anyone be your friend, Natalie, or mine.”

“I know.” She sighs heavily and leans against me again. “I know.”

Having no idea what more I can do, or say, I let silence do its work.

Before long, Nat lets Shadow go and gives me a final hug before jumping to her feet. “If we’re going as far as the notch tree, we’d best get going.”

The notch tree is just that. A dead old tree that we put a notch in every time we hike this trail.

I’m still raw on the inside and torn over what to do. Being a father’s the one thing that doesn’t get easier with experience.

I can take the pressures of the army, of running my own business, of the Black Pearls breathing down my neck, but this...being a preteen’s dad, outweighs all the other issues. Easy.

Natalie reverts back to her usual smiling self when we arrive at the house. Blue sits in a chair on the porch with a stack of papers on the table beside her. Shadow lounging lazily by her feet.

“How was the hike?”

The shine in Blue’s eyes as they settle on Nat scares me as much as I appreciate it. Might not know what the hell to think about this woman, or what to do with her, but I do value what she does for my daughter.

“Awesome!” Nat says. “We made another notch in our tree. Number fifty eight.”

“Good for you.” Blue gestures towards the kitchen. “I made some lemonade. It’s in the fridge if you’re thirsty.”

“Thanks. I’ll get some. You want a glass, Dad?”

“Sure.” I sit down in the chair opposite Blue. “What are you working on?”

She gathers the papers into a neat stack. “Lesson plans.”

Hearing Nat in the kitchen, talking to Shadow about getting the cat some treats and water, I lean closer. “The other day, when you accused me of

keeping Natalie within arm's reach, what did you mean?"

She frowns and glances towards the kitchen. "Just that...you seem to have control over everything she does."

"I have to, she's my daughter."

Blue nods, keeping her voice hushed. "She certainly is, but she's also her own person. A few opportunities for her to interact with other children her age, without an adult around, could really benefit her."

I can tell how carefully she's treading. "Like a different gym class or lunch period, you mean?"

She bites her bottom lip and nods. "Yes. I apologize if I overstepped, but she's lonely. Very lonely. She's smart. Brilliant. But emotionally, she's ten, and needs to be around other ten year olds in order to learn how to cope with things better."

Again, she's stepping lightly. Carefully.

If it was anyone else, I'd probably be so pissed off I'd send them packing, but whatever Blue did for Natalie, it was totally to help her. I respect that.

An excited squeal comes from the kitchen. "Cookies!"

Blue cringes slightly. "You had a visitor while you were gone. Mrs. Wingard. Shadow didn't come home last night, so she figured you were here and brought over a platter of cookies."

I hold my breath for a second. The harder I try to crawl out, the deeper this shit gets.

Old Lady Wingard is as nosy as her cat. "She ask who you are?"

"Yes." Her cheeks redden. "I said I'm Natalie's tutor."

That was a better answer than I could have come up with.

Hell of a lot better than a fake fiancé, like I'd told Preston. I still hate that guy. Hate the idea that he had a real date with Blue. Whether he'd fucked it up or not, she'd actually agreed to go out with him.

I don't like the idea of her agreeing to go out with anyone. Also don't give a damn how insane that sounds.

Nat returns carrying lemonade and cookies. After eating a few, and enjoying how intently Blue listens to everything we say about our hike, I need a way to release the tension.

That's all it takes. Five minutes with her and I'm hard as stone. Thinking

thoughts that I shouldn't be thinking and wanting things that I shouldn't be wanting.

"Think I'll go take care of that dead tree behind the barn." I down the last of my lemonade and stand.

"We'll help," Natalie says. "I'll get Izzy a pair of your old gloves."

"She'll need more than gloves," I say, referring to her dress and sandals as I head for the door.

Lady Luck isn't on my side. In fact, she's decided to give me the bird today.

Blue has jeans. A pair that molds to her sweet ass perfectly.

Fuck.

The next several hours of cutting the tree into logs and splitting each one into smaller bits is close to hell. I can't take my eyes off her as she carries the wood to the barn and stacks it in a pile. The tight tank top and jeans leave little to my imagination, besides imagining how bad I'd like to rip that tank top off with my teeth, suck on those perfect tits, and bury my throbbing cock deep in her.

I'm so fucking hard it hurts.

Have been the entire time. There are few things worse than being so close, yet still not able to get your rocks off. Every part of me stays on edge, screaming for a release it's not getting.

I pull my t-shirt off and toss it on the ground. Fuck it all.

I have to stop getting so worked up over her. "That's it."

Blue turns towards me, tilting her head. A soft sheen of sweat makes her skin glisten, and her nipples couldn't be more noticeable. "What's it?"

"The wood. You're done. I'll finish up."

"But I can —"

"No."

She's staring at me. Frowning.

I know I sound pissed. I am.

Fully frustrated. Need a few minutes of reprieve. "You and Nat should go inside. Start getting ready for the rehearsal dinner." I send the axe into another log so hard my shoulders pulse.

Now, I'm imagining her in the shower. Cleaning up. Naked. Fuck!

I can't fathom how this ends, but my gut tells me one way, and one way only. One of us gets fucked. The other, completely destroyed.



HOURS LATER, after an ice cold shower, partially because the hot water heater needs to be replaced, and not allowing myself to do more than glance her way, we pull into the Mexican restaurant for the rehearsal dinner.

A crowd of people will help. It has to.

There's a crowd, all right, and a hushed silence fills the banquet room as all eyes turn to us. Dread fills her eyes as Blue glances up at me.

Despite all the misery I've put myself through the past twenty four hours, I put my hand in the small of her back and guide her forward. It's too late to do anything else.

Dressed in another flowing red outfit including a floppy hat, Cleo rushes towards us. If I was hoping she'd act as some sort of shield, I'd thought wrong.

"Finally, the man of the hour! Everyone's bursting at the seams to meet you, Mr. Eden." She lowers her voice to add, "They all thought I was lying. Even though Clara insisted she'd met you, too."

I catch the way Blue's breasts rise as she draws in a deep breath and holds it. She's wearing another short dress. Dark blue with a low-cut neckline. Her hair hangs loose, past her shoulders, and flutters slightly as she bows her head and presses a hand to her forehead.

"Come with me, darling," Cleo says, taking Natalie's hand. "I'll introduce you to the other children. I've told them all about you and our trip to the zoo. There's a kid's table set up so you youngsters can all eat together when the food is served and won't be bored by all the silly adults."

Silly is right. Every adult in the room stares at us, whispering. Nat looks up at me, and unlike Blue, excitement shines in her eyes. I give her a nod and she hurries off with Cleo.

"Ready?" I ask Blue.

She lets out a long sigh and glances up at me. "To leave? Heck yes."

Hoping to ease her anxiety, I laugh, loud enough so others hear, and then lean closer, "Just say the word and we're out of here."

"I wish!" she answers. "But we have to stay long enough to eat. Common courtesy."

“I’m sure they make a good margarita.”

She shakes her head. “I had enough last night.”

“We’ve all been waiting for you,” Clara says, approaching with a group of others. “Izzy, make the rounds with our man of honor! Everybody’s waiting for Brent.”

Blue does just that with a worn smirk on her face. Onward we go, and I make an effort to remember specific people and their names.

Particularly the ones who cast the most scornful, jealous glares.

I don’t know what sort of joy these people get out of embarrassing her, but they do, and a few of their remarks do more than irritate me.

“He doesn’t mean any harm,” Clara says, after a cousin makes a snide remark. “Izzy’s been a member of the lonely-hearts club for so long, a few people took bets you were an imaginary friend. Thought she’d *still* show up all by her lonesome. Joke’s on them!” She elbows Blue, grinning.

I slide my arm around to Blue’s side and tug her closer. “I’m not imaginary and she’s not alone. Won’t be tomorrow, either.”

Clara smiles and bats her eyelashes. “You’ll have tongues wagging, talking about another wedding happening soon.”

The bride and groom arrive then, along with the rest of their small wedding party. I’m thankful as hell the focus of the room shifts to them, until Clara says one more thing.

“Don’t worry, your secret’s safe with me. I haven’t even told Cleo I ran into Preston Graves. Or that he mentioned your engagement.”

Blue smothers her gasp only because she quickly covers her mouth with one hand.

I escort her to the table and order us each a margarita.

She offers a shaky smile. “Thanks.”

I nod, but have to ask, “Didn’t you say you met Preston on a dating site?”

“Yes.”

“Then how does Clara know him?”

Her shoulders slump. “Fuck if I know. Right now, I can’t say I care.”

I don’t say anything. No need to give that little bastard a second more of thought than he deserves.

There are bigger sharks in my pond right now. Far more dangerous ones.

Others arrive at the table. Small talk trails from one end to the other. I join in with those nearby, especially Cleo's boyfriend, George, sitting across from me.

Of all the people here, he was the only one who greeted Blue with sincerity, and his expression held respect when he shook my hand. I get the sense he doesn't care as much as the rest of the family if Blue and I are really dating. Only that she's not here alone. I can appreciate that.

Halfway through the meal, I glance around the table and say to Blue, "Isn't the rehearsal dinner usually just for the wedding party and immediate family?"

She huffs out a breath while nodding.

George laughs. "You've been recruited. Congratulations."

"Recruited?"

"Sure," he says, "after the meal ends, we're all expected to go over to Janice and Joe's house. Bride's parents. There, we'll set up tents, tables, chairs, and anything else they need strong, abled-bodies to complete."

I look at Blue. She takes a sip off her margarita. "We can leave. I've already told mother."

Sitting across from Blue, Cleo gives me a pleading look.

It's a test. Or, in my eyes, a challenge. Something I can never back away from.

This family is harsh, but only on Blue, which rubs me the wrong way. And continues to as people keep glancing our way. They don't even try hiding their doubts, or how they whisper to each other.

Later, as I pull in the wide driveway and park behind George and Cleo, Blue insists we don't need to help. Under her breath because Nat seems excited, hoping to play longer with the girls she was introduced to at the restaurant.

Natalie flies out the back door of the truck as soon as I cut the engine. She slams the door and runs straight toward the minivan where the other girls are climbing out.

"You can leave, I'll watch Nat while she plays for a while," Blue says.

"Nowhere I need to go." I climb out.

She meets me at the front of the truck. "Really. You don't have to stay." Shooting a nervous glance, she says, "Go back to the ranch. I can borrow

mom's car and bring Natalie home later."

Others are pulling in. No doubt they're watching us.

Enough of this fuckery. I grab her by the hips and yank her forward.

She plants her hands on my chest. "What are you doing?"

"Giving them the show they're waiting for." I brush my lips over hers.

Pinched tight, her lips don't respond against mine. Not at first.

Then I pull her closer, running my hand over the silky material covering her ass. "Come on, you can do better than that," I whisper against her mouth. "I know you can."

The heels she's wearing make her a bit taller, but still, she has to tilt her head back slightly in order to look up at me. "We shouldn't do this, Eden. You shouldn't. It's –"

She's trying too hard not to smile, to hide the flash of excitement in her eyes. "I want to," I growl, grabbing her ass.

Taking advantage of her lips parting, I lock my mouth on hers and give some solid tongue action. Her response, her tongue twisting around mine, shoots a thrill through me. Within seconds, I'm as hard as I'd been this afternoon, aching like hell. I'm willing to take the pain.

She's worth it. So's giving her family something to stare at.

The heat between us intensifies. Her hands go up my neck, her fingers in my hair. I feel every curve of her body as she presses it harder against mine, and it's fucking amazing. Intoxicating.

I drag my mouth away from hers and do my damndest to act like I'm perfectly fine. "I'll be staying till it's time for all of us to leave." I plant another kiss on her forehead and then spin her about. Wrapping my arms around her waist, I press my hard bulge against her backside.

She gasps, pressing into me. "Now, you get it. I've got you, Isabella Derby. And I don't want to hear another word about it."

She steps forward, and so do I, keeping us tight together and flattening my hand over her stomach. The pressure of my dick against her ass is an extra stimulation I don't need, but love. It's like pushing on a wound, how the pain makes it feel better.

"Stop being silly," she hisses, twisting her hips.

I nip the lobe of her ear. "This isn't."

I thrust my hips forward.

She jolts. “Whatever it is, stop! Before you make us a spectacle.”

I laugh, stepping out from behind her. “Too late for that.” I grab her hand to lead her to the front door the others are walking through, glancing back at us.

The beasts are quickly separated from the beauties by a thin gray-haired man in the front foyer who directs the men to the backyard and the women into the living room. For good measure, I give Blue a quick parting kiss and head out to help set up tents, chairs, and tables, just like George said.

The thin man is Joe Derby, Megan and Clara’s father. Apparently, brother of Blue’s dead father. He has two other daughters, older, and already married. The mothers of the girls playing with Nat.

Megan is Joe’s youngest, and if throwing together a wedding in two weeks has him frazzled, it doesn’t show. He’s friendly and jovial and continuously passing out beers in payment for the work.

I finish pounding the final tie-down stake in the ground for the big tent and stand up as he walks closer, a bottle of beer in each hand.

“Ready for a fresh one?” he asks.

“Sure.” I set the sledgehammer down and take a bottle. Swallowing a long drink, I nod towards the huge back yard that also hosts a swimming pool. “Nice place you’ve got here.”

“Thanks. We built it years ago while raising our girls.” He takes a pull off his beer. “I’m sure you don’t remember, but we spoke on the phone a few years back. One of my sandwich shops had a fire in the kitchen. Called your company for a clean-up quote.”

I point out the obvious. “I didn’t get the job.”

“You’d come highly recommended, and even though I tried coaxing you to reconsider, you said you were too booked to take on another job in the time span I had to get things done. Especially a gig up here.” He holds up his beer. “No hard feelings. The guys you recommended did a fine job.”

“Wes Raine out of Flagstaff?” I ask.

“Yep. I’ve used him since, too.”

I’ve known Wes for years. Always happy to recommend him. “He’s good. We’ve worked together on several big projects around the state.” My attention shifts to the patio door opening. Blue steps outside, following a few other women.

“Aw, hell,” Joe says. “Looks like they’re ready to decorate the arch and it’s not up yet.”

I empty my beer and hand him the bottle. “Where’s it at?”

He points towards the house. “Box in the garage.”

“Let’s go grab it,” I say, clapping his shoulder.

‘Some assembly required’ involves so many tiny screws I could have built the damn thing from scratch faster than it takes us to throw it together. Except, then I wouldn’t have needed all the assistance from Blue.

Of all the women here, she’s by far the prettiest. Every time I look at her, my eyes land on her lips, remembering how soft and lush they get under mine.

“Looks perfect,” she says, admiring the archway.

“Marvelous!” Cleo holds up a mess of flimsy fabric. “Now, Brent, could you be a dear and help us get this tulle wrapped around the top?”

“I can do it, Mother.” Blue walks over and picks up one of the folding chairs.

“You can’t stand on that!” Cleo says.

I take the fabric from Cleo. “I’ll help her.”

“Thank you.” Cleo waves at both of us as she walks away.

Blue sets the chair next to the archway. “I can do this.”

“Not without my help. Not standing by while you roll off that thing and crack your neck.” I plant a swift kiss on her lips, enjoying how her cheeks go cherry red. “Let me hold the chair. Help you balance. It’ll collapse if I try standing on it.”

She kicks off her shoes. “All right.”

I grasp the back of the chair and take her hand to help her step up onto the seat.

“The quicker we get this done, the quicker we’ll be able to leave,” she says.

“Whaaat? You’re leaving us already, Izzy?”

The question comes from a young woman walking past. One who’s not nearly as pretty as she thinks she is, and has made a habit of walking past me several times tonight, casting looks any fool could read.

Some fools might take her up on her offer, too.

She doesn’t get it.

Ever since the day Isabella Derby walked into my life, I’m no fucking fool.

Ignoring the question, I cup one of Blue's butt cheeks. Standing on the chair, she's taller than me, and has to bend down, just as expected. Before she can speak, I kiss her.

"What're you doing?" she asks, breaking the kiss.

"Marking territory. Letting everybody know you're taken."

"Oh, please! No one's concerned about that."

I lean back so I can see her face, the sheepish expression forming as she stands straight again. "I've convinced them, you mean? Glad that was fast." I say, happy to have been of service.

"Convinced them? You can say that, I suppose." She holds her hand out for the fabric.

I hand it to her. "That upset you?"

"I'm past being upset by what any of them have to say."

First, I'm irritated, then my thoughts go in a different direction. One I should've thought of before. "Even if they say you're too good for me?"

"Hardly, Eden!" She rolls the material over the top of the archway. "Quite the opposite. Between nearly every woman drooling over you with their tongues out, I've been told constantly how hard I'll have to work to keep a man like you satisfied."

My irritation at her family returns, turning to anger in two-seconds flat. "Bullshit. All of it."

"It's true." She evens out the fabric flowing over both sides of the archway to the ground.

I let go of the chair and grab her waist, lifting her into my arms. Then I let her body slide down the front of mine.

"What are you doing? I'm not done yet."

Isn't it obvious?

Or is she just playing hard to get like a pro?

I hold her against me with her feet barely dangling off the ground and capture her lips. Heaven.

This kiss holds nothing back. It's long and hard and hot.

Doesn't stop till she's slumped against me, moaning softly, holding onto my neck and gasping for air.

I must be getting used to the fact that I have no control over my body when she's near.

Maybe I just don't care.

I'm hard. I'm ready. Eager to fuck her all night long, past sunup, but it's not the only reason I'm running down her lips like a starving lion.

It's the desire to teach her entire family a lesson.

When they pick on Blue, they pick on me, and I retaliate.

SHOW ME (IZZY)

I watch the ranch come into view with a nervousness I've never felt.
It would be easier if Natalie was with us. She's not.

Though I believe allowing her to spend the night with Paige and Hannah, Janice's granddaughters, is a good thing, she's the shield I need right now.

Not against him. Me. Brent's kiss earlier rocketed my libido to Jupiter and it hasn't come down yet.

His kisses are fake, I know. He's playing a role. My bogus boyfriend. My not fiancé.

But hell, who would've thought he was such a great actor? I'm half-believing we're real.

Which we're not. And can't be. And that can never change.

Damn, I should've stayed with Uncle Joe and Aunt Janice, too. Slept on the floor, maybe.

Which would have proven to everyone how false this is, leaving him for the vultures among my many single cousins. If that one bridesmaid, Pamela something or another, made *one more* comment about Brent's God abs, I swear I would've ripped her bleached blonde hair out by its black roots.

Every time I turned around that little bitch was outside, strutting past him.

Presenting. Pleading. Filling me with a jealousy there's no rational reason for me to have.

"Home," he whispers, parking the truck.

I take a deep breath as he shuts off the engine. Staring out the windshield, I see Shadow on the front porch, his big gold eyes catching moonlight. "Natalie will be fine, if you're worried. Mom loves company. She'll keep a close eye on her."

He opens his door. “Yeah. Wouldn’t have allowed her to stay if I didn’t already know it.”

Of course. I knew that, too, but I’m stalling.

It feels like I’m on some sort of rickety bridge. I’ve made it too far to turn around, yet, if I go forward, all the way across, I know I can never go back.

Forward it is. Like there’s another choice.

I have to see what’s waiting for me, even crave it deep inside, and that frightens me.

What if I reach the other side and find out I’ll want more? *More*. And then maybe the wanting never ends.

It just swallows me whole, chews me up, and spits me back out piece by mangled piece.

“You gonna sit there all night, or what?” He’s smiling, despite the teasing edge in his voice.

I glance across, to where he’s standing, door open. Moonlight shrouds him, blending into darkness. Deep green man eyes shine brighter than Shadow’s.

Brighter than they’ve been all day, even. And they were damn bright.

This afternoon, when he’d taken his shirt off, I’d nearly fainted. Pamela Bitchface wasn’t kidding about God abs.

Putting Brent Eden and ripped in the same sentence doesn’t do him justice. Neither does assigning him a mere six pack.

Seeing him shirtless stopped my heart. I had to tell myself to breathe.

He’s beyond good-looking. He’s art. Sculpted to perfection by life. The tattoos he keeps hidden are magnificent, too.

They’re huge and dark and meaningful and just the slightest bit scary.

I wish they were scarier. Then I wouldn’t want to examine each and every one of them. Up close.

Each and every inch of him.

“Blue?”

I grab the door handle, open the passenger door, and climb out.

Taking another step to the proverbial bridge. Toward the other side, the unknown, and possibly my self-destruction.

Brent runs out of patience. He steps up next to me and takes my hand.

I should say something, but what? I had a nice time tonight? Thanks for being so nice to my family, who all want to fuck you? You know, like I do?

Dread bubbles up in my stomach. *What am I thinking?*

It's Pretend with a capital P. He was pretending to like me.

Kissing me to make things look good. To make it look like neither one of us was lying.

He lets go of my hand and opens the front door. I step past him, into the living room. My breath catches in my lungs, hanging heavy in my chest. I swallow and turn around.

"Thanks for, um..." God, he looks so good.

His button up pale green shirt still looks fresh and neat even after all the work he did setting up the tent, the chairs, the tables. And the archway.

How could I ever forget?

That kiss, when he lifted me off the chair, swung me around, and attacked my mouth, still has my blood smoking. "Everything," I say, the air rushing out of me. "Thanks again."

He steps closer.

My heart races.

"My pleasure, Blue." He tucks a lock of my hair behind my ear. "Everything," he growls, throwing my strained word back at me.

Heat swirls deep inside me. A whirlpool of fire.

I'll never forget the first time I saw that face. He walked into the classroom, looking all grumpy and formative.

I thought he was the sexiest man I'd ever seen. Still do.

Even after everything we've been through.

"You're a good actor," I say.

Lame.

His grin nearly knocks me off my feet. Literally.

I have to press my heels into the floor to stay upright. God.

"I'll share the Oscar, Blue," he says. "You weren't half bad yourself. Not half anything."

His eyes swoop downward, and back up, slowly. My nipples tingle when they settle there, as if he can see right through my clothes.

I swallow hard and flip around, needing to breathe. “I wasn’t acting. Not the whole time, I mean.”

“No?” he raises an eyebrow.

Crap.

I shake my head, still trying to convince myself not to turn around, rather than answering his question. “No. I –”

He twists me around before I finish. Runs both hands down my arms, sending shivers clear to my toes. “Fuck the acting, Blue. I’m just as sick of it as you are.”

His voice is so husky. So sexy.

Fuck me.

In a flash, he pulls me against him. “I want you, Blue. Honestly. Right the hell now.”

My mind is gone. All I can do is nod.

“Right now,” he growls again, running his hips into mine.

He’s too hard.

I’m too wet.

This is too insane.

Then it finally happens.

My lips land on his while my arms wrap around his neck. Hallelujah!

He spins me around and around, plants me against the wall, kisses me until I can’t breathe.

I pull away, sucking at the air, and then go back for more. His hands are under my dress, free marauders, running up my thighs. Whatever surges through me – some adrenaline I’ve never experienced – gives me courage.

Freedom.

I hook one foot around his leg, giving him more access.

His fingers slip under my panties. I arch into him and press my head against the wall as his lips leave mine and trail downwards. Lower than ever. So low there’s a soft weight in my panties from how drenched I am.

My breasts throb, nipples aching as his tongue leaves a burning path from my neck to my cleavage.

I’m not sure how it happens, but the next thing I know, he’s carrying me like

one of the heroes in my mom's dirty novels. I throw my head back and laugh. "Are you for real, Eden?"

"Very real, Blue. Very, very real." He kisses me again. "You'll see how fucking real I get just as soon as we reach the bedroom."

Reality comes crashing down like a cold shower. I have to tell him I have no idea what to do.

I know the gist of it, have read all about it, but actual experience...with sex?

Nope. None.

Shit.

Maybe I can just pretend. That's what we've been dancing around forever, right? Act like I know more than I do.

If only it weren't for my face.

He sets me on the bed, kneels in front of me, and lets me know I've blown it with one question. "What's wrong?"

Trying to quell the nerves overtaking me, I shrug. "Nothing."

He lifts a brow. "Blue?"

My heart pounds. My body pulses. I've never been the sole focus of a man at this level, and I want it.

Want it beyond all else.

I close my eyes and give it up, "I'm a virgin, Brent."

"Like I don't know."

My eyes snap open. "You do? What? How?" The horror. "That bad?"

He chuckles, running his hands up my thighs. "No. That good, Blue. That tense. That ready. That eager to be fucked for the very first time."

Fire shoots up my legs, hitting the crux between my thighs so hard I gasp. We haven't even gotten started and the pleasure comes in waves.

"Want you, Blue." He leans forward and kisses the tip of my nose. "Want you fully. Completely. The thought of being your first thrills me, but it has to be what you want, too."

His sincerity excites me, but also fills me with wary embarrassment. "I do, but what if I disappoint you?" The very idea makes me cringe.

"Not a chance in hell of that happening."

He sounds like he means it, too. Wow.

He kisses me long and passionately, until my mind can't stop spinning. His thumbs press deep into my inner thighs, slowly working their way up, inciting a wild intensity to swirl deep inside me. Like an inner thunder disappearing the rest of the world.

When he breaks the kiss, we're on the bed, side by side, both gasping.

He combs my hair away from my face. "We'll take it slow and easy."

I'm so close to coming, I'm fighting to catch my breath. Twisting onto my side, I squeeze my thighs together, trying to ease the commotion down there, just long enough to get his shirt off, button by button. "Not too slow, I hope. Don't know how much longer I can last."

"Not long, Blue," he growls, slipping a hand inside the v-cut neckline of my dress, cupping one breast.

Oh, God. *Not long* is painfully accurate.

The heat of his palm, his pressure, against my tender nipple is perfection.

Whimpering, I squirm against him, silently pleading.

His brows make a v as he frowns. "Too fucking hot, Blue. I thought –"

"I've had orgasms. Self-inflicted." Heat burns my cheeks. I have no idea why I felt the need to share.

"Really?" He nips at my earlobe.

"Everybody does it." Don't they? I spread his shirt open, exploring the hard curves of his chest with my hand. It's as amazing as I imagined.

"Yeah, they do. Always wondered about you coming, thinking about me..." His lips are just in time before I die. They take control of mine for another long, luxurious kiss. Then he lifts my chin, looks straight at me. "Show me."

Evil excitement shimmers in his eyes. Part of me loves knowing I put it there. But I also have to squeeze my thighs together, harder to keep from peaking.

He rolls my nipple between his thumb and finger. "Show me, Blue. Show me how bad you want this."

Flushed, I'm nodding.

He jumps off the bed and pulls on my arms. "I'll help you get ready."

A mischievous grin covers his face as he pulls off my shoes, one with each hand. "Let go, woman. I've got you."

I'm nervous, and a bit unsure. It's one thing to do it alone, in the shower.

Something else to have an audience, but I'm committed. *Fully.*

I shimmy to the edge of the bed, and he helps me stand. After taking off his shirt, he grasps the hem of my dress.

His eyes ask permission. I nod, biting my lip, lifting my arms. He pulls my dress over my head in one swift jerk and tosses it aside. Never taking his eyes off me.

Holy.

"You're so beautiful." He runs both hands down my side. "So perfect. So damn mine tonight."

I could say the same about him.

If I could find my voice.

Or stop my eyes from roaming down his torso to where the dark crop of hair disappears into the top of his jeans.

"We don't need this, either, do we?" he asks, plucking at my bra straps. "Now, Blue. Show me."

Brazen encouragement flares inside me at the idea of bringing myself off for him. Suddenly, rather than worrying about holding back my climax, I'm excited to bring it, and not just for the release.

I want it to be his.

"Okay," I whisper, pointing to the wooden chest behind him. "You watch."

Growling, he nods. I watch him cross the room, imagining how hard he'll thrust into me soon when I catch an inviting glimpse at his powerful backside.

He sits. I unhook the back of my bra, glad I'd bought the dark blue silk bra and panty set. I lean forward, letting the straps slide off my shoulders, and then down my arms.

The bra drops to the floor. There's definitely a smolder in his eyes when his gaze meets mine. Eager to please – maybe *too* eager – I slide my hands inside my waistband.

I'm not sure if it's him I hear sucking breath, or me.

I'm no longer nervous, but on edge. Eager to put on a show for this man who's driven me insane for weeks.

A sexy show. A tease that'll make him want more.

I push my panties down, slowly, my pussy helplessly tingling as it touches the air. He watches as the panties slide all the way down to my feet, and then

meets my gaze again.

“Blue, Show me.”

Again, the same mantra. Every time he says it, my body burns a little more. Fire lashes the tips of my fingers, urging them inside me.

With his eyes locked on mine, he unbuttons his jeans, and pushes down his zipper.

That kicks off new chain reactions inside me. I want to see what’s hiding there, but this is my show.

I lift a leg, exposing my pussy fully. His eyes lock on, and I wonder if he can see how wet I am. How hard I’m throbbing.

He draws in an audible breath, then lets out a low groan. “Fucking. Show. Me.”

The vicious smirk on his face, the way he lifts a brow, thrills me. I’ve never been bold about anything. Until now.

“Usually, I do this in the shower,” I say.

He cocks his head, never saying a word.

“So my hands are wet.” I stick one index finger in my mouth and slowly pull it out. “I’ll have to improvise.”

His lids lower halfway and the muscles in his neck become more prominent. “Yeah. Improvise.”

I slide my fingertip down my torso, between my breasts and lower, getting more of a thrill out of the way he watches the downward movement than from touching myself. Passing through my trimmed bush, I run my fingertip along one side of my pussy. “I start like this...work my way back and forth...then a little side to side.”

His hands are on his knees. I watch as his fingers spread out and grip them tighter.

I’ve never experienced the pleasure erupting inside me. Hot. Wild. Uninhibited.

Hell, I’ve barely even started.

“Then what, Blue?” Sex fuel. That’s what his low, husky growl is.

“More...like this...several times.” I brush my clit, heat overloading my core. “Then I find my clit. I press.” I have to swallow a gasp before I can add, “Hard.”

“Legs wider, babe. Let me see it all.”

“Wider,” I echo softly. Trying not to burst into flames.

How my voice sounds normal is beyond me. I can barely breathe. I’m sure my movement up the bed is anything but graceful. It doesn’t stop me for a second.

I push my bottom as close to the edge as possible while still being able to plant my heels on the mattress, giving him a full-on view.

Propping myself up with one hand so I can keep watching him, I find my clit again. “Sweet spot. Here,” I say, teasing myself, firmly twirling my fingertip. “I work it over. Once in a while, slide my finger inside. Right here.” I raise my hips for him to see. “In. Out. Again.” I go slowly at first, but the rhythm quickly finds itself.

So does the pleasure.

It comes quicker and hotter than ever. My hips rise and fall against my hand, desperate for friction.

“Talk to me, Blue.” I just know he’s suppressing a devilish smile.

“Back out, to the clit. Again,” I whimper. My breathing is fast, uneven, and words are too difficult.

Oh, God. My head falls back as my climax rushes in. Totally off guard.

“And? Blue?”

I squeeze my eyes shut, fighting to gain enough control to answer. “And – oh!”

A moan overtakes my words. There’s no stopping it.

I drop to my elbows, unable to speak as he jumps to his feet. “Since you’re done talking, I am, too. Got something better to do with this mouth.”

My hand gets pushed aside, replaced by a concentrated heat.

Brent’s mouth.

I dig my hand into his hair, then spread my legs wider, giving him full access and loving every fricking nano-second.

The rush. The fire. Pleasure so intense it almost hurts.

Lifting my hips off the bed, I scream ecstasy as he sucks my clit, lashing it with his tongue again and again.

Drawing me out to the fullest.

Pushing me rudely, sweetly, furiously over.

My thighs shudder. My pussy tightens. A moment later, I hit the climax of climaxes.

Dear fuck – I’m coming!

It consumes my entire body. Unlike usual, when I’m alone, it doesn’t end.

Brent keeps going. Licking and sucking and taking me on a ride so wild, so amazing, I’m begging him not to stop.

He keeps his mouth glued to me. His beard grazes my thighs, presses into tender flesh, and his growl echoes up my body. It’s too much. Too intense. Too good.

Muscles I didn’t know I had seize. Electrified.

I flop against the mattress, convulsing, riding out the ripples of the best O ever.

“Holy. Shit.” I mumble two distinct words.

Finally, he lets my thighs drop away from his face.

He gives me a final lick, then pokes his head up between my legs, still running his tongue slowly along his lips. “That was fucking amazing, Blue. Never tasted pussy so sweet.”

The heat roars back, this time in my cheeks. I’m drowning in feels.

Happy. Ecstatic. Spent.

I can’t do anything except roll my head from side to side, trying to come home. My senses return slowly. He’s on the bed. Beside me. Grinning.

“Hope I didn’t ruin the show,” he says. “And if I did, well fuck, I don’t regret it.”

I laugh. More of a happy purr, but it gets the point across. I’m too exhausted to do more.

“No choice, Blue. It was either taste you or blow off in my pants like a kid on prom night.” He kisses my forehead.

It dawns on me that I’m satisfied, but he’s not. *Is he?*

Unsure what to do, I ask, “What now?”

“Now, we fuck,” he whispers in my ear while his palm makes large circles on my stomach. “While you’re wet and ready. My mouth was just the beginning.”

My body leaps to life as his hand works between my legs. His finger slips inside me.

Amazing.

I can feel myself tightening around him as it goes in further, past the knuckle, tantalizing some strange, marvelous spot inside me I can't pin down.

"I'll probably fuck you till sunup, Blue." He twirls his tongue over one of my nipples.

My hips arch. I'm chewing my lip.

Bastard.

He's going to make me come again. And I want to. This time, I'm ready.

I reach between our bodies, finding his hard-on, squeezing through his pants. "Better get your pants off before I finish again."

He laughs and sucks my tit. Finger-fucking me harder.

"I mean it, Eden," I growl this time, a split second before the bliss chokes my tongue quiet.

Heat swirls hard and fast, deep inside me again. It won't take long before I'm gone. I slide my hand inside his boxers, folding my fingers around his cock.

It's velvety soft on the outside, hard underneath.

Naturally, it's huge. What else?

Big and wide and vowing to split me in two.

"Careful, darlin'," he whispers. "I've been ready to bust since we met."

"I know the feeling." I pump his cock. "But I'm one up on you."

He grasps my wrist and pulls my hand off him, then rolls over and slides out of his jeans and boxers with one swift movement. "Have you ever put on a condom before?"

"No."

"Do you want to?"

I sit up and grab a packet out of his hand. "Yes. You're always this prepared?"

"Bought a few at the gas station when I fueled up on our way home."

I laugh, overly pleased. "That was pretty confident of you."

"Optimistic, Blue. That's the right word."

I tear the foil packet open. It's not the first condom I've seen, but comparing

the tiny circle of latex to his erect, impressive cock, I question exactly how this works.

His entire body is art. A walking masterpiece, just like I thought that first fateful night in art class.

A perfect palate of sculpted muscle, glistening skin, and dark patches of hair.

All adorned with several mingling tattoos.

Dark eagles and lines of cursive script that look like they're straight from a spell book. I recognize NATALIE near his shoulder, stamped next to a date that has to be her birthday. There's a tangle of barbed wire lower, snaking toward his gorgeous abs, along his side. There's a word anchored in it I'm just able to make out: DAVID. And a date next to it that's more recent.

I don't dare ruin the sexy times by asking pointed questions. Another time.

Once again, I glance between the condom and him. "Show me, maybe. Just this once."

He sits up, kisses me. "Just put it on the head of my cock and roll the edges down."

"Will it fit?"

His laugh comes out so sexy my pussy aches.

"Too good, Blue. You're too fucking good to be true." There's no doubt in his eyes as he guides my hand to his cock, though.

With ease, the latex stretches, covering him fully as I do exactly what he suggests. "That's impressive."

He grabs my shoulders and lowers me back down on the bed. "No, Blue. That's this."

My face heats. Impressive is right.

He's too skilled. He's stolen my ability to think of anything but him.

The way he's touched me. Fingered me. Kissed me all over.

My mouth and neck and breasts.

The heat inside me pulses beyond description. I spread my legs wide.

"Now, Eden," I'm begging. "Please. It's your turn: show me."

Smiling, he reaches between us, guiding the tip of him to my folds. I arch, desperate for a satisfaction I've never known, but want so badly every nerve-ending goes up in flames.

His gaze locks on mine as he slowly eases his way in. First a small amount, and then back out.

The muscles in his neck, his shoulders, are tight. His jaw clenched. But it's the passion in his eyes that captures me fully.

I grip his sides, pulling him forward, pushing backwards as he continues to work his way inside me. I know he's holding back. Being gentle. Allowing my body to conform to his size and rhythm, but I've waited too long.

We've already done it slow.

"Give it to me, Eden. No playing nice. Give. It. All." I arch into his thrust, urging him deeper. The sensation rocks my world.

Growling, he lets go. Pushes into me so fast, so hard, my pussy glides against his cock. Something tears sharply for a split second. Then there's just new heat, pleasure and pain blurring, colliding, owning every piece of me.

Holy hell. I never knew what I was missing.

Being full of him expands my whole universe.

I don't just lay there and let him work. Tightening my hold, I meet every one of his thrusts, digging my nails in his back as our momentum grows. The pace quickens by the second, his hips pounding into mine, frantic and deliciously rough.

Every pummel pushes me deeper into the mattress and gives me the buoyancy to rise up to meet the next.

This is our rhythm.

Hearts and bodies and one raging fire.

Wild and wanton pleasure shuts my eyelids, but I tear them back open, intent on watching him. The wave is coming closer, threatening to swallow both of us. I just know it.

Next time I come, it won't be alone. And the thought makes coming that much quicker.

Witnessing his pleasure is powerful. Captivating. So fucking hot.

"Blue, fuck," he growls, throwing himself into me.

His pubic bone drifts against my clit each time he goes deep. My pussy tightens a little more every time I feel the soft smack of his balls against my flesh.

I'm falling for this cock and it's happening too fast. Much like the man

attached to it.

Every thrust sends us closer and closer to a zone I've only dreamed of.

I don't want any of this to end.

Brent captures my mouth with another demanding kiss that shoots me across the point of no return. I go rigid. Cry out. Sign my body over to ecstasy with a squeal, and my pussy clamps down on his cock so hard he loses himself in one long growl.

His body goes rock hard as he slams deep inside me, holds himself there, and something swells deep. "Blue! Come!"

And I do.

I come beyond words. Beyond my wildest imagination.

Somewhere in the inferno, I *feel* his release, his cock pulsing deep inside me.

I'm coming so hard I see stars. And feel them, too. Everything is light and heat.

My toes curl and my fingers pinch his skin. Pure liberation. Spreading through my all.

He grinds against me, milking our climax until there's nothing left to give.

Trying to conquer.

Trying to mark me.

Trying to give and take every single bit of us.

As my delirium slowly subsides, he stamps a parting kiss on my lips and pulls out. I whimper at the sudden emptiness. He laughs, climbing off the bed.

"That good, huh?" There's a smug look in his eye I can't even fight. I just nod.

A moment later, he returns to the bedroom. The condom, gone.

I sigh. "Too bad they're only single use."

He plops on the bed next to me. We're both laying spread eagle. He takes my hand and threads his fingers through mine. "You think I only brought one?"

"Four. I counted," I say, deadpan, trying to act disappointed.

"That's not enough?" His eyes go wide, and then he laughs. "Shit, Blue. We'll pick up more first thing in the morning."

WHILE IT LASTS (BRENT)

The sunlight filling the room almost seems as bright as the light in Blue's pale eyes.

Fuck. It wasn't just a dream.

I plant a quick kiss on her lips. It's been ages since I had a night like we'd just experienced. Actually, I've never had one quite like it. Not like this.

Fucking her doesn't leave me wanting to get up and leave the next morning. Doesn't make me want to get on with my life. This woman, in my bed, naked and glorious, is it.

"Morning, Sunshine," I growl, watching her eyelids flutter open.

Her giggle includes a little sigh.

I run a hand across her silky stomach. "How you feeling? Sore?"

I'm still on cloud nine knowing I'm the first man to touch her.

First to show her peaks she never even knew existed in her own skin.

First to make her call my name, coming loud, raking her nails down my back.

Fuck again.

I'd never even thought about stuff like this before, but she's got my brain stuck on it. She also brought me to some heights I'd never seen before – primal satisfaction like no other.

Hell, I blew three times inside her and a fourth time in my hand, spattering her tits. I'm still ready to go again. But I don't want to wear her out.

"What are you going to do if I say yes? To being sore?"

Damn, but she makes me happy. "Kiss you, Crazy. Then go make us some breakfast."

She runs a single fingernail across my chest, which makes my morning wood throb like mad.

“And if I say no?” she asks.

“I’ll kiss you.” I run my fingers through that strip of hair tucked above her sweet cunt. “Fuck you, and then go make us breakfast.”

Smiling, she thrusts a knee between my legs, rubbing my hard-on against her thigh. “Only one condom left.”

I slide a finger inside her. “Maybe we’ll go to town for breakfast. And grab more.”

“I love eating out.” Her tongue slides across my bottom lip. “And no, I’m not too sore.”

Best damn words I’ve ever woken up to.

We use up our last condom. I put her down in front of me, on her belly, then draw her hands behind her back. I mount her from behind and fuck like a bull in rut.

She screams after a minute or two of me crashing into her, holding her wrists together, moving my free hand to her hair. Tugging that blue-blond mess in my fist brings me over after a couple more minutes of rodeo tier thrusting.

I come right in her tight little pussy clenching for dear life. Through the condom, at least, but fuck, of course I imagine what it’d be like to go bare. My seed has an animal need to be inside her.

Someday.

For now, I just come. Come hard, still fucking, not wanting to let up even when my dick softens.

Finally, we take a shower together to save on hot water. Which is all gone by the time we’re done. She’s still riled up, the little minx. Can’t keep her paws to herself. I’ve never had a woman jack me off before, but hell, I’m more than willing to let her try it.

Anytime.

Breakfast is an old place I remember in Flagstaff. We have big omelets with all the fixings and sausage gravy before popping by the drugstore. With a full box of condoms, we head back to the ranch, and christen the new pack with a hot roll on a blanket in the screened in part of the porch.

For once, I’m thankful the cat isn’t around. The sun peaks in the sky and starts drifting lower.

“Shit, it’s afternoon. What time’s the wedding?” I ask, my chest still heaving after another extremely intense fuck. I don’t even have the strength to get up and take care of the condom yet.

“Three o’clock,” she says, breathing as hard as me. “But we’ll have to get there early enough for Natalie to change into the dress you bought her.”

“You’re right.” It’s already after one. “Shit.”

She giggles.

I groan.

Snuggling closer, she lays her head on my shoulder. “Will you ever move out here? Full time?”

A flash of darkness overcomes me. “Someday.”

Maybe. When the Pearls are finished forever. Can’t even think about it till then.

I hold her closer to my side, rubbing her arm. Not wanting to expose her to how dark my thoughts could become if I let them, I kiss her. “When my business can run itself, anything’s possible.” I smack her sweet ass lightly, loving how it bounces against my hand. “Come on. Up. Gotta get showered and dressed.”

“Again?” Blue gives me a knowing wink.

I should be beyond satisfied, but I swear I could take her one more time. Two more. Easily.

Not actually doing it, that’s hard. I kiss her forehead. “You go first.”

A little pout forms on her lips. “Alone?”

“Blue.” I laugh and roll over, pushing myself up. Taking both her hands, I pull her to her feet. “Alone. Or we’ll *never* get to that wedding.”

She laughs, then plants a quick kiss on my lips, spinning around. I admire her back. That shapely, perfect ass, as she walks into the kitchen and then disappears around the corner.

It’s different with her, the admiration. Not like anybody else.

It goes deep. Gets inside me like venom. Like nothing really has.

She’s too good, just like I said last night. Too damn unique and then some.

I realize it again later, after I’m showered and dressed, putting a bowl of cat food outside the door in case Shadow shows up.

“You really are a sweet man.”

I turn around at the sound of her voice, nearly losing my ability to speak. Her dress is royal blue, silky, and loose fitting, yet hugs her in all the right places.

The lacy white sweater is unbuttoned and stops above her waist. Her hair hangs in waves over her shoulders. All in all, she looks demure. Innocent.

And once again, I’m struck knowing I’m the only man who’s discovered what a wild cat she is underneath that school teacher mirage.

I take a step toward her. It’s almost as if I have a split second ripple in my knees.

Crazy.

I’ve seen hundreds of good-looking women naked in the contraband passed around in the motorcycle club and the army. Bedded dozens in the flesh. But she mops the floor with them. “You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen.”

She dips her chin shyly while shaking her head. “You’ve already charmed me, Eden.” A teasing glint forms in her eyes. “Enough. What more do you want?”

Several sexual innuendos come to mind, but I keep them to myself. They’ll only make us late.

Besides, what I’m feeling goes deeper than sex, as fucking ludicrous as it seems. That makes me nervous.

I can’t have *deeper*. Not with her. Not with anyone. Not right now.

She holds up a bag with one hand. “I have Nat’s things. We better get going.”

I take the bag and open the truck door for her, stealing a kiss before closing it.



ON THE WAY TO TOWN, she fills me in about more family members I’ll meet today. I listen, mainly between the lines, noting her tone so I’ll know the ones to keep an eye on. The ones who’ve given her the most grief in the past.

She has no idea I’m picking up on it, taking mental notes.

She apologizes, too. About how I’ve been caught up in this. If she knew the truth about why I’m here, I’d be the asshole down on my hands and knees, asking her forgiveness.

I want to tell her that the grief is overdone. Under my protection, she’s got nothing to worry about, if it were just her family.

But the truth is, her family’s antics are nothing compared to the Pearls. I’ve

put her in more danger by keeping her close.

I glance her way. "If you remember right, I'm the one who started all this."

She lets out a sigh. "And never thought it would go this far."

I find a place to park the truck near Joe and Janice's house. After shutting off the engine, I reach over and take her hand. "I'm not sorry it's gone this far."

"You haven't met everyone yet. Just wait. Even mom said it took her years to settle into this family. Now, she fits like a glove."

"Blue," I tug her into me as I lean across the console. Nose to nose, I say, "I'm a grown boy. I can handle it." I give her a quick, possessive kiss. "Stop worrying."

If only I could take my own advice.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Nat running up the sidewalk. "Looks like Natalie was watching for us."

Blue spins her head around and I laugh at her reddening cheeks, opening my door. "Hey, baby girl."

"Hi, Daddy! Did you bring my dress?" Two of the girls she'd been playing with last night are with her, dressed in their best.

"Sure did."

"It's right here," Blue says, holding out the bag she's packed. "And I brought along my hair ties so I can French-braid your hair like we talked about."

"Yay! Thanks, Izzy," Nat says. "I told everyone you were going to braid my hair."

Blue glances up at me as I arrive at her side. I knew nothing about the hair braiding and smile at the apology in her eyes. "Go," I say. "I'll save us some seats."

"I already saved them, Daddy," Natalie says. "And Joe says you can join him in the garage for a pre-ceremony beverage."

"Perfect." A drink sounds awfully good right now, honestly.

We walk to the house together, but the girls pull Blue onto the porch and through the door before either of us can say a word.

I walk to the garage, where I recognize a few faces from last night, including Joe, who invites me over to a bar that's been set up for the big day. He introduces me to several other guys.

There are a few lifted brows when Joe says I'm Izzy's friend. I bite my tongue

to keep from saying I'm more than a friend. Totally for their benefit. Let them know straight off I won't stand for a single word spoken against her.

I soon discover the men aren't as hard on her as the women. When she and Nat show up in the garage and the three of us have walked into the back yard to take our seats, the gossip mongers strike.

Whispering and pointing. Blue's ability to ignore them surpasses mine. I don't give them any attention, but they have the hair on my neck standing on end.

When the usher holds out his arm to Blue, I point to Natalie.

He nods and holds his arm out to her. I hook Blue's hand around my arm as we follow the teenager and Nat up the center aisle, between the dozens of chairs we'd set up last night.

It seems much longer ago. Mainly because of the amazing time we had after leaving yesterday.

Nat put our seats next to her newfound friends. She sits beside them. Blue sits next to Nat, and I take the last seat in the row, near the aisle. I drape an arm around her shoulders, hoping this doesn't take long. My mind drifts back to the ranch, last night, this morning. With Blue.

It's typically hot out here. Not as bad as summer, but damn if the daytime heat wants to give up its grip before late October. There's barely a breeze.

I consider rolling up the sleeves of my shirt, but that won't help much. A good portion of the heat overtaking me is internal, too. Last night was hotter than the balmiest 120 degree day in Phoenix.

The little sideways glances beneath her lashes that Blue keeps sending my way increases the anticipation pumping in my veins. I run my hand over her shoulder and down her back, beneath her silky hair, and lean close to whisper in her ear. "Should we stop for another box of condoms on the way home?"

Her head snaps my way as she puts a finger against her lips. There's also an excited shine in her eyes.

I lean close again. "Should we?"

She puts a hand on my thigh. "Hush."

"I just want to be prepared." I nuzzle her ear.

"Stop," she hisses, smiling anyway.

I kiss her earlobe. "Let me know when you decide."

She shakes her head, but also squeezes my thigh.

The shimmer in her eyes makes me wish we were anywhere but the middle of a wedding. Brutal, insistent ideas of what we'd be doing fill my head and keep on filling it as we sit through dinner later.

I'm counting the minutes till we can leave, knowing we've got hours to go.

The sun sinks lower in the western sky when the dancing begins. The desire to feel Blue's body against mine has been eating at me all afternoon. I lead her onto the dance floor and pull her close. Holding someone in my arms never felt so good. *So right.*

"You certainly are set on keeping tongues wagging, aren't you?" she whispers in my ear.

No shit. Keeping my hands wandering all over her reflects what's been in my head all day. "Can't say I've noticed." I tug her closer, pressing her hips firmly against mine as we sway to the music. "Tell me who said what and I'll take care of them for you."

She buries her face in my shoulder while giggling, and then leans back to look at me.

I kiss her lips. Gently, but long enough for her to know what later promises.

Our lips barely part when someone taps her shoulder. It's the bridesmaid from last night.

"May I cut in?"

Blue's hand slips off my shoulder as she attempts to step back. I see the disappointment in her eyes and tighten my hold, keeping her planted against me. "No," I say.

Blue has more manners. "Sorry, Pam," she says to the other woman.

The bridesmaid walks away and Blue shakes her head. "I don't think that's what she expected."

I couldn't care less. "Too bad. Only got one date I'm interested in tonight." Running my hand up and down her back, I nip at her earlobe. "I didn't want to shock her, anyway."

She leans back again to look me in the face. "Shock her?"

"Yeah." I thrust harder against her. "Tell me you don't feel how hard I am right now."

"Oh!" Her brows lift. "Not surprised. Considering all the things you've been whispering in my ear all day."

"Would you rather I drew pictures? I can, and you know it. Show you exactly

what we'll do when we get home." I grind against her. "What we're going to do." I grasp a handful of her ass. "In vivid detail."

She kisses the side of my neck. "I've seen your drawings. I *know* the details you like to include."

"But you'd rather have the real thing."

"So real."

Fuck, her voice. I'm so hard it's torture. "When can we leave?"

The music ends and Blue glances across the room. "Once Nat's ready, I guess."

Since the day she was born, I've always put my daughter first, but right now, seeing how much fun she's having, and knowing she wouldn't want that to end anytime soon, I clamp my teeth together to hold in a growl.

A moment later, as I lead Blue back to our table, Cleo's smile gives me hope. And an idea.

Within fifteen minutes, Blue and I are heading for my truck. Alone. Both Cleo and Natalie were happy with the thought of Nat spending another night at the house. So am I.

As soon as we arrive at the ranch, I walk around the house and start piling kindling in the fire pit.

"What are you doing?"

I smile at the confusion in Blue's voice. Although I'm helpless how my body begs for release, my cock screaming for me to fuck her hard and fast, I'm holding out.

I've got no clue when we'll be alone together again and I'll make the absolute most of the next few hours.

Running a hand down her arm, I say, "I thought we could sit out here for a while."

The bewilderment crossing her face looks adorable. "Why?"

I kiss the tip of her nose and turn back to the fire pit. "Why not?"

Biting my jaw tight at how she mutters, 'Why not?' I set flame to the wood, and once the fire's going, add a couple larger logs.

She's sitting in one of the chairs. I pat her shoulder as I walk past. "Wait here. I'll be right back."

Excitement of what's to come puts a beat in my step as I head inside the

house and collect several items. Back at the fire, I hand her one of the canned margaritas I'd taken out of the fridge, then spread the blanket on the ground and drop the pillows.

"Plan on being out here a while, do you?" She pops open the top of her can and takes a swallow.

I sit down on the blanket and open a can of beer. "You ever slept beneath the stars, Blue?"

"No."

"That's one of the things out here that makes putting up with the Arizona heat worth it. Clear skies." I pat the blanket beside me. "Come the hell here."

She kicks off her shoes before stepping onto the blanket and then sits down next to me. "You plan on sleeping out here, too?"

I shrug. "Maybe." Anticipation is winning. I suck a few gulps from my beer, set it aside, and kick off my boots. "That'll depend on if we're interested in sleep or not."

She flicks her tongue over her bottom lip, watching me unbutton my shirt. Blue sets her can on the ground. "Need some help?"

"Would you like to help?"

She nods and scoots closer. "You know I would."

I love how open she is with me, how trusting and uninhibited. I pull my hands off my shirt and hold them up in the air. "Be my guest. Undress me."

She laughs. "Is that an invite to do whatever I please?"

My dick lets me know how it feels about that. "Sure," I say. "Whatever you please, Blue. Long as it gets me hard."

Her grin turns mischievous as she finishes undoing my shirt and tugs it wide open. "Let's see," she says. "I think it'll please me to see you shirtless, so I can examine each of those glorious tattoos." She pushes the shirt off my shoulders. "And kiss them."

Her breath is hot and damp against my skin. My cock throbs harder with every little kiss she plants on my chest. Fuck.

This woman will be the end of me. And maybe the beginning, too.

Her weight moves me up the blanket. My lungs catch as her kisses twist down my stomach. I'm hard enough to cut diamond.

"Oh, my," she says, rubbing her hand down the front of my jeans. "It'll please

me, Brent, to see what's gotten so hard under here."

Fuck yeah. She's right.

It'll please me to the moon.

My jaw tightens at how hard I have to fight to maintain control as she unbuckles my belt, and then unzips my jeans. The throb of my cock matches the pounding echo in my ears.

"I knew it," she whispers, pushing down my boxers, freeing my cock to spring upright. "They're too tight for something so big."

A growl bubbles up my throat as she grasps hold of my dick, stroking softly. My balls go nuclear.

"Don't you like it?" she whispers, eyeing me sideways.

Before I growl agreement, she bends, moving lower.

"Maybe *this* is better."

Her lips, hot and heavenly, suck the head of my cock before she pulls me fully into her mouth. My hips rise, thrusting my length deeper through her lips.

I love how her sweet heat engulfs inch after throbbing inch.

Blue tugs down the waistband of my jeans, grasping my ass as she proceeds to suck. It's some kind of sex miracle. First time she's done this – I think – and it's the best fucking blow job known to man.

It's so stunningly good I'm about to lose it, but don't want to. Tonight's for both of us. Grabbing both sides of her head, I force her to stop. "Enough."

Her lips smack as they release my cock. "You don't want more?"

"More, yes." The pressure behind my cock is practically killing me. "I want to fuck you, Blue. My dick inside your pussy. Fast and hard. Now."

"Please," she whispers, helping me pull her dress over her head. "Hope you remembered the condoms."

My jeans are down around my thighs. "In my pants pocket."

She finds one, and as she rips it open, I unhook her bra. Her nipples are dark pink, shadows dancing across them in the fire's light.

Like they're calling me. I pull her forward to suck on one, flicking the hard nub with my tongue.

"I can't put this on while you're doing that!" she says.

I stop long enough to ask, "You can't?"

“No-ohhh!”

Her answer becomes a moan as I take her other tit in my mouth. No stopping now.

I stick my hands inside her panties and push them over that perfect ass of hers. She shifts enough to get one leg free. All I need to work my fingers inside her. Her pussy is slick, wet, and my cock jolts instantly. It’s killing me not to shred what’s left of her panties and push the fuck in her.

Still, I work her folds, press her clit, twirl two fingers deep inside her. Love the way she groans, huskily calls me Eden, begs me to continue.

Too bad she’s able to form too many words. I fix that, running my fingers deeper, finding the spot against her wall that makes her whole body arc like a cat in heat.

Ground zero. My fingers go wild, frigging her to Heaven.

Her breath comes faster and she pumps against my hand. Much as I’d love to make her cum right now, the pressure building at the base of my spine is too strong to ignore.

I give her nipple a final nibble before growling, “Now, Blue. Put that condom on.”

She’s nearly an old hand at rolling the condom over my cock, and a moment later, she’s straddling me, lowering her hot wet pussy over me.

It’s almost so good I lose it. I’ve never fought back a climax this hard in my life.

Damn if it stops me from taking what’s mine. Vigorously.

We both let out satisfying groans as I completely fill her, and then start moving. The friction shreds my soul. I grasp her hips, pulling her down, against every upwards thrust.

Faster and faster and faster and fuck!

We’re both so fucking close it’s painful.

She has her head thrown back, blue hair flying. Her body quakes. Lips frozen in a half-open pout as she shouts my name.

I thrust upwards, hard, and let out a bearish groan as her pussy clenches. Her body shudders as her climax lets loose.

My own hits so savagely I’m stunned.

Gloriously senseless as her pussy locks tight, sucking every last come jet out

of my balls.

It's so fucking good I'm lost to anything but her.

But *this*.

She collapses on top of me later, gasping for air. As breathless as she is, I hold her tight, my dick still buried inside her, until we're able to breathe again.

"Holy crap," she says. "Eden, you beast."

I laugh, kissing the top of her head, running my teeth playfully through a strand of hair.

She pushes off and kisses me as our bodies separate. I help her roll onto her back and then toss the condom in the fire.

"Won't the bugs bite us out here?" she asks.

"Fire should keep most of them at bay. No ants. Only seen scorpions three or four times in all the years I've been here." I roll over to lean across her. "If your worried, I'll take top next round."

She loops one arm around my neck and meets my lips for a slow kiss. "Okay."

Each night with her gets better than the last. Something I'd never have believed possible if I hadn't actually experienced it. We don't spend the whole night outside after all because a brief rain blows through.

Just enough to wake us so we move inside. The double bed encourages a quickie before we both drift away again. Exhausted.



"WHAT ARE YOU GRINNING ABOUT?"

I set the cooler in the back of the truck. "Memories from last night."

Her blush makes me laugh. This crazy, beautiful woman has two sides: kitten in the light of day and wild cat at night.

Wouldn't have it any other way.

"This it?" I ask, taking the bag from her.

"Yeah, looks like everything."

I shut the tailgate and tug her close for a kiss. "I try to get up here once a month." Not sure exactly how to let her know I want her to join me, I ask, "Interested in coming up again sometime?"

She smiles before dropping her eyes to the ground. Fuck. The second the

question left my mouth, I knew we had a problem. “Brent, we should talk about...”

“Us?”

She nods. “There can’t be an us. Not back home, anyway.”

I knew that’s been on her mind the past few hours. The rules of the academy. Been like lead on mine, too. I take her hand and lead her back to the house for a final walk-through before locking the doors.

“Let’s not tempt trouble,” I say.

Lord knows I have enough of that waiting for me. Damned sure don’t need any more. Even though I know I’ll have to face my trouble, in full, head-on one day soon.

So will she if anyone at the school learns we’ve spent the weekend together. That’s the part that bothers me.

Her having to face career consequences – ridiculous. Whether she’s Nat’s teacher or not, it shouldn’t have anything to do with who she chooses to date.

And it’s not like we’re dating, but after this weekend, I won’t be able to go long without seeing her.

I’m still cursing inwardly as I make the final rounds. The house is in order, right down to the freshly made beds. We’d washed the linens while eating lunch.

“Ready?”

She nods and walks out the front door. I follow, locking the door, then take a hold of her hand as we head for the pickup.

It’s a solemn ride home. We talk, but not about anything serious.

I know she’s worried, but refrain from telling her to stop.

“You can just drop me off at my apartment.” Blue looks at me as we enter the outskirts of Phoenix.

“You don’t want to see your ma when she drops Nat off?” Cleo and I made that our plan last night, that she’d drop my daughter off at my house at five this evening.

“I’ll talk to her,” Blue says. “But then you’ll have to give me a ride home later and Natalie will probably be ready for bed.”

She’s right, damn it. I’m just not ready to be done yet. “I’m sure she won’t mind riding with to give you a ride home.”

Her gaze remains out the side window as she answers, “Probably not, but she’s had a busy weekend and needs a good night’s rest before school. She has art class tomorrow night, so it’ll be a long day for her. And me.”

She’s right about that part, too. I take the exit towards her apartment. Her car is in her parking space, and I pull up behind it since there aren’t any other open spaces.

“I’ll get your bag.”

“No need.” She opens her door. “I’m on it.”

I grab her arm as she’s climbing out. “I’m walking you up to your apartment, so there’s no use trying to stop me.”

She’s trying hard not to smile. “Fine.”

Because it’s still daylight and I have no idea who might be watching, I release her and open my door. I grab her bag out of the back and follow her to the door. Then up the stairs.

The hallway feels balmy as ever and I catch a whiff of something sour. Her nose wrinkles, too. “Christ, what is that?”

“Don’t know, never smelled it before,” she says. “But it stinks.”

“Almost smells like...rotten fish,” I say, as she’s unlocking her door.

The instant her door swings open, the stench assaults us full blast. Holy Moses.

We both cough, covering our mouths and noses with one hand. I push her aside to step in first, wondering what, or who, died in here.

Shit. It’s not just a joke.

Both her large fish tanks are shattered. Shriveled and dead, fish and plants are scattered across the light-colored carpet.

Fuck. The Pearls.

I spin around at her gasp, then at the wall behind me because that’s where she’s staring, her eyes practically glued to it. A picture hangs above the couch, her and her mother.

Someone wrote TEASE, BITCH, WHORE on the wall, with arrows pointing towards Blue.

I fight the urge to put my fist through it.

“Jesus. You...you told me there was something dead in here,” she whimpers, still in shock.

“Dead’s right,” another voice says.

I step forward and pull Blue against my chest before turning to the door. The old man from across the hall stands there, looking as ornery as before, as well as a younger guy, staring straight at Blue.

He steps forward. “Ms. Derby, are you all right?”

As I tighten my hold on Blue, a stab of jealousy hits me like no other. There’s way too much concern, too much want on this man’s face for my liking. “Who the fuck are you?” I snarl.

Blue stiffens and pushes against my chest while taking a single step backwards. “He’s the building manager. Scott Riker.”

“I told you something was dead in here, Riker,” the old man repeats. “Been stinking like a damn latrine for the last two days.”

“Go back to your apartment, Mr. Barrett,” Riker says, but his gaze never leaves me. “Who are you?”

Keeping Blue close to my side, I say it loud and clear, “Her fiancé.”

Her eyes widen, but not in surprise.

More like they want to say *not again*.

Riker eyeballs me suspiciously, until he catches a glimpse of the wall behind me. “Whoa. What happened?”

“Obviously, the place was broken into.” With a gesture towards the door, I add, “Those ten dollar locks on the doors in this place can be shimmied open with a credit card.”

“Have you called the police?” Riker asks.

“We just walked in,” I point out.

“I’m calling them right now,” the old man says with a phone at his ear.

Riker spins around and grabs the man’s phone. “Give me that, please.” A moment later, he steps in the hall, “Yes, I need to report a break-in...”

“Did you hear anything? See anything?” I ask the old man.

“No, just got a whiff of something dead a few nights ago.” The old man points a thumb over his shoulder. “Called Riker. He said he’d check on it, but never did.”

Blue keeps trembling hard. I spin her around and escort her into the bedroom, away from the hell-stench. I give the room a solid once over before I lead her to the bed. The room looks untouched, so I sit her down, kneeling in front of

her. "Breathe, Izzy. Just breathe."

She nods, then shakes her head. "Who would do such a thing? My poor fish..."

I squeeze her hands. "The police will find out. I'll stay on them till they have answers."

She closes her eyes and swallows hard. "There's only one person I can think of: Preston."

I nod grimly, but wonder if it was really him, or the Pearls trying to get my full attention.

There's a knock on the wall beside the open door. It's Riker.

"Police are on their way. I'm going down a floor to see if there's any ceiling damage in that apartment, but I'll be right back."

"Thank you," Blue says with a meek smile.

I still don't like how he looks at her, so remain silent until he leaves. Then, I nod towards her closet. "Pack your things."

"What things?"

"Whatever you need," I say, just as my phone rings. "You aren't staying here." Glancing at the phone, I tell her, "It's your mother."

"Don't tell her!" Blue jumps to her feet. "Nothing, Brent. Not a thing. I'll never hear the end of it."

I answer the phone and listen to Cleo explain they're running late and won't have Natalie to my house until after six. I tell her that's fine and hang up.

I gesture towards the closet again, certain Blue isn't done putting up a fight about where she's staying. "You either stay with me, or your mother. Your choice."

She opens her mouth, but a shout from the other room interrupts her.

"You in there, the fiancé?" the old man says from the living room. "Come take a look at this."

"Coming." I tell her, "Start packing."

"You can't tell me what –"

"Blue?"

"Brent, it isn't –"

"Pack, babe. Now."

She turns around in a huff.

“I’m only saying what the police will tell you.” Having already witnessed her hard-headedness, I add, “For your own safety, they’ll suggest you stay somewhere else for a few days. Common procedure.”

I walk out of the bedroom. In the living room, the old man stops near the remnants of the broken fish tanks. “Don’t touch anything,” I tell him.

“Yeah, yeah, I know better.” He points to the floor. “Look at the hammer laying there. Bet that’s what was used to smash the tanks. Pretty dumb to leave it behind, don’t you think?”

“That’s *my* hammer,” Blue says stepping up beside me. “Weird. It’s usually in the kitchen drawer.”

I grab her arm as she starts walking forward. “We can’t touch anything in here until the police arrive.” Glancing around, I notice the lamps are on. Even weirder.

I hadn’t flipped any switches. I’m sure of it. And I walked in before her, so she hadn’t either, which means whoever did this, did it at night.

My stomach knots at the thought of what may have happened had she been home. Last week, after realizing I couldn’t keep following her, I’d paid one of Juan’s cousins to, but only until she’d arrived home for the night.

“I have to clean up this mess,” she says. “The entire building will start stinking.”

“I’ll send over a crew first thing in the morning,” I say. Looking her in the eye, I ask, “So, which is it, Blue? Your mother’s place or mine?”

ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM (IZZY)

I keep my trembling hands in my lap beneath the table while mother paces Brent's kitchen.

"Who on earth would do such a thing?" she says again. "Destroy someone's property like that? Kill their fish?"

"The police are looking into it," Brent says. "Probably just vandals."

Thankfully, he's only told her someone broke into my apartment and smashed the fish tanks. The loss of the fish didn't scare me as badly as the writing on the walls. I see those devil words every time I close my eyes.

TEASE. BITCH. WHORE.

"Well, I'm so glad that you'll be staying here, darling," Mother says. "I hate the idea of you being alone. I can stay home, too, if you'd prefer. If you need a hand with –"

"No," I say sharply. "You go to Vegas with George, Mom. There's nothing you can do here."

Brent's phone rings. After glancing at the screen, he walks out the sliding door, closing it tight before answering.

Mom sighs and the look on her face tells the world what she thinks of Brent. "Such a wonderful man, Izzy. I'm so glad he was with you this evening. He's exactly what you need. Strong. Solid. Caring. Handsome..."

I stop listening to her long litany celebrating my Not Fiancé, however true.

Brent is all those things. But this is a clusterfuck.

It's living a lie. One that can't continue.

I was set to go to mother's house, even though I knew it'd be hellish, until she said she and George are heading up to Vegas tomorrow for a car show. I really don't want to be alone, but I can't stay here. I'll lose my job for sure. And

though Brent and I had some amazing sex the past couple of days, that doesn't mean we're meant to live together. Even if there's a new reason.

Brent walks back in and I curse my heart. It jumps way too noticeably when he's near.

Ridiculous. I don't need that any more than I need the rest of this insanity.

If only I'd known what a mess signing up for an online dating site and having one date with a first class douchebag could cause...

I stand to give mom a hug and assure her I'll be fine. Brent walks her to the front door and yells upstairs for Natalie to come down and say goodbye.

Fine. I wait in the kitchen.

Brent and mother are talking, saying I'll be okay. I will be. As far as the break-in goes.

I walk to the patio door, stare out into the darkness that's settled over the desert.

What scares me, what really shakes me up, is being here.

At his house.

After what happened this weekend.

I could fall in love. I'm more than halfway there, honestly, and I can't be.

I've worked too hard to get what I want. A job at the academy.

I can't throw it all away for a man I barely know.

My heart skips a beat, telling me he's near even before I see his reflection in the glass. I close my eyes to his smile. If only it was so easy to shut out everything else.

His warm hands gently settle on my arms, and then he caresses my skin so softly my insides melt. What should be sweetness hurts.

I take a step away. "We can't do this."

"You can't stay alone, Blue."

"If the school finds out, I'll be fired. You know that."

He shrugs. "No job's worth your life. You're a smart lady. You've got to know that."

There's frustration in his voice. I'm frustrated, too. And pissed.

I spin around to face him. "Haven't you ever wanted something, Brent? Wanted it so bad you worked day and night?"

“It’s a job.” He shakes his head. “A fucking teaching job. There has to be a thousand others. Jobs come and go. Can’t replace your life, Blue.”

“To *you*. To me, it’s the job. A dream that actually came true.” I twist away from him, as flustered with myself as I am with his lecture.

No one else has ever understood, so there’s no reason he should either, I suppose. Art was the only thing I could focus on after dad died. The only thing no one could take away.

Brent’s arms fold around me from behind, and as badly as I want the comfort, I can’t accept it.

Not from him. If only he was anyone else. Someone who didn’t have a connection to the academy.

“I’ll talk to Jacobs.”

I shake my head. “And tell him what? That you’re my fiancé? That seems to be your standard answer and what got us in trouble in the first place.” I step out of his hold and turn around. “Besides...I don’t want to be your pretend fiancée. Don’t want to be anyone’s pretend anything.”

He stares at me. “I get it, Blue. But you have to know, I wasn’t pretending this weekend, and I don’t believe you were either.”

I wasn’t, but can’t admit it. “This weekend has nothing to do with any of this.”

His glare grows icy. “You’re right. It doesn’t.” He gestures down the hallway. “Your things are in the bedroom across from Nat’s and your car will be here by the time you need to leave in the morning.”

He walks out of the room. I slump against the counter. What the fuck is wrong with me?

Seriously? I just spent the last four days with this man, loving every minute, and now, when I want nothing more than to feel his arms around me again, I push him away.

He’s right and wrong. Both simultaneously.

It’s just a job. But it’s also my everything, just like I told him. A chance to put me on the fast track to the goal I set many tumultuous years ago.

I push myself off the counter and head upstairs. Natalie comes out of her room just as I arrive at the door across the hall.

“I’m sorry someone broke into your apartment, Izzy,” she says, “but I’m happy you’re staying here with us.”

I give her a hug. “Thank you.” Not wanting to get her hopes up, I say, “My apartment should be ready for me to move back in just a couple days. I shouldn’t be here long.”

“I know. Dad told me. I just want you to know I’m happy that you’re here.”

My heart takes a tumble. Of course, he told her.

This isn’t what he wants either.

Maybe his reasons are different – they must be – but he knows how crazy this is.

I tell Nat goodnight and spend a restless night trying to figure out why Brent keeps letting things go as far as they have. I don’t mean the sex. I mean agreeing to be my pretend boyfriend. Vowing to protect me. Practically telling me he won’t take no for an answer.

He might be a nice guy, with the background to make good on his strongman promises, but no one’s *that* nice.

What the hell?

Sure, he loves his daughter, but I can’t believe he’s doing all this just for her sake, either. There has to be more behind it.

But what?



He’s in the kitchen the next morning, looking far too handsome this early. He’s wearing nothing more than a pair of pajama pants. Their tight cut makes me remember the weekend mornings all too well.

“Coffee?”

I shake my head. “I’ll get some on the way to school.”

He sets down his cup. “I’m not blind, Blue. I get this has gone farther than we ever anticipated, but –”

“No, buts,” I say. “I’ll go straight to my mom’s after work tonight.”

“No, you won’t. That call I took last night was from a captain in the sheriff’s department. He’s bringing the papers by tonight for an Order For Protection against Preston Graves. I told him to be here at five. So you’ll still make it to your art class this evening.”

I’m full of protests, but know they’ll be a waste of breath and time. “Are the keys in my car?” I’d given them to Riker last night, for Juan to collect, and deliver my car to Brent’s.

He digs in his pocket and sets them on the counter.

I pick them up and leave the house. The gut sense that came to me last night, that there's more going on, is stronger than ever this morning. I just can't make sense of it now.

Later, I will.

The day is a total circus. Four days of vacation this early in the year disrupts the routine I'd spent weeks instilling in the preschoolers. There are tears, bathroom accidents and temper tantrums that leave me euphoric when 2:30 finally rolls around.

I've just finished saying goodbye to the last student when the phone on the wall rings. Intuition hits hard, telling me who it is even before I hold the receiver to my ear.

"Ms. Derby?" Sally Jones says. "Mr. Jacobs would like to see you in his office."

"I'll be there soon. Thanks." Amazing how calm I sound. Dread pricks my entire body.

I collect my things and leave the classroom. I've never been fired before, so don't know exactly how it happens.

Natalie sits in the front office when I get there, tears in her eyes. "I didn't want to tell him we went to the wedding with you, but Mr. Jacobs made me. I'm sorry."

Anger boils inside me as I wrap my arms around her. Whatever I expected from the principal, it isn't this. "You didn't do anything to be sorry about," I whisper. "Nothing at all."

Behind her desk, Sally Jones gives me a nod and then glances towards Mr. Jacobs' office. I'm beyond pissed that he made Natalie cry. "I'll be back shortly," I tell her.

I enter the Principal's office, and as I'm closing the door, I say the first thing that comes to mind, "Brent Eden is going to be furious when he finds out you interrogated his daughter."

He nods slowly, as if unaffected by what I'd just said. "Then perhaps Mr. Eden, and you, should have been honest with me from the beginning, Ms. Derby." Sitting down, he points towards the chair in front of his desk. "Have a seat. I'll get to it. You came so highly recommended. I'd be extremely disappointed to have to let you go, so I suggest we consider this a warning in the strongest possible terms –"

If his office door opening with a bang doesn't interrupt him, Brent's angrily distorted face does.

No denying it. That badass attitude I thought was a grand charade exists.

The door slams shut and in two steps Brent slaps a hand on the desk hard enough to knock over a photo. "Who the fuck do you think you are? What I do, what my daughter does, outside of this school, is no business of yours."

"Now, Mr. Eden, listen here, I—"

"No, you listen. If you and your fucking academy cared more about your teachers and students than you do your rules and regulations, you'd have had Preston Graves charged for breaking and entering." Brent slams a hand on the desk again. "But you didn't. So, that slimy little bastard breaks into Ms. Derby's apartment, destroys her stuff, kills her fish, and leaves her no choice but to file a restraining order against the bastard. And what are you worried about? If she's fraternizing with a student and her old man outside of school? How fucked up is that?"

Jacobs looks shocked. "He-he broke in to —"

"Yeah. Just a couple days ago," Brent answers. "Tore the place up."

"Well, this is a new development, I hadn't heard —"

It's hard not to smile, watching Jacobs go pale with a thousand ugly legal implications invading his head.

"Then listen good. Right now." Brent waves a hand towards me. "If Ms. Derby can't be friends with my family outside of school because Nat's a student, then I'll pull her out. I'll raise hell for a refund. And I'll make sure everybody knows this place puts red tape over real safety. There are plenty of other schools just as good as this one."

I jump to my feet. "You can't do that!"

"No, there aren't!" Jacobs says at the same time.

"I can," Brent says to me before turning to Jacobs. "And there are." Brent sets both hands on the desk and leans towards Jacobs. "Last chance, bub. You'd better get a handle on what you're trying to cover up with this rules bullshit, or I'll expose your dirty laundry. Every damn bit of it."

The air goes so still a shiver tickles my spine.

Jacobs goes bone white as he slowly lowers himself onto his chair.

Brent straightens. "I'm sure you'll have a change of heart. Agree Ms. Derby's done nothing to put her employment here in jeopardy. And once you've

apologized to her, you owe my daughter one, too.”

Jacobs nods.

The next few minutes, which include the apologies Brent demanded, are subdued. I can’t help but question what sort of cover up Brent kept referring to.

If it was just rules, which every parent agrees to when they enroll their kids, the academy would have the upper hand. Jacobs wouldn’t be scared out of his skin. I don’t ask until after we’re all at his place, later.

“I have no idea,” Brent says. “It was the only thing that made sense. Calling the bastard’s bluff with one of my own. It worked. Probably a few laws on the books that would’ve landed him in hot water over you and Graves, the break-in, giving a predator access to the school. Hell of a lot worse than his dumbass rules with you and me.”

We’re in the kitchen and Natalie’s upstairs. I’m still suspicious. “All schools have rules about teacher and student relationships.”

“Which they need to, but Jacobs blew this one out of proportion.”

I step closer to the kitchen island separating us. “And what about you? Didn’t you blow up, too? Threatening to send her elsewhere?”

“No.” He leans across the island, laying a hand on mine. “I was telling the truth. Don’t know why you love that school so much, but you do, and if it means you losing your job, then fuck yes, I’ll send Nat to another school.”

I try to pull my hand out from under his, but he grasps it tight.

“That’s what Natalie would want, too,” he says softly. “No lie.”

I shake my head, heart sinking to depths of confusion I never knew existed. “No. I’d never allow that to happen.”

He keeps his tense hold on my fingers as he walks around the edge of the island. Stopping in front of me, he takes my other hand. “Just like I won’t allow Jacobs to bully you.”

Damn!

The question I’d asked myself all night comes out. I can’t hold it in any longer.

“Why?” I shake my head. “Why are you doing all this, Brent? It doesn’t make sense.”

I can’t pull my eyes off him, and also realize just how over my head I am in all of this. Pure instinct is what kept me going last weekend. Instinct and

pleasure. *Unbelievable* pleasure.

It was a game. Mindless fun.

Back here, in Phoenix, it's real life, and it's far from carefree. I've never done anything like this, and don't know what to do. If there are rules for this sort of thing, or not.

"Does this make better sense?" he asks, moments before his lips meet mine.

The kiss is so soft, so sweet and gentle, my insides melt at the same time a fire sparks.

He does that.

Makes me forget everything except how perfect we can be.

It can't keep happening. It's not the answer to any of this.

It takes all my effort to pull away. "No. None of this makes sense. You didn't want to be my prop, my pretend boyfriend. You said –"

"I *know* what I said, Blue." He frames my face with both hands. "And I thought you knew I meant it at the time."

"Thought?"

"I was attracted to you before." His fingers comb my hair. "You saw the pictures I drew. From the moment I met you, I couldn't get you out of my head. Still can't. Shit happened. Drew us together. Still happening."

That's true, but it's no answer. "Okay, fine, but –"

"Quiet. You're putting too much thought into this, Blue." He kisses my forehead. "You no longer have any worries over losing your job. So let's just go slow and see what happens."

Again, he's right, but I'm still not convinced. Maybe because I've always been wary of relationships. Seen too many broken hearts.

Maybe the job at the academy wasn't my ultimate goal. Or maybe it was just an excuse to not have to be in a relationship of any kind.

"It's too much," I say loudly. "All of this. It's just too, well...complicated."

He slides his hands down to my shoulders. There's a simple answer in his touch that makes my blood seethe. "Doesn't have to be. Quit thinking. Stop doubting. Saying we're impossible before we're even anything."

"Jesus, it's not like that. How can we be? The school. My family." I shake my head, battling back tears. "It's gone too far, too fast."

“We’ll slow down then,” he says. “Set boundaries.”

“Boundaries?”

He nods. He’s trying so hard. “You name them.”

“Well.” I step back so I can think. It’s harder than it should be while he’s touching me. My mind becomes focused on only one thing then. “No more charging into the Principal’s office and pounding his desk like a Neanderthal, for one.”

“Okay.” He shrugs.

He agrees so fast I haven’t had time to think of anything else, other than how badly I want him to kiss me again, and then do a few other choice things. This is impossible, however he wants me to think otherwise. Staying here with him. “And no kissing,” I say.

He lifts a single brow. “Bull.”

“Not in front of Natalie, I mean.” I bite my tongue softly, but it’s too late. I can’t stop a strained smile.

“Whatever, fair enough,” he says. “Anything else?”

Nothing comes to me. How could it when he’s staring. Knowing I want more than kisses. “I’ll let you know when I think of something else.”

He steps forward and touches the end of my nose with one finger. “Got it.”

Walking toward the hall, he gives me a wink. “I’ll order a pizza for supper while you do your thinking. That shit always makes me hungry enough to eat a water buffalo.”

Flustered because I’m not sure I gained any ground, I yell after him, “No anchovies!”

He laughs.

I spin around and consider banging my head against the countertop. The marble countertop.

Despite all this tension and heart-to-heart madness, I’m no closer to finding out the truth. The missing piece that’s hanging in the air between us. Invisible and omnipresent like dark matter.

There *has* to be more than meets the eye here. I feel it in my bones. Deep down.

Has to be more for him wanting to be my boyfriend so bad. Pretend or not. Attraction aside.

It's not like I've had guys lined up out the door. The only reason I signed up for that dating app was because I knew Megan's wedding was just around the corner.

No, I hadn't known *which* corner, but they'd been looking at rings since Christmas, so it was inevitable. I'd just wanted a man by then. A 'man friend,' as mom would say.

Nothing more than that.

Instead, I accidentally ordered up a fucking psycho. Preston.

Who I'm rescued from by a dream come true. A complicated, overprotective beast with a heart of gold under his fuck-the-world exterior. A man who also might have the best dick on the planet, which I'm now telling myself I can't play with.

Fucking idiot. Crazy. That's what I am.

That's what he does to me.

That's what this is.

I'm still in the depths of chiding myself when the doorbell rings. A moment later, voices and footsteps sound in the hallway. It's too soon to be the pizza man.

I step away from the counter and try to busy myself at the sink, getting a glass of water. Which I damn near choke on when I recognize the stocky cop standing beside Brent.

"Izzy, this is Captain Bob Dawson from the sheriff's department," Brent says. "He's brought the paperwork for you to sign for the OFP."

Oh, we've met.

He's the one who gave me a ticket weeks ago. And was extremely rude about it.

I'm hoping the captain doesn't remember my face, but considering my car in the driveway, there really isn't much hope.

"Hello, Captain Dawson," I say, trying not to grit my teeth.

"Ms. Derby." He gives a shallow nod. Then he sets some papers on the counter and pulls a pen out of his shirt pocket. "If you'll just complete these forms, and sign them, I'll have them sent to the judge promptly."

"Thank you." I take the pen and slide the papers closer.

Brent and the Captain talk while I read the instructions and check the

appropriate boxes. I'm in the midst of explaining what happened at my apartment in as few words as possible when the doorbell rings again.

Brent excuses himself to go get the pizza.

The captain steps over and leans against the island. My nerves are already shot, and his closeness makes my spine ice up.

I really don't like this man. Something weird about him. Police officers are supposed to make you feel safe. With him, it's the opposite.

"How long have you known Brent Eden?" he asks, glancing at the lines I've completed.

It's hard not to turn and look him in the eye. I don't think that's anyone's business and keep my attention on the papers. "A while."

"Did you know his brother? David?"

I don't glance up. "No."

"Ah. Just curious. Brent's done a lot of work for the department, and I've known him for years. It's too bad what happened to Dave."

I'm curious, but don't dare ask. Not with that strange, soft edge in his voice.

I sign the last page and slide them all over to him. "Done, officer. Anything else you need from me?"

Brent and Nat enter the room, chattering away. Thank God. Natalie sets the pizza box on the counter.

"Got all I need right here, Brent," the captain says. "I'll head out now. Better get at that pizza before it gets cold."

Brent walks him outside while Natalie and I set the table.

She's still a bit subdued, so I turn the subject to the pizza, pretending I've never had Mike's before. Her demeanor changes instantly, and by the time Brent returns, we're laughing and comparing local pizza joints.

After we eat, Brent insists on driving us both to the school and sits in the back of the room the entire time. By the time we get home, the stress of the last two days is dragging on me.

I go upstairs, take a bath, and then crawl into bed. I hear Brent come upstairs. I don't want to imagine how comforting it would be to flop down next to him, feel those strong arms wrap around me. But tonight's not the night or the place for it.

I shouldn't be so selfish. This isn't easy on him, either.

He's as stressed as I am. I can tell.

Even though I'm tired, I know I won't be able to sleep, so I pull out my tablet to read. I don't get far. None of the books I've downloaded hold my attention tonight, so I open up my web browser, and before I even realize it, I'm typing David Eden into the search bar.

There are plenty of people by that name, and I only need to pay nine dollars and ninety-nine cents to shady background sites to learn all about them.

Snorting, I narrow my search. Including Brent's name in quotes helps, but the only things that come up are Davey's obituary on several different websites.

That creepy cop is why I'm more curious now than before. Why in God's name did he ask me about Brent's dead brother?

It makes no sense and it's eerie as hell. I don't just dislike Captain Dawson. He freaks me out.

I sigh, shutting off the tablet. "You don't like him because he gave you a ticket," I whisper to myself. It's not very reassuring. "Just go to sleep. Stop trying to make a mountain out of every molehill..."

An hour later, I'm still wide awake, and seriously contemplating sneaking down the hall to Brent's bedroom, apologizing for being so foolish earlier, and begging him to let me crawl into his bed. Preferably naked.

It's wrong, but there are a few walls between his room and Nat's. If we're careful, there isn't a chance we'll wake her.

The click of the door opening has me sitting up, and the dark silhouette that appears in the doorway a second later sends my heart soaring.

He walks in and closes the door behind him. "Nat's sound asleep."

"Oh?" It's all I can think to say.

He steps closer to the bed. "I'm not, Blue. Wide awake."

"Same," I whisper, slowly flipping back the covers, exposing the wide-open space beside me.

He's not even completely on the bed before we're kissing. Seriously and deliciously. Tongues fused, thrashing, hot omens of things to come.

Pulling his mouth away, he says, "I suggest no boundaries once she's sleeping." He cups one of my breasts firmly, rolling the nipple between his fingers. "None whatsoever."

I slide my hands under his T-shirt. "Sold."

DARK FORMULA (BRENT)

I pull the door shut on Blue's apartment and lock it. Her place is as good as new.

Better, really, than when she'd first moved in. That's for sure. The job took longer than it needed to, replacing the carpet and sub-floor. I usually leave that to someone else.

Clean it and get out is the motto for most of the jobs I contract. This one wasn't contracted, though, and I wanted it to take as long as possible.

I've gotten used to Blue being in my place. Warming my bed. Sneaking into hers.

Fucking her brains out after we've both had a long, hard day. Usually keep my hand pressed over her mouth or stuff her face in the pillow so the little screamer doesn't make too much noise.

I'm too damn used to the new routine. Like it too much. Don't want it changing.

Too bad I'll have to let her know the place is done, though. Riker, the manager, just did the walk through with me. So did the nosy neighbor, Mr. Barrett. Both kept asking when Blue would be coming back.

Not for a little while, I told them. Now, I just have to make sure she agrees to it.

There hasn't been a word from that asshole, Preston, but I'm still not totally convinced he's the one who trashed her place. That keeps my nerves on edge. There's no peace. More like the calm before a storm.

Bastard Phil hasn't shown up either. Not since I threatened him with his own knife.

It's not like any fuckers in the Pearls to give up so easy. He'd been hounding me for weeks, and now, nothing?

Doesn't make sense. Stinks worse than the rotten carpet we just ripped out.

Then again, none of this ever did. No sense. Going all the way back to Davey getting tangled up with them in the first place.

I push open the double glass doors of Blue's apartment lobby and walk to my truck.

Davey got greedy, but he liked his job with the newspaper and was a damn good photographer. When he said he'd quit, neither my parents or I believed it. He floundered around then, taking odd jobs, spent months at the ranch. Kept saying he was fixing the place up, but never actually did any fixing.

I climb in the truck and turn on the ignition.

I slap the steering wheel. Can't fucking help it.

"Damn. If only he'd taken my offer that night." My business wasn't as successful then as it is now, when I'd offered my brother money, but I'd have given him every dime I had.



Years Ago

"WHATEVER MONEY YOU NEED, you've got it. Right here."

Davey laughs as he picks up my checkbook and tosses it back at me. "This isn't about money, big bro. It's bigger."

"Bigger danger, you mean. You're going to get yourself killed."

He shrugs. "Same shit they said about you. As I recall, you could've gotten killed in the Army, but that didn't stop you, did it? Didn't stop you from wheeling drugs and guns and fucking God only knows how many sluts when you were a Grizz." An angry glare appears in his eyes. Jealousy.

Christ. Doesn't he see how I hang my head when he mentions my past? The club was dirty in those days, but the worst of it never snowballed into Arizona. It still nearly cost me my life, and my soul.

"The only reason you left," he says, "only reason you came home for good, is because Cindy died."

He's done that before, the prick. Acting like Cindy's death was my fucking fault.

It wasn't. An act of God took her away before her time. I step closer to him, balling my hands into fists to keep from grabbing at his shirt, and shaking

some sense into him.

I'd tried that once. It doesn't work. Just makes him more determined to fuck up his life.

"Davey, don't you think I wish she was alive? That Natalie could know her ma?"

"You kept Cindy on a yo-yo string for years. On again, off again. Left her wondering. Had everybody scratching their heads."

Keeping my anger in check grows harder. "This isn't about Cindy, dammit. It's about you, and how you're a chin hair away from fucking up your life. Throwing it away."

He shrugs. "Mine to fuck up, bro."

"You're right about that," I say. "But what about Mom and Dad? Don't you care about them? About how they'd feel knowing you're mixed up with the mob?"

He laughs. "There you go again. It was fine for you to be part of the Grizzlies, but not me. Oh, no. Never little Davey. I'm the good brother. Can't measure up to big brother's success or his disasters." He shoves a finger in my chest.

"No, Brent. This time, it's different. I'll be the one everyone's talking about. The one everyone's so proud of." He tosses his pool stick on the table. "It's been a long time coming, but it'll be worth it. Just wait."



Present

MY EYES ARE STINGING and my throat burns like hell, remembering how I'd stood there and watched him walk out the door. That was the last time I'd seen him alive.

Two days later, I was identifying his body at the morgue. A job I didn't want to hand off to either of my parents. A sight I couldn't stand them to see.

I reverse the truck and drive out of the parking lot.

Cross-fire. That's what the police said. That Davey was caught up in the cross-fire of a drug deal gone wrong. That he was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Like hell.

He'd been shot in the head at point blank range and then put in his car. His

keys were in his pocket. I wanted to know more, but my parents believed the story. They wanted to believe and I couldn't ruin Davey's memory by insisting it was a lie.

Even now. That's why I have to be careful.

My phone rings at the same time the speaker tells me Blue's calling. I glance at the clock while tapping the answer button. Nat had ridden to school with her today and she'd sent a text a short time ago, saying they were home and going swimming in the pool.

"Hello," I say.

"Hey."

She doesn't sound right. That instantly heightens my instincts. "What's wrong?"

"Are you on your way home?"

Blue's voice trembles. Urgency has me stepping harder on the gas. "Right this second. Why?"

"Captain Dawson...he s-said they found Preston Graves. He's dead, Brent."

Fuck.

I suck in my breath. "I'm on my way. Be there soon, babe, don't go anywhere." Although I have a ton of questions, now's not the time. "There's nothing to worry about. Is Dawson still there?"

"Y-yes. He asked when you'd be home."

I wish I was there. To comfort her and tell Dawson he should've called me first. Dropping this on Blue...it's too damn much.

He shouldn't have knocked on the door with this kind of bomb. What the fuck was he thinking? "I'll be home in a few."

"Okay."

Her voice sounds so meek, so drained, my pulse kicks higher. "It'll be all right, babe. Everything."

Concern for Blue, how she sounded, stays first and foremost as I speed toward home. Meanwhile, I curse Dawson.

The man's not an idiot, so what gives?

He's hired me for a large number of jobs the past couple of years. Has to know I don't appreciate him telling Blue that type of news alone.

His squad car sits in the driveway. I park behind Blue's car and jump out of the truck.

Dawson steps through the front door just as I step on the porch.

"Ms. Derby's fine, Brent," he says, blocking me from going around him. "We need to talk."

"Why?" I play dumb.

He rubs a hand over his stiff mustache. "Preston Graves was beaten before he was dumped in the desert. Left to die."

A chill rips up my spine. "Yeah, what else? What are you insinuating?"

Folding his arms across his chest, he raises a brow. "Hope you won't take this the wrong way, however...it's no secret you had some rough friends, Eden."

"The Grizzlies?" I'm instantly pissed, but hide it by shaking my head. "Fuck, you know I haven't been a member for a long time. But even if I was, that wouldn't have anything to do with this. Besides, their national Prez, Blackjack, keeps the uglier elements on a tight leash these days. Local chapter flies right from everything I've heard. All the straight up scum long purged. The MC doesn't do shit like that anymore. Not in Arizona, or anywhere."

"Standard procedure. Nothing personal," he says quietly. "Surely, you can't blame me, considering how it looks. An old boyfriend breaking into your girlfriend's apartment? Who winds up dead a couple weeks later?"

"You're barking up the wrong tree, Dawson." I look him dead in the eye. "Tell me one thing: do I need a lawyer?"

He says nothing. "Just want you to know you'll be looked at long and hard. Friendly warning. If you have anything to say, you'd be better off telling me privately. We've worked together a lot recently. That could work in your favor."

He's overseen the L.E. cleanups I've been hired to do, and he's referred me to others, but it's not as if we're drinking buddies. "I don't need any favors," I say. "No one's above the law. If I've got to clear my name, I will. Didn't have anything to do with Preston Graves."

He shrugs. "The investigators will think differently, given all the evidence."

Evidence? The fuck is he on about?

"What evidence? I've only ever seen the guy once. The night he was in Izzy's face, trying to strong-arm her into a second date she wanted nothing to do with." I stop right there. I've got to be damn careful what I say next, however true.

He slaps my shoulder as he walks past. "We'll talk tomorrow."

I spin around, watch him walk to his car, then let it go.

He's just doing his job. Right?

Now, I have to do mine.

I walk into the house and find Blue in the kitchen. The moment she sees me, she squeezes her eyes shut. The recent tears are obvious, and so is her fighting to hide more. I walk over and pull her into my arms.

"I didn't like him, but I didn't want him dead," she sobs quietly into my shirt. "Just wanted him to go away and leave me alone!"

I kiss the top of her head. "Course you did, Blue. You don't have a mean bone in your body."

Preston was a little prick. Not a stretch to believe he pissed off the wrong person. I cringe slightly at the thought. I *had* threatened him, once.

He could have told others. Fuck.

I could get in some scalding hot water over this shit. I can't have that. Not with the Pearls already breathing down my neck.

I need to know more. Releasing her, I keep one arm around her while leading her to a stool. "What else did Dawson say?"

She sniffs, wiping her eyes. "He wanted to know when the last time I saw Preston was. I told him I haven't seen him since that night at the school. Two times, ever."

Shit. I'm not expecting her to have lied, but if she'd told him word-for-word what happened, I'm fucked.

"What's wrong?"

I shake my head. "Nothing. Preston must have pissed off the wrong person. Maybe he's been harassing another woman from that dating site."

Her phone rings. The screen says Mom.

Glad for the interruption, I slide it across the counter. "Good distraction. You should take it."

Blue shakes her head.

"You'll have to talk to her sooner or later," I say. "Clara knew Preston, she said. Fundraiser or something, like she told us at the wedding."

"Shit. You're right." She picks up the phone. "Hey, Mom. How's Vegas? Oh,

you're home already..."

My mind weighs a hundred pounds and it's spinning out of control.

The way Davey's death was handled, no one in Phoenix investigations was overly worried about discovering the truth. I know the workload of those detectives. The quickest and easiest route to a resolution is the one they usually follow. Especially when the signs of foul play aren't ironclad.

"Hey, Dad." Natalie opens the sliding glass door and steps into the kitchen with a towel wrapped around her wet body. "Did Izzy tell you we're making tacos for supper? Hatch chilis with 'em!"

"Sounds good. How's the pool?"

"Perfect." She nods towards Blue. "We were just heading out the door when the sheriff showed up."

I hadn't noticed Blue has a swimming suit on because it's covered with a long shirt. Needing a way to release the tension that's overwhelming me, I say, "I'll go get my suit on. We can all take a swim before supper."

"Awesome," Natalie exclaims. "I told Izzy you'd probably join us once you got home." She lowers her voice. "Is everything okay? Did they find out who broke into Izzy's apartment?"

"They're still working on that," I say, recalling the bikini I'd packed up at Blue's last week and brought here, along with most of her other personal items. "I'll meet you outside in five or ten."

She heads back out the door and I go upstairs to change. A few minutes later, we're all in the pool.

I've always appreciated my daughter, but do even more right now. There's nothing like a child to put life back in perspective. And watching Blue glide through the water in her skimpy pink and blue bikini has me determined to hire the best fucking lawyer in Arizona if necessary to prove I had nothing to do with Preston's death.

Which will screw up my chances of paying the Pearls back for Davey's death. But not forever.

It'll still happen. Even if it takes a bit longer than I'd planned.



AFTER OUR TACO DINNER, Blue and Nat do some homework in the living room while I watch a movie. It's a new one, five star review, but it doesn't hold my attention.

Blue's captured too much already. She's changed into a pair of shorts and a T-shirt after swimming, but I keep seeing her in that bikini. Actually, I keep thinking about taking that little swimsuit off her.

Something about the stress makes my dick hard. Relentless.

Nat kisses me goodnight and heads upstairs. I switch the channel to the local news. Blue gets glued to the TV and I know she's waiting to hear the same thing I am.

That a body was found in the desert.

Nothing's reported. That doesn't totally surprise me. They'll have to notify family before releasing information. Sometimes, the media will sit on investigations for a little while by police request, too.

Done worrying about the dead prick, Preston, I click off the TV and set the remote on the table. "Be right back."

Blue nods and piles up the scraps of construction paper left over from all the shapes she'd cut out for her day class. I check on Nat first, who's sound asleep, and then use the bathroom.

I find Blue in the kitchen, filling the coffee pot for morning. "I have an idea," I say, grasping her hips and pulling her back against me.

"You *always* have that idea." She smiles, wriggling her ass against my cock.

"Nah, babe, this one's even better," I whisper in her ear. "You'll like it. Trust me."

She spins around and loops her arms around my neck. "I'll try."

Her kiss comes fast, barely happens before she asks, "Is Natalie sleeping?"

"Yeah." I take her hand, grabbing the towels I'd just set on the counter. "And we're going swimming."

"Just hung up my suit."

"You won't need one," I growl, opening the sliding door.

"Skinny dipping?" Her eyes go big and a familiar blush heats her cheeks.

I nod seriously. Before stepping out, I turn off the outdoor lights. They all have motion detectors that I don't want tripped.

"Did you read my mind earlier?" Her eyes have more stars in them than the sky.

Man, I love how honest she is. How ready and willing, how eager.

She's like a fantasy come true. I kiss her. "Maybe."

"Maybe?"

I drop the towel and pull my shirt over my head. "Can't say who was first. Maybe you're the mind reader digging into mine. Same wavelength, babe."

She follows my lead, undressing, and then unhooks her bra, freeing those glorious tits. I lick my lips, imagining sucking on their dark circles. Feeling those nipples turning into hard little nubs beneath my hungry tongue.

A moment later, she disappears with a giggle. The splash is quiet, subdued. I spin toward the pool, knowing she just dove in like a dolphin. She's so graceful and sleek there's barely a ripple in the water.

I get rid of my shorts and follow. The cool, refreshing water takes me light years away from the evil fuckery hanging over our heads.

I've been swimming since I was old enough to walk, and consider myself good at it, but she could swim circles around me. And does. I feel the movement in the water, but she stays just out of my reach.

She giggles softly each time her head pops out of the water and gives me a catch-me-if-you-can look. The one thing I'm very, very good at, is holding my breath.

I go beneath the water, and rather than swim towards her, sink to the bottom, knowing she'll come to investigate.

My lungs are rigid by the time I snag her waist and shove off the pool's floor. We break the surface at the same time.

"Ass!" she says, slapping my chest. "You scared me."

The water's chest deep. I take advantage of that and nibble the tip of her nipple. The water laps against my chin as I tell her, "Only way I could catch you, Blue. You swim like a fish."

Her fingers wrap around the base of my cock and she gives it a long, perfect stroke. "Well, maybe you weren't dangling the right bait."

"There's no dangling here, darlin'." I give her nipple another bite. "I'm hard as a rock."

"I feel that," she says.

The way she strokes me feels like fucking Heaven. Better than any hand job in the universe.

I stifle a groan as she increases the rhythm. It's damn near brutal the way she turns me on, instantly brings me to the brink, the very edge where I can't last

long.

She knows it, too. And loves it. Her eyes shine sheer excitement.

I reach between her legs, find her clit, and pinch it while working another finger inside her. The vibration of her breath, a pleasure gasp, steals my ability to breathe.

I love this shit.

Pleasuring her, owning her, with all the time in the world.

“We’re two of a kind,” I whisper against her lips.

“Yeah.” Her tongue delves into my mouth.

I catch it with mine and kiss till we both have to throw our heads back and gulp in air.

“Condom?” she whimpers.

I’m still gasping, too, and the pressure building at my spine is almost to maximum. “With the towels,” I growl.

Perfect timing. I’m so fucking close to coming from her hand, I can barely stand it. I shove another finger inside her and tease her clit with my thumb. “This what’s got you bothered? My hard cock in your tight wet pussy?”

She gasps as the walls of her cunt spasm against my fingers. “I – Oh!” She groans, pressing down against my hand.

“Go for it, baby,” I whisper, too close to stop.

I find her clit, shift my fingers deeper, finger-fuck her to completion. She presses her mouth against my chest, muffling her cry.

Warmth oozes around my fingers. Despite the fact she’s in the middle of an O, she never stops pumping my cock in her hand. Not once. Her fulfillment rips through me. My cock jolts.

Wave after wave of pleasure rocks through me as she keeps stroking, stretching my climax for what damn well might be forever. I pulse between her fingers, out of my mind and then some.

It’s some kind of black magic when a woman can drive me batshit off a hand job.

When we’re both spent and slumped against each other, she giggles softly. I wrap my arms around her, utterly amazed. Never before have I been brought to the depth of an orgasm. Not before her.

I’ve never been so ready for an encore fuck either.

Can't get enough of this woman. Not tonight. Not ever.

"Want that condom now?"

She laughs shyly again, a sound I love. Lifting her head, she looks up at me. Eyes shimmering in the moonlight. "Let's take it inside the house. Upstairs. Somewhere we won't have to move after."

I chuckle, knowing exactly what she means. A few minutes ago I wouldn't have been able to walk if my life depended on it.

The encore's worth the wait. I haul her upstairs and tip-toe past Nat's room, holding her in my arms, bringing us into the bedroom.

She goes under me on the bed, ass up. I push deep inside her, plant my arms against her shoulders, binding her hair in one fist. I give it to her hard.

And when I say hard, I mean fuck-quake *hard*.

My dick drives fast and deep. Hits the spot that makes her little body seize. She whimpers sweetly under me, her O coming fast. Her pussy clenches me like silk madness, wringing come up from my balls, but damn if there isn't something else.

A warmth like never before. All over.

Her clit throbs against my balls as I fuck us both over. I empty myself inside her groaning, drowning Blue's screams in my hand. They rush out between her teeth against my palm. Her eyes roll, practically shaking the rest of her, and I give it back just as fierce.

I'm coming so hard it's barely human. And I think she just squirted for the first time.

Running my hand over the wet spot on the sheets underneath her tells me it's true. I suppress a wicked smile, proud of another first, knowing there's many, many more to come before I've fully branded my flesh on hers.

I crawl back into the bed after getting up to toss the condom. She welcomes me with a gentle smile and soft sigh as her head settles on my chest. "Brent, what was that?"

"That was you at your finest, babe. And me there, joining you, thanking my lucky stars. Fucking this good used to be rare. Before you." I take her lips in mine again.

When I pull away, her smile fades. "I don't just mean the sex, Romeo."

I give her a serious look.

"He might be your friend," she says quietly. "But I don't like him."

I run a hand down the length of her back, loving the silky feel of her skin against my palm. “Who?”

“Captain Dawson.” She sighs. “I know it’s probably just because he gave me that speeding ticket. The only one I’ve ever had.”

I kiss the top of her head, but can’t stop a frown from forming. “Dawson gave you the ticket you got leaving here that day?”

“Yes.”

“Really?” Venom drifts through my veins.

She lifts her head. “Yes, really. I won’t forget him.” Sitting up, her brows knit together. “You don’t believe me?”

“Not that.” I shake my head. “I believe you, Blue. It’s just that he works for the sheriff’s department. County level. This is city limits. He can issue citations, but this area’s out of his jurisdiction for that sort of thing.”

“Not that night. It was him.” She lays back down and runs her nails softly across on my chest. “You’ve known him a long time.”

“Not that long,” I say.

“But he knew your brother, too.”

“Davey?”

She nods.

Stupid question. I only have one brother. *Had* one.

But Dawson hadn’t started working for the force in this area until after he’d died. “He never mentioned that to me. Knowing him.”

She sits up again. “What? Weird.”

I nod. “You act like you’re not that surprised?”

“I am. I mean, he’s asked me about Davey each time he’s been here. When he brought out the OFP, and then today.” She crosses her arms. “Which, by the way, he never even filed.”

What the fuck?

Confused why Dawson would ever ask her about Davey, I shake my head to catch what she’s talking about. “Filed what?”

“The OFP. Restraining order. I asked him what I should do when I get the signed copy back from the judge. He said not to worry about it, that he hadn’t had time to file it yet.”

“That was almost two weeks ago,” I say.

“I know. I thought that’s why he was here at first. To deliver my copy. From what I read, it usually only takes like forty eight hours or so.”

My mind runs a hundred miles an hour in very dark directions, but I can’t let her know it.

It’s like we’re staring down some dark, fucked up formula designed to produce nothing but bad answers.

I just pull her back down and run my fingers through her hair as her head settles on my chest.

This whole situation’s too fucking odd. Too wrong. That scares me in a way I haven’t ever felt before. Maybe because I have more to lose than ever before.

After I’m sure she’s asleep, I ease off the bed and slip on my shorts. Down in my office, I dial a number I haven’t called in years.

When the gruff voice on the other end answers, I say, “It’s Eden. Monk. We need to talk.”

MIXED UP (IZZY)

I can't stay focused. Partly because I expect Mr. Jacobs to call me into his office any second. I'll be fired this time for sure. Once he hears about Preston.

Weirdly, being fired doesn't have the same reaction as before. This job – the entire aspect of a job meaning more than the people in my life – no longer holds a choke-chain over my life.

Sure, I want to keep it. But I also want more.

I can't pinpoint when that became apparent, but it has.

That's only part of why I can't focus. Brent was acting odd this morning.

Jumpy. Distracted. I don't know.

Also couldn't guess how long he'd been gone when I woke up and realized he wasn't next to me. That wasn't unusual. He always goes to his own bed before morning, but it wasn't morning today.

Not even close.

I found him outside. At the table near the pool. He said he couldn't sleep, and told me to go back up to bed. I can't say he was trying to get rid of me, exactly.

Just had a feeling he didn't want me out there right then.

There was a faint scent of cigarette smoke in the air. Even stranger. I've never seen him smoke, not even once. Never saw any indication that he does, but my father smoked and the scent of it always brings back memories.

Maybe it's the stress. Old habits coming back. I've heard of that, people who quit seeking comfort in old familiar tobacco when times get tough.

I can forgive him. The memories, with dad, maybe not so much.

There's too much there. Good and bad.

The good ones are of him. Of us. The bad ones are of missing him. Losing him. The day several neatly dressed officers showed up on our doorstep with bad news. Those are the bitter, ice cold memories lingering inside me.

They stoke very present fears.

Of losing Brent. And Nat. And everything.

"Ms. Derby, Ginger's eating paint again!" A small voice yells.

Speaking of the present...I hurry to the finger paint station, where little Ginger sucks on the bristles of a paint brush. Kneeling down beside her, I take the brush from her hand. "No, no, little lady. We don't want to eat paint," I say, shaking my head.

Her curly black pigtails flip and flop as she shakes her head. All the while licking the blue paint off her lips.

"Let's get you cleaned up." I take her hand and lead her to the sink, where I drop the brush in the plastic bucket of soapy water and wet a paper towel to wipe her face. With big brown eyes and golden-brown skin, she's absolutely adorable, and the tiniest four year old I've ever seen.

Probably because she doesn't eat much except for things she's not suppose to. Paint. Glue. Crayons.

"Five more minutes until clean up time!" I tell the rest of the class, giving Ginger a paper cup full of water to rinse out her mouth.

I hear my phone buzz as a text comes in. Normally, I leave it in my purse in the closet all day, but not today.

It's on my desk.

Brent has already sent several messages. Asking how things are going and saying that he misses me. Which is sweet, but also odd. That's not like him. He's always saved his love for us in-person.

Something's going on. Something bigger than I'd first imagined.

More than Preston's body being found. I truly don't know how I feel about that. Sad, shocked, but also scared. Like there's another shoe ready to drop, and it may just be an ass-kicker.

I get Ginger interested in a puzzle and then put away the rest of the paint before I go to my desk. It's Brent again.

How are you doing?

Fine. I type back. And you?

Good, babe. See you in a couple of hours.

I set the phone down, but then pick it back up and type, *Did you get a new phone or something?*

You've just never sent this many messages.

His reply comes in. Weirdly off. *Nah. Missing you.*

I swipe to the emoji screen, but only have time to tap on a heart and hit send because the crash of building blocks needs my attention.



CLASS FINALLY ENDS by the time I get a chance to look at the phone again. No more messages, but I have to admit that I'd enjoyed knowing he was thinking about me all day.

"Do you ever go to football games?"

"No," I say to Nat, who walks into my classroom. I've never been a big sports fan, but enjoyed going to high school games with friends years ago. "Why? Do you want to go to the game tonight?"

"No." She starts helping me set the chairs on the tables so the janitor can clean the floor. "Just curious. The kids in my class were talking about it."

The entire school's been buzzing about how well the team is doing this year. "Well, if you do want to go, just let me know," I say, not wanting to push, but certainly wanting to encourage. "I'll take you. Your dad probably would, too. I've seen a Cardinals logo or two in his office."

"Okay! I'll think about it. Thanks, Ms. Derby."

I grab my purse out of the closet and walk over to the desk to collect my phone. "Ever asked him to take you before?"

She shakes her head. "I'd rather go to the ranch. Or hike up Camelback. Hey, you think Dad would want to go this weekend? It's finally cooling off!"

Everyone leaves early on Friday afternoons. It's barely three when she walks out the door. Following her, I click off the light. "We'll see. No idea what his plans are for the weekend, I'm afraid. You're right about the weather, though."

I smile, noticing I no longer feel the urge to instantly bust into flames stepping into the sun.

Her eyes sparkle as she grins. "If we both ask, really nicely, I bet he'll say

yes!”

I can’t help but smile. I love a good scheme. “Are you suggesting we gang up on him?”

She shrugs, but her smile never falters.

The more I’m around this kid, the more I like her. She has a light about her that never dims. Grasping her shoulder, I pull her to my side for a quick hug. “Let’s feel him out. I’ve got your back if you give him a few words of encouragement.”

Brent is home when we arrive, outside lounging near the pool, and on the phone. He spins around as he sees me, changing his expression, but I’d already seen the look on his face.

Something’s wrong. Seriously wrong.

He’s in full badass mode.

I feel the change in the air as much as I see it in him. That doesn’t scare me, but at the same time, it’s unnerving how tormented he looks. Like it’s taking everything he has to figure something out.

“Hey, kiddo,” I say to Natalie. She’d been talking about the chocolate cake we’d had at lunch today, so I use that as an excuse. “Will you go search chocolate cake recipes? Print out a couple and then we can see if we have all the ingredients. I bet we can improve on what the cafeteria serves up.”

She lifts a brow, having also seen her father out the window. “Sure!” With a nod towards Brent, she says, “He’ll be fine after he hangs up. It’s just work stress. I tell him he should hire a manager for some things.”

I laugh, loving how she’s so ready to advise him on business. Still, I wish she was right about this just being work-related. A sick vortex in the pit of my stomach says it’s anything but.

“Nat, go Google those recipes.”

“On it!”

I wait until she leaves the room before I open the sliding glass door. Brent shoves his phone in his pocket as soon as I step outside. He turns and walks towards me.

“Hey. How was your day?”

His smile is as false as Santa Claus. “What’s wrong?” I ask. “You look –”

He kisses my forehead. “Nothing, Blue.”

I step back and hold up my hands to keep him at arm's length. "Don't lie to me, Eden. A moment ago, you'd transformed into your badass papa bear self. I saw it."

"Blue –"

A mixture of fear and frustration boils inside me. "I know what I saw! Jesus. You've been acting strange all day. Either tell me what's going on, or..." I can't think of a threat he'll take seriously.

He grasps my wrists, pulling me closer. "You'll what?"

"Leave." I'm serious, because I know something bad is happening. He might think he's hiding it, but he's not. It's still on his face. Whatever it is. "I'll leave."

"Leave? And go where?"

The challenge in his voice makes me more determined. "My apartment's done. Riker called. I don't have to stay here a minute longer if there's no good reason."

"When?"

"Wednesday. Said he'd already done a walk through with you, too, and squared the work away with the city code."

He releases my wrists and steps away. "You can't go back there."

"Why? Preston's no threat."

Running a hand through his hair, he shakes his head. "No body yet."

He'd lowered his voice to little more than a whisper. Not sure I heard correctly, I ask, slowly, "What do you mean? No body?"

"Preston Graves," he growls. "They haven't got his body. The police have no record of it."

"But Dawson –"

"I know," he growls. "He didn't file your OFP, either. Heard it straight from the horse's mouth today."

A shiver darts up my spine. So does the gravity in his voice. Fear and anger race to curdle my stomach first. "God, what's going on, Brent? There's been something happening behind the scenes for weeks, something you don't want me to know about. What is it?"

He glances around and shakes his head. "Nothing, Blue. Nothing you need to worry over."

“Bullshit!” It just explodes out. “It’s too late. Too late for games. I’m worried sick.”

“Don’t be. I’ll keep you safe.”

“Safe. From. What?”

“Nothing.”

This is nuts.

I study him, wondering why he’s fighting so hard to lie to me. His jaw is tight, his neck muscles showing. I lurch forward and shove at his chest with both hands. “You sonofabitch! I just asked you *not* to lie to me. And here you are.” My anger turns raw and painful as the truth reveals itself. “You’ve been lying to me since the beginning, haven’t you?”

He stays stock-still.

Searching for a way to break through that hard fucking shell of his, I shove his chest again. It’s like trying to move solid steel. “Who the hell answers their front door with a gun? You, that’s who. The first time I came here you answered the door with a freaking handgun. And never said a word.”

He shoves my hands aside. “Yeah, and I wish you’d never come here that night.”

My jaw drops. Whoever said words will never hurt is a fucking liar.

It’s like my heart was just sliced in two. “Fine. Fuck you. And your fucking creepy cop friend.”

He grabs my hand as I spin around. “Blue –”

“Shut up!” I break his hold on me and step away. “You know what, I don’t want to know. Whatever you’re mixed up with, it’s bad. I don’t want to know, and I don’t want to be a part of it, either. I’m such an idiot.”

I’m two steps away when he says, “I wish like hell you weren’t part of it. I didn’t want you to be. Still fucking don’t. But it’s too late.”

Another cold chill. Another flash of anger. I hold my breath for a moment, trying to decide my options. The hurt, the pain inside, making it hard to see reason. To see any choices.

“And I need your help.”

I turn to see his face. His emerald eyes. And the sincerity in them.

Wow. I know him. Asking anyone for help would gut him. “My help?”

He nods.

“Brent, you better not be –”

“I’m not,” he says. “I don’t know what’s coming, Blue. Not all of it. But I have to stop it. I can’t lose you.”

“Stop what?”

“I’m not exactly sure.”

I want to ask how he can stop something when he doesn’t know what it is, but refrain. He’s not lying. He doesn’t know. And that’s what’s tormenting him. I step closer. “What *do* you know?”

“Not much.”

“Then tell me not much.” I lay a hand on his chest. “I deserve to know. Whatever it is, if I’m mixed up in it, I need the full truth.”

He huffs out a breath and then pulls me into his arms. “You’re right.”

As much as I love being in his arms, I don’t lean against him. That would be too easy and make me forget the anger that had my blood boiling only seconds ago. He knows what his touch does to me, and I have to prevent that from happening. From forgetting everything except what it feels like to be held in those heavily inked arms. “Then tell me.”

“Where’s Nat?”

“In her room.”

He nods and leads me over to the table he was sitting at early this morning when I’d smelled cigarette smoke.

“Who was here this morning?” I ask.

“Did you hear someone?”

I shake my head. “But someone was here. I know it.”

He nods slowly. Gestures for me to sit while he drops into another chair. “A friend. Old acquaintance.”

“There’s a difference,” I point out.

“Yeah, there is.” He leans forward, puts his elbows on the table. “There’s always a fine line between the right side and the wrong side of the law, Blue. Some people weave across that line for the good of the law. Others, for ill.”

Not about to be buffaloed I say, “Don’t beat around the bush, Brent. This isn’t a movie.”

He cracks a slight grin. “Sometimes you’re too smart for your own good.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

He shakes his head and takes my hand. “There’s a crime syndicate in Phoenix called the Black Pearls. If it’s illegal, they’ve got their paws in it, usually heading it up. Drugs. Smuggling. Trafficking.”

The name wasn’t familiar to me, but the crimes were. With the border so close, the unexplained disappearances on the reservations, the bad news is never ending. I don’t want to believe it, but have to ask, “Are you mixed up with them?”

“My brother Davey was.” Pain fills his eyes. “I tried to stop him. Tried like hell to make him understand he was on the road to nowhere, to death, but he wouldn’t listen.”

I squeeze the fingers he’s wrapped around my hand. “What happened?”

“He was shot. Police said he was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Driving past a drug deal that went to shit, but his keys were in his pocket. Someone shot him and put him in his car after he was dead.”

Jesus. I feel the color drain from my face.

“Surely an investigation –”

“Wasn’t one. Not a thorough one.” He shakes his head and slams a hand on the table. “They arrested two young kids from Mexico, claimed they were responsible, and shipped them back across the border, but it wasn’t them.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because it was too easy. Too clean cut. But because my parents had already been through enough losing their son, I didn’t push it. I’d almost learned to live with it myself, until a few months ago when one of the Pearls contacted me. Said Davey died owing the bastards a large debt, and that I needed to make it right.”

“Did you go to the police?”

His chuckle sounds fake and bitter. “No. Think I’d probably have had an accident if I had.” Scorn twists his face as he seethes, “Shot by two young kids from the wrong side of the tracks.”

A shiver ripples my skin.

“I told the Pearls I’ve got no interest paying off the debt. Yet, every few months, Phil shows up again. Each time what they wanted was different. I could launder some money for them, they said, or deliver some cargo.”

He shakes his head before letting out a sigh and glances around, as if he isn’t

sure what to say next.

“But you didn’t?”

“No. Fuck no.”

He’s torn, and angry, that much is obvious. My heart sinks, wanting to help him with all I have. “Why did your brother hook up with them?”

“I don’t know. It came out of the blue. I didn’t even believe it when I first heard, but then Davey confirmed it.” He shrugs. “Two days later he was dead.”

My heart goes out to him. Blinking at the tears stinging my eyes because of his pain, I ask, “What do you mean out of the blue?”

“Well, wasn’t a complete shock,” he says. “Davey had worked for the newspaper for several years. A photographer. He wrote a few articles too, but mostly took pictures. Then he quit. Took odd jobs now and then. Spent a lot of time out at the ranch. At first I thought it was a woman, but he never had a steady girlfriend. He was just friends with everyone. A likeable guy. My ma once said some girl smashed his heart to pieces while I was in the army, and that it was going to take him time to get over it.” He scratches his head. “I’d been home from the army for years, so he should have been long over it. I don’t know.”

I hold my tongue to keep from telling him some people never mend a broken heart.

He doesn’t need to hear it right now, and having never experienced it, he wouldn’t understand. Focusing on the rest of what he’s said, I ask, “So, what did he say when you tried to stop him? Told him he was on the road to nowhere?”

“Some stupid shit. That it wasn’t about money. Not entirely. He told me everyone would be proud of him soon and his ship would come in. Riches. Fame. Power. Whatever.”

“Why do you say it was stupid?”

“Because it was. Davey was...” He pinches his lips together for a moment. “He wasn’t much bigger than you. In height or weight. And he wore pop-bottle glasses before he switched to contacts. As a kid, he got picked on all the time and –”

“And you protected him,” I say, sensing the obvious. “Made the assholes picking on him stop.” Tears press harder on my eyes at how it’s torturing him.

He wasn’t able to save his little brother that one time, and there’d never be a

second chance. “Brent, it’s not your fault.”

“Like hell it’s not. He didn’t know what he was getting into. My words didn’t work. I should’ve clubbed him over the head and dragged him back to my place. Made him see sense.”

His pain just makes him angrier, which won’t help either of us. My insides are trembling. I have no idea what to do to help him. And I’m no closer to understanding what’s going on. “Who told you the police have no record of a body being found? These Pearl people?”

Some of the pain leaves his face as he shakes his head. “No. I have a friend, a guy who has an in with the city police.”

“What sort of friend? A police officer?”

“Not exactly. He’s...a member of a motorcycle club I used to belong to.” He stands up and rubs the back of his neck. “I think Dawson’s trying to pin Preston’s death on me.”

I jump to my feet. “You? Why? How?” My mind lurches all directions. I rush to his side and grab his arm. “He can’t! No way. I’ll tell him you were with me. Twenty-four hours a day.”

He pulls me against him. I wrap my arms around his waist and hold on for dear life.

“I don’t know why, but I have to find out. That’s where I need your help.”

I lean back to look up at him. “Anything, Eden. Name it.”

“I need to go meet some people and need you to stay with Nat. Just for a little while.” He brushes my hair back with one hand. “There’s no one else I trust to take care of her.”

“Of course I will, but there has to be more I can do than that.”

He shakes his head slowly. “There’s nothing more important than knowing you two stay here. Safe.”

His kiss is long and slow and full of emotion. He presses my head into his chest after. “I wish you weren’t involved, but I’ll never regret you coming to the house that night,” he says. “Never regret having you in my life. You’re the sunshine I needed. That Nat needed. I won’t lose you over this bullshit.”

Tears needle my eyes again. “You won’t lose me.”

His hold tightens even more.

I understand why and though I don’t want to know, I have to. “When are you leaving?” I ask. “When will you be back?”

“As soon as I get the call. I’m not sure how long it’ll take. Could be all night.”

He’s too elusive. “I need to know more,” I say. “If something happens –”

“Nothing’s happening, Blue.” His jaw goes tight. “Not to you or me. I’ll do my business and come right home.”

Before I can come up with a response, his phone rings.

He lets go of me, grabs his phone out of his pocket, and walks into the grass. “Eden.”

I hold my breath, but it doesn’t help. I can’t hear anything the other person says. When he turns around and meets my gaze, an overwhelming fear washes over me.

“You’re leaving now?”

He nods. “Have to, babe. Take care.”

Two hours later, I’m still scared. Still pacing the floor. Still doing my damndest not to let Natalie see me freaked out.

I’ve tried hard not to let anything show as we make supper and then bake our chocolate cake.

As I take the cake out of the oven, she points at the hook by the door, a frown on her face. The keys to the ranch are gone. I always remember the little turtle he keeps fastened to the chain, how its silver and turquoise catch the light.

A chill sinks through my bones. This isn’t working, trying to stay calm.

Pacing, chewing my lip, won’t bring him home any sooner.

So, I pick up my phone and dial while walking into the hall. As soon as there’s an answer on the other end, I pop the question, “Hey, Mom, I need a favor...could Natalie come stay with you for the night?”

CROSS-BONES (BRENT)

That motherfucker's trying to set me up.

Think I know why too. That asshole, Dawson, is in with the Pearls. Has been for years.

I should've caught on sooner. He stopped by every clean up gig I did for the Sheriff's department. Those nasty, grim jobs, where he always said who he thought was responsible.

Never said the Pearls, but I'd known who he was referring to. He'd wanted me to see how they got rid of anyone in their way. In *his* way.

He'd made comments about Davey, too. Disguised them, claimed he'd heard I had a brother who died, and how hard some of those violent scenes had to be for me.

His remarks weren't so often I caught on, but I sure as hell should have. And he never mentioned knowing Davey once.

Only thing I can't figure out is what the bastard wants from me. Or what Preston, dead or MIA, has to do with any of this. Dawson has to know I'd never sink to the level of working with the Pearls.

Fuck. That's exactly what I've sank to.

But only to catch them.

To put an end to this.

The ranch is where it has to happen. That's always been the plan. Out of Dawson's jurisdiction.

It's no wonder the Pearls have the power they do with a captain of the sheriff's department on their side. Well, I have backup, too. The Grizzlies have come through for me.

A call to Blackjack, their national Prez, put me in touch with the new

reorganized chapter in Phoenix. I never thought an old biker dude with long gray hair and a bad hip could leave me choked up, but fuck, there it is.

Remembering his words tears at my throat. *Anytime, son. Any damn time. Whether you hung up the patch or not, you're family.*

Some people blaze through your life for a few bright seconds. Others remain, even in the shadows, and no matter how infrequently you see them, they're there when the going gets tough.

Someday, I'll repay that old man. He saved my skin once, helped me get out when Fang, the dirty old President, didn't make that easy. Now, he might be saving my ass again.

Same with Blue.

Without her, I don't know what I'd have done with Nat. It's more than that, though. I'd wanted all this put behind me for years, for Davey's sake, but now it's stronger.

It's for her sake, too. I can't have a future while I'm focused on the past. A future including her.

By tomorrow this time, I'll be well on my way to carving that future with sweat and fire.

This will be behind me.

If I'm careful, strong, and most of all, lucky.

My hands sweat when I steer the truck into the final fuel stop near Flagstaff. A Harley, black and sleek, turns off the road from the other direction. It parks on the other side of the pump.

The rider doesn't take off his helmet, but I recognize him. Not too many men are that wide or tall. Civilians wouldn't be caught wearing the patch with the roaring bear. Or the blood red one-percenter patch near his collar.

We both make our selection. He jams one nozzle in his fuel tank while I do the same with mine.

"Good to see you, Monk. Been a long fucking time," he says.

"Yeah. Too long."

He flips up his shield and my throat gets hard. "Cross-Bones," I growl.

He nods. It's a face I'll never forget. Half his teeth are still just as silver as I remember. A long scar lines his right cheek, merging into the end of his missing earlobe.

A long time ago, I'd trusted my life to this man. Followed him into danger on the road and in the worst corners of Phoenix. Besides Blackjack, he's the only reason I left the club with my life.

He worked his way up to Vice President in our chapter, back when times were bad. These days, he's top dog in Arizona, ever since the club cleaned up its act. Blackjack doesn't let dirty players rank in any chapter.

Once upon a time, old Cross-Bones was like a second father.

Before the army. Before I'd made the choice to change the path I'd been on. Before I had to leave the craziness behind.

"You sure you're ready?" he asks.

I want to ask him the same thing. Shit, I want to ask him why he's doing this, but I already know.

Family.

I could be walking into a larger trap than the one I've set up. Swallowing, I nod.

He lifts the nozzle out of his bike's tank and swipes his card. "The bait's been taken. Three o'clock a.m."

"You have the coordinates?" I ask.

His partial grin is sarcastic. All silver. I take his crap. He wouldn't be here if he didn't know every last in and out.

"I'll have everything in place." My back teeth clench as I squelch any fear trying to rise up inside me. It's been years since I've put everything aside except for the mission at hand.

And it's harder than it's ever been. I didn't have Nat in those days. But now, I have to. "Everything."

He starts his Harley and rides off. I finish fueling the truck and walk inside to pay. I also pick up a couple of snacks, mostly beef jerky, and bottles of water before getting back in the the driver's seat and heading north.

I can't help but think about the last trip to the ranch, with Blue in the front beside me and Natalie chatting like a magpie in the backseat.

The memories of that weekend are too good. I have to bury them and concentrate on the plan.

The sun's already sinking low in the sky. I won't have much daylight to get everything left in place. Urgency has me stepping harder on the gas pedal, hoping to turn the normal two hour trip into half that time.

I don't dare sigh a breath of relief as I pull into the ranch. Grabbing the bag of snacks, I head to the house. Out of habit, I give the place a quick search before I grab the backpack from the top shelf in the closet.

Tossing it on the bed, I pull out two nines and ammo. After putting on the double shoulder holster, I insert the magazines into the guns and slide them into place.

I put my coat back on to cover the harness and check the other contents of the backpack before heading back out to my truck. The road to the shack is rough. I focus on driving rather than all the other thoughts that keep trying to steal my attention.

Ten years. That's how long I've lived for my daughter.

Now, when I think about living, think about the future, Blue gives me a brand new reason.

Same reason I need this shit with the Pearls done and over.

A deep rut makes the truck bounce so hard my head smacks the roof. I can't act on the urge to rub it, or my knee from where it bashes the steering column. There's more to go. I have to keep both hands on the wheel to maneuver around the treacherous switchbacks that take me to the other side of the hill.

I arrive at the shack, and as I shut the truck off, I glance at the key chain. "Shit." A sense of regret fills me as I look at the silver turtle.

Once, it was Davey's. I'd given it to him for his sixteenth birthday. The turtle's back was a piece of turquoise. Or had been. The stone must have fallen out when I hit that rut and slammed my knee against the column.

He'd had this in his pocket when he'd died. It was the one thing of his I'd kept. Usually, I only keep the ranch keys on this ring, but today, for some reason, I felt the need to clip it to my day-to-day chain.

Now, it's broke, like a bad fucking omen.

I glance to the floor mat, looking for the stone. It's there. I pick it up and try to stick it back into the tiny prongs. It won't go, so I push harder.

Then the back pops open. I'm stunned. Never knew it was hollow inside.

I'm baffled at what I see in the tiny compartment. It's a memory chip. One from a camera. Lodged against the edges, still, never giving off a rattle.

The fuck? Davey had too many cameras to count, but why would a chip be in here?

I snap the turtle shut and unclip it from my keyring before putting it in my

pocket with the stone. Then I head inside the shack to gather the explosives.

The sun's practically gone by the time I have the bombs and detonators in place. I'm almost back to the house when I notice headlights on the road leading into the yard.

My lights are off, but I double check just to make sure. I slow the truck in order to pull up behind a cluster of rocks.

It's not long before the vehicle comes close enough for me to recognize.

Classic Mustang.

Blue.

Dark dread overshadows the excitement I normally feel, which flickers out way too fast. "Fuck. What's she doing here?"

I told her not to come. Told her to stay with Nat. Anger and worry storm through my veins.

I pull back on to the dirt path and arrive at the house, just as she's climbing out of her car.

Blue holds up a hand as I jump out of the truck, sensing I'm about to give her an earful. "You said you needed my help."

"Yeah," I growl back. "To watch Natalie." I gesture towards the car. "Where is she?"

"With my mother."

I'd be even more worried if she'd brought my daughter.

I'm not as mad at her as I am the entire world. For years, I've focused on being a good father, a good man, yet the past just won't let go. It's like I'm chained to it, and so's everybody else who walks into my life.

"How'd you even know where to find me?"

"Natalie pointed out you'd taken the keys to this place." Blue steps closer, holding her hand out. "I have no idea what's going on, but whatever it is, we're in this together. From beginning to end. You asked for my help, Brent."

I don't want to take her hand. She wasn't in this at the beginning and I don't want her involved now. Don't want her hurt. Or worse.

"You need to leave, Blue. Right the fuck now."

She drops her hand to her side and walks toward the house. "Not happening, Eden."

I follow, and though the urge to grab her is strong, I resist. Knowing as soon as I touch her, I'll want to hold on. Tight. "No fooling. It's too dangerous for you to be here."

"Why?" she asks while we walk into the house. "There's going to be a shoot out or something?"

She's being flippant. I'm not.

I close the door behind me and pull open my coat. "Close enough. You can't stay."

Her eyes lock on the guns in my holsters. She realizes I'm not joking.

Fear flashes in her eyes as they meet mine. So does tenacity. "Whatever. It's too late. Tell me what I can do."

I admire her grit, but shake my head. "Leave. Leave now."

"That's *not* happening." She walks into the center of the room and looks around before asking, "Is this where your brother met with the Pearls?"

"No." I shrug then. "I don't know, really. Don't know where he met them. What went down between them. I just know they're the reason he died, and now they want something from me."

She's here, goddamn it. I might as well accept that because she's too stubborn to leave. And there isn't enough time or energy to fight her on top of everything else. It's also too dangerous. Both the Pearls and the Grizzlies are on their way.

"Who told you Davey was involved with the Pearls?"

"Someone."

"Another acquaintance?"

"You could say that."

She throws her hands in the air. "Quit being so allusive. If you can't trust me, why'd you ask for my help?"

"I asked you to take care of Nat."

"She's with mom and she's perfectly fine. Safer than with me." She steps closer. "Listen, I want to help. I want this over. I really, really do. But I've never done anything illegal so you need to give me a reason why that's the only choice besides –"

She snaps her mouth shut and closes her eyes. I put a finger under her chin and lift her face to look at me again. The need to know what she'd been about

to say hits stronger than anything else I've felt tonight, and that's saying a lot. "Besides what?"

Something akin to anger flashes in her eyes. "Besides the truth. I love you, Eden. I trust you."

Fuck me.

If I live to be a hundred, I'll never be able to describe what rocks my insides right then. It's like a hydrogen bomb. Fire and lightning, out of control, filling me in a way I'd never been full before.

Like every empty spot, every hole inside me, suddenly goes solid. Real. Warm and alive.

I gather her against my chest and bury my face in her hair, anchoring my nose in her trademark blue stripe. "I love you, too, Blue. Love you like no woman I've ever had."

I could have stood there forever, just holding her. She pulls back first.

"Okay," she says, smiling. "Now that we have that out of the way." Her smile fades. "What's happening tonight? Who are you here to shoot?"

Leave it to me to find a woman smarter and more forward than I am. I did. And don't want it any other way.

"I'm not helpless, you know. I have my conceal and carry permit," she says.

"You do?"

She nods. "I've just never gotten around to buying a gun."

"You don't need a permit in Arizona," I say, amazed but not shocked by what she's said.

"I know, they taught us that in the class. I took basic safety because I thought if I ever decided to buy a gun and carry it, I should know what I'm doing."

She's too serious for me to laugh at, though I am amused.

"I've taken self-defense classes, too."

"You have?"

"Yes. I just get sort of clumsy when I'm nervous."

"Don't I know it," I say, remembering when we first met.

She holds out both hands and shrugs. "So, who are you here to shoot?"

Considering all that, it's safer for her to know the truth. Not that I have any plans to let her within thirty feet of any live guns and the assholes behind

them.

“Told you, I used to belong to a motorcycle club. One that didn’t always operate on the right side of the law. It’s full of men, many former military. They’re the reason I joined the army. I thought I’d do my tours of duty and come home, make a life with the patch, but Cindy got pregnant. Natalie was born. I broke my ties with them when I got back in civilian life. It was hard, but a couple good guys understood. Helped me get out. We never spoke much after.”

“Until now.”

I nod. “I need their help to get this settled with the Pearls.”

“Why?”

“Because of Davey.”

“Why really?”

Christ. It’s almost like she’s forcing me to break through the fog that’s been filling my head for years. “It was a Grizzly, Cross-Bones, who told me Davey was putting his nose in things he shouldn’t. That he was going to get himself hurt. Or worse.” I don’t want the memories, I realize.

That’s why there’s fog. I’d been here before, with Nat, at the ranch, when Cross-Bones Haggerty had shown up. I close my eyes and open them again, ready to give her one last missing piece.



Years Ago

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?” I ask even before he climbs off his bike. Natalie’s playing in the screened in porch with her kitchen set. Only five years old and she’s already memorizing English teas. I told her to stay there as soon as I’d heard the familiar sound of a Harley.

“Need to talk to you, Monk,” he says, using a nickname I haven’t heard in eons.

“Not interested,” I growl. “I’m out. Remember?”

The past few years haven’t been easy, transforming myself into the sort of father Natalie needs. Sure, there were times when I’d craved the old days. Partying. Running wild. Women. Taking what I wanted. The army had been a lot like that, too, when I wasn’t in a war zone. The whole now or never attitude. The constant reminders of death.

“Won’t say you wouldn’t be welcomed back, but I’m not here to recruit you. Relax.” Haggerty lights a cigarette and takes a long draw between his silver teeth. “It’s about your little brother. He’s not you, Monk, and he’s gonna get his ass stung. Bad.”

“Davey?” I shake my head and laugh. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Wrong, boy. I do. The Pearls are playing serious eight-ball these days, and don’t think twice about clearing the table. Pulling people in, bright-eyed and bushy tailed. Expanding like a fuckin’ plague.”

My nerve-endings tingle. He’s not talking about a game of pool, but about the Pearls discarding anyone in their way. Using anyone and anything to make blood money. I’ve seen their latest scraps in the news, too. The ugly aftermath.

Haggerty squishes his cig with the toe of one boot, then swings his leg over the seat of his bike. “I came as a friend, Monk. All I’ve ever been. Your old Veep. Not an enemy. But that’s all I can do. Send you a message. We both know what it’s like, looking out for family.”



Present

“BRENT?”

I shake my head, clearing the memories.

Blue frowns as she asks, “What was Davey doing?”

“I never found out,” I say, pissed at myself for not digging deeper then.

If I had, this wouldn’t be happening, and Davey could still be alive. I can’t change that. “Whatever it was, the Pearls want me to pay for it. Last night, I called a club member. There’s no proof, but it’s thought that Dawson was in with the Pearls all along. I believe he’s trying to pin Preston’s death on me. Payback for not giving into the Pearls.” This was my only option, but I’m not sure she’ll see it.

“I called a meeting with the Pearls. Here. Tonight. Made ‘em believe I’m ready to bury the hatchet, filling up their coffers.” I gesture in the direction of the kitchen behind her. “Beyond that hill you see from the back porch, there’s a small valley that can only be accessed by an old mining road off the highway. I told the Pearls I’d meet them there tonight.”

“Alone?” Her soft eyes widen.

I nod. “Close. The Grizzlies will be there, too. Out of sight until needed.”

“Needed? For what?”

I shake my head, not wanting to reveal the rest, but the look in her eyes has me relenting. “I need to cut off the head. The masterminds behind it all. That’s the only way this ends. My plan isn’t to listen to what the Pearls want, but to set up a rumble between the Pearls and my old MC.”

“A rumble? You mean a fight.” She points to my holsters. “One with guns.”

“Ideally, it won’t get that far.” I plan on using more than guns, but that much I’ll keep hidden from her. “If all goes well, they’ll be done before they slink away to fire any shots.”

“When?”

“Three o’clock a.m.”

“There has to be a better way,” she says. “The police, the —”

“Wrong. If Dawson’s involved, others could be, too. That’s why it has to be here. Out of his district. Away from any eyes and ears who’ll warn them.”

CHASING GHOSTS (IZZY)

I can't let this happen.
He could be shot. Killed.

There *has* to be something I can do to make him see reason. Not knowing what else to say, to do, I shake my head. "None of this will bring Davey back."

"I know that, Blue, but it *will* end it. Before I lose anybody else."

I'm trying to see the whole picture here. All the ins and outs, understand how he came to the conclusion that this was the only sane resolution.

"End what?" I ask. "Dawson trying to frame you for Preston's death? I don't see how this does that. What you need is *proof* that Dawson's involved. Then take that to the authorities."

"That's what I'm going for, Blue. He's gotten word of the rumble and will be here. Made sure of that before leaving Phoenix. I'll get all the proof I need."

He walks past me, into the kitchen, and takes a bottle of water out of a bag on the table. I shake my head when he holds it out to me. I'm too nervous to drink anything.

After taking a long swallow, he sets the bottle on the table and then pulls something out of his pocket. He's looking at it intently. I move closer, recognizing the turtle on the keychain Natalie knew was missing.

"That was Davey's?" I say. "The one you keep the keys to this place on."

He nods. "It broke. Hit a hard bump in the road up on the hills."

The turquoise stone had fallen off. "I'm sure a jeweler can put it back in."

He squeezes the side with his other hand. "Not what I'm worried about. Found out it opens."

The back had popped off. There's something small, black, and metallic inside.

"Is that an SD card?" I ask.

"Sure looks like it. Must have been an extra for one of his cameras. He had dozens."

He goes to close the lid and I stop him. The hairs on the back of my neck stand up as scenarios play out in my mind. "Wait. What if Davey was telling you the truth? That his involvement wasn't about money. Wasn't what it seems?"

"What are you talking about?"

I pick up the SD card. It's only a hunch, but I feel it clear to my bones. "What if Davey wasn't working with the Pearls, but *against* them? Hoping to bring them down and make a name for himself that way? What if he had proof? Pictures?"

Brent glances at the keychain. "This was in his pocket when he died. No camera in his car. Which was odd because he never went anywhere without one."

"We have to see what's on this," I say. "Is there a camera here? Something we can put this in?"

"In the trunk. Bedroom." Brent grabs my hand. "It's full of Davey's stuff. I never felt like going through it."

My heart races. Makes my chest burn by the time we open the lid of the old metal trunk. I tell myself not to jump to any conclusions, but I can't help it.

It's only nine o'clock. With solid proof we can go to the authorities before the battle ever begins.

There are half a dozen cameras in the trunk, but not a single one has batteries. Lovely.

"You don't have any double A's in the entire house?" I ask for a second time. There must be batteries somewhere.

"No. Don't need them for anything."

"Well, keep digging," I say, pulling out a stack of newspapers and magazines. "Maybe there's some in here, or a charger."

He keeps digging. A birthday card slips out of one of the magazines and hits the floor. I can't stop myself from opening it, or reading what's written inside.

"Holy shit..." I whisper it to myself, barely out of his earshot.

I can't believe my eyes.

I KNOW I'm the last person you want a card from, but we'll be a family soon. Are already.

And I'm sorry. I've said it before, and I'm saying it again.

We both know the baby is Brent's.

What happened between us shouldn't have happened at all. I was lonely. Missing him. So were you.

I'm sorry about saying you don't want his leftovers. I didn't mean it the way it sounded. You're a good man. A kind man. You'll make the world a better place one day.

HAPPY BIRTHDAY, Davey.

LOVE, Cindy

"WHAT'S THAT?" he asks, standing behind me.

I close the card and consider tucking it back inside the magazine, pretending I never saw anything, but it's too late. Brent's already reaching for it.

I hand it over and reach back inside the trunk, not wanting to see his reaction to the card.

Still, I can't help myself.

He reads it, more than once by the way he's studying it. My stomach gurgles, not knowing what to say. Cowardly, I pull out another stack of newspapers. This time, it's the headline that catches my eye.

Hard Evidence Proves the Cameras Are Working.

I skim the article about the Border Enforcement Task Force installing Buckeye cameras along the border. It talks about how the motion activated sensors send pictures straight to the sheriff's office, then onto Homeland Security and the DEA.

The article goes on, showing how the task force can respond to the pictures within minutes. Within the first few months of operation, thousands of pounds of drugs were seized, dozens of smugglers arrested, and several human

trafficking operations busted.

Last, it mentions how the local sheriff's department declined commenting on the issue. I glanced at the pictures then, of the task force and of Captain Dawson refusing to talk to a reporter.

The photos were taken by Dave Eden.

I hand the newspaper to Brent. "We have to see what's on that SD card. Now." An epiphany hits. "Hold up. I think...we can put it in my cellphone."

"Phones don't use SD cards anymore," he says, scanning the newspaper.

"Your brand doesn't. Mine still does. Jesus, I'd forgotten that little slot..." I've already pulled my phone out of my pocket and pry off the back.

I collect the card from where I'd set it on the window sill, and carefully slide it in. I pop the back on again and power up the phone.

Brent's putting everything back in the trunk. I try not to notice he's still holding the birthday card.

I can't imagine what he must be thinking. Or if he already knew Davey and Cindy had what I'm assuming was an affair while he was in the army.

When the screen appears on my phone, I tap the photo icon. "Look, it says SD card."

Brent finally tosses the birthday card back inside and shuts the trunk lid. We both sit on it as I click on the icon again.

The first few pictures make my heart sink. Nothing but black.

The next few have some odd shapes and shades of gray, but nothing I can make out. I keep scrolling.

There's a truck and a building of sorts, but the colors are off.

"He must have been using a thermal imaging camera. Maybe a setting for that," Brent says, his eyebrows inching up.

I scroll some more. Brent grabs the phone from my hand. "Fuck. I know that place. It's one of the first cleanup jobs I did for the sheriff's department. That house had been used for human trafficking. Those poor girls had a bad end."

That tells me I don't want to see the pictures. "Was Davey still alive then?"

"No, I didn't start doing cleanup jobs for them until after his death." He's scrolling faster. "It's him, Blue." He turns the phone towards me. "That's Dawson."

"You can't see his face," I say.

“That’s him. His size and shape.”

He keeps scrolling. Faster than I can focus in on anything. Until one picture stands out.

“Stop. Go back one.”

When he does, I point towards the close-up picture of a hand. “Jesus. I’ve seen that ring before. Zoom in if you can.” My heart skips several sorely needed beats as he zooms in on the ring. “That’s Mother-Of-Pearl behind the turquoise.”

“Seen it? Where?”

I swallow hard before saying, “On Dawson’s finger. I’m sure of it. When I was filling out the OFP.”

He swipes to the next picture and I have to look away. The hand with the ring is holding a knife to someone’s throat. Brent curses beneath his breath as he swipes through several other pictures. “I’ve seen enough,” he says, clicking out of the photos.

I take the phone. “Davey took those pictures, didn’t he?”

“Yeah. Had to. Fuck, he must have had enough time to stash the card in his key chain before they took his camera. Before they killed him.” He puts his elbows on his knees and rubs his head with both hands. “You were right. Davey must’ve tried to prove Dawson was in on the trafficking. That house was hell on Earth. *Awful*, Blue.” He huffs out a long breath. “Must have had my crew out there roughly six months after Davey died.” He shakes his head.

A wild flicker enters his deep green eyes. “Dawson was testing me. Trying to see if I knew anything.”

I’m rubbing his back with one hand, but can’t think of anything to say when he jumps to his feet.

“Someone’s here.”

“Your motorcycle friends?”

“No. Too early.” He spins around. “Stay here.”

I don’t have time to utter a response before he’s across the room, clicking off the light, shutting the door behind him.

Crossing the room, I tuck the phone in my back pocket, but then pull it out again.

Not sure what to do with it, I tuck it under the mattress, and then walk to the door. Carefully, I turn the knob and open the door, just enough to hear –

Nothing. Dead silence. *Or was that a car door?*

“What are you doing here?” Brent asks, an edge in his voice.

There’s a faint sound of laughter. Repulsive laughter.

I sneak out the door and down the hallway, my heart drumming in my ears so loud I can barely hear. I can’t make out the words, but know the voice.

Asshole Dawson.

I peek around the living room doorway. Brent’s outside, standing on the front steps.

“Disappointed,” I hear Dawson say. Then something about “my boys” and “out here.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Brent says.

“Let me explain, numbnuts.” Dawson must have walked closer, because I hear him clearer. “Your little meeting tonight with the Pearls and the Grizzlies won’t be happening. Not the way you planned, anyway. After we’re done here, we’re blowing those bears to shit. Good news is, there *will* be a meeting. You. Me. That little girlfriend you have inside, and my other guests.”

Brent’s mumbled curse is only part of what I hear.

“Let go of her, you heathen!” My mother’s voice.

I race across the room and push open the door.

“I told you to stay inside,” Brent snarls, whirling around.

“I’m sorry,” is all I can think to say. “So sorry.”

No words in the universe can do justice to the nightmare in front of me.

Mother stands next to a car, her arms wrapped around Natalie. There’s a burly man behind them, a smug demon look on his face.

Dawson, who’s just a few feet in front of us, laughs again. “Don’t be thinking about pulling one of those guns out, Eden.” He waves a hand in the air. Two men step out of the driver’s doors of the two cars parked behind the first. “I have backup. Plenty of it. You can’t outsmart me, Brent. I’ll always be one step ahead of you. Got the best of both worlds. My badge and my Pearls.”

“Cut the shit, Dawson. What do you want?”

Brent sounds unaffected. Furious, really. But I can hear his breathing. It’s quick and shallow. His eyes never leave Nat.

“Regret how it’s come to this. Truly, I do. I’ve given you plenty of lovely

opportunities for you to fess up what you know about your brother,” Dawson says. “You’ve ignored them.”

“I don’t know anything. Never have.”

“I find that hard to believe.” Dawson takes a step closer. “I know he took pictures that night. They weren’t in his camera. Where are they?”

“Pictures of what?” Brent shakes his head, a cool deception in his eyes.

Dawson’s eyes nearly glow red as he glares at Brent, then me.

Eventually he turns his neck, glancing around. He lets out a laugh and rubs his chin. His ring shines as it catches the moonlight.

“You know, fuck it. This might be better than my other plan.” He waves a hand. “They’ll find Graves’ body over there in the barn, where you killed him in a jealous rage. Then you went on a rampage, killing the girlfriend, your very own daughter, and of course, the future mother-in-law.”

I don’t know how I’m still standing. My stomach churns, way past ready to be violently, violently sick. I’m shaking so hard there’s no feeling left in my legs.

He laughs again. “The staging will be easy. Your guns are already loaded. Plenty of prints. Ballistics will prove it all.”

“You win, Dawson,” Brent says. “I’ll give you what I have. Just let us go.”

No! I scream it in my head, but my lips won’t work. Neither does my throat.

I grab Brent’s arm. He can’t give them the SD card.

His body feels stiff. Hard as stone while he shakes his head.

I want to say Dawson will still kill us. Kill us all. But he already knows that.

“They’re not here,” Brent says.

“Really?” Dawson says. “I don’t believe that shit for a second. You’re a bad fucking liar.”

“They’re on the other side of the property. There’s a shack. Anything Davey ever had is tucked away there. Hidden.”

Dawson casts a doubtful gaze at Brent before he turns slightly, the wheels turning in his evil head. “Natalie, you got a shack on this property?”

Don’t answer, Nat. Please don’t answer. Please, please, please, I say over and over in my head.

“Yeah,” she whispers.

Fuck!

“Do you know how to get there?” Dawson asks.

I find my voice. “What?”

I find my feet, too, and leap forward. Brent grabs my arm, but I continue to speak. “You’re dragging a child into your selfish, miserable life? Can’t you find anyone bigger to pick on, Captain Dawson? You’re officially the most useless, twisted, choked up shit-worm I’ve ever laid eyes on.”

“Blue, stop it!” Brent says.

“No, Eden, let her go on,” Dawson steps closer. “Would you prefer I pick on you, Ms. Derby? Seems you’re asking for it.” He lifts his brow. “Better yet, would you like to be the one who goes on a rampage? Killing Graves, then Eden, then his kid and your mom before doing yourself in? That’d make a fuck of a story! Blue the Cold Blooded Killer. They’ll love it!”

Brent holds me back from stepping closer, but I let Dawson know what I think. “Fuck you.”

He lifts a brow.

I glare. “How do you even know if Preston’s dead?”

“Oh, he’s dead all right. Just on ice till I decide where I want him found.” Dawson’s beady eyes scan me from head to toe. “Graves found out exactly how I take to other people trespassing on my territory. That fucker’s family tried to strong-arm a few choice real estate deals way too close to my liking. Then I found out he was tangled up with you, with Eden. Can we say ‘match made in Heaven?’”

Demon laughter. Again.

My blood runs cold for real. “You’re one sick puppy, aren’t you?”

“I’ll take you to the shack,” Brent says. “The women and Natalie stay here.”

“Have you forgotten, Eden, that you don’t have any bargaining chips?” Dawson steps forward and holds out his hand. “I’ll take those guns now.”

Brent pulls me backwards and steps in front of me. The glance he gives me over his shoulder tells me to stay put. I’m not that stupid.

Shame washes over me. Stupid is exactly what I was earlier.

It’s my fault mom and Natalie are here. If I’d just stayed home like he asked, they’d be safe.

And Brent would be alone. He wouldn’t know what Dawson was after, either.

At least I gave him that. Closure.

Small price for our lives.

But I can't get hung up on defeat. I have to keep thinking. Have to figure out what we can do next.

I close my eyes in order to swallow the lump in my throat, refusing to admit we're cooked.

"Everyone won't fit in my truck," Brent says. "The trail's rough. Your cars won't make it."

"Don't tell me what my cars can and can't do, asshole," Dawson says, sticking one of the guns Brent handed him in his waistband. The other one, he points at us, while talking to his men. "Phil, load those two back in the car. Kessler, you take Ms. Derby, and Albright, you ride with Eden."

I can feel the fury radiating off Brent. It might just be the scariest thing here.

I lay a hand on his back and stretch up on my toes to whisper in his ear, "I love you."

It's all I can think to say. The truth.

The full no-holds-barred truth. I never imagined that love, when I found it, would take precedence over all else. But it does. It's stronger than life and death.

"Come on, girlie," Dawson says.

Brent squeezes my wrist as I step up beside him. I nod, real subtle, silently telling him we're in this together and that I won't let him down. Whatever happens.

Then, I step down off the stoop, wrenching my arm out of Dawson's reach when he tries to grab it.

This psycho *will* pay. One way or another. If it's the last thing we do.

"Cuff her, Kessler," he says.

"Dawson!" Brent growls.

"Get in your truck, Eden, and stop bitching," Dawson orders. "And remember: one wrong move and somebody dies. That's an easy rule even a dumb shit like you can understand."

The man called Kessler grabs my arm, spins me around, and slaps a zip-tie on my wrists. I wish I was a hundred pounds heavier, or a hundred times stronger. Either one would come in handy right about now.

A piece of my self-defense training pops into my head. "Are you a cop too?" I

ask, trying to draw his attention off how I'm keeping my wrists crossed while he tightens the tie.

Rather than answering, he shoves me towards the car he'd stepped out of earlier.

I don't know if others are in there or not. I'm mildly relieved the front and back seats are empty when he opens the passenger door. The man who'd driven the other car climbs in Brent's truck and Dawson gets in the passenger seat of the car carrying mother and Nat.

Brent's truck darts off through the field I'd watched him drive across while I'd driven up the driveway. The car with Dawson in it goes next and we follow.

I don't know if I'm so scared I can no longer feel it, or what, but I've gone numb inside.

Completely numb.

I don't have a fucking clue what to do next. Which thoroughly pisses me off.

Without even thinking about doing so, I kick the dash. The glovebox falls open and I kick it again, slamming it shut.

"Hey, knock that off!" the driver shouts.

"Fuck you!" I kick the dash again, keeping my foot against the box. I thought I glimpsed a gun in there, but I'm not sure.

I keep tapping it with my foot, rage taking over, trying to make the latch let loose again so I can get a better look.

"Stop, bitch. I won't think twice about shooting you!"

"You don't think twice," I say. "That's for sure. If you did, you wouldn't be working with Dawson. But go ahead, shoot me. I'm sure he'll be impressed."

The car bounces over ruts and he's squeezing the steering wheel with both hands. He's nervous. There's sweat dripping down the side of his face. He doesn't look that old, either.

Close to my age, I'd guess. A new recruit in the Pearls, maybe. Young and unseasoned.

I press the advantage. "Is this your full-time job? Or are you a cop, too? Cop by day, thug by night?"

He doesn't answer.

Brent's four-wheel drive truck climbs the terrain better than the cars, but

we're still traveling faster than we should. I hear rocks scraping the undercarriage. We hit a rut so hard, the entire vehicle jumps.

"Should have buckled up!" I let out a false laugh. "Don't want to die prematurely, do we?"

He flashes a glare my way.

I don't mind irritating him. Not in the least. "I'm a preschool teacher. And an art teacher." I kick the dash again, watching as the glovebox pops open, then kick it shut.

Yep, it's a gun.

"This kind of shit doesn't happen to preschool teachers, you know. I'd never even had a *ticket* until your lovely boss pulled me over. Perfect driving record, gone, just like that! You got any kids? Think this sort of thing ever happened to their teachers?"

"Shut. Up!"

"I bet it hasn't. How old are they? They know what you do? What about your parents? Do they know you're making them oh-so-proud?"

"Shut the fuck up!" He's roaring.

"What's that saying they used to have on all those police ride along rescue shows?" I'm working at getting a fingernail inside the clip of the zip-tie. Self-defense classes showed us how to do that, how to snap off the little tab inside, at just the right angle. "Crime doesn't pay, right? Remember?"

His jaw clenches as tight as his hands grip the wheel. We're losing ground on the car ahead of us. That's flustering him almost as much as my constant chatter.

"Better step on it, brah. Don't want to piss off your boss, do you?"

"Shut up, shut up, shut up, you fucking evil bitch!"

"Evil? Yeah, fuck you." The zip-tie loosens. "How long have you been working for him? Does he have Preston's body stored in your freezer? Bet your wife loves that."

We stop so fast we both fly forward. My leg on the dash stops me from hitting it, but he smacks the steering wheel hard.

"See what you did now, you whore?"

Pain explodes on the side of my face. It's a hot moment before I realize he's slapped me.

I was pissed before. Pissed and scared.

Now, I'm livid, and know I don't have much to lose.

Dawson isn't going to let any of us out alive. "I wasn't the one driving, you stupid SOB. It's no wonder Dawson put you bringing up the rear. He knew you wouldn't keep up."

He's laying on the gas, but we're hung up. Stuck. I hear the tires spinning, rocks flying everywhere.

Brent's truck rounds a bend at the bottom of the hill, slipping out of sight, and the other car is about to enter the bend, too.

"You better see what we're caught on." I nod toward the disappearing car. "Or you'll never know where to go. Won't have anyone to follow soon."

He slaps the steering wheel. "Fuck!"

Throwing open his door, he leans out, looking beneath the car before hitting the gas again. He curses again and then slams the car in park before climbing out.

I wait until he's at the back of the vehicle before I pull my hands out of the zip-tie and grab the gun.

The car rocks like a seesaw from the way he's pushing it from behind.

"Poor bastard, should have put it in neutral. Not park," I mumble, quickly sliding over into the driver's seat. I pull the door shut and hit the lock button.

He sees that and comes running up to the side of the car. Praying for the biggest break of my life, I drop the car into drive, slam my foot down on the gas pedal, and close my eyes against the gun he's pulled out.

The explosion of his shot is deafening.

FIRES ABOVE AND BELOW (BRENT)

The sound of a gunshot has me slamming the brakes. I can see one car behind me, the one with Dawson in it, but the other hasn't made it around the first switchback.

"Keep driving," the motherfucker beside me says.

His gun never moves from the side of my head, and I want to break the bastard's arm like a dry stick.

I hit the gas, shaking my head.

It's been poisoned. My mind.

The idea of Blue being shot. Hurt. Begging for help.

Makes it hard to breathe. My lungs blaze. So does my rage.

I take the next switchback so fast the truck skids, back-steering it straight. Knowing I only have a few seconds before the other car's headlights will round the corner, I have to act.

Right the fuck now.

The cliff is on the passenger side. Keeping one hand on the wheel, I grab hold of the hand he has wrapped around the butt of his gun and use it to smack him in the face.

The weapon goes off, blowing out the passenger's window.

I smack him with it again.

Again.

Fucking again.

Warmth, his blood, splatters my hand. I ram metal into his face three more times, all the while keeping the truck hugging the hill side of the road.

When his grip loosens, I take the gun away. Drop it in my lap, then stretch across him and grab the door handle.

Fuck. It won't open. Locked.

I use my knee to steer in order to hit the unlock button. The door opens, and I give his shoulder a push.

He screams, tries reaching for the door. I stomp the gas like a madman, swerving toward the cliff. My tires slide on the loose gravel. I swerve back at the very last second.

The door knocks him against the truck. I make the truck go jagged again, as close to the edge as possible, without throwing us open.

It's enough. The door flings wide open and this time, when it flies back, it slams shut.

Empty. Asshole, gone.

I check the the rear-view mirror, and side mirrors, but don't see a body.

One down, three to go.

If that shot I heard hurt Blue – if it was even aimed at her – I won't leave a single Pearl alive in the entire fucking state.

She's not dead, though.

I know she's not. My heart wouldn't still be beating if she was.

I have to press on, get to the shack, eliminate the others before I can go back for her.

My eyes are scalding hot. My chest about to explode.

Blue's smart. Real smart.

A survivor. Like me.

That's why we're so good together. Two of a kind. In some ways.

In others, we're complete opposites, which makes us good for each other.

The truck bounces and skids as I take the last corner. The hill's downward slope is smoother, and I lay on the gas for the short straightaway.

Look behind me before taking the next corner. One set of headlights. Has to be Dawson.

Natalie has to be terrified. I shouldn't be thankful to have pulled Cleo into this, but I'm glad she's with her. That has to help.

Dawson has so much to pay for, threatening my baby girl.

So fucking much.

Stay focused, I tell myself. Focus on what has to happen, what has to be done.

I take the last corner and then bounce over another pit in the road. Stomping on the gas, I make a beeline for the shack, thankful I've left one bomb under the lumber and boxes in the shed. It's a last ditch measure I'll have to use tonight.

Its detonator is hidden on the top of the door frame. The other triggers, the ones for the bombs I'd buried along the road in the valley, are in the backpack.

The road can't be seen from the shack, so I go over the placement of each bomb in my head, knowing I'm on my own. The Grizzlies won't be here yet, but the Pearls are already down there. Possibly dozens of them. A small army of cold blooded killers coming to save their friend, Officer Prick, and destroy the evidence that might flay them all alive.

Dawson wouldn't be here if they weren't close behind. He counts on backup.

He's where my focus has to stay. On him. On elimination.

The trees that shelter the shack come into view and I hit my bright lights, scanning the area for vehicles or movement. Nothing.

I park on the north side of the shed, so Dawson will only see the tailgate, and then jump out.

Time to run. There's barely a minute left.

Snatching the detonator off the door frame, I circle back, grabbing the backpack. After pulling out my last gun, I stuff it in my holster, keeping the one from Dawson's man in my pocket, and then I run out to the trees and hide the backpack.

When the time comes, I'll have to make it to the top of the little knoll at the end of the tree grove to see the road. I'll know when to trigger the explosions. My jaw tightens.

Headlights wind closer as I run for the shed. I glance up the hill, searching for a second set.

Something's up there, glistening in the moonlight. But it's not moving, and there aren't any lights.

I don't know what to make of that. What to think, except that Blue's still alive.

I refuse to think anything less.

Can't think otherwise.

I camp just inside the door, where I can watch the car roll to a stop, but Dawson can't see me.

Come on, you fucking demon shit. I'm waiting.

The passenger door opens. Finally, he steps out. "Albright!"

Silence echoes. He's calling the dead man's name.

"Albright!" A moment later, Dawson says, "Shit. Get them out of the back!"

I watch as the driver gets out and opens the back door. Cleo climbs out first and then helps Natalie out. Wrapping her arms around Nat, Cleo keeps her tight against her as she sidesteps away from the car.

"Eden!" Dawson shouts.

I step into the doorway. "Here."

"Where's Albright, you fuck?"

I shrug. "No lights in here. Got lost, maybe."

"Get in the car," he tells the driver, Bastard Phil. "Pull it up to the doorway."

I don't dare move, but I glance at Cleo.

She whispers to Natalie, who nods.

There's really no place for them to run. The trees aren't that thick, mostly overgrown brush. Rocks everywhere. Plus there could be snakes inside. Spiders, scorpions, stinging ants.

But I need them as far away from the shed as possible when I hit the detonator.

As the driver pulls the car forward, Dawson swings around, pointing his gun at Cleo and Nat. "You two stay right where you're at."

Cleo's head snaps up, and in that moment, I see where Blue gets her grit.

"And just exactly where do you expect us to go, Captain Dawson?" Cleo says. "Take a little jaunt up here in the hills? And please, stop waving that thing at us! You should be ashamed of yourself. Pointing a gun at a defenseless child." She steps in front of Nat. "Have you no pride? None whatsoever? You call yourself a man?"

Dawson sneers at her before turning back to me. "Now, where's Albright? Where?!"

"I don't know," I say. "Maybe he's taking a leak."

“For a man who’s about to die, you’re awfully calm.”

No, I’m not, but I’m playing the part well.

I used to have to play it often. Zen-like calm masking an urge to hurt. That’s how I got the nickname Monk, and that’s who takes over now. “I could say the same about you, Dawson.”

“Bullshit,” he says, stepping closer. “I’m not the one dying tonight.”

I nod. “Yeah. Dying would be too good for a fucking limp dick prick like you. You’ll get what you deserve. Prison time. Sleeping next to convicts you put there. Some who used to be on your payroll.” I hold up a hand. “I know you killed anyone who saw your face. Slit their throats.”

Dawson’s eyes widen.

“I’ve seen the pictures, Dawson. Grisly shit. All the men you promised to pay for hauling those young girls out of Mexico. Instead of money, they got their throat’s cut. Bled to death right there at your feet.” I shake my head, mainly to keep his attention on me as Natalie and Cleo inch their way backwards. “Did you think I’d just turn them over to you, idiot?” I let out a sarcastic laugh.

Now, his eyes are huge.

“There’d be no fun in that. No chess match. No kings. No queens. No pawns. No fun.”

The gun in his hand shakes like a rattle.

I smile. “It’s been five long years since Davey died. Pictures can be copied a lot of times. Sent many places.”

Dawson shakes his head. “Enough! Don’t fucking try me, Eden. You’re a dead man. And if anyone but you has copies, I’d have caught wind of it by now. Just like I’d have heard about you snooping around to see if I’d filed the OFP, or if Graves’ body was really found. There’s *nothing* that happens in Phoenix I don’t know about.”

“Whatever. Just wanted you to know I’ve been snooping around.” Movement catches the corner of my eye. At first, I think it’s Bastard Phil, but he’s still behind the wheel.

I keep my eyes on Dawson while trying to make out what’s moving. “Wanted you to wonder where Davey put those pictures he took.” My heart slams into my throat as I realize it’s Blue. Sneaking up the road. She’s crouched low, apparently unhurt. Thank God almighty.

“Other than the one on the front page of the paper, I mean. Where you declined to talk about the cameras you had installed on the border. Why was

that? Afraid you might be recognized? That's when you had to move your crossing points. Found a new place to cross where there were no cameras not under your control."

I pretend to glance over my shoulder while I'm really getting a better look at Blue, just to make sure it's her. Cleo must notice, too, because she and Natalie are slowly inching backward.

Further and further. A little bit more and they'll be in the clear of debris.

Thank God again.

"Everything Davey left behind is in this shed," I say. "I boxed it up real neat. Put it out here. Of course, at the time, I didn't recognize you. Didn't know you till you hired me to start cleaning up your messes." I lower my voice. "Bloody, filthy, evil fucking messes. But your signature was on every one of them."

"Phil!" Dawson shouts. "What the fuck are you still doing in that car? Get inside that shed! Tell me what's in there."

The driver jumps out and storms past me. I regret not running Bastard Phil through the throat with his knife the day I decided to tell him to fuck off. Maybe we wouldn't be standing here.

"Watch for snakes," I tell him. "Nasty way to go."

"Fuck you," he snarls. "You're not so tough when you're outgunned, Monk."

Just wait, asshole, I think to myself.

I step out of the doorway and around the opposite side of the car from Dawson.

"Hold it right there, Eden," he says, swinging his gun at me.

I hold up my hands. "I was just giving him more light."

"What's in there, Phil?" Dawson asks.

"Can't tell for sure, but it looks like...a stack of boxes? Lots of 'em."

"Check them. Now!"

I glance through the doorway, see how close to the pile Phil is while sticking my hand into my coat pocket. I wrap my hand around the detonator and then count to three before I yell towards Cleo and Nat.

"Get down! For God's sake, keep your heads covered!"

Four lives.

Three seconds.

Two screams.

One chance.

Punching the button, I hit the ground. Barely start crawling under the car trunk before there's a noise like the end of the world.

The explosion rocks the mountain. From where I'm at, I can see where Cleo and Nat took cover behind a boulder, and how Cleo's body has completely covered Nat. Blue's on the ground too, closer now.

While the debris falls, I roll out from under the car. Though I'd love nothing more than to kill the bastard with my bare hands, I take aim at Dawson running for the trees, and shoot him in the knee.

Down he goes. *Now.*

I jump up and run. Getting to him before he has a chance to roll over, I kick the gun out of his hands.

Jerking both his arms, I twist them behind his back. "Shut the fuck up," I tell him.

"Yeah, you fucking cry-baby!"

The sound of her voice has me looking over my shoulder, where I see the most beautiful sight of my life. Blue.

She's smiling. "Hold him! I'm sure there's a few spare zip-ties in his car. I'll get them."

"Sure are!" Cleo shouts. "Right in the back seat. They thought they'd put one on me, but let me tell you, I told them Cleo Derby doesn't chafe her wrists for anything."

Blue returns within seconds. It just seems like hours. So does the time it takes her to zip-tie him. She not only binds his wrists, she ties his fingers, too. Making sure there's zero chance the evil fuck ever slips out.

"Are you about done?" I finally have to ask.

"Almost. He won't have a chance in hell of getting loose when I'm through."

Cleo and Nat arrive while Blue stays busy – she's moved on to using a zip-tie to hold a rag in Dawson's mouth.

"Daddy!" her little voice sets me off all over again.

I lift Natalie into my arms and hug her so tight.

So. So tight.

“You okay, baby girl? Did they hurt you? Tell me!”

“Yes, Daddy, I’m fine. Cleo didn’t let them touch me.” She kisses my cheek and then points to Dawson. “That man told us you were hurt and that we had to come with him to see you. I thought he was a cop. He showed us his badge.”

“He is, baby girl. Unfortunately, sometimes bad people hide behind good things.”

“That’s what I told her, too.”

I put Nat down and hug Cleo. “I’ll never be able to thank you enough for tonight.” I kiss her cheek before taking a step back and asking, “How do you manage to look like you just stepped out of a magazine even after hours of being held hostage?”

It’s true. Her clothes don’t have a wrinkle, and there isn’t a single hair out of place on her head.

“A woman never tells all her secrets, Eden.” She winks and then puts a hand on Natalie’s shoulder as they both step back. They’re clearing a path.

Blue steps forward.

There’s dirt on her face. Her hair is a mess. Her shirt, torn. There’s a gun stuck in the front of her jeans.

All in all, she’s absolutely gorgeous.

My throat swells. I try, but words won’t come. My eyes burn, this time with something besides maniac rage.

I shake my head, clearing my throat. “Blue, I heard a gun go off.” I have to clear my throat again.

“That was Kessler.” She shrugs. “Shooting at me. Idiot missed.”

“Where is he?”

“I’m not sure, but I think I hit him with the back of the car. I never saw him in the mirror after I took off, but it sorta felt like I hit something. Could’ve been whatever the car hung up on, though.” She shrugs again. “Or not.” Glancing over my shoulder, she asks, “Is that the only way out of here?”

She’s pointing up the road. “Yes,” I answer. “Why?”

“Because there’s a car hanging off a cliff up there, and I’m not sure where it’ll land. But it could be on the road.”

I grab her by the upper arms. “What?”

Fuck, when does it end? That had to be what I saw glistening in the moonlight.

“I shut off the headlights so no one would see me following and sort of misjudged that one really sharp turn.” She steps closer to me. “Only two wheels went over the edge, but the other, the back one, was skidding over when I climbed out.”

My heart stops. I pull her close.

Hug her. Kiss her. Kiss her some more.

She’s the one who finally stops the kiss I want to last forever.

Holding up a finger, she says, “Hold that thought because this —” She makes a circle in the air with one finger. “Isn’t over. I saw a *ton* of headlights down in the valley, Brent. And after that explosion, they’ll be heading this way. Pronto.”

Fuck. “Wait here!”

I run to the trees and snatch the backpack off the ground. At the top of the knoll, I see Blue’s right.

A shitload of headlights the size of a small army rolls on, coming this way. It can’t be close to three in the morning, so the Grizzlies aren’t here yet.

I don’t have much choice. I’ll set off the bombs I’ve buried, and then we’ll have to make a run for it. Hopefully, the blasts will take out enough to give us a fucking chance. Panic the ones who survive into running.

I pull out the detonators and hit the first trigger. Suck a breath and hold it in.

There’s a slight delay before the first bomb down in the valley explodes. Then the second.

By the time the third one goes, I’m in jaw-hanging awe. The hills around us light up. None are close enough to make out completely, but I imagine there are dirt bikes, four-wheelers, dune buggies, and damn near every kind of all terrain vehicle.

As the sixth and final bomb goes off, the lights start descending down the hills. Harleys send their deep growls through the valley, and tracer fire rains down on the smoldering wreckage below.

“Your friends?” she asks.

“Yeah,” I say, wrapping an arm around Blue. “They’ve got the high ground. Cross-Bones came early. They’ll clean up real nice.”

She wraps her arm around my waist and we watch the lights for a moment. Then she sighs. “Do you think all those bikers will want to come to a wedding?”

I turn, twisting her about so we’re facing each other. “Wedding?”

She nods and grimaces. “My mother expects you to marry me after...” She shrugs. “All this. And she likes big weddings. Won’t care one bit if half the guys are wearing leather and tattoos.”

“What do you want?” I ask.

She shakes her head.

My heart takes a tumble. I would’ve sworn she’d say yes in a heartbeat. “You don’t want to get married?”

She shakes her head and then nods. Bites her little lip.

“Blue, talk to me? Which is it? Yes or no?”

She presses both hands to her lips and shakes her head again.

“What? You can’t talk?”

Shrugging, she nods. Then she shakes her head at me again.

Damn.

She closes her eyes and holds up a finger as if saying ‘give me a minute.’

I get it. She’s been through a lot the past few hours. I was speechless not that long ago myself. Grateful to be alive.

I don’t have a ring, just the remains of Davey’s turtle stuffed into my pocket.

Fuck if I care. All she has to do is say the word.

Letting out a long breath, she says, “I want...whatever you do.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“It’s the only one you’re going to get until you tell me first.”

I smile. That’s my girl. Willing to give up whatever she might want for someone else.

Selfless. Sweet. Beautiful. Infuriating.

Blue. Red. Pink. And mine.

There’s only one thing missing from that list, which I’m not waiting another minute to add.

God, do I love her.

This small, blue-haired, gun-toting preschool teacher. I've never been more sure of loving her. Tonight, after hearing that gunshot and fearing it was her, I knew exactly what I wanted.

A future. With her. All *ours*.

She's shown me that with her, I don't have to change. Be one thing or the other. I can be me.

Hard-ass when I need to be, or family man. Eden, Brent, or Monk. It doesn't matter.

She's there.

She's here with me right now. Staring nervously with the same pale gray-blue eyes I fell for what seems like an eternity ago. She's the angel for the devil inside me. The voice of reason. The love of my life.

The one I have to – fucking *have to* – call my wife.

"You already know what I want, babe." I stand up, kiss the tip of her nose, reaching into my pocket. Then I'm down on one knee again, grasping her hand in mine, pressing that silver turtle against her palm. "I've been your fiancé for over a month now. I'm ready for the wedding the second you say yes. Marry me, Blue. Give me all of it. All of you. Let me love you like I've never loved anyone else."

"Brent..."

I nod. "Tell me, babe. Gotta hear it. Straight from your lips to my soul. Say yes."

"Yes!" It's barely a hiss. But it's enough.

I jump up, throw her back in my arms, hold on tight, and kiss her longer than it'd take to count the lights dancing all around us, above and below.

It's the strangest kind of fireworks between the stars and the flames crackling in the valley, smoking debris, but it's ours. It's fitting. It's chaotic and scary and exhilarating all at once.

It's everything I've wanted since the second we locked eyes in her class. And it's everything I'll keep till my dying day, smiling like a wrinkled old fool, remembering how our love blew the world apart and outshined Heaven itself for one crazy, unforgettable, heart-stopping night.

"I love you, Blue. Give me a week. I'll take part of Davey's turtle, whatever I can't repair, and have it made into a proper ring."

She pulls back before kissing me again, the tears in her eyes falling out.

“Jesus. You’re sure?”

I give her the most solemn nod of my life.

It’s one last homage to my little brother, wherever he is, and it’s also continuity. Without his sacrifice, I might not be here. There wouldn’t be an us. I wouldn’t be free from the oppressive weight on my back.

Free and clear to focus on making this woman the happiest on planet Earth.

“Blue, I’m positive.”

She wraps her arms around my neck, bringing her lips close to my ear, speaking straight to my soul. “I love you, too, Eden. You and your everything.”



Two Months Later

“KISS THE BRIDE.”

There’s nothing more exciting than hearing those words.

Nothing better than tasting her lips.

Nothing better than pulling my newly-married Blue into my grasp and fusing us with a kiss that promises forever tenfold.

It seems like a whole eternity passes in a kiss.

I can’t hear the laughter, the screams of joy, all the friends and family and even a few bawdy bikers roaring in the distance.

Right here, right now, it’s me, her, and nothing else.

My feisty, blue beautiful all. My passion, wrapped in her ivory white dress with a fresh blue stripe in her hair.

My temptation. It’s hard as hell not to rip off the veil I’ve just thrown back to own her lips.

Fuck, it’s hard not to just pull her out of the whole ensemble and put her where she belongs: under me.

I’ve never wanted to be in this woman more than I do now.

Every waking second since she became Mrs. Eden.

“God!” She whispers one word, turning away, just as reluctant as me to break the kiss. “We’d better get going. We’ve got a reception to get to.”

“Yeah. That thing,” I tell her with a wink.

Her hand pulses several times in mine. I lead her down the aisle and we walk through the confetti shower. Nat stands on a chair next to my parents, hurling it everywhere. Country music blasts from the elaborate sound system.

Never been completely my style, but today, it works. It’s us, after all our highs and lows and near-death somersaults to this very moment, when forever isn’t just theoretical anymore.

I’ve married the woman of my dreams. I’m walking with her hand-in-hand, past my grinning daughter, my family, a hysterically sobbing new mother-in-law, and big men with Grizzlies MC and US Army patches alike.

It takes almost a million years to make our way through the many handshakes, back slaps, hugs, and congratulations coming from all sides.

Finally, we’re in the limo. Blue barely has time to pour herself a glass of champagne before I tug her on my lap, storming kisses up her neck. “Easy, babe. I promised you four hours. My limit. Then we’ve got ourselves a date with a bed and a closed door.”

“You’re lucky I agreed to a short reception. If mom had her way, there’d be karaoke blasting until dawn.”

I grin, loving how she shudders the longer my beard grazes her throat. Encouragement. I plant several more kisses, marking on my territory before I say, “Like I don’t already know I’m the luckiest man between here and Pluto. Four hours, babe. I’m pushing it so hard because it’s all I can take.”

“Oh?”

Growling, I play with the frilly collar of her dress. One little rip is all it’d take. I’m able to reign in my inner caveman just enough to keep her gown intact. “Need to fuck my wife, Blue. All night. Very hard.”

She bats her hands playfully at my chest, laughing. I show her how serious I am, palming her cheek, bringing her in for another kiss. Her champagne lips taste sweeter than usual.

Good way to get started this evening, too. I’ll need a few stiff drinks at the reception just to keep my dick in line.

Let the four hour countdown begin.



“BRENT, WHAT’S WRONG?”

I can’t take my eyes off the scene in front of me. We’re lucky we had the

dance floor to ourselves for our first waltz, or we damn well might have been upstaged by a very drunk Clara dancing like mad with Scarecrow.

I hadn't seen him for years since. Not since leaving the Grizzlies. The mean, lean young man with the long tawny beard became an even more jacked thirty year old with an even longer beard in the meantime. Possibly the only man on earth capable of shutting Clara's big mouth.

Hand on my face, I turn back to see Blue laughing. "Oh, that? She's having fun doing something besides wagging her tongue. Proves this wedding's *really* something special!"

"There's your chance, Blue."

"Chance?"

I swing her around as another song starts, bringing us closer to the odd couple. "You. Her. Gossip. Payback."

"Eden!" She pinches my cheek.

I close off her gasp, smothering her lips with another feral kiss.

"What? You're telling me you really can't stand kicking up a little mischief?"

"Not *here*. Sure, she annoyed me, but our guests should be immune from –"

"All right," I growl, pulling out my phone. "We'll do it your way, then."

Her jaw drops as I snap a pic. Then several more in quick succession, just as Scarecrow dips Clara low and she runs a clumsy hand through his scruff.

"Brent, hey –"

"I'll be sure our photographer cleans it up and posts it front and center all over social media. That'll get some Derbys clucking, yeah?"

Blue's eyes go big. Then she's smiling, wrinkling her nose, trying to suppress a snicker.

"Sometimes, I think you're trying to give the devil a run for his money."

I shrug. "Yeah, Blue. Except I'm better looking. You knew that long before we said 'I do.'"

She slaps me playfully again. I turn away from the bizarre mating dance between my old biker bud and her cousin, giving her lips my full attention again.

They're more than happy there till a small voice behind me hits my ears. "Daddy? Izzy? Can I cut in?"

"For you, baby girl, anytime. Come here!" I bend down low to take Nat's

hands and spin her slowly to Johnny Cash.

Blue gives me a knowing look and saunters aside, casting one last sexy glance my way before she trots off to mingle with her relatives. The night couldn't get more perfect.

I'm left smiling. Teasing my daughter constantly about how the next time we're dancing at a wedding, it might be her own.

Later, I rejoin Blue. We spend another hour talking up our guests. A whole slew of folks from her ma's side I hadn't met at Megan's wedding, Derbys I already know, then men on my payroll, vets from my unit, and guys from the club I used to call home.

Cross-Bones reluctantly takes the huge bear hug I lay on him before we head out. I don't care. "Thanks again, Veep. For everything. Wouldn't be here today if you hadn't sent the cavalry that night. Give my best to Blackjack when you see him again."

"You're damn welcome anytime. I will. Drop us a line sometime, Monk. Even if it's just for beers."

"Will do."

Our limo's waiting outside. Cross-Bones whistles to the guys. I'm a made man, plenty of money to go around, but I'm not sure I'll ever get used to this high class shit.

I'm not Knox Carlisle, the Phoenix billionaire who owns the Black Rhino jewelry company, where I had her ring made using bits of Davey's old turtle. Knox heard about the blowout with the Pearls and personally ordered it done free of charge.

And I'm perfectly okay with that.

Life is good. Especially when we're in the limo again, on a one way trip to our fancy hotel near the airport. Tonight only. Tomorrow, we're bound for Zurich. A city steeped in history, beauty, and art Blue's always wanted to see. I'll be perfectly happy to load up on fresh air and good Swiss beer.

"I hope Nat won't miss us too long," Blue says.

Makes me smile. She can't help it.

Even on our wedding night, she's got my little girl in mind. I didn't go into this looking to find her a mama, but damn it, I did. There's no one else I'd rather have in Nat's life than me and Isabella Eden.

"My parents will keep her plenty busy, Blue. Probably buy her pizza and tacos every night they're in town, holding down the house, after dragging her

to every art museum between here and Tucson.”

“You’re right, I suppose.”

“Totally,” I say, pulling her closer onto my lap. “Now, Mrs. Eden, we’re close to the four hour mark. We both have some *very* pressing business.”

I grind my hips into hers, shifting up slightly. She smiles, feeling my hard-on.

So full, so ready, and so wild. Aching like hell to claim my wife’s sweet cunt for the very first time.



LESS THAN A HALF HOUR LATER, we’re stumbling into our honeymoon suite. She tugs on my tie, muttering a few words about how she’s sorry to see my tux go. Not sorry enough to resist my hands when they start pulling her out of that dress.

We crash down on the bed after we’re free. Naked. Frantic.

She sucks me with a vigor I haven’t seen for weeks. Maybe it’s because we swore off fucking for the past seven days, something she wanted, telling me it’d make tonight that much sweeter.

I put up a fight at the time.

Damn if she isn’t right, though. Her little mouth takes me so good, so deep, it’s hard not to pop off in the first couple minutes.

Good thing I’ve got stamina. I’m not the only one looking my finest this wedding night either. Her hair looks damn good.

Feels good in my fist as I gently tug several blue-blond locks, lifting her away.

Then, I push her back on the bed, spread her legs, and hear the word that makes my cock tingle. “Oh, Brent!”

Oh.

O.

That’s what I’m here to deliver. Wedged between her legs, tongue going, lapping at her folds like the sex starved maniac I’ve become.

Her clit goes between my teeth. I suck until she whimpers.

Hello, Heaven.

But it’s nothing like every beautiful inch of Blue quaking as she goes off on my tongue. Her thighs catch my face. I don’t fucking stop for anything. She

rides my mouth, my beard, my tongue – which leaves nothing to the imagination about how hard we'll be fucking soon.

She's still clenching the sheets when I come up for air, wiping her sweetness off my fingers. "Babe," I whisper, hovering over her.

Blue's already trying to twist onto her belly. Hot and bothered, ready to put her ass up for me.

Growling, I pin her down, loving how desire flashes in her eyes as they roll.

"Up," I say, taking her hand, leading her across the room.

I love fucking her from behind. There'll be plenty of that to come.

Right now, I've got something different in mind.

I booked this place months ago. It's a Presidential suite which has probably had a few real Presidents and reams of royals and CEOs calling it home during their stay in Phoenix. These fancy ass rooms need a draw, and the big one here's obvious.

The mirror up against the wall in the bathroom is *huge*.

Like something damn near out of the seventeenth century. I have to spread her arms wide to flatten her hands along the edges. Love how she huffs a small, uncertain breath as my hand drifts lower, spreading her thighs.

I fist a long lock of her hair before speaking again. "First of many wedding presents, Blue. Soon as I saw the pics of this place online, I knew it'd be perfect."

"Perfect...why?" Her eyes narrow as I rub my swollen tip against her aching pussy lips.

Fuck, so wet. So ready.

"For this." I push dead into her with a growl, going balls deep in one stroke. Her voice hitches and the adrenaline hits my system. "Wanted to fuck you first in our favorite position. But I also wanted to look into my wife's eyes the first time she comes on my dick."

"Oh, God. Oh, Eden."

I thrust. Slowly, firmly, fiercely at first, picking up speed. My lips graze her shoulder each time she leans into me, and then my teeth come out to play.

No more words. Not anymore.

We're both too lost in the frenzy. In each other. In this crazy sweet chaos we've decided to weave a life from, drunk on every molecule of us.

“Oh. Brent. Oh. Shit!” She’s practically screaming.

It’s nice to hear her let it all out for once.

Here, there’s no worries about Nat waking up down the hall if we’re too loud. It urges me on, and I lay into her. Wanting her to scream like a banshee.

We go hard.

Give it so hard my ass clenches each time I drive deep, balls slapping madly on her clit.

She needs to come. Right the fuck now. Because watching her tits bounce wild in the mirror while she’s bent over with her ass against my abs is too much.

“Blue!”

“Brent, I’m –”

Fuck! Make that both of us.

Coming so savagely it could shear us in two, if we weren’t already *one*.

I see her eyes flutter shut the very second it hits. Then I feel her heat, her silk, her O clenching my cock.

One more thrust and I’m done.

If there’s anything else on this earth better than coming deep in my woman without a rubber, I haven’t found it. Don’t fucking want to.

My seed wants to claim her at a primal level. The fire ripping through my cock reminds me of that, turning my spine into one long torch running up my brain.

Bliss.

Sweet bliss. Knowing it’s just a matter of time before I own her completely, and give Nat a little brother or sister.

Won’t be for a few years, probably. We’ve talked about kids and decided they’re at least a year out, maybe two. But fuck, when she’s ready, I’ll be waiting with every aphrodisiac known to man.

My cock gives a few last fiery jolts. I force my balls to empty inside her and I barely go soft. If I didn’t have to spin her around to lay a proper kiss on those lips, I might’ve just stayed in her and kept going straight into round two.

“That. Was. Incredible.”

I smile at her breathing more than her words. Kiss her with a fierceness that

says I'm glad I've done my job, stealing the air from her lungs, rendering her speechless.

"Incredible, yeah. Only the best for Mrs. Eden," I say, running my fingers through her hair.

"Baby, don't rush. We've got our whole lives ahead." Her eyes are huge, beautiful, sparkling. "Also, we *have* to get some sleep by two or three. Our flight's at eight o'clock."

"Plenty of time to sleep on our way to Europe."

"Eden –"

"Blue," I whisper, taking her lips again. The next kiss lets her know I'm not messing around. So does how I squeeze her shoulders. "Let's move this to bed. Got a couple hours to ourselves to find out if Mrs. Eden does a better job than Ms. Derby did at tiring out her husband on their wedding night."

"Ass!" Oh, but she's laughing.

I lift her up, carrying her across the makeshift threshold, before throwing her down on the mattress.

This, right here, is where we belong. She isn't wrong.

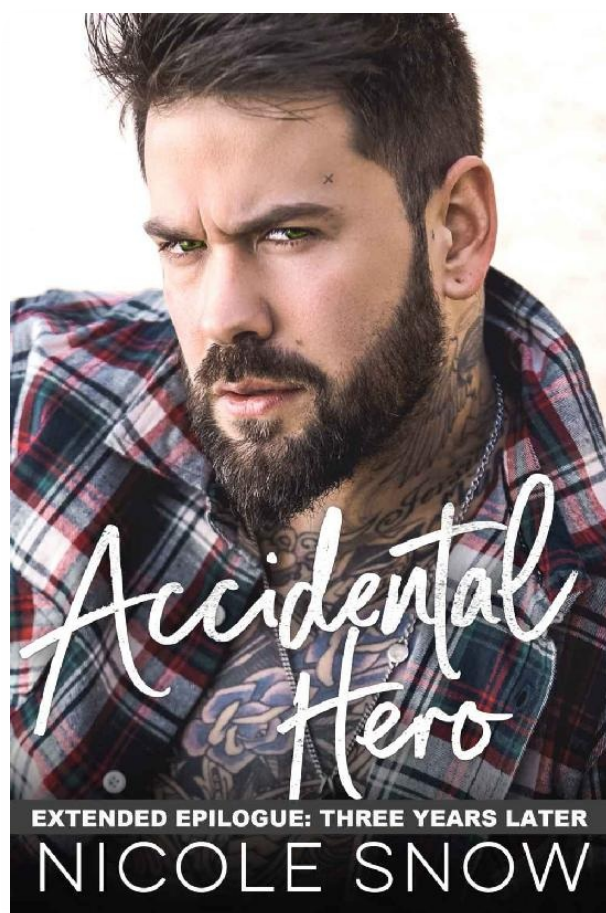
We've got our whole lives ahead to refine, to explore, to do what we do best over and over and over.

And tonight, I know, that's all of it. From the way we kiss with everything in our bones, to how she looks at my little girl.

It's right. It's mine. And it'll always be Blue.



THANKS FOR READING ACCIDENTAL HERO! Need more Brent and Blue?



Their story isn't over! Find out what big changes – and *little ones* – are in store for the Edens three years later in this extended epilogue. - <https://dl.bookfunnel.com/tamewfhhbqv>

THEN KEEP READING for two more full length romances with badass heroes I know you'll love. Surprise Daddy and Stepbrother UnSEALed, both included in this special release edition!

SURPRISE DADDY

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Published in the United States of America.

First published in January, 2018.

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DESCRIPTION

I KNEW BETTER. MY HEART DOESN'T CARE...

This wasn't supposed to happen.

Marshal Howard is a death wish wrapped in mystery. Over six feet of hulking muscle that screams leave me the hell alone. Cold, rude, insanely overprotective single dad.

Everyone in our little town warned me to stay far, far away. I didn't listen.

I answered the Castoff's nanny ad because no one else would.

I got too close.

I saw through his vicious reputation.

I found the impossible.

A call to reckless nights entangled and on fire. My destroyer in every kiss. A man who's turning my heart inside out, making me a fool.

So what if his pillow talk tears the stars from the sky and lays them in my trembling fingers? I haven't lost my mind.

If it was just the bad blood with him and my family, maybe we'd work through this. Maybe we'd find paradise. Just me, him, and that adorable little girl.

But surprises come in threes. Like the lines on the pregnancy test.

How do I love this beast and have his baby when Fate keeps giving us a big fat middle finger?

MORNING GLORY (SADIE)

It's too early in the morning to be up close and personal with stark raving crazy.

But it's not like time itself, or anything, ever mattered to *him*.

I knew something was up as soon as the whispers started. First Dr. Cartwright, wearing a sour smirk as he stepped up to June's desk. "Get the Howard girl's results in quickly, please. I'd love to get him the hell out of my office ASAP."

"On it!" June, our lab admin, smiled sweetly, acknowledging the order on her screen for a blood test with a nod. Apparently, this isn't the first time they've had to deal with him, or else she's really good at hiding her panic. "Ladies, look alive for this one! Did ya'll hear? It's Marshal again."

Her soft Missouri drawl rolls over the cubicle to the table I'm sitting at with Quinn, helping her re-stock today's supplies. "Sure did, Junie! One blood test for the world's last living Neanderthal. Shame we're out of tranquilizers."

Quinn gives me a sideways look, her eyes narrowed. "You ready to have some fun today, kiddo? Out of the frying pan and into the fire...but that's how we learn, right? God, I hope you find a good place to stick him on the first try."

Before I can open my mouth to answer, June appears around the corner, her eyes wide as she taps her long fingernails against the low divider wall. "Actually, it's for his little girl. She's a total sweetheart, as long as you don't set off Papa Bear."

"Papa Bear?" I blink, echoing the phrase. She can't be serious.

I don't think I've ever heard a more endearing term for the strange, scary, hyper-aggressive whirlwind known as Marshal Howard.

It's too cute. Too endearing. Not at all fitting for the angry disgrace everyone

in Port Eagle calls the Castoff when he's not in earshot – and sometimes when he is.

June never answers. The phone at her desk rings, its deafening sound sending her running.

It's just me, my nerves, and Quinn humming quietly with her back to me. I try not to dwell on the hulking problem due any minute.

God, I hope he doesn't recognize my name. I carefully remove the student badge with my name, pulling it off my scrubs and tucking it into my pocket. After his thing with my brother, Jackson, several years ago...

No. Don't do this, I tell myself. Quinn knows her stuff. Treat it like a routine procedure, and you'll be fine.

Quinn reaches over, grasps my hand, and beams. "Don't worry, doll. You'll do *fine*. I had a guy with veins like tree roots on my first rodeo. Must've stabbed him half to death before I struck red." She sticks out her tongue.

Hardly reassuring. "Yeah, well, I've never done a kid before."

Much less a child whose father is a volcano wrapped in pure muscle.

"Everybody has their first complainy-pants," she says, her not-so-lovely term for the difficult patients. "Consider yourself lucky you're getting broken in early, Sadie."

Oh, I try.

Swiveling my chair around to my desk, I sift through supplies. At least we're well stocked with cartoon character Band-Aids and plenty of numbing agents. Quinn continues humming along to the low Christmas music piping through the building's speakers.

I'm sweating like a dog. It's only my second week of on-the-job training. I always figured I'd hit a few landmines along the way to my phlebotomy certificate and a job that pays more than minimum wage, but damn, the freaking Castoff? So soon?

It's too quiet in the lab. My pen sounds like a branch snapping when it rolls off my desk and smacks the floor. Quinn is still humming, softer now.

I haven't been this anxious in my life. Which is ridiculous, considering the last year, leaving college early to deal with mom.

I look up just as Quinn's sing-song melody comes to a dead stop. She's listening to the new conversation in the waiting room.

He's here, growling his first words at June. "You ready for us yet, or what?"

Don't want to keep her here any longer than I need to."

"Sir, if you'll just take a seat for five or ten, I'm sure our techs will be with you shortly." I recognize June's tone. It's the same she uses with Doc Cartwright whenever he calls up in a panic over a lipid panel he forgot to order.

"You're not listening. Look at her. My girl's anxious. That's not good for anybody. I want this fucking done *now*."

Quinn and I share a look. Then we hear June sigh over the music. "You're lucky I'm a sucker for kids and the clinic ain't too busy. Hold on a sec."

I hold my breath, waiting. She pokes her face around the corner, giving us both a knowing look. "We good, or should I tell Papa Bear to scarf a chill pill?"

Quinn's eyes shift my way. "Sadie?"

Ugh. It's now, or never.

"Ready," I say, nodding, pulling on a fresh pair of gloves. "Tell him he's welcome to come in."

The world goes freakishly silent again. June steps out and mumbles a few words to our little patient and big daddy. I study Quinn listening, just like me, his heavy footsteps coming closer, scraping the floor.

I try to remember the million things and then some I've heard about the man our town calls the Castoff.

He's cold.

He's dangerous.

He's crazy.

He's an asshole, and also a hell of a mechanic.

He's six feet something of pure muscle, ink, and hot rage.

He gives what little warmth he has left in his snowball heart to his little girl.

Supposedly.

He's infamous.

He freaked out and punched my older brother in the face in the middle of the town's Fourth of July parade.

He's...holy shit, he's *here*. Standing right in front of me.

And he's handsome, too. As sinfully gorgeous as any man with his sterling

blue eyes, scowling jaw, and roughed up five o'clock shadow can be at nine o'clock in the morning.

"Come in, have a seat, and we'll take her from here, sir!" Quinn smiles, reaching for the tiny hand belonging to the adorable little creature next to him. Marshal gives her a death glare before slowly passing his daughter over, and – *Jesus* – is that a growl lingering low in his throat?

"It's okay, honeybee. It'll be over soon. Just listen and be brave," he tells her, following her across our space.

"Hi, sweetie!" I try to be nice without looking fake, showing my biggest pearly grin. Quinn helps the little girl into the seat in front of me.

I touch her arm and immediately notice the heat through my glove. Fever. "Oh my, you're burning up. Promise I'll make this fast, okay?"

I'm up. I grab my supplies and go to work.

One step at a time. Mechanical. Just like I learned in class, taking extra care to rub extra numbing agent on her arm.

She inhales sharply as I tie the rubber band, grab my vacutainer with the long-tipped needle, and slide it into the tube.

Papa Bear speaks again, his voice a low boom. "Eyes on me, honeybee. Daddy's got you. This won't hurt for long. She'll make it fast if she knows what's good for her."

Don't look at him.

Easier said than done with his eyes blazing into my soul, but I do my damndest not to return Papa Bear's angry glance. He stands on her other side, her free hand in his, possibly the most freakish contrast between big crazy and tiny innocence ever.

Everyone watches me except the little girl. I can't blame Quinn. She signs off on the trainee worksheet with my hours and a performance review, bringing me closer to my certificate.

I'm always being tested.

I can't screw this up.

"Okay, sweetie," I whisper softly, feeling for a vein one last time. "There. Big breath, please."

I wait for her little lungs to fill before I prick her skin.

She's amazingly well behaved as the small tube slowly turns red. The draw lasts somewhere between thirty seconds and a minute. I'm grateful every

second I don't have to deal with a scared, shrieking child. I got lucky.

I ease the needle out, apply gauze, and top it with a grinning cartoon cat bandage. "Feel better soon. We'll have the results over to the doctor, quick as we can." I look up, acknowledging the beast next to her directly for the first time.

"Take your time. Just do it right," he rumbles.

Huh? Not the response I was expecting. Neither is the look he's giving me.

I can't decide whether the Papa Bear moniker actually fits. Sure, he's huge and over-protective. But the blue eyes piercing through me are more like a wolf's.

A fearsome, all alpha, take-no-crap-from-anyone pack leader.

"Nice job, honeybee. We'll make cookies once you're feeling better. Chocolate chip." He lifts her up and pecks a quick kiss on her forehead.

Next to me, Quinn is completely melting, going doe-eyed. I don't know what the hell I'm feeling.

It's surreal watching the local freak being all tender and lovey-dovey. Maybe my ovaries are just cold, or I'm in too dark a place to be easily impressed. Who is he fooling, anyway?

"First time she didn't cry. Congratulations, Red." His otherworldly gaze pins me against my seat.

"For real?" I hate how it rushes out, a hushed whisper, like I'm flattered by his praise. "Well, thank you."

I won't let the compliment go to my head. I don't care how good he looks or how civil he thinks he's being.

Then his eyes grow colder. "You misunderstood. I'm saying it's a *goddamned miracle* she didn't cry after your hack job. I've seen medics in combat zones with steadier hands than yours."

"Sir, she's a student," Quinn cuts in, a nervous blush on her cheeks. I can't tell if she's shocked or furious. "Watched her myself the entire time, and her procedure was well within standard parameters. I apologize sincerely for any discomfort, but —"

"But nothing. We're done. When did I ask for an apology? I don't have time to sit around all day waiting for the Doc to give her a damn prescription, and I definitely don't have time for bruised egos." He barely acknowledges her, shifting his gaze back to me, harsher than ever. "Work on your technique if you're looking to stay for the long haul."

My mouth drops open. I'm shocked, appalled, and a dozen kinds of offended.

Just like that, Papa Bear is gone, carrying the sweet thing on his shoulder through the office divider opening that's barely big enough for his shoulders.

"Holy shit. The nerve!" Quinn's voice cracks. She snatches the tube from my hand and carries it over to her end of the room for analysis, shaking her head. "I'll go straight to management. Someone needs to put that asshole in his place, keep him away from here. He can go to Davenport next time he needs a checkup. We're not his doormats."

It's tempting. Very, very tempting, but then I remember how far Davenport is, especially in the winter when the winds do whiteout like second nature on the Iowa roads.

Banning him from the clinic will just inconvenience the little girl, who's far more likely to need our services than Mr. Crass-hole.

"Let's just drop it, okay?" I'm smiling by the time Quinn whips around, popping a stick of gum into her mouth, chewing her irritation away. "It could've been worse, I mean. Mia was a total doll and the procedure was fine. I'm just glad he didn't stick around longer."

"Mr. Howard, no soliciting! It's clinic policy. Hey, wait!" June's voice rings out behind us, loudly, and we hear her chair sliding as she stands up frantically.

Silence. Quinn rolls her eyes, turning back to her screen. "Suit yourself. You're a nicer person than I'd be, Sadie, but I can't hold that against you. Why don't you take five or ten and go see what else the idiot did? I've got the sample."

"Fine." A break is actually what I need.

I don't realize I'm holding my breath, hoping the asshole is really gone, until I'm next to June. She's next to the table in the waiting area, plucking a pile of torn white paper scraps off a business magazine, muttering to herself. "Nanny, my sweet tush. You're the one who needs the babysitter, you big, pissed off, stupid lug of a —"

"What'd he do now?"

June turns, startled by my appearance. I smile an apology and hold out my hand while she pushes the mess of papers into my palm. "I told him this isn't the place to leave his junk lying around. Of course, he can't be bothered to even have a professional looking card made."

I flick my fingers over the torn scraps. They all have the same four words written on them with a phone number in his blocky, crabbed script. Even his

handwriting is threatening.

NANNY WANTED.

CALL MARSHAL.

There's a phone number underneath.

"Take them to the trash, will you? Before the doctor comes in to debrief. I can't have him seeing this. Last time Ms. Myers left a couple papers about her bake sale, I never heard the end of it."

I nod, crumpling the dozen or so uneven white scraps in my palm. I leave June alone at her desk and step into the hall. I'm just in time to flatten myself against the wall before a frowning Cartwright passes, without so much as a good morning.

The figure turning down the hall, heading out to the reception area and then to the parking lot, is the reason why.

Against my better instinct, I follow, stopping just around the bend, staring out the frosted glass.

It's absurd, really. But maybe I'm worried for the little girl, or part of me just wants to know what turns a man into an antisocial buffalo.

The Castoff stands there with his daughter, kneeling down, fixing her coat. He double-checks her mittens and then plants another kiss on her forehead through the hoodie, giving the clinic behind him the stink eye one last time.

Our eyes meet.

I look away.

Seething blood crashes against my ears, drowning out this weird, mysterious piece of the world I can't quite make sense of. The Castoff, Papa Bear, Marshal the Crass-hole is gone the next time I find the courage to look through the glass. I catch a flash of his SUV rolling by, big and black and loud, cleaner than it should be for a man who lives off the grid, deep in the woods by the bluffs.

Supposedly.

Rumors, rumors, and what are they worth? None of them explain how he can be so sweet to his own flesh and blood, while he's a total brute to the rest of us.

I hate rumors. And I hate it even more that I want the bitter truth about Marshal.

Hasn't he given me plenty?

My head keeps spinning with three hard lessons from this morning.

Yes, he's as outrageous, short-fused, and brutally sexy as his reputation says.

Yes, he needs a nanny.

And yes, I think his cocky bluster is making me insane.

Because the longer I stare at those two words – NANNY WANTED – the bigger an insufferable prick I see. I also see my own tiny reflection, fists balled and jaw clenched. Ready to prove someone wrong.

I'm trembling, defiant, and oh-so-ready to put Marshal Howard in his rightful place.



WHAT A DAY.

I worry, doubt, and second guess the madness I'm considering the whole drive home. Thankfully, the rest of my shift is smoother than this morning. There are only ten more other patients before I'm off several hours later. Each with more tact and kindness than the Castoff has in his thumb.

A saner Sadie would've tossed all his sloppy nanny ads like June wanted. But this stupid, desperate new me kept one in my purse.

Actually, it's even worse. His number *might* already be in my contacts.

There's no calm at my parents' place. I'm still living in the same cramped upstairs bedroom I've had since I was a girl. The only place I've ever felt comfortable in this house since family business brought me home months ago.

"How's she doing today?" I ask dad, laying my keys on the counter. It's always the first question as soon as I'm through the door. He barely glances up from his newspaper, sipping his evening Earl Grey. "Okay, so wrong question. How are *you*?"

"I'm fine. Your mom's the same as always, babe. She's resting right now. Tried to keep her off the canvas this morning, knowing how upsets she gets when her muse doesn't flow." He sets his tea down and looks away. "You know how that goes."

Oh, yes. I know.

The pit in my stomach becomes a chasm.

I think I've seen my own mother meltdown like a toddler more than a dozen times since summer.

But it isn't her fault. She's sick.

It started not long after dad retired, after her paintings and sculptures stopped bringing in a healthy side income. The drugs barely help on the rare days she'll actually take them. The shrinks never do.

She's lost her muse, and I think a piece of her soul went with it.

However messed up the rest of her mind is, mother's pride remains intact. I'm glad that's the case for one of us.

"Should I check in?" I give him another look, grabbing an iced mocha from the fridge, my go-to evening treat. "Maybe bring her one of these? She's in a better mood sometimes after caffeine."

"No. The woman blew through a whole pot of coffee this morning. Mostly decaff. I never mix in more of the real stuff than I need to." He stands, brushes past me, and clinks his cup in the sink. "Besides, dinner should be ready in an hour or two. Company, too. Jackson and Ginger are coming over."

My jaw tenses mid-sip, evening coffee bliss ruined hearing my brother's name. My sister-in-law, I don't mind. Too bad she's married to the horse's ass who brought me back to this miserable town.

"That's okay, isn't it? Sorry, I should've told you this morning." Dad smiles sheepishly, running water for the dishes. His familiar crooked smile looks more beat up than ever under this thick black frames.

It can't be easy being the only one trying to keep this family together, without the tensions, having to deal with mother constantly. I try to help him.

Isn't that the reason I came home? To help? I can't stand seeing this ruin his retirement.

That's what really brought me home. Not Jackson's stupid guilt trip. Dad deserves better. Both my parents do.

"Sadie?" He says my name while my eyes are still closed.

Then they're wide open. "It's fine. I'll manage, I'm sure. If they're coming soon, we'd better get her ready."

He nods, turning back to the sink, leaving me to trundle upstairs to their bedroom.

I don't know how I'll break the news about the nanny job. It would've been a difficult conversation under any circumstances, but with tonight's company? I can't ignore the bad blood with Marshal and my brother.

For now, I try to forget it.

“Mom? It’s me.” I knock gently at the door and wait. A second or two later, I hear her footsteps pad over. She whips the door open, old hinges groaning.

“Good day, sweetie?” Even under her frizzy bedhead, she’s the same no nonsense green-eyed woman who raised me.

“Lovely. Dad says dinner’s coming up. Apparently, we’re having Jackson tonight, too.”

Her tired smile grows. “Wonderful! Then I’ll have a few hours to work before they come –“

“Mom, no!” I reach out, grabbing her hand before she’s able to turn around and close the door in my face. I sigh, hating how hard this always is. “You’ve been at it all day, I heard. I really think you need some time to rest, clean up, re-charge. Maybe help us with the meal prep before they’re here? I know dad could use a hand.”

She frowns, looking over her shoulder. It’s a complete mess behind her. How dad sleeps with her in a space that’s more like a messy artist’s loft than a real bedroom, I’ll never understand.

“I really shouldn’t. I’m so behind, Sadie. Why don’t you run along and tell your father I’ll be down soon? Only an hour, okay?” Her eyes are pleading.

I’m looking right through her. Staring at the white canvass splotted with random black smears, the places where she missed on the floor, the holes she knocked in the wall during a really bad episode a couple weeks ago. *Jesus*.

I can’t believe it’s our lives sometimes.

It was never like this before the breakdown.

“Oh, come. If it really means this much to you, then I suppose one little night off won’t hurt.” She smiles sweetly like she’s done me a huge favor. My eyes must have really looked like hell to break through her obsession.

“Thanks, mom. See you downstairs soon.” I wait in the laundry room around the corner until she finishes her shower, and I hear her coming. It wouldn’t be the first time she’s changed her mind.

My fingers keep tugging at the scrap of paper tucked in my pocket.

NANNY WANTED.

I’ve been unpaid help for the last six months. The good, faithful, dedicated daughter. The girl who put her life on hold to bail out a family crisis – what choice did I have after Jackson twisted my arm?

I don’t mind helping out. Really. Even though I’m totally unprepared and

undereducated after dropping out of college, I do what I have to, ignoring how my patience is bleeding out one day at a time.

But I'm not an angel. I'm not selfless. I haven't given up on life.

I need money. I need hope. I need a future.

NANNY WANTED.

I'll have to talk to Jackson first. He's harder because he always has dad's ear, even though our father likes to pretend he's his own man.

I'm laughing, shaking my head when I stand, already disgusted at the absurd thought of having to ask big brother for his holy permission to take a side job.

If I can deal with this family, though, I think I'm up for anything.

Including a frigid, arrogant, rude beast of a man I want signing my paychecks. I want to prove him wrong even more.



"DAMN GOOD GRAVY TONIGHT. Your cooking, ma?" Jackson stuffs another big uneven bite into his mouth, smacking his lips loudly until Ginger elbows him. They've been married for over a year, and she's still trying to teach my older brother some manners.

Mom looks up from picking at her food and doesn't answer. Dad smiles, placing his hand over hers, a low chuckle escaping his throat. "I'm the chef tonight, but it's *her* recipe. I'm just glad I've done it justice. Oh, and your sister helped with chopping. Thanks again, Sadie."

"So good," Ginger whispers, popping a bite of ham in her mouth. She's trying hard to keep the peace before another Kelley dinner turns into a train wreck, and she's forced to ask herself why she ever married into this family.

"I'm not made of glass," mom says, her eyes pinpricks. "You did wonderful, Peter. I should've been down to help you sooner..."

"Nonsense, Steph!" Dad's nervous smile grows. He squeezes her hand, his knuckles going white. "You needed your rest. You were at it for, what? Eight, nine hours today?"

"Eleven. I tracked them like always. Producing nothing but complete and utter dog shit." The last word is like a sudden gust of wind ripping through the house.

Jackson coughs. Ginger looks down at her plate. I try to keep eating because damn it, it's been a long day, and I'm hungry. Dad does his best to comfort her, but it's like pushing the pin back into a hand grenade that's already been

triggered.

It physically hurts to see this happening. Again.

For my first twenty-one years of life, it was a rarity to see my mother cry, much less swear like a sailor. Now, it happens almost daily. The tears are already in her eyes.

“What about you, Sadie? Having fun sticking people with needles all day?”

I glare, scratching my fork on the plate a couple times. “It’s a blast. Good training and interesting work. I’ll be ready to find a job as soon as I’m licensed.”

“You’d better. Think dad chopped down the money tree out back last year when we were cleaning up brush.” My big, dumb brother grins like a fool at my mother, hoping she enjoys his joke.

It’s tempting to lay into him. He always thinks I’m the one with my hand out because I went to college while he went into the service. Too bad he’s trying to relieve my mother’s tension in his own sadistic way, and if it saves her from a meltdown, then sure, I’ll put on a brave face.

“Cheer up, ma. You’ll find your groove soon,” he says, wiping his mouth. He’s testing the waters, trying to see if she’s calmed down. “I’ve got the sunshine tonight. Originally thought we’d save this for dessert, but since the mood in here needs some serious lightening up...honey, you want to do the honors, or should I?”

Ginger’s big blue eyes shift to him, and then us. Whatever it is, she can’t believe the timing.

“Um, sure, Jackson if you think they’re ready...” She trails off. He gives her the nod that says there’s no backing out.

The knot in my stomach tells me what’s coming before her timid little lips open, and I hear the two most terrifying words in forever. “I’m expecting. Peter, Stephanie, you’re going to be grandparents!”

I try to smile. It’s hard.

Dad bursts into a flurry of happy questions, congratulations, before he notices how quiet mom is. “Honey? What’s wrong?”

“Me. This *should* be a wonderful day for our family. Instead I feel...nothing. I’m numb. My only son is bringing a child into this world and they’ll be born knowing their grandmother is just a psycho has-been.”

“Mom!” Jackson’s fork clatters against his plate. Great, he’s about to add to the chaos, but a quick squeeze of Ginger’s hands on his shoulders restrains his

inner beast.

“She can’t help it, remember?” she whispers, turning to me, smiling sweetly. “At least you’re excited, right?”

“Well, yeah. I get to be a kickass aunt.” And I’ll need to be with a baby growing up under Jackson’s roof. All the more reason to take the nanny job, too, and get re-acquainted with kids.

“Ginger, we’re thrilled. Truly. All of us.” Dad’s eyes ooze the apology he won’t say out loud because it’s sure to make this worse. He turns to my mother. “Steph, you can’t be so hard on yourself. There’s more reason than ever for us to set a good example. You’re an artist, and a damn good one. You’ll get through this.”

“Whatever, Peter. Here, take my hand again like a dog on its leash.”

I’m cringing. So does Ginger. Jackson drains his wine glass, the only thing he can do not to explode.

“Remember last week?” Dad’s still trying, rubbing the back of her hand with his fingers. “The doctor gave you that book to read about Van Gogh –“

“Van Gogh, Van Gogh, I’m sick and *fucking tired* of hearing about Van Gogh!” She snatches her hand out of dad’s and both palms hit the table. “He was a genius. We’re not even in the same universe. I can’t produce another damn birch tree painting, much less something brilliant and immortal. I get it. I’m sick. There’s something wrong with me. It stopped being stupid and demeaning a long time ago. Now, it’s just exhausting, and I’m so, so tired...”

It’s over. Night ruined. My appetite with it. It doesn’t bother me knowing we probably won’t have the heart to break into the French silk pie waiting in the fridge.

“Sadie?” Jackson looks at me, an evil glint in the green eyes we Kelleys share.

I shrug, angrily, never knowing what to do. Yet, it’s always my responsibility.

My feet push the chair out reluctantly, ready to lead her upstairs. But before I’m able, dad takes her arm, helping her up. “I’ve got this. Keep your big brother company while I help her to bed.”

Mom goes slowly, hand covering her face, hiding her tears. Jackson reaches for the wine bottle once they’re out of sight. He fills his glass to the rim.

“Jesus Christ. Here I thought it’d give her something to smile about for once.” He’s scowling, unfazed by his very patient wife rubbing his shoulder.

“I’m sure she feels guilty, somewhere in there. Give her a break.” I look him

square in the face. It's inviting trouble, mentioning guilt to my perfect brother, but tonight I don't care.

"A break? She just spat in our faces after we announced our first kid. This isn't getting better."

"Yeah, I know. I was there," I remind him, pushing the last few bites of food on my plate away in disgust. "She isn't in her right mind, Jackson, and you know it. You can't hold it against –"

"You're right. It just gets to me, sometimes. How the fuck do we ever have a normal family again as long as this continues?"

Ginger looks at me, a strained smile on her lips. "How's your training coming along, Sadie? You're – what? – just a few weeks away from finishing?"

"A couple more weeks for the hands-on stuff. Then I'll be doing it all the time, as soon as I'm able to find a job." I don't know what century that will be. The clinic's openings for new hires are rare, and Davenport is far for work. "Enough about me, though. I'm excited for you guys. Seriously."

I reach for Ginger's hand. We trade smiles, and then I try to hold it, eyes shifting to Jackson. He gives me the same disdain he's had since he went to boot camp when I was just thirteen. "Thanks. I see what you're doing, and believe it or not, I appreciate it. At least one person at this table other than dad pretends to give a shit."

Praise. It's rare. I haven't gotten so much as a thank you since he screamed his version of common sense into me over the phone while I was still in my Des Moines dorm room.

I did the family a huge favor putting my life on hold to come back. As much as I don't mind helping dad, it can't go on forever. I need a life.

It's now or never. "Actually, guys, there's something I wanted to run by you...I've got my hands busy looking after mom between training. Turns out, I'm getting really short on savings, and it'd sure be nice to have a full gas tank this winter without begging dad for change."

Jackson flops back in his chair, his ghost of a smile disappearing. "Oh, here it comes. Just spit it out, sis. What are you hinting at?"

"There's a job I saw for a part-time babysitter in town. I'm going to apply." I wait for disapproval to boil over in my brother's eyes. I'll have to make my case, and fast. "Before you start, I'm not being irresponsible or unrealistic. I *listened* to you, Jackson. I came home to help dad so he doesn't go crazy and we don't have to put her in a place she'll hate. I've been doing it for six months, in between trying to get my life back on track. Can't you at least see

I've put some serious thought into this?"

One little white lie won't hurt. Before today, I'd never even seen the Castoff in the flesh, much less considered working for him. Of course, I'm conveniently omitting that part, too.

So, two little white lies.

"Can't you at least pretend you soaked in what just happened tonight?" Jackson folds his hands, leaning in, a shadow hanging on his face. "Ginger's pregnant, Sadie. We can't pick up any slack if you're thinking we want to spend any longer in this fun house than necessary helping dad."

"Jackson..."

My brother lifts his hand, cutting off his wife, the voice of reason. "Sure wish somebody sat down like this and asked me to rearrange my life before I went overseas. Would've saved me a skin graft."

Here comes the guilt trip. Lovely.

I respect my brother's service and his sacrifices. It's when he uses them to get his way, to control everyone else's lives, that I loathe him.

"You know that's not what I'm saying. Not even close. Everyone respects what you did over there. I've made sacrifices for this family, too. They're very different, obviously, but they're real."

"Hm, what were those again, sis? Six months taking care of our own mother and gritting your teeth the whole time? After I begged you to come home from your stupid pre-med degree draining dad's 401 in tuition? Shit. Tell you what, I'll turn my purple heart over to you."

"Jackson, enough!" Ginger's nerves of steel have melted. She spreads her arms between us, sighing, and gives me a pleading look. "Let me know the hours you need. I'll help Peter when he needs it."

"Babe, no..." Jackson grabs her hand, pulling it to his chest. The daggers in his eyes turn on me. "You're not putting her out when she's carrying my kid. Apologize."

"I'm sorry...sorry for wanting a life." I'm so done. My palms press the edge of the table, ready to ease my chair back so I can run to my room, but Ginger shakes off my brother, grabbing my arm.

"Wait! This is ridiculous, you guys." She looks at Jackson again, her anger melting into doe eyes. "Give her a chance, hon. Please. She deserves it after all she's done the last six months. It's not like I have anything better to do, sitting around at home while your dad needs help. I'll be a stay at home,

remember?”

Calming, my brother slides his fingers through hers, locking them tight. “Damned straight. Whatever you want to do, Sadie. Maybe I overreacted tonight. Fuck, I’m just so sick of it. Mom’s condition, whatever it is, has screwed us royal.”

“Yeah, well, we make do. That’s what we’ve always done, isn’t it?” I wait for him to give me the look that says he knows what I’m talking about. “I’m doing this whether you like it or not, Jackson. But I’d really, really love to have your support. Just for once.”

He’s quiet for a minute. I’m expecting another verbal lashing, and this time I will walk away, but he eases into his seat. “You’ve got it. For real. It’s just a part-time job. What’s the worst that could happen?”

You could find out I’m working for the man who pulled you into a fistfight. I just feel crazier when I confront the other truth I’m hiding.

Still, tonight feels like training. It’s the first time I’ve grown a backbone in a good, long while.

I like it. And I know what I need to do.

Of course, I hesitate. I put it off because I don’t have a clue what to expect the second I show up on Marshal Howard’s doorstep.

Three more days at the clinic drift by before I’m brave enough to follow through. It’s another screaming kid in the waiting room who finally gives me courage, a little boy with no chill. I’m the one who comes out with a green apple sucker while Quinn draws his mom’s blood. He quiets down like magic.

I can do this. I might even be good at it.

No more delays. No more crap. Come Monday, I’m seeing Mr. Castoff for my job interview.

LITTLE RED RIDING HOOD (MARSHAL)

The alarm on my phone blares just before five a.m. It's cold, it's winter, and fuck, the hot shower I step into is glorious.

No time to stand in the suds jerking off, though. It's another day packed with business.

I dry my hair quickly and head for the kitchen, stopping to poke my head through the door into Mia's room. My little angel should be asleep for a couple more hours. That means now is the best window of opportunity I'll have all day to get to my shop and get some major work done.

I take a detour to the stove. My coffee is black, pour over, and so dark it could strip rust.

The first slurp is perfection. Too bad it never lasts.

By the second, I have every reason in the world to be pissed off again.

"Keep coping, asshole. You won't fix it today," I tell myself, growling into the shadows before I drain the excess coffee dregs into my thermos for later. "It's just another morning. No different than the rest."

Half an hour later, I'm too busy to worry about the stains on my soul. The grease all over my hands is a nice distraction, making this wrench a hard bastard to screw.

I have to be careful. Have to focus. Classic motorcycle parts don't come cheap if I fuck up and break them.

Besides, I've got plenty more work lined up through New Year's. I put in a solid hour on the old Harleys, stripping metal and overhauling damned near everything. Then my muscles lock, pleading for a break.

This is the part I hate. The quiet, productive hours are over too soon. If I'm lucky, I'll have another thirty minutes, maybe less.

Usually before ten, I hear my little girl screaming my name from the back door, or else coming up to my shop door to rap the secret knock I taught her. She's been sleeping in later the last few days since her fever faded. Of course, I lost precious time, tending to her every need.

Money is the last thing on my mind when she's sick.

I don't know how I've kept us stable, raising a four year old alone as long as I have, but I do. I'm hoping that changes once there's an answer to my nanny ad.

I sit down to rest, sipping the rest of my coffee, staring at the old ammo box in the corner.

It's like a hellish magnet. Never fails to draw my gaze every idle second in my workspace.

Goddamn, not today. I can't.

The blanket I threw over it a couple months ago hasn't helped, ever since the last time I slammed it shut and pinched the lock on tight. Everything is still there.

Secret. Taunting. *Pleading.*

Everything I don't want to dwell on, but have to.

Ignoring the fatigue in my hands, my fist tightens. "Someday, boys. I haven't given up. I'll die before that ever –"

There's that knock. Three, to be precise. *Right on time, honeybee.*

Standing, I'm ready to greet her and head back to the kitchen to make us breakfast. I'm halfway to the door before I realize the other three taps are missing.

It should be six with a pause in the middle. Not three.

What the hell? I rip the door open, afraid something's wrong because Mia never forgets.

It isn't my little girl.

It's a woman. A voluptuous hourglass of a fox who looks like she just stepped out of my wet dreams with her long flaming hair and jade green eyes. Teasing hips, deadly lips, and so much of that bright red fucking hair, my hands have a better reason to burn besides their recent workout.

Then her familiarity hits. Red.

The reckless flunky who stuck my daughter's arm just last week. The shy,

soft-spoken girl who should be anywhere but here.

It doesn't make sense.

"You again. Here. Why?" I step out and stop, taking back my front step, surprised she holds her ground.

"I'm here about the nanny job." It's quick and forceful and anxious. Like she's been practicing the words all morning. "Don't look so surprised. I saw the ads in the waiting room yesterday. I need work. I'm at your service."

My...service? What is this, the nineteen-fucking-fifties? The mouth on this girl.

She's nervous and defiant. Strange and enticing. Worth maybe five seconds before I kick her to the curb.

Sure, she's given me a hard-on, but not any patience. When I posted my ad, I expected serious offers. "Wrong job, lady. I need mornings, evenings, sometimes in between. This won't work with your schedule."

I twist my arm behind me, reaching for the door, ready to step back into my shop and slam it shut.

Then Red shows me how insane she really is.

She *grabs* my goddamned work shirt. She's got to stand on her tippy toes to reach my collar, rocking forward from the motion, just enough to leave a soft invisible kiss of warm breath on my neck. An inch closer, and she'd plow her hips right into the hard-on I mentioned, big and tense and seething.

Fuck me seven ways. I don't need this.

"An interview, Marshal. Five minutes of your time. That's all I'm asking," she says, her little fists twisting the fabric of my shirt. "I'm just a student in the lab. Not full time. They aren't even paying me yet."

I'm growling when I grab her wrists several seconds too late. It's not like me to hesitate. "Three minutes. In the house. Start talking now."

She's ballsy for a broad, coming here like this, using my first name. To Port Eagle, I'm either Castoff or Mr. Howard. Both said with equal derision.

Her courage is worth something – at least a sixty second litany telling her why she needs to get fucking lost if she's got any common sense.

I'll pretend to hear her out and then get her gone.

A minute later, we're in my kitchen. That's where I finally remember to get my hands off her.

Doesn't stop the ache below my waist. I stand behind the table, feigning setting breakfast plates for Mia, hoping Red doesn't see what she's done to me.

Her eyes dart around my place. I wonder what happened to the spitfire who marched her way in here only seconds ago, wonder why she's so quiet. "What's wrong? Clock's ticking."

She shakes her head, startled, pouring those bright green eyes into mine. "Nothing. It's just...so normal."

"What were you expecting? A cave with cougar skulls?" My hands slap the table so hard she jumps. "Start talking, sweetness. No time for games. What makes you think you're remotely qualified for this job when you already upset my little girl?"

"You told me she usually cries. When I took her blood, she didn't. Don't I get a little credit for keeping her cheeks dry?"

I stare through her, letting my gaze do the talking. *Very, very little.*

"I'm a good listener," she continues. "Young at heart. Responsible. I've taken every job I've ever had seriously. Never been disciplined once."

There's a first time for everything. The dangerous ache in my balls strengthens when I think about her and discipline in the same sentence.

It isn't fucking good for me.

I turn, throwing a fresh pot of water on the stove for oatmeal. Mia will be down here any minute. Red plows through her life experience, which isn't much.

High school honor roll. Charity work in Cancun. Three years of college. Something about a sick mother.

I can't believe I haven't fallen back asleep by the time I decide to stop half-listening.

Hardly surprising for a girl in this town who looks like she's barely old enough to drink. The girl trails off while I'm digging in the fruit basket for a few bananas to slice up, Mia's favorite add-in.

"Oh, and I'm going to be an aunt. Good chance I'll be helping my sister-in-law after the baby comes. Taking care of people is what I do, just like helping my sick mom. I mentioned that. Same reason I'm going into lab work. I'd love more experience with kids."

I'm less impressed with this resume by the second. "Looks like we're done here," I say, throwing the banana slices and nuts on top of the oatmeal in a

bowl, which I lay down in front of Mia's seat.

"Wait, that's it?" She's got her arms folded when I turn.

"What else were you expecting? I can't hire a kid fresh out of college who's got half her day booked with more important shit. Let me save us both some time. If there's one thing I hate, it's wasting mine, and bringing you in here was a big –"

"Daddyyyy!" Mia's squeal cuts in mid-sentence, but it's not what interrupts me.

It's the blur of tawny fur flying across the room a split second before my oatmeal hits the floor. Our cat, Whiskey, scurries off as my little girl stops. She doubles over, wide eyed and laughing. And who can blame her, knowing how many times I've tried to train that fucking hairball to stay off the table?

If he wasn't her favorite, sometimes, I swear...

"You're right. I'm sorry I wasted your time." Red blinks at the mess. Her boots thump across the floor. Then I hear the hinges squeal as she pulls open the screen door, ready to leave this insanity behind.

Leaving me too busy holding my dick to reach for the paper towels.

My eyes flick to the clock. It's going on ten.

Shit.

I promised those motorheads I'd have their Harley engines rebuilt by afternoon. They're coming all the way from Dubuque to get them. Also told Mia we'd be going to the mall to get her new shoes, and maybe she'd get an ice cream for good behavior.

That won't happen if I don't get this crap off the floor and make sure she's fed. Right fucking now.

Against my better instincts, I fling the door open, screaming the three feet between us. "You want this job? Then get back here and help. This is your hands-on interview."

Red halts, slowly looks up, a sour smirk on her lips. "You want to add anything to that, boss? I dunno. Seems like I'm crazy after all, chasing this nanny gig..."

Damn. She just *knows* she's got me by the balls. For a split second, I'm back in boot camp, the time the drill instructor caught me trying to sneak a beer. Worse, I mouthed off. He taught me how to clean miles of grout with just a toothbrush.

If there's one thing I hate more than asking for help, it's being punished for my own stupidity.

"Come back." It comes out like thunder stuck in my throat. "Please, Red. I was too hasty, maybe. Show me what you've got, and I'll re-think this."

Her eyes go to the frigid overcast sky, still mulling my abrupt change of heart. *Come the fuck on.*

"All right. I'm a believer in second chances. I'll see what I can do, Marshal." She waltzes past me, into my house. I linger outside a moment, listening to her chattering sweet talk with my daughter while she cleans the floor.

It's times like this I miss the tobacco from my army days. But I gave that shit up years ago; partly for Mia, partly because I can't stand the other burning stench I'll never forget after my last smoke.

I take a few more placebo puffs of icy December air before I go inside, and see my little girl in her booster seat, Whiskey rubbing on her ankles. My death glare doesn't even phase the cat, who looks up and squeaks carelessly at me. *Bastard fiend.*

"Can you keep her company for the next few hours, Red? It'd mean a lot. Pretty easy to keep her busy. She's got a tablet in the living room, plenty of animal learning games she loves. I've got work to do."

"Did we start the clock then? I've got the job?"

I hesitate for a couple long seconds. The worst that could happen is already over, isn't it?

If she's able to fill in like this in an emergency, then she's reliable enough. For now.

"Tentatively, yes. How does seventeen an hour plus expenses sound?"

"Fair. Glad we could work this out, Marshal. My name's Sadie, in case you cared."

I pause. "Good. I'll check in sometime after noon, Red." I avoid the name, shaking my head as I rush to my workshop to pick up where I left off.

Sadie lingers on my mind like a forbidden kiss.

It's a pretty name. It suits her. It's also way too fucking close for comfort.

Can't remember the last time I was on a first name basis with a woman. Not since Nameless, probably, that bitch who turned my life upside down with a little help from a busted condom.

Not that I regret Mia. I've never done that for a second.

Her, on the other hand, Jenna...

An angry chill bristles up my spine every time I remember her name.

For some fucked up reason, it also makes me hear Red saying mine. How she says it wrong.

She doesn't say 'Marshal' in the timid, subtle whispers like everybody else in this town, the rare times they aren't saying *Castoff* instead. If only I had time to care.

Work beckons and money threatens. I dive in and shut my ransacked brain up.

Or try to.

Another thirty minutes into the job, I hurl my greasy wrench down, grunting as I wipe my hands on a rag.

Fuck, I don't like this one bit.

I need a nanny, but I can't have her in my head.

My eyes drift to the ammo box again. I get the same sharp adrenaline burst I always do in my chest.

"Quit worrying, you assholes. This isn't another distraction. I'm *not* letting little red riding hood screw me over."



DESPITE THE ROCKY START, I'm able to finish quicker than I thought. It's barely noon and there's even time for lunch.

I head into the house to check on Mia. The rumble in my gut encourages me to fix a quick sandwich. I throw together cold cuts, mayo, and bread before I head into the living room.

That's where I find them. Mia, parked on the floor in front of the TV, her usual spot, humming a kid's tune while her fingers tap at tigers and elephants on her tablet.

Red is bent over in the corner, scooping something off the floor. That long grey grandma dress she's wearing presses up against her ass cheeks, taunting the hard-on its been hell keeping down all morning.

This shit is too much.

I grab her around the waist. She spins around and gasps, clasping a thick medical textbook tight in her little hands, the object she was busy retrieving.

Our eyes lock for a long, fiery second before I let go.

“Do you mind?” she whispers, an edge in her voice.

“I do. Like to know exactly what’s happening in my house. Everything cool here, or did you spill a whole library?” I nod toward several more books and scraps of papers strewn across the floor.

She steps away from me, sniffing, this time facing forward as she attacks the pile. “Clumsy me. My backpack ripped. I was fine picking it up like a normal human being before you barged in.”

All the books and printouts are about blood. Interesting. “You sure you’re human? Seems like your studies would go over better in Transylvania than Nowhere, Iowa.”

“Oh, please.” She rolls her eyes. They catch the soft low winter sun seeping through the window, giving me a kaleidoscope of pretty green. “Somebody has to learn to stick veins if we want a functional medical system. Phlebotomists and lab techs are actually in pretty big demand around here with our aging population.”

“That so?” I lean in. An evil part of me adores how her breath sticks in her long ivory throat when I’m up close and personal. My voice drops an octave. “Just keep that shit away from Mia. She’s real squeamish with blood and needles. You’re welcome to read whatever when she’s occupied.”

“Fine. It’s only for a few more weeks, anyway. I’ll have my certificate soon, and then I’ll be able to go back to books I enjoy.”

My flicker of amusement fades. I don’t need the reminder I’m dealing with a student.

Another risk. One more strike against having a reliable nanny.

My eyes stick to her while she turns, slips past me, and settles onto the sofa next to my little girl on the floor, opening her book. Sadie smiles down at the kid for a moment, who’s trying to pronounce different animals’ names. She looks at me and opens her plush lips. “I thought you had work?”

I hesitate, taking in the scene. I’m still trying to decide if this whole thing is a big fat stinking mistake. Maybe I should cut her loose by the end of the day.

There’s a million reasons this is wrong.

But Mia’s happy singsong melody, stuck in her own little world, doesn’t lie. She likes her new babysitter. That’s a huge plus. Almost so massive it negates the risk of her getting attached, which will be a bitch to deal with if Red leaves me high and dry.

“Another hour or so,” I finally tell her. “I’ll be back in soon to square up your

pay and talk hours for the rest of the week.”

Red smiles. I don’t say anything as I walk past, pausing a second to reach down and ruffle little Mia’s hair. She’s so deep in the zone learning she barely notices.

That’s the way I want it.

That’s why I’m risking my own good judgment and Red’s flippant anything-could-happen place in life.

That’s how much I’m willing to put up with the subtle cock tease parading around my house, awakening a need for cold showers I haven’t had for years.

This thing could blow up in my face. Hell, it probably will.

It could also be the break I’ve waited for. Nothing will shut up the ghosts in my head until they’ve had justice. I can’t find the time unless something takes the pressure off Marshal, part-time machinist and full time single dad.

Marshal the killer operates best when he’s alone.



“COME ON, honeybee. Stretch out your arms, please.” Mia laughs and obeys, standing reasonably still while I bend down, sliding her jacket over her little arms. She’ll ride with me to town first, then the mall. Now that the motorheads have picked up their bikes, I have a refurbished trolling motor to drop off and money to collect.

Behind me, Red clears her throat. It’s the first time I’ve seen her getting antsy, but I can’t really blame her.

“I almost forgot...” I stand up, pull my wallet, and dig through the mass of twenties I always keep tucked inside. “Six hours at seventeen bucks each. That comes out to...screw it, we’ll just say a hundred and twenty. Fair?”

“Perfectly. Hope this means more tomorrow?” Her green eyes widen the instant her palm closes around the crumpled bills.

“Yeah. Except tomorrow I want you wearing jeans, Red.” I look her in the eye and lower my voice when I say it. Mia’s too young to understand, but I don’t want her picking up on anything if this gets dicey, and my new nanny won’t listen. “I can’t concentrate when you’re dressed like that. Bad influence.”

She smiles, shaking her head like I’m joking. Disappointing.

“You’re serious? You want a dress code to babysit your little girl? Jesus. This one even goes to my ankles.”

“My house, my rules. I’m paying you for keeping her company. Not

distracting my sorry ass every time I come in for a cup of coffee. Be here at nine again. Hopefully you can shuffle around your hours for whatever else.”

“You’re insane,” she says, fighting through the beet red flush. Hesitation scrunches her face, and then defeat. “Whatever. You’re lucky I’m flexible.”

She doesn’t specify with the job, leaving my brain to imagine bending her into all kinds of positions. *God damn.*

We have to get out of here.

“Mia, it’s time to go. Say bye-bye to Sadie. She’ll be hanging out with you again tomorrow – fun, right?” I take Mia’s little hand, leading her to the door, while she waves frantically with the other. We all step outside together, Sadie in front of us, giving me one more parting view of that dangerous, full ass.

My hand twitches. So does something else for the thousandth time today.

Fuck.

She heads for her car while my little girl calls after her. “Bye-bye, bye, Ms. Sadie!”

“Bye, sweetie! Tomorrow we’ll go north on your game and I’ll show you some polar bears. My grandpa spent a lot of time in Alaska. I always loved his stories.” She’s beaming like my four year old daughter is an old friend, rather than a child she’s paid to keep up with. I’ll admit I admire her attitude.

My eyes jerk toward her one last time after I settle my little girl in her seat, and then slide into the driver’s seat. Red’s older Toyota pulls out of my long driveway and curls down the overgrown path toward the highway, a few stray icicles breaking off the trees, littering the road behind her.

The rest of the evening goes peacefully. A rarity.

The guy with the boat motor pays up without a fuss, singing my praises for a job well done. I put a little of my haul to good use in Davenport. A new pair of shoes for Mia, pizza, and ice cream before we head home.

Eating out in a bigger city is actually a pleasure because nobody recognizes me. They keep their eyes to themselves. They don’t whisper *Castoff* under their breath, secretly wondering if I’m fit to be a father.

That last part is the only thing that ever gets to me. The rest, I’m used to.

I’ve never had to use fists over it yet. The coward assholes in this town who like to mutter get up and run the second I stand, muscles flexed, giving them holy hell in a gaze.

That’s for the best. I’m willing to stand my ground, but any extra altercations

will just make my life harder, and my exile from Port Eagle's polite society even longer, more irredeemable.

Later, at home, I help Mia clean up and put her to bed. She picks a story out of the big fairytale book I bought her last summer. It's *Little Red Riding Hood*.

How fucking fitting. Every sentence drags my warped brain far from the innocent kid's story involving a good girl in over her head and the big bad wolf.

She's snoozing softly by the end of the tale, right when I get to the part where the hunter shows up and saves the day. It's just as well because I'm too damn distracted to come up with a PG ending.

Those Grimm brothers make every parent's job harder, reading their twisted crap verbatim.

I tuck her in, kiss her forehead, and switch off her light, then walk through the house until I reach the kitchen. Part one of my nightly ritual is over.

Part two, visiting my shop in the off-hours, I skip. Probably for the first time in weeks.

Freezing out there in layers with the wood burning stove while I rifle through fury, guns, and dead men's memories can't rip me away from a hot shower tonight.

The balmy water beckons to a part of my soul I'd buried a long time ago. The old shower head hisses, pouring steaming droplets down my back in rivulets. They trace the rough, deep crevices between my hard body like lonely fingers. They tease muscles built in haunting memories, always on edge, but tonight they lull them to sweet forgetfulness.

It's not the past on my mind when my hand dips below my abs, grasping the throbbing spike between my legs. The source of this ache in my balls is very much in the present.

Sadie.

Red.

"Fucking Red!" I'm grunting her name when the long, hard strokes wrapped around my cock pull the come out of me.

It's the crack of her ass caught in my head when everything up my spine goes nuclear, except there's no dress this time. Just my imagination. Just my thick hands on her cheeks, pulling them apart, taking hold to slam her cunt hard and deep.

I'm panting like an idiot, coming down from the blistering high. What the hell was that? Really?

I'm not losing it. It's just a fantasy. Harmless.

I'm not stupid. I won't actually bed my nanny, and screw up the best break I've had in awhile before it's even begun. But damn if I'm able to ignore the urge. She can't live in my head rent free, without relief, knowing the fucked up insta-lust thing her body does to my mind.

I think about her blood books and grin, hands braced against the tiled wall so they rinse away the shameful sweat clinging to my skin. Whatever happens next, I won't let her stick me. Red will *not* fucking break my skin.

If she doesn't get into my system, and discover my blood is already on fire, we might have a fighting chance at making this work. Without someone getting fucked very hard, I mean, while someone else's heart gets pulverized.

BOSSYPANTS (SADIE)

I can't believe it's been a week working for the man the whole town keeps at an arm's length.

I haven't told anybody yet. As far as my family, my friends, my co-workers know, I'm just picking up a few extra hours watching a busy welder's kid. Not exactly uncommon in this town, where two thirds of the men still make their money off motor oil, muscle, and machines.

The timing is just as well, too. We'll be into Christmas soon. Officially signaling the end of my lab training and a few days to rest.

I doubt I'll have as many days here with this little cherub. We've shifted from wildlife studies to reading practice, a lesson plan set by Papa Bear, who's surprisingly meticulous about his daughter's learning schedule.

I wouldn't have expected a man like Marshal to know the first thing about homeschooling. He tells me he's planning to send her to school as soon as she's kindergarten age, but he wants her ready to leave everybody else in the dust.

So, I follow his lesson plan. I use Google and a few advice videos from YouTube to help fill in the gaps. I ask the little girl for her thoughts after we watch the kids' shows on his list, and she recites back what she's learned beautifully.

Surprisingly easy. Efficient. Mutual.

She's happy, and I'm making money. That's the point, right?

If it weren't for him, the answer would be obvious. But I'm learning fast there's a lot more than what's surface deep.

Marshal never shows his face more than two or three times during our days together, always briefly. And often just to check in, make sure I'm carrying out his orders, and pay up at the end of the day.

After seven days back to back, it's becoming routine. He spends the last couple hours with us in the living room, seemingly ahead with his work.

Marshal stomps across the room while I'm reading to Mia and rips a few candy canes off the tall Christmas tree reaching to the ceiling. He shoves one into my hand, passing the little girl another. "Part of your bonus. Won't need you around until the twenty-sixth," he growls, biting through the wrapper of the final cane he keeps for himself.

"Got it. We'll pick up then. Anything else you need before I head out?" I ask, gathering my training material into my backpack. I'm so ready to be done.

It's nice to accomplish something for a change. Just a few more hours to log and a test or two, and I can start contemplating my future with a fancy new license from the state of Iowa.

"We need to talk hours for next year. You're performing, Red." I blink through his compliment, surprised. "Didn't think you had it in you to juggle responsibilities. Glad I was wrong. Guess you're more grown up than you look – especially in the jeans."

Mia laughs, watching me stand, hands on my hips. I'm not daunted by the prickly glow in his bright blue eyes. "Again, bossypants? If you want more hours, I wish you'd take an interest in something besides what I'm wearing."

"Keep dressing right and maybe I will." Jesus, he's serious. He looks at me slowly, hoisting Mia into his arms, then settling into the huge wood recliner in the corner. The end of the unwrapped candy cane goes into the corner of his mouth and there's a loud *crunch*. "I'm trying to be nice, Sadie. It's almost Christmas. Relax."

There's nothing relaxing about the second time he chews into peppermint. Mia giggles at the sound.

I don't know why I'm so on edge.

If only calming down were so easy. Truly, nothing ever puts me at ease in his presence. Well, nothing except the wild contrast between this beast and his daughter, who looks like a porcelain doll in his arms, smiling so sweetly.

She clearly loves the brute. He'd tear a hole through the world just to keep that happy grin on her face. They're a happy family, a unit, however strange and unlikely.

It'd be delightful, if his pearly blues didn't twist knots inside me. "I want you full time for a few days next month, if you can swing it." He gnaws his candy cane halfway down, helping Mia open hers, never taking his eyes off me. "And if you can't, how does overtime sound? I need the extra hours."

“We’ll see,” I say, backing away slowly, trying to hide how stunned I am. He’s already asking for *more*? I averaged over thirty hours this week, every day but Sunday. I’m not sure how much leeway I’ll get from home, knowing dad can’t look after mom constantly.

“What’s holding you back?” he asks, pulling Mia closer. Her smile is gone. She’s less than a minute from dozing in his arms by the looks of it, and his voice drops to a rough whisper. “School? Home? Already planning to jump ship?”

Now, he’s just being an asshole. My fingers go taught against my skin. “I told you, I’m flexible, as long as I’m being paid and treated fairly. But as you know, I have a situation at home –“

“Yeah, your mom. Tell you what, how much would it take to get your family a real nurse to look after her part-time? Whatever it is, I’ll pay it.”

Red flags beat me in the face. I’m not even shocked by what he’s said because it doesn’t compute on any level.

He wants to pay out oodles of extra money why, exactly?

It’s not even the mystery of how he thinks he can afford it on a freelance machinist’s salary that’s bugging me. He clearly makes good money doing what he does, but nothing justifies what he’s offering.

“Talk to me, Red. Before I dole out your pay and put her down for a nap. You look like you just got run over.” He stands, bouncing the lazy little girl gently on his shoulder. She’s sleepy, lazily sucking her candy. “Why are you passing up real help?”

“Because it’s completely *ludicrous*, Marshal!” It comes out louder than I intend, making Mia shift in his arms. “You want me to work for you full time? After a single week? Jesus. Look, I like spending time with her but...I do have a life. I’m after a career. Every day is a struggle to get on the right track.”

“Then you weren’t listening. Your problem is your sick mother, yeah?” He steps closer, silent, blue eyes blazing through me until I finally nod. But he doesn’t understand. Lord, not even close. “I just said I’d help take care of it. I want you to move in.”

“Move. In?” I mouth the words slowly, searching for their meaning and failing to find it.

Okay, so he isn’t just insane in the eccentric fringe weirdo sense. He’s delusional. Decoupled from reality. Full on hallucinating if this isn’t some kind of sick joke.

“Right. You, me, Mia, here.” There’s no humor in his eyes. They shift around the room, landing on his daughter, and me again last. It’s a look that tells me to just shut up and accept this madness. “You follow? I’m talking the whole nine yards. Lodging. Better pay. Family benefits. Just for a few weeks, so I’m able to take on a special job I’ve had on the back burner forever.”

“Oh. You didn’t say temporary...” Does that even make it better? In theory, sure. “I’ll have to think about this. Get back to you after Christmas?”

He isn’t happy. He wanted an answer today.

The blank, sour disappointment on his face tells me I might be jeopardizing this whole arrangement. Too bad. I can’t agree to move into the Castoff’s house without even talking to my family first!

Not without breaking the news as gently as I possibly can. Jackson’s disgust alone will be a hurricane.

“I’ll give you till New Year’s. Won’t be needing the full time gig for a few weeks, anyway. I’ll be busy traveling for awhile next month, and I really need someone to hold down everything here full time.”

“You want to leave Mia here? With me?” That surprises me more than anything else.

They’re inseparable. He hates to even let her out of his sight when she isn’t asleep or playing next to me.

He’s just silent. I don’t have a clue what that means.

Then his eyes break, signaling a whole new level of *what the hell is going on here?* I’ve never seen him look away before. “This isn’t easy for me to ask. If it weren’t so damn important, I wouldn’t think about it twice. Truth be told, I *loathe* the thought of leaving her alone anywhere. She’s been by my side since the day she was born. But I don’t think she’d handle the trip well, and I need to get this done.”

“Daddy? You’re...going? Away?” Mia looks up, concerned by the darkness entering his tone.

He kisses her forehead. “Not for long, honeybee. Nothing to worry over right now. Promise.” His eyes are small, pained, reluctant.

Wow. Apparently, shame can be part of Marshal Howard’s makeup.

So many heavy words. Sweet ones, too. He wasn’t kidding – this is hard for him.

I don’t know, but I doubt they’ve ever been apart. I have a brief flash of Marshal’s hulking arms holding a new born baby, bottle feeding her, alone

and uncertain as he learns what it takes to protect this new life.

It's also not the first time I've wondered why there's no Mrs. Howard. "What about Mia's mother?" I instinctively know it's not an easy question. "Can't she help out?"

Marshal doesn't breathe. His gaze sharpens, intensifies, a new energy I can't quite comprehend coming into it. He holds his daughter softly against his chest.

I don't know why I bother saying the next words. They just come out. I need to know, and maybe he isn't following. "I mean, it's none of my business, but doesn't she have —"

It's incredible how intimidating he is even when there's a tired child in his arms. He storms closer, buries me in his shadow, and cuts me off mid-sentence with nothing but the fierce glow in those eyes. They've become oceans, dragging me under.

"Don't, Red. I'll cut you some slack this time, and this time only because you don't know better." His eyes bore deeper into mine and his voice becomes a harsh whisper. "Listen close because I'm only gonna say this once: never, *ever* talk about the bitch who walked out on my baby girl in this house. She's dead to us."

Holy crap. I'm trembling, backing away, wishing I could disappear through the nearest wall. "Uh, sorry. I'm sorry, Marshal. I didn't know. Really."

I still don't know anything, technically. What does 'dead to us' mean? Is this woman gone literally? Figuratively?

Whatever the case, it's not the time to find out. I'm long past due to get the hell out of dodge.

"I'll drop by the day after Christmas, just like we planned. Sorry for any bad memories, again."

"Sadie, stop." His voice freezes me mid-turn, before I find my way out through the kitchen. Wincing, I close my eyes, scared to look back. I finally do, wondering if the next word I'll hear is *fired*. "Grab the envelope off the table with your pay before you leave. It's all there, and then some. Merry Christmas."

I almost died. I can't even manage a smile as I beat it out of his house.

I barely remember to snatch up the envelope before I'm gone, skipping the goodbye. His heavy footsteps tread in the other direction, taking his little girl upstairs for her nap.

It only hits me later what a thoughtless, skittish asshole I am. It's later, after I'm up in my room binging Netflix, and mom is down for the night. There's three hundred dollars when I tear open the envelope. Over twice what he owed for the day. There's also a note tucked inside with the same blocky, crabbed writing I saw the first day I decided to go after the nanny gig.

HERE'S YOUR BONUS, Red. Now think about the rest. I want you under my roof helping out. I'll even be a perfect gentleman.

I DON'T KNOW whether to laugh, sigh, or breakdown in tears. Whatever else Marshal, Papa Bear, the Castoff is, he's an emotional labyrinth.



LATER AT THE drugstore I stop for extra wrapping paper and a few last loose ends before Christmas. I pick up an extra box of candy for Mia, a late gift I'll give the little girl as soon as my break is over. I also get her a couple coloring books and find a bag of treats for Whiskey, the overgrown ginger who spends most of his time sleeping in the corner cat bed while I'm babysitting.

I hesitate in the coffee aisle, but yes, I even breakdown and buy a nice bag of imported beans for Mr. Grinch himself.

Marshal's offer won't stop gnawing at my belly. It shouldn't be possible to carry this creeping frustration down Port Eagle's main street, fully decked out for the festive season, but I do.

I've never been a fan of the holiday rush. It just seems claustrophobic, another measure of my time ticking away in every blinking light and winking plastic Santa.

I can't go on like this. Decisions are waiting. I want to talk to my family sooner, rather than later, and make the best of the fallout. If I even decide to become Marshal's temporary live-in nanny.

My luck doesn't improve much when I pull into the driveway. My brother's fancy SUV is parked in front. It's been there long enough to have the evening's dusting of snow sitting on its black sun roof.

Pushing my key into the front door lock, I grit my teeth. My jaw clenches tighter when it opens for me.

"There you are, weirdo." Jackson steps aside, giving me space. Nothing dampens his ugly grin as I yank open the closet door, peeling off my winter

coat.

“Hello to you, too, dick. What are you doing here?”

“Actually, I dropped by to see you. Thought I’d find out how that babysitting gig is treating you. It’s gotten an awful lot of your attention. Dad says you’re dragging yourself through the door so late some evenings he’s already put mom to bed.”

“Jackson, I just got home. Can’t you wait five minutes before laying into me?”

He shrugs, an annoyed look on his face. Like I’m the one who’s being ridiculous.

I realize a second later it’s all for show. I also notice Ginger isn’t here, which means he has a bigger license than usual to be a huge prick without her reigning him in.

“What? Can’t your big brother have a heart-to-heart?” he says quietly, moving in front of me. His hands dart out, catch my chest, and squeeze. I try not to flinch. “I’m not here to screw you over, sis. Honest. But you’re gonna have to tell me what the fuck you think you’re doing hanging around with *him*.”

I’m not sure whether I blink before my heart rate goes to eleven. Blood rushes to my cheeks, throbbing like a bad wound. I hate how easy it is for him to make me feel like a fourteen year old kid who just got caught sneaking in after curfew.

There’s no point in asking *who*. We both know. What I can’t figure out is how he found out I’m working for Marshal.

“The Castoff, sis? After what he fucking did to me?” His tone isn’t what I expect.

I thought there’d be disgust, anger, shame. But this voice, this outrage in my brother’s eyes, is deeply personal.

“I’ve only heard the rumors second-hand. I was in college when it happened, remember? Jackson, I don’t know what you’re –“

“He started a fight on main street, sis. Attacked me like the crazy animal he is. He spit in my goddamn face and on every man in uniform at that parade.”

“That’s...” *Not what I’ve always heard.* According to the story I know, Marshal was guilty of insulting him, but he never threw the first punch. I looked up the old articles since I started working for him. “That’s crazy. Obviously, I’m really sorry it happened, Jackson, but it was also four years ago.”

I decide to play it safe. There's no use in challenging his account, where he's the victim. I'd also love a chance to find out what he thinks he is, if he'd just get out of my way, come into the living room, and sit. "Why don't we talk about this over coffee like rational human beings?"

Jackson swallows, rooted to the ground, his arms slack at his sides. "Because just looking at you makes me sick. What the fuck is there to discuss if you're not backing off, Sadie? You're just going to keep nannying for that asshole, apparently. After you kept your boss a secret and didn't even spill the truth as a common courtesy."

I look him in the eye, nodding. *Yes, yes, and obviously, yes.*

"There's nothing for us to talk about." He moves past, heading for the door, pushing me lightly against the wall.

"Jackson, wait!" He doesn't. He triggers me on a whole new level, leaving me screaming after him. "It doesn't have to be like this! He's not a total monster. If you'd just come back and talk to me, instead of running away like a pissed off man-child, maybe you'd see!"

I jump, feeling another heavy hand on my shoulder. I spin around and see dad, a deflated frustration in his eyes that says he already knows. "Let him go, Sadie. He has his reasons."

"Yeah, and what reasons are those?" I hate how angry I sound, how I push my father away and stomp into the kitchen, hurling my purse on the counter. "Nobody talks to me about anything. I *know* what happened at that stupid Fourth of July parade years ago, dad. I read the old Port Eagle Standard piece. I know I wasn't here for it, I know there's plenty of blame to go around, but is Jackson really the total victim?"

My father sighs, slowly trailing after me. "That man signing your paychecks insulted him deeply. He scandalized the entire town."

"Oh? Even though the police report says Jackson confessed to starting the fight?" I watch my father cough into his hand, rubbing his throat. It's the same nervous tick I've seen whenever mom confronted him over running up the monthly credit card statement. "That's right, dad. I've done my homework. Sure, it's a little reckless, taking this job after everything that happened. I know I kept it close to my chest. Part of me just knew this would happen. But I went back and checked. It's not nearly as one-sided as everybody makes it seem."

I can't believe I'm defending the Castoff. I signed up for Mia, not his reputation management, yet here I am.

“It’s not about the fistfight, babe. It never was. He was the only man in uniform there who wasn’t part of the parade. And he turned his back when your brother led his convoy past. Can you imagine how that feels?” Dad’s eyes are darker, more sympathetic than they should be behind his glasses. “There were men in their sixties, seventies, eighties there. Five vets from Afghanistan, two from Iraq, plus a few old timers from Vietnam. Sheriff Wheeler almost had a conniption fit.”

His words hit like a poison dart. I hate being thrown back to doubt after I was sure I could at least have a safe conversation with my family about this.

Wishful thinking.

“Never saw anything like it in my life, Sadie. Neither did anybody else. This kind of drama only happens in the big cities. Not our town. We’re a simple place. Mr. Howard should’ve known the whole town would turn on him the second he decided to disrespect a hometown hero, and go down swinging, screaming how your brother did all kinds of terrible things.” Dad pauses, shaking his head. “The man’s clearly unstable. It’s a miracle they don’t take his little girl away.”

It physically hurts to hear him say that. My eyes shut so tight they throb at the mere suggestion.

Goddamn it, he doesn’t understand. Just like everybody else, who seems to think he’s the devil incarnate.

A moment of passion, a big public mistake, shouldn’t ruin a man’s life. There’s a lot I don’t know about Marshal and his inner workings, but he’s proven that much.

There isn’t a cruel bone in his body toward Mia. I’ve looked. What’s there is a busy, stressed, and caring father. Nothing evil. Not so different from the man in front of me.

I’ve watched him light her world up and make her smile with my own two eyes. No rumors, or scorn, or past mistakes will ever strip that truth away.

“How long have you known?” I ask, trying not to let on how bothered I am.

Dad shrugs. “A few days, maybe. You know Emmie at the corner store. She said you’d been on a lot of little snack runs lately, and I guess those winter Oreo packs are his girl’s favorite. Wasn’t hard for her to make a good guess.”

Damn! I tried so hard to keep it on the down-low, too. If only this town wasn’t so small, so gossipy, so incestuous. Keeping secrets for more than three days tops is near impossible.

Dad clears his throat again, stepping closer, loaded words at the tip of his

tongue. “Sadie, I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t concerned. This nanny thing, it isn’t healthy. It isn’t good for you. There *have* to be other jobs in town. Between us, I don’t think it’s appropriate to continue. You just saw how hard Jackson’s taking it.”

I’m quiet for a moment. “You’re asking me to up and quit?”

Dad looks at me and nods, slowly.

I don’t know why it cuts as deep as it does. Maybe it’s knowing now I have a fight on my hands. I’m not backing down easy, but it also seems like the worst time in the world to discuss Marshal’s live-in offer.

Too bad. I want to get this over with.

“I can’t. I’m sorry. I understand he doesn’t like it, and neither do you, but I *need* the money. Marshal’s a fair man. He pays me well, every single day. I’d like to think his little girl is kinda attached, too. I won’t give up on her.” Imagining Mia alone and disappointed stings worse than anything else. “I’m a grown woman. Jackson will have to get over it, dad. And I hate to say it, but so will you.”

“Jesus, Sadie,” he growls, rubbing his face. His glasses are foggy – steaming from the tension in the room – and he rips them off and starts cleaning them with his shirt. “This isn’t an ego thing, in case you’re wondering. I’m trying to look out for you, for the whole family. Working for the Castoff isn’t just unhealthy. It’s –“

“I’m taking more hours in January. Overnights. Probably for a few weeks. Marshal has a big job out of town, apparently. He’s offered higher pay and some really generous benefits if I take him up on it. I didn’t want to lay it on you like this, but there’s no point in hiding it. Sorry I didn’t come clean sooner about my boss.” I ignore his wide-eyed glance, strolling past, ready to go to my room.

I can’t get past the figure in the hall. Mom’s been standing outside the kitchen eavesdropping for God only knows how long. She looks like she’s numb to everything in her baggy sweatshirt and scuffed clogs. The usual paint splotches are on her arms, at least three different colors, her sleeves rolled up in a rumpled mess.

That used to mean she’d had a good day creatively. Today, it’s just more potential chaos.

“Where do you think you’re going?” she asks, centering herself in my path so I know I’m not just getting by without words.

“Upstairs. It’s been a long day. Need anything?”

“I didn’t raise my daughter to be a wimp. How about you turn around, march back in there, and give your father a nice fat piece of your mind? The nerve, making your decisions for you!”

Oh, Christ. I take a deep breath. “Mom, no, it’s not like that. He was just –“

“Steph, I’m not making her do anything. I simply asked her to have a little respect for her brother, who’s been through so much. I don’t want this family turning into a laughing stock.”

Mom rolls her eyes, steps forward, and puts her hand over his face. I actually feel a little bad for my father, having to take this, knowing she isn’t well.

Quite a change from the defeated misery he pulled on me only minutes ago.

“Peter, Peter, *Peter*,” she says, slurring his name the third time. “Always so concerned about appearances. So *what* if she’s decided to take a harmless sitter job? It’s easy money. Lord knows I did my fair share of part-time gigs through art school.”

Dad gives me a dirty look, gently lifting her hand off his mouth. “It’s not like that. She’s looking after the Howard girl, Marshal’s kid. Do you remember what he did a few years back?”

Mom wrinkles her nose. “It’s my muse that’s shot, not my memory, Peter. Of course I remember.”

“Then you know how Jackson feels. I tried to break the news as gently as I could, before he stormed out.”

“You handled him with kid gloves. Easy mistake.” Mom doesn’t skip a beat, a wry smile on her face. She turns toward me. “Listen, both of you, what’s really messing with this family are the secrets. Sadie, you never should’ve kept this from us. And you, Peter, I should’ve been the first to know. I’m disappointed.”

“I’m sorry, dear. I would’ve told you tonight, but our kids couldn’t wait to lock horns.”

I think mom and I share the same disapproving look. Just for once, I wish my dad would grow a pair if he’s decided to double-down on being an asshat. I hurt him, I get it, but he knew the truth. Possibly for days, without confronting me. He went to Jackson first instead.

“So, does a crazy person get any real input in this house, or will you two just humor me?” Mom looks from him to me.

“What?” I shake my head, not understanding.

Dad gives me a warning look, before he stands straight and whispers through

clenched teeth. “Of course we’ll consider anything you have to say, Steph. You’re the love of my life.”

Her eyes soften. Sometimes, when the love flows honestly, we’re able to get through to her. She walks over to him, grasping his hand. Then we lock eyes.

“She’s a young woman and she’s finding her way, Peter. Let her do the nanny gig. And no, Sadie, I don’t want any help from your boss. I’d love to have one less busy-body in this house standing over my shoulder, making sure I don’t throw a chair through the window again.”

I inwardly wince. It happened last summer, just weeks after I came home. I was the only one home at the time, and I went flying up the stairs, bracing for the worst after hearing the crash.

My heart never beat harder or louder thinking my mother had thrown herself off the balcony attached to the master bedroom.

“Also, I’d love a promise from you, Sadie – don’t take this opportunity lightly. Promise us you’ll do exactly what you said. Just a few weeks with him, overnight or whatever. You’ll check in once a day. Come straight home if there’s even the slightest hint of trouble.” Mom’s eyes crawl dad’s face. She’s trying to make him feel better, coaxing this out of me.

Ugh. Despite the edge in her voice, I can’t deny the common sense. I nod, looking at my parents, searching for the words. “Fine. I won’t let anything get weird. It’s just a job. It’s not like I’m trying to be the Castoff’s best friend, or anything.”

No? Then I wonder why calling him the word Castoff tastes so wrong on my tongue.

“Dear, it’s not the nature of the work or the bad blood with Jackson worrying me,” dad says, beginning in his softest voice. “It’s Sadie’s safety. That man, after what he did...he’s clearly a few screws short of a set. I don’t trust him.”

“Who isn’t these days? It’s incredible, really. This town still treats him as an outcast even after he published his apology in the local press. I remember reading it later that year. Seems no one else did. Do we just punish the wild ones forever? Marshal Howard is feral, strange, a little crazy, perhaps, but he’s no murderer. He didn’t mean to hurt anyone. He simply chose a very colorful way to protest.”

“Protest *what?*” Dad barks. That’s the prize question no one’s ever answered.

From the old reports I read, Marshal went into a fury as soon as he was on the ground, tackled by my brother, fighting for his life. He screamed incoherently about something that happened overseas, something terrible he thought

Jackson did.

“I’m sorry. It doesn’t matter anymore, I suppose. Let me talk to Jacky,” dad says quietly. But he can’t hide the soft, slow breath leaving his lungs once mom takes his hand, pushes her fingers through his, and squeezes. *Please*, her grip says. A cry from a sensitive side we thought was lost in her mind. “I don’t like this, but I’ll tolerate it.”

My heart flutters hopefully. My parents are quiet the entire time I step forward, throw my arms around them, and hug until my arms hurt.

For once, I’m grateful. Without my brother in the mix, it’s actually possible for us to solve our disagreements without screaming across the room like howler monkeys.

Tomorrow is Christmas Eve. One more day to cobble together gifts and figure out how I’ll deal with Jackson at dinner after he’s done licking his wounds.

I take a long shower, trying to sift through today’s shell shock in my head. The steam helps, but by the time I’m drying my hair, the only thing I really know is uncertainty.

This is a ginormous risk. Nothing less.

I don’t know if the knee-jerk decision to take his extended nanny offer is a huge plus, or the worst decision of my life.

I don’t know how I’ll find the strength to look my brother in the eye, and prove that I still care about him, despite working with the man who freaked out on him years ago.

I don’t even know why I miss them so much already.

Not just the little girl.

I miss him, too. Miss his brooding, his mystery, the sideways glances he gives that always make me wonder if he wants to give me a tongue lashing, or just take me against the nearest horizontal surface.

Marshal is a conundrum and it makes him irresistible. That, in turn, is what makes him so dangerous.

I’m laughing in the mirror, combing my hair, finally face to face with the awful truth.

This can only go one way: I’ll come out of this job better off, or completely wrecked.

LOST AGAIN (MARSHAL)

I must be off my fucking rocker.

It's seven o'clock on Christmas night and I'm sitting in my truck outside a stranger's house, heat running full blast, Mia singing carols softly in the kid's seat. My stomach growls. No good reason after I filled it with two slices of the best apple pie in town.

It's been a long day for us both. If I hadn't taken the notion to swing by Red's house and sit outside like a stalker, I could easily say it's been the best Christmas in years.

This year, I was ready. I woke up with a smile at the ass crack of dawn when Mia barged into my room screaming, ready for presents.

I sat down while she attacked everything under the tree. Sipped my coffee calmly, spiked with a shot of Irish whiskey like the happiest man alive. I actually smiled watching my daughter rip through her gift pile, summoning endless patience for the butterfly kisses she dive bombed into my cheek every time she revealed something new. I got everything she wanted and then some.

Dolls. Books. Games. Imported chocolate with names neither of us can pronounce.

I even cooked an entire turkey dinner. Couldn't do the dessert justice, which is why I decided to take her into town, after she woke up from her nap.

Sheryl's Diner has a reputation for the best pies in the county going back before I was born. There's no better day than Christmas to get our fix.

I only had to sit through one small gaggle of pricks on the other side of the restaurant giving me *those* looks, and then quickly shifting their eyes away the second I looked back. On any other day eating here in town, I'd have to worry about at least a dozen sets of eyes doing the same, and then the whispers, which always make it to Mia's innocent ears.

Daddy, are people talking? I tried everything the first five times I heard that question.

Denials, little white lies, warped admissions that weigh on me later like a cancer.

Sure are, honeybee. They're talking shit because they don't know daddy got in big trouble a few years ago for flipping out on a fucking murderer.

Those thoughts never leave my head, of course. I'm not insane.

We had a lovely time at the diner with our Christmas treats anyway. Apple pie a la mode dripping with warm caramel for Mia, and flaky, tangy cherry for me. I was so in the zone I didn't even think about the last time I had cherry pie for Christmas, not long before the mission, scrapping cheap imitation cherry goo out of an MRE.

I didn't think about my boys either. First time ever that's happened this time of year.

I just sat quietly, brain fixed on one thing only: Red.

Her whiplash tongue. Her lush ass I glimpse every time she's got her back to me. How much salvation and torture she brings every day I have her around the house, and how fucking lucky I'll be not to screw myself over, with her sleeping in the same house, *if* she actually decides to take my offer.

Something else nags at me, too. I wonder why the hell she looks so familiar.

What do I really know about this woman I'm asking to move in, to be my short-term live in nanny? There wasn't exactly time for a background check the day she showed up. Her references were the professionalism I saw at the clinic, plus her spitfire mouth.

Leaving the diner, I decided I'd had enough of letting that mouth do all the talking for her up until now. I made sure Mia didn't need a bathroom break, and then I loaded her into our vehicle, telling her we'd be taking a quick detour.

I drove to the only address I had, a house I'd been by years ago, and tried to forget. My eyes started to burn as soon as we turned on the familiar street.

Hard to recognize with so many houses decked out in their full Christmas glory.

Difficult, but not impossible.

When I parked across the street, turned the radio to low, ears tuned to the soft, slow carols drifting by, I finally let it hit me. And with Mia singing along with her mushy, adorable little voice in the backseat, all I'm able to do is grip the

fucking steering wheel until I'm afraid I'll tear it clean off.

Her house, her name, her face is so familiar because it's the sickest trick God ever played.

It's *his* family's house. It's *his* sister, his cousin, his something I don't want to begin to comprehend. It's *his* fucking truck in the driveway.

It takes everything I've got not to open the door, unlatch my belt, and take a crowbar from the back. I want to break his windshield before we get the hell out of here. The cherry pie churns in my guts, making me fight to keep it down.

I don't realize I'm shaking until my knuckles pinch the wheel so tight it burns.

Use your head, asshole, I tell myself. You have to turn this vehicle around and leave. Right now.

"Daddy?" her tiny voice interrupts the volcanic roar in my head.

"Yeah, honeybee?" I'm on another planet, trying to return to earth, hoping her small sweet face will bring me home in the mirror.

"Are you lost again?"

Such an innocent question for a four year old. So innocent, and so fucking loaded.

I sigh, loosening my death-grip on the wheel, eyeing the street for traffic. It's time to go. "No, honeybee. Not anymore. Sweet of you to ask. Let's watch some movies tonight, okay? It's still early..."

"Okay, daddy." She sucks at the juice box clutched in her hands.

For a second, I ignore how fucked up this is. Pretend my whole world isn't caving in, and hasn't thrown me into a new crisis.

If I force myself not to look back at Red's house, avoiding the happy lights and an ordinary family bustle of cars, I'm able to regain control. I don't breathe until we've turned the corner, putting the nightmare behind me well out of view.

The rest of the drive home is peaceful. I nudge the radio up, listening to Mia hum *Frosty the Snowman*, joining in myself for the last few verses with a deep, baritone hum.

It's Christmas night. That's all this is; a tender, happy moment with a father and his daughter. Something I'll try hard to remember in the years to come, long after I deal with the scalding lump of coal Santa just dropped on my

balls.



SHE DRIFTS off in front of the TV a couple hours later. A claymation yeti spins his eyes, one more reminder I've had enough today.

I switch off the TV and carry my sleeping little girl to her room.

Mia stirs lightly as I tuck her in, pull her blanket close, and place my nightly kiss on her forehead. "Sleep tight, honeybee. Sorry there's so much crap on my mind lately. Would've been a whole lot worse without you making this day worth something."

Despite the horrific shock at the Kelley household, it's the best Christmas I've ever had, hands down. First time I've genuinely laughed in years, and not at the grim, bawdy jokes from the men who used to keep me company on an Afghan base.

My little girl's growing up. I stop in the doorway to her room, looking back, marveling how big she's gotten in just a few years. Won't be long before she's older and wiser, asking for shit I can't afford, and then getting pissy when I don't let her stay out late with awkward, skinny boys on Christmas Eve.

Funny thing is, I know I'll love her as much as I do right now. Doesn't matter how old or antsy or wild she gets. To me, her old man, she'll always be innocence itself, hunkered in her little bed with the overstuffed tiger I got her two birthdays ago.

Time marches on, relentless and impatient as ever. It doesn't give a damn how fast it's threatening to walk over me. Or how far it's dragging me away from the past, kicking and screaming. It doesn't let up for justice, or even just so I can catch my breath.

I put out the fire in my living room, staring through the darkness outside, wondering if I really want to go out there tonight. Five minutes later, I'm bundled for the arctic, grumbling through the cold as I walk into my shop and throw a fresh log on the wood stove.

I need warmth. I'm not in here to work. The light from the soft fire is plenty for the trunk.

The ammo box's old hinges groans as I pop the lock, throwing the top open. I wipe my face, pull my hood down, blood going several degrees hotter the second I look inside.

Everything is still there – and why wouldn't it be?

It's not like I've had time to make good on any promises.

“Erik, Zane, Adam...I’m fucking sorry.” I grab what’s left of my friends, my brothers, the men who fought and bled in that hellhole by my side.

A cracked shot glass. Zane’s favorite for the brown honey he snuck between missions to warm himself, before we deployed with our orders. Also his weapon of choice the times he drank every man on base under the table, including me.

A lingerie magazine from the eighties, dog-eared and worn. Erik’s contraband. We laughed at his sorry ass for being so desperate he had to beat it to nudes snapped before he was born.

A charred mini-portrait I pulled from Adam’s pocket the day he died. Inside, Bev’s face is smiling, a lovely young woman who became a widow way too soon. He said it was his good luck charm, his reason for being there, the thing that kept him going.

It was with him to the bitter end. I wish to God almighty it had been enough.

I dig deeper. The old stuff is there, taunting me. Folders stacked thick with newspapers, printouts, obituaries.

There’s an entire tanned folio bursting with everything I could find about Jackson Kelley. I flip through it, stopping when I see their old address on Westlund Street, confirming my worst fear.

It’s the very same I stalked tonight. The family names were always there. Except this time, one stands out like lightning in the night.

Sarah Kelley.

Sadie.

Red.

How the fuck did I forget he had a little sister?

My hands push through dead men’s relics again. Somewhere, they’re smiling ear-to-ear, enjoying a good cosmic laugh at this fresh kink in my master plan.

Karma for past mistakes, maybe, for dragging my feet for so long.

The newspapers laid over the guns aren’t just for show. It takes a lot of paper to cover the entire length of a NATO standard rifle. One of my old biker clients hooked me up with his black market connections several years ago, not long after my Fourth of July shitshow.

Clenching my jaw, I lift the papers, the same faded issue of the Port Eagle Standard. My eyes drift over the lethal fifteen minutes of local infamy I never asked for.

It was my own fault, triggering the fistfight.

If only I hadn't gone to that goddamn parade after having a few drinks. Thank God Mia wasn't there to see it.

She was away for the weekend with her grandma, Andrea, the only woman who ever laid eyes on her from her mother's side. And now she's as dead as the reckless creature who incubated her for nine months, and then walked out.

I'll never understand how a bitch like Jenna came from a completely normal, understanding mother.

Knocking her up could've been the worst mistake of my life, but it wasn't. I wouldn't trade honeybee for the world.

My one night stand is also eclipsed by the major league fuck up the day I became the Castoff, turning my back at that stupid parade, and then trading blows with a man I should have already put six feet under.

My anger got the worst of me then. It set me back years. Too premature and thoughtless.

Now I'm too afraid, too comfortable, too prone to over-thinking.

The truth hasn't changed. Neither has the seething need for justice.

Jackson *must* pay for the blood on his hands, satisfy the men I promised vengeance. I refuse to become the dark angel hastening his judgment. But I'm the man who'll dispatch him to the next world, once I get my head straight and the courage to pull the trigger.

So, what's the fucking holdup? The old newspaper slips and hits the ground. Rather, half of it does. The rest falls open to a section I never paid attention to, an old graduation spotlight for the local high school.

It's a sick joke that my eyes fall straight to the spot where she's listed. Her name. Her picture in black and white. Pretty, and way too young for me then.

Four years ago, Red was just a clueless kid with straight As, bound for a school in Des Moines by the looks of it. I don't know what brought her back to this town. It's a safe bet she didn't come home just to nanny for the bastard who's going to kill her brother.

"Sadie, I'm sorry." It's my second apology tonight, and the last.

Picking the newspaper up with a sigh, I grit my teeth, stuffing everything back into its tidy box. I seal the ghosts away for another evening, giving the padlock a tug to make sure it's secure.

I move to the safe underneath my workbench. I spin the dial, entering the

right combo from memory. There's a satisfying pop. I'm careful to put my gloves on before I grab the tools, look them over, and then the old maps and traffic reports I dug up from the library.

There's a lot of fine print I haven't ironed out yet. The devil's always in the details, and when it comes to offing a man and not getting caught, the details better be picture-fucking-perfect.

It's getting closer. I can feel it.

Less theory. More action. Fewer delays. Closure.

If I manage not to screw this up, I'll never have to spend another restless winter night cooped up in my shop, prisoner to hopes and dark promises.

I know what needs to happen.

First, I need to tuck this shit away, get out of here, and hit the sack. Some sleep will clear my head, make the next phase of Operation Vengeance more obvious.

Tomorrow, I'll cut Red loose. I'll let her down easy. I don't have a choice. I'll post a new ad for a nanny in town, a better one, and next time I'll make damn sure I don't bring anybody on who's ever so much as brought Jackson Kelley a drink of water.

It might delay the plan by a few more weeks, but so what? As long as this gets done. As long as I'm able to fulfill the other promise I made to myself, and to Mia, the ones I never said out loud.

I swore she'd have a normal life before school begins. If I can't get past this and rehabilitate my reputation as something other than Castoff freak, we're leaving town. I'm not having her subjected to derision from other little shits who want to make her life hell thanks to my mistakes.

Before my little girl starts kindergarten next fall, she'll have a dad who's fully alive, fully in the present, truly in this world.

Her world. Ours. No longer shackled to an ugly, secret past she'll never know.

Once Jackson dies, I'll slam this book shut, and shove almost everything in that ammo box off the steepest bluff I can find by the Mississippi.

I'm willing to risk a lot to see this through. Hanging around to watch the smoking ruins I've made out of Sadie's heart isn't part of it.



SHE SHOWS up bright and early the next morning. I know who it is on the first knock, still perched at the kitchen table sipping my coffee. I put my mug

down, stand up, and stomp over, jerking the door open.

“Hey, I’ve got a box in my trunk, if you want to give me a hand.” Her lips are just a shade or two dimmer than her dark red hair. Such a wicked contrast to the forest green in her eyes.

“What box?” I growl, patience already running thin.

She’s more radiant than ever today, standing on my porch under the dull December light like a pinup. Except no pinup girl ever looked this hot in layers meant for an Iowa winter.

Just my fucking luck. If this were easy, it wouldn’t be my problem.

Red cocks her head. “It’s in my car. Just a few things I packed. I mean, I don’t have to move in today, but I figured it’d be good to get a start. Whenever you want me, I’m –“

“We need to talk.” I take her wrist, yank her inside, backing off with a hand on her back, pointing her to the table. “Have a seat. Please.”

I know I’m screwed the second she looks at me. The trust is gone. She isn’t stupid. She knows something reeks.

“What now, sunshine? Don’t tell me you’re having second thoughts?” Her voice can’t hide the frustration.

Clearly, it wasn’t easy deciding to take the offer. Just makes it even harder to put on my war face, and kill this thing now. “Before I say anything else, I want you to know you’ve done good work. That was never in question. This isn’t a quality issue.”

She sits up straighter, dropping the curl of cinnamon red hair in her fingers. Her gaze narrows, deadly serious, waiting for me to get on with it.

No time for nonsense. Right. I can respect that.

What I don’t expect is for her to steal the words right from my mouth. “Mia loves me. We get along perfect, and you *need* a nanny for this project. What’s the deal, Marshal? Why the change of heart?”

I’m sitting on half a dozen excuses. I’ve read the whole litany through my head since I stepped into my morning shower – *you’re too young, work’s delayed, change of plans* – and now none of them seem right.

“Because you lied to me, Sadie.” I fold my arms, watching her eyes pop like marbles.

Fuck the Nice Guy act. It won’t get us anywhere. I need to drive her out of here, quick and clean, without any lingering desire to return for more

punishment.

“Look, it’s not like that. If you mean Jackson, it never came up. Honest. I don’t know why I’m supposed to dredge up bad blood.” She sits up straighter, hands clasped. Whatever I expected, it isn’t a confession. “I don’t know why it matters, Marshal, if I’m being honest. Your beef is with my brother, yeah? Not me.”

Goddamn, her logic. It bursts out like it’s the simplest thing in the world, and that should be the end of it.

“Come the fuck on, Red. You thought it didn’t matter? That I wouldn’t raise an eyebrow over the fact you’re Jackson Kelley’s little sister?” I’m closer than I want to be to her face a few seconds later, glaring. A sick urge to put my lips on hers slices through my need to push her away. “This won’t work. I can’t have any trace of that asshole here. I’ve had enough dirty looks in this town to worry about.”

“I can’t control what other people do. They’re judgmental pricks. In case you hadn’t noticed, I’m not one of them.” Her voice doesn’t skip a beat. Her jungle green eyes are wilder, giving as good as they get from my death glare.

Fucking hell. Why does nothing get through to her? I sigh, ripping the chair away next to her, sliding into the seat backwards. I lay my hands on the back, grip the wooden edges like I want to tear them off, and lean forward.

“You’re not following me, Red. I said this isn’t working out. You were good to me and I didn’t mean it to go down like this. But I already told you, there’s too damn many skeletons in the closet. I can’t have you mixed up in my business. End of story.”

I’m still expecting hell. Daggers in her eyes, a few nasty words, even a crisp slap across the face. I’m used to being that kind of asshole – the kind who gets his way.

Then Red shocks my world for the second time this morning. Her fingers fall on mine.

Her touch is electric. Five soft, long little fingers on my huge paw, more innocent than they’ve got any business being.

Damn it all. Doesn’t she know these hands have ended lives, pulling triggers and wiring up explosions to stop terrorist wolves who’d love to do a thousand times worse?

I want to keep dealing with the twenty-two year old who takes no shit. Not this soft-eyed, heart prodding girl with an angel’s nerve. “I know Jackson started the fight. Wasn’t hard to find the old articles. Whatever happened

wasn't your fault, and this town hasn't been fair to you or Mia since. Let me make it up to you."

"Fucker threw the first punch, yeah, but I was drunk. There was plenty of blame to go around," I growl.

She's still staring, a gentle smile on her lips, never redder and more irresistible than they are right now. My cock awakens, quietly raging in my pants. How many levels of screwed up is it that I want to curse her out and bend her over this table simultaneously?

Also can't figure out what the fuck she means. I'm too busy trying to stop freezing up like a deer in the headlights. I clear my throat, but the words won't come, lost in her fingers curling around mine.

"Let me in, Marshal. Let me be your nanny. Just let me earn your trust, your money, your respect." Lofty promises. Worst part is, she's absolutely serious. "Please. Give this a chance. How do we ever make things better if you've decided Castoff is who you really are?"

There's no sane answer. Frankly, I'm fucking done debating, and I just want her gone. I'll throw her over my shoulder and carry her out to the car if I need to.

I'm contemplating how best to do it when a small voice rings out behind me. "Daddy?"

I whip around and see Mia, standing there in her pajamas, big Whiskey rubbing at her feet. The cat lets out a timely squeak, ready to have his bowl refilled for breakfast. Her eyes light up when she sees Red. Ignoring me, she runs straight to her nanny, throwing her little arms around her.

"I missed you, honeybee! Merry Christmas." Red looks across my little girl's shoulder. I stand without saying a word, angrily grabbing the cat food under the counter. Whiskey's bowl overflows a little as I dump a heaping portion in his dish. "Are you hungry? I'd love to fix you something to eat, once I've got the go ahead from your daddy."

I clip the cat food bag and throw it back where it belongs, then stand, taking a good, hard look at the scene in front of me. It's as happy as this house will ever be while Red's brother is still alive.

Her, with her big green eyes and cinnamon hair, waiting with baited breath for my final answer.

Mia in her arms, sweet and oblivious as ever. She chews her thumb, probably trying to decipher why I look so pissed off and confused this early in the morning.

The cat crunches loudly in the corner. My patience is gone.

“Make sure she gets her vegetables if you’re doing omelets today, please. I have to get to work.” It comes out like sticky blood from a wound that’s slow to close. I grab my coat off the empty chair before I head for the door. Only slow down to give Mia’s tiny hand a squeeze with my fingers, whispering a few last bitter words. “Be good for Sadie today. I think she’s brought you presents.”



I CAN’T FUCKING BELIEVE I gave in.

I’m oily, scratched, and frustrated from having my hands up an old industrial drill press all morning. It’s a quick job for a pig farmer who does carpentry in his off season.

I’m up to my knees in more business, too. Another Harley plus a couple old trucks due later this week. I should have said fuck no before I buried myself too deep.

I’m not rich, but it’s not like I’m hurting for money with a paid off place and plenty in the bank. I worked my balls off the first few years after Mia was born.

Taking on these odd jobs were part of the reason I second guessed. Would’ve had an easier time saying no to the mess in my kitchen if there wasn’t so much else happening.

Red didn’t convince me. I try to tell myself that’s true over and over again. Even after all her heart, her pleas, her logic, I was ready to turn her out like the stone cold bastard I think I am.

It was Mia who threw the wrench into everything.

I couldn’t snuff out the light in my little girl’s eyes, the happy stars I’m afraid are at risk of dying the older she gets, the more she experiences this fucked up world. I can’t shield her forever, but for a few more weeks, trying this nanny thing against my better instincts?

Maybe.

And maybe I can also make Little Red Riding Hell useful in other ways.

Despite the stalker files sitting in my ammo box, I don’t have all the intel I should on my target. Red can help fill in the blanks. Tell me what time of day her brother eats, breathes, and shits. Expose an opportunity I wouldn’t see otherwise to whack him, and pray to sweet chaos I get away clean.

I'll worry about the evil, ass biting karma later. That's how this works.

If I'm keeping her on for the next few weeks as my nanny, clearing my books to kill this asshole who murdered my men, then I'll use her to help me do it. Maybe the corrosive guilt in my bones will keep my greedy dick under control, too.

That part, I'm sure I'll reign in. There's too many new black marks on my soul to worry how I'll handle it tonight when she's here. Sleeping under the same roof, a lonely wall away from the pent-up urges blazing in my blood.

They're there, screaming, even now. They're blind, deaf, and dumb to violence, revenge, and intrigue. They just want to sort out the insane tension between us in a primal language I swore off since a one night stand left lifelong consequences.

Fuck urges. I can't let it get to me again.

I can't, and I won't.

Because if I step on the final landmine that lands us in the same bed, this house of cards collapses.

No itch is worth making a complicated situation fatal, no matter how fucking good it'd feel to scratch.

HAPPY NEW YEAR (SADIE)

“Finish line, I win!” Mia tap dances her little blue plastic game piece across the board, flying past mine.

“Perfect score, lucky girl. Guess I owe you a treat?” My fingers ruffle her hair before she’s standing up and screaming.

Honestly, she deserves it. I think she knows numbers better than most kids her age, and she’s given me a crash course in children. Before I started this gig, I wasn’t sure I’d enjoy it.

Now, I can’t imagine doing anything else with my time.

I get up, walk over to the fridge, and retrieve a cherry-apple juice box. I also grab a tea for myself, something to wet my throat. The kitchen is extra dry this time of year, or maybe I’m just used to the high humidity mom always insists on at home for her skin.

I reach for my phone and tap the button, illuminating its screen. Almost six o’clock.

Marshal is late. He’s usually inside fixing dinner by now, giving me a chance to make a run to my parents’ house and check up on them.

“Hey, honeybee, want to help clean up? I need to bring your daddy in before he freezes.” She nods enthusiastically and I smile again, watching as her tiny hands reach for the trivia cards, piling them back into the empty game box.

It’s New Year’s Eve tomorrow. Another turn of the calendar. Possibly the year Marshal decides to treat me like a human being again.

He’s kept his distance since the morning I thought he’d turn me out. Still can’t figure out what changed his mind. Haven’t mustered up the courage to ask either.

I’m here, I’m being paid, and for the first time since college, I’m doing something on my own. That means a lot. So much, maybe, it’s hard to ask the

burning questions.

I shouldn't rock the boat. Just be happy.

If only every contact with him didn't feel like Russian roulette. I'm flying blind. There's no telling what sets him off, might make him think I'm not good enough after all, and turn me back out to nowhere.

It's ridiculous how nervous I am closing in, bundled to the brim. Winter resumed its assault after Christmas. The winds are extra frigid, especially after sunset, blowing wispy snow across the short path connecting the back door to his workshop.

My knock sounds muffled through mittens. But it gets his attention.

Marshal jerks the door open a second later and pulls me inside, an anxious flame in his blue eyes. "What?"

"Thought I'd see if you're coming in to fix dinner soon. Or should I take Mia into town and grab something?"

Marshal shakes his head, turning away. It's much warmer in here and it shows.

He's been at it for most of the day, so long and hard he's stripped down to jeans and a tight grey muscle shirt. He's wearing a few dark blotches, the same oily smudges on his tree trunk arms, imperfections merging seamlessly with the dense, dark inks stenciled on his skin.

Sweet Jesus. I didn't realize how tattooed he was. This is the barest I've seen him without those flannel shirts and thermal suits he wears.

Danger echoes in my head. Every second I keep my eyes on him, there's a siren blaring louder. A warning and a slow moving heat pooling between my legs, thieving my breath away. I think it's the cost of admiring this feral, ripped, blue eyed beast.

"You seem busy. You're *sure* you don't want me to just get pizza or Chinese tonight?"

"She's met her junk food quota with Christmas. Can't you cook?"

My blood warms, and it has nothing to do with standing close to his wood burning stove. "Didn't realize that was in the job description."

"Shit changes, Red. Welcome to life," he growls, ignoring me as he stomps toward his workbench, wiping his hands on a rag. "I know there's plenty of food in the freezer. Make us something tonight?"

I don't move. I'm not saying anything until he turns around and finally looks

me in the eye. “Try again. You’re missing a very important word.”

There’s a long pause. For a second, I’m worried I’ll have to walk out to salvage my wounded pride, and order a pizza after all. I’m not slaving over dinner for this ungrateful beast who thinks he can bark and bring the world to his knees.

“Please.” He sighs, bright blue eyes shifting in his face, just short of a full sarcastic roll. “Please, Red. I’m sorry this is coming out wrong. I’ve got the holiday weekend to wrap up this job. People get pissed if I don’t get their crap back to them on time.”

Better. But I’m still not buying his excuses.

“I’ll see what I can do,” I say quietly, mulling how far I want to test the waters. “Should I plan on food for tomorrow, too? New Year’s Eve?”

He blinks. Almost winces. I don’t know why it sends a shot of guilt through my heart.

“No. Leave that to me. I’ll be done in another hour or two, and I’ll put her to bed tonight. Just worry about dinner.”

Of course. He never misses his nightly ritual. The few times I’ve been over late, trying to tuck the little girl in, he intervenes, telling me their story time is sacred. It would be adorable, if only his eyes weren’t so scary.

Just like now. Watching while I linger in his personal space, staring at the picture hanging on the wall. Weird because the only decorations in his house are a couple pictures of a newborn Mia sitting on his mantle.

This is the only frame containing anything different. Four men, dressed in desert camo and laughing, a younger Marshal in the middle. His signature blue eyes stare out, missing the thick dark five o’clock shadow he wears now, smiling like I’ve never seen.

“When was this?” I ask, stepping closer, nodding toward the picture. There’s a darkness in his eyes, a hesitation, like the words are at the tip of his tongue but he just won’t let them come.

“When you learned it’s none of your damn business, Red. Now, leave me alone. I’ve got a lot to finish.”

Typical Marshal. Rude, but predictable. I turn, regretting my stupid question, wondering why I thought he’d give an answer that doesn’t resemble spitting in my face.

I take one last quick glimpse of him before wandering back into the cold, shutting his door. He’s hunkered over his desk again, a wrench in his hand,

but he isn't moving.

He's staring into space, his blue eyes narrow, but full. I think he's more annoyed with himself.

Regardless, I don't wait around to find out. I shut the door and race into the house, where Mia is wrestling Whiskey on a kitchen chair, her juice tipped over and dripping sticky red stuff on the tabby cat's tail.

For once, I'm grateful for the mess. I'll take every distraction I can get this evening so I don't have to dwell on Marshal's haunted eyes.



IT'S WELL over an hour before he comes in. By then, I've got Mia in her bath, dropping a few toys in the bubbles to keep her company.

I read on my phone in the bathroom, listening to her splashing for background noise. Even Whiskey stands on the edge of the tub, giving honeybee a skeptical look every time she tries to coax him in. Nobody pays any attention to the heavy footsteps in the kitchen, the scrape of the chair, the loud stab of a fork on a plate.

I hope he likes simple. It's chili mac tonight, one of the first things mom taught me how to make. I dressed it up as healthy as I could with lean beef, but I can't work miracles. Thank God for the salad kit I found buried in the fridge, still fresh.

Of course, I'm not really sure *why* I care whether big daddy likes my cooking.

He practically put a gun to my head and told me to make dinner, and then let me know exactly how welcome questions are in his man cave.

Infuriating. As much as he is mysterious. I can't stop thinking about his six feet something of frustration, dipped in ink as rude as his tongue, heart as hard as the rest of him.

I hate how my ears prick up every time he stomps around in the kitchen, devouring his food, the small TV mounted to the corner playing the evening news.

I hate it even more how I'm halfway hoping he'll come here, giving me a chance to redeem my ego before he puts Mia down for bed.

And I hate it most how hard it is to get his muscle shirt and savage looks out of my brain. It sticks like his bulging muscles, his smudged cheeks, his arrogant eyes a silent interrogation just for prying into His Highness' secret kingdom.

God.

“Ms. Sadie?” Mia clucks from the tub, poking her hands up from the bubbles laying them on the edge.

Too adorable. I temporarily forget the grudge against her father. “Yeah, honeybee?”

“Do I have a mommy?”

I stop cold. An awkward smile hides the speechless, painful twist in my guts. Whatever else I was ready for tonight, it wasn’t answering this kind of question.

Hell, I don’t even know how.

“Sure you do, Mia,” I try. “You’re here. Everybody born on this planet has two parents. At least starting out...”

“Then...where is she? Why’s daddy all alone?”

My heart skips a few more beats. *Crap.*

Such hard, damning questions spoken in such an innocent voice. I don’t even know where to begin, even if I had the answers. After today, finding out anything from Marshal is as likely as him spontaneously discovering a conscience.

“I...I don’t know, honeybee. Ask your father. Those are big questions.” I’m being dead honest. I reach for the towel, ready to lift her out of the tub, hoping she forgets the conversation once she’s dried off and dressed.

She’s very quiet as I get her ready for the night. But I figure it’s just my imagination once I hear her familiar sing-song humming, just as I finish sliding on her PJs.

Her little hand is tucked in mine when I open the bathroom door. My heart leaps into my throat and collides with a gasp. Marshal blocks my path, his steely blue gaze a few seconds away from lighting something on fire.

“I’ll take her from here. Good dinner, Red,” he says, bending to take honeybee. I watch as they disappear into her room, and linger in the hall until I hear his deep voice soften, asking if she remembers what chapter they stopped at last night.

Story time never had so many unanswered questions. None of them have anything to do with the mischievous genie and magic wishes he reads to her either.

I’ve lost my fight. I don’t want to confront him anymore over earlier, much

less dig at secrets that will just piss him off more.

Exhaustion hits in a wave. I head straight for my room and shut the door, turning out the light.

It's cooler than ever underneath the blanket. I fall asleep still trying to get warm, half-hoping the icy silence in this house just brings peace. It certainly isn't making anybody comfortable.



THE NEXT DAY IS A BLUR. He's already in his shop before I wake up, leaving a list on the table with a few random groceries written down.

PICK UP. PLEASE.

At least he remembered the important word.

Progress? Who the hell knows.

I head out early, grabbing Mia.

She loves being out and about, bundled up in her new purple coat. We turn a few heads in the crowded store. The people who notice us take a sixty second break from their holiday shopping sprees to stare, wondering what the hell I'm doing with the Castoff's daughter.

I give them daggers right back, especially the ones who linger uncomfortably on the little girl.

She doesn't deserve this, pricks. Leave her the hell alone. I keep it to myself, but barely.

The others don't recognize us because it's too weird for them to contemplate. Or maybe they're just sucked into their own worlds.

When we get home, he's parked at the table, a thick mug of dark roast steaming between his hands. "You got the ham like I asked?"

I empty it onto the table, glaring as Mia crawls onto his lap. "Yeah. Ten pounds, like you asked. Seems like a lot for the three of us."

"Always freeze the extra for soup and casseroles. Plus I'll want to have my fill tomorrow. Thanks for the groceries, Red." He stands, carrying the slab over to the fridge. I hold Mia while he puts the groceries away, rubbing a mewling Whiskey under the table.

"I wasn't expecting you back so early," I say. He gives me a look like I should have. "What's wrong? Are you actually taking a day off?"

"Work can wait. It's too damn cold out there now and I need to chop more

wood for the stove. Besides, it's New Year's tomorrow. I'd be an idiot if I missed it with my favorite person."

Mia chirps happily and laughs in my arms. He walks over, ruffles her hair. I've never noticed how many features they share. The little girl is truly his. Dark haired, blue eyed, and beautiful.

Almost nothing inherited from her mom, wherever she is.

"I'd like a chance to check in with my family if you'll be here most of today. I've only been by a couple times this week. Also have a couple books I really need to pick up from the library, before it closes early."

Marshal nods. He takes Mia off my lap, bouncing her in his arms until she giggles. "Go. I've got our food covered tonight and tomorrow. You're welcome to the midnight snacks. Whatever you want. We're just missing champagne."

His eyes go to the sparkling cider on the table. It's non-alcoholic, of course, a likely concession to his daughter. Not that I've seen him drink much, which surprises me, considering the rudeness strapped to him like a boulder.

"I'll be back in a few hours," I say, feeling a weight lift as soon as I'm in my coat and out the door.

The drive to my parents' place goes fast. Our small town skews older, and plenty of people are spending extra time indoors, enjoying the transition from one year to the next with peace and quiet. I grab my books at the library and then head over.

I park in my usual spot, walking in on a familiar scene. Mom and dad are in the living room, in front of the TV, watching an old movie on Netflix.

It's more surprising Jackson and Ginger are here, especially since their car wasn't in the driveway.

"Nice of you to join us, sis. I was beginning to wonder." Jackson's voice makes me tense.

Well, *tenser*. I'm in no mood for his crap today. If he still wants to fight over the job I've taken, I swear to God...

"Happy New Year, dear. Or is it too early?" Mom stands, hugs me, strangely tired today. "Sit down. You're just in time for the Hitchcock marathon."

I smile, flashing dad a look. He actually seems hopeful today. There's good reason. Watching artsy films all day on New Year's is a tradition stretching back to my childhood. Something mom has always done.

I take a seat, grabbing a soda off the counter, careful to keep my distance from

Jackson. We watch the black and white film in silence.

Hitchcock is a master of unease, but that isn't why I'm biting my lip by the end credits.

My brother won't stop casting glances. Each one leaves me guessing, wondering what he's really up to.

"Think I'll head upstairs for an hour or two," mom says quietly, once the movie ends. "I'm feeling oddly inspired. Something about the year rolling over, I suppose."

It's hardly that, judging by the smirk she's been wearing since I stepped in. I don't want to contemplate what's happening in her head, or if it'll lead to a new outburst. Dad smiles at us and rises with her, whispering something about keeping her company.

My eyes go straight to the big painting on the wall. It's an elk standing quietly in a snowy forest, a cabin behind it, tucked into the pristine blue mountains beyond.

Probably a scene mom remembers from growing up in Montana. It's been there since I was fourteen, one of her finest works, a relic from her natural phase that also sold like crazy.

"I remember that year," Jackson says. He's caught me looking. "Happiest I've ever seen her. Mom's muse was strong then. She had something new coming out every week, sent pictures of everything to base. Only thing I looked forward to more than cookies, I think."

Smiling, Ginger nuzzles into him, rubbing his arm. It's the one that's deformed, forever scorched by the hellish sacrifices he made on Afghan soil. Asshole or not, I appreciate him, even if he spends his hero capital a little more freely than I'd like.

"Yeah, well, maybe she'll get back to it someday." I hope to God I'm right. "Is it just me or does she seem...normal today?"

"Give it a few more hours, closer to midnight. Dad made her stop those timed work exercises because they made her so anxious. Stressed her the hell out. Her sense of time is all screwed up, but who can blame her? There's no stopping the future. It grinds on and people do whatever the fuck they want."

My eyes narrow. I fold my arms, suddenly sensing cold. "Care to explain what you're getting at?"

"Nothing, sis. Nothing at all." He pauses. "I've basically accepted your decision, in case you wondered. No point in getting bent out of shape anymore. You're a grown woman. You'll make your own mistakes. If you

want to make bank for awhile babysitting for the bastard who almost broke my jaw, be my fucking guest, Sadie.”

He’s always been a jack(ass) of many trades, but I think the one he’s mastered is leaving me speechless, choking on my own guilt. I sit there helplessly as he stomps past, swiping a beer from the kitchen, a sad looking Ginger shooting me apologetic looks.

They get to me more today than his disgusting attitude for some crazy reason. “I think I’d better go. Mom and dad won’t be coming back down, anyway.” I grab my purse, digging in the front pocket for my keys.

“Stay! I’m sure my lovely husband didn’t really mean anything by it...” She’s fighting so hard. Probably because she wonders what things will be like next year, with a newborn. Fair, I suppose, as much as it annoys me. “I said he didn’t mean anything – did you, honey?”

Jackson aims an annoyed look at his wife. His eyes are on her as he rejoins us, stopping short of the sectional end where she’s parked for the evening. He turns, his pissed off gaze softening. “Ginger’s right. I’ve been a royal asshole, and I’m sorry. Stand up, sis, will you?”

I humor him. I’m glad I do because a second later, Jackson does something he hasn’t done since his pre-army days, when he was still that smiling, lean kid with a chip on his shoulder and big dreams.

He embraces me. And he means it.

Hello, heartbreak.

“I’m sorry. You deserve better than I’ve given the last few months. That’s done.” Jackson’s arms go tighter, bringing me back to a kinder, gentler brother I thought I’d lost in the war.

The tears break, rolling heavy down my cheeks. “No, no, I’m sorry, too. I should have come clean right away, working for him.”

“Forget it.” He’s smiling when he pulls away, an understanding I didn’t think he had on his lips. “Things keep changing. Mostly shit we can’t control. Mom, dad, babies getting closer by the day...maybe it’s just the season making me think, but I’ve realized something lately, sis. I need to roll with the punches. Shut up and adapt. Because there’s no use trying to control how they land. Usually just makes it harder.”

Grabbing his hands, I give them a squeeze. Ginger comes up behind him, very moved, and wraps her hands around his waist. There hasn’t been a family moment like this for...God knows.

I still feel a little guilty, but it’s that soft, antsy butterfly guilt. A refreshing

break from the forced kind my brother usually makes me feel.

I don't want to leave.

"How long will you be around tonight, Sadie?" Ginger asks, a hopeful note in her voice.

I open my mouth to answer, but I'm silenced by the earthquake upstairs.

Mom screams. Something crashes on the floor so loudly it rattles the whole house. Dad's voice, frantic and fighting to stay controlled, trying to calm her. The usual.

Hell is here after a break, leaving us gawking at each other, frozen.

Jackson is the first to go running. Ginger and I follow behind him, taking the steps by twos, only a few paces away. We barge into their bedroom and see the mess – a bigger one than usual.

There's an entire canvas on the floor, a fist-sized hole punched through it, dripping wet paint everywhere. Mom steps over it, gives us a dirty look, and skirts past us, muttering. "This is why I can *never* get any work done. Too many damn spectators."

"What happened?" Jackson finally asks, stepping forward. We join in, helping our father lift the huge canvass off the ground, and prop it against an overstuffed bookcase.

"Oh, you know. She tried to work, I encouraged her, and she freaked. Artist's block." The same cold patience he's had forever sticks in his voice, but it's unusually frayed.

Dad looks away, but not before I see him nudge up his glasses, wiping a secret tear. My heart goes to pieces for the second time tonight, this time without any warmth.

"What can we do?" I ask, laying my hand gently on his shoulder. Ginger backs me up, stepping around us to bend down on the floor, collecting smaller debris.

"Just...everybody out. Enjoy yourselves. It's New Year's Eve, dammit. It's nobody else's problem but mine." He's trying so hard to be brave. Then he moves to the spot where Ginger is. Something crunches under his shoes and I wince.

"I can't leave you alone, dad," Jackson growls. "Let me clean this up, unless you want me to go down there and calm her?"

"That's the only thing I'm good at. Most of the time. You stay here and sweep, if you're really bent on helping. Thank you, son." He reaches into

their closet and pulls out a broom, passing it over.

Our father heads out, but I don't hear footsteps making it downstairs right away. He's made a detour to the guest room, the only place he can get a moment alone. Somehow, it makes this worse.

"Here, let me help," I say, taking Ginger's place on the floor, picking at the mess of beads, pebbles, and fallen brushes. I feel like a helpless idiot just standing and watching.

Grunting, Jackson pushes another canvass over, smaller than the last. There's a huge paint blob stuck to the floor, more dried than the rest. He swears under his breath, then looks at his wife. "Shit. It's gonna take a while to get this off. Sadie, you wanted to help?"

I nod.

"Do us a favor, we're planning to spend the night here anyway with the car in the shop, but Ginger's got a doctor's appointment the day after tomorrow. Dee's place is closed for New Year's. Probably won't have time to grab our other vehicle. Can you swing by again? Just park the truck for Ginger while I'm at work, and she'll pick it up?"

"Sure can." I smile. I like feeling useful. "Just text me the time and place. Blank check, too, if you want me to square it away with Dee."

"Beautiful. I owe you one, sis." He returns my look, the new understanding we cultivated over the past hour still there. "Oh, and I'll keep my distance. I'll leave the vehicle trade off to Ginger. If that means you've got to bring along the Castoff or his kid, so be it."

Ouch. I haven't contemplated how I'll handle that. Especially with Marshal ramping up for his mystery trip, supposedly ASAP after the holiday blows over.

"No worries. I'll be by to grab it. Anything else?"

My brother shakes his head. Ginger hands me the keys and thanks me again. Then I head downstairs, casting a quick glance at dad, still licking his wounds in the guest room. He's sitting on the bed.

I worry about him. It hurts that I'm not here anymore to share the punishment, but I gave it six months. I had to move on. Medicine and this nanny gig are a future. They're also the first time I enjoy getting out of the house because I'm accomplishing something.

But still, I can't help it. Guilt burns like napalm in my chest.

I stop, staring at my father's silhouette. Why does he look so small and alone?

I take a few steps inside, rapping at the door gently. “You’re *sure* you’ll be okay?”

He turns, a fake smile on his pale lips. “It’s nothing, babe. Just another day. Your mom will be better tomorrow, and so will I.”

I try to return his warmth, but it isn’t easy. What he really should say is, *nobody knows*.

Mom’s moods are near unpredictable. Avoiding her triggers isn’t easy. Nothing helps enough, short of taking her away from the only thing she loves. No matter how hard this gets, none of us have the heart to force her into a facility.

“Take care of yourself, please. Not just her.” I round the bed while he leans in, grudgingly presenting his cheek for a kiss. “I’d better go. I’ll check on her before I’m out the door just to make sure everything’s okay.”

“You’re a good girl, Sadie. I’m sorry as hell you had to put up with this for so long.” Whatever guilt I carry around, it’s nothing compared to the looks he gives me at times like this. “I wish we hadn’t pulled you out of school. It was a damn waste. I never should’ve let Jackson strong-arm you.”

“Nonsense, dad. It was my choice.” Maybe not completely, considering the intense pressure, but no one ever forced me to fall into line. Family matters most. I don’t regret putting life on hold to help, however hopeless it turned out to be. “Jackson’s been very nice to me today. Whatever happened months ago, or just the other week, it’s water under the bridge.”

His eyes flicker hopefully beneath his bushy salt and pepper eyebrows. “I’m glad. Happy New Year, Sarah.” He uses my real name and sends butterflies dashing through my belly.

“Happy New Year.” My fingers give his a parting squeeze, and then I head down. “It’ll be better than the last. It has to be.”

Mom is in the kitchen fixing tea. She watches the kettle slowly steaming, her lips an impatient line. “Leaving already? That figures.”

I stop next to the door. What do I say to this crazy person I still love?

“I’ve got to go, mom. Work. I’ll be by next week. Let me know if you need anything.”

“Wait!” She barks the one word that makes me freeze with my hand on the doorknob. I turn, a chill darting up my spine, wondering what’s next. “How is he?”

She doesn’t mean dad. Jesus, she can’t mean...

I give her a rough look, trying to understand. Her head is a mess since she started losing it, true, but I can't fathom why she'd want to know anything about Marshal.

"The Castoff, I mean," she says, stepping forward, confirming my worst fears. A freshly poured mug smokes in her hand. "Don't be coy with me, dear. Surely, you know what makes him tick by now."

"Mia, I suppose." It's as good an answer as any.

"Hm, yes, the little girl. I figured he'd be the weird, overprotective type."

"Mom, it isn't like that. He really loves her. It could be a whole lot worse, for both of them, I mean."

She wags her eyebrows, taking a pull off her tea. "So, he's lonely. Compensating for some great tragedy by showering affection on his darling girl. A shame."

What the hell does she mean? I blink, a small voice in my head begging this to end. *Whatever this even is.*

"It's terribly predictable. I thought your squeeze would be a lot more interesting with the big dark secret that made him lash out at your brother, turning the town against him. These men, always the same."

Did she just say...squeeze? "Whoa." I put my hands out, every part of me in full flight at the mere suggestion. "He's my boss, mom. I'm his nanny. Nothing more."

She shrugs, taking another sip so full I'm surprised it doesn't scorch her mouth. "So you say. Come back when you're ready to deal with a few more hard truths, Sadie. I'll be waiting."

I'm so done. "Happy New Year to you, too, mom."

I don't remember the last time I was so glad to climb into my car.

The relief is far from instant, even on the road, putting comfortable mileage between the circus my parents call home.

A sunburst flush on my cheeks smolders in my half-heated car. Cold weather makes it easier to feel than ever, and I wonder if there's any merit to my mom's insane words.

Every mile closer to Marshal's cabin, new questions charge through my brain, taunting and unpleasant.

The images in my head are even worse. They're Marshal in all his tall, steely-eyed muscle shirt glory. They're tattoos like beds of thorns, sharp words, and

stubble that will burn like thistle on my skin.

They're everything I imagine he's doing when my back is turned – the lewd glances I sometimes feel sauntering up my legs, stopping at my ass.

They're fire and ice, January and July, a loving single father with a stoic heart and a hidden beast who will demolish me if our lips ever meet.

Okay.

So what if I can't deny this sick attraction? This weird, messy spark between us?

The rude questions rattling around in my brain are another matter.

Them, I'll defy until my dying breath. I'll toss the grains of truth hidden in my mother's crazy psychobabble on feral ground. A place where they'll never, ever take root.

Because if they do, if I start acting on heart stopping *what ifs*, we'll both have a lot more to worry about than who's spending evenings with Mia.



“FIVE...FOUR...THREE...TWO...ONE! There it is, *Happy New Year!*” The screaming grin on TV disappears into the thick of Times Square, *Auld Lang Syne* strumming its bittersweet notes in the background.

It's now past midnight. Another year lost to time's ashes, and a new one in the making.

It's fitting that I spend the first few minutes alone. That's all I've wanted since I came home, saying a few words to Mia. I parked myself in front of the TV as soon as I knew she was in daddy's hands.

I haven't seen Marshal since he took her upstairs. The poor thing didn't last past nine o'clock, passed out on the sofa, a half-eaten candy cane still tucked in her hands. He sent a questioning glance my way before carrying her up, as if to say, *everything all right?*

I just nodded. Whispered something about an upset stomach, and told him to holler if he needed anything. He didn't hang around to check in with me again. After he came down from tending Mia, he walked straight past the living room, into the kitchen, and then I heard the door click shut.

He's been out there ever since.

I see the soft orange glow of the light illuminating the chill space between the house and his sanctum in the work shed.

It feels wrong that we're both spending the New Year's zenith alone.

But I can't shake the unease I've had ever since I returned.

My stomach growls. Far from upset, I'm starving. I shuffle into the kitchen, searching for any snacks he might have left out. Too bad he's so meticulous everything is in the fridge, the cheese ball he rolled with his huge hands covered in foil.

I grab a box of crackers off the counter and scrape a few bites. It's nutty and flavorful. Surprisingly delicious.

Same with the dips. His homemade salsa nearly bowls me over with how good it is.

One more mark in his sexy column. A man who can make food earns default brownie points, but damn it, I don't need him wracking them up on a scoreboard that shouldn't exist.

I haven't bothered to flick the lights on in the kitchen. The window above the sink catches the light outside. It oozes in from his workshop, another reminder he's out there.

Alone.

Sighing, I put the snacks away and dig through the fridge. There's a six pack of beer in the corner so frosted over it probably hasn't been touched for weeks. I yank off two cans and stuff them into my coat pockets before throwing it on.

I'm not sure what I'm getting into, knocking on his workshop this late. I almost don't expect an answer. But Marshal cracks the door with the same fierce stare I'm slowly getting used to. "Yeah?"

"Happy New Year. It's past midnight. Here's a present." I reach into my pockets with both hands, holding up the beers. "How about a quick toast? Assuming I'm not interrupting anything, of course."

A low growl shakes his throat. I wonder if I've barged in on another secret ritual, another part of his life that's meant for his eyes only. He answers my question, stepping aside so I can enter, snatching one of the beers out of my hand.

"Grab a seat, Red. Happy to see your bellyache is better." He drags a chair out of the corner and props it in front of his bench, where he plops down next to me. He waits to sip his drink until I'm facing him, a glint in his eye that says he knows the upset stomach thing is BS. "Why are you really out here?"

"I didn't want you to be alone. Nobody should ring in the New Year without some company." My voice is so quiet, popping my beer open sounds like a bullet ricocheting. So do our cheers.

We clink cans and then take long sips. Another growl slips out of him, but this time it's a satisfied one.

"How thoughtful," he rumbles, clasping his can between his legs. "Too bad I don't need your sympathy, Red. Don't tell me you feel guilty for wanting a night by yourself? Everybody needs a break sometimes."

I look down, eyes to the floor so they don't get lost deeper in his storm blue eyes. "It isn't that. It's just...what's the matter, Marshal? Really? You spend so much time out here by yourself. I know you're not working."

His eyes darken a shade, bright skies becoming stormy seas. *Guilty.*

"I'm not trying to upset you," I tell him. He's in no rush to answer my awkward questions. "If it isn't any of my business...if this is your private retreat, or something, just say so and I'll --"

"It's bullshit, is what it is." His words are as deafening as an avalanche. "I spend half my time with Mia. Another forty percent with memories of men who died in combat years ago. The last ten goes to clients who don't give a shit beyond getting their machines fixed, and jackoffs in town who'd love to see the Sheriff fish my carcass out of the river one fine day."

"Jesus." I think I already regret this. "They're haters, Marshal, but I'm not sure anybody wants you dead."

"No? That'd be a big fucking relief for them, I'm sure. Easy. Maybe the Castoff schtick will take me down like Frankenstein or Dracula someday. Everybody treats this place like it's fucking haunted." He guzzles half his beer, wiping his mouth. Then he lifts his hand and points to the army picture on the wall. "Don't worry yourself, darling, I'm not planning on doing nothing I shouldn't. On the contrary, I'm still alive and kicking. Plus I'd never leave my little girl. Some other boys aren't so lucky."

"No? What happened?" It oozes out in a whisper. It's hard to keep my eyes on his when they're so incredibly fierce.

At least he doesn't look offended. Thank God. "Botched mission. A real sloppy prick who made some big promises about catching a Taliban lieutenant got good men killed. The raid was supposed to be a cakewalk. I knew in my guts it wouldn't be, and the intel was wrong, but fuck...our commanding officer wouldn't hear it. Our source's reputation was iron-clad, you see. He insisted, ignoring obvious dangers."

My eyes study his, diving into the pain. It's hard.

I can't tear myself away. Lifting my beer, I gently sip, ready for the gentle buzz to sooth the restless itch in my veins.

"I still hear their screams in my nightmares, Red. Adam, Erik, Zane...they didn't deserve to die like that. Gunned down with their fucking faces melted into vapor by the airstrike that came, without even checking to see if my boys were clear." He sighs, pushing a rough hand through his hair to bring him back. "I limped away untouched. That's war, though. Sorry for the gruesome image." He drains his beer and then collapses the can with a vicious squeeze.

"It's fine. I've heard stories from my brother, too. He had it just as bad...came home with a nasty burn. He spent weeks in the hospital getting therapy, skin grafts..." I close my eyes, hating the ordeal Jackson went through, shortly before his honorable discharge.

Marshal doesn't say anything. He gets up, walks across the room, and reaches under the table on the other side of the shop. There's a fresh six pack, chilled from the crisp air in here when the stove isn't going.

He cracks two new beers and hands me one, reclaiming his place. "Fuck bad memories. It's the New Year, isn't it?"

His voice lights me up. The sudden optimism in his voice is a pleasant surprise, however faint. "Right. There's plenty to look forward to. If all goes well, I'll be one step closer to a real career. I hope you make mad money on that big job coming up, too. And Mia, well, she'll be a doll at preschool. I just know it."

Marshal stares into his beer, taking a long sip. When he looks up, his features have darkened just as mysteriously as they warmed a minute ago. "Let's not get ahead of ourselves. I like to focus on the present, one minute at a time. Think I'd be a whole hell of a lot crazier if I didn't."

"Not me. I'd be a goner without goals to work for." I suck down more beer, its liquid courage adding a defiant note to my voice. "Different strokes, you know?"

He grins, setting his beer down next to him. "Yeah, Red. I do."

The look in his eyes aimed down at me is new. It's hungry, ferocious, and understanding all in one. It's not the look of my boss or some drunken tough guy who's short on company. It's the way a man sees a woman, the kind of eyes I ignored through high school and college, always too afraid to let it take me away.

"Red?" Marshal's voice drops, and so does his hand.

Pure heat. He gently cups my chin, turning it to face him.

"What?" *You already know*, I tell myself, and it's amazing I'm not terrified.

“Come the fuck here,” he growls, lifting me up with his strong hands.

Then they’re around my waist, joining me to his tight, hard, unrelenting muscle.

His lips are on mine, and those sparks resonating in his deep blue eyes are more numerous than stars.

They’re everywhere. Crackling in my tongue, electrifying my flesh, turning that hot, slick urge at the ends of my nipples and between my legs into a beautiful discord.

His tongue presses against mine. I think I moan, and he definitely growls.

His savage hand sweeps down my low back, clasps my ass, and squeezes.

What. Is. Even. Happening?

I can’t tell where he begins or I end. That goes double for this new reality, where I’m honest-to-God *kissing* the Castoff.

I’m kissing Marshal. *Marshal freaking Howard.*

A dangerous temptation that’s now swallowed me like a pit, and I have no clue where it ends.

He breaks the kiss, more reluctant thunder hanging on his lips. “Happy fucking New Year. Had to make it count. Now I think we’d better both turn in.”

What now really means is, *before I fuck your brains out.*

I nod, too lost for words, pinching his massive arm one last time. It’s like I’m trying to check that he’s still real and this isn’t a dream. “Agreed. I’ll help you with dinner tomorrow. Goodnight, Marshal. Thanks for...a memorable start to the year.” That’s so lame, but I don’t know what else to say.

We share one more look before I remember how my legs work. Then I slip out in the cold. It’s close to absolute zero when there’s hellfire in my blood.

I was wrong about his stubble.

It isn’t harsh or prickly or overwhelming at all. It’s soft, but rugged. Tenderly harsh. Another contrast. Enigma, plus one.

Quintessentially Marshal.

And it’s left me marked. I’m secretly craving its sweetness, but not on my cheek. I imagine its friction going new places guaranteed to bring me to my knees if I let this not-so-innocent New Year’s kiss become more.

REPERCUSSIONS (MARSHAL)

This year is going to be insane, and it's only the first day.

I'm in the kitchen at the ass crack of dawn, a throat scratching mug of pitch black coffee in my hand, asking why the fuck I lost it so hard last night. Seriously.

It's bad enough that I'm using her. Pumping her for questions, insights, opportunities to find out how best to end her monster bother.

Even worse that I still taste her today on my lips. That soft, sticky, inviting warmth left me hard as granite all night, and Christ does it make me want more.

Very risky. Very stupid. Very, very dangerous.

I start prepping the ham long before anybody else is awake. It's the best distraction I can find, especially when Red walks in, decked in a plum dress and dark leggings I've never seen.

She says a few words about breakfast. I tell her I'll take care of it before she beats a shy retreat.

My inner beast is in full hunt, fighting for permission to push her against the nearest wall, toss up her skirt, and bury my tongue against hers until she's begging to be filled. I want to find her clit and frig it numb. I want her pussy coming on my fingers.

It's hell hearing her less than twenty steps away, separated by two walls, watching TV alone. I ache to be her company.

I've never been more grateful to see Mia. My little sleepyhead drags herself down late, probably exhausted from last night's excitement, crashing well before midnight. I kiss her on the cheek and put a bowl of oatmeal in front of her, apple-cinnamon today.

“How’d you sleep, honeybee?” I ask, sliding into the seat across from her.

“Okay. Funny dream, daddy...” She looks at me sheepishly, dipping her spoon into the food. I stop and stare, smiling. Just four years old, and she’s already mastered suspense. “Dreamed Sadie got to live here all the time. Dreamed you and her were mommy and daddy.”

Fuck. I’m almost choked up, but a slug of coffee saves me at the last second.

“That’s...pretty wild, baby girl. Let’s blame the snacks. Too much salami, I think – those cured meats will put all kinds of odd ideas in your brain.”

My eyes drift up. I almost sputter a second time when I see Red leaning in the doorway, next to the stove, a rumpled smile between two apple blossom cheeks. *How the hell much has she heard?*

“No, not meats, daddy. You and her made cake and we were happy. One big happy family.”

“No Whiskey?” I’m desperate to change the subject before the minx in the corner gets any ideas to give my little girl a run for her crazy.

“Oh, he was there. But he ate the magic cake too and it made us all giants. Made him big like a tiger!” Mia laughs, covering her mouth, giggling like it’s too absurd for her.

I look past her, eyeballing Red, trying not to let my raging hard-on reignite. “Think I’ll start listening to the vet as part of my New Year’s resolution. I’ll tell you what the dream means: that damn cat needs a diet.”

Right on time, the ginger beast appears, rubbing Red’s ankles. She never takes her eyes off me as she reaches down, stroking his head. He lets out a sharp squeak that sets honeybee off laughing all over again.



WINTER HAS NO MERCY. It’s windy as fucking sin later, blowing several tarps off the old beaters and a tractor parked next to my storage shed. They’re abandoned projects I repo’ed after their owners failed to pick them up or show me the money, but I don’t want them rusting before I can flip them for spare cash next year.

So, I’m outside tying rope and using loose bricks to weigh their cover down, freezing my balls off. Except they’re hot as coals the instant I see Red walk out, stepping past her car, coming straight for me.

“I checked the ham. It’s looking good, but I hope you won’t be out here too much longer, daddy.”

I give her a look like hot death. *Don't even.*

Then, a second later, I'm laughing like a fucking idiot.

"That's why you're out here, Red? To tell jokes and rub some nonsense dream Mia had in my face?" I lean forward, ignoring the wind hitting me in the face. Think I need it to cool down every second my eyes spend glued to Sadie, deciphering her hourglass shape under that jacket.

"Actually, I wanted to have a conversation before you started choking up." I fix my eyes impatiently, waiting for the rest. *Go on.* "You're not...worried? Not afraid this new arrangement is confusing her?"

"You've been at this gig long enough to realize kids say the craziest shit." I stoop down, laying another brick on the tarp, testing it with a quick jerk to make sure it's secure.

"Well, if you're not worried..." *Neither am I*, she should say, but it lingers on the tip of her tongue, never coming out.

I stand, grasping her shoulders, pulling her closer. Time to put this crap to bed before it complicates everything more. "Not worried in the slightest, Red. Mia's always had an active imagination. Don't think she's about to up and start calling you mommy, but if she does and it bothers you, I'll have a talk."

"No. Nothing like that. It's just..." She drifts off, searching for words. I can't tell if her cheeks are so flushed because we're risking frostbite every second spent out here, or if it's what's weighing on her mind. "What happened to 'mommy,' Marshal? It's none of my business, I know. You said never mention her, but this isn't the first time we've gone there. She asked me the same question not so long ago."

Shock growls through my heart. Even the cold can't stop the lava surging in my blood. "Told you before, we don't talk about her around here, Sadie. She's nobody."

"Is she really...dead?" The last word comes out of her mouth like a squeak.

I don't know what the fuck comes over me next.

I'm just growling, seizing her wrist, pulling her away from the machines. We quickly take the narrow path behind the fence, leading to my shop.

Inside, I switch on the light and kick the door shut. She throws her hood down, and I see her breathing heavy, uncertain what's coming next. I wish to hell I knew.

Revisiting fucking Jenna is the last way I want to start this year.

"Next time we kiss, warn me it makes you nosy instead of horny." My eyes

stab her. The frustration welling up inside me doesn't stop the wicked flick of delight I get seeing Red turn redder. "It was a different time in my life, since you're dying to know. A fucked up time."

"Marshal...it's not like that. If it's something you're hiding, something you need to keep locked away, just say so."

"No. You asked." I pause, ripping off my gloves, the better to take her hands. I pluck them out of her pockets, tightening my grip, making sure I've got her whole attention before I cough up the ugly truth.

"Marshal, hey..."

I hold her jade eyes prisoner. "I was home from the war all kinds of messed up. Lost, hurting, very pissed off. Took almost a year to put these hands to real work again. That's because I spent the rest of the time looking after my ma, before she lost her fight with cancer."

"Oh. Jesus." Her soft, evasive look says more than any words. Too bad I won't let her weasel away from the curiosity that brought us here.

"When I wasn't spending my time keeping her company, checking her vitals, making her more comfortable than any strangers could before the end, I hit the bars. Marinated myself in booze early and often. Fucked more bar bitches than one man should in a lifetime."

Actually, just three. But that's still plenty for this life.

There's a jealous, hurt twitch in her face. Damn if it isn't a little satisfying. *You wanted the truth, Red. Remember? Here it fucking is.*

"Jenna was a big goddamn mistake. Knew she was a wild child from the first time I beat her at pool, and she paid our bet in head."

Sadie wrinkles her nose. "Ew. I don't need the fine print. Just –"

No. I yank her closer, until our faces are only inches apart. There's a sick, fierce desire to put my lips on hers again, and this time add teeth. "Long story short, we hooked up twice. She blew town. Took off after some biker fucks who offered more adventure and better drugs than anything she could get in this town. That was fine. I never meant to make us a thing." I pause, trying to cool my blood before reaching the part that's always a roiling boil. "Ma died. I started tinkering with shit, putting some of my Army Ranger skills to civilian use. I was good, and the county learned fast. Hit me up for jobs all the time. Stopped visiting the bars as often, but I heard the gossip. Jenna came back here pregnant, sure it was somebody who'd knocked her up the year before."

"Terrible," Red whispers.

She doesn't have a clue, but she will. My tepid smile burns. "I won't bore you with the rest of the details. She was sure it was mine. I listened. Said we'd have a paternity test to sort it out when all was said and done. I didn't need to wait for the results because the day that little angel was born, I knew. A man always does, holding his own flesh and blood for the first time."

Sadie's face lights up. I'm sure it's an adorable image in her head, picturing my cruel mug shocked into silent hope, staring at a newborn baby.

It isn't wrong. That tiny miracle in my hands gave me a new respect for life.

"The kid taught me a thing or two, yeah. Jenna, not so much. She took off two or three weeks after she got out of the hospital. Never came by once to see our little girl. I decided after the first week with no calls I wouldn't fucking let her." It's easy to forget what happened next. There's no point in holding grudges. "Flash to the end. She took off half-drunk on a winter night, not so different from this one. You know how the roads are around the bluffs. Too much ice, a bad reflex or two...calamity. I'll never know what ended her for sure. They yanked what was left of her car out of the freezing river a couple days later."

"Oh my God. I'm..." She pauses, holding in her *sorry*. Smart move. "So, you two never tried to make it work? I mean, if she'd lived..."

"Never." It comes out raw. Then my heart starts hammering so fucking hard I think I'm about to pass out.

My hands take hers. She thinks it's some confession, some special chemistry, but I know what it really is: getting a grip before I hit the floor, mind tangled up in my worst mistake.

The one I still won't ever tell her. *Not anyone*.

Red's just looking. Her face is softer now. Stunned, maybe, trying to digest the hell I just served her.

I'm waiting.

Shit, on second thought, I don't know what I expect. A gasp, a look of shock, more sympathy streaming from her mouth I want nothing to do with.

But Red does the worst she could possibly do: she leans in, hands tight around my neck, bringing her lips into mine.

Sweet fuck.

We're two for two. I'm convinced my dick is about to explode.

But that first kiss was passion, celebration.

This one's honest fury. Manic desire spiked with truth.

Too honest. Too fucking truthful.

I'm growling as I push her away. I haven't had to fight emotion like this since my run-in with her asshole brother three years ago, trying not to end his life on the simmering pavement, in front of a couple hundred people before the cops stepped in.

"Don't," I say, holding her at arm's length. Doesn't stop my fingers from coiling around her wrist, pressing tight. Her pulse is livid. "We shouldn't."

"I know, Marshal. I'm not stupid. I'm also perfectly well aware it isn't every day you drain a little of the snake bite that's killing you." Those big green eyes are undaunted. They're also insane. They want to get closer. Still.

Just fucking great.

This is where I am. Not only do I have to worry about a flammable attraction to my live-in nanny, my mortal enemy's sister, and spilling my spaghetti. Now, I've got myself a goddamn armchair psychologist who wants in my head as bad as I want up her skirt.

Kill me.

"Don't get any grand ideas, Red. I see it in your eyes: you want to be the beauty to my beast, the woman who figures me out, ties me down, and fucking tames me. It's a walking cliché, and you can forget it right now. You see them coming from ten miles out when you've got a four year old into fairy tales."

It's hard not to erase that shy, frail smile written on her face. But the only way I'd do that is with another kiss, and we're at our limit for shit-that-should-never-happen today.

"Last warning," I growl, reaching for the door. "We need to get back in there. I've got a ham to pull out of the oven and a green bean casserole to make. No more games. I want to enjoy dinner without another side of fuck-me eyes or dark ass secrets."

Red doesn't say another word. She follows me in and helps set the table.

It's a small miracle we sit down like a normal family. Mia helps break up the awkward tension – totally all on Sadie – telling us her big plans for the shiny New Year.

My little girl can't wait to be class princess in kindergarten. Never mind they don't do royalty. Maybe I've gotten her too damn deep in fairy tales.

I humor her anyway, letting her know she'll always have a permanent place as

princess, Keeper of the Overfed Tiger in this house. The lighter stuff also helps me ignore every attempt at eyes Red makes across the table.

I don't know what the fuck she's trying to do.

Can't tell anymore whether it's all in my head. I just know I *have* to avoid those eyes, especially over pie and coffee later, or else I'll wind up putting Mia to bed early and opening the door to God only knows.

Time for another resolution: no more mistakes this year.

Not with Red. Not with Mia. Not with Jackson Kelley.

Definitely not with Red. Again.

The fact that I'm more worried about screwing up with her than the others drives home an ugly truth I don't want to put into words. It involves the two of us, an empty bed, and a very hard night of fucking.

The road to desolation might be paved with the best sex of my life. That can't be how Marshal Howard ends.

I've fought too hard and come too far to let my dick lead me to ruin.



I'M HAPPIER than ever to get back to work the next day. Getting my parts together and hauling them three towns over to the small company who hired me takes the whole morning.

When I get home, several thousand bucks richer, there's no car in the driveway. I shouldn't feel so relieved. Red took Mia into town just like she said, a grocery run and an errand for her family, supposedly.

I sit down at the table for lunch, thinking nothing of it, until I see the tall black Escalade through the window pulling into the driveway. The fucking truck that belongs to the bastard I'm supposed to murder.

"Shit!" I toss my half-eaten sandwich against the plate so hard it rattles.

I haven't planned for this scenario, what the hell to do if asshole himself shows up on my doorstep. The guns are locked up in my shop, and even so, I'm not sure even I'm so insane I'll shoot a man in broad daylight on my doorstep.

There's also no time. I move.

My fists are on fire as I crash through the screen, heading straight for the truck, ready to rip the driver's door open. The vehicle stops in Red's parking space, dumping gasoline on the cauldron roaring inside me.

Then I see the kid's seat and my daughter's smiling face in the glass. Urge to destroy, gone.

Well, mostly. I still don't understand why the fuck Red is here with *this* vehicle. My eyes flick to the license plate, confirming my worst suspicions. There's no mistake. It's Jackson's.

"We're back! No worries about lunch, we stopped off in town for a bit. Brought you a little something, too." Red holds a sandwich out from my favorite deli, dangling in a paper bag.

It doesn't make up for the questions beating in my temples. I reluctantly grab the food and ignore her confused look, watching as she makes her way to the other side to retrieve Mia.

"Daddy?" My little girl looks up from her nanny's arms. She senses the worry, the rage, the relentless questions written on my face.

"It's okay, honeybee. Sadie, get her inside. We'll talk later."

I only catch the briefest glimpse of her shocked green eyes before turning my back.

Then I head straight for my shop, trying to decide if having this vehicle here is a lucky break or a fucking curse.



I LOOK around the corner a few hours later. I see Mia on the floor playing with her tablet. A delicious aroma wafts through the house – so appetizing it makes my stomach growl through the anger.

Red sits in front of the stove, eyes on her phone, waiting for the timer to announce the most heavenly chicken dumpling soup I've smelled since grandma's. She's a damn good cook, I'll give her that, but fuck if it absolves the menace parked outside.

"Oh, there you are. Finally," she says, looking up, pressing her phone tight against her thigh. "What's wrong?"

"You didn't tell me you were driving his truck." I fold my arms, trying not to scowl.

Maybe there's a rational explanation. One that won't make me blast through the roof.

"Just a family favor, Marshal. I'll only have it a day or two. They needed me to pick it up, and I figured it wouldn't be a problem. Jackson knows. He's also perfectly aware why I'm here and who I'm working for."

My fingers pinch my arm. I suppress a growl. “I’m not asking you to fall down and beg for permission. But shit, it would’ve been nice if you’d decided to drop a head’s up before bringing a killer’s fucking wheels here.”

“Killer?” Her echo is pointed and sharp. As it should be.

I’ve said too much. Fuck this.

I’m about to walk away when she rushes over, throws her hands on my shoulders, refusing to let go. I turn, giving her the ice in my eyes. “I don’t understand, Marshal. Killer, what? What *are* you talking about?”

“Nothing. He’s an asshole, is all I meant.” I can’t let her on to what I’m planning. “Look, I want that thing gone ASAP. Next time you drag his shit on my property, ask first.”

I tear myself away, stomping back outside, ignoring her eyes trailing after me. This whole thing is a mistake.

It’s just a question of how fucking big, how irreparable it really is.

Worst part is, I hate being an asshole to her. My stomach knots at something that used to come naturally.

Wicked, wicked irony.

I don’t know who I’m becoming. Red has me so tangled up in her innocence, her beauty, her living cliché, I’m risking the only thing that’ll ever give my dead friends peace.

That has to stop now.



“SHIT.” I glance up at the clock hanging in my shop. It’s an old Felix the Cat hand-me-down from my grandpa, big mechanical eyeballs moving with every tick. It’s past eight thirty, long after I should have come inside, sat down for dinner, and then brought my little girl upstairs.

I throw the parts down I’ve been working on, wiping my hands. Pretending to, anyway. I can’t keep my eyes off the black truck, almost invisible in the night, a demon chance taunting me.

If I could find an excuse to sneak out there, fuck with a few choice parts, and then return it myself...

No, asshole, I warn myself for the thousandth time.

It’s too insane. Too evil. Too risky.

Unless I know for sure her prick of a brother will be driving, without

endangering anybody else on the road, I can't take him out like this.

Right?

The clock ticks louder than usual. It brings my gaze to the same picture that always draws my eyes, the one with my boys outside Kandahar.

It flashes through my head again like lightning. War, mistakes, and murder return in the blink of an eye.

The prick himself, Jackson, younger and cockier. Selling our commanding officer a load of horseshit about how easy it would be, how sure he thought the target was in the mountain compound, virtually unguarded.

It didn't jive with everything we'd heard from the villages at the foot of the mountain. But fuck, the drone's photos seemed to back up the prick's story. He was gunning for a big promotion. So certain he volunteered to lead us into the thick of it himself.

He had local sources, see. More than just grainy pics. Guys who hadn't been vetted by proper intelligence, and who liked to tell tall tales to anybody in a U.S. uniform in exchange for a few precious dollars, which can stretch for weeks in Afghanistan.

They also loved to murder the shit out of rivals who'd crossed them in blood feuds and ancient politics. They loved it even more when we did their dirty work for them.

I knew the scheme. I saw how uneasy Adam looked. Remembered that look Zane gave me with his eyes, pleading, *say something, sir*.

And I did. I voiced my objection. The commander said he'd consider it, and, of course, it was overruled by morning.

We did our best, and our best became a clusterfuck.

Our best got good men killed.

Our best was a completely preventable shit show egged on by a glory hog who refused to take the fall. The very same asshole who limped home to our little town and did the same shit here, exploiting his purple heart at every opportunity.

There's a sour taste in my mouth. Reaching under the bench, I grab one of the last beers from my New Year's pack and crack it open. I need to take the edge off. I chug half the contents on the walk to the house.

Red stops me mid-sentence once I'm inside, seeing her there at the table.

One look turns my blood molten. She's ready for bed, wrapped in a tight skin-

colored gown that leaves too damn little to the imagination. Hell, it's like it *forces* me to picture her naked.

What are you trying to do, woman? What the hell are you trying to do?

"You couldn't wait till you were down for the night?" I glare at her, hard and unblinking. "Dress code."

"It's as fancy as what you're wearing, Mr. Bluejeans." She rolls her eyes, watching me snatch off my faded jean jacket and throw it on the scuffed hanger by the door.

"Mia?" I ask. The familiar shot of adrenaline only a father knows spikes my blood.

"I put her down a little early. Upset tummy. She's sleeping peacefully upstairs, if you want to say goodnight. But, uh, maybe you need a napkin or something first?" She smiles, giving a terse nod at the beer droplets clinging to my chin.

I don't even reach for the napkin she tries to pass, wiping my face with my sleeve. "Whatever."

Ignoring her half eye roll, I head upstairs to Mia's room. I stand next to my little girl's bed, stroking her hair, watching her sleep.

I hate missing story time. Haven't done that for the better part of a year.

Tonight, she's peaceful. Such a sweet contrast to the uneasy tossing and turning, the nightmares that used to wrack her brain. It's been about a year since she woke up screaming in the middle of the night.

Before her speech developed, I never knew why. Now, on the mornings she wakes up early, restless from the night before, she speaks hurt in her tiny little voice. "Afraid, daddy. 'Fraid you'll leave me."

It's like a stake through the heart. Those are the times I grab her tight, hold on, and promise daddy's never going anywhere.

Then the guilt sinks its teeth in. Chews my heart to pieces.

I'm a fucking liar and I don't want to be.

I wish I could promise her I'll be good, I'll be enough, and no, nothing will ever drag me away from her as long as I'm breathing. I want like hell to say it and *mean* it, more than life itself.

But I can't.

Because what I'm swearing up and down to honeybee clashes with the vow I made to three dead men.

I know what it means. Know the risks.

If I screw up, if I get caught trying to put Jackson Kelley under, there are plenty of ways I'll be stripped away from her for life.

Hell is this paradox.

How the fuck do I keep both promises? How do I live with myself breaking one?

I don't know. I press my lips hard to honeybee's forehead, banishing the torture before I whisper the same words I do every night. "Sleep tight, baby girl. You're safe, you're loved, and you always will be."

That part is true, at least. I'll die before it isn't.

I'm in no mood for Red waiting in the kitchen. She's standing by the stove, her arms crossed, eyeballing me from the knees up.

I tilt my head without saying a word. *What the fuck now?!*

"You called my brother 'killer,'" she says quietly. "What did he do over there? There's a reason you hate him."

Guilty. But I'll be damned if I buckle so easy and spill.

"Mind your own business, Red. You'll never understand. It's better that way." I turn my back, ready to beat it. Too bad she's too fast. Those little hands reach out, catch the nape of my neck, and squeeze.

I whip around. There's a thousand stars dancing in her evergreen eyes. "Try me. I don't want to take his side just because we're family, Marshal. If he's done something truly awful, then —"

"Then the last thing you want is a grandstanding chickenshit for a brother!" I'm snarling. Somehow, her wrist made it into my hand. She's shocked, and then it's my turn. "Look, I'm trying to save you. I also need some damn sleep, woman. Yeah, your brother made mistakes. Big ones. That's done now. You want to know, find out from the horse's mouth."

Her jaw falls open and closes just as quick. Her sharp little tongue flicks across her lips, giving me another sensation I don't need. I can't get hard in the middle of this. "But..."

"But nothing, Red. Listen! Ask yourself what's the point of me dropping the ugly truth on your head? Do you really want to see every skeleton in his closet and wreck a perfectly happy family?"

She hesitates, jerks her eyes away, burning a hole through the wall with her stare. "I don't...I don't know anymore, Marshal. No one tells me anything."

“That’s what I thought,” I whisper, letting her hand drop.

And that’s how it has to be.

Her silence is my cue to exit. I drag my ass upstairs with electric venom nipping at my veins.

Sad thing is, treating her like shit is the lesser evil. This predicament is my fault, too. I slipped up when I called him ‘killer.’ Put a new worry in her pretty little head that’s only making this harder.

Too goddamn bad. My lips are sealed.

No good will ever come from laying Jackson’s dirt at his sister’s door.

Not for me, not for my mission, not for her.

I’m heading for my room, resisting the urge to slam the door shut like I want to, so hard it rattles the entire house. I can’t wake Mia.

She’s too precious. I’m already risking too much hurt she doesn’t deserve, pursuing this vendetta. Her little face brings me to a stop in the hall. The pictures from when she was just a newborn hang there, framed in the moonlight streaming through the window.

So tiny, but bigger than the world itself. Knew it the first time I picked her up, and the feeling’s never gone away.

So soft and so dependent. She needs me, and even though I act like I don’t, it’s mutual.

I need her. Mia keeps me sane, focused, prevents me from lashing out like a bigger fool than I’ve already been.

I’m so lost in my own skull I don’t hear the footsteps behind me. I’m ready to throw the intruder through the nearest wall the second those hands grab my waist, but I relax once I realize whose they are.

They’re too small, too warm, too regretful to be dangerous.

“I’m sorry for down there,” Sadie whispers, tickling the nape of my neck.

In no time at all, I’m aching again. My dick throbs, fuller and angrier than ever, a lightning rod for the turmoil storming my soul.

Please, Christ, make it go away.

When I turn, face her, and fix my eyes on that pale face surrounded in cinnamon, please just let this be done.

Of course, it never is. A growl deepens in my throat, and I push her against the wall, taking both her little hands in mine.

“What do you want, darling? It’s bedtime.”

If only it were that simple. The beast part of me pulsing between my legs doesn’t know what sleep even means. It begs me to do the unthinkable, turns her into a distracting piece of sex before my eyes.

“I’m apologizing, asshole. Can’t you just take it?” There’s a real angst in her eyes tonight, hot and frustrated.

I shouldn’t stare. Shouldn’t let it deepen the madness ripping through my system, the new sick urges I can’t ignore.

It wants me to fuck this out, whatever *this* is. And I want to bad, use her body to pull it out of me, fill her soft young cunt until I’m twitching, spent, purified.

“What apology?” I have to ask again, wondering if I’ve lost the capacity for making sense of words. “I’m the one who’s been a cock tonight. You deserve better, Red. Go to sleep. I’ll reign it in and do better tomorrow. Give you my word.”

Every last alarm in my wilting sanity blasts full volume. It’s my last chance to walk away, but her little hands squeeze mine, lacing her soft, skinny fingers through my calloused paws.

“Stop. You blame yourself constantly, Marshal. It isn’t healthy.” She pauses. “Obviously, there are reasons you act this way. Reasons why you’re holding so much anger.” She pushes closer, coming through the wall I’ve formed with my arms. Goddamn, her touch diffuses me. “No one should be this alone. I’m not asking for secrets. I just want to *know* you.”

This. Girl.

This woman. She’s up close and personal with every demon crawling in my skin, and she’s still clueless what she’s getting herself into.

My hands fall to her wrists again, tighter than before. Our gaze is locked. “Sadie, fuck...why won’t you go? Why won’t you listen?”

“Because I’m sick of watching you hurt,” she whispers. Balmy wetness fills her eyes. They’re wide, dilated, prickling every nerve in my body. “And maybe, just maybe, I think there’s more than a raging asshole under the surface. A man who shouldn’t have to be alone.”

I throw my head back, pinching my jaw. The plea oozing through my teeth comes out forced. “Step away, Red. Last chance. Go, now, before we both do something we’ll fucking regret.”

Of course, she doesn’t listen. Her soft hands move up my arms and then wrap

around my back. They glide upward, criss-crossing under my shirt, trying to peel it off my body.

“I’m done with regrets,” she whispers, less than an inch from my face.

It’s the last sentence I hear before something soft and wet and wonderful lands on my lips. Her taste is in my mouth again, full and lush, but I don’t savor it.

I become a wild animal breaking its chain. I reach for her body, crush her against the wall, and take everything my dick has wanted for weeks while she’s paraded around my house. My tongue plows into hers, rough and possessive, and the moan I get back says *more*.

Fuck.

Regrets? There will be plenty, but there’s too much inertia to stop.

After I’ve owned the spitfire tongue that’s left my head a ruin, I’m grabbing the rest. I’m owning it.

I’m going to fuck the everlasting hell out of Sadie Kelley until one of us walks away broken.

CASCADE (SADIE)

A thousand suns light me up. Except their heat, their energy, their power was never this deliciously masculine.

Kissing Marshal freely is an out-of-body experience. Having his hands trawling my curves defies description.

I'm not in Kansas anymore, or heck, not even Port Eagle, Iowa.

I'm in his hands. I'm on his tongue. Undone, piece by piece, reduced to the sharp hum anchored in my thighs, the incessant craving.

"Marshal!" His name is one more slurred moan once he breaks for air. "Jesus."

"No," he rumbles, grabbing my chin, touching his forehead to mine. The edge of his stubble grazes my cheek, seductive and rough. I'm scared and excited to find out what it'll feel like between my legs. "Leave him the fuck out of it, Red. We're already balls deep in blasphemy."

I'm so flushed I'm shaking. This is wrong on so many levels, but he isn't.

My hand slides back in his. Those baby blues cemented in his head pin me down, a hunger more like a wild animal's than a man's lapping to get out. "You. Bed. Right the fuck now."

I remember not to squeal at the last second. My feet are off the ground and I'm thrown over his shoulder. His footsteps race the furious tempo of my own heart as he carries me down the hall.

It's a nice distance, comfortably several walls away from Mia's room, but I hope like nothing else we won't wake her.

Marshal's subtle, rough scent amplifies in the bedroom. I can't take a breath without smelling him in the sheets draped over his spartan bed, in the work clothes hanging in his closet, and yes, *all over me*.

My nostrils bristle. His scent is just like his taste: pain dipped in passion, a little bit of motor oil, and so overwhelmingly *real*.

“Marshal, please!” I hiss, falling against the bed, bucking against his hand. He’s grabbing at the hem of my gown. He’s already torn one of the straps, leaving my right boob nearly exposed.

I thought he’d suck it, flick it with his thumb, but there’s no stopping the animalistic need to be inside me. He has me bent over, pressing his hard-on against my wetness, edge of my gown tossed over my ass.

It’s suddenly paper thin. Like I’ve been wrapped up and served, and his rough, marauding hands are going *everywhere*.

“You really want to fuck me, Red? You want a dick inside you attached to a mouth that can’t kiss without teeth?” He’s snarling in my ear.

His hand reaches for my neck, gives it a firm squeeze. Then a brusque shake, demanding answers.

“Would I be here if I didn’t?” I whimper.

No sooner than the words are out, something hot stings my ass. A delectable *crack* explodes in my ears.

Holy hell. He didn’t just do that...did he?

I haven’t even lost my virginity, and I’m being spanked.

“Wrong fucking answer, Red. If you want this, if you want me to give you every inch, then say it. *Say it.*” Every word rips out of him sharper.

I’m tense and hot. Squirming underneath him. His bulge presses into my panties, separated only by our clothes. My ache becomes insane.

And, God, he’s still holding me down.

“Yes, Marshal. Please. Please be my first.” My moan crescendos and softens, wondering why his pressure is suddenly so much less.

Those rough hands catch my shoulders, flip me around, and put us face-to-face. His huge chest rises and falls. I think we both know I just screwed up. I never should’ve said the word *first*.

“Too honest?” I whisper, hoping it cuts the tension.

“What the fuck did you mean by *first*?” Raging blue eyes shift, searching mine. “You can’t be serious, Red, telling me you’ve never fucked a man before?”

Who knew hot, cold, and awkward could merge like a melting sundae? Okay,

so when I'm half-naked, sopping wet, and begging to have my brains screwed out by a beast-man like Marshal Howard, announcing my virginity probably isn't the smartest move.

"It's true, but so what? I'm ready. I want you, Marshal. I want to give myself to –"

"Fuck." He eases backward, hand over his face, snarling as he ruffles his thick hair. "Fuck!"

My cheeks blaze like twin suns. I sit up, hands on my knees, pulling down my gown. I'm holding my breath, waiting for him to turn around, and look me in the eye. If I'm destined to shuffle back to my room tonight, humiliated and alone, then let's just get this over with.

But he doesn't say a word. Just stops, hand against the wall, staring like a wolf.

"What?" It comes out sharply. I can't take the suspense. "Seriously?!"

"You." He lifts a hand and points. "This is crazy, Red. Wrong. All kinds of fucked up in ways I didn't know existed."

My teeth prod my bottom lip. I don't like how he's staring. There's a hundred reasons to get up, walk over, and send my hand flying across his cheek like lightning. But there's another reason I'm paralyzed, questioning how it's still possible to want him as bad as I do when he's dressing me down like a dumb kid.

Marshal is a freaking enigma.

His pose, just a little too stern. His eyes, too bright. His voice, too much like thunder to leave me certain about anything.

I can't figure him out. Even when he's being a jackass, I can't, and it makes me a moth to flame.

I jump when he starts moving. It's such a deliberate, quick motion, so fast he's next to me again, fingers in my hair, teasing new goosebumps on my skin.

"Real talk: as bad as I want to rip that thing to shreds, push your face into the pillow, and fuck you hoarse, I shouldn't. You deserve better for your first. Some skinny, smiley little prick who didn't get hollowed out in a war zone, who didn't knock up a one-night bar stand." His breath is so heavy on my throat, skipping up my neck as it travels to my ear. "But fuck, Red. Fuck. There's that *need*. Desire makes a man crazy. Here's your last chance: tell me to fuck you, and I will."

My hands tense in my lap, a hard ball pressed together. Those eyes of his aren't just undressing me. They're blue oceans with a terrible undertow and zero apologies. They catch me, drown me, draw me into a deep trench with no escape written all over it.

"Marshal...please." My cheeks are overheating before I even say it, the crude, nasty thing he's demanding. "I want this. I want you. I want us to enjoy one night. Fuck me."

I'm expecting a second of hesitation, one last *oh-Jesus-is-this-really-happening* moment.

I'm flat out wrong.

Marshal curls one hand around my head, seizing a few locks of my hair. He pulls until my lips are primed for his. Our kiss is a collision, and it's happening while his other hand takes the left strap of my gown that's still intact.

One quick jerk destroys it. *Oh, hell.*

I'm moaning, he's growling, and our tongues are two sucking fuses lit on fire. He pushes me against the bed, the better to drink me in, grinding his cock into my panties. My clit throbs against his friction, harder by the second through my panties, soaked and tight and so damn ready.

My breath hitches when he leans back, stripping me down to new naked levels with his eyes. It's just a prelude to actually being naked, in the flesh. Marshal's hands go to the loose fabric hanging on my breasts. He takes it in both hands and rips.

My gown screams. The entire thing parts in his ruthless hands, falls around me like a torn sheath, revealing my bare breasts for his animal tongue.

Holy hell, it's on.

His hands, his mouth, his teeth surround my nipples. They're pebbled, pleading, begging to be sucked and stroked sane again. Lucky me this brute is a master.

His stubble rakes new friction on my skin, igniting fresh moans.

His hand cups my left breast and squeezes while his mouth attacks the right. My nipple disappears in his mouth. Pleasure comes in waves that make me ripple.

His eyes – holy hell, those eyes – never release me for more than a second. They're forged to mine, studying every tick in my face, and there are so many it's embarrassing. There's something shameful, becoming undone like this for

him, but my body doesn't care.

My heart regrets nothing.

Good thing, too, because his kisses zip down the softness of my belly. He lifts my leg, holds it at an angle, opening the path for his frantic hunger. Then his mouth races up my thighs again, trading kisses on each, and then the faintest nip of teeth.

Oh, God. Oh, God!

I'm afraid I'll come before he's even touched my fuse.

My panties ball up in his hands. There's less than two seconds from the time I lift my ass and they swing off my ankles, baring all.

I'm naked. Exposed. Brutally wet.

He stops with his face in front of my swollen pussy lips. There's a growl in his throat. Hot, sweet breath greets my wetness.

Then the warmth stops. He's inhaling me. Slowly and maddeningly in control.

"Please," I whisper again, voice shaking. "Please, Marshal."

Oh, but this beast has his own schedule, and apparently it's not the same as mine. He looks up a second later, new blue fire in his eyes, just as his hand finds its way between my legs and spreads me open. "No. Fuck my fingers first."

His thumb drifts over my clit. His pressure mounts just out of reach, making me work for it. And I do.

Legs splayed over his huge shoulders, I'm grinding into him. I need this. Rocking my pussy on his hand, searching for the delicious friction again, begging for release.

Marshal's thumb pushes in, covering my clit, vibrating. My breath stalls out in my lungs.

So. Damn. Close.

His free hand reaches up, pinches my chin, aiming his gaze into me. "Come for me, darling. Come like a good girl before you get to do it a whole lot harder on my tongue."

His hand starts moving again, quickening its hypnotic rhythm. There's a tense, sticky heat in my belly, an explosion, and I'm *gone*.

My first O shears me in two.

Thighs shaking, sheets balled in both hands, rendered breathless. I'm coming

harder than anything I've ever had with my own fingers or the tiny silver vibrator I keep in my drawer at home.

His fingers press my opening apart, but stop just short of entering. He's making me wait for his mouth, his cock, his fury.

He's drenched every nerve in whiskey with his *don't you fucking stop* look, and his thumb won't let me dream of it.

Who the hell is this? Surely, not Sadie anymore. The girl on his hand is a humping, heated, sweat soaked mess – everything feels hotter than it should on a cold winter's night – and nothing, *nothing*, stops the onslaught.

Not until it's over.

Not until he's given me my fill.

Not until his hand drifts away from the vice of my thighs, he pinches my face harder, and his kiss eases me back from heaven.

My eyes flutter, still trying to process what just happened. *You came like you didn't know you could, stupid*, I tell myself.

There's no denying it. The satisfied smirk on his lips won't let me tell any lies.

"Always knew you'd come fucking beautiful, Red," he whispers, running his fingers briskly through my hair again. He waits until my eyes are his before the next words come. "Touch me."

I don't know what he means. I sit up and the room is spinning. There's a new sight to take in as he grips his shirt, rolls it up his body, and exposes every miraculous inch of his skin.

He's even more of a mountain than I thought.

Smooth in his peaks and valleys. Rugged where it counts. Shadows everywhere, branded on his skin in tangled, messy ink. Blazing warm to my touch.

I gnaw my lip, extending a hand. My fingers connect with his side and move cautiously across his warrior abs. My hand saunters over his feral tattoos like I'm afraid they'll burn.

So hot. So wild. So hard.

So damn hard.

My eyes flit to the bulge in his jeans. My hand starts moving down, but he's faster than me. I gasp when his fist catches my wrist, stopping my hand in mid-air. "No. Let me guide you."

His other hand flicks his jeans open, roughs down the zipper, and he shuffles out of his pants. His boxers are a flick from coming off. There's a new heat in my blood before his exposed cock pops out just from seeing the outline.

It's...nothing like I expect. Except for guessing he'd be massive, I mean.

"Holy..." I stop mid-sentence, fingers trembling. Marshal wears a ghostly smile as he moves my hand to his cock, pushes my fingers around his full length, and we glide down it together.

Of course, he's augmented. Unnatural. The small metal nub in his swollen head tickles my skin.

"Welcome home, Sadie. It's pierced, it's rock, and it's down to fuck you senseless, darling. You ever used your mouth on a man?" He stares through me while I shake my head. "Good. Plenty of chances to learn. Put your virgin tongue to work, Red. Wow me."

Great. It's totally no pressure when he sounds like he's expecting miracles.

I've never given a blowjob in my life, but I'm an eager student. I sink down on my knees, leaning into him, gripping his cock by the base while I lower my mouth.

His head snaps back. Thunder quakes in his throat, a satisfied rumble. "Yeah, yeah. So fucking tight."

I try not to smile when he groans. Then I just focus on moving up and down, taking his fullness, tasting his masculine essence. That stud in his cock is a nice marker. It gives me something to drag my tongue up to again and again, before I dive back down, taking more of him every time, whatever I can handle.

I'm not even halfway down his length. My pussy, quietly afraid of his size, melts anyway in a hot, wet need.

He groans again. Louder. I suck faster.

There's a strange, wicked pride building the more this beast rumbles, the more he tenses along my tongue, the harder he stares out through narrowed, violent blues.

He's like a sexual volcano, release building, but his expression is the most relaxed I've ever seen.

Marshal is vulnerable. Enjoying himself, for once. And it's all thanks to me.

I moan the next time I drag my tongue down. His fist pulls my hair tighter, guiding me up, glaring at the hand I put between my legs. It's instinct, and it's impossible to resist touching myself while I've got a mouthful of his cock.

“Enough,” he says softly.

Confused, I try to suck harder, moving my mouth as quickly as I can. The fierce tension in my hair sharpens, but it’s also reluctant when he pulls.

“I said, ‘enough.’” His eyes are darker than the dim room, expecting obedience.

He tips his face up, motioning me to stand. I do, running my tongue over my lip. “Sorry. Was it...you know?”

“Good? One more minute and I’d have busted in your mouth. Not because you’re some virtuoso in sucking dick like a whore, but because it’s you. You on this dick, and only fucking you, Red.”

Touching. In a weird, shameful, heart-wrenching way.

I try not to read too much in his words. He certainly wouldn’t want me to. But it’s like I’ve just received a gold star on my first cock sucking test from a bear of a teacher I shouldn’t even be with.

Just because it’s wrong doesn’t mean I’m not proud of it.

“On your hands and knees, on the bed. Now.” His hands circle my ass, pinching my cheeks, bringing me home.

I turn, giving my butt a defiant shake. His low growl brings a smile to my lips, and then I’m on the bed, shamefully naked and open and loving it.

Is this it? I’m waiting for his raging fullness to fill me any second. The bed sinks beneath his weight. But it’s too heavy, too concentrated in one place to warrant an imminent fuck.

His stubble tickles my thighs. There’s just enough time to gasp before he buries his face in my pussy.

I try to take it, just like he wants, but it’s overwhelming.

Marshal’s hands on my thighs, holding me open. Frantic licks dive-bombing my aching cunt, pulling me open a little more each time. He’s sucking, tasting, owning me from the inside-out.

Mercy.

I don’t even try to last.

My hands grip the pillows above my head for dear life as I collapse on the bed, ass up and at his mercy. Snarling, he pulls on my legs again, making me the world’s most pampered prisoner to his tongue.

My clit burns, swells, and ignites.

Then it's all just fire. So much more than the first time.

My blood becomes a cocktail bent on vicious ecstasy. Chemicals churn in my veins, hit my lower belly, join the heat and give themselves over to the expert chemist's tongue. With just the right pressure, Marshal pulls my tiny, pulsing nub into his teeth and strokes like it's his last time.

Because hell, maybe it will be. And if tonight is the only night I'm destined to enjoy the Castoff's fuck-genius, I want to come harder than I ever thought possible.

My appetite hasn't softened a bit for his cock. The latest O he laps into my body, leaving me breathless, offers relief.

It's fleeting. By the time I'm able to tilt my face on the pillow to replenish my spent lungs, the need surges in my pussy again.

It's madness, but it's real. Probably medically unhealthy, too, and there's only one cure.

His hand slides into mine from behind. "Turn, Sadie. Spread those legs and get the fuck ready."

Helping me, pushing his massive body between my legs, reaching across the side of the bed. The drawer to his homemade nightstand rips open so hard it slams against wood.

My eyes focus through the darkness, just in time to see him tearing open foil with his teeth. The condom hangs in his fingers like a portal to another world. He grabs my hand, guiding it to the rubbery sheath, and then to his cock, fuller than ever and leaking pre-come.

It slides on with a pleasant tightness. Then I'm falling gently, legs open and under him. Finally ready.

"Breathe for me, darling," he growls, placing his hand gently on my throat. The head of his cock presses closer to my entrance. "Look here. Give me your eyes when I take your cherry."

Oh, God.

He's taking so much more than my virginity. I'm delirious.

My hands go flush to his big, powerful arms. Then he's moving in, hips pushing hard, the head of his cock forcefully taking, filling, staking its claim.

My pussy burns. Something soft and faint gives way. There's a second of pain, and then a little more as my walls fight to take him in all his pierced wonder. But it works because I was made for it.

In this weird, sensual *I-can't-believe-I'm-actually-fucking-Marshal* moment, I think I was custom made for *him*.

Marshal grunts when his cock pushes in to the hilt. His balls rest against my ass, warm and full, God only knows how many pumps away from giving up their fire. Holding his position, his hand takes my breast, and my nipple throbs in his fingers as he smothers me in a kiss.

“Fuck me, Red. Throw your little hips into mine. Yeah, darling, just like that.” A satisfied groan melts into another kiss.

I listen, and we're off.

Losing our minds. Fusing our bodies. Matching pulses.

My senses shut down. I lift my legs higher, fighting through the early discomfort, the burn. Pleasure rewards me a little more with every thrust. And then a lot when I'm able to push my hips into his.

My whimpers get more shrill by the second, drowning out the soft creak of the bed. His thrusts are coming harder, faster. They lift me up and punch me down again, masculine power slamming into me.

Marshal's eyes burn like never before. It's so intense I want to look away, if only he weren't holding my chin, keeping my lips ready every time he wants to stamp another rough kiss into me.

There's a new side of him in bed. It's wounded, frantic, and dangerously greedy. He owns me harder in every thrust, and that's where I sense him letting go, wishing our bodies were the entire universe.

My fingers pinch his arms harder. I move my hips into his, bite into our next kiss, as rough as I can stand because I want him to be okay, damn it. I don't want him to think. I want him to be here, with me, sharing this reckless, beautiful heat.

Harder, Marshal. Fuck me and forget the rest.

Just you, and me, and fire.

Whatever I'm doing, it works. He can't control the roughness entering his rhythm.

His hips slam mine so hard I might bruise. Delicate friction from his pubic bone becomes a fierce rubbing, rocketing my clit into ecstasy.

My mouth falls open, seeking desperate breath. “Marshal, I can't...I can't!”

The words I can't form tell him surrender is just a heartbeat away.

Those blue fires in his eyes intensify, and he grabs my hands. He pins me to

the bed. His hips go rabid, thrusting like they're fully possessed. They finish me.

The fireball he's lit in my belly explodes, careening through the rest of me. My body hitches to his and I'm a convulsing mess, entirely undone by the unstoppable O ripping through me.

It's an eternity before it stops. Marshal sees to that, shoving my wrists deep into the mattress, grunting every time I bite the pillow to stop the screams, fucking like a piston. He wants my O harder, faster, deeper.

He thrusts through my pussy clenching his cock. Undaunted, feral, fueled by animal want.

My body is fried on so many levels, and we're nowhere near done. It's incredible how I still want – no, *need* – him to finish.

I don't understand it, but I do.

Marshal's next kiss is heavy. His tongue chases mine, says we're not done until he's given me some of that fire torching his veins.

His next few thrusts are electric, more deliberate than before. Growling, he lets my hands up. Seizing my legs, he throws them over his shoulders, lending better leverage.

His huge inked body becomes a hammer. He crashes into me, his huge chest rising and falling faster.

He rocks me to my very core.

Nerves I didn't know I had dance. Pulse quickens. Every bone in my body sings. My fingernails push into the soft sheets, seeking coolness, relief from Marshal's firestorm.

It's the contrast, two delicious sensations colliding, that rips open the sky and showers us in ecstasy.

My legs tremble, tuned to the thunder welling in his throat. "Come for me, Red. We come together. Right the fuck *now*!"

Vicious words. They're dirty, roughness in my ears, and also irresistible.

"Marshal!" His name is a hoarse whisper. It's the last thing I recognize before everything turns blinding white.

Release comes, fierce and incandescent.

Shaking, sweating, clutching at each other, we give in. We give all.

My legs pinch his waist and he bows up inside me, pouring his heat into the

condom. It's hotter than anything.

His cock sinks into me, throbbing, and I look up. Marshal's jaw pinches tight as his body shudders. His seed flows like madness itself leaving him.

Then there's a tense peace on his face. A relief. Like all the burdens corroding him from the inside-out are vapor. It's unexpected, beautiful, and it makes me come harder.

Relief is infectious, too. There's an afterglow waiting once my spasms wane; happy, soft, and freeing.

His grip is looser, but his eyes are still glued to mine. I reach up, stroking his big arms. Then I find his hand, push my fingers through his, holding on and waiting for him to leave a new empty ache in my body.

His hips roll back, untangling us slowly.

"Shit," he whispers.

Oh, no. It can't be *that* bad pulling out, right? But the second my eyes hit the space between us, noticing the soft smear on the tip of his cock, it's my turn to echo his soft curse.

"Shit!"

Fingers trembling, I reach between my legs. There's something thick and hot spilling out of me, far too much to be natural.

"Fucking condom broke," he growls. "Hang on."

I watch all six feet of his hard, gorgeous body rise. He carries the mess in his hand to the bathroom. I hear it hit the trash and then the running water.

It's a strange background track to contemplate the myriad ways my life could change after tonight. Unintended consequences never seemed so real.

Of course, I can't just let it happen.

I'm sitting on the bed when he comes out, fingers combing his dark hair with his fingers. "Darling, I'm sorry. That's never happened before. Haven't even boned for the better part of a year. What are the odds?"

"Nothing we need to worry about," I say, smiling as I pat the bed. I wait for him to calm down and sit next to me. "Remember June at the clinic? Front desk? We're still on friendly terms. I'm sure she'll help me get some Plan B. It pays to have a direct line to the pharmacy."

He stares for a second, then reaches over, takes my hands, and lifts them to his lips. The kiss he plants on my wrists, one at a time, is exactly what *I* need to calm down. "Whatever happens, we'll deal. It's nothing I can't handle,

Red.”

Is he talking about the possibility – even with the drug – that I could wind up pregnant? No way.

That’s *not* happening. Still, it’s sweet, in its own weird, wonderful, panicky way.

Apparently, I didn’t just sleep with a beast who made my first time memorable because he’s so damn good at it.

I slept with a good heart. It’s there somewhere, buried behind the body sculpted by war, torment, and dark black ink coiled across his skin like serpents.

“You need a ride now, or what?” he asks, baby blues interrogating me softly.

“We’re fine. The night’s young, Marshal. And it’s not like the next few hours will change anything after we’ve had one broken condom. Why don’t we pick up where we left off before sleeping? I’ll do it first thing tomorrow.” I raise an eyebrow, tightening my fingers in his, tempting him.

He looks me up and down. That hunger I love returns. Reaching for my hand, he guides it to his cock, wraps my fingers snug, and squeezes. “Guy I knew in the army always told me to watch out for redheads. Devils, all of them, he said. Never thought I’d ever want to break a fuck record in one night with one.”

Oh, but we do.

The night blurs on in a sex crazed haze. My virgin pussy isn’t just broken into womanhood by morning. It’s taken, filled, stretched, completed in the best ways.

The last time Marshal bends me over, sinking his bare cock to the hilt in long, deep strokes, I can’t stop smiling.

It’s different now. This isn’t wrong anymore.

It’s natural. Comfortable. *Right*.

We fit together in mysterious ways beyond how well his thrusts light me on fire.

My toes curl, dipped in pleasure, right before he crashes into me again. His cock plunges deep, swells deliciously, and erupts.

I come with no apologies, drawing in his thick, naked heat. Losing myself in Marshal’s very essence. He empties into me with a roar, draining his balls, snug against my clit as they pulse out their contents.

The mess he leaves behind when we crash, tangled in each other's arms, is oddly satisfying.

There was always something we couldn't quite work out with words. It's nice to let our bodies do the talking for a change in the primal, secret language only the flesh understands.

I woke up his nanny, and nothing more.

Tonight, we're lovers.

Whatever we become tomorrow, just like he told me, *we'll deal*.

INSPIRATION (MARSHAL)

These tractors are a goddamned pain in the ass.

Not the old ones, which were built to survive the third world war, but the new machines with their pretty looks. Prone to breakdowns whenever you need them most. That's why I'm inside this beast's shell, hands in her guts.

Building frustration is the only extra warmth I get in the twenty degree cold.

Normally, I'd have spat out the flashlight pinched in my teeth a few times over, struck by the need to swear like a sailor.

Not today. It's different since I woke up, my dick a little sore and a few faint scratch marks on my back. Red has all the makings of a wildcat in bed for any man who puts in the time to train her.

He clearly isn't me, but fuck, what happened last night was fun. Something I needed for a good long while.

It's drained the poison from my skull, letting me work with a patience and a focus I haven't had for months. Maybe years.

I shine the light higher, find the half-stripped bolt I missed the first time around, and grab my wrench. It isn't long before I've got that bastard off, freeing the parts underneath. Takes half an hour to solve what should be a day long problem.

Thing I've always liked about good sex isn't just the momentary burn. It's the inspiration, the focus, the peace that hits later.

It's almost lunchtime. If I get moving, the owner can even pick up his machine today. Which I'm sure he'll need with a major snow dump in the forecast later this week. Most guys here draft their farming equipment for snow removal off harvest season.

I'm wiping my hands clean on a rag when I hear the loud *ka-thunk* outside. Either Frankenstein has shown up outside my shop, or it's a vehicle groaning

in agony.

I rush out and see a flustered Red in the driver's seat. Her brother's truck. Mia sits behind her, tucked into her hoodie. Her little blue eyes are anxious from the racket.

"Turn it off!" I growl, tapping on the window.

Red kills the engine before she rolls it down. There's a knowing look in her eye behind the concern for the truck's life. "Ugh, sorry. The guy at the garage told me it was good to go. Doesn't sound like it's fixed!"

"Take Mia. I'll open her up and see what I can do."

"Really? Okay. Thanks, Marshal." Her smile is different today. It's appreciative, subtle, more secret than before.

I know that look.

It's how a woman lays eyes on a man after he's bent her over and fucked her senseless. After he's owned her. Normally, I don't care, but this? It makes me look the hell away before I get too hard to be useful.

Mia chirps through the open door, helpfully banishing the thoughts. I grab my little girl out of the kiddie seat and pass her to my nanny, planting a kiss on her forehead. "Behave. Daddy needs to get this fixed before you head to town."

Honeybee tugs my stubble before I set her down. I rub my chin, wondering if I should just sprout a true beard. It's winter. Also might help us avoid a few uncomfortable stares. Less *Castoff freak* whispers when they think I can't hear, too.

I reach up, fixing my hat so it's protecting my ears, and stomp into the shop to grab my tools. I spend the next twenty minutes trying to find the problem.

Every evil demon comes to whisper in my ear. It's hard working with murder on my mind.

If there was ever a golden opportunity to kill Jackson Kelley, it's in my fucking lap.

My eyes comb over the truck's innards. The truck's real problem is an easy fix. A simple belt replacement. That's not why I'm staring into this thing like I'm face-to-face with the Reaper himself.

A small adjustment here, a snip of the brake line there, and I could end this.

Hell, figuring out how to get the truck back in his hands without killing anybody else wouldn't be difficult, if I really put my mind to it.

Every evil second that demon whispers louder in my ear, calling me a fool to pass this up. Heaven fucking help me.

My blood runs hot the longer I work. Zane, Adam, Erik.

Their faces flash by like bad memories. I hear them over my shoulder, speaking bloodlust in my ear, begging me to honor my promise.

Do what you said, Captain. Avenge us. Get the hell on with your life.

Jesus, I want to.

Do I fucking ever!

There's a loud giggle behind me and something hits my boot. The spirits banish in a cloud of snow dusting my feet.

I sit up and turn. Mia laughs in Sadie's arms, nanny crouched over her, a small pile of snowballs at their feet. "No, no, honeybee. He's busy. How about you throw them at the tree instead?" I notice the half-built snowman a few feet away once they're coming closer.

"Sorry. We were just playing. Things got a little out of hand." Red's bashful smile hangs on her lips. She's got a good hold on little Mia, the way it should be, keeping her from more mischief.

"Just a little longer, ladies. Quick tweak or two, and you'll be on your way."

"Great. I'll probably just drop it at my parents' place. Jackson can pick it up whenever. Maybe stop for lunch with mom. She's good with children, despite her issues." Her smile weakens, staring down at a hyper Mia clinging to her leg.

I turn, ignoring her, and start working the metal. Wish I had a radio. Maybe then they wouldn't be inclined to hang around while I fix the little starter problem.

Maybe I'd think twice about creating a new one guaranteed to be fatal.

"How is your brother, anyway?" I ask softly. *What's my best chance to trap him in a pile of crunched metal* is what I really mean.

"Uh, he's okay, I guess." She's as surprised as anybody I'm asking about him. "Busy with his business. Checking on our folks when he isn't. Living life."

"He's a lucky man if he doesn't think about Afghanistan anymore. Very lucky, stupid SOB." It'd be weird not to put a jab in there. I have to keep her guessing – especially with the tiny puncture in the brake line.

It'll bleed fluid for hours. Nice and slow. Just enough to let me drive it safely, if I'm careful, but not so long the asshole can avoid major problems next time

he's on the roads.

My brain ticks through the possibilities, how I can lure him to the dangerous, isolated stretches by the bluffs. A fake emergency call from a burner phone, maybe. I'll trail him, just to be safe. Give his vehicle the last nudge over the cliff, into the trees, through the ice coating the Mississippi.

"Like I said, he's busy, Marshal." She's still talking. "He's kind of a jerk sometimes, too. Married life changed him somewhat for the better that way – but not enough. Oh well. Maybe the new baby will do the trick."

Baby? I jerk up so hard I narrowly avoid denting my head on the hood. "What baby?"

She cocks her head, amused. "His wife, Ginger, she's pregnant. Barely made the announcement a month ago. I can't wait to be an aunt, honestly."

Shit, shit, shit. My best laid plans go to slag before my eyes. Mia murmurs behind me.

I can't do it. Not now. I can't risk killing a pregnant woman and her kid, if asshole decides to ride with her, or God forbid lets her drive instead. I won't do it, even if the odds are worse than going down in a plane crash with the winning fucking lotto numbers in your pocket.

Shit!

I'm so done. Digging the tape out of my tool box, I wrap up the damage I just caused.

Then I look a frozen Red in the eye while I lie through my teeth. "His brake line's bad. Sorry. You'll have to get the guys at the garage to take a look. It's getting late and I've got crap to do. I checked the fluid and patched it up as best I could. It's drivable, but I don't have time for a replacement job."

"Oh, no. It's okay! Thanks for trying."

The worst part is, she actually sounds grateful.

"I still need to get it back today. I'll let them know it needs some work. They can take it from there."

"Follow me over to your parents' house. I'll drive this thing, just to make sure it holds up like it should." I feel like I've taken a direct hit to the gut, especially once Red leans in, closes her eyes, and stamps a quick, discrete peck on my cheek.

I'm all kinds of fucked now. Screwed, blued, and tattooed.

I need to kill her goddamned brother. But how do I make that happen when,

as much as I'm too sick to admit it, I'm starting to need her smile?



THE TRUCK RUNS fine on the first few miles to her parents' house. No surprises.

The poison eating my guts is another story.

I tell myself the same shit over and over: *hands on the wheel. Focus. Don't let it fucking get to you.*

Every time, it's nothing. I just see Adam in my head, giving me that look I'll never forget before we rushed the compound.

"Sir, if we don't make it out of this for some reason...give my best to Bev. Take care of her. She's only one state over."

My eyes drill through him. A nervous tick stings my face for reasons I don't understand. "Shut the fuck up, Henderson. It's the same song and dance we've done a thousand times. In, out, marked, and clear before the hawks swoop in to mop up the remains. Easy."

That's how it should've been. I stormed through the brittle gate with my unit telling myself it was, repeating the lie. I began to believe it.

Then we got hit. Pinned down in the ambush those fuckers laid, the one we would've avoided if *someone* hadn't pushed his bad intel. The place wasn't nearly as unguarded as Jackson's friends in a Pashtun clan said. A fuck of a lot less deserted than the drone photos showed, too, which must have caught them when they were concealed, out on patrol, who knows.

His mistake was the worst fucking hour of my life.

First I watched two of my men, two of my best friends, cut to pieces. Zane and Erik, knees cut out under them, heavy rounds that wouldn't stop after they hit the dirt. Adam was the last man alive, his leg chewed up by sniper fire.

I tried to save him. Tried so fucking hard.

But the asshole, Lieutenant Jackson Kelley, knew we were hosed. He called for air support without checking if my team was clear, thinking we were already dead. Or maybe the prick just ignored my screams over the radio, too fucked up and damaged to go straight to command.

I'll never know what he heard, or didn't. It doesn't really matter.

I know what happened next.

In another life, it might've been a miracle I survived the screaming shrapnel

whizzing by my head with nothing worse than a clean slice across the forehead. But there was nothing miraculous about what was left of Adam.

One blinding flash and he was gone. Most of him. I still held his hands. The rest of him long since swept away in chaos and fire from above.

“Shit!”

Back in the present, I slam on the brakes. The black ice on the road nearly runs me into a ditch, and I have to work to pump the bandaged brakes, slowing the vehicle just short of a dip in the Mississippi.

Red’s car in front of me never slows. Apparently, she doesn’t notice. I’m grateful because Mia’s with her.

It’d be too sick an irony for my little girl to see daddy suffer the same fate that took the bitch who gave her birth. I may be fucked in the head, but I’m not ready to die. I’m not giving up, however rough this gets.

Not today. Not tomorrow. Not while I have promises to keep.



“UGH. GREAT TIMING.” Worry strains Red’s voice, instantly catching my attention.

“What now?” I growl, slamming the truck’s door. We’re parked in front of an average upper middle class house in town, her walking slowly toward me, Mia in her arms.

She doesn’t know I was already here Christmas night. That’s something I’ll keep to myself.

“She shouldn’t be out here in this weather. Just...play along, Marshal. Please.” I follow her eyes to the lonely figure on the porch. It’s an older, thinner woman with a restless darkness in her eyes.

She’s standing there, watching us, not a flicker of recognition in her face until Red opens up. “Hi, mom! Whatcha doing outside?”

So, this is her. The mysterious Mrs. Kelley, the woman who gave the most beautiful girl I ever laid eyes on life, and the only person in this town who might be more screwed up than me.

“What does it look like? I was hoping you’d bring a little angel here to keep me company one day.” Her face lights up, eyes fixed on my daughter. “What’s your name, sugar?”

Mia chews her lip, snuggling shyly into Red’s arms. I reach for her, knowing she’ll feel better with daddy. Honestly, so will I, not knowing what level of

crazy I'm dealing with.

"Mia, ma'am. That's her name. But she also goes by honeybee sometimes," I answer for my little girl.

Red's eyes pop and she turns her head, then sends another uneasy look toward her mom. "We're just here to drop off Jackson's truck. Where's dad?"

"Oh, who the hell knows? Putzing around the house, pretending to keep an eye on me, I'm sure. It's nice to get some fresh air during his naps. I could never get out when you were around, after all."

Sadie winces. It's slightly amusing seeing her dancing on serious eggshells, but what kind of prick would I be if I didn't offer her an out?

"Tell your son he's got major brake problems. That thing should be towed or driven very, very carefully. I'd have done the job myself, but we're out of time."

Mrs. Kelley perks up, giving Red a sideways glance. "Nice find, dear. Every woman appreciates a man who's good with his hands."

Red nearly falls over. Mia peeks over my shoulder and laughs at the awkward gesture, clapping her hands. I don't let on how much it shocks me.

"She's on my payroll. Nothing more." I give her my hardest look, but it doesn't do jack. Already hate how easily this crazy woman can see through my lies.

"And you must be the jackass who punched my son in the face a few years ago?" Mrs. Kelley smiles. I freeze, trying to figure out how to handle this delicately, but the nut is on a roll. "Frankly, you did him some good. We'd gotten tired of him moping around, always so sour over his arm. I told the boy no woman would care about a little loose skin. That fight knocked some sense into him, I think. Sure enough, he buckled down and found Ginger not long after your little melee."

I stare right through her. This isn't the crazy I expected. Should also piss me off, learning I inadvertently helped the man I want dead, assuming she's telling the truth. Too fucking bad I'm standing here in the cold, trapped in the most awkward four way stare down I've seen for years.

"You should really come in and warm up, dear," Mrs. Kelley says, breaking the frigid silence. "It's freezing out here."

Red opens her mouth to protest, but her mother won't hear it. She turns her back, flings the screen door open, and holds it for us.

"I'm so sorry," Red whispers, nudging my side.

“For what? I *can* sit down and talk like a normal human being, you know. Come on.” She waits impatiently.

Invitation accepted. What’s the harm? Stepping inside, I set Mia down gently. Her little nose twitches the second her feet are on the ground. “Daddy, is that...chocolate?!”

Red’s mother grins and gives a brisk nod, then starts walking. Honeybee runs after Mrs. Kelley, disappearing around the corner into the kitchen. My fists ball silently at my sides, wondering what the hell we’ll really find on the other side.

It’s shocking because it’s so normal. By the time Red and I join them, Mrs. Kelley is pouring a steaming mug of sweetness. She drops a couple fat marshmallows in the brew before reaching for a sippie lid for the cup.

Crazy or not, she’s still got her wits. I help Mia to the table and put her in the nearest chair, leaning down. “Drink it slowly, honeybee. You don’t want to burn your tongue.”

Leave it to my little genius to blow through the tiny opening, trying to cool her treat faster. At least it’s a nice distraction while Red gets her own cocoa. Mrs. Kelley gives me a knowing smile when she grabs a third empty cup, walks to another thermos on the counter, and pushes it open. “Black coffee. Just the way you like it?”

I nod. Fuck, am I really so cliché?

Doesn’t change the fact that the stuff feels like thermal heaven, sliding down my throat a second later. We sit, Red next to me. Her hand moves anxiously, unthinkingly into my lap. My reassuring squeeze could crush diamond.

“Glad you let me borrow your daughter,” I say, taking another pull off my coffee. “She’s been a godsend for business. Couldn’t get half the crap done without her.”

“She’s a grown woman. Much too old to waste her time chasing a mad woman.”

“Mom!” Red’s fingers pinch mine. “Don’t be so hard on yourself. It’s not like _“

“It’s *exactly* like that, Sarah. I’ve spent years at the end of my artistic rope, completely uninspired after that droll little series of birch trees I painted several winters ago. Why people in this town still ask for them every so often, no clue.” She shrugs. “They certainly weren’t buying.”

“It’s because you don’t give yourself enough credit, mom. You’re good at

what you do. So what if the tree scenes got old? These things come in cycles. You can do anything. Someday, I'm *sure* you'll get your groove back." My eyes drift over. I've never seen a smile on Red's face so forced.

That's really saying something after the hell I put her through.

"About that..." Mrs. Kelley's gaze shifts to me. They have the same green eyes, leaving me to wonder if her hair was also once the same cinnamon sweetness I love pulling. "Tell me, Mr. Castoff, have you ever had a portrait?"

I'm so taken back by the question the nickname doesn't sting. "Have I...what?"

"Been painted. Drawn. Put to canvas. Captured all your tall, dark majesty in pastel? Or maybe charcoal would be better?" Mrs. Kelley pushes a finger into the edge of her cheek, too deep in thought for my liking.

"Mom, no. You're not painting him. He's a busy man."

My hand comes down on Red's, pinning hers gently to the table. It just fucking happens.

"I'm not the modeling type. Sorry, Mrs. Kelley, I'd help you out in another life, but this is a full season for me. Sadie's right. Too many projects lined up." *Like figuring out how I'm going to kill your son.*

I keep the last thought to myself, obviously. The old lady looks through me like she can see my vicious secrets. "Such a shame. There's a lovely, unusual contrast between you and the girl. It's rare to see a man like you raising a child alone."

"A man like me?" I thumb my chest. Sadie's look diffuses the indignation spiking my blood. As annoying as this is, I have to remember she isn't well. She can't mean any of this weird bullshit. "I wouldn't give up being a father for even a day. Mia keeps me sane."

"So feisty!" Mrs. Kelley chirps. "I love it. It's such a shame you won't put those broody blue eyes to paper."

"Paper, daddy?" Mia looks up, a smear of marshmallow and coca on her chin.

"That's right, honeybee. I'm begging for a chance to make the two of you immortal, but it seems your father has other ideas." Mrs. Kelley smirks, clucking her tongue as she looks at my daughter. "My, what a sweet little thing you are. You just need a puppy to make this picture perfect."

"Puppy, yeah!" Mia's little hands slap the table. I'm afraid she'll spill her cocoa. "Can we have one, daddy? Whiskey needs a friend."

"Whiskey?" Mrs. Kelley forms a sly smile.

“Their cat, mother. I think we *really* should be going. We’ve overstayed our welcome.”

Mia draws my eyes. There’s a guilt-inducing child sadness in them I hate.

Fuck. Nothing upsets me more than the cold reality I can’t make her wishes come true. And the possibility I might be causing nightmares soon is always there, if Jackson isn’t a clean kill.

I’m also licking my earlier defeat with the brake line plan. It hits me when I look back toward the mantle in the living room, where I see the photos. The smiling face of my enemy, younger and prouder in his uniform. Wedding photos, where he beams next to his trim young wife, not a shred of the men’s lives he ended outside Kandahar on his face.

He’s living the life my men should’ve had. Stolen it like the rat fucking thief he is, feeding off the misery he’s left Adam’s widow, Erik’s mother, Zane’s kid brother.

Wait. Life?

Another idea attacks my head so fierce it hurts my eyes.

It’d be insane to pump this crazy momma for info...wouldn’t it?

Crazier still to use my presence around the house to get to him, bait him, box him in. A hunter on his family’s turf. I choose my next words carefully.

“How about this, honeybee: we *think* about the puppy for another year or two? In the meantime, we’ll let Mrs. Kelley give you whatever imaginary dog you’d like?” I look through my daughter, new guilt twisting my guts.

Damn it all. She’s smiling and nodding her tiny head. If this works out, I *will* have to buy her that dog.

“Marshal? You don’t have to do this.” Red’s pretty green eyes are big and pleading, a question tangled up inside. *Do you have any idea what you’re getting yourself into?*

I do. My last, best shot at ending Jackson quick and easy.

“Please, dear, let the man decide for himself!” Mrs. Kelley’s voice takes on a sudden tension. It catches our full attention.

Red squeezes my hand, like she knows a volcano is about to go off. I smile, baring my teeth. “It’s January. Not a whole hell of a lot to do around this town when it’s fifteen below. You name a time, Mrs. Kelley, and I’ll see what I can do.”

“Time for what?” An older, gruffer male voice speaks from behind the

kitchen counter.

My eyes follow everybody else's to the thin sixty-something year old adjusting his spectacles. Clearly Sadie's old man.

"Oh, Peter, good news. I've found my muse again. Sit down, before you swallow your own tongue. He's here to help me, believe it or not."

Red's grip on my hand becomes a vice. She mouths her next few words: *Jesus. This is bad.*

"What the hell is he doing here, Stephanie?" Peter steps closer, giving Red the evil eye.

It's my turn to stand. I've got to try and diffuse a clusterfuck for once, instead of setting it off.

"Dropped your son's truck off. You're welcome. We'll be showing ourselves the door."

"Oh, Peter, give him a chance! He's not here to light the house on fire or anything." Mrs. Kelley stands. Laying her hands on her husband's shoulders, she tries to smother the look of a man facing an intruder. "I want to paint him and his darling little girl. Don't make this difficult."

"Paint him? In *this* house?" Peter faces Sadie again, his eyes darkening. He sees Mia, and I think it's the only reason he doesn't explode. "Did you put her up to this, Sadie?"

"Dad, calm down. I didn't do anything!" Red raises her hands, stretching them between us. "All her idea. Marshal's a good man, believe it or not. I say we let her."

Her father's stare intensifies. So cold, cruel, bewildered, and fixed on her. *You can't be fucking serious* is written all over him.

"Has anyone even thought what Jackson will think?" he says.

"Yeah, I have." I steal her old man's gaze. "I'll keep out of his way. What happened with us years ago is ancient history. I'll help your wife make art. I'm doing this for my little girl, and Sadie, too."

A total lie. Several, probably. But it's also the one choice phrase that might let us walk out of here whole.

"I'll call later, dad. We'll talk then. Right now, we've got to go," Sadie whispers in my ear, tugging on my shirt.

Finally a wise idea. I walk over to the table, grab Mia, and brush past Mrs. Kelley. She gives my shoulder a quick pat on the way out, dumping gasoline

on the raging fire in this house. “I’ll let Sadie give you the best times for my studio. It’s nice to have something to look forward to again.”

Resisting the urge to cringe, we keep moving. Nothing matters more than getting the hell out of here, leaving the flaming wreckage behind.



“CHRIST, Marshal. You’re really willing to sit there while she paints you? How will you get Mia to sit still for so long?” I’m crunched up in the passenger seat in her old Toyota. Feels more out of place than ever being blasted by her questions.

“We’ll work it out, Red. Quit your worries. Mia’s excited – aren’t you, honeybee?” I look at my dozing daughter in the mirror.

She opens one little eye and nods vigorously, before passing out in the kiddie seat again. Who the hell can blame her? The tension we left behind was so thick it could choke a man. Takes its toll on a mind. So does the winter cold, newly sprinkled with a slow-moving, wispy snowfall.

We’re leaving town, winding toward the bluffs as she drives.

“Why did you do this? Really, I mean? Won’t it interfere with work? And, Jesus, the drama!” She brakes hard at the stop sign, just a few miles from the overgrown road winding into my place.

“Why’re you flipping out when a man finally does you a favor, Red?” I watch her blink. “You told me your ma’s not all there. She lost her marbles struggling with her muse or whatever, yeah?”

Slowly, Red nods. “Not your problem. You’re paying me to look after Mia, remember? I don’t need you fixing *my* family issues.”

“Didn’t pay you for last night either,” I growl, reaching for her hand. “That was you and me. Not boss and nanny. Something else.”

“That was...” She pauses, leaving me to wonder if it’s *mistake* at the tip of her tongue. “That was different. You and me, I mean. Nobody else to worry about with any of that. This is my mother, Marshal. My very screwed up, sometimes very scary mother.”

She shakes her head, bringing the car down the home stretch. I wait until we’re parked. Then I reach over, cup her chin, and guide her face to mine. “Quiet. Just let me fucking help without making it so hard, beautiful.”

I glance at Mia. She’s still fast asleep. I lean in, whispering the next part in Sadie’s reddening ear. “You want to make this an even trade? Fine. Give me another taste of last night.”

There's no time to answer. My lips attack hers. Then they don't stop.

Thank fuck, too. Guilt and lies are no match for drowning in her sweetness. My dick throbs, angrier than usual, ready as hell to be in her.

Truth be told, I don't know what kind of mess I've just stepped in.

I'm not sure it even matters. I've got everything I could ever want in front of me. Today, I see the illusion of a perfect world.

If it weren't for the hit job breathing down my neck, I might be able to pretend I have a family.



JANUARY GOES from white to red. It's cold, rage, frustration. Numbing days burn into long hard nights of fucking.

Red shares my bed now. I'm worried we'll slip up and Mia will wonder why we're sleeping in the same room, but it's not enough to stop taking her over the edge night after blistering night.

The need in my balls won't let me quit.

The animal ache on my lips every second they're not fused to hers is ready for tough questions. They'd rather speak to a thousand innocent concerns from honeybee than go one day without tasting this woman I've claimed.

She's getting more adventurous by the week. Some nights Red spends nearly an hour on her knees, my dick in her mouth, learning every nook and cranny of my bliss. I've lost my come in her mouth a few times.

It's heaven when it happens, but the aftermath is hell. I can't ignore that demon urge in the back of my mind that always wants to bust inside her, shoot my fire up her womb until she's mine, mine, *so fucking mine*.

Yes, she's on the pill. Good thing, too, or I'm not sure I'd ask what the fuck is going on. I'm not sure the sadistic beast inside me would care.

I'm no shrink, but I know what it's like when a man's subconscious gets obsessed with knocking pussy up.

Adam had that glint in his eye every time he talked about fucking Bev. He only had a chance to put one baby in her, sad to say, and remembering his mortality dials this demented need to fuck my nanny raw up to eleven.

The days are more tolerable. Work keeps my mind off sex and murder, but those ghosts in my ear are getting louder.

You said you'd do it, asshole. Make us proud. It's Zane's voice every time, his dead grey eyes hollowing out my soul. *Tony can't even walk straight. Least*

you can do is let my kid brother know I didn't die for nothing.

Focus, douchebag. Focus, focus, focus. You can't let the asshole who melted my face keep breathing forever. Oh, and you'd better send my ma a card. Erik had a high school quarterback's good looks. Think that boy would've played the field forever back home in California if he hadn't gotten murdered.

Do it, Captain. For Bev. For Mikey. For me. You promised my family justice.

Yes, I did. Goddammit, I did, Adam, and no nighttime bliss I find with your killer's sis will ever let me forget.

It's just, the right opportunity hasn't shown up yet. Sadie keeps asking why I haven't gone on that big job out of town yet. I tell her it's delayed.

Even the cover story doesn't seem right anymore, and I have zilch in the blueprints department. Even the infrequent trips I make to the Kelley place with Mia and Red doesn't inspire any grand ideas.

Weeks go by, and I'm no closer to learning anything new about Jackson. No secret vulnerabilities or silver bullets lying around, ready.

We sit like statues upstairs while the old lady paints us. She's more animated than ever, moving like a woman possessed. Red says she's never seen her mother work so hard without a meltdown in years.

The first finished sketch in charcoal seems like a beauty. I'm a huge, dark shadow holding onto a sunbeam smiling in my arms. The imaginary puppy is a strange touch, a teacup poodle peeking out of my other hand.

I wish Mrs. Kelley would just call it there. But, of course, insanity always goes hand-in-hand with perfectionism.

We're supposed to show up before Valentine's Day again so she can do us in oils.

It's a lazy Saturday, one I've taken off work. I decide to drown my dead end frustration in pussy. I've got Red bent over the bed, her lush ass smacking my thighs every time I drive into her.

"Fuck me harder, darling. Harder!" My hand crashes into her ass. The other gives her cinnamon hair a harsh tug, showing her how fucking serious I am.

"Yes, yes – Marshal!" My name flies out of her mouth on fire. I tilt her head down a split second before she comes, smothering her screams in the pillow. Can't have her disturbing Mia's sleep, much as I want to howl to the moon.

I bite my tongue and taste blood. Her pussy melts, massaging my dick like pure silk.

My hips go berserk. I think the collision between our bodies will fucking break us, but it just sends an electric heat up my spine.

“Fuck!” I snarl it again, pounding into her, pushing the box spring to its limits. Her release unlocks mine.

My cock swells, lava surging in my balls, and then there’s that point-of-no-return release that brings heaven to earth.

It’s as good as a bastard like me is bound to get in this lifetime. Thick seed hurls up her in ropes, wrung from the depths of my balls by Red’s tight sucking cunt. Her pussy is my end.

It’s fire, divine and irresistible. It’s mine. It’s what I keep and what I crave, a steady addiction I’m afraid I’ll never be able to walk away from.

My vision stops spinning after a while and I’m able to see the clock. Almost eight. Time to take a break from getting my rocks off long enough to make breakfast.

I pull out reluctantly like I always do and flop down. My lungs are never happier than they are when they’re replenishing breath spent fucking this woman to Jupiter and back.

“It’s early. Okay weather. We could do something today?” Red smiles, leaning over, her lips already a fresh temptation and her fingers grazing my chest.

“There’s that river museum up the highway in Dubuque. Steamships and fish so big they could swallow Whiskey in a gulp.” I aim a dirty look outside the door. Right on cue, the cat is digging at the carpet, meowing for his morning breakfast.

“How exciting,” she says, rolling her eyes. But the softness in her gaze says sarcasm isn’t the only thing on her mind. “Since you’re finally asking me on a normal date, though...I’d be a fool to say no. Right?”

Shit.

Is that what this is? A goddamned date?

It doesn’t feel wrong, necessarily. Not till I remember the kill I keep avoiding. The grin I didn’t know I was wearing vanishes.

“Right. Get your crap together while I wash up. I’ll wake honeybee. First we’ll have bacon and eggs, then we’ll get in my truck and make a day of it.”

I get up to move, but she’s still in bed, staring with her arms crossed. “Wow. That was easy. Too easy. What gives?”

I shrug. “Can’t a man treat his daughter and her nanny to a nice day out?”

Don't look too hard between the lines, Red. You'll hurt your pretty eyes."

She laughs while I round her side of the bed, cup her cheek, and bury her in a long, ferocious kiss. It's not just because my lips need hers, but because I need a distraction.

I almost fucked up when I said my daughter and her nanny. I almost called Red my woman.

Christ.

I'm becoming too soft. Too derelict in duties I should've carried out long ago. And good goddamn, it's increasingly harder to feel guilty every time Red wraps her little arms around my waist, and I pull her face to the nook of my neck.

While Mrs. Kelley's found her artistic muse in me and Mia, I've found a different inspiration in this beautiful, headstrong woman.

A calling to be a better man. A kinder, freer beast. A need to be more than a pent up wad of hate, venom, and impending violence.

First light I've seen since Mia at the end of this hellish torture tunnel. That's put my life in blackness ever since I left the war in pieces.

Can I let go of the kill? Find another way to make Jackson pay for his crimes?

I don't fucking know. I'm not ready to make any hard decisions today.

The fact that I'm even considering it tells me something has changed.

Red isn't just the best fuck of my life, or the fastest ticket to putting a smile on my little girl's face.

She's a second sun, shining brighter over everything, so sweet and hot and unexpected it burns.

If I give this more time and stretch out my arms, who the hell knows what might happen next?

Her warmth might thaw the black ice wrapped around my heart like a prison.

Her light may inspire a fresh insanity I never imagined, without the hurt, the obsession, the cancerous secrets.

Her kiss could be my second chance at becoming human again.

CAST ASIDE (SADIE)

“Daddy, daddy, what kinda fish is *that*?” Mia scrunches her face up against the glass aquarium, staring at what looks like a catfish the size of a small shark.

“Mississippi whale, I’m guessing. You ever hear how they ate Huck Finn?” Marshal lifts the little angel onto his shoulders, giving her a better view.

It’s the dozenth time today he’s smiling. God help him.

And help *me*. I nudge him gently in the side, leaning closer than I should as a glorified babysitter on a field trip. “Mark Twain never wrote about river whales. Sorry to disappoint, but I was going after an American lit minor once upon a time.”

“No steamboat Ahab? Ah, well. I never paid much attention to readin’ anyway. But you, honeybee, damn sure ought to outdo daddy.” He winks, then carries Mia off to the next exhibit, a huge alligator in a tank simulating the southern bayou.

The place is bigger than I imagined. We spend the next two hours in a crash course on river history, steamboat models, a menagerie of Mississippi wildlife. Fish, turtles, birds, and otters fight for space in my crowded memory.

As awesome as it is, my mind is somewhere else. I think the part I remember most about our little outing is the ice cream shop across the street later.

That’s where honeybee looks up, lips smacking melted chocolate, and drops an atomic bomb on her poor father’s head. “Daddy, why you and Sadie got the same room now?”

My heart stops. Marshal’s eyes shift, first to his little girl, then to me.

I set my half-finished cup of ice cream on the table and lift my water, sipping carefully. It helps hide how bad I want to cough. *Oh, Jesus. If his eyes are any indication, this is a crisis.*

“We’re grownups, baby girl. Sometimes adults do grownup things, and sleeping in the same bed some nights is part of that. Don’t you worry,” he says, rubbing her tiny head. “If there’s ever a new mommy one fine day, I’ll be the first to tell you.”

She looks at him, taking another uneven bite of ice cream, a vague satisfaction in her eyes. “But...I want Sadie, daddy. I like her. Want Sadie to stay. And I want a puppy. A poodle or a pomer-mar-anian.”

Say something! I keep telling myself, trying to prevent a train wreck. But for the life of me, I don’t know what.

“We’ll see about the Pomeranian, dearie.” I’m turning into my mother. I smile, thinking of the last painting mom did. Marshal was a huge dark shadow looking over the little girl and her dog, an otherworldly contrast. “As for your dad and I –“

“We’re grownups.” Marshal cuts me off. “Good friends. Patient people.”

I cock my head, wondering what he means by the last part. His blue gaze could set me on fire. I test the waters, reaching for his huge hand. He takes it in front of Mia, coils his fingers in mine, and squeezes so hard my knuckles go white.

“You’re a babe, honeybee. So young, so innocent, so many years ahead. Listen to daddy: a whole heck of a lot can change. One day, you’re with us here. No higher than my knees. Enjoying an ice cream with your old man and your nanny. Flash forward five years, and it all might be different. Everything. Even this family.”

The little girl goes quiet, licking at her ice cream. I wonder if she understands. Hell, do I? Am I reading too much into what this gorgeous brute with a new softness in his voice means?

Don’t look too hard between the lines, Red. You’ll hurt your pretty eyes.

I remember his words from his morning. Remember, and smile, because the message in his couldn’t be clearer. There’s no need to decipher anything.

He’s telling me he’s open. He won’t deny this invisible, wonderfully weird chemistry. He won’t run if we’re destined to...I don’t even know.

But I want to find out.

“Daddy?” Mia lowers the cone pinched in her little hands.

“Yeah, honeybee?” Marshal takes her hand, still holding mine in the other.

“Will you ever find me a mommy?”

He's avoiding my eyes when he speaks again, but there's a soft certainty in his voice anyway. "Sure, Mia. If it's meant to be."

His fingers pulse around mine. I pinch his strong, steady hand harder.

I'm ready once we finally lock eyes. He's hidden so many things in those eyes. His anguish, his secrets, the demons from the past that are always there.

Today, there's something else. I think I see a future, or maybe just a chance.

Whatever it is, I'll follow. I'll trust. I'll see the end of this crazy thing, and I'll do it with a pout on my lips and a glint in my eye.

I'll do it because every minute we spend together, I don't want this to end.



IT'S LATER the same week and he's up early. I come down at my usual time, expecting to find Marshal in his shop.

But he's not alone in the kitchen today. There's a woman at the table with curly blonde hair, sad blue eyes, and full Monroe lips. Jealousy shoots through me. I duck around the corner, grateful honeybee isn't up yet, and eavesdrop shamelessly.

"Believe me, Marshal, I've tried. Spent way too much on the investigator last year," she says, frustration in her voice. "The army won't re-open the case. They say there's too much classified material still. And everything is cut and dry. God, if you hadn't told me what you saw over there, I wouldn't have even known. I'd have thought Adam died honorably and –"

"He did, Bev. The dirt doesn't take away from his sacrifice. Now, forget it. We don't need to go there again. Told you a million times: save your funds. Those fucks in the kangaroo courts won't do crap unless it involves bad press. Too much politics. We won't find any justice throwing money down a black hole."

"So...where do we, then? Is this just how it is? Maybe I'm being stupid. I should just let go, get on with my life."

My breath hitches as he stands. I duck behind the wall, but not before I see him grab her hands, pulling her closer than he's done with anyone.

Except for me.

I'm holding the oxygen in my lungs for what seems like forever, slowly counting, praying this isn't an ex-girlfriend. Or, God forbid, a baby mama.

"Adam didn't marry a stupid woman. Look at me, Bev. Right the hell here." He's growling. "Leave it to me. Stop worrying. Do you got enough money for

Mikey? How's that lung thing?"

"A little better this year." She sniffs tearfully. "We're...we're getting money from the state and it's helping a little. Not as much as I'd like. But please, Marshal, you can't. You've already done so much. I'm not asking you for more loans."

More? My ears are turning red. It's none of my business, really, but I can't figure out what's actually happening here.

"I haven't done enough. That's the real truth. Whatever you need, Bev, just say it. Any time. I'm good for it."

"Glad I could stop by, at least. It's a long trip up from Missouri. I'm going to his grave a little less than I'd like. I'd be a fool to lose touch with his friends, too." She sniffs again.

"Adam's friends will always be mine, woman. Always welcome in this house. Don't you forget it. He served, honorably, and he paid the ultimate price. I'm gonna make sure that wasn't in vain."

"I know, Marshal. Lord, every single day, I *know*."

It goes quiet. I try to relax, knowing this isn't anything crazy or serious, but when I look into the kitchen, he's holding her.

Very close. Very tight. Looking straight through the wall with his face perched over her blonde hair.

"Anything comes up, you call. I'm happy you came by today, too. I've had... a lot going on lately. Needed the kick in the ass, seeing you again, to remind me what's really important."

"Take care. If you ever come south, you've always got a place to crash."

"Same. You're sure you want to go all the way to Des Moines?" He looks at her. The woman nods. "I'll get Mia a play date with Mikey one of these days. That's a promise."

"You take care of yourself, Marshal Howard, you hear?" She takes a step or two away, still holding both his hands. "Next time we meet, I want to see you with somebody. Place could use a woman's touch."

"Actually..." He pauses. "Nah, forget it. I'll walk you out to your car. Don't forget the box!" He grabs something off the table, a small wooden container. I watch them head out through the screen door and down the snowy steps to a silver van.

It's several minutes before Marshal returns. I stand by the stove, brewing coffee, unsure whether to chastise myself for being stupid or him for being

secretive.

I don't feel threatened by her anymore. Whatever it is, it isn't romantic. There's no goodbye kiss with this woman, no longing, just raw emotion and an old gratitude I don't understand.

Of course, jealousy shouldn't be a thing in the first place, however misplaced. Maybe I'm just bothered because it's a sign of yet another secret hole in his life to trip over.

I still don't know who Marshal Howard really is.

Who is this man I'm sharing the best sex of my life with? The only sex of my life.

Who is he behind the rough stubble I love to run my fingers through and the smoking blue eyes? Beneath the loving father with the vicious exterior, there's a stranger.

"Morning, darling," he says, stepping inside, something wrapped in tinfoil under his arm.

He walks past me to the counter, pulling out the cutting board. Fresh banana scent fills the kitchen as soon as the package opens. He turns, grabbing a couple plates, a warmth I've only started seeing lately in his eyes. "Banana bread? It's fresh baked by —"

"Bev, I know. Who is she?"

His eyes narrow. "Were you spying on us?"

"Nothing like that. I just came down and heard you talking. Sounded pretty serious. Like something you'd want me to stay out of. I didn't want to intrude." My cheeks are red fire. Am I being a major league bitch over this?

"Bev is Adam's wife," he says, stuffing a piece of bread into his mouth and swallowing loudly. "Widow, I should say. He was in my unit. We still talk, and every so often, she comes this way. Couldn't stay long this time around. She's got a sick father upstate and needs to get back to her kid."

"It's good," I say, tasting the bread he's left in front of me. It truly is. I haven't had anything like it since I used to stop in the little Amish bakeries north of here. "What about the case you two were talking about? Sorry, I overheard..."

No, I straight up *listened*. I tried to get into his business, and it's not time for that in this relationship yet. *Whatever this relationship even is.*

He stops, his back to me, pouring his coffee slower than he should. "It's nothing, Red. Old issue with VA benefits."

I don't know why, but it doesn't sound right. Or truthful.

I fix my eyes on his, searching, watching as he hides his beautifully damaged face behind the mug, taking a long sip. "You're sure?"

He tips his head, releasing a long sigh, almost a groan. The mug bangs against the counter, sloshing hot coffee everywhere. "I asked you before, last time we got into it around New Years – if I knew shit about your brother, would you want it?"

There's a hole opening in the pit of my stomach. I think about Jackson, Ginger, the precious little boy or girl growing inside her. Then mom, and dad chasing after her, trying to nurse her back to a healthy mind that may never exist again.

If he has some dark, horrid secret about my brother...is it worth it? Can I handle it?

"We'll talk about this later," Marshal says, stepping past me, yanking his hat off the hook. "Need to get to work."

Once again, he's swept the ground out under me.



IT'S GETTING late and he hasn't come in for dinner. His loss, I suppose, because the rosemary beef stew bubbling to a finish in the slow cooker smells heavenly. Even Mia asks for a heaping portion. I ladle food in bowls, warning her to let it cool. The oven dings for the French bread I've baked to go with the meal. Just in time.

I'm blowing on my first bite when the phone rings. My brother's name lights up the screen and I wrinkle my nose after the morning's drama. But I have to answer.

"Yeah, Jackson?"

"I'm only gonna ask this once, you fucking idiot: what made you think letting mom paint the Castoff was such a brilliant move?"

"One second." I freeze. Mia chews her food happily, humming to herself, oblivious to the hell in my ear. I tuck the phone against my shoulder, whisper a few words, tell her I'll be back in a minute.

Oh, if only this would be so brief.

Once I'm around the corner, I resume. "Jackson, calm down, I –"

"You *what*, sis? Thought you'd bring a crazy man you've decided is cool because he signs your checks into our mentally ill mother's home? Let her

spend hours with him, *alone*, painting that asshole in our parents' bedroom?"

I swallow. My patience hangs by its very last thread.

"Christ. When I said you could take the job, and blow off helping dad, I thought you had some common sense."

"You don't control my life!" I snap. "Look, it was mom's idea, this whole thing. She lit up the first time we came by. He helped me drop your truck off, no less. She wanted to paint him and Mia, and she wouldn't take no for an answer."

"You didn't tell her no? Goddamn."

"No, Jackson, I didn't. She's still our mother, and in case you hadn't noticed, keeping her cooped up alone with dad all day isn't working. This might. He said she's a lot happier lately, even when the sketches don't come out just like she'd hoped. She's inspired for the first time in years."

"You're too close to that asshole, sis. Fuck. I never should've let you screw off playing sitter, trusting you wouldn't bring him anywhere near our family."

"He's not a monster!" My voice cracks. I wish he'd understand. Someday he might have to, if whatever's happening with Marshal lasts. "Look, this isn't easy, I get it. There'll always be bad blood between you two. Fine. But that stupid fight you had years ago? The one that turned the town against him? He doesn't deserve it. Not then and not now."

"Doesn't deserve it?" I can't tell if he sounds confused, or if he's about to explode. "Sis, the asshole you're so soft on tried to humiliate me in front of the entire town. He spit on my fucking service record and he did it publicly. Implied I did atrocities overseas, serving this country, and –"

"So, did you?" I'm shaking my head.

I don't know what to believe. I don't know what I *want* to.

"You're serious?" His voice is like sandpaper. "Fuck you, sis. He's really got you brainwashed if you're even asking that question. Forget the shit with mom. I'll deal with it myself."

"Jackson –" My phone makes a clicking noise. "Hello?"

I hold it away. It's disconnected, just as I thought, blinking his name and number a few last times before fading away. Stuffing it back into my pocket, I storm the kitchen, wishing I could open the door and hurl the damned thing out into the nearest snow drift.

I slow before I get to my seat, surprised. Marshal sits at the table, a fresh bowl of piping hot dinner in front of him. He bites the end off a piece of French

bread and looks at me. “Damn good on a cold night like this. We’re supposed to be snowed in later. Least we’ll have plenty of leftovers for tomorrow.”

My soup is cooler. It’s good, but I’m not enjoying it as much as I wanted to before the call. Mia asks for seconds, and he gets up, ladling more into her bowl before rejoining us.

“What’s the matter, Red?” he says, staring into my eyes. “Talk to me.”

“Nothing. I’m glad you like it.”

“Honeybee, cover your ears for a second,” he says, leaning into me. “Bullshit, darling. I know a woman gnarled up in knots, and I’m looking at her. What the fuck’s wrong?”

“It’s just...my brother called. He found out about mom’s sessions with you and Mia, I guess.”

His eyes narrow. Flexing his fist on the table, he reaches with his other hand, gently pinching my arm. “And what? He’s pissed?”

“Well, yeah.” I nod. “He thinks you’re dangerous. Evil. Totally unfit to set foot in my parents’ house.”

“Lucky me, you know better,” he says.

I look up, surprised how well he’s taking it. “I don’t know what to do, Marshal. The last thing we need is Jackson up my butt about bringing you around our mother.”

“It’ll work itself out. This crap always does,” he rumbles, a strange smile materializing on his rough lips. “He gives you more trouble, tell him we’ll work it out man-to-man. I’m sure he’d love a rematch.”

“Marshal, no!” It takes several seconds to see his grin, realize he’s joking. *I think*. “I hope he doesn’t do anything stupid. He said he’d deal with mom and her art, whatever that means.”

“Man’s got a fuck of an ego. I’ve spent enough time around your ma to see she’s not howling at the moon crazy. Just depressed and under-motivated. She’s never been real interested in your brother sticking his nose in her business, I think. He’ll do nothing.”

I pause, thinking. “No, you’re right. He can’t just waltz in and make mom do anything. Nobody can. That’s half the reason she’s never gone in for major treatment. She put up a huge fight every time, and dad never had the heart for it, so...”

“She’s getting better. Saw her working on something that wasn’t just Mia’s smiling face last time we were there. Looked like a big bunch of white trees

and some mountains.”

“I hope so. It’ll be a miracle if she ever does landscapes again.” I squeeze his hand, bringing it to my face. His caress helps. I refuse to let the lonely tears I’m holding in fall because I don’t want him to wipe them away, delaying his dinner any more. I also don’t want to ruin it for the bashful little girl next to us.

“Daddy?” Mia perks up, rocking in the chair, her hands still pressed tight to her head.

Smiling, Marshal takes her little arms and puts them down. “Thanks, honeybee. Let’s eat. Even I’ve had it with this grownup crap tonight.”

That makes three of us.



It’s a good old fashioned Iowa snowstorm like I haven’t seen in years.

It’s getting late and we’re just putting Mia down for the night. Yes, *we*.

For the first time, Marshal lets me sit next to him on her bed. We take turns reading from the big story book in his hands, a weathered old volume of fairy tales that looks like it’s been passed down for a long time.

It’s the end of sleeping beauty. All is right with the kingdom, the enchanted princess, the handsome prince, and their twins.

“Silly. Imagine if it were so easy – making babies with just a kiss.” I tug at his hand and smile. We’re sitting in the kitchen after the story, late night coffee in our hands.

“Yeah. Imagine.” His eyes pin down mine, bringing scalding blood to my cheeks. “I sure as hell wouldn’t wait to break the spell before carrying you off, if it were up to me.”

“No?” My fingers tug gently at his. It’s sweet to see him like this, mind fixed on meaningless what-ifs instead of the many real poisons weighing on his mind.

“No. Red, listen, I’ve been meaning to have a talk. I want you moving in.”

Blinking, I shake my head, doing a slow sweep around the kitchen. “I thought I did?”

“I mean permanently, darling. I want you in this house full time. Whatever you need, I’ll provide, but I don’t want to sign your checks anymore. I want to send you to school full time, do whatever it takes to get you working where you want. I want you happy, safe, and mine.”

A nervous pit opens up under me. It's a happy one. Taking his hand again, I'm shaking, trying to decipher his words through my own wishful thinking. He can't be asking for...oh God, what *is* he asking?

"Marshal, whoa. That's...really, really sudden. We've only been together a few months."

"And they've been fucking bliss. Happiest I've been since the war, since I've had to fight for the good days with Mia. Happiest since ever. Don't tell me any different." His eyes are so bright. Twin blue moons; hypnotic, gorgeous, and powerful. "I get it, Red. You're a lady of class, you want this to go off proper, so here goes."

Slowly, he stands, unwinding our fingers. I watch him walk across the room to the old radio on the counter. He flicks it on. Soft rock guitar twangs out, not at all what I expect. Country, some cowboy bellowing out his love for the one who got away. It's a change from the rambunctious, heavy beats he listens to in his shop.

Then he's next to me again, sliding my hand into his, a mysterious smirk on his face. "Give me this dance, Red."

It's not a request. Or a dream, unbelievable as it is.

I instantly rise, grinning as I fall into his arms.

The impossible is happening.

I'm dancing with the man who dragged me into his bed, into his life, and apparently, now into his soul, too. He's a swaying, smiling contrast. A bundle of blue-eyed pain, gorgeous in his imperfections, scary in the changes rippling through his massive soul like river rapids.

I lay my head against his chest. Hear his heart hammering his ribs, and I wonder why he's nervous.

Then it hits me: he's planned this. Whatever it is, it's thought out and deliberate. And yet, I'm the one who's fighting to stay calm, moving with him as he leads me around his little kitchen, grinning like a sixteen year old idiot at prom.

"Want to know something, Red?" He leans in, stubble tickling my neck as he whispers in my ear. "You're the first woman I've ever bothered dancing with. I kept to myself in school and all through the service. Had my fun, yeah, but never made it serious. Sex was a distraction from the bullshit. From the cruelty. Nothing more."

He lets me fall, holding onto my hands, gently tipping me backward. Then he jerks my body to his again. There's a vicious grace in his movements. His

eyes are a constant glow, experts at leaving me small and wet and wanting.

But it's more than just another master seduction tonight. It *has* to be.

There are too many secrets in his eyes. Too big a confession bleeding in his whispers. Too much need in his embrace, winding tighter all the time, all the better to angle my head just so for the fiery kiss he traces on my lips

His forceful, teasing tongue takes my knees out from under me, leaving me breathless before I can ask any questions.

Holy hell yes.

Both his hands encircle mine before it's over. He's still holding my hands as he sinks to his knees, his gaze even firmer than before. He has my full attention. My fullest, and then some.

The snowstorm whipping against the windows could cave the roof in, and I still wouldn't look away.

"Sarah. Sadie. Red. It'd be a damn shame to ruin such a nice evening, but I'd be a jackass not to try. You're right about everything, more than I ever let on. But tonight, you said something dead wrong. We're not moving too fast, darling. I believe with all my heart we're moving at the speed God intended, and if this is too fast, too ridiculous, too reckless, it isn't meant to be. I believe you're ready to admit you're wrong, once you hear what I have to say next."

My pulse throbs. The rest of the world goes dark and silent. Lost in his smile and two brilliant eyes that shame the stars.

His hands squeeze mine. One drops away, reaching into his pocket, digging. I'm baffled how an epic game changer can be this small. Just a tiny box, wrapped in burgundy purple.

"Red..." Oh my God, is he speaking again? I'm very, very faint. "You're wrong, I think, I hope, because I'm asking you to be my wife. Marry me."

With a flick of his thumb, earth tilts on its axis. I'm staring into a shiny slice of heaven forged in white gold and diamonds.

A ring. A rite of passage. A journey waiting for me to say the magic word.

"Jesus, Marshal...I..." I can't remember my own name. So I just sink down on the floor, too. I throw my arms around his neck, pushing my forehead into his so hard it hurts. "Of course, of course, of course...yes!"

I'm afraid I'll leave my own body. Good thing his kiss anchors me back in the flesh, and the ring sliding on my finger does the rest. His tongue hits mine and I'm home where I belong, happier than I've ever been to admit when I'm

wrong.

“Thank fuck. I’m no expert at this proposal thing..”

“Marshal, it was perfect. You were right, and so is this. Just the speed we’re meant for,” I whisper, echoing his words.

His eyes are narrowed now, fixed on mine with a balmy blue peace I’ve never seen. His next kiss comes with rough fingers in my hair, his other hand in mine, gripping the size eight promise he just made like it’s forever.

Because it is.

“You’re a bad man, Marshal Howard,” I whisper, once he finally withdraws his teeth from my bottom lip. “But I love you anyway. I’ll love you through all the twists and turns we’ve got coming.”

“Love you, too, Red. Long as I draw breath, long as I’ve still got a pulse, only you. And darling, nothing’s ever changing it. Nothing will steal it. Nothing will rip you away from me while I’m alive and I’ve still got fire in my lungs, no thanks to you.” His fingers are a vice on the last part.

I believe him.

I trust him.

In him, I’ve put my faith.

If our story could’ve ended here, it would’ve been perfect. But fate had other plans.

We were about to learn its heart-wrenching, bone cracking, soul torching agenda stops for no one.

SETUP (MARSHAL)

Having her under me as my moaning, clenching, eager virgin nanny lit my balls on fire. Red turned me all kinds of crazy and took no prisoners.

Maybe that's why I didn't know having her as my fiancé would be nirvana. What the fuck is happening?

I said I'd be a married man. I got on my knees. And now I'm wrapped in the legs of a woman worth forever, lips pressed to hers, sucking every whimper off her tongue as my dick pumps overtime.

It's almost too easy. Too fucking simple for a savage like me.

I expected more torture, more confusion, more heartbreak along the way.

That's gone. Pales compared to the promise I just made, the chance at a normal family, and the bliss in this bed drenching my blood in sweet bourbon fuckery.

Something about that ring on her finger just makes her pussy better.

I know it's because it's mine. Because every time I see it shining in the dim light dancing across us from the open bathroom door, I get chills up my spine, electric shocks urging me to fuck her harder.

It's happening because I want to bring her off in this bed every night.

I want my wife to scream my name, rake her nails down my back, sink her teeth into my darkest ink.

I want her at her softest and her most violent. I want her when she's magic or when we're both on the brink of tears.

I want her damn soul. Tonight, tomorrow, and forever.

And once we're done marking this bed, when it isn't winter anymore, I want to take her under the naked sky.

We'll fuck for the moon and the sun, until every damn permutation of her and I is written in the stars.

"Come harder, Red. Come for me!" I whisper a familiar mantra in her ear. Familiar, yeah, but I've never meant it more than now.

My hips never knew this fire. They never rocked with an urgency and a tense peace, a patience and a fury. They were never a paradox collecting lightning, sending it to my balls, the charge inside them building every time I crash into her so hard the bed's frame ripples.

"Red, what did I just say?" Growling, I pull her cinnamon locks, tilting her ear to my lips. "What the fuck did I tell you, woman? Come for me *right now*."

It's the last nudge she needs. Time freezes and her pussy constricts on every inch of me, heated and convulsing.

Pure heaven. She's perfection itself, arching her back like a good girl, ass up, my balls slapping furiously on her clit.

Her face dives for the pillow, muffling her screams. My ears devour every shrill whimper, just like my eyes feast on her coming this hard for me.

I love this woman when she's at her finest, prim and shy and put together. But I love her even more when she's completely undone.

Love her, love this, so damn much I can't even hold it.

I seriously fucking can't.

My dick burns, throbs, and swells inside her. A few more rough strokes and my fingers jerk her hair. I bury myself to the hilt and let go.

Come roars out of me like madness itself. Her sweet cunt works to wring me dry, clenching harder at my heaving cock.

I can't remember the last time I had a nut like this. It's never been this good.

I'm coming in the woman I'm going to marry for the first time, and it's fucking magic.

"Sadie!" Her name is the last thing on my lips in the storm. It sets my skin on fire, blinding hot, taking me apart to my soul and rebuilding everything from the bones up.

I'm a different man once I'm able to feel my hips again. I'm still hard, even if I've gone numb, and I thrust another harsh O into her before I'm fully spent. I turn her over for the finale. Both my hands go in hers, pinning them high above her head. She responds with the tightest legs I've ever had pressed to

this body, ankles digging in my calves until I give it up a second time, losing myself in her delicate heat all over again.

“That. Was. Amazing,” she says later in bursts, a smile on her sly little lips. She’s perched over me, hand on my chest, a flicker in those dark green eyes tempting me to go one more round tonight. “And it’s really the start of something, isn’t it?”

I grab her hand, bring it to my lips, and kiss until I think I’ve left burns. “Damn right. It’s the start of something beautiful, Red, and it’s gonna be forever.”



FOREVER. Can it really be? The reward for putting my deepest, darkest fantasies about tearing Jackson Kelley apart to bed?

I don’t know, but it’s in my head the next time I’m in my shop. It’s a painfully frigid January day, zipping near zero. The wind chill is a whole lot worse.

I’m under two layers of flannel, adding an extra log to the stove every hour, hands stuffed up an old Buick job for Sheryl’s boy. It’s his first car. I wouldn’t have taken on something this easy for so little pay, normally, but she’s always been good to me, treating Mia and me like human beings every time we visit her diner.

I wish like hell I had a piece of that dangerous cherry pie with my coffee right now.

Nothing like what I’d give to have a little peace and quiet, though. A void without the steady thump in my psychotic ears coming from the corner. It’s the ammo box, and it’s all in my head.

Three angry, bloodthirsty ghosts straining to get out. Who the hell can blame them?

I let them down. I didn’t kill him when I had the chance. To have a wife and family, I fucking have to, and it’s shredding me.

It’s only been two days since the storm. Less than forty-eight hours since I got down on my knee, popping the most important question in the world.

She heard the crucial part. But I also asked the universe, God, whatever you want to call it for a second chance.

I know what the woman I’m marrying said. As for the rest...

I try. Strain my broken thoughts, trying to work on this car, without seeing Adam’s severed hands in mine, or Zane and Erik screaming, armor piercing

rounds blown clean through them.

My friends died so I could live. Me, and the sick fuck who still needs to pay for his crime.

“I haven’t given up, you assholes!” I scream, spinning around, hurling my wrench at the floor. The clatter temporarily shuts up whatever’s wrong inside me. “Give me some time. Let me figure this out. There’s got to be another way. Clean, legal, some slip to bring the fuck to justice without outright killing him.”

That pounding in the box has stopped. Rather, my mind can’t fabricate it anymore.

Time to step away. I walk to the frosted window facing my house. Growling, I swipe the ice off, chip away a little circle to see into my living room.

There’s Mia inside, sitting on the couch with Red. They’re laughing, pointing at something. The huge orange blur leaping onto the ottoman a second later tells me everything.

It’s Whiskey, and I’ve never seen the greedy furball so happy. If a cat could smile, it’d look like him squealing for another treat, snatched from the ample supply of two giggling ladies who really shouldn’t be indulging him.

Damn if there’s not something wrong with my face. I was worried about my head, my mental health, a minute ago for seeing ghosts. Now I have a new reason.

I’m smiling, too.

Grinning like a slack-jawed idiot at the scene inside, which ought to be ripped from a Christmas card. Best part is, it comes alive when I wrap up for the day, and finally drag myself inside to wash the grease and oil off before dinner.

This is my life. Not the one I deserve, maybe, but the one I’ll do anything to keep.

It’s hard as hell to let go, but I can’t be judge, jury, and executioner. Not if I want to be a husband, a father, and a good man.

If justice demands blood, it’s a mortal threat to the forever I swore I’d defend with my life. And if it wants to upend everything, then I’m not the man to serve its sin.



THE WINTER DRAGS ON. It’s been weeks and nothing’s resolved. I’ve buried myself in morning coffee blacker than the void, happy family dinners and

weekend breakfasts at the kitchen table, and sex so good it makes me forget how to sign my own name the next morning.

It's finally warming up, too, thank Christ.

The late February thaw makes the streets muddy. I'm coming home, tires kicking up dirt, an empty flatbed and a fat envelope of cash in my glove compartment, two rebuilt tractors lighter since I dropped them off this morning one town over. Doesn't get more satisfying.

I stop at the mailbox before I pull into our driveway, holding the envelope in my hands I'm about to stuff inside. I finally broke down and got it together this morning, a sympathy card I picked up at the drugstore last week, while Red was busy helping my little girl pick out candy.

I didn't want them to see. Hell, I want this thing out of my sight ASAP. It's rocket fuel for every sick, disturbing thing I'm trying to forget. If missing it wouldn't tear a fresh hole through my heart, I wouldn't be sending it at all.

It's like my eyes have x-ray vision. They can see through the envelope to the short words written inside, underneath three crisp hundred dollar bills.

DEAR MRS. FOLWELL,

THIS WON'T BRING him back, but he's been on my mind a lot lately. I know it's tough when it's his birthday. Erik would've been twenty-eight this year. Hope this is enough to get that old boat running by your beach house. Take the money and send me another letter if it isn't.

I'M NOT TRYING to buy peace of mind. The first few times it didn't work, I stopped expecting miracles, even if it helps keep the bitter acid churning in my stomach from causing an ulcer.

It saves my brain from re-living the last crude jokes I swapped with that dark-eyed kid, before I watched his lifeless body hit the ground in front of me. His tags didn't even survive the air strike. I'd say it's a small mercy his death was quick, before the blinding hellfire incinerated everything, but that's never been the fucking truth.

There was no mercy.

Just a stinging cancer in my soul every time his birthday rolls around, and I send his mother a card, a tradition we started the first year after his death. If

she didn't write me such kind Christmas notes, I'd stop.

But I can't, damn it. I'm the last person on earth who remembers her only son, and misses him. We share that strange, mystical bond. Nobody else hurts today like we do.

February 21st. An infamous day of heartache that'll stick with me for the rest of my life.

The rest of this life I've sworn I'll live clean, without any killing.

Live well. It's the best I can do to make sure Erik Folwell didn't die for nothing, I've decided.

Since I swore off ending Jackson's wretched life, it's all I can do.

I park my truck, pushing the letter out of my head. Stepping inside the house, I instantly notice the eerie quiet. Then Red's voice explodes from the living room.

"Jesus, dad, will you please calm down? Start over. What's wrong with her?" Her voice pricks my ears.

I move, thudding through the house, wondering what the fuck's happening. And where the hell is my little girl?

I find Mia sitting near the screened in porch on the side of the house, a Dr. Seuss book in her hand, and a fat shaggy tabby pressing his chin against her elbow. She looks sleepy, but there's another emotion I don't like pinched on her tiny face: worry.

"What's going on, honeybee? Come to daddy." I pick her up, placing a calming kiss on her forehead. "You okay?"

I study her eyes, peering into them. She smiles softly, nods, and maybe it's not as bad as I feared. The anxious thump in my chest throttles back a notch. "Story time, daddy. Sadie had to get the phone."

"How long?"

She shrugs her little shoulders. I hold her tighter, chastising myself for expecting her to become an overnight expert at telling time. Whatever Red has gotten herself into, she's too young for this.

I kiss her on the forehead again, holding her in my arms while we trundle into the living room. Red doesn't even acknowledge my presence, standing in the corner by the window, peering across the darkening fields while her dad's voice rattles over the phone.

"Just get over here, please. I need the help." I can't tell if Peter Kelley sounds

frantic or defeated. Both, perhaps. “She’s asking for you. Jackson wants to call the paramedics, but we know how that goes...”

“Well, yeah! This time, I can’t blame her. She’s upset. You won’t tell me what’s going on, and why my stupid brother came by in the first place, freaking her out. Tell him to leave for starters.”

“Sadie...it isn’t like that. Look, if there’s ever been a time to have a family talk, it’s –“

“Now. Yeah, yeah, I get it dad. Give me twenty minutes. I’ll have to bring Mia because Marshal isn’t home yet. This better not scare her.”

I’m standing behind her the whole time. The cat brushes against my ankles. I guess he feels the tension slowly strangling us, too.

“Okay, whatever,” her father says, his voice strained. “Just, please, get over. I’m afraid, Sadie.”

“Don’t be. We’ll figure this out,” she whispers, her voice softening. “If he’s being an ass, dad, please just tell me. He shouldn’t be in the middle of this anyway – hello?”

Her arm drops, the phone hanging limply in her hand. I clear my throat before she turns around, and the panic in her sweet eyes intensifies. “Oh, crap. You scared me. How long have you been standing there?”

“Long enough, darling. Come here.” I shift Mia to one arm and pull Sadie into the other. I hold her tight, devouring her worry and confusion, wishing like hell I could keep my family like this forever.

“Talk to me. Why the family circus?”

“It’s mom. She’s...having a nervous breakdown or something. Again. I don’t know.”

I tighten my hold. Mia runs her little hands through Sadie’s hair, and for a second, we pull back and smile. I put my little girl down, returning my hands to my fiancée’s waist.

“Let me drive you. No barging into the thick of it, I promise. I’ll crank up the heat and wait in the truck with Mia. Take all the time you need to sort this out.”

“Marshal, no. It’s my problem. Family business.” Her little hands go plush against my chest. She’s pushing me away, but the desperate spark in her eyes say something different. “I can handle this alone.”

“Your family’s my family soon. At least in theory, right?” I raise an eyebrow.

Her cheeks burn hot and her gaze drops. “True. Okay, but let me scope things out first when we get there. This could get ugly. If Jackson’s there like he’s supposed to be...”

I don’t let her finish. I just run my hand up her neck and push her into a long, sultry kiss. Then my eyes pound strength into hers. “Then I’ll be a good boy, Red. You have my word. I’ll give the prick space, no contest.”

She manages a thin smile, walking past me into the kitchen to grab her coat. She’s waiting by the door by the time I follow, Mia in tow. I stop to help her small arms into her new purple jacket. “What would I do without you?”

“Dunno, darling. But that’s not something worth fretting over. I’m here forever.”



“BACK, I said. Last warning! Don’t you *dare* come another step closer, Jackson Winstead Kelley.” Mrs. Kelley is screaming at the top of her lungs. I’m parked in the driveway, giving Red one last look of sympathy before she heads inside. I try to hide my worry.

She slides out of the seat, closes the door, and stomps through the snow.

I look over, glad I remembered Mia’s earmuffs. She’s lost in her tablet, a new game I bought her just yesterday, something where she flings pissed off birds around with a sling.

It’s been over a minute since Red disappeared into the house, and the screaming hasn’t stopped. It’s only become more muffled, less intelligible.

Fuck, I’m white-knuckling the steering wheel.

I roll down the window, cranking up the heat so the cold doesn’t bother honeybee. It helps me eavesdrop on the shit show inside.

“I’m not going anywhere, dear...I said I won’t...you can’t control my life...bring him the hell back! He never hurt anyone.”

I catch her mother’s words, loud and shrill and desperate. Mrs. Kelley sounds like she’s fighting for her life. Judging by the familiar black truck parked in front of me, she’s probably not far off.

Already know what kind of concern her fuck of a son has for life.

Just wish I could dump the promise I made earlier, to stay out of this. It’s a new hell, sitting here while God only knows what’s happening a few feet away. But it’s quieter the next few minutes.

Too fucking quiet.

Pressing my back into the seat, I fight my better instincts to get out, march to the door, and kick it in.

Maybe they're in there fixing this shit. Maybe they're calming her down. Maybe this will all pass, and I won't have to worry about putting my boot on Jackson's spine.

Wishful thinking. I force my mind to go there, and stay, for the next five minutes.

That's all I get before hell breaks its chain and starts running right at me.

"You won't answer me?! He's here, isn't he? I know he is. If none of you will admit it, I'll just see for myself." Stephanie Kelley's voice gets louder, becoming a roar.

The door whips open. Before anyone can pull her back inside, she's buried her slippers in the snow, her eyes red and angry as she marches toward my vehicle.

Shit. I look behind me, grabbing Mia's little hand, giving it a squeeze so she pays attention. "Play your game and sit tight, baby girl. Don't move. Listen to daddy. I've got important business."

Stephanie is on me before I've even got my door open and shut again. I slam my back into it, closing it, seizing the frenzied woman as she crashes into me.

"There you are! Thank God, Marshal. Can you believe it? My idiot son wants us to stop working together." Her eyes are wild, sad, and furious all at once. She whips around, twisting in my arms. I do my damndest to hold her. "Go ahead. Tell them it's okay. Make my family understand."

I look up and see shades of red I never imagined – and I don't just mean Sadie.

My vision blurs with killer intent the second I lay eyes on him. Jackson stands there in the cold, feet planted in the driveway, several steps in front of my woman, Peter, and a girl I'm assuming is fuckhead's wife. They're all huddled on the porch, watching in horror.

"Been a long time, asshole. Can't believe I thought you were done shitting up my life that day we had our fun at the parade. Here you are years later. Just as big a psycho freak as you were then." Jackson takes another step toward me, hatred simmering in his eyes. "Let my mother go."

"Jackson, no! Stay back!" Stephanie throws her hands out and nearly slips on the ice. I have to fight to catch her, pin her to my chest, taking frail beats from her elbows square on my shoulders. "Just tell him for me, Marshal. Tell him you're helping! For God's sake –"

“It’s a family situation, Mrs. Kelley. Please understand.” Christ, those words taste like poison on my lips. “Listen to your son. Go back inside. Work this out and don’t worry about me. They’re trying to help.”

She spins out of my grasp, betrayal written in the deep grooves on her face. “But...but...you’re my muse. The only thing that’s let me finish a canvass in years.”

I close my eyes. “I know. And I’m sorry. Please, Mrs. Kelley, Mia’s in the truck. I don’t want this getting too crazy while we’re right in front of her.”

I’m hoping she’s sane enough to honor the plea for my little girl’s sake. She drops out of my arms. Jackson runs forward, motioning behind him to Sadie and Peter, who come up and take the defeated woman from my grasp. I watch Peter help his shattered wife back inside. The door to the house slams shut, leaving us out here alone.

“Let me know when you’re done,” I tell Red, looking through my enemy. I want to be out of here more than I’ve ever wished for anything. “I’ll be in the truck.”

I turn, ready to walk the five steps back, but a vicious hand wraps around my wrist. I hear his demon voice in my ear, and red overtakes my vision. “Oh, no, asshole. Not that easy. I’m pressing charges.”

“Charges?” The word is a tripped landmine in my throat. “You’ve got to be fucking kidding.”

I rip my hand out of his grip, so fierce it rocks him back. Skidding on the ice just makes his ugly smirk worse. It’s taking every fiber of discipline I own not to knock him over and slam his head into the ice until it resembles ground beef.

“No, Captain Howard, I’m serious. I’d be a fool to let any man who comes here threatening my family walk away.”

Breathe, breathe, just fucking breathe, I tell myself. It’s easier looking at him than forcing back the pure unadulterated violence struggling to get out.

“No time for this. I need to bring my daughter home. Do what you have to, dick.”

“Jackson!” It’s Red’s voice, pained, just as I’m starting to turn. “Wait, put the phone down, you can’t do this!”

She’s tugging frantically at her brother’s arm. He gives her a death look. Goddamn, the urge to punch him square in the face just got ten times stronger.

I look back, wrestling every instinct to step in. If he hurts her...

“Get off me, sis! You don’t understand.”

“You don’t, idiot! We’re engaged. I can’t let you call the cops, can’t let you hurt him.”

“Engaged?” His face goes pale for a second as the cold truth sets in.

Then his lip curls back. He pushes her away. Hard.

Red spins across the ice, a snowbank to the side barely breaking her fall, ass-first.

No, he fucking didn’t.

No damn more!

The kinder, gentler man I’ve become should be at her side, helping her up, ushering her into the truck so we can leave this cursed place. That’s not who I am once I’m lunging at her idiot brother, grabbing him by the throat, slamming him down as hard as I can face first.

“Marshal, no, don’t!” Red bolts up, surprisingly graceful for a woman who’s just been knocked off balance. “Don’t do this. Please don’t hurt him.”

Her voice. Every pleading word seeps into my soul, and for a second, it freezes the beast that’s taken over. The one that’s so ready to slam him into the ice again, and this time there *will* be brain damage.

“You touch her again, you hurt her, you’re dead,” I snarl, holding him at eye level by the hair. There’s a bruise forming on his forehead.

I get up, making room for the other woman to rush over, hands over her mouth. Her eyes are wide and full of tears. I can’t feel the guilt as his wife stoops over him, helping him struggle up on his knees, his cruel eyes following me.

“Let’s get the fuck out of here,” I tell Red, throwing my arm around her shoulder.

“Wait!” Jackson again. The devil doesn’t know when to shut his mouth. “Don’t go, don’t go, Sadie. Don’t fucking leave with him.”

I give her a look. *Don’t acknowledge him. We have to keep moving.*

But Red looks back, her eyes pained, staring at her injured brother as he coughs. His wife takes his head in her arms, shooting us a vicious look. The woman wants us gone, wants this to end just as badly as we do.

Yet, for some unholy reason, the fucker’s lips are still moving. “Wait, wait.

You have to stay, Sadie. It's not safe with him. Hold up. We'll talk about this. I have information...truth..."

"Truth?" She turns. I tug on her arm, begging her to get the hell in the passenger seat, but it isn't enough.

Somehow, we're still trapped in this nightmare.

I make the mistake of looking through the frosty windshield. Mia's little face is on us, her eyes big, dark, and confused. It rips my heart in two.

We need to leave *now*.

"Red, come on. We have to –"

"Marshal, wait." Again, that word, this time from her pretty lips. Why the hell does something so benign as *wait* sound like death itself? "Jackson, whatever you're talking about, you'd better tell me right now."

"Don't you get it, or are you just stupid, Sadie?" his wife snaps, finally breaking her silence. "He's using you. He's using all of us. Trying to make this town forget what he's all about, and welcome him back with open arms. He's the Castoff and he's a monster."

"Ginger, stop! You don't have a clue." There's no pride in Red coming to my defense, new daggers in her eyes, pointed at the other woman.

I just want to fucking leave. I want us to go, before there's no getting out, and this calamity becomes an apocalypse.

"No, she doesn't, but I do," Jackson says, wincing as he stands. He looks me dead in the eye, tempting the urge to strangle him all over again. "He killed the kid's mother. I wasn't going to say anything until I was sure, but fuck it, I've got the police records."

"What?" Red's jaw drops. Her fingers tense in mine. My heart threatens an explosion in my chest. "It was an accident. What are you talking –"

"Shit I dug up says different, sis," he growls, never looking at her once. His eyes are fixed on me in bitter, arrogant, lying judgment. "You know why this town wasn't keen on him before he went nuts on me? Did you ever stop to think?"

I close my eyes and think of the Nameless Bitch I've tried forever to push away.

Jenna.

Irresponsible. Reckless. Immature. My worst mistake.

She didn't have a chance to prove she was a bad mother. She died before that

happened, pissed away her own life chasing more drugs on a sour night.

But I did *not* fucking kill her.

“You’d better get yourself a lawyer, you lying fuck,” I tell Jackson, bowing up, tugging at Red’s hand. I need to get her in my truck, and I need to do it now, before more steaming lies drop out of his mouth. “I didn’t kill her. An accident did. I’m suing your lying ass for defamation.”

Jackson snorts, wiping at his forehead, smearing the blood trickle. “Listen to him bullshit. You know they did a solid job combing through that crunched up car, right, Howard? Just, nobody had the balls to call you on it, after the FBI said ‘case closed.’ Even the Feds make mistakes sometimes. We both know better. We know what happened. We know there’s a pattern now. You cut her brakes and sent her down an icy road, Captain. Just like you fucking did to mine last month.”

Shit!

Fuck.

“Red, now.” The words are mangled, raw sandpaper hissing through my teeth. “We need to go right fucking –“

Her hand slips from mine. She’s walking, but it’s the wrong fucking way.

“Marshal...you said he needed a brake job. I remember. Surely, you didn’t...” She trails off and a knife twists in my guts.

I did, and I’m guilty, but that’s all I ever did.

Too bad she doesn’t know. Too bad I’m so shocked, so mortified, it’s hard to even speak.

I’ve lied to her enough. But for all I know, the asshole smiling behind her might be wearing a wire, and I’ll go to jail soon if this is a goddamned set up like I think it is.

Sadie’s brow furrows more with every step I back away. Then I’m slinking into the driver’s seat, before Mia starts to cry.

The green eyes I’ve fallen in love with have never looked so hurt, so unsure. She stands there in the snow, tiny specks floating through darkness, like remnants of our universe blown to kingdom come.

“I have to go. Call me,” I say, ripping open the door.

“Daddy?” Mia mumbles a thousand questions in one word. We don’t have time.

“Not now, honeybee. Later.”

I don't know what the fuck later even looks like. Because by the time I'm backing the truck onto the icy street, roaring out of her parents' neighborhood faster than I should, I see the end of everything in the rear view mirror.

I see Red on her knees, hot tears streaming through her hands, covering her eyes. Then her sadistic bastard of a brother stepping forward, laying a gentle hand on her shoulder, watching us peel into the distance. He tells her it'll be okay, and I'm such a horrid, slick evil bastard anyone could've made her mistake. Won't she come inside? He has the proof to set her heart on fire.

He's poisoned her. Planted lies, terrible doubts and half-truths. That's hardly the worst part, though.

All he has to do is nurse this, water his black seeds, and make my girl see the reckless killer she's fallen in love with all along.

GAPS (SADIE)

It's been a whole week.

The slight bruises on my shoulder are better, barely visible since Jackson knocked me into the snow. If only my heart weren't still on the icy pavement, butchered by the truth that took the world out from under me.

I'm sitting upstairs in my old room, staring at the lonely painting propped against the wall. Dad moved mom's excess stuff in here, the landscape projects she attacked so vigorously they wouldn't even fit in their bedroom anymore.

The birch trees in front of the Alaskan wilderness have never looked sadder. It's another grim reminder the world isn't even close to what I thought, and her talk about how much Marshal helped her was just more madness speaking. Not reality.

I never asked for proof after I hobbled inside, helped along by Ginger and my brother. Amazing, really, since he's the one who needed a visit to Urgent Care to rule out a concussion.

But he was hellbent on making me see the light. He took my phone. Said he'd keep it safe, and having it would help him turn over any incriminating threats that Castoff Freak left on my voice mail immediately.

We need to act fast, sis. Before he slithers home and takes off with his daughter. We can't let him leave town.

My brother's words echo like a bad movie. The whole night still feels like a dream.

Worse because I didn't just lose the love of my life, didn't just have the little girl I was ready to adopt ripped away from me.

Somewhere in the middle of his interrogation, mom stopped crying, and dad stepped into the room. He told us he was taking her to the mental health place

in Davenport, now that she's done putting up a fight.

I lost my mother. Her eyes never looked so dead, so vacant, as he led her to the car, whispering encouragement.

There, there, Steph. Everything'll be okay. Just a few weeks. That's all we're asking.

Everything? No, nothing ever will be again.

I've been too upset to make the hour long trip to see her, but I keep telling myself it'll happen soon. I just need to get this sickness under control.

I just need to let the wound close, slow the steady bleed oozing from my heart.

Only, Jackson hasn't let that happen. He stayed overnight with Ginger. They were there at the breakfast table, waiting for me, asking if I was well enough to sit down, and listen.

He showed me the papers. The Jenna Flynn case, a troubled young woman with a newborn who ran her car off the road half a decade ago. It was only a couple weeks after she had Mia, and told Marshal she wanted nothing to do with her.

Only, that isn't what she said. What Marshal told me isn't the story listed in the police file Jackson tracked down. She said she was leaving town to clear her head, and she'd be back to deal with the little girl, probably after a few months.

Sure, there were drugs in her system, but it doesn't change the truth.

Marshal lied to me. He lied about her intentions, about my brother's brakes, and apparently, about what really happened to Mia's mom.

I knew the town had a problem before he slugged my brother. I'd heard the whispers and seen the disapproving looks, but what did it matter when I was seventeen, focused on college, no thoughts of falling in love with a troubled, manipulative older man whatsoever?

What a fool.

God, what a stupid, blind, gullible, heart broken fool.

I peel myself off my bed long enough to pad downstairs for a bite. Dad is in his easy chair, Earl Grey in his hands, which he sets down the second we make eye contact.

"How is she today?" I ask, wondering if he's heard from mom.

"Better. They're saying the new drugs are really helping, but we'll have to see

how the behavioral sessions go. How are *you*?” Concern shines behind my father’s glasses.

I give him a pained look. *You really can’t tell?*

“I want my phone from Jackson,” I say. “I’ll turn over anything that comes up right away, of course. But it’s the only contact I’ve got for the clinic.”

“The job posting?” Dad asks, surprise pulling at his face. I nod. “Wow, so soon? That’s wonderful, honey. Really.”

Loving Marshal left some obvious wreckage. I didn’t think it’d turn me into a liar, but it has.

It’s not the blood job I’m interested in. I’m not sure I’ll be in the state of mind for a job interview in the next century. Rather, I need to follow up on these cramps, the constant nausea every morning. Tragic symptoms of the psychic trauma I just suffered, I’m sure.

I hope.

I’m not ready to contemplate the other possibility. It’s the reason I haven’t taken dad’s car to the drugstore and gotten tested to find out.

I *can’t* be pregnant with Marshal’s baby. Not after he left a canyon sized hole where my heart should be.

“We spoke maybe an hour ago,” dad says, stroking his chin. “I’ll give him a call back and see about your phone. There’s probably time to catch him before he goes to work.”

I’m barely listening, heading into the kitchen. I dump a small mountain of bland Cheerios into my bowl, even though it’s long past one in the afternoon.

“Hey, he got your car yesterday,” dad says, giving me a hopeful look.

I tense, my fingers digging into the counter. “Just like that? You mean he went to Marshal’s place?”

Our old place. The comfy little house in the woods and the shop tucked in the forest, where I thought I’d build a life.

Dad nods. “Yeah. No sign of him or the girl. Lots of police warrants out to bring him in. Nobody knows where they’ve gone. I feel bad for the kid.”

I choke on my first bite of cereal. It tastes like ash and I’m totally sobbing, remembering Mia’s sweet smile.

“Sorry, honey. I should have told you last night. Didn’t want to say anything and upset you.”

“I get it,” I tell him, pushing the bowl away.

He’s out of his chair before I’m halfway across the kitchen, stopping at the end of the stairs. “Going back up? No worries. I’ll clean up.”

I mumble a thanks and retreat to my bedroom to lick my latest wounds. My father isn’t wrong.

I hope like hell Mia is okay.

But for some sick reason, I hope Marshal is, too. I want him to be okay, dammit. I tell myself that’s for Mia’s sake, but my lying, damaged heart can’t hide the truth from itself.

I want him to be okay because I’m still praying, as irrational as it is, that this is all a hideous mistake.

I want to just settle into my pillow, close my eyes, and wake up with the world being right-side up again.



FOUR MORE DAYS pass in a haze. I’m outside on the deck, freezing with the phone clutched to my ear.

“Ms. Kelley? Sarah?” It takes Dr. Cartwright saying my real name to break the trance.

“I’m here. Sorry, doctor.”

So sorry. It’s the first time in forever I let myself feel a shred of self-pity. I should’ve known going into the clinic to get checked would lead to this.

“You heard the results, correct?”

“Yes. Of course. I spaced and I’m sorry.”

“It’s no trouble, considering the circumstances.” Brutal. His voice is soft, but there’s judgment. “Listen, there’s a wonderful prenatal and maternity crew in Davenport. I’ll have June set up your referral to ensure you receive the finest care.”

It’s like he’s read me a death sentence. My hands go to my waist, trembling, and I pull my cardigan tighter. It doesn’t do much against this kind of cold. I’d better get back inside. Surely, fetuses won’t be harmed by a few minutes of twenty degree exposure?

I don’t have a clue. I have to start thinking about this stuff, whatever it takes to keep the baby I shouldn’t be having safe.

“Thanks, doctor. I’ll be waiting.” I wait before my screen starts flashing.

The call ends. No goodbye.

He's an asshole, but what do I expect? Dr. Cartwright knows it's just as unplanned as I do.

Oh, and not only am I staring down the black hole of having a child I'm not the least bit mentally equipped for, but I've just blown my best chance to snag a lab job in town.

I'm fucked.

Completely hopelessly devastated.

I'm holding in a silent scream as I fling open the door and step inside the house. Of course, there's a surprise waiting that makes the wintry February snow seem downright balmy.

"Oh, there you are, sis. Finally." Jackson beams. I don't know how to associate my brother's harsh smile with anything less than a new nightmare. He pushes something across the kitchen counter, taking a long slurp of coffee. "Look this over. Tell me what you think."

"Can't it wait? I'm not really...I'm just not in the mood."

His smile disappears. He picks the slim stack of papers up, rounds the corner, and gets in my face. "Okay. You will be for this, though. Read."

What choice do I have? What choice ever where he's involved?

My eyes skim the words. I see a judge's name, something about a restraining order, custody, and – Mia.

Jesus Christ.

My stomach tries to turn itself inside-out.

"What's the matter? I thought it'd perk you up. Soon as we show up on the Castoff's fucking doorstep, we've got him. We can get her away, somewhere safe, where she'll have a chance to – hey!"

I'm stumbling, knocking over a water bottle on the counter. I can't breathe. Hell, I try not to, because if this is really some twisted nightmare, maybe I'll finally wake up once the oxygen deprivation hits.

"Sis? Whoa. Hey, Ginger!"

I didn't even notice my sister-in-law nearby. Her hands are the only thing keeping my knees from slamming into the floor a few seconds later. I'm doubled over, both their arms tucked under my shoulders, watching hot, vicious tears slap the kitchen's wooden floor.

“Oh, Jackson, why’d you have to lay this on her now? She’s been through so much. It isn’t easy being stuck in the middle of all this. I told you, wait.” It’s one of the few times I’ve ever heard her annoyed.

It doesn’t help. The second I turn my head, eyeballing her growing baby bump, I want to throw up all over again.

God damn it, Marshal Howard.

A shrill whimper punctures the air. I think I’m hyperventilating.

“Mia!” I whimper, the only word I’m able to get out.

“What? What?!” Jackson barks the same question in my face twice, angrier by the second. “Don’t tell me you still give a shit what happens to the kid? Can’t you see what I’m trying to do here? You can’t be this fucking blind, sis.”

“Jackson, don’t! Come on.” Ginger’s grip tightens on my arm. She tries leading me to the sofa in the living room, but my brother isn’t having it, blocking our path.

“No, *you* come on. It’s bullshit. Here I am, trying to do the right thing, searching high and low for that goddamned killer freak. Same thing anybody with a brain should’ve done years ago: get the kid away from him. If there was ever a bad fucking influence –“

“Jackson!” A louder male voice I don’t recognize at first booms down the hall. We all stop and turn. “Enough. Leave her be.”

Dad steps into the fray, a quiet anger in his eyes. My brother stands taller, straighter, staring our father down. “Stay the hell out of this, old man. You let that freak in the house, too. Neither of you were ever fit to care for mom. Just wish I’d seen it sooner.”

I’m petrified. So is Ginger. We watch in horror as my father blinks once and then adjusts his glasses. “I wish I knew what the hell happened to you over there, son. It’s sick what you’ve become. Fit? You’re no longer fit to come here.”

I wish I could applaud my father for finally growing a backbone. Too bad it’s today, after everything else has left me numb.

“Really? Just like that you’ve found your balls? Nice. Real fuckin’ nice! This is the thanks I get for trying to track down the asshole who assaulted me twice, and put our mother in the nuthouse.”

“Leave, Jackson. I’m tired of it. Ginger, drive him home.”

My brother’s eyes laser through his wife. “I know when we’re not welcome.

Let's fucking go."

Her arm slips off mine. It's rare to see anyone look as disgusted as my own sister-in-law as she walks to the table, grabbing her purse, probably contemplating the painful drive home.

Jackson slumps against the wall, stewing and waiting. My father heads for the kitchen, shaking his head, knocking around cups in the cabinet more loudly than he needs to.

"What the hell were you so busy bawling about anyway? If it's not my full intent to nail that Castoff prick to the wall, then –"

"I'm pregnant." It just falls out.

I didn't know the truth could go terminal until now.

Confusion flicks through my brother's eyes, rapidly becoming shock, and then rage. "You're...you're fucking knocked up? You've *got* to be shitting me, sis." He pauses, shaking his head, jerking up and closing on me so fast he winces. "Who?"

I don't say anything. There's no point.

I'm alone, somehow still standing underneath the heat lamps where Jackson's eyes should be. And right now, I'd give anything to see Marshal again.

I don't care if it's insane. I don't care if it's desperate. I don't even care if he lied, ran, and left me behind for good.

Whatever he's guilty of, it can't be worse than weathering the explosive betrayal in my brother's face.

It's gone dead quiet in the house. I wait for Ginger to come between us, use her charm on overtime to lead him away, but she's stopped, staring, unsure. It's too much for even her.

"Who, Sadie? Who? Who the fuck got you...Jesus!" Jackson can't bring himself to say it.

Then his hands are on my shoulders. Thumbs digging into my clavicles. He's screaming something my ears have lost the will to comprehend.

"It was him. Him. Fucking him!"

"Jackson! No, no, holy –" Jackson flings her away. Ginger squeals, holding tight to him for support, but barely.

His eyes widen and his grip dies. It takes his pregnant wife nearly slamming into the wall face first before he lets go.

Jackson steps back, disgusted. I wish I knew if it was meant for me, or himself.

“Fuck. I’m so sorry, baby,” he growls, clenching Ginger to his chest. He cups her reluctant face, sliding his fingers through her hair, giving me and dad the evil eye.

For once, I stare right back, finding my strength. *I did not make you do that, asshole.*

“We’re going home, and I’m sorting out the shit nobody else has the stones to deal with. I’ve got a lead on that Castoff prick. Mark my words, I’ll pay him a visit myself. Before the police show up. I want a chance to beat the ever-living shit out of him first for wrecking my life.”

“Jackson!” Dad barks his name one last time, but there’s no stopping him.

He’s gone, heading through the garage, a sobbing Ginger hooked on his arm. I’m still alone, cold, and utterly crushed.

Even when my father finally turns to me, disgust fading from his eyes, and holds me in the tightest embrace I think we’ve shared since my Sweet Sixteen, it isn’t enough. It isn’t consolation. It can’t help.

I know what’s coming next: disaster.

GROWLING CLOSER (MARSHAL)

“Daddy...it’s cold.”

“Working on it, honeybee. Give me a minute and drink your hot cider. Little sips, baby girl, just like I told you.” I break another log apart, hurling the wood into the old furnace, slamming the metal grate shut.

Of course the temperature had to plummet on day fourteen of exile. Ten days past the time we should already be several states away from Port Eagle.

The real problem isn’t that this trailer parked on the abandoned hunting ground is too cold, too dreary, too far removed from civilization. It’s that it’s working too well. It’s comfortable enough to keep me here, hiding away with Mia while I try to force myself to pull the pin. There’s no hurry to start the long, permanent road trip that will take us God knows where.

A different end of the country, certainly. That much, I know. Anchorage, maybe, or Tucson.

Whatever mid-sized city has never attracted a single person from Port Eagle, Iowa, and who can’t identify me as the Castoff behind my growing scruff. I reach up and scratch.

Shit itches. Another week, the full beard will start feeling natural, and then I’ll be able to settle into the cover story I’ve concocted, wherever we wind up. I’m telling our new neighbors I’m a Missoula affiliate. One of those lumbersexual gun shop owners who made a killing selling ammo to the Prairie Devils MC, or whatever the hell other scary syndicate I can name drop to make people keep their nosy ass questions to themselves.

Easy. I hope.

Leaving this place, on the other hand...putting more miles between me and Red...

God damn. I sit down next to Mia, pushing my fingers through my hair, trying

not to let her see me scared.

It's hard, and it shouldn't be.

Why am I fucking up like this today? Why for the last week have I been telling myself we'll check the truck and leave? *Tomorrow, honeybee.*

Always tomorrow. Never today.

"Daddy, I'm hungry." She tugs at my flannel sleeve, giving me a longing look. For a second, I look through the wall, wishing like hell I'd never posted that nanny ad.

I'm an okay cook, but nothing like Red. My little girl misses her grub even if she won't say it. Hell, so do I.

I wish I'd done things differently, like never bringing Sarah Kelley into my house. But by the time I give Mia my reassuring smile, promise her mac and cheese, and start rummaging through the tiny fridge to see if we have any frozen peas left for a veggie add-in, I know it isn't true.

I don't regret this, however much I hate roughing it out with my little girl. I don't regret *her*.

Fuck, I miss her more than ever.

Little Mia's sing-song humming while she waits for me to boil water just drives it home. It's the Star Spangled banner. I cock my head, listening to the national anthem. Out of place, out of context, but damn if it isn't what they were working on before the terrible night that ripped her away from me.

I try not to slam the knife down on the onions and mushrooms I'm adding to our poor man's macaroni casserole. At least I have real cheese to flesh out the instant powder.

Thinking about Red inevitably brings my mind to her asshole brother and his threats.

His threats make me think of Jenna.

Jenna makes me think of the truth, which yeah, I fucking embellished, but I never killed her.

Too bad I was caught red-handed the second asshole noticed me tampering with his brakes. I'll never understand how he deciphered the intent, or why he sat on it as long as he did.

I underestimated him. Should've done more than a basic patch job, realizing too late the garage in town never half-asses things.

It's not like it matters.

His lies were enough. They tore her away, stole my woman while she was still wearing my ring, clutching it to her trembling lip like it was the reason our world went to hell.

Not because of the lying, would-be murderer idiot standing in front of her on the icy driveway after attacking her brother. Not because of the bigger fool who *ran*.

I should have faced the music.

Turned myself in and let the heavens fall.

Shoulda, coulda, woulda.

I don't know what's in the crystal ball next. I try not to picture it, much as I need to, if we're ever getting anywhere.

Today, I'm here, boiling pasta, listening to my little girl hum a patriotic tune that tears my heart out, and not because it summons a lot of ghosts into my screwed up head.

My eyes drift over to the cheap notebook and pen. I bought it the first and last time we stopped in town, the same night we left everything, tearing down the highway to this abandoned place I've seen a thousand times. It's got hotels, routes, itineraries, whatever I could find online the first night before I switched off my phone and tossed it into the Mississippi at a scenic overlook.

There's plenty of paper left over, demanding words. For two weeks, I've resisted the biting urge to sit down and write. I can't, I can't, I so fucking can't, I keep telling myself.

Because the instant I do, and those words flow out of me, they have to find Red. I have to bring them to her. And if I let that happen, everything ends.



I WAKE up with a groan the next morning. I roll over, check honeybee snoozing on the blow up mattress next to me. She likes to pull her covers off at night and wake up freezing, but thankfully that's not the case this morning.

I'm careful not to wake her, fixing myself a coffee in the little kitchen. It's cheap instant shit that puts a few more hairs on my chest after the first sip. First thing I'm grabbing once we've settled into our new lives is a grinder and some fresh beans.

Even hardasses are coffee snobs sometimes.

My caffeine woes pale compared to the notebook next to the stove. The pen is still on top, calling me, ruining my day before the cold winter sun is up.

“Goddammit, I can’t...” I whisper, downing more black sludge.

My hands aren’t listening.

Somehow, my fingers find their way to the smudged black pen.

Somehow, I’m holding the notebook when I sit on the plastic stack of storage bins I use as a makeshift chair.

Somehow, I’m writing like a man who’s lost his mind.

I can’t leave town without Red knowing. Not without an explanation. Not without a clue.

My hand scribbles furiously for the next half hour, finding the words lodged in my heart like an arrow, drawing them out in quick, painful bursts. Emotion bleeds out of me and stains the pages. Wounds the old Marshal Howard never knew.

This new man I’ve become beats his way out of me, high on adrenaline. Alive and enraged with a cold new realization.

I never thought I’d love a woman this fucking much.

How the hell can I leave Sadie behind?

I don’t know. But I have to find a way, right after I finish this note, get our crap together, and feed my little girl some breakfast.

Survival doesn’t make room for heartbreak, or bitter confessions. It’s cruel, unrelenting, and a bitch with zero room in her icy heart for error.

Go.

After you finish this thing, stuff it in an envelope, and drop it at her door.

This has to be the end.

I tell myself the same thing over and over. It’s early, well before our small town’s poor excuse for a rush hour. Maybe if I can get Mia up and dressed in the next half hour, stopping at the McDonald’s on the edge of town won’t be too huge a risk. Then we’ll hit the highway and never look back.

Finally. I have a plan, and it’s the first time it’s actually felt *right*.

Standing, I look through the dirty windows at the first sunlight peaking up above the frosted trees. There’s a heavy peace in my bones.

Then I hear the engine. It’s a rough noise that shouldn’t be here in the morning calm. A slow steady growl that’s too ominous and far too fucking close to our hideaway.

“Mia!” I yell her name, crossing the trailer to the air mattress. “Honeybee, come on, wake up. We have to go right now.”

Now, now, right the fuck now.

I can’t even wait for her to rub her little eyes. I’ve yanked her up in a matter of seconds, clutched tight to my chest, ripping our jackets off the back of the sofa.

That engine is coming closer still. I stop for a split second at the kitchen window, and see a familiar black truck rumbling through the morning gloom.

What little hopes I had for a lost farmer using this abandoned turf to turn around dies. I’m desperate, but I’m not delusional.

There’s no mistaking it.

I know who it is, even if I can’t make out his features in the driver’s dark silhouette.

Jackson. And in less than another minute, he’ll be at my fucking doorstep.

“Mia, baby, listen to daddy. You awake?”

“Daddy?” Her little voice sets off a new panic. I hold her tight, grabbing our pre-packed bug out bag, crashing through the door.

“Just hold on tight! We’ve got a bumpy ride ahead. Listen and be good, you hear?”

“Okay. Okay, daddy, I –“

I can’t listen anymore. My hands are too busy shoving her in the kiddie seat, strapping her in, careful as I can be not to hurt her or miss anything important.

We have to fucking go!

The engine is on top of us now. I’m in the driver’s seat, jamming the ignition, refusing to look up when I hear a vehicle’s door slam shut, and then a man’s voice yelling.

“Hey, asshole!” He gets two words in. No more.

We’re off. My tires rip through powdery snow, crunching the overgrown brush underneath it. My truck weaves a circle around the intruder, straight to the road, and I floor it.

He’s just a small dot in the distance by the time I glance in my mirrors, the only thing keeping my heart from ripping out of my chest.

Jackson hits the side of his truck hard, struggling for the door. He slips, slowing him down. Must be the ice and the frenzied attempt to chase. Thank

God for small favors.

We have a head start on the highway. But I know what the bastard expects.

Logic says I should take the first fork out of town, heading south, toward the closest state line, Illinois.

But if he can't catch me, he'll probably call the Sheriff. They'll be expecting me on the route. I'll run smack into them and the handcuffs I have waiting after whatever insane story he's concocted about me murdering Jenna.

The one that isn't true.

Messing with his brakes, though...

Shit! There's plenty that actually could land me behind bars without any miracles from defense attorneys.

The muffled laughter behind me is a surprise and a welcome distraction.

"Honeybee? Everything okay back there?" My eyes flit to the mirror and see my smiling little girl.

"Again, daddy! That was fun." Her little hands slap together like the beat of angel's wings.

Christ. My heart drops a hundred feet in a second.

Angels? Right. I could use a few of those right now, big hulking guardians with their flaming swords and earth splitting trumpets.

If there's still a way to get the hell out of here a free man, I need every bit of help I can get.



I'M WALKING out of the bathroom with Mia in tow. The entire day is shot and it's already dark.

We're parked at a tiny little gas station on the other side of town. The owner, Fred, is a sports junky who's completely oblivious to anything except his Hawkeyes winning. He smiles and thanks me for the crumpled cash I use to buy us a couple candy bars, then turns back to the TV broadcasting the game.

Chocolate is the least my girl deserves after the fucked up day I've given her. Not even the morning chase, which she innocently enjoyed, but the mind-mending boredom after.

I'm paralyzed. Taking any route out of town feels like a fatal mistake. I surf the radio stations for a hint, a word about traffic conditions and police activity, but Port Eagle is the armpit on the river between Dubuque and

Davenport. If there's a manhunt going on, or even just the town's three man police crew lined up on every road leading out of it, I'll never know until I run smack into them.

I wish I'd packed my scanner, damn it.

After another half hour at the station, I finally fire up my engine and drive us down the road. Fred's pump is no place to spend the night with the twenty-four hour lights blaring in our eyes.

There's an eyesore about a mile away, an old rail junction with a crumbling fence. The dead grey building next to the decommissioned tracks has been a dumping ground for years. Perfect hiding spot.

My truck looks like nothing from the road, tucked between a rusted tractor and a Honda missing its windshield. Just another dark ghost, gone and forgotten.

For once, that's how I want to stay while I try to think. Sort out whether the cover of night will do us any favors.

Mia sips her cocoa and mumbles to herself. Guilt throbs in my veins. I can't keep her cooped up in this truck forever, especially if we're staying for one more night. I need time to think, to look the town over, to raise my morale.

What the hell do I do? Sitting here through dusk isn't doing us any favors.

Turning, I reach for my little girl's hand, pinching her fingers. "How about a drive? Break up the monotony."

"Seattle, daddy?" Her eyes go big.

I smile and a numb half-laugh slips out. It's the first time in forever, so long I've forgotten the sound in my throat. "Nah, that'll be a few more days." *If* we decide to head to Alaska at all, it'll be through Washington. "I mean for tonight, before we turn in."

Honeybee nods, more than a little disappointed. It turns the wrench in my guts harder. I hope the place I have in mind doesn't bring back too many bad memories, and make this even worse.



I'M EERILY CALM APPROACHING the Kelley residence. Mia drifts off before we're even there, blissfully ignorant to the pain that starts ripping through me once I'm on Sadie's street.

It's after eight o'clock. The house is weirdly dark, barely lit. There's no sign of Jackson's truck – the only thing that really matters.

I switch off the lights and wait. I count five minutes, trying not to rip off the steering wheel.

This is where I lost her. The woman I wasn't supposed to love, much less marry. She, who taught me I could live in the present, without being shackled to ghosts who haven't shut up since my fist crashed into Jackson's face.

Cinnamon hair and mischief lips. Promises I wasn't meant to break. Heart and fucking soul.

Red, beautiful Red.

God damn it.

I step out of the truck and close the door lightly, hand tucked in my pocket. Every step crunching through the snow is deafening. It doesn't slow me down.

I make it to her doorstep, slide the envelope into the screen, and beat it. It was risky coming here, riskier still to stay.

If all goes well, she'll find my note tomorrow.

She'll have till noon to make her choice. If she buys my explanation, finds it in herself to forgive, and realizes I'm not a total monster, then maybe I won't leave my ruined soul behind.

Maybe, we'll have a chance.

GUIDE THE WAY (SADIE)

I can't sleep. I tell myself it's normal, the same thing since Jackson went berserk. But if I'm being honest, deep down, the sandman abandoned me the day I lost Marshal.

I'm awake after four listless hours, anxious as ever. It's barely past nine. I shower, dress, and head downstairs, just in time for the day's main event.

"Mom?" I freeze, one-step into the living room, staring at my mother like she's a phantom.

She turns slowly, dad eyeing her anxiously. "Nice to see you, dear. It's good to be home."

I go running. For once in my life, I throw myself at my mother, wrap my arms around her, and she hugs me back just as hard.

I'm sure dad hasn't briefed her on the latest drama, or the fact that they'll be grandparents in eight months and counting. Too much, too soon, after weeks of intense psychotherapy. His eyes are warnings when they land on me, understanding, but begging me to take it easy.

"How are you? How was it?" Two questions down, and only ninety-eight more to go. It seems like an eternity since she's been away.

My mother sits up straight, little sign of her unruly fidgeting. "It was... dreadful, really. What else would you call being committed?"

"Steph," dad whispers, rubbing her arm. He's trying so hard not to upset her, fearful something might trigger a relapse any second.

This is a trial run. If she can't hack it here, or backslides, then she could be away for months.

"Mom, you're okay." I need her to be. Because I don't know what okay means anymore.

“Someday. For now, I’m just better. The pills help stop the urge to scream and tear our lovely home apart.” She looks at me and smiles. I’m thankful treatment hasn’t broken her very blunt spirit. “And what about you, dear? Still babysitting for our friend?”

My smile fades. Dad’s hand slides completely off her arm, his face going pale. I don’t know what to say.

“Peter?” Mom looks from me to him, bewildered.

“Nothing, nothing. I just really need some coffee. Care for a cup, anybody?” He heads into the kitchen, aiming a desperate look my way. *Don’t say anything*, his eyes say.

Mom turns back to me, a glint in her eye, leaning in. “So, you’re toying with me. What’s going on? Where’s Marshal and that precious little girl?”

“Away.” I never knew one word could cut my throat. “He’s left town, mom. Family business. Said it was urgent, I believe. I’m not working for him anymore.”

There’s a small crash in the kitchen. We both turn. Dad looks at us sheepishly, lifting a small saucer out of the sink. Rather, one broken half of it. “Butterfingers. You gals are *sure* you don’t need anything?”

Mom sighs, slumping in her chair. “I’m so sorry, dear. So, you’re living here again full time then? Such a bore. My condolences.”

Oh, mom. You have no earthly idea.



I TAKE COFFEE AFTER ALL. Dad brews a fresh pot of decaf, just for me. I’m doing everything by the book for this pregnancy, well into weaning myself off caffeine.

Once he sees mom’s brain is still in one piece, he’s comfortable enough to leave us alone. I sit with my mother making small talk, sugarcoating the tragic irony growing inside me.

She gives the doctors and nurses who tended her brutal reviews. I pretend to give her my full attention, the impossible. Of course, there’s plenty of guilt to go around.

How long will I have to sit on my secret? Weeks? Months?

If Jackson finds Marshal, maybe sooner. I hope he doesn’t, and for no good reason.

“We did some work in your bedroom. Want to see?” I force a smile, hoping

the clean new bedroom-studio waiting upstairs does her some good.

“Sure, dear. It’s important to know where I’ll be spending ten hours out of the day. These damn drugs are narcotics, I swear.” Yawning for emphasis, she stands and we walk together.

I lead her past dad mopping the dining room. He looks up, mouthing a single word: *easy*.

Duh, I mouth back, following mom upstairs.

She moves cautiously into the bedroom, past the miserable mess where I’m sleeping. I’m glad I remembered to shut my door. I’ve been too down the past few weeks to catch up on laundry, or even arrange the things Jackson retrieved from Marshal’s place.

We stop at the entrance to the room. My mother pokes her head in and sniffs, then gives me a restless look. “Birch themed. Predictable, I suppose, but it’ll do.”

The breath I’m holding in slips out. No freakouts. That’s good.

Before, mom refused to let anyone touch her things. Now, she’s accepted the clean slate we’ve tried to give her. A few deflated words feels like a miracle, like we’ve averted a storm.

Maybe people really can change.

“Are you tired, mom?”

She shakes her head, brushing past me. “No. And I’m in no mood to work either. Not for a couple more weeks, the doctor said. I’d better pretend to listen. Give the drugs some time to settle before I fight them tooth and nail for my muse.”

I wish this was more of a victory. I’m trailing behind her, heading downstairs. I almost crash into my mother’s back when she stops on the last step, her eyes narrowed, peeking through our glass door.

“What’s that?” She lifts a finger, pointing to the small scrap of paper lodged inside.

Shrugging, I head over. Probably just an ad, but why in God’s name anyone would want to brave an Iowa winter to go door-to-door, I’ll never know.

I open the door and pull it out as fast as I can. There’s no time for the familiar handwriting to hit me with mom standing over my shoulder.

A short, surprised hiss slips through her teeth instead. “*Ah-ha*. So, it’s him, isn’t it? I knew he didn’t just up and leave.”

My cheeks combust, burning red insanity. I fight the urge to rip it up with my hands before I even open it. Surely, that's better than the scream I'm holding in.

"Oh, don't look so guilty, my love. I'll leave you to your love letters. Someone will fill me in sooner or later, but just between us, I hope it's you. Your father still thinks I'm liable to become a fire breathing dragon." Mom claps me on the shoulder and trots away, humming to herself.

Dare I? My fingernail slides under the seal. It's harder than paper, more like tearing fabric.

The note falls open. A precious artifact from another life, which ended the day I threw Marshal's ring in my nightstand drawer, never to be seen again.

I take a deep breath. Let's get this over and done.

DEAR RED,

I'M NOT RISKING everything to get this to you for sweet talk.

So let's get straight to the point: I love you.

Really. Truly. So fucking much.

Wish somebody told me love comes with a lot of regrets. Wish even harder none of the shit with your brother happened that night. Mostly, I wish I'd told you the truth from the get go.

This isn't getting on some high horse. We're both liars, him and me. Difference is, I'm finally coming clean. I'm done spending another second on this planet without you knowing the truth, thinking I'm a monster.

Maybe that's how it's supposed to be, but I'd rather lay it out and take my chances. Here's where we're at, darling.

I didn't kill Jenna. Once upon a time, I tried to make it work for all of one week. That's as much as the bitch and I could stand each other. Then she jumped on the highway and crashed in the river. It was so goddamned miserable I tried to forget it ever happened. I lied to myself so long I misled you, and I'm sorry.

I never cut her brakes. She left Mia hungry and ran off a cliff. Ask for the pages your brother omitted if you don't want to take my word for it. The cops put me through the wringer, and I walked out alive because I didn't kill her. Their investigation proved it.

Now for the rest: I did cut your brother's brakes.

You didn't read that wrong. I wanted his ass dead.

If you want to turn me in, here's my confession.

I've had a vendetta against his lying, scheming soul since the service. His bad intel killed three of my best friends, fellow Rangers, good men who left their families for nothing. He lied to our officers, led us into an ambush, and then called in an airstrike without checking to see if my team was out of the combat zone.

Death wasn't even the end of it. Their parents, their kids, their widows are still suffering. I was drunk that day on the Fourth and I couldn't hold it in anymore while our hometown hero passed by. I did something stupid, and he punched me in the face.

I tried to ruin him then and there, without thinking about it, and it backfired on me.

I've spent the last few years plotting the best way to get him ever since, to avenge my dead friends and my own fucking name. Until last Christmas, that was my obsession.

Then you came.

You slayed the demons. You gave me hope. You saying yes to being my wife was the best minute of my life. Right up there with the first time I ever laid eyes on my little girl.

You, Red, are the reason Jackson is still breathing. I tried to off him and I couldn't. Just fixed his shitty brakes instead, then drove his truck to your parents place, safe and sound.

I swore off killing him for you. Hell, I even realized I did wrong.

I still want to get even. But if I ever do him justice, it'll be legal, proper, and it'll happen without hurting a hair on his nasty face. Promise.

Also, we're leaving soon. I've got my little girl ready for a long trip. Mia misses you.

So the hell do I.

We want you with. If you're able to look past his lies, if you can handle my darkest truths, join us.

If you can forgive, even if I don't deserve it, then I'm ready for anything.

I'd love to have your lips. Still crave them more than air itself on the nights I can't breathe.

Pretty much every night since I lost you, Sadie.

Make that every night for the rest of my miserable life if it's really over.

Come see us at the old junction stop by noon if there's any love left in your heart. Call a cab. We have to leave today and we'll sort the rest later.

YOURS FOREVER,

MARSHAL

I CAN'T MOVE until I've read it three more times. Then my knees just work like they're lighter than a cloud. They carry me upstairs.

My hands, light and happy, plow through the mess of my belongings. They stuff the essentials in a suitcase. There's a shiver up my spine as I slide my ring back on.

I hadn't realized how truly naked I felt without it. I tuck the note into my purse and sling it over my shoulder.

I pass dad at the base of the stairs. He's heading up and I'm going to sit by the door, waiting for my ride.

"Where's the fire, Sadie? Looks like you're going away for a long time..." He frowns, trailing off.

Crap. I'm caught and I know it. I stand there silently, staring at my dad adjusting his spectacles.

"It's nothing. Honest. I'll be home before you know it, dad. I'm...just going into town to unload some junk." I've never been an awesome liar. This comes out so weak, even I'm ashamed.

He lifts an eyebrow. "Sadie?"

There's no fooling him.

I should've known. He's too experienced for this. Spent too many years unraveling Jackson's lies, ever since he started acting out in his teens, and then too many more dealing with mom's torrid half-truths and exaggerations.

"Let's try this again: I'm going away with a friend. It's everything going on here, dad. I just need to get away before I lose it. Promise I'll stay safe. I'll call whenever I can. It might...honestly, it might be a while." I look down,

wondering if he'll let it go. "I'm sorry to do it like this, especially today. But, dad, I have to leave now. My mental health is kinda at stake."

His hand lingers on the banister, rough grip sapping his strength. He hangs his head and sighs. When his eyes return to mine, they're conflicted, then understanding. "I can't keep you here. Please, babe, just don't do anything illegal or dangerous. If it's him...damn it, just stay safe. Get out of here before Jackson comes sniffing. He hasn't been thinking clearly since the day he almost knocked you down."

"Dad?" I'm in disbelief. I drop everything and squeeze him until his glasses come loose. "I'll never forget this. Thank you."

"Yeah, now run along. Looks like your taxi's here. I'll tell your mom everything tomorrow over brunch. We'll manage, one way or another, just like we always do."

I give him one more hug and then grab my things. It's hard to believe I've gotten so lucky.

Now, I just have to decide whether the next time I lay eyes on Marshal, I smother him with kisses or slap his face into a tailspin.



"HERE, MA'AM? YOU'RE SURE?" The middle aged cab driver looks back in the mirror, doing a double take at the dirty place I've asked him to drop me off.

I search for signs of Marshal. It's several seconds before I catch faint movement, a reflection inside one of the few windshields still intact in the parking lot.

A signal. It has to be.

"I am, and thank you," I mutter, shoving a ball of cash at the cabbie. An ultra-generous tip should keep him from asking any questions.

I wait until he starts pulling away before I move. Then I'm speed walking through the opening in the rusted chain link fence, careful not to trip over the debris. I hear a car door open.

Suddenly, he's running toward me. It's less than a minute before his massive arms crash around me, and the lips I've needed for weeks forge tears.

Our kiss is a collision. I put my hands around his neck and sink my nails in his skin.

We come together like a storm.

Angry. Blistering. Melancholy. Raw.

Every last feeling on passion's atlas, plus some uncharted. I try to suck the life out of him, but he does it better, drinking my pain and love and confusion. And I taste his, sweet sustenance, even in its dark and ugly parts.

I see the sun when his grip finally lessens, and I'm able to gaze into those blue eyes I've missed like priceless pearls.

"Never letting you out of my sight again, woman," he growls, his fingers pressed against my back through my coat. He's going to shear it off my body, I swear, leaving nothing but his warmth for protection.

I think I'm okay with that.

"Idiot, you'd better not. Because I can't believe I'm standing here, bags packed, considering...I don't even know what."

"Say you'll still be my wife. Run away with me. Leave all the crap in this town behind. It's not too late to find our way, the one we were always meant for."

There's so much happening between the words I don't even know. This gorgeous, rough man in front of me can't even give me any hard answers.

But it's his eyes that win me over.

They always do.

Scorching blue as morning sky. Intense, alive, and always hopeful.

That, I can work with. I can take his hand and fight. We'll sift through this drama, somehow, someday. And maybe after a while, we *can* let go of everything that's been holding us apart, dragging us down.

"Darling, say it," he growls, pressing his forehead to mine. "Let me hear those words coming from your lips."

"Yes, yes, yes. Of course I will, Marshal. I love you, and today that's enough." It really is.

Truth is never more powerful than when it's spoken out loud. Everything else becomes a flimsy apparition. All our troubles, our doubts, our woes are destined to melt in the daylight of my heartbeat for him. They always were.

"Love the fuck out of you," he rumbles, sweet baritone roughness vibrating through his chest. His thick hand cups my cheek and he digs his fingers in just slightly, holding me for his eyes. "I thought I'd lost you."

"Not quite." I smile. "Not ever. There's things we'll need to discuss, questions I really need an answer to –"

“Red, say no more. I’ll break my ribs and hand you my still-beating heart if it gets us good again. No more secrets. I promise.”

“Promise, what’d you promise, daddy?” A little singsong voice stands behind him, tentatively clinging to a busted tractor tire.

We let go. Marshal takes my hand like it’s the first day of the rest of our life. Then we both walk over to greet Mia together, him hoisting her up, and we race to find out who smothers the little cherub in kisses first.

“Your daddy just promised to make me the happiest woman on earth, honeybee,” I say. “And I know he will. There’s a good man in there – even if he struggles to find his way out, sometimes.”

Marshal holds his little girl closer, ruffling her dark brown hair. “He needs the right woman. Lucky him, that shouldn’t be a problem anymore.”

Mia’s tiny face wrinkles. “Does...does this mean mama’s coming to Alaska, too?”

Mama. My heart goes to pieces for probably the thousandth time today.

Marshal just looks at me and grins. “Yeah, honeybee. I think it does, assuming she doesn’t give us a warmer option. I hear Arizona’s nice this time of year. Even knew a guy in Phoenix from my army days, Knox or whatever. He’s doing well there, I hear.”

I wipe my brow, just imagining the furious summer heat. “Alaska it is. Sorry, I need my seasons, even if they’re short.”

Mia laughs and it sets off a chain reaction. For the briefest moment, we’re lost in a winter sunbeam. The clouds have lifted, the sun is shining, and everything is rosy.

Then there’s a sound that doesn’t fully compute in my brain.

A car door slamming. Footprints crunching weirdly close to us in the snow. A voice.

“Well, well, if it isn’t the happy family. Jesus Christ, sis. I knew you came out here to talk to him, but you’re running away with this psycho?” Jackson stops, only several feet away, his hand shoved awkwardly inside his coat.

Marshal turns. He presses one hand against the small of my back, holding Mia closer with the other arm. “My daughter is here. Whatever you want, it’ll have to wait.”

“Oh, no, motherfucker. We’re not playing *that* game again. I would’ve had you by now if I hadn’t let you run, hiding behind the kid. Nearly broke my damn back skidding on the ice. I took my sweet time coming after you

because I didn't want to scare her. Not gonna make that mistake again."

"Jackson, no! She's just a little girl. Let me, please." I'm pulling on Marshal's arms, trying to get her. He reluctantly lets go, passing her to me. "Come here, baby," I whisper, doing my very best to cover her ears.

My brother snorts. I look up, raw hatred lighting fires in my veins. What he's become makes me sick.

"Go home. We're not out to hurt anyone. We just want to be left alone." I don't know why I try to reason with him.

Marshal knows it won't work. He steps in front of us, spreading his arms protectively. "Let *them* go. At least to my truck. Then we can talk, man-to-man."

Jackson looks me over. I guess there's a faint thread of humanity left inside him because he nods, motions to Marshal's vehicle, and finds his most condescending tone. "You get in the truck with her and stay, sis. Do not fucking move unless I say."

I want to do so many other things. Defy him, tell him to go to hell, pull Marshal into the driver's seat and take off, leaving this madness forever. But that can't happen.

Nothing is ever easy while there's a dangerous, self-righteous demon controlling my brother.

"Let's sit, honeybee. This'll all be over soon." It's hard to make my legs work, but I do.

Less than a minute later, she's in my lap. I press her weary face to my chest, hiding the gut-wrenching scene unfolding through the windshield no more than twenty, maybe thirty feet away.

My brother finally takes his hand out of his jacket.

He points a gun at the love of my life.

Marshal raises his hands, says something I can't hear, and rips open his jacket.

He's bearing his heart for his executioner.

I don't even look away because the tears blurring the world are too much.

They leak. They burn. They remind me how helpless I am.

I'm waiting for the gunshot to rip through the silence, but it never comes.

Instead, I see Jackson lay his gun on the ground. His heavy winter coat falls

off, and he's coming toward Marshal, whose fists are bowed viciously at his sides.

I don't know what's worse once the first blow lands on my love's face: watching them kill each other in slow motion, or knowing there's nothing I can do.

He told me to keep Mia safe. He meant it. So, I do, trying to drown out the agony unfolding behind the glass.

This has to play out. I doubt my brother called the police, or they'd be here by now, breaking up this sick gladiator match.

Mia stirs in my arms. "Mama?"

"*Shhhhhh*. Sleep, baby. I'll tell you when to wake. This will all be over soon." It's amazing how I'm able to sound so calm, carefully mouthing each word, watching two of the men I care about most hit the ground.

They're tearing into each other like animals.

This will all be over soon. I try to believe it, closing my eyes, dynamite threatening to blow my temples apart while I muster every last ounce of strength not to cry.

I count numbers slowly in my head, one by one, for what seems like forever.

It's eerily quiet. My eyes snap open after God knows how long and I look around. There's no sign of them. Just furious, angry chaos left in uneven snow. Plus the uneven footprints that may be stained with blood or rust.

I can't tell.

I really don't want to.

Oh, but the movement in the rear view mirror brings new questions. They're behind the truck now, next to the building, moving inside. Both men are still fighting. Still trying to kill each other.

Panting, my brother staggers backwards, disappearing through the broken doorway. Marshal follows, his face bloodied, a thousand curses engraved on his busted lips.

Then they're gone. I can't see anything.

A terrible memory from high school science class snatches at my brain. Remember the experiment with the cat in the box that might be living or dead, but not until it's opened and seen?

I'm living it right now. Just like I'm living every soft breath of the tiny little girl in my arms, every slow beat of my heart, and every prayer.

Please don't let him die. Not when he just came back. Not when we were going to make this right.

This isn't fair. There are so many things I haven't had a chance to say.

I haven't even mentioned the secret growing inside me! Marshal deserves a chance to be a father again, this time with a family, like he always wanted. My eyes open, drifting toward the quiet sky.

Please.

We deserve a second chance.

Hell, we deserve a first.

We've fought too hard to be whole just to see it all burn down in front of me.

Please don't let it do this. Please just let him come back to me.

Please!

COMMON GROUND (MARSHAL)

I'm battered, exhausted, pushed to my limit. I haven't been physically torn up this bad since the day the fuckwit hunched on the ground in front of me killed my boys.

Emotionally, I've never been this alive. Adam, Erik, Zane, their ghosts give me strength. They breathe a fury in my fists and a will to murder in my blood, guiding every blow to this asshole's body whenever I have the chance.

If I weren't distracted by something else, I think he'd be dead by now. This should be my moment of triumph, watching him with his broken ribs, backed into a corner, ready to mount his last desperate defense before I end him.

But there's nothing. No endorphin rush. No triumph. No satisfaction.

No desire to do anything except walk the fuck away, climb in my truck, and drive my family far, far away from here.

"You...you had a clear shot to grab my gun, you fuck," Jackson growls, speech slurred on his swollen tongue. "Why didn't you? You want to fucking torture me?"

I stop in front of him, a couple feet between us, narrowing my eyes. "Why didn't you? You had a clean shot at my chest. Hell, I offered. You fucked yourself."

"Don't you get it?! I'm not like you, Castoff. Not a fucking coward. I couldn't shoot an unarmed man. Don't have to prey on little girls who ought to know better not to get mixed up with psychos." I take a step forward and he jumps, almost falling over. "Go ahead and finish it, asshole. I couldn't protect her. Couldn't talk Sadie out of it."

He's leaving me no choice. Why does it even matter?

Finish this, idiot.

I reach deep inside myself, find my inner killer again. Then I rush him, grab

his wrist, twist it to near breaking. It's the last shock his body needs. Knowing he's disabled, I power slam him into the old brick wall, snarling in his face, listening as something hard and metal scuffs the floor.

He barely fights as I reach down, searching, wrapping my fingers around lethal weight. It's heavy. Solid. A handle broke off a tool they used for rail work in the old days, probably.

It's more than enough to split his skull open, if I choose.

"Don't make me do this, prick. Sadie's the only reason I'm not finishing what I started with your brakes. Hell, what really started that day you got my men killed."

"That's what this is about? Vigilante justice? Fuck, you're pathetic." He stops talking and shakes. Something warm and slippery hits my face.

The asshole just spat on me.

Enough.

I bring the steel rod down like a hammer on his shoulder. It's worse than I intended, knocking him to the floor, nearly out cold. He's on his hands and knees, looking up like the demon he is, his eyes small black pools of hate begging me to send him home to hell.

"Last chance, you piece of shit. End it. Do it now. I couldn't turn you in. Couldn't keep you away from her. Couldn't stop you from telling everybody the awful fucking truth."

"Truth? What truth?" Every syllable hurts. I'm sure a few of my bones are splintered. Wiping his spit from my face, I stare into the eyes of the man I have to murder.

"Doesn't matter. Just put me out of my fucking misery. They'll be off my mind. Send me to Father Karma, God's judgment, I don't fucking care. Just get this blood off my hands."

I stare, trying to understand. He winces in pain, his head tipping down at the ground, before he looks up again.

New frustration clouds his eyes. "What the fuck are you waiting for? I said, *do it*. It's what I deserve after I killed them, isn't it?"

For five hellish years, I would have answered yes. No hesitation.

Today, that steel rod perched against his head, screaming for justice, slips from my hand. It hits the cement floor so hard the echo rattles my teeth. I take a step back, giving him breathing space.

“What...what are you doing?” he whispers. The surprise in his eyes isn’t the only thing we have in common.

All these fucking years, I thought he was a monster. Believed I’d never have peace unless I killed him.

I look at the blood on my hands. There’s no honor here. No right. No fucking peace.

“Howard, what the *hell*?!” He’s trying to scream and it’s still a desperate whisper. He can’t manage more.

“Shut up. Listen to what’s happening if you want to walk out of here alive.”

I wait for that to sink in, watch for him to blink, steeling my eyes. Then I crouch to his level, grabbing his face, holding it in a death-grip I’m sure will leave another bruise on his battered jaw.

“I’d be a damn fool if I let you walk away easy – especially when we’re so much alike. I hate it, but it’s true. So much common fucking ground I could slap myself for not seeing it sooner.”

“You’re out of your mind, asshole. There’s nothing!” He yells another lie, but the fear creeping into his eyes confirms the truth, clear and bright and blinding.

He knows, just like I do.

“Wrong. Let’s be real: in less than a year, you’ll be a father. A sick joke if I ever heard one. I kill you today, I leave your widow, your son or daughter, without a man to pay their rent or put them through college? I tear a hole through Sadie’s heart she’ll never get over, even if she knows it’s self-defense.” I pause. He jerks his head, and I tighten my grip, until the bastard whimpers. “Worse, I kill you here and now, I lose my soul. And you do, too. I’ll give you what you’ve wanted this whole fucking time, what I’ve been too stupid to see.”

“Psycho,” he snarls in my face again. “I’ll turn you in, I swear! You better just kill me now or I *will* put you in jail, Howard.”

“Nah. Here’s what you’ll do instead: crawl back in your truck and drive home. Tell the cops you were wrong about the brakes, and I did a real nice job patching them up. Maybe I even saved your life. Then you’ll pack your shit and leave this town forever. I’ll give you three days to tie up loose ends.”

“Leave, you maniac? Leave what? This is home!”

He’s such a defiant little shit. I tighten my grip, shake his head like a rabid dog’s, waiting for him to shut the hell up, and listen.

“You’ve got money. You’ve got a pretty young wife. You’ve got yourself a kid on the way. You’ll manage a few states over. I’ll let you know when it’s safe to come home for a visit. It’ll be awhile after what you’ll write for the local press.”

He shakes his head. Poor baby. So much confusion. “Write? What? What the hell do you mean?”

“You’ll clear my name. Make a full confession. Tell the whole county you fucked up years ago, got good men killed, and I had every right to turn my back that day at the parade. Uncle Sam’s investigators found you innocent, yeah, but the court of public opinion won’t be so forgiving. Trust me, I know. I’m saving you plenty of grief, asking you to start over elsewhere.”

His face starts twitching in my hands. But he isn’t fighting anymore. He’s broken, bawling like a child who’s finally been held accountable for the very first time. “You can’t...can’t just fuckin’ do this. I –“

“Shut up, asshole. I’m not done yet.” I wait for his latest round of whimpering to stop. “You’ve got my address. The old place you drove me out of nearly a month ago. I’ll be expecting your financials every quarter. Bank statement, investments, what-the-fuck-ever. You report in like a good boy, and we’ll be cool.”

“Report, report, what report?” He shakes his head.

The last part still isn’t making sense. I suppose I’ve got it in me to help him get it one last time.

“You keep what you need to support your family. Not a penny more. The rest is restitution.”

His eyes narrow, the hatred coming back. “Where? Your greedy ass?”

“No. Even three way split between a widow, a mother who lost her only son, and a sick kid who’s graduating high school this year. They’re the ones who suffer a hundred times worse than anything we’ll ever understand. They’re the real victims. You’ll pay big to make the rest of their lives comfortable. That’s a drop in the fucking bucket for what you owe.”

His gaze drops. Growling, I let him go, stand up, and extend a hand.

It’s hell offering to help my worst enemy stand on his own two feet again. Takes a strength like nothing I’ve ever had. But it’s all I’ve got if I ever want Adam, Zane, and Erik to sleep without spinning in their graves.

It’s my last best hope for a normal life with Red, Mia, and her many unborn siblings. A key to a life that doesn’t make me want to turn myself inside-out every miserable damn day.

I'm still waiting for the asshole to take my hand.

"You understand me, Jackson? Last and only chance." The death look returns to my eyes, so hot it makes them throb. I'm not playing games.

He stares me down long and hard before opening his cracked lips. "Yeah, asshole. I do."

One more raw look and it's over.

Finally.

He staggers to his feet. I help him walk. We shuffle past the beat up machinery, across the snowy expanse, straight by the truck where Red watches us with her sweet mouth hanging open.

I stuff him in his driver's seat. Then I stand, arms folded, a frozen sentinel with my feet iced to the ground. Never move a muscle until he drives away.

I'm secretly hoping I didn't just make the biggest mistake of my life. If this asshole double-crosses me...

But I don't have time to think about that. I just feel two sets of hands embracing my beat up body. Red's long fingers graze my chest and take the pain away. So do Mia's tiny fingers, hugging at my leg.

It's nothing compared to their eyes. There's more questions than I can fathom in my soon-to-be wife and my daughter.

"Marshal?" Red's hold tightens, her soft voice flooding my ears.

"Daddy?" Mia whispers up at me, eyes big, wondering why I look like I've just gotten mauled by a mountain lion.

I put my scratched hand over Sadie's and look Mia in the eye. "Later. I'll tell you everything. We're okay, ladies. Let's go home."



"YOU'RE *sure* you won't let me take you to the clinic? I can drive, you know. You should get checked out." Sadie pushes a sponge soaked in hellfire across my naked back, sanitizing cuts I didn't know I had. The little ones are the worst, and they're everywhere.

I grit my teeth, trying to start a fire inside the wall with my gaze. "I've had worse. It's nothing."

"If there's any signs of infection, I'm taking you in. No buts." She moves the sponge over the sink and wrings it out. Then she circles around, kneeling next to me, her soft green eyes a quiet storm. "Never again. You could've died out

there, Marshal, and Jackson, too.”

Her lips peck mine. A fresh torture because my kiss is always greedy.

“Not my time,” I growl, throwing my arms around her. “Not his, either. Long as he lives up to his word.”

“He will,” she says, bowing her head. “If he knows what’s good for him, he’ll listen. Our parents won’t like them moving away, but I think dad will realize it’s for the best. He knows better than anyone how screwed up Jackson has been for a long time.”

There’s pain in her voice. I wish I could take it all away, but there’s been so fucking much today.

I just palm her soft cheek, press her face to mine, and kiss her until we taste the end of time.

“Lay with me. I’ve missed your bed,” she whispers, tugging gently at my fingers.

Nodding, I rise. Something soft and furry brushes past us, squeaking.

Whiskey. I kneel down, grateful to see the old furball for once in my life. He licks his chops, turning his face to my fingers, plumper than ever.

I’d left instructions with a farmer one town over to feed the cat until I could find a way to get him shipped to us. Glad to see he followed through. Even better we won’t be having to contemplate the Alaskan cold or the Arizona sun anytime soon.

The cat follows, curling up by my feet, a pleasure I’ll allow him just for today.

Screw it, maybe most days.

I don’t realize how badly I’ve missed my bed, too, until I’m flat on my back. Or maybe it’s just because I’ve missed the beauty pressed up next to me so much more.

“There’s something I need to tell you...” Red says, a shy heat glowing on her cheeks, even in the darkness.

I look at her, narrowing my eyes. My fingers hook in hers, begging the question.

“Things were really messed up with so much drama going on. I tried to keep everything straight, tried to take my pill like I should...but apparently, the universe had other plans.”

What the fuck is she hinting? It takes my dull, battle weary brain a few solid

seconds to get the message. Then the world shifts like a carousel for the third time in one day.

“Jesus,” I whisper, sitting up. “You mean you’re...”

“Pregnant.” Red leans into me, nodding faintly.

Several things happen at once.

The pain drains out of my body, despite my bones screaming for rest less than a minute ago.

I can’t fight the gnawing urge to put my lips on hers, taste and own and mark the woman who’s just told me she’s carrying my kid. My second fucking born, and first of many.

She moans into my mouth. I swallow every soft tremor of her sweetness.

My dick goes hard like it’s stealing life from the rest of me.

No, I’m not insane. We’re too beat up and drained to fuck like we should right now. But damn if crushing her to me in the tightest embrace, kissing her over and over for the next hour, and fingering her engagement ring with my thumb isn’t almost as satisfying.

I never thought I’d ever find that with any woman, the electric understanding that’s a dimension beyond feral sex.

Until tonight, I never had this certainty, this full freak perception we’ve found our place. We belong. This time, forever.

Whiskey lets out a squeak at the edge of the bed. Even the damn cat agrees.



“DANG, Mr. Howard. You’re looking boss today. Way to go all sauce-master,” Tony grins and salutes, his not-quite-grown dimples folding in. Hard not to notice how much he looks like his older brother, Zane.

If this wasn’t the happiest day of my life, the familiarity in his face would sting like a bastard. So would realizing this high school kid is the closest thing I’ve got to extended family. Plus a widow from Missouri, and a mother who lost her only son. Closest *living* thing, I should say.

Hell, I’ll take it. Proudly.

He’s a good kid, and all three of them are the only people left on earth who can understand what today means.

They’ve seen me at my worst, even when I was comforting them. There are some things I couldn’t hide. The sadness, the angst, the urge to kill ripping

my soul in two.

Now, they deserve to see my best. I'm bringing it in droves.

"Thanks, kid. I owe you for giving me a second set of eyes." I step forward, slapping him on the shoulder. "How's the legs today?"

He smiles sheepishly. "Doc says I'll probably get the braces off before college. Going to Iowa City next year. I'm gonna try for engineering."

"Good man. Braces or none, you'll pull the ladies. Just keep smiling and be bold." I give him a reassuring squeeze, letting him know I'm not BSing. "You'll make Zane proud, whatever you do. Just hope I manage to do the same today."

"Yeah. Thanks." His face falls to the ground for a second. Mine, too.

It's hard not to think about the ghosts on my wedding day. Avenging Adam, Zane, and Erik is the whole reason I'm here on a sunny spring day. Life's more perfect than it's ever been. I'm truly ready to make my wife the ultimate promise.

When I think of my dead men lately, it's a fleeting sadness.

Nothing will bring them back. But I've made peace with moving on.

The prick, Jackson, has lived up to his word for now. I track every penny coming in or out of his accounts. He paid for Tony's visit to the Mayo Clinic last month, where someone competent finally fixed his legs.

Sadie says his marriage is on the rocks. Ginger stays in touch and talks an awful lot about leaving. But the baby who has a few more months before being born won't let her make any hasty decisions.

I don't care, whatever works best for her, and keeps asshole's money going where it should.

I've kept my eye on the checks rolling in to Bev and Mrs. Folwell, too. So far, so good. It's live and let live, never mind the little voice inside me that wants to take a spontaneous trip to where they've resettled in Maine, and break his face all over again.

Thankfully, I'm a million miles from those thoughts today. I escort Tony out of the dressing room, pointing him upstairs to the main deck, where we'll have our ceremony.

The steamboat I've rented out for our wedding is one of the finest on the Mississippi. So big it easily accommodates our small guest list. Also gives Mia something to scream happily about. I've promised her a river boat ride forever.

It's a hell of a day to deliver.

I watch Tony walk off and take his seat. In another half hour, I'll be hearing music, watching my blushing bride walking down the aisle. Trying like mad to control the incessant throb in my balls the whole time.

"Ah, there you are. I've been looking." A familiar voice. I whip around and see Stephanie Kelley standing there. She looks healthier than ever. Her eyes are just eccentric, not crazy.

A shot of panic shoots through my veins. "Shit, Sadie isn't around, is she? It's bad luck to see her before our vows."

"No worries, my superstitious beast. She's safely down the hall with Peter, who can't wait to walk her down the aisle."

Sweet relief. "You need help finding your seat?"

"It's right where I left it, I'm sure." She smiles, moving closer, a drink in her hand. Looks like she's started the reception early. "There's one more thing I added to the décor today. Truly hope you appreciate it, *son*." Of course she stresses the last word. It wouldn't be her otherwise.

It's so fucking weird, hearing those words from her mouth, knowing my own mother has been dead for the better part of a decade. But I'd better get used to them. "It's stunning, Mrs. Kelley. I love the white ribbons everywhere. Birch, too. Think Mark Twain in his Sunday finest would approve."

"Well, our centerpiece is slightly darker, but I trust you'll take it as a compliment. I managed to save it before my time at the funny farm. The finishing touches are recent. Come." She grabs my hand and tugs me down the hall.

At the back end of the ship, there's a huge sheet tossed over what has to be a painting. Her eyes nudge me onward, imploring. *Go. Look. Wonder.*

This better be good.

Taking a deep breath, I step forward, and rip the cover off. "Fuck me," I whisper.

It's...not the kind of immortality I ever hoped for. But it's very good.

I recognize my likeness perched on the same chair where I used to sit with her, a French bulldog in one arm, and honeybee in the other. My daughter anchors the light. I can practically hear the giggle through her crooked smile.

There's a familiar shadow across my face. Same angst-ridden darkness that used to stare out at me in the mirror every damn day.

Except it isn't so bad anymore. Not with the light in my eyes. Or with the other focal point in the painting, the most ravishing image of a smiling Red ever put to canvass, her little hand on my shoulder.

"Amazing job, Mrs. Kelley. Let me flag down somebody to get this upstairs."

Happy relief swells in her eyes. "Good. I wanted to do you justice."

I look back over my shoulder one more time. The painting is a study in contrasts if there ever was one. Slowly, I nod, giving her another smile. "With all due respect, fuck justice, Mrs. Kelley. This is perfection. I'm finally seeing myself through the eyes of someone who gets it."



"...KISS THE BRIDE."

The pastor's words ring through my skull like the opening shot at a horse track.

Finally. I'm free to ravish my new wife, and it's hard not to do it in front of the several dozen people in our audience.

They're clapping, laughing, cheering. I open my eyes for a second just to see Mia. She's on Mrs. Folwell's lap. Her eyes connect with mine and her grin doubles, broad and bright and beautiful.

She's small, but she understands.

You've got yourself a family now, honeybee. We're whole. And so am I.

Fuck, I don't think I'll ever get the taste of Red off my lips after today. That's a mighty good problem to have.

My tongue plunges into her mouth over and over, taking control. The tears streaming down her cheeks melt in a soft moan. My hand cups her ass. A subtle squeeze promises every dirty, wild thing I've had running through my head for days, since we took a premarital break from sex.

That isn't even why my balls are turning blue.

She's always beautiful, but today? Right now?

My woman's a goddamn knockout.

First time I saw her decked in that white lacy thing, cinnamon-red hair spilling out behind her veil, my heart swelled with pride and wonder. Then my dick took over, and the urge to rip it off her like a dog tearing open a butcher's bag hasn't faded since.

"I love you, Marshal," she whispers, words totally silent over the applause

exploding around us.

“Darling, it’s forever. If I had to condense the love I’ve got for you into now, Red, I’d fucking die.”

The steamship blows its horn. We’re in motion just as planned the instant our vows are over. I plant her feet firmly on the ground again and stroll the aisle, heading into the main cabin where dinner and drinks are waiting. It’s a four hour cruise, ample time to take in the evening sights and catch up with the people close to us.

So, this is what it’s like being a married man. A full grin splits my lips while we slip past the throng of people trying to stop us to shake hands or embrace. Everyone’s too happy, too impatient to wait for the reception.

We’re both lost in the scene. There are Sadie’s parents, looking happier than I expect. Her old man needs more time than Stephanie to come around, but I’m confident he will. Deep down, he’s just glad to have a family again, without the evil in his son tainting it.

My new mother-in-law gives me a knowing glance. I follow her eyes. Her huge work of art is hung neat outside the door leading inside the ship’s cabin. I’ll hear plenty of praise and chatter about it later, I’m sure.

The smiles on Bev, Tony, and Mrs. Folwell are conflicted. They’re happy for me, but they also understand what it’s taken to get here, and what they’ll never see from their own flesh and blood.

I slow when we’re just a few steps from heading inside. The back row of seats is supposed to empty.

Red notices, matches my pace, and squeezes my fingers. Happy green eyes search mine. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah,” I whisper quietly. It takes another second to really believe it. “Honestly, never been better.”

We trade another quick smile. Then a kiss that lasts far longer.

I fucking love my wife’s lips.

She’ll also never know the reason I froze up like an idiot. That part is my little secret.

For several seconds, I swear I saw something in those empty seats that shouldn’t have been there. Three faces I’ll never forget in their desert camo, smiling, wishing me the best, finally at rest.

I’m not about to start believing in ghosts one way or another.

Still, something tells me they won't be troubling my head anymore.



“SUCH AN AMAZING TIME. Everything I ever hoped for.” Even on the ride home, Red can't stop smiling.

I give Red a look she knows, reaching for her hand. “Everything?”

“Marshal!” She bats her eyes and punches me softly in the arm. “Later. Let's not wake honeybee.”

She isn't wrong. My little girl is completely tucked out from the excitement, snoozing in her seat.

Where the hell does the time go?

I've spent four incredible hours sipping champagne, feasting, and going through a whirlwind of introductions to her college friends and obscure cousins. I'm ready to turn in with a whiskey sour and a little quiet, but damn if it wasn't fun.

It wasn't the biggest wedding, or the fanciest, or the kind we'll watch on a screen years from now, wondering where the hell our youth and fire went.

Exactly how it should be. This isn't the bookend of our lives.

This is our beginning.

From here, it gets better. That's the real promise I made the second I growled the words, “I do.”

After tonight, it's forever, and it's ours.

Every kiss, every squeeze, every fuck, every sideways glance.

Every late night run for whatever she's craving, pregnant and happy.

Every tear, every disappointment, every time we pull back from the brink, remembering how deep this love goes.

Every. Damn. Thing.

Tonight, this woman becomes mine in whole. Won't let my head hit the pillow before I've claimed her totality, and then some.

I'm glad winter is just a memory. Makes it easy after I pull in, park my truck, and carry my beautiful bride across the threshold. We pause in the kitchen, stealing one more kiss, before I head back outside for honeybee.

“Upstairs,” I whisper, giving Red a wink, careful not to wake the sleepy girl in my arms. “Let's put her to bed first.”

Red holds my hand while we head into honeybee's room. I lay my little girl down, switch her lamp on its lowest setting, and pick up the book. It's the stories I've read her a hundred times. She won't miss anything if she's truly out.

Red's fingers tighten on my shoulder. I stare into her curious eyes. "Have a seat. Ritual, darling."

And it is.

Reading to my little girl keeps me grounded. Lets her know I'll always be there, no matter how much life changes, or how many new additions our family adds.

She's got a big year ahead. A new mama, and a little sibling on the way.

My eyes flick to Red's belly anxiously, wondering if I'll have a son or another precious girl. Whatever it is, I'm ready.

I break open the book, holding Sadie's hand, and read her a silly poem about the moon. Can't remember where the legend comes from, but damn if it isn't powerful.

Once, there was darkness. The moon didn't glow until it had a visit from the maiden of light, sent by the sun. She knew exactly how to wipe away the darkness. Her kiss breathed light into the void – the same spark that's shared down in the eyes of every child on earth, whenever they look up on long clear nights.

Red's grip tightens on mine the more I read. There's a lot of pretty language in between, a few lines that are downright scandalous for a kid's book, describing the moon kiss.

Good thing it's just us who hear it. I'm being eaten alive every second by hot green eyes.

I'm so fucking ready to carry them to bed.

"Here, darling. You do the honors. Read the last line..." I pass the book, sliding an arm around her shoulder.

"And all this because the sun maiden shared her happy kiss, her light. The moon grew full, and he shared his light, too. Every time the earth looked up, it trembled, no longer lost, alone, or afraid in the dark." She closes it slowly, giving me a soft smile.

Goddamn, she still looks ravishing in white. I put the book on the nightstand, flick out the light, and lead her by the hand into the hall.

I'm about to close the door when there's a soft, tiny murmur from the bed.

“So happy, daddy. Like you happy. Make mama stay.”

I stop and stare. Totally off guard. Slowly, I turn, wondering if Red just heard what I did.

Red lays her soft, warm cheek against my neck, whispering into the room. “I’m here for good, honeybee. Here, with daddy, is where I’ll always stay.”

Smiling, her door clicks shut, and then we disappear behind ours. We’ll have a proper honeymoon in Florida next week. I’ve promised my little girl manatee time, fresh OJ, and plenty of sun. Maybe even a Disney trip.

All the things that make up heaven after a life changing winter.

Of course, my patience is wearing thin. I’ve never had it in heaping quantities to begin with. I’m not waiting for our flight on Monday, or for the swanky hotel I’ve reserved on the ocean, to consummate this marriage.

Tonight, I’m carrying my wife, my woman, my love straight to the sky.

I’m taking her just like the moon in that story, basking in her light, and wrapping every steel inch of me in pink perfection.

HAPPILY EVER ONE (SADIE)

My husband strips me naked before his hands are even on my dress. It's his eyes.

Never has he looked so hungry.

Never have I felt so bare.

Never, ever have I wanted him in me so bad while feeling like a total virgin. Not even our first time together, when he actually claimed my V-card.

This is better. This is more.

Holy hell. Marshal cups my face, bringing his lips to mine for what seems like the hundredth time today. It's incredible how his kiss grows sweeter.

It's slower, harder, dirtier. It lights new fires under my skin, makes me fall into him.

Maybe it's because we finally have all the time in the world for each other. I'm ready to relish every second.

I kiss him back harder, urging him on. It doesn't take much.

Marshal's hands grip mine, rough and thick and delicious as always. They travel my body like an explorer marking territory, taking what's his, and always seeking more. His shoulders go on forever. His huge inked chest rumbles against mine when he speaks, raising my blood a few more degrees.

"You ready for your husband's cock?" he growls, a raw spark in his eye that says, *you'd better be, beautiful.*

"Hell yeah." I throw my hips into his, tracing his bulge, even through our clothes.

It's almost a shame to lose his suit and tie. I love his rough everyday charm, the jeans and flannel, but the change of pace is even hotter. He's a class act, more like a distinguished prince than a former soldier and bootstrapping

mechanic, dressed to dazzle.

Oh, but I know how wrong I am for missing the suit once our clothes fall in hurried fistfuls. If it wasn't obvious with just one look, his stubble would tell me. It races against my skin, prickly as ever, fanning my lust.

There's nothing delicate in his full naked glory. He's my beast, furious and filthy mouthed, inked and hard and always in control.

A rough push is all it takes to put me on the edge of the bed. He growls into my skin, lips marauding downward, fingers perched between my legs, teasing my pussy. The tingle that's been there since this evening becomes an itch, and then a roar.

"Fuck my fingers, Red. Fuck them till I decide you're done." He pushes two stiff fingers into me. Holding his thumb just away from my clit, I buck into him, madness descending a little more every second I'm missing his cock.

His tongue helps distract me for a few minutes. His face dives between my legs. Licks come tense, quick, unrelenting. They sweep up as my legs buckle, and the crushing fire inside me explodes.

"Marshal, yes!"

Yes.

Oh, hell, I'm coming. Just like he wants me to: hot, forced, and totally his.

Marshal's tongue takes my pussy apart with every lick. He turns me inside out, teases my inner heat, makes every whimper spill out meld into one long beg.

Please, please fuck me.

It seems like I'm coming forever before my body lets my senses work again.

We've changed positions. He's put me on all fours, pushed my ass up prone, gripping each cheek in his rebel hands.

"You get how much I love you, darling?" he growls, pushing the swollen head of his cock past my aching lips. I whimper, bury my face in the sheet. "No? How about now?"

Damn, another inch. His cock piercing hits the spot on my inner wall that makes me clench. So close, so hot, so full, but not the fullness I need.

"Why the silence, Red? What the fuck's got your tongue?" His hand rubs my ass, soft and kneading. Then his voice drops an octave. My breath stops. "Answer me."

Such a simple command. Accented by the brisk, fiery slap across my ass,

which makes me jerk up, breathing again. “Answer,” he says.

“All of you, Marshal. I want it, please. Fuck me.” I barely recognize my own strained voice. I want this so bad it hurts, a thousand times worse than any delicious spanking.

Will I come on the first stroke of my husband’s dick? Is that the magic of our wedding night? I’m afraid I’m about to find out.

“Just like that? Fuck my sweet, adorable, ass-like-perfection wife? Is it really that easy?” Marshal’s fingers lace through my hair, tugging a fistful.

Oh, God. I’m nodding hard.

Then it happens. He pushes in to the hilt and I think my brain leaves this planet.

It’s dark out tonight, but I see everything from that silly poem. The maiden’s kiss, the light, the sun, the moon, the stars. I see our loving reflection lit up every day in the future, in our children’s eyes, and in Mia’s.

I see myself hunkered over him while he rocks our new born baby, so gently I’m crying. I see four kids and a French bulldog. A little boy and two twin girls, plus Mia. All ours. Equal parts miracle and beautiful. I even see my dying breath, him at my side, eyes locked on me so intense they pierce the veil and say, *I will fucking find you again.*

Not even the end could stop this man. His love bends the very laws of the universe.

He’s mine, I’m his, and that’s just the end of it.

Simple. Just like the rough heat splitting me in two.

Release is an explosion. One hard whimpering, sheet clawing, cock pinching O.

Then there are many. And I can’t tell where they begin or end.

He’s striking nerves I didn’t know existed, thrusting through my climax. His distant breath gets closer, heavier, more feral every time. My ass slams into him, rippling like never before.

It’s vicious, hot, and beautiful. Fitting. It’s how loving him has always been: hard, glorious, and a little scary.

But it always works out, doesn’t it?

Something sure does while he’s power slamming into me, grunting a little louder every time, finding his release. His cock plunges deep, holds, and swells, setting me off all over again.

I reach behind me, gripping his hands. I pinch his fingers so hard I think I do damage.

I don't know. I don't care. The boundaries between our bodies are completely gone, no more divide between his pleasure and mine.

There's just our heat, coming in waves. Burning like a howling napalm fire.

His seed erupts, hurling into me in thick lava ropes, and I'm left pushing my face into the mattress, stifling my screams.

He doesn't pull out for a long time. Marshal roots himself in me, kissing my neck, bringing me back from – hell, *what was that?* I can't find the words to explain it.

Just know I can't wait for it to happen again.

Eventually, he rolls me over, and pushes into me again, never going soft. He cradles my cheek. I look him in the eye while we're still, his fingers sliding through my hair, eyes driving spikes through my soul.

It should be unpleasant, a love this intense. But Marshal Howard doesn't do weakness.

"We're doing this a thousand more times, Red," he growls. It ends in a kiss and his forehead pressed to mine.

"Huh? Tonight?!" I look up, more than a little worried. I'm wondering if he's crazy enough to try.

There's the grin I've fallen in love with, shining on his face like an early morning sun. "We'll put a dent in it by dawn, sure. But that isn't what I mean."

"No?" I study his starry blue eyes. Apparently, our sex is so good it's either made me miss words, or unable to understand them.

Then his hand slides into mine and he kisses me again. "I'm talking about us, darling Red. You and me. Every day. It'll be a thousand fucking lifetimes before I even dream of asking for a breather. And that'll only be because I want a minute to step back, take you, and realize – fuck – you're *still* mine."

I smile like a crazy woman into our next kiss. That's how it hits me.

When you've found the man who takes your light, who spins it into something beautiful, a thousand lifetimes isn't nearly enough. The heat death of the universe will happen before our love goes cold.

We're destined to last until forever loses its meaning and just is.

There's no beginning or end when there's just us. There can't be.

Because Marshal Howard is fate, and now he's part of who I am, who I was,
and who I'll always be.

STEPBROTHER UNSEALED

A BAD BOY MILITARY ROMANCE

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Published in the United States of America.

First published in August, 2015.

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Cover Design – Kevin McGrath - Kevin Does Art. Photo by Allan Spiers Photography.

DESCRIPTION

MY HERO, MY RUIN, MY RECKLESS TEMPTATION...

DELIA

I almost landed in my stepbrother's bed, and I want it to happen again.

I'm too good for him. He's too crude for me. Fantasy is where this twisted thing should end.

Chris Cleveland tempts me because he's *wrong*. Swoon-worthy, all-American Navy SEAL. Bad boy. Manwhore.

I didn't know he was off limits the night we got hot and heavy. I didn't know our folks were hitched.

Hell, I definitely didn't know I could ever want what I'm not supposed to have this badly, and one more smirk of his devilish lips just might bring me to my knees...

There's a lot I don't know anymore.

And he's about to teach me.

CHRIS

Love's a goddamned joke. I bed women between missions and rock their worlds with military precision. I never taste, touch, or tease the same chick twice.

Get in, get out, and leave her a breathless mess always worked flawlessly – until Cordelia.

I can't pry my perfect new stepsister out of my skull. I've never wanted to corrupt a girl so bad. She's my new target, my conquest, my obsession.

Lucky I'm a SEAL. Losing isn't in my blood.

But Delia's already lost, and her panties are about to be in flames.

BASTARDS AND BEACH BUMS (DELIA)

“Holy shit! Do you see the meat on that boy?” My best friend Marnie’s high, whiny voice cuts through the beach party’s racket.

She’s so loud and desperate I expect the gorilla in the speedo she’s been eye-fucking for the last ten minutes to skip fetching our drinks and drag her behind the rocks for some alone time. It won’t take much for him to throw her over his shoulder and carry her off – exactly what the excitement lining her face says she wants.

“Delia, did you see –“

“I saw,” I say, draining the last dregs of my water bottle. “Believe me, I couldn’t miss him. He’s like the oldest dude here.”

Her smile quirks. “Oh, come on. You’re never jealous. Don’t tell me you’re pissed that I poached him first with a little flirting? We’ll be down to geeks and dad bods by the time you make a move.”

Laughing, she shakes her hips, causing her beauty queen body to bounce. I don’t know how she tolerates those skimpy, skin-tight bikinis. Not that one wouldn’t feel awfully nice right now in the California sun.

“It’s okay, Marnie. Really. He’s a good pick. Not really my style, you know.”

It’s not just the overgrown body builder with the tangerine skin I’m talking about.

I stare down at my tank top and shorts. I’ve probably got the most conservative beachwear here – same as always. Sometimes, I think everybody else enjoys these parties on dad’s private stretch of beach way more than I do.

Sometimes? Okay, make that all the time.

She throws her head back and laughs louder, slapping me on the shoulder. “Oh, girl. Just what the hell is your style, anyway?”

I shrug, and she leans in closer. “Kyle told me you two never fucked. Jesus, lady, you’re about to start your senior year and you’re *still* a virgin. Don’t tell me you’re going to be the only one in our circle to walk off campus with a fancy degree in hand and your cherry intact.”

I wrinkle my nose. Marnie acts like a crazed lioness when she gets a few drinks in her, and I make a mental note to slip away once she’s had a few more, maybe got her arms around her latest hottie.

“I’m *going* to get you laid, you know. I’ve made it my personal mission.” She wags her finger at me and flips her blonde hair with the pink highlights back. “I know you brought a bikini. Go slip into it, show off your sexy, and maybe I’ll ask big boy if he’s got a friend when I’m done with him.”

The smile she’s wearing makes her look like a shark. Shaking my head, I fold my arms, one more reminder that I’m overdressed, even though I feel like I’m half-naked out here.

“Jesus, no. I told you, I’m just here to get some sun and a nice buzz. Oh, and remind me to flip Kyle the bird next semester for talking about crap he really shouldn’t.”

Trouble is, the idiot I’d broken up with a month ago was supposed to be the one. We lasted a few months, longer than my other boyfriends, and I’d actually been getting a little impatient about jumping his bones. He’d been the first man in awhile I could imagine going to bed with – until the day he sat me down and came out with the nasty, kinky stuff he wanted me to do.

I’m no stranger to weird, overpowering sex. I crave it. Heck, I’ve read all about it in those books about billionaires with dirty mouths and a love for handcuffs and spankings.

All the crap Kyle wanted? Picture the opposite.

I wasn’t ready to tie him up and slap him across the face while he called me mama. Not in this lifetime. Not with anyone.

Seriously, why the *hell* is it so hard to find a normal man with a body like an Adonis on campus? Do the guys with an alpha bone in their bodies still exist outside romance novels?

“Aw, c’mon,” Marnie whined. “We need to do lunch so you can dish right back. I’m sure it wasn’t all one-sided, and I’d love to hear what the little rat was really up to.”

I open my mouth to try to change the subject, and then I see Mr. Tangerine coming back, two martinis and a beer in his hands. Thank God.

“Here you go, ladies,” he says, pushing one martini into my hand and flashing

me a wink.

Ugh. Some of these beach bums have the balls to try for two girls at once, and there's no way I'm falling for it. I nod, then turn my attention to Marnie as she gives me *the look*, as if to say *watch this*.

"Damn, what kinda beer is that?" she asks, closing the tiny distance between her and Tangerine Man, a quick, jerky movement that causes her to crash her martini glass rim right into his thick chest. "Oh, shit! I'm so sorry."

Every bone in my body wants me to roll my eyes. The beach bum laughs, wipes the booze off his pecs, and then pulls her into him.

"You know I'm gonna make you lick that off, right?" He growls it softly into her ear, but it's loud enough for me to overhear.

Marnie practically loses her panties on the spot. I turn away in disgust, sipping my drink, praying the strong alcohol beneath the fruity sweetness will help me forget the train wreck I'm seeing.

Who the hell invited him anyway? I wonder. He's too old to be a student, unless he's like a grad student in fitness or something.

Marnie's a way bigger social butterfly than I am. Every time I get dad to open up the beach and fire up the bar for our private fun, my friend tells me it'll just be a few people, no more than a couple dozen. My eyes scan the crowd. I estimate there are way more than a hundred here, sorority boys and bleached out bimbos I've never even sat in a lecture with.

"Hey, Delia! Seriously, thanks again for letting us play on papa's property again. If anybody leaves their shit behind, come to me. I'll kick their ass." Marnie reaches for my hand and gives it a firm squeeze.

"Yeah, me too," Tangerine Man says lazily, not even pulling his eyes off her ass.

"Go have some fun! We'll link up again later," she says, giving me a gentle push.

I'm too upset to turn around until I'm sure they're gone. It's not just my friend's too loud to live attitude, or her taste in the dumbest man candy around.

Everything here reminds me I'm stuck being the good girl again, and I don't want to be.

I'm tired of playing third wheel. Just once, I wish I could be somebody's number one, just for one night. I wish a tall, dark, and mysteriously kinky man would swoop in from nowhere and blow my hair back.

But the boys out here tonight don't fit the bill. Not one of them, not even close.

College is hell when your standards are too high, and luck won't even shake your hand, much less push a girl into the strong, sexy arms of a man with a brain and an attitude.



A COUPLE HOURS AFTER SUNSET, and it's just like every other party I've hosted for Marnie. I watch the sun sink below the roaring waves, and every building lining the Bay Area's coast comes alive.

I'm several hundred feet from the nearest party couple, sitting on a big, smooth rock, my fifth drink of the night halfway drained, an extra tall Long Island Iced Tea.

The liquor drowns my feelings, keeping me out later than I intended. I should go soon, but I don't.

I'm running behind on my senior project for Professor Thosser, the most arrogant, picky slave driver in the entire journalism department. He's also the teacher with the hottest connections for landing an internship or maybe a full blown career after school, and I'm determined to impress him.

Unfortunately, that means turning in a rough draft before summer's over, hopefully something interesting enough for him to cite in his Op-Eds to the big papers and endless seminars. A few simple citations for other students over the years landed them gigs with some serious money and mobility. One guy even wound up working in the White House.

I'm also supposed to meet my brand new stepbrother tomorrow. When dad tied the knot for the second time in his life last month, it turned my whole world upside down.

Well, technically it was still upending itself right now. I'd only spent two days in bizarro land back home since moving out of my dorm for summer.

Weird is an understatement. His new wife, Evie, looks exactly like the hot, prestigious trophy girl a high powered airline executive ought to have.

She's also a washed up Hollywood bombshell with three ex-husbands and at least two bankruptcies behind her. If the tabloids are to be believed, she's been struggling to get her career back on track, and hasn't had a major role since she played lead on a romantic comedy about ten years ago.

I'd barely been around her for a day total, and I still don't understand it. Maybe I don't want to.

It's not like dad to elope with a stranger. Much less an aggressive, high demand Hollywood babe with a lot of baggage. The looks are all she's got. It's hard to believe he's fallen so fast, so hard.

I don't want to believe dad is just another shallow, overworked rich guy with a hard-on for a beautiful younger woman, but...

My thoughts stop the instant I see the man standing on the rocks overlooking the ocean. He's only there for a second before he leaps, plunging into the dark Pacific.

Is he *crazy*? I'm ready to rush over and find out if he's been cut to pieces by rocks when I see him emerge, apparently in one piece.

His big arms rise above the waves, like black flames in the darkness, huge and powerful, pushing the water aside like Moses.

No, he can't be hurt. He wouldn't be swimming like a total pro if he were. Then I get a better look, and I realize he's not just some kid out for a swim.

This dude's serious.

He's wearing a full body wet suit, complete with a snorkel mask and oxygen tank. At first, I'm fascinated, wondering if he's just a diehard swim fanatic, or maybe a hobby diver who's gotten off course. His feet kick up sand as he comes ashore, heading for a rock further down the beach, where I notice there's more gear carefully stored, like a little campsite.

I frown. I'm not crazy over-protective of dad's private property, but he's definitely screwing around on our family beach. He must've somehow missed the bright red PRIVATE PROPERTY signs lining the cliffs every twenty or thirty feet.

Finishing my drink, I slide off the rock and start to approach him, getting a better look in the last summer sunlight fading red over the Pacific.

He's got his back turned to me, focused on his diving gear like it's the most important thing in the world. His mask and oxygen tank are off by the time I'm a few feet away, and he's working on the suit. He peels it off quickly, as effortlessly as shedding a second skin.

Oh God, is he completely naked under there? I'm a little relieved when I see the navy blue trunks as he kicks off the rest – but only a little.

He's...magnificent.

His back looks powerful, just like a hardened swimmer's who's been at it for a long time. Muscular creases collide with long, dark stripes permanently inked on his flesh. He's *big*, but he's smooth, sculpted, and his skin looks

totally natural, healthy and real in a way Tangerine Man will never be.

Sure, it's silly to prefer ink all over his body instead of too much UV tone, but I can't help myself. Then he turns around, and my eyes almost pop out.

His chest looks like an underwear model's, if they put their perfect bodies under the world's most skilled tattoo artists. More dark stripes spike up his arms, like flames licking his biceps, and something dark and menacing lines his broad chest.

It's some kinda dragon. The beast surrounds an anchor or multi-pronged pitchfork, a lot like my grandfather's old Navy patches that dad keeps hanging proudly in his office.

He's mature, several years older than me, but young and alive, like he's fresh out of college.

Our eyes lock. His are bright green, set in a strong face, with just the right amount of dark, sandy stubble. His jaw looks like it's home to the most capable mouth in the world, able to kiss or spit so much fire he can burn whatever the hell he wants.

Maybe even *who* he wants.

Oh, God. I'm supposed to give him a polite warning about diving on our little stretch of land, but now I can't even think. I'm starting to feel like a bitch for inwardly rolling my eyes at Marnie and her boy toys after all.

"Didn't know I had an audience," he growls, giving his rubber suit a swift kick behind him and marching toward me. "Where the fuck did you come from, princess?"

Jesus. The tone in his voice makes it sound like *I'm* the intruder here.

"You're not supposed to be diving here." I swallow weakly and point to the nearest PRIVATE PROPERTY sign behind me, wondering if he can even read it in the creeping darkness.

Mystery Man focuses his eyes through the darkness before he looks at me. "Aw, shit. I thought this whole stretch was public?"

I shake my head. "No, my dad owns it."

Damn! Why is it so hard to form words? It's not like he's going to grab me and throw me in the water for saying the wrong thing.

The man cocks his head and smiles. "What did daddy do to buy himself such prime beachfront? Hell, who'd he fuck to make a sexy thing like you? The rich guys I know all look like something I oughta find under the ocean."

I'm floored at the crude, half-complimentary things spewing out of his mouth. Then the big, beautiful bastard closes the last few steps between us and throws his arms around me, pulling me close.

Despite being beneath the cool waves only a few minutes ago, his chest is warm, dangerously hot and tempting. Finally, I'm thankful for the shorts. If I had bikini bottoms on right now, I'm sure he'd see them soaked, and then I'd probably drop dead from embarrassment.

"You know, I normally don't take orders from little girls standing on the beach in their PJs," he whispers in my ear, his breath so hot it matches the fire rippling in my blood. "But I normally don't fuck up and drag myself onto a billionaire's private beach club either. What's going on over there? Big party?"

Tilting his head, he looks over my shoulder, noticing the light and noise from all the parties. Just the perfect angle for his sandpaper stubble to rake my shoulder, ruining any urge to fight him off for at least another ten numb seconds.

"I'll be damned." He pulls back, staring me straight in the eyes. "You don't look like much of a party girl, princess. Then again, I've fucked enough girls in my day to know the quiet ones are always the wildest. Go on, get back to your fun. I'll be on my way."

His hands slowly slide down my body as he releases me, driving me temporarily insane.

This can't be happening, getting felt up by a total stranger. Why am I letting him?

Some crazy instinct flips on and my hand flies across his face.

Before I know what's happened, there's needles on my palms, and I realize I've just slapped Mystery Man. My jaw drops.

"Oh, crap. Jesus. I'm sorry, sir, I really didn't mean to hit you like that. I just got carried away when you started feeling around for –"

What, exactly? Maybe I screwed up, misread him, even if he was getting way too close for comfort.

"For what?" he says coldly, reaching down to a huge bag at his feet to start packing up his gear. "You've got nothing to worry about. I said I'm on my way out. I'm used to partying on these beaches too when I'm stateside. It's fucking hard keeping my hands to myself when I see a firecracker."

He flashes me a smile, complete with dimples that bend in on his cheeks. My heart sinks as I watch him stuffing his scuba gear away.

Yeah, he's been rude, but I haven't exactly been an angel. Clearing my throat, I step up to him again, gently reaching for his shoulder.

He stands up, a fresh change of clothes in his hands, turning to look at me when he feels my touch. "What?"

"Hey, I didn't mean to just brush you off. I'm not as rude as I seem. You probably think I'm a snob, but if you want, we've got an open bar and some music tonight. It's no big deal if you want to hang around and have a few drinks. This isn't like an invite-only thing."

He quirks an eyebrow, moving his eyes up and down my curves. "Yeah? You're serious?"

I nod. I'm not sure what's pumping my heart harder – the awkward guilt, or seeing how hard his tattooed muscles flex when he drops his pants and boxers, ready to roll them on.

"Sounds a helluva lot more fun than being slapped by a party girl. Turn around while I get dressed. Unless, you know, you wanna rake those little nails across somewhere else on my body."

I'm not sure what's pounding more hot blood as I spin around. My nipples are like hot, wild buds beneath my tank top, but the heat in my cheeks is almost enough to burn me alive.



I LEAD Mystery Man to the small private bar and watch as he orders a dark beer and another martini for me.

"So, what the hell were you doing out there diving this late at night?" I stare at the neat white button down shirt he's changed into. It clings perfectly to his slab of a chest.

"Work. Fitness. Pleasure too. You'd be amazed at all the things you can see along this stretch of beach. This place is pretty damned pristine by Bay Area standards."

I sip my martini, unable to keep my eyes off just *how* sculpted he really is. He sounds too smart to be a beach bum bodybuilder like Marnie's new fling. Only one possibility comes to mind.

"Are you Navy, or something?"

"Yeah, you can say that," he says with a wink, taking a long pull from his beer. "I didn't really come here to talk about business. Listen to that music."

He holds up a finger, and I sit up straight, listening to the booming speakers.

There are only a few couples left swinging drunkenly around the fire, occasionally collapsing into the sand underfoot with bawdy laughter.

“I didn’t get your name,” he says, standing up and darting his eyes over my top.

I try not to flush. “Cordelia. Everybody calls me Delia.”

“Fuck, for real? I’ve never heard that name outside the Johnny Cash song.” He snorts, and then smiles. “Love it. Does Delia like to dance dirty?”

I’m stunned. Is he seriously asking me to dance? Nobody’s done that since high school prom, and the skinny geek I danced with there didn’t have *anything* on this god.

He gestures toward the open fire, polishing off his drink. Before I can answer, he slams his empty glass down with a clink, and grabs my wrist.

“Come on, babe. This is supposed to be a party.” He pulls me along, picking me up with one arm under mine, carrying me across the sand toward the dance around the fire. “My name’s Chris, by the way.”

I’d say ‘pleased to meet you,’ but I’m yelling instead when she swings me completely over his shoulder and flings me around, before pushing my bare feet into the sand with ease. Right where he wants me. It’s hard to keep up, and he does most of the work.

I catch flashes of his eyes on me, checking to make sure I’m not going to freak out and walk away. Once his hands wrap tight around my waist, jerking me close to his chest, it’s not even a possibility.

“Too rough for you?” he asks, pushing his hot breath into my ear.

My brow furrows. I’m tired of being the boring good girl at all these parties. I want to act out, and the perfect opportunity just landed in my lap – or is it up my skirt?

My panties feel like they’re about to melt, but I force my hips to grind into him, wrapping my arms around his thick neck.

“No. Show me what you can do.”

His green eyes light up and he grins. “I knew you’d be fun, Delia. I’m gonna move fast, swift, *hard*. I’ll take you every goddamned place I see you begging for in your dark little eyes. I’m in control. I’ve got you.”

Everything about him screamed powerful before. But once he’s moving me effortlessly across the sand, around the fire, tangling our shadows together like rich black waves, I know it’s true.

Something visceral tells me I'm clinging to a real man, an alpha male with an edge to him that's so sharp I want him to cut me to pieces.

Chris handles me with strength and elegance. Total control. Everything he promised.

He flings me through the air and rips me back, dangerously close to his heat, his temptation, before tearing me away again.

He makes me want. I'm dying to feel his mouth on mine, his hands on my hips, his strength between my legs. His power wants to conquer, and I want to submit.

His hands are everywhere – long enough to tease, but never lingering so long it wins him another slap across the face.

I'm glad I slowed down on the drinks. Some of the strange tango movements he leads me through are so quick, so vibrant, they'd upset my stomach if I'd had a little more. So would the swarms of butterflies he's stirring up from head to toe.

Mostly, I'm drunk on the adrenaline, the hellfire coursing through my blood, filling all my tender parts with crazy admiration, wanton desire, ruthless excitement.

Obsession, in a word. *Crazy fucking need.*

We dance for what seems like ten minutes, and I'm breathless by the end. Toward the last spin, his hands sweep across my ass, grab it hard, and pull me into him. My legs part automatically. I'm only against him for a second, but I swear I feel something hard and wild in his jeans, something electrifying.

The current hits and makes my whole body tingle. My head spins as he finally settles me in the sand for good, still holding me close.

There's a clapping noise. I look up, and realize some of the drunken partiers are applauding us. Chris waves, brushing it off like it's nothing. It doesn't take them more than a few seconds to go back to their private revelry.

"Wow. Holy shit. Where'd you learn to do that?" I gasp, trying to recover precious oxygen.

"A man learns a few things when he's been around the world like I have. Tonight, I only care about this beach."

The way he's looking at me makes me feel like it's *not* just the beach. There's a hunger in his eyes, a feral look I've only seen on my short-term boyfriends a few times before. The big difference is, for the first time in my life, I'm sure I'm beaming back the same desire.

“You’re a bigger party girl than I thought, Delia.” He pushes his chin against my shoulder, moves his lip to my ear, and growls. “You move like a fucking angel, when I make you. Will your lips twist like they were made to kiss me, or am I gonna have to lead them too?”

Oh, God. God! He doesn’t waste any time. His hips grind against me, giving me another rough, wonderful feel of that huge, angry hardness he’s sporting beneath his denim.

My hand slides down between us, checking if I’m completely soaked through my shorts. Not quite, but there’s definitely a heat; a raw, wet craving so bad it makes me want to rip my clothes off.

I have to taste him. Craning my head, I pucker up, moving in for a kiss.

He preempts me, driving his firm, strong lips against mine first. *Bastard.*

Wonderful, arrogant bastard.

Masculine warmth floods my mouth. Chris takes my mouth in a heartbeat, blitzes my lips. His kiss is intense, decisive, and so is the way he parts my lips, shoving his hot tongue into my mouth.

I can’t hold back the moan that washes over me. It comes from deep in my belly, pulses into his mouth, like I’m sharing the horny fire deep inside me.

His breath quickens. His chest bows up, pushes against mine, giving my buds the perfect friction.

So much for regaining my breath. By the time he breaks the kiss, I’m panting, struggling not to pass out from the wild thunder in my blood, plus the surreal realization that I want to *fuck* this strange badass.

“You like my taste, baby?” His eyes burn me down as I nod shyly. I can’t deny it.

He smiles before he leans in again, stamping his mad lips up my throat, working his way to my ear. “Good. I want to feel your hungry little lips wrapped around every fucking inch of my cock. Now.”

He’s got me by the wrist again, and we’re heading for the bar, but we pull past it. It’s like my feet have turned into dumbbells, and I trip all over myself, trying to keep up with him.

Hell, trying to decide if I’m really going to go all the way and get my V-card punched by this wild animal tonight.

I don’t have long to decide. My body does it for me when he slams me against the wall, covering my mouth with his again, picking up where we left off.

Except now we're truly alone and secluded, behind my dad's beach bar. His kisses crash over me again and again, as sure and powerful as the dark waves lapping the shore behind us. He palms my breast, pinching my nipple, and I almost come on the spot.

"Christ. Chris!" Mom would slap me across the face if she heard me confusing Jesus with the bad boy at my throat.

Her efforts to fill me with more than a lukewarm faith never went very far. But I'm feeling heavenly now with his stubble on my skin, his lips, his rough hands all over my body. He holds me down, pushes between my legs, and starts to dry hump me.

I've gotten hot and heavy with a few guys before, even if I haven't gone all the way. Making out has nothing on this, and his delicious friction stabs deep. The bulge in his pants rakes through my shorts just right, pushing the fabric over my clit.

Help. Me.

My arms pinch tight around his neck. Chris growls, filling my mouth with his energy on the next kiss. His tongue flicks in and out of my mouth, deep and possessive, almost like he's fucking my mouth with his tongue.

His hips haven't stopped speeding up. They're frenzied, hellbent on burying me, crashing into me again and again.

I'm so damned close it hurts, ready to go careening over the edge, straight into my first climax at a man's touch.

He seems to sense it too. He breaks the kiss, beams his hot green eyes into mine, and gives me an ice cold look that seems way too serious for any ordinary lover. It's more like the sort of face you'd see on a cop ordering somebody to hit the ground, hands behind their backs.

"Fucking come for me, babe. I want to hear you whimper in my ear. I need to hear you come undone." His hips punch mine harder, rougher, longer and meaner strokes. "Come!"

And I do.

My orgasm roars up like a huge wave and almost rips me in two. I can't even stop to wonder if I'm hurting him, tearing at his neck with my desperate nails, because the pleasure shaking my body engulfs me. My head hits the brick behind me as he continues to grind me against the wall.

Snarling, he shoves one hand down my waistband, pushes his fingers against my mound. My hips buck wildly against his calloused fingers until he finds my clit, and then I'm blasted into a whole new universe of ecstasy.

My thighs clench hard around his hand. I want those fingers deep inside me, a prelude to feeling the magnificent cock swollen in his pants pounding into me.

My hips rock wild as he rubs through my wetness. I push my lips against his shoulder, stifling the screams exploding up my throat, all I can do not to cry out across the hot summer beach.

“Babe? You okay?” That sexy stubble on his cheek brushes mine.

I open my eyes. It feels like my knees collapsed and he’s holding me up by both hips, angling me against the wall, awake and safe in his strong arms.

“Yeah. I’ve never had it so good,” I tell him, running my tongue across my lips.

I’ve never had it at all.

A nervous spark shoots through me, cutting through the tingling desire. Something holds me back from telling this wolf of a man that I’m a virgin.

What the hell would he think? There were only two possibilities. He’d either turn around and run, or else rip me away from the wall, push me into the sand, and fuck me so hard I’d shatter.

I’m not ready for that. I’m nervous, lost in the butterflies soaring through my stomach, sapping all the confidence I had earlier.

Maybe if we just take it slow, I’ll work my way into it. He doesn’t need to know anything, right?

“My turn,” he growls. “You kiss like a little maniac, Delia. I fucking love it. Now, it’s time to find out how hard you can suck my cock.”

His hands move to his hips. He backs up a step, and I watch him tearing at his belt. That massive bulge in his jeans is about to get a whole lot closer, stronger, *real*.

Shit. Sweet baby Jesus.

My heart pounds. My eyes fall to his crotch and they don’t let up, and I notice I’m holding my breath, trying to stop myself from soaking what’s left of my panties as I think about what he’s about to reveal in all its hard, naked glory.

Then there’s a sound like someone shredding the quiet night, and a burning rub in my pocket. I jump, realizing too late it’s just my phone vibrating.

Ugh. Worst timing in the world.

Sighing, I pull it out, tap the screen, and see a message from my dad.

HONEY, ARE YOU OKAY? IT'S LATE. YOU'RE NOT HOME. SHOULD I SEND MARY DOWN TO SEE IF YOU AND YOUR FRIENDS ARE ALL RIGHT?

Chris stops, gives me a knowing grin. The look in his eyes isn't so patient, though. He looks like he wants to rip the phone out of my hands and smash it on the nearest rock, obliterating the distraction so I can get down on my knees, open his pants, and –

“Sorry. Just a second.” I type back furiously, tell my father I'll be home in another hour, maybe less.

I smile at Chris, ready to tuck the phone away and find my courage. Then another message blows up my screen.

CORDELIA, DON'T DO THIS TO ME TONIGHT. I TOLD YOU EVIE IS VERY NERVOUS ABOUT TOMORROW. PLEASE DON'T EMBARASS ME. YOU NEED YOUR BEAUTY SLEEP.

My brow furrows. Daddy's always been Mr. Responsibility, uptight and overprotective. It's sweet that he worries about me, but he's also terrified of rattling her.

He won't do anything to upset the Hollywood bombshell I never wanted for a stepmother. And as much as I hate to admit it, he's right. Evie gets bitchy, moody, and throws tantrums like a sixteen year old girl.

I've seen it happen with the servants. I know my father secretly fears her turning on him.

I look at Chris again, my smile gone. My heart sinks, and whatever confidence I had before is completely gone. This is no way to learn how to pleasure a man for the first time, bleeding guilt over busting dad's dreams about his fresh new happy family.

“I'm really sorry,” I say, stepping forward and stroking his arm. “There's an issue at home. I need to get going. Can we take a rain check?”

I bite my lip like some scared little romance heroine. Especially when he comes marching up, wraps an arm around my waist, and jerks me so hard against his chest I feel our heat collide.

“You're damned lucky I'm staying in town for the next week, babe.” His arrogant lips brush over mine. Softly at first, before his kiss deepens.

Rough. Aggressive. Domineering.

He wants me so fucking bad. And I want him. The fire in my pussy reignites, and I pinch my thighs together, trying to stop the wetness leaking out of me.

His hands wrap around my backside, find my ass, and squeeze.

I moan, shimmer, dangerously close to coming all over again. I'm so turned on it's obscene, and I can't figure out if it's because he's just so hot, or because I'm the most inexperienced girl on this beach.

"Give me the phone," he orders, not even waiting for me as he pushes his hand into my pocket.

Before I can say anything, he's got it, fumbling with the screen.

"Hey! What're you doing?"

"Putting in my digits as soon as you unlock this fucking thing. Here. Pull up your contacts." He shoves it into my hand and folds his arms, waiting.

I feel like I'm fetching my insurance info for a cop. For a second, I think about bullshitting him, typing in nonsense that isn't whatever number he tells me.

That's the smart thing to do, hands down. Get out while the going's good. Chalk tonight up to a few drinks and a lot of pent up emotion.

If I just lie, I won't be tempted. I won't have to deal with his bossy, dirty mouth. But crap, then I'd miss finding out what else that mouth can do to me, what he feels like when I'm full of him, experiencing every inch of my body cracking apart as he owns me in ways I've never imagined.

I don't want to imagine anymore. I don't want to be the good girl, and this strange bad boy showed up just in time to offer me a way *out*.

"Get those fingers moving. Four-one-eight, nine-zero-seven..."

He rattles off his number. God help me, I put in every digit, holding it up when he's finished so he can see me saving it. I can always delete it later if I chicken out – or just go tumbling headfirst into the greatest storm I've ever known.

Next time, there won't be any distractions. He won't let it happen, and neither will I.

"Let's go. I'll walk you to your car," he says, grabbing my hand and pulling me along.

I can't stop savoring his heat the whole walk back, up the high concrete steps leading over the cliffs, and then toward dad's private parking lot. Several parties are crashing for the night in their cars, and at least one truck is creaking and rocking, barely hiding the panting, grunting moans and laughs from the couple inside it.

“It was nice meeting you,” I say, kicking myself for not saying more. “We’ll text tomorrow.”

“Yeah, we fucking better, or I’ll be trespassing here a helluva a lot more.” He reaches through my open driver’s window and grabs my hair, catching my long dark locks and giving them a stern pull.

It should freak me out, but it only hurts a little. It hurts so good.

“Everything they’re doing over there,” he says, pointing to the pickup several spaces over where I heard the couple having sex. “I’m gonna do to you in spades. If you come so hard just feeling my hips and my hands rubbing you to heaven, you’ll lose your damned mind when my mouth’s on your clit.”

Shit. He pulls me forward, just enough to lower his face, pulsing more hot breath into my ear. “Get home. Rest up. Have a nice, peaceful night. Then clear your calendar tomorrow. We’re gonna fuck the whole night. I need to hear everything you muffled on this beach. I need to make you *scream*, baby girl, and you will once you’ve had my cock. You’ll scream when it’s teasing you, fucking you, and then you’ll beg me for more.”

I’m speechless. He’s completely lost his mind, and I’m going to pieces for this psycho’s dirty talk. I’m about to start my car and drive right over him, but he lets me go in one swift jerk, flashing me those sultry, determined green eyes again.

I’m flushed, melting down inside like the scared little virgin I am. But I’m determined to have him, to prove to myself I can do this.

“Tomorrow,” I mutter, unable to get my mind off his dick, which is still hard and outlined in his tight jeans. “Let’s make an evening of it.”

“Goodnight, Delia.”

He nods to me and backs up, leaning against the car next to me. He watches me start my car and back out, and I know his eyes don’t skip a beat until I’m out of sight.

I don’t notice my hands shaking on the steering wheel until I’m halfway home. If it weren’t for dad’s text, I would’ve fucked a complete stranger. And not just any mystery man, but a tall, brash, heavily tattooed badass – the total opposite of every clean college boy I ever dated.

Am I losing my mind? Am I completely drunk, or just so horny I couldn’t help it?

I don’t know, but I’m going to text him tomorrow. I can’t walk away when I’m so damned close to finally losing it with a man who makes all my senses purr.

Tomorrow's so bright, so lively, so vibrant I can practically taste it.

I'll eat light tomorrow at the family luncheon and skip through the snorefest meeting my new stepbrother. Then, I'll get in touch with Chris and we'll find a bar, maybe a quiet restaurant. Hell, maybe we'll just head straight to his place.

I'm barely old enough to drink, and way too old not to fuck. It's just one night. It's just sex. It's not forever, right?

No, I've made up my mind. There's no way one more meeting with Mr. Tall, Dark, and Dirty can hurt. Especially not if it involves me pinned down underneath him, screaming in all the ways he's promised.

I want to find out how long it takes between my legs before he breaks too, tensing and groaning, melting into me.

ON TARGET (CHRIS)

My last night in Iraq wasn't half as frustrating as this. I watch the beach hottie pull away and do a tight turn out of the lot.

My dick hammers in my pants like a jet engine. Christ, I need to fuck this girl. I need to fuck her so bad I punched in my digits, giving her a second chance, twenty-four hours to get ready for everything I've got.

And I'm going off like dynamite when I finally get her alone. I think about all the ways I'll be in her soon, fisting those long, dark locks the entire time.

I want it all, every damned inch of her. Under me, up on all fours, riding my cock while I slap her round ass, an ass that's just the right kinda thick built to make me come lightning.

Fuck. I didn't show up on this beach shopping for fresh meat. If I was hellbent on getting my dick hot and wet tonight, then I'd walk towards the fire pit and mingle with the drunken chicks I saw earlier.

I'm used to girls dropping their panties in a heartbeat. And I'd have had Delia's in my pocket already, or maybe stuffed into her mouth, if it hadn't been for the goddamned phone.

I don't want a random slut. I want *her*.

Something about Delia glows a hundred times hotter than them. Maybe it's because she's clean, soft, and pure, a good girl begging for the right man to tear apart the mask she wears.

Or maybe it's just those perky, palm-sized tits I had in my palms. Thinking about her rosy nipples makes me kick the sand, pissed that I've got a whole day to wait before I find out how quick I can make turn them soft with my tongue, my teeth, my roaming hands.

I'm not sure what to make of her just yet beyond the fucking, and that's part of the fun.

She didn't kiss like a rich, pretentious little girl either. When my lips landed on hers, I felt fire, and almost stumbled away with scorch marks on my tongue. My hips jammed my cock against her sweet pussy, separated only by a few thin layers of sopping wet fabric.

Chemistry? Fuck, it was more like a whole goddamned lab.

I know I'm fucked when I'm finally collecting my diving gear, gathering up my bag, and heading for my car, and I'm still thinking about her coming on my fingertips.

That little whimper she made right before I pinched her clit? It's burned into my skull all night, and if she turns coward tomorrow, it's gonna be damned hard finding a chick who sounds like that to take her place.

I hope like hell my threat to keep coming back to daddy's beach sunk in. I mean every word.

No woman *ever* leaves Chris Cleveland high and dry, and I'm sure as shit not going on my next mission with her pussy on my mind, unknown and unconquered.

I'm going to hit it 'til I'm bored of her sweet cunt, or else disappear like I always do when Uncle Sam sends me overseas again. That's my MO, what always works, and adding her notch to my bedpost sounds pretty damned good before I do my duty and return to find a new girl to fuck.

I head back to base, already loving the distraction she's giving me.

Too bad there's another one to get through first before I haul her into bed. It's gonna be rough getting through this bullshit with mom's rich new sugar daddy tomorrow. She screamed at me earlier today, all but insisted I get my ass over to his mansion tomorrow to meet him and his kid, some bland little rich girl in journalism or something.

Blowing off some steam between the sheets helps me forget about the latest crap my shell of a mother wants to sling in all directions. It helps me forget about the endless duties I've still got here Stateside as a SEAL, all the things I've done in the service that keeps me wondering about my karma debt when it's late and lonely.

I can't get too attached. I don't let my mind wander too much. I never, ever do.

Delia's just another fuck, after all, even if she's the hottest one I've had for months. I shower quickly before heading for my bunk, careful to charge my phone for tomorrow.

I resist the urge to jerk my dick off in the shower, thinking about that little

sound she made for me when I sent her to heaven, or how fucking *wet* she was, grinding on my hand.

I'm saving everything for tomorrow, for her. She acts like she's never fucked a real man before, and if that's true, I'll leave her with something she'll never forget.

Sometimes I almost feel bad about my fuck-and-release policy, but I don't do relationships when the US Navy owns my balls twenty-four-seven. There's no time for that shit.

If I leave the girls I fuck breathless and begging for more, it's not my problem. That's for the next guy in line to worry about, the poor bastard who'll never be able to bring them off like I do.



MY GUTS CHURN when I pull up to the place, straight through the huge iron gate. I know the new rich cocksucker mom's hooked up with is loaded, but it's hard for me to believe just how rich this prick really is.

There's a guardhouse and everything. The slim, prissy older man inside looks like he wants to search my truck for an improvised explosive. I flash my badge, and Jeeves looks closely at the name, giving me a sour nod and waving me through.

Fucking prick. All of them.

It's just a matter of time before mom flames out and hits rehab again, sending the executive running to his next trophy wife. He probably thinks he's hit the jackpot with a washed up Hollywood starlet, but he'll find out real soon what he's gotten himself into.

I pass the keys to a servant playing valet when I pull up to the curb. The place is beautiful, high on the cliffs overlooking the roaring Pacific, probably even a sexy view of the entire Bay Area if I climb up to the bluffs.

It's just a few miles down the road from the party I crashed last night. Good. Maybe I'll be able to hit Delia's pussy sooner if she lives in the same rich neighborhood.

The house is more like a palace. My new stepdad has taste, I'll give the jackass that.

I walk through the double door entrance and stop when I see the huge crystal chandelier and sprawling staircases. It's like walking onto one of mom's sets, or maybe one of those historic homes she used to drag me to as a kid for charity shit before she went off the rails.

“Christopher!” I hear a squeal, and turn around just in time before she hits me. “Oh my God, I thought you’d never come home, darling. Let me show you to your room.”

“Whatever,” I growl, pulling her off me after a quick squeeze. “Let’s get this over with. There’s something I’ve got planned tonight after dinner. I can’t stay all evening.”

“As long as you’re planning on coming home. This *is* your home now, Chris. I want you here for the summer. Every night away from those nasty, spartan army cots does wonders for your posture.”

I resist the urge to roll my eyes as I follow her upstairs. “I’m a *Navy SEAL*. Sleeping anywhere that’s not a dusty shithole or scraggly rocks feels pretty damned good.”

Her eyes narrow. She’s probably scared my mouth’s going to get me in trouble with sugar daddy. Fucking incredible seeing that worry from *her*, the woman who practically invented the modern bitch on the screen.

Miss Evangeline Cleveland, everybody’s favorite sharp-tongued TV witch, lost her magic forever the night she stole her ex’s car and drove it into a damned pond. I’m wondering if she’s already fighting with billionaire boy like she did the body builder she shacked up with in my early teens. I tried to stay the fuck out of it then, everything except the dude’s home gym.

“Here’s your new stepsister’s room,” mom says, giving the door furthest down the hall a shove. “She’s downstairs right now with her father, waiting for us. Private bathroom inside, just like yours.”

A feminine flowery smell hits me in the face. It’s breezy and borderline familiar. My dick throbs, and I swear it was in the air last night when I had Delia against the wall, making her come on my cock through her beach shorts.

It must be a popular perfume or some shit for women this summer. I hope she wears it tonight when I get a better whiff of her scent, shoving my face between her legs, owning the pussy I should’ve had all morning.

“And this...well, it’s not much yet, but I know how much you love to keep things simple.” I shake my head as mom shoves the door several steps away from rich girl’s room wide open.

Really? She just had to put us next to each other like we’re both high school kids?

Sometimes I wonder if the crap she did at all her parties scrambled up her brain forever. It’s like she still sees me as a punk ass fifteen year old kid. Not

a man who's in the most elite ranks his country has to offer, a man who's killed, bled, and suffered.

I've done it all, and I know I'll end up doing it again, because I can't imagine anything less than a hard, fulfilling life. I see what happens when people get lazy, complacent, and spoiled – they end up like mom, acting out their fuckups and waiting for the next underpaid butler to wipe their asses.

I walk in and take a look around. The dark cherry furniture is simple enough, a dresser, chair, and small desk. There's a big, Victorian looking bed with tall posts that almost make me laugh.

Mainly because I'm thinking about using my belt to bind my next conquest to one post, grabbing her ass, and giving her the fucking of her life.

The bed looks like it belongs in some cheesy romance flick. I want to defile it even more.

Truth is, I don't want a goddamned thing from mom or my new stepdad, much less this ridiculous antique bed.

"Well? It's awesome, isn't it?" Mom already has disappointment in her eyes by the time I turn around.

"It's all right." The old Chris would've told her exactly how fucking stupid it is, but I'm determined not to rock the boat, anything to get me outta this castle and into Delia's pussy sooner. "We going downstairs to meet the others, or what? I don't have a lot of time."

Her face tightens up, but she doesn't say anything. Just turns around and leads me back out. I follow her downstairs and she leads me down a long corridor, where I can see early evening light streaming in.

I see sugar daddy first, slouched in a leather chair with his phone. He takes one look at me and jumps to his feet, a tall, slender, graying man with spectacles. Too classy and flabby compared to every other husband I've seen mom burn through.

"Christopher, I'm Bruce Burr, and it's an honor to finally have you here." He smiles big and takes my hand.

I squeeze it harder than I should, wondering how many jobs this bastard axed with those fingers, typing on his bullshit. The airline industry's a damned joke in this country. I went through BUD/S training listening to several guys talk about how their mechanic dads getting laid off nearly ruined them in their teens.

"Good to meet you," I tell him, chewing into my tongue the entire time. "Is dinner ready yet?"

He laughs – way too cheery for my liking. “My, Evie told me you’re a hungry young man. Yes, I believe it should all be laid out in the dining room soon. But first, I’d like you to meet my daughter. Cordelia! Don’t be shy, come over here and meet your new stepbrother.”

I stop dead in my tracks before I turn around.

Cordelia? Delia? No fucking way.

He steps aside and points toward the sofa. It’s a huge room, and she’s sitting awkwardly on it, staring at me like she’s about to lose her damned mind.

I’m not sure what hits first. The shot of adrenaline in my chest, or the lust ripping through my dick. I don’t know whether to laugh or scream or just put my fist through the hand crafted wood lining one wall.

Any ordinary man would’ve had a heart attack on the spot. Thank fuck for Navy discipline. Instead, I step away from Bruce and walk toward her, grinning though the shock like it’s nothing.

“Delia! Hot damn, you’re cuter than I expected. It’s so good to finally meet you.” I hold out a hand to her.

She’s staring like a deer in headlights, sitting on the couch. Her father clears his throat, reminding her to stand the hell up and meet her new stepbro like a good girl.

If only he knew how crudely I’d taken her and made her come in her panties last night.

A handshake or a hug ought to be nothing after what we started on the beach. Still, she bolts up shakily, takes my hand weakly.

It’s hot and clammy. I want to shake her fingers, move them lower, make them tighten around my dick.

“It’s really, uh, good to meet you too.” That little tremor in her voice reminds me of *the sound*.

My dick springs up and I throw one arm around her back, jerking her close. From behind, I know it’ll look like a friendly hug to our parents. Up close, it’s almost the exact way I pinned her against the wall with my hands down her pants, forcing her to come so hard she nearly screamed.

My hips pump forward, only for a second, enough to sink toward the sweet spot in her belly. Right above her pussy. I want her to *feel* how hard I am, remind her the world might’ve suddenly dealt us a shit hand, but it didn’t do shit to kill my need to have her under me.

It's risky, it's mad, and I can't resist. When I feel her heat, inhale her scent, that ocean breezy perfume mingling with her pheromones, my balls churn fire.

They blaze pure want. *Need.*

"You hungry, sis?" I pull back and look at her after several long seconds, the hand behind her back roaming, dangerously close to her ass.

"Starving. Yeah, let's eat." Her voice sounds better, but when I look into those dark brown eyes, the only thing I see is a nervous, *what the fuck?*

I let go and turn around. Bruce gives an approving nod. Mom's got her skinny hand in his, smiling at me like I've just brought her the damned moon.

"Aw, Christopher. Very touching," she purrs. Then her hands clap together. "Come! Let's go get to know each other better over food and wine. The risotto Bruce's head chef makes is simply amazing, you've both got to try it."

We head for the dining room. It's huge, spacious, more like a cozy medieval war room in a castle than anything that belongs in a modern house. There's a massive fireplace behind the table, which looks like it's a hand-me-down from some mafia kingpin.

I take the seat right next to Delia, while mom and Bruce sit across from us, making goo-goo eyes at each other. If it wasn't for the shock and awe sitting next to me, my stomach would've soured a couple times over by now at their shit.

We watch a single sharp dressed man playing servant. He plates up our food and pours wine. Everybody tucks into their salad and drinks – except for poor Delia, who picks at her grub like a damned bird.

"You're a busy lady, aren't you? Journalism?" I say, remembering the one thing I've heard about my new sis. "You really should shovel that down. Keep up your strength."

She gives me that wide-eyed look of pain and disbelief again. "I'm kinda on a diet. Too many bad influences, distractions. You know how it can be. The last thing a girl needs is her own body turning on her."

"Nah, no fucking way," I growl, stabbing down my fork. I reach underneath the table with my other hand, catch her thigh, and squeeze. "Everybody needs their fun. Don't you have a boyfriend or something to help blow off the steam?"

Mom coughs. I look at her over the table, while Delia shoots one hand down, desperately trying to slap me away without alerting our parents.

Yeah, I'm a jackass. But I can't resist. It's too much fun getting her hot and bothered, and as fucked up as it is, I'd still like nothing better than to slide between these silky thighs, shove her cunt on my face and lick her clit over and over 'til she explodes.

"I'm afraid my girl's always been very shy with the boys," Bruce says, staring awkwardly at his risotto.

"Dad!" she chirps, loud and whiny. "Can we not talk about that?"

More heat flows through Delia's skin. Now, she's hot, bothered, and pissed.

Looks like I'm not the only bastard at the table shaming her. One more pinch ratcheting up the pressure, and I tear my hand away, lifting it over the table to grab some bread.

"She'll catch on sooner or later," I say, giving Bruce a wink. "Or somebody's gonna catch onto her. I can't believe she's not engaged to some college kid yet."

Her ignorant daddy chuckles. "Ah, yes, plenty of time for all that. She's a very good student. Her last semester's coming up soon, and she's picking at her thesis this summer."

"Thesis, huh? What's the subject?"

"I haven't decided," she snaps, taking an angry sip of wine. "It'll be something exciting. My professor's a real hard ass. It takes a lot to impress him, but I'm going to manage. His connections go far. I need to find something amazing, something tragic, something that tugs on the heartstrings."

I can't help it. I roll my eyes, even as mom gives me a horrified look.

"I see you're already talking like a true reporter. Maybe you should give your subjects some more thought. It's not always fun being on the receiving end of some gangly, embedded jackoff who doesn't think twice about tweeting sensitive info from a war zone."

"Chris!" Mom's turn to scream. Her silverware clatters on the china bowl. "I apologize for my son's mouth, Cordelia. He's a military man, very sensitive about these things."

She flips her long dark hair back over one shoulder and shakes her head. "It's okay. Really. I shouldn't have sounded so stressed out myself."

The fire blazing out my eyes, falling all over her skin, must finally get her attention. She looks at me, cocks her head, and polishes off another sip of wine before speaking.

“So, what are you? Some kind of sailor? A marine?”

“He’s a SEAL,” mom answers for me. “You’re not the only one who likes to hold her cards close to her chest. My son’s very shy about admitting it, or maybe the government keeps his lips sewed shut, or something.”

Or something. The only thing worse than the asshole reporters I dealt with in Iraq and Afghanistan are mom’s loose lips. My commanding officer wrung my neck the first month I joined the SEALs after she squawked to a tabloid while she was drunk.

Thankfully, the asshole printing up the story refused to drop it, but only after she shelled out some serious money. Maybe she thought marrying her new sugar daddy gave her a new license to blab about my business again, but hell if I was having it.

“A SEAL?” Delia actually sounds impressed. “Wow. You must be awfully good at what you do to get inducted into the special forces. So elite.”

“Whatever. I’m good at everything I do.” I look her in the eyes and watch her eyes skip down. My confidence scares her, and I fucking love it. “I’ve got my duties and I take them seriously. That’s all anybody at this table really needs to know. So, Bruce, while we’re talking secrets, tell us about the big merger coming up with your company.”

I’ve got a feeling the soft, rich boy has a narcissistic streak as well. And I’m right when his face lights up, and he begins prattling on about all these high level corporate details, legalese, and how it’s all but guaranteed to make him even richer.

He’s as shameless as I expected – maybe a little more so. What a fucking joke.

After about five minutes of listening to him while I’m chomping on my main dish, a seared steak with a lobster tail and glazed asparagus, I hit my beer hard. Mom gives me the stink eye while I lift my tall glass and down the entire thing in one fluid movement.

It’s like she doesn’t know I’m doing her a favor. Something’s gotta take the edge off here. Getting a nice buzz is definitely the lesser evil compared to shoving my hand under the table again, and this time I won’t stop at Delia’s thigh.

I’ll feel her hot pussy again, shove my fingers straight up her wetness, drag my fingers back to her mouth and finally taste what I’ve had on my mind all fucking night.

She won’t even look at me now, picking at her food more aggressively,

occasionally lifting her head to look at our parents and murmur her interest. Fuck, that pisses me off.

I'm used to laying low. Secrets are my life in the force, and so is handling life or death, possibly for millions when our missions go critical to prevent bigger wars and terrorist attacks.

But being *ignored* by the girl I was guaranteed to sink my dick into up until this dinner? Fuck everything about it.

"Christopher, no one else has your expertise. Why don't you see what Bruce has to offer next time you're up for re-enlistment?" Mom's staring intently at me, and I don't even know what turn the conversation's taken after thinking about all the ways I'd rip off my stepsister's dress and fuck her. "I worry about you sometimes. Being over there, doing God only knows what..."

She mimics concern. Bruce holds her hand, giving me a warm, approving look, like he wants to interview me today for some boring bullshit designed to turn my muscles into fat office goo.

Maybe he cares, but I know better than to mistake anything mom says. I'll never believe her again, not after she leaned on me in my late teens, turning me into the rock I never asked to be.

It's a miracle I survived. Mom nearly ruined me before I found my discipline and purpose in the Navy. She's been trying to slither back into my life ever since, bringing her venom, her drama, her brutal flaws.

"No," I growl, blotting at my lips with a tablecloth. "I don't do office crap, you know that. I'm happy where I'm at. I can handle the danger. I know every single day what I signed up for, and I wouldn't trade it for anything."

Now, I'm feeling the heat. Delia's anxious eyes are on me, but I don't give a damn about that. It's feeling mom's gaze digging into me, pleading, trying to bend me like clay to be her perfect trophy boy again.

"But Christopher, *look*." She pauses, grabs Bruce's hand, and runs a hand over her tired face. "We can all start over. It's not too late. Look at me. I've sorted out my life and I'm ready to love again. You've given a lot to this country, and you've got to draw the line somewhere. I didn't want it all to come out like this, but I—"

I throw my cloth napkin down on my plate and bang my empty beer glass so hard Delia jumps next to me. "You what? Is that what you really brought me here to talk about, mom? I should've known there was an ambush here somewhere in between the grand tour and hanging out with your perfect new family."

Bruce puts a hand up, timid and unsure. “Your mother’s concerned for you, Chris. She talks about you every single day. I never served like you did, but I’ve had plenty of colleagues who did, and I know how dangerous it can be. The pay’s pretty terrible for everything they put you through. I follow the news, and I know what might happen now that this situation with North Korea’s heating up. Nobody in this house wants to see you get hurt.”

How the fuck does this guy manage a billion dollar company? He’s such a worm. He can’t even look me in the eye for more than three seconds at a time, but I guess looking like I’m about to tear his head off has something to do with it.

“I didn’t come here to get berated and bitched at. I’m a grown man, mom, and I had to do most of the growing up myself. If it’s taken you a lot longer than me, too fucking bad. I’ll suffer for my job. I won’t suffer for you. Any of you.”

I stand up and look right at Delia. She’s sucking at her lip, tense and afraid, maybe a flash of sympathy in her eyes.

Great. Pity’s just about the last thing I need from the hot girl at the beach I was going to spend all night fucking – the girl who some sick twist of fate just turned into my stepsister.

“Chris, wait, that’s not what I’m saying.” The calm, controlled poise in mom’s voice breaks. Her fists hit the table. “You never fucking listen, do you!?”

“Evie, it’s okay.” Bruce puts a hand on her shoulder, trying to calm her down. She brushes him off like she’s shaking off swamp water.

“No! It’s not okay. He’s going to wind up just like his bum of a father, too hooked on adrenaline to know what’s good for him.” She buries her face in sugar daddy’s chest and squeezes out a few tears before she looks back at me, her face wild and red. “Don’t come crying to us when something awful happens overseas. I tried to help, tried to do everything for you. Why is it so fucking hard for you to just open up your heart and realize we care? All of us!”

My hand burns, just like it does when I’m flying up a flight of stairs in some terrorist asshole’s luxury bunker, tearing open doors, ready to pop the first thing that moves with a sneer on his face and a weapon in his hands. I’m tempted to rip my glass off the table and hurl it over their heads, smash it against the mantle of that fancy fucking fireplace in the corner.

But I’m not giving her what she wants. Mom wants a raging, crazy outburst. That was the old Chris – mad, lost, undisciplined.

“I’ve barely met you,” I say, directing it to Delia. “I don’t know what the hell any of you really think, nor do I care. I want to believe this is just mom, but for all I know, everything since I got back into town’s been a damned setup meant to twist me into place. This rich, fucked up family time’s a joke, and I’m not gonna pretend I belong. I’m out.”

Mom screams after me, but I don’t turn back. The last thing I see before I turn my shoulder for good is pain flashing in Delia’s eyes.

No, I don’t want to believe last night was some weird conspiracy to soften me up. But I can’t put anything past Evie, master manipulator, especially when the mask comes off.

And the rich asshole she married? He’ll do anything to make sure I’m not an embarrassment, maybe even give his own daughter permission to flirt and tease before I find out she’s off limits.

I’m stomping toward the big entryway, but the beer was bigger than I realized. I’ve been laying off the booze for weeks after the last mission fucked me over.

Shit. I’m too damned buzzed to drive, and there’s no way they’ll think I did anything except storm out.

I find the nearest servant and shake him, asking for a bottle of whiskey. He promptly brings me a glass and a nice bottle while I wait by the tall staircases. Then, I take the nearest one up and head into my room, kick the door shut, and flop down on the bed.

I’m supposed to be getting some R and R, and I’m not giving up.

If I can’t deal with the bullshit here, I’ll sure as hell drink ‘til I’m too dumb to be pissed, ‘til I can’t think about the shit she said about my dead dad. Much less the twisted, dark haired little succubus next to me all night.

She still wanted my hand between her legs when I clasped her thigh. I couldn’t mistake it.

I know a woman’s body better than I know SEAL Team drills, and I’m so fucking good at those I work the new recruits.

There’s a lot I already know about tonight. I know mom hasn’t changed a damned bit, and her new hubby’s exactly the weak, snob pissant I expected.

Delia’s the only mystery left. She acted like she really didn’t know who I was, and her body still can’t believe it. Thinking about how close my fingers were to the hot little clit I brushed to convulsions last night makes my dick throb, even while I’m slinging fiery whiskey down my throat in quick, steady shots.

I can't seriously fuck her. Can I?

I don't know, but my cock doesn't give a shit. The flesh knows what it wants. It doesn't understand boundaries or taboos or complications. Only mad, hawkish desire.

She can't slip away. Sure, I'm too disciplined to ever do something stupid, too hardened to ever see her as anything but a rich girl with a killer body.

But I can't ignore her. Can't pretend she doesn't make me burn. *Fuck it.*

I decide then and there I'm having some fun with her one way or another. If it doesn't end with us tangled up in the sheets, listening as she begs for my come, then I can sure as hell tease her 'til she cries.

The longest summer of my life just started, and Delia's gonna help me blow off some steam.

I have to know her. I have to unravel her. And if I don't end up between her legs again, giving it to her harder and better than anyone else ever can, then I'll sure as fuck tease her like nobody ever has.

TRUTH OR DARE (DELIA)

It's late. I'm laying in bed, flipping tensely at my phone, playing stupid games and texting a few friends.

I can't do anything serious after that disaster of a dinner. Poor dad dragged Evie straight to bed after Chris exploded and left, leaving my jaw hanging on the floor for about the third time today.

I don't know how I let him touch me without flipping out. The hug in front of our parents was bad enough, his hand gliding down my back and the not-so-subtle bump in his hips.

My stepbrother. My arrogant, demanding, sinfully sexy stepbrother.

What are the odds? What had I done to piss the universe off so badly?

His greeting hurt as much as it set me on fire. It was nothing but a reminder of what we'd lost by fate screwing us over like this.

Of course, the way he carried on, it's like he doesn't even know how badly screwed we are.

I think about his hand underneath the table, riding up my skirt, clenching my thigh. His touch was so rough, so rude, so tempting.

He paralyzed me. I'm still not sure what was worse – my urge to jam a fork in his face, or let his fingers go higher.

Jesus. I can't do this. I'm the only one who knows he's still in the house too. An hour ago, I heard him banging around behind my wall, throwing something heavy into a metal trashcan in his room.

Why Evie decided to set his room up next to mine, I'll never know. This house has at least six more empty guest rooms, and any one of them could've been ours, nice and private.

My fingers keep rolling across the screen, returning to his number. It *hurts* to

see it now, like the entire world keeps razzing me in his digits, telling me I'm an idiot to let a stranger into my pants last night.

I should've been texting him around this time to tell him to pick me up. In some alternate universe where dad hadn't gotten hitched to his mom, maybe I was.

In this one, all I can do is stare sadly at the screen, fighting the savage urge to send him a text anyway.

But I can't. There's nothing to say, logically. It's not hard to imagine how it would sound.

Oh, hi, Chris, sorry about dinner. Sorry your mom's a big bitch and my dad hangs on her every word. Sorry that I'll never be able to feel your lips on mine again.

Sorry I didn't slap you across the face when you put your hands where they don't belong.

Ugh. I want to hurl my phone against the wall, slam it into the matching metal trashcan I've got in my room, right next to my dresser.

Night sounds keep filtering through my cracked door. When I hear the whoosh, I think it's just a sudden breeze, but it's odd how it doesn't blow the clothes hanging out in my closet, where I've left the door open.

When I feel the rough hand tugging at my shoulder, my first instinct is to scream. Chris flips me over, throwing his other hand against my mouth, preventing the shock from ever leaving me.

"Don't. I didn't mean to sneak up on you, babe, but we gotta talk. Roll over."

He doesn't ask me again. He keeps his hand tight across my mouth as he crashes into bed next to me, pulling me tight to his chest. His palm doesn't leave my lips until he feels my mouth completely shut.

As soon as he lets me go, I rip myself away and jump out of bed, staring at him in disbelief. The door's wide open now, and so is the screen.

"What the hell are you doing!?" It's a struggle to keep my voice low.

I watch him put a stern finger over his lips, and that infuriates me even more.

I want to scream bloody murder. Instead, I stomp over to the door he's just slipped through, and take a quick look out before shutting the screen.

"Seriously, what did you do? Climb a tree? Jump to my balcony from yours? Jesus, we're like twenty or thirty feet off the ground!"

He gives me a blank look and shrugs. "I had to talk to you after what

happened down there tonight. Come sit, sis.”

His big hand pats the empty spot next to him. Snorting, I shake my head, feeling a strange rush of heat as the last word echoes in my ear. I’m not sure if *sis* is supposed to piss me off with its sarcasm, or remind me there’s something broken in my head.

Crap. We really are brother and sister now, but it’s not like it stops me from wanting to climb into his lap, spread my hands on his chest, and find out how tight he’ll stretch me once he sinks between my legs.

The fire surging through my veins isn’t just anger, even though it should be. It’s what we had last night, the strange, contradictory need to feel this asshole’s lips on mine.

This isn’t me. I’m supposed to be the good girl, the level headed one, the *magna cum laude* career woman in the making. I never thought I’d be sweet talked by hard muscles, tattoos, and confidence bordering on insanity, but here I am.

Here *he* is, laying in my bed, doing – what, exactly?

I push away from him. I have to get his hands off me, clear my head.

“What do we have to talk about?” I sigh angrily. “Neither of us can change this. We screwed up last night, and now things are going to be awkward. If only I’d known you were *that* Christopher. My new stepbrother Christopher, instead of just a beach bum sharing the same name.”

“Ah, fuck.” He sits up, smiling and shaking his head. “It’s *Chris*. Mom just uses the long form bullshit to make me sound like I fit in her world. In case you hadn’t noticed, I don’t. No way in hell. I’m just here as a courtesy because I can’t stop thinking about how sweet your little clit burned on my thumb.”

Holy shit. His green eyes shine when he says it, and I have to look away before my panties start on fire.

I can’t let him win. I can’t give in. This is crazy!

“Well, we certainly don’t fit together, Chris. I can’t help you there. Are you seriously staying here for awhile, or are you driving back to your base once you’ve sobered up?” I can smell the whiskey dripping off his breath.

It’s amazing he didn’t fall on the concrete below and kill himself when he made the jump. Maybe he has some secret SEAL gear I don’t know about. Either way, I’m glad he smells drunk. It helps bury the intoxicating masculine scent I breathed last night, dreamed about, wanted so fucking badly to smell again.

“Bullshit. You’re so coy, Delia. You still want me,” he says, bowing out his chest as he pushes his arm against my mattress and pops up. “Hell yeah, you do. I’d know that look on a woman anywhere. You really didn’t know last night, did you?”

What?

My lip trembles as he walks toward me, and there’s nowhere to run before his arms are around me again. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. Of *course* I didn’t know about you last night! Do you think I’m some kind of psycho who really wants to fuck her own stepbrother?”

He chuckles, rich and smoky, vibrating through my body. “You tell me. Are you?”

His hands press against my spine, shooting down, smoothing the wrinkles in my dress. He captures my ass and squeezes it, so hard and swift I gasp, inadvertently throwing my hips into his.

“Goddamn, baby. You don’t know what you’ve got in the trunk, do you? This is an ass men jerkoff to through a whole damned tour. This ass makes boys fight twice as hard in the field, whatever it takes to get home safe and tap it again.”

Hellfire shrieks in my veins. For the next few seconds, I’m a twisting, writhing mess in his hands, resisting the urge to grind into him like we did last night.

My clit remembers what he did. It can’t forget. Neither can my skin, my nipples, even the tips of my fingertips. They all remember the buzz that flowed through them as we touched, kissed, and stroked ourselves to bliss.

God, it’s undeniable. My entire body wants another taste. I don’t want to stop, and my hands involuntarily wrap around my neck.

His lips press to mine, crushing and hot and forbidden. I can’t believe I’m kissing my stepbrother – my own fucking stepbrother!

That does it.

I jerk back, wiping his taste off, pretending I’m ten times more disgusted than I really am. His rough hands finally let go and he steps away with a growl.

“You gotta be shitting me. I really disgust you that much?”

My heart sinks. I didn’t mean it like that. It was just a reaction, a reflex to get him off me, before we toppled into bed together and made the greatest mistake of our lives.

“Sorry. No, Chris, it’s not like that. It’s just...this is too much,” I say softly, voice cracking. “You know we can’t do this. It’s wrong. If only we could’ve been at their stupid wedding and objected when they took their vows, maybe this would all be different. But it’s too late for that. We need to learn to live together without all this teasing, this fighting, this urge to...”

I can’t say it. My cheeks go bright red. Adrenaline shocks my body, raw desire that *knows* exactly what’s on the tip of my tongue.

“What – to fuck? Because that’s what I want to do every goddamned minute I’m standing here with you. I can’t keep my hands off you, babe. I’m dangerous.”

He sounds so cold. Jesus, is this what he’s like when he’s upset? I talk toward him cautiously, reaching for his shoulder, trying to soothe him. He’s a total bastard, but maybe I hurt him more than I realized, struck something evil stirred up inside him by Evie’s antics earlier tonight.

“It’s going to be okay, Chris. This doesn’t have to be weird or awkward. We can learn to *deal*, right? We made a big mistake last night, but it was an innocent one! Nobody knows. Nobody but you and me ever have to.”

Snarling, he shoves my arm away. It’s so fast and sudden it scares me. I’m surprised it doesn’t hurt. He rips the heavy balcony door open, stopping its momentum like it’s nothing in his strong hand, before it crashes against the wall.

“I don’t need your damned pity, and I sure as shit don’t need your advice. You’re right, it doesn’t have to be like this. I’m getting the fuck back to base tomorrow so I don’t have to stare at a chick all summer who’s too afraid to fuck me. I’ve never had a problem getting pussy between tours. I want yours, but don’t you ever think I *need* it.”

Ouch, ouch, ouch.

Every sentence bruising my ears stabs deep like hateful arrows. I can’t think of anything else to say before he lets himself out.

Oh, shit. Not again! He’s going to...

I rush forward, afraid he’s going to slip and break his legs catapulting between our balconies. I push through the screen and call after him, but it’s too late.

He’s already jumped, hit the other side, and he hoists himself up. I watch his enormous body jump up over the stone banister like it’s nothing. He lands safe like an Olympic gymnast, and he doesn’t look back before he disappears inside his own room, completely ignoring me.

I retreat back to my bed and flop down, only after latching the balcony door this time. I want to beat the shit out of my pillow, but I don't. The noise would probably slip through our shared wall, and I can't stand the thought of the smug, broody bastard smiling at how bad he's pissed me off.

I hope to god he follows through on his threat to go back to his base. Evie setting up our summer rooms was a big fucking mistake.

After about an hour, I'm somewhere between rage and sleep, emotionally exhausted from the last twenty-four hours. My brain won't stop running through everything he's ever said to me.

The horny threats, the arrogance, the teasing, the attraction. Even the mundane details flash through my mind, everything I know about him, tiny bits and pieces. I feel like I still know nothing.

I've sworn to give Evie a chance for dad's sake, but I know she's bad news. I wonder what it was like growing up with her.

Are all his asshole, sexaholic tendencies just symptoms of the poison she's left him with?

I shake my head, trying to fit the pieces together. I shouldn't try. The best thing that can happen to us is distance – cold, clean space.

But it isn't so easy. Something about watching him go, leaving like this, shocks my heart worse than anything that's happened.

I'm worried for Chris. Worried for myself. Worried for dad.

If Evie turned him into the man he is, an ego-filled jackass who thinks he's got the world on his shoulders because he's in the SEALs, what will she do to my dad before this train wreck of a marriage withers?

Hell, how am I supposed to get anything done on my summer thesis now? Professor Thosser won't stop breathing down my neck. He's going to expect at least an outline in another two weeks, and I'm gobsmacked for ideas, *good ideas* that could make or break my whole future.

Something about the last thing Chris said echoes in my head. *I've never had a problem getting pussy between tours.*

Just what was he doing overseas before coming home? Had he killed people, blown things up, watched as his own men died?

He's a rare breed. A modern day warrior living a life I can't imagine. I'm not sure why I want to, but I do.

Then it hits me. I bolt up out of bed, walk over to my desk where I've got my laptop, and open it. I search through articles, and it doesn't take long to find

it.

The big raid in Kirkuk. It was all over the news in May, and we talked about it in my international politics class before the final.

US special forces took out several brutal terrorists, but they'd also gotten in the middle of an Iranian operation sneaking across the Iraqi border on their way out. Iran and the United States exchanged fire for the first time in decades. When the dust settled, there were three servicemen killed – probably SEALs – and the wreckage of several high tech gliders was revealed to the world for the first time.

It almost caused a war. A SEAL Team was definitely involved in the raid, and the military held it close to their chest, deflecting the media's attention to the war threat, which diminished after the US and Iran came to terms.

I stared at the words and maps on my screen, pushing a lump down my throat. Chris couldn't have been involved...right?

The timeline fit. So did his attitude, foul tempered and dark, assuming this wasn't just the norm for him.

My heart starts racing, and I reach up, rubbing my eyes. He'll never talk – not willingly, anyway. But I don't need to know every dirty, gritty, classified detail of what happened in the three way firefight with the terrorists and Iran.

My greedy little heart skips another beat. I feel like the biggest bitch in the world for wanting to base a paper off my asshole SEAL stepbrother, but what else am I supposed to do when the universe has dropped a goldmine in my lap? Assuming it doesn't land me in his first, I mean.

It's all right in front of me. A story that'll knock the Professor's socks off. All I have to do is dig.

I tell myself I have limits. I won't compromise his privacy or national security, no, but I can't ignore all the crazy possibilities here. I pull up a blank document and begin typing furiously, the start of my emotional study in SEAL psychology.

I'm chewing my lip, tasting the last of his kiss lingering on my skin. I need to get closer to him, have to feel whatever he's feeling in life.

We don't need to be best friends. We have to stop short of being lovers. What if I just *pretend* to like him?

Virgin or not, I know how to flirt. Marnie and my other friends always told me I was cute, and I don't think it was just his own horndog desires that nearly brought him to his knees last night.

It seems insane on the surface, yeah, but there's a chance it'll also get me what I want, what I need to finish my degree with every door in the world wide open.

A few minutes later, and it's all worked out. I'm going to apologize to Chris tomorrow and beg him to stay in our house this summer.

If I can get him to agree to that, I know it won't take much to pull more out of him. We'll play truth or dare. No, I'm not disciplined like a SEAL, but I'm confident I can control myself.

I'll smile sweetly, tell him anything he wants, maybe even make out if it gets me more, brings me deeper into his life.

I won't whore myself out. I'll stop short of doing anything crazy – he's my freaking stepbrother!

I don't care how hot he is, or how wet his filthy mouth gets me sometimes. I know I can resist.

Pushing him away tonight tells me I can keep control. I'll stop him before he goes too far. If he gets pissed and goes running to his floozies, I won't get jealous.

It's hard, but it isn't impossible. I'm on target, and a strange kinda confidence tears through my veins.

I'm going to strip him down, turn his secrets into something beautiful to share with the world.

This bad boy and all his mysteries are mine. It's only a few hot summer weeks. If I can walk the tightrope without letting him catch on, or find his way into my bed, I'll never have issues saying no to a man again.

I drift off to sleep wearing a wicked smile. Chris and I should've been fucking right now, if Evie hadn't hooked up with my dad, but I'm done spilling tears over what might've been.

Having him as my pet project will do more for me than finding out how hard he can slam me into the mattress. He's going to help me grow up, jump start my life, and not by getting my panties off.

I'm a vibrant young woman, and I can do this. I won't buckle to Chris Cleveland. I'll show my warrior stepbrother who's in control once and for all.

LANDMINES (CHRIS)

Every time I turn around, there's a fucking landmine.

I head for base early that morning, grabbing all my crap and hoisting it into my truck. I fight not flip off the prissy shithead in the mansion's guard shack when he opens the gate, giving me another one of those looks that tells me I don't belong here.

Base is supposed to be my safe haven. It's cramped, spartan, but I've lived with it for almost five years. Enlisting makes you appreciate any warm bed without the threat of some evil bastard sneaking up in the dark and blowing out your brains with a quick, silent shot.

And compared to all the bullshit drama at home? Staying on base sounds pretty damned good.

Mom's shown her true colors for about the thousandth time. Marriage hasn't changed her a single shade, and I'll be damned if I'm gonna crash in that god forsaken house while her and sugar daddy beat me up about my career.

Delia's feelings are crystal clear, too. She threw her hands at me last night like I was carrying the plague when I shoved my lips on hers, grabbed her incredible ass. I was ready to bed her over the bed and pick up right where we started on the beach.

Today, with less whiskey in my veins, I couldn't totally blame her for being such a bitch.

I'd almost fucked up royal. Bitch or beauty, she's my stepsister, and she's got a point about all the inevitable hangups that'll come from getting nasty.

I don't do drama. It's been my policy since my balls dropped and I learned to make women moan.

Love? Give me a damned break. I only do casual, worry free fucking, and there are a million chicks out here in the Bay Area who'll be happy to ride my

cock, without worrying about entangling myself deeper into this twisted family.

I'm planning to hit the bar tonight after I workout and get my bunk set up. Then I get down to the wing, and I see the notice. It's big, bold military script with a three day date range, starting today.

FUMIGATION, 18:00 HOURS. ALL ACTIVE DUTY MEN, SEE YOUR COMMANDING OFFICERS ABOUT OTHER ACCOMODATIONS.

I slam my bag down on the ground and look around, grateful there's nobody else to see me blowing up. I can't believe my horseshit luck.

Something needs to go right after Kirkuk. The universe fucking owes me.

A man's supposed to get a break after watching three of his own men cut to pieces. I close my eyes for a second and it all comes rushing back, the screams and explosions. We'd just finished off Abu Alhazred and his guards, flattened him like the terrorist piece of shit he was. The last thing we expected was to see were the Iranians surrounding us, trying to get their hands on all the shit we'd flown in with.

Commander Jones called their bluff. Who the hell knew to this day if it was the right choice, but it saved our asses, and protected American goods from falling into rival hands.

They made a move before we blew up the gliders. We protected our assets with deadly force.

We shot our way out of there. The Iranians balked in the end and opened up an escape route, but only after they'd slaughtered three of our finest while the SEALs were busy planting demo charges on our gear.

I had to see the commander about other accommodations off base. Knowing Uncle Sam's budget, we'd probably get a crappy two star hotel, tucked away from anything exciting around the city.

Whatever, anything's better than heading back to that joke of a home. Until I decide to settle down one day, I don't have one, and it doesn't phase me.

I'll hump it and bring a tent out to the park if I need to. Nothing beats avoiding the freak show, especially watching that little minx with the long black hair tease me with all her charms that are suddenly off limits.

AN HOUR LATER, I'm running along the docks, looking out at the submarines peaking up above the water. One of them I'd jumped out of a week ago for drill, my boys behind me in an inflatable raft, swimming toward a small

island strewn with barbed wire for the live fire drill.

The new recruits were on their way to earning their full colors. They'd never replace the guys we'd just lost in Iraq, but fresh blood meant everything in a SEAL Team like ours, always a heartbeat away from a new assault to stamp out some foreign brushfire.

The commander kept it short and sweet. Jones set me up with a room at a mediocre motel, surprised I wasn't going to crash at my family's place.

He also reminded me we're always on call – as if I needed to hear it. Anybody with eyes in their skull knew about the Korean situation simmering in the background, ready to go hot the instant their potbellied Dear Leader decides to test his new missiles, which are going to shoot over Hawaii and stretch to California if the President doesn't do something.

The Norks can't afford another full blown war. They'll never win. But if things go hot, and they're stupid enough to lob rockets at US territory, they'll have to fight when the South and her allies punch back. It's our job to slap their pride before it gets really wounded, and prevent a total meltdown, destroying the sixty year truce that's held along the DMZ.

I can't wait to get the hell outta here. My boots pound cement, faster and harder than I normally run, trying to scorch away all the blue ball frustration Delia's left me with. If I have my way – and I *will* – it'll be the last time she riles me up.

After the workout, it's late evening. I stop for a burger and then hit the bar next door, only a few blocks from the motel. It's nothing fancy, but it's the perfect place to haul some bar girl for the night.

Nothing's getting to me tonight. It's not the first time I've used sex to purify my skull, and it's a helluva lot more fun than whiskey and hangovers.

I'll fuck away the disaster tonight, and forget about everything. Kirkuk, Evie and her billionaire boy toy, my tease of a stepsister with the perfect little ass. With the way shit's going, I'll be sent overseas before I know it, too busy to worry about any of this.

I work hard enough busting butt for Uncle Sam, and now it's time to play the way I like – hard.



THE LOUD, half-smashed blonde chick sits on my lap in a corner booth, already moving her hand down my abs, dangerously close to my dick. I'm hard, but I'm not sure why the fuck I don't have my hand up her skirt yet.

She's a beach girl, all right. Laura, or something. She likes her martinis double strength and her men rock hard.

She's hot. Skimpy, glaringly bright summer dress, bleached highlights in her hair, fake tits, and a laugh that sounds like a strangled hyena.

She's the kinda girl I'm used to hauling into bed for the night.

Too bad I can't stop thinking about Delia, goddammit it. She's a wicked little tease, and having this slut wrapped around my neck reminds me how rare it is to find a party girl in this town who's not just trolling for tonight's dick.

"Baby, what's a matter?" she purrs, stopping to push a desperate kiss into my throat. "You act like you just dragged yourself off a long flight. I thought you said you've been here for a few days? Talk to me!"

I force a thin, fake smile, and run my fingers up over her ass. They move swiftly, giving her goosebumps as I run my hand all the way up her neck, grabbing a fistful of her hair and giving it a tug.

"You're not my shrink. I don't need to talk. Do you want another drink, or is your pussy wet and ready for me?" Finally, I reach up that skirt.

Her skin feels warm and dry, probably from too much sun. Fuck.

My dick jerks – only because I'm remembering Delia's soft thighs, the feel of her cream trickling down her legs after I thumbed her clit into overdrive.

She moans, refusing to answer me. I shove her lace panties aside and push my fingers into her pussy. Growling, I try to imagine it's just as hot as sis, but something tells me Delia's a helluva lot tighter. And I'll never get a chance to find out either.

Fuck! Why the hell does she have to be my stepsister? What god did I piss off to make the hottest chick I ever tasted like cyanide?

Blondie's eyes pinch shut, and she starts to shudder. I haven't even started on her clit, and she's in high heaven. There's no way I'll ever be as hot for her as she is for me, but it wouldn't be the first time I've done a chick without equal sparks flying both ways.

Pussy's pussy. Tonight, I need some under me, get my dick soaked, fuck 'til dawn tomorrow if that's what it takes to get Delia's little whimper out of my head.

"Come for me right here," I growl, nipping at her earlobe.

She shakes, resisting me, trying to moan something about how naughty it is. Like I give a shit.

My other hand shoots behind her and smacks her ass. Laura shifts against me hard, surprised and drunk, sending her half-filled margarita glass flying off the table.

Shit! Even I'm freaked out by all the eyes on us after the tremendous clash.

I pull my hands back and she scurries off me, wide-eyed and apologetic. A waitress rushes up to deal with the mess, and I realize I've gotten splashed too. The sugary crap feels sticky, and it's all up my arm.

"Baby, damn, I didn't mean it! I'm such a klutz. Let me help clean you up." She smiles, pulls out a napkin, and starts patting me down.

I push her away, sliding out and standing up. "I've gotta hit the men's room anyway. Give me a minute."

I head into the bathroom and wash my arm, then smooth cool water across my face. My stubble feels edgier today, like my whole damned body's on edge, the same intensity I always feel before a mission.

What the fuck is wrong with me? Why's it so hard to settle down and do what I've always done best – giving one stranger the night of her life?

I want to punch my own reflection. Delia's hot little ass has me screwed up, yeah, but it's my own fault for letting her get underneath my skin.

She's nothing special. She's a hot, responsive spitfire who just so happens to be off limits. She's –

My phone dings and I rip it out of my pocket, tapping the screen. Speak of the fucking devil – or should I say the succubus?

YOU BUSY? I REALLY WANT TO TALK ABOUT LAST NIGHT.

Adrenaline spikes through my blood. It's the same superhuman focus I get with my rifle in hand, except there's no life or death on the line here. Only egos.

WHAT DO YOU WANT? I send back.

I work my way out of the bathroom and lean against the wall, waiting. Her next text hits a couple seconds later.

MORE LIKE WHAT I DON'T WANT, CHRIS. I DON'T WANT BAD BLOOD. I WANT YOU TO COME HOME SO WE CAN TALK. EVIE AND DAD ARE GONE FOR THE WEEKEND – OUT ON THE YACHT.

Is she serious, or just yanking my dick? She wants to talk to me...alone? I gotta wonder if this chick's much crazier than I thought.

It takes me a few seconds to ignore the fire throbbing in my balls to write

back. I tell her I'll think about it – no guarantees – and then shove my phone back in its place.

One thing's for sure – I've lost interest in blondie, still waiting for me at our table, wet and drunk as ever. I walk up and tap her on the shoulder. She smiles up at me with her fat glossy lips, the same look I know she'd have before taking my cock in her mouth.

"I need to run. Something's come up."

"Don't go!" Her smile melts. She leaps up and grabs my arm, and I hear her breath catch. "Did I do something wrong? Don't tell me it was the spill."

I shove her off me and I only slow my way out of the bar to bark back. "Duty first. Stop following me. I'll pick up the tab."

I stop and handle it with a waitress on the way out, grateful blondie's too pissed to moan begging for my number. I'd have to shoot her down the hard way then.

On the drive to the estate, I pound my fist on the wheel, wondering what the hell I'm doing. Did I just give up sane, guaranteed pussy for a talk with my prissy little stepsis?

My last text told her to tell the guard I was coming. He gives me the same shitty look when I roll up to the gate. I floor it up the hilly driveway after I'm through.

The place is just as pretentious and alien as the first time. I'm standing underneath the big chandelier by the staircases when I text her.

I'M HERE.

Delia comes sauntering down the staircase in about thirty seconds, and my eyes pop out of my fucking skull. The sleek, conservative crap I've seen her in before has given way to a short red dress, cut in all the right places.

My dick hammers in my pants, begging for release, howling for her tight, wet warmth. Something about the dress accents her curves even more than her tank top and shorts did on the beach. I don't know whether to throw on the only suit and tie I've got to take her out, or rip it all off and fuck her right here in our parents' grand entryway.

She lights up with a smile when she sees me staring.

It's too much. All the shit I haven't been able to control since Kirkuk takes hold. As soon as she's next to me, I grab her, spin her around, and fling her against the wall.

"What's going on here? Really?" She whimpers with more than surprise, and

I realize too late I've shoved my fingers through her hair, pulling too tight. "Sorry."

She backs away from me when I give her a chance, a sour look on her face. "Jackass. Would a hello kill you?"

I shrug. "You're the one who wanted to talk, and you come out dressed like that. I'm warning you right now – head games and cockteases aren't my thing, babe. Unless you want to go upstairs and spread your legs for me, you'd better start talking, because that's looking like the only reason I'm here."

She flushes bright red and holds up her hands. "No, no, you've got the wrong idea. I'm not that kind of girl."

"Yeah?" I shoot her a dirty look. She's not entirely wrong – I haven't been able to figure out what the fuck she is yet, or what she's up to.

"No, I mean, I don't just jump into bed with people."

Snorting, I nail her with my sarcasm. "No, but you really want to. You came hotter than any chick I've ever fingered behind a bar, babe. And you're hardly the first. You want to know me? Cut the good girl act. I see right through it like I can see your tits through that thing."

We stare, saying nothing for several seconds, before I drop my eyes to her chest and take a good look. That makes her flush harder, and my cock is ready to go off like a rocket.

Yeah, I'm a crude SOB. I never hide what I want. I half-expect her to turn around, stomp right back upstairs, and slam the door.

"Whatever. I'm trying to be nice. Let's go outside and talk."

She starts moving before I can say anything. I watch the full, round globes of her ass bobbing in that skin-tight dress behind her, and I'm led along like a bulldog following a bitch in heat.

We stop off in the kitchen. Her ass taunts me more as she bends, opening up the thick door to daddy's special liquor cabinet attached to the kitchen, reaching inside and pulling out a bottle of something white and fancy.

My dick thuds. I instantly think about popping the cork and splashing it all over her, licking expensive Dom or some shit off her tits, tasting it on her pussy, cooling her body with booze before I get between her thighs and burn her to cinders.

"Glass?" She smiles like an angel and gestures to the crystal glasses hanging off a rack. I grab two and follow her down the long deck stairs to the pool

below, overlooking a perfect view of the sea in the distance.

A man could get used to fucking a chick out here. Damn if I'm not gonna try, sooner or later, even if I've got to drag her into the pool.

We flop down next to each other in these huge cabana chairs. I'm staring at her cleavage the whole time as she unscrews the cork and fills our glasses.

That sound of the wine flowing into the glass sounds too much like wet, hard sex, the noise we'd make together getting down and dirty.

"I'm sorry last night was so ridiculous," she says. "I didn't know Evie would give you such a hard time, Chris. I don't blame you a bit for handling her like you did. I would've been just as pissed."

"Stop, babe," I growl, taking a long pull from my wine. It's smooth, good, warming. "I didn't come here for family therapy time, and I've got a feeling that's not why you reached out either. What's going on? Why call me back after you turned my ass outta your room last night?"

She looks into her glass, giving it a little swirl. "The night on the beach was a disaster. Something would've happened if you weren't my stepbrother, Chris, I'll be up front about it. But we can't do that now."

Fuck that, I want to scream. You're wrong. We can do it all, and then some.

My hand burns to smash my wine glass next to the pool and march the fuck out, but that shy little look she's giving me causes my dick to hum fire. It's like she's intentionally feeding me lies I'm supposed to catch.

Maybe this chick is crazy, or just too damned stuck up to admit she wants a working boy in her bed. I've fucked rich girls before. Nobody as high class as Delia, maybe, but damn if I don't know how to handle 'em.

They always play coy. She's going over the line, but it feels like the same game. I crack a thin smile, gently set my glass down, and fold my arms.

"So, what, then? You're here for some brotherly loving?" I watch her do a double take, flustered as ever. "Brother *love*, I mean."

"I've been just fine my whole life without any siblings," she says. "I'm an only child, just like you. Mom divorced when I was in my teens, just walked out of our lives with another man. The stress was too much for her. I know this sounds crazy, but any family friction brings that feeling back. It hurts."

I look the girl up and down seriously. Her eyes are honest, but I'm not joining the pity party just yet. As far as I'm concerned, nobody on earth needs to know about my old man and his fucked up last days with mom, much less this dark haired beauty who acts like she's out for a therapy hug one minute, and

the roughest fuck of her life the next.

“I’m no stranger to family bullshit, Delia. Sorry it upsets you. Mom’s always been a huge bitch, and she’s got a lot of problems, falling off the screen and all. If she ever pushes you, push her right back. I don’t know what she pulled to get your old man interested.”

She smiles sadly. “Probably desperate. He’s been a mess since mom walked out, and he’s taken a back seat with business the last couple years too, leaving him too much time to think. Time for trouble too, I guess.”

I finish my wine and grab the bottle, topping off our glasses. “I’d say I understand, but I’m not looking to be your shoulder to cry on, babe. Is that the only reason you want me here, or what?”

Maybe it’s the booze in my system, but I’m done playing around. Uncle Sam taught me to be sharp and direct, to manage time and damage control like nobody’s business. I want to get to the heart of why the fuck I’m here, and if she won’t answer with words, or getting her lips on mine, I’m out.

I decided years ago there are three things I’ll never do with any woman. Not after what happened to dad.

I don’t do drama. I don’t do therapy. And I definitely don’t do *love*.

“I just want to know you, Chris. You’re interesting. It’s not every day a girl meets a Navy SEAL.” Delia looks up, her eyes softer, nervous. “There’s this project coming up for my senior thesis in journalism. It’s sent my stress levels through the roof, along with everything else going on in the family. I don’t need an estranged stepbrother too, you know?”

She offers her hand. I’m not the touchy-feely kind, but hell if I’m passing on any opportunity to touch her again. I reach out, lace her little fingers through mine, and squeeze.

Inside, I’m already smiling because I’ve figured her out. She’s lonely.

I can do lonely chicks, bring a little lightning into their lives, fill them with the hot, real connection that comes from being wrapped around all ten inches of me.

No, I’m not a total bastard. I’ll hand out some sage advice, and mean it, even if all I care about is finding out how loud she screams when I’m pounding her ass against the nearest surface.

“It’ll be okay, woman. You’re a few years younger than me. This shit gets better when you figure out your life. Finish school. Find a good career. Leave this fancy carnival behind. My mom’s nothing but drama with a facelift, and you can’t be your dad’s shoulder to cry on your whole damned life. You’ve

gotta get out there and live.”

“It’s not that simple for me, Chris. You’ve probably had more action and adventure in your pinky than I’ve had in my entire life.” The sadness in her eyes fades when she looks up, curiosity flickering in her big brown eyes. “What’s it like out there? Take my mind off this crap. Tell me something about the SEALs.”

“The first rule about being a SEAL is you don’t talk about what happens when you’re a SEAL.” I give her a hard glare.

She slides off the chair and stands up, causing her plump tits to bounce. “Come on, Chris. There must be something you can tell me. I’m not a Russian spy or anything. I just want to know what it’s like – how does it make you feel?”

I don’t like her hovering over me, unless she’s going to strip. My hand darts out and I grab her wrist, jerking her down. She crashes against my chest with a squeal, and my free hand reaches for her ass.

That sweet, plump, grabbable, fuckable ass!

She gasps when I squeeze her cheeks for what feels like the thousandth time without seeing it bare. And I’m still not fucking sick of it yet.

“You wanna play truth or dare? Is that what this crap’s all about?”

She has to work hard to wiggle my hand off her rear. But she doesn’t bolt up and run like before, settling against me, resting her head on my shoulder. I hear her breathe deep, pushing those gorgeous ripe tits flush against my hard muscle, exploding a primal spark inside me.

“Maybe I do, big brother. Like I said – I just want to know you. I don’t care who you’re running around killing or what you’re blowing up over there. Do you like your job?”

I think seriously before answering. The little tease has got her thigh settled around my dick. There’s no fucking way she can’t feel how hard I am, how bad it hurts not to pull her legs apart and sink down into her, slamming her sweet cunt ‘til I explode.

“I wouldn’t be there if I didn’t like it, babe. Somebody’s gotta protect this country. It took me years to find structure, and the Navy’s given me that. I don’t give a shit what Evie thinks. There’s nothing I’d rather be doing than drilling hard and hauling myself onto base whenever duty calls.”

“Hmmm,” she purrs, nuzzling her face on my shoulder before she looks up. “That’s really noble. I’ve always respected military men.”

I roll my eyes. “We’re not all prima donnas looking for constant praise. I don’t need it from you. The free drinks down by the base are plenty thanks for me. I don’t do this shit because I want my ego stroked.”

“Then why?” She lifts her head up and her cheeks are rose red. Thinking about all the blood hissing through her makes my dick harder, knowing how bad she wants me. “Isn’t there anything else you’d rather do?”

“Playing warrior suits me. It’s just like anything else – it’s a role, a calling, and I’ve found mine. You don’t walk away from that when it’s pulled you in.” I’m tired of these questions, and I lift up my hand from her lower back, bringing it down on her ass.

She jumps at the short, searing spank, and then punches me playfully. “Hey! I didn’t ask you to run your hands all over my body and treat me like another one of your beach sluts. Jesus, is that what you thought I was the other night?”

I don’t answer her. She hasn’t told me a damned thing yet, and there’s no way I’m letting her know she’s the hottest chick I’ve seen for several tours. I’m not giving her that power. I’m the one in control, all the time, no exceptions.

“It’s my turn, Delia. You wanna play truth or dare? Fine.” I reach for her face and dig my fingers into her chin, just hard enough to tell her I’m not playing around. “How long has it been since you last fucked? Was he good?”

I need to know. I’ve got a feeling she’s going through one helluva dry spell, and if I find out what truly makes her tick, I’ll have her panties in my fist by sundown.

She laughs and starts shaking her head like mad, slapping my arm. I don’t let go. Don’t let up.

I stroke her jaw softly with my thumb, reminding her of all the things I can do to her clit. Hell, her whole body, if only she’d stop talking, stuff the bullshit head games, and get me naked.

“Come on. Who’s asking who classified information now?”

She twists her face away from me. The girl’s gone a whole new shade of red, blushing like a sunburn, just like a –

No fucking way. She can’t be.

I run my hand along her cheek, pushing her gently, forcing her to look at me before I ask. “Are you telling me you’re a virgin? You’ve never been with a guy before?”

She opens her mouth, and her words catch in her throat. Shit.

I push her off me. I need to get room, get oxygen, before my dick or my heart give out. I'm not sure which one it'll be first – guilt and crazy lust start storming in my system, so hard it rattles my bones.

“Fuck, Delia, what're you doing here? You want to fuck me, don't you?” She's bunched up on the cabana chair, staring at me while I'm pacing in front of her, trying to process this ludicrous shit.

“I'm just...having a little fun. That's all. Really, Chris, I don't see what the big deal is. I do want to know you, and I don't mind flirting around.”

“Flirting?” I snort, shaking my head. “Flirting doesn't include having your stepbrother's hand on your ass, ready to tear your panties off. You know, I started thinking *maybe* it was possible, as fucked up as it is. Now, I know I can't fuck you. No way in hell.”

I start to walk toward the edge of the pool, wondering if I'm too drunk to drive out of this sideshow. Yeah, I sure as shit am – sis and me sucked down most of the bottle. It's amazing how fast booze flows when words are gushing too.

“Jesus, Chris! It's just a little drunken fun. Can't you see I'm trying to fucking open up? And maybe find out if we can at least be friends?”

“I don't need more friends,” I snap. “Not friends I grab ass with. Not friends I want to lock lips with, leaving my marks on their skin. I don't *need* any friends who aren't going to turn into fuck buddies – and we don't have a chance. There's no way I'm gonna be your first fuck. I'm not screwing up your head and leaving you with the lifelong knowledge that the first man you spread your legs for was your own fucking stepbrother.”

“Screwing up? *Screwing up?!?*” She's got fire on her lips when she runs after me, digging her nails into my shoulder. “What do you think happened the other night? We were *so* close, Chris. You can't deny it. You're the first man who ever got his hands down there. Do I look screwed up to you? Well?”

Crazy confirmed.

Fucking shit. I don't know how to answer that without breaking her heart.

“We didn't know. It was a mistake, nothing more. Now, you'll agree this truth and dare shit's a bad idea, and I need to get the hell out of here before we piss ourselves off more. Sorry it's gotta be like this, Delia. There's somebody in this town for you out there. Good luck.”

I get about ten steps away when I hear her scream.

“I'm not the one who needs it! Just go ahead and run, you fucking coward. You're right – this was a mistake.” Tears are streaming down her hot red

cheeks now, and her arm flaps erratically, hurling her empty wine glass at me. It shatters on the pool deck with a loud echo.

Coward, huh? If she were a dude, I'd already have her on the ground, one hand on her throat and the other in a fist, knocking teeth out.

She's upset, I remind myself. She's just my stupid, naïve stepsister. One more spitfire who caused my cock to ache, even if she's a little better at it than most.

Nothing more.

I walk away, and this time I don't stop. I'm sober enough to run up the long staircase without breaking my damned neck, and that's all I do before I slam the door to my room.

I need to sleep this bullshit off. In the morning, before she's up, I'll be gone, taking my last look at this insufferable mansion forever. This time, there's nothing that'll bring me back.

I can fuck chicks with a little crazy. I can fuck my own stepsister too, especially when she's hot and willing and wanting.

But I can't fuck my *virgin* stepsis, no matter how bad every dark, primal urge inside me wants to mount her like no other man ever will. Even I have limits.

I can't leave poison and serious heartbreak in her head the minute after I'm spent. And I can't let her greedy little nails dig me deeper, trying to pull me into some fucked up, impossible relationship, the kind I know she'll want after I've burned the feel of my dick into her brain for life.

OVER A LEDGE (DELIA)

I played with fire, and I got burned.

The whole idea was stupid. Idiotic. Devastating.

It takes me a long time to head upstairs, telling a servant to sweep up the broken glass on the way in. I take a long, hot shower, and then I settle down in front of my computer, desperate for a new idea.

There's a new message from the prof. He's needling me about my thesis again, telling me I'd better move and give him some meat. He says the SEAL idea I barely mentioned to him sounds good.

My stomach forms knots. I close the laptop and crash for the night, hating my fucking life.

I just need to get away. There's a fog wrapped around my body and soul. Travel always helps clear it.

Dad has airline perks for the entire family. I can take first class anywhere, and I'm strongly tempted to hop the red eye up to Washington or even Alaska for a week, explore the parks there and forget all about my infuriating stepbrother.

But I can't seriously think about it yet. Not while the asshole is still in this house, teasing me with the SEAL stuff and his own wicked good looks.

What the hell's wrong with him, anyway? I'd have never gone all the way, but if I did, shouldn't most guys *want* a virgin? I can't understand why he thinks I'll lose my mind.

He's so damned full of himself. Maybe they all are, but especially this badass warrior I'm cursed to share a wall with now.

I can't believe he thinks I'll be obsessed with him forever if I temporarily lose my mind and let him between my legs.

Hell, Marnie barely remembers who she slept with her first time in our freshmen year, and it hasn't slowed her down a bit from poaching more hotties.

I can't sleep. I'm tossing and turning all night, and by about four o'clock, I'm sitting on my bed, listening through the quiet house for any sound of him stirring.

He's gotten me restless, desperate to prove him wrong, to prove to myself how much I *don't* need him.

It's about thirty minutes later when I hear him getting up to dress.

I wait until his door clicks open before I race to mine. Jumping out into the hall right ahead of him, he stops in his tracks, staring at me like I'm a ghost.

"What?" he growls, holding the heavy bag with all the military gear he always carried around over his shoulder.

"I'm not done with you yet," I snap, pushing my hands against his chest. "I don't care if you never want me. You made your point loud and clear. I won't tease you anymore."

"Good. Then kindly get out of my way, sis." Something about the way he says it sends shivers up my spine.

"No, wait!" I grab his arm as he tries to walk past, and he doesn't stop until my feet are practically dragging on the floor. "Don't go. I still want to know you, Chris. As a friend, I mean, as a brother. No more sexy stuff. No more awkwardness. Please. It doesn't have to be like this."

He shakes me off, more vigorously this time. I don't follow him. He stops at the stairs and looks back at me, shaking his head.

"Look, girl, I don't know what your issues are, but get 'em sorted the fuck out. It's not my job to help with that. I'm your stepbrother in name only. You're sweet, and you've got a body boys will kill for, but you've got some serious abandonment shit going on. Fix it, get yourself a boyfriend, and maybe I'll be in touch."

My heart pumps brimstone. I want to race after him and throw myself at him, even though I know how fucking insane that is, tackling a Navy SEAL.

Instead, I force my feet to stay rooted to the floor, listening as he tromps down the stairs and slams the door.

Great.

I'm alone, I'm sexless, and the man who was supposed to give me my knockout thesis just walked out the door.



It's early afternoon when there's a slap at my door. I wake up, rub my eyes, wondering why these screwed up sleep schedules always cause so much grog.

"Yeah?" I pop my bedroom door open and Evie pushes her way inside, smiling like a Cheshire cat.

"Jesus, you're home early, aren't you? What happened to the weekend getaway?"

"Your father and I decided we had more important business here," she says, flashing me a wink. "He was here last night, wasn't he?"

I try to play dumb until she looks at me sharply, his name written in her eyes. *Chris*.

I shrug. "I don't know what you're –"

"Oh, shut it, little girl. Don't play stupid with me. I know my son's been sniffing around you since the moment he showed up here for dinner. Winston told me everything."

Damn it. Big mouth should be our gate guy's middle name, but I'm floored that he's telling Evie crap behind dad's back.

So what if he was here? Why's it any of her business?

I shoot her a dirty look. It takes a lot of courage because Evie is kinda scary when she gets ramped up, smiling like an over-painted mannequin.

It's my room. I don't have to take this shit.

"We can talk about this later. You've got the wrong idea about Chris and me. He came by because I asked him to help with my project, this thing I'm doing for school about Navy SEALs."

"Ha! You really expect me to believe that?" She throws her head back and drums her bright green nails on my dresser. "I saw exactly how he looked at you during dinner last week. Don't you *dare* play coy with me, little missy. I've had years of practice dealing with my son's bullshit, and you're not half the liar he is."

Evie stomps up, wild eyed, and gets in my face. My instinct is to slap her, but honestly, I'm too freaked out.

It's like having a lioness rush you, a full on psychopath letting down her guard.

Stumbling backwards, I crash against the wall, right as she reaches up and grabs my face. "Are you two fucking? Is that why he keeps coming home? It

can't be for me. He doesn't give a shit about his own poor mother."

"Christ, no!" That's it.

Fumbling, I manage to get my hand up, and slam it across Evie's cheek so hard I'm surprised her head isn't spinning.

She staggers back a couple paces, feeling the burn on her cheek with one hand.

"What the hell is *wrong* with you!?" I shout, so loud the servants downstairs can probably hear it. "He's just my stepbrother. Nothing happened between us, and nothing ever will. I just wanted to know him, feel him out about my thesis. It's not like there's some kind of crazy crush going on here."

Okay, that last part was a lie, but I don't care. When you're dealing with lunatics, anything is on the table to keep them in line, and right now Evie has that vacant, scary look in her eyes.

I wonder if she's back on drugs. If all the weird crap I've read about in the tabloids, the stuff that caused her career to fly off the rails forever, is true.

"We'll just see about that," she snaps. Then her hand flies up and she aims a shaky finger at me. "I'm watching you, Cordelia. I'm not going to let you kids screw this up. I've worked too hard to get where I'm at, and I'm so fucking close to having it all fixed."

The door bangs open gently against the wall. Dad looks in on us, an awkward smile on his face.

Great timing. He's missed the whole twisted blowout, and I'm too gobsmacked by what just happened to tell him his new wife is a psychopath on the spot.

"Delia! I hope we didn't ruin any parties you had planned with the early return."

I force a smile and shake my head. Evie shoots me one more look like a scolded cat, and then slips past us without saying a word. Dad rubs her shoulder on her way out, before she throws him off, then he comes in and sits on my bed.

"How's the big project going? You need any help?"

I roll my eyes. Dad used to help me with my homework when I was little, cutting in all the private tutors he hired. They probably had the easiest jobs in the world with my father's micromanagement.

He still hasn't given up the old habit. I have a feeling I'll be sixteen forever in his eyes, even though I'm about to graduate college and get an adult job – if I

can get my honors degree locked down. And right now, that's looking like a *big* if.

"I'm working through it," I lie, trying to forget the crap that's just happened. "Did you really cut things short for business? Or is there another reason?"

I sit down on the bed next to him, laying one hand on his shoulder. He looks so tense, and there's a dark, sad shadow under his eyes too. Honestly, I haven't seen him look like this since all the shakeups in the airlines after 9-11, when I was just a little girl.

Hell, maybe not since mom walked out.

I know it's her. I want to scream at Evie all over again, ask her why she's such a bitch, anything to stop her before she breaks my poor dad's heart all over again. I don't think he'll survive another breakup.

"It's for Evie's sake. Travel can be...very taxing on her," he says softly, before turning to face me and giving me a huge, business-like smile. "Hey, I've got a few company passes for Las Vegas next weekend. Interested? Maybe a little fun will help you get your creative juices going."

Vegas. I've only been there a few times, and never as a grown woman, willing and able to let loose and go crazy.

"You know, I think I'll take you up on that. Maybe I'll see if Marnie wants to come along so I have somebody to go with."

He stands up and slaps me on the back. "That's my girl! I'll have the arrangements ironed out for you in the next couple days. Until then, try to get some studying in before the trip. You're on the home stretch now!"

We flash grins and I give him a quick hug, holding on a little longer before he heads out the door. "Dad, if there's ever anything insane happening, you need to tell me. Don't bottle it all up."

He shakes his head furiously. "No, honey, everything's fine. It's a marriage, after all. I promised her I'd make this work, and I know in my heart she's the only one I want to spend my life with. That's *our* problem, not yours, and I'm going to figure it out. Thanks, though."

He squeezes my hand one more time and then he's gone.

I CAN HARDLY WRITE. My thesis drags. I want to pick up my laptop and hurl it out the window, anything to break this funk, this frustration, my asshole stepbrother has woven across everything SEAL-related.

The week goes by in a blur. There's drinks with Marnie on Tuesday, and a whole lot of jogging and notes that never lead anywhere in between.

I consider my alternatives. There's some huge new startups coming into town, and I almost think about using them for a thesis, assuming I can schmooze my way into the tech moguls in the making for an exclusive feature. But then I hear another girl under Professor Thosser, Georgette, is already on it, and she's got an uncle in venture capital.

Damn it! All I've got is this SEAL thing I can't stop researching. I don't know why I'm continuing to read books and articles, especially when Chris' room is empty every night, a cruel reminder that our love-hate thing ended just as quickly as it started.

His empty room taunts me, reminds me how dumb I was to try to play truth or dare, and how big a jackass he is for running away.

On the other hand, maybe he's right.

I'm already too attached. I can't stop thinking about him. My hand floats over his number at night, glowing on my phone, aching to send him one more text to ask him what's going on.

But I can't. I won't.

I don't chase guys, much less an arrogant creep so full of himself who also happens to be "family."

Vegas can't come soon enough. I pack my bags Thursday night, ready for my flight early Friday morning. I'm about to wash up and check everything over one more time when I hear two men laughing, coming up the stairs.

I stick my head out my bedroom door and do a double take. It's dad and Chris together, smiling at each other like they're old business buddies.

What the hell's he doing back in this house?

Stepping out into the hall, dad looks up, notices me, and smiles. "There's my girl! So glad you're still awake, Cordelia, I have something to tell you."

Chris' eyes light up when he sees me. He stops and stares, taking me in, as if we haven't seen each other for months. I don't get it. His dragon green eyes make me feel...well, more than I really want.

"What? What's going on?" I whisper, bracing myself for another blow to the stomach.

"Chris is taking a week off from the Navy for some R and R. You said your friend Marnie couldn't make it, so I've decided you should go together. Think of him like a personal bodyguard." My dad reaches up and slaps Chris on the

shoulder.

The floor falls out underneath me. I'm gutted. I shoot the asshole SEAL a sharp look and can't resist cocking my head.

"Really? I thought you had so much to do on your base? Isn't that what you told me when you stormed out last week?" I'm giving him crap, and he knows it. "I thought the last place you'd want to be is spending time with us."

He chuckles and walks up to me, puts his hands on my shoulders and pulls me in. "Come on. You think I'd pass up a free fucking trip to Vegas? You're the one who told me you'd keep your hands to yourself. Play nice."

He squeezes me tight as he whispers the last part into my ear, and then releases me. I have to lock my knees not to fall backwards against the wall.

What the hell kind of game is he playing?

"Vegas can be a dangerous place, especially for a young girl traveling by herself," dad says. Like I don't already know. "He's not there to be your shadow, Cordelia, but we'll all feel better with Chris along if anything happens."

"Yeah, sis, I can handle all of it. Dudes trying to spike your drink, biker gangs, cartels, mafia card dealers. Just say the word if you're in trouble." He gives me a wink. "Who knows, maybe I can help you with that project your old man's telling me about. Hang with me in Vegas and you'll find out how SEALs play."

Butterflies shoot through my stomach. Yeah, right.

Actually, he's being a total dick, teasing me like this, but in the back of my mind, he isn't completely wrong. He's holding out a carrot. I'm still going to come up with a backup idea, but maybe if I hang around watching him drink and gamble, he'll loosen up, and I'll get something I can use for this SEAL psychology paper.

My heart skips a couple of beats, and not just because he's suddenly restored hope in my thesis. He's starting to make me think that maybe – just maybe – he wants to bury the hatchet.

What I can't figure out is why he's so damned enthusiastic all of a sudden. Is it all a show for dad, or did he change his mind about something else too?

Dad gives me a sour look. I'm sure I look like I'm staring at an oncoming train, frozen in my tracks. "Look, I know this is rather abrupt. If you really don't want your stepbrother around, I'm sure we can figure out a compromise, an alternate itinerary for both of you."

Chris pivots, throwing a thick hand on my dad's shoulder. "Bruce, don't worry about it. I'll give her as much space as she needs. Separate rooms. One good dinner and a few drinks are all I really want with my little stepsister anyway. Believe me, I've got my own plans in sin city. I'm not gonna fuck up hers."

I shake off the shock and step toward them. "Guys, it's fine. Sorry. It just caught me by surprise."

I look at Chris as he flashes me his perfect teeth. It's amazing how he's probably evaded death a dozen times, and still has all his teeth set in a smile so good it burns between my legs.

What would that perfect mouth feel like anchored between my thighs? I squeeze my knees together as I wonder, trying to blunt the dull ache in my pussy. It's hopeless.

Jesus, how am I going to survive a week in Vegas alone with this man?

"I'm happy to hear you say that, honey. You've matured so much." Dad beams, before he looks at Chris again. "Make sure there's time for breakfast before you two leave tomorrow. She always gets cranky traveling on an empty stomach. As for me, I'll look after your mother."

Chris' face darkens. "It's her own damned business to figure out. Nobody else's, Bruce. Not even yours."

"She's my wife," dad says sternly. "I'll do whatever I need to. She always wanted a good family, a tight family."

My stepbrother snorts. "Oh, is that what she's been telling you? Fucking chameleon. She'll say whatever it takes to keep the coin flowing, old man."

He rubs his fingers together. I can see my dad's obviously displeased, but he's rarely confrontational. It took him months to come after mom about her affair, when the evidence was all over the house.

Just once, I'd like to see my father show some backbone. He isn't going to start with Chris, though, and I watch him turn and head for the stairs.

"Have a safe flight, kids. Enjoy yourselves while you're young, before things get very...complicated." He disappears out of sight, leaving us hanging on that word.

Enjoy yourselves. His words echo in my head, and I try not to let my brain go to sex.

Shit. I realize I'm alone with Chris in the hall, a prelude to a week of god knows what with him in Vegas.

I fold my arms, biting my tongue so I don't let it dart out at him. "I can't believe you're back. What changed your mind?"

"Vegas, baby. It's as simple as that." He shrugs like it's nothing. "I like you, Delia, even if you're not cut out to ride my dick. You're honest. You're coming up in the world."

My ears perk up. I can't decide if it's the start of another ridiculous joke, or if he's being sweet and sincere. He steps up to me, and I'm ready to jump away from his grasp before he forces me to confront the lava that won't stop rippling in my veins every time I look at him.

"Besides, babe, somebody needs to come along for the ride and make sure you're not a hot little cocktease for all the wrong guys." He reaches out, grabs my wrists, and jerks me into him. "I wasn't kidding when I said the city has a dark side. It's not all fun and games. If you've been following the news, you'd have heard all about the new sex trafficking syndicate that's taking chicks without a trace."

"I'm too old for a fucking babysitter, Chris. I'm not a little kid." I spit fire in his face. "Besides, I'm more likely to get held for ransom than shipped off for my looks."

He laughs dismissively and hardens his grip. Raw desire wakes in my veins, churns in my whole system, paralyzing me. He's such a bastard.

I'm not sure what that makes me for wanting him.

And I still do – even after the insults, the humiliation, the total silence.

Just once, I want to be the bad girl. I want to be like Marnie, a functioning, sexually alive woman who's ready for all the things a girl ought to be doing at this age, and the badass with his body tucked around mine reminds me that I'm *not*.

"Call me your conscience," he growls, running his stubble across my smooth cheek, melting my panties in the process. "It's your ride, Delia. Your adventure. No bullshit. I'm just along to keep you safe, make sure you don't get yourself into anything you'll regret."

Just like that, he lets me go. Every time I fall out of his arms, it's like the earth is crashing back, and I'm having the wind sucked out of me.

I watch him pick up the bag he's dropped on the floor, and sling it over his powerful shoulder. He doesn't even look at me as he walks by, goes into his room, and closes the door.

I'm left on the spot, wetter and more confused than ever before.

I think I just entered a new tier of hell.



IT'S A BUSY MORNING FLIGHT. So busy, in fact, that Chris and I are jammed together in our seats, surrounded by yawning, jabbering businesspeople of every race, gender, and creed.

I swear Chris splashed something extra in his coffee while he watched me eat my muffin. Probably whiskey.

Evie took off with dad somewhere this morning before the chauffeur took us to the airport, and I'm too on edge about the trip to care.

I want to have fun. I want to sort this crap out with my quite possibly drunken stepbrother. And I *really* want to forget all the BS that's been plaguing me like the senior thesis and this sadistic crush that won't stop eating my soul.

He's at my side, dozing in his seat. Or so I think, until we're at twenty-thousand feet.

"Goddamn it, Charlie...told you about Kirkuk...I told you, you poor dumb bastard. They're coming. They're armed. Where's our fucking backup?" His hand brushes mine.

My ears perk up. He's babbling in his sleep. He's remembering something awful.

I lean in, holding my breath, careful not to wake him. Then he jerks, making a sound that's way too loud with my ear close to his face.

"The fuck?" he growls, a strange smile on his face. "Do you always watch people sleep, creeper girl, or is the flight just that boring?"

Asshole. I want to punch him in the arm, but the wheels are turning in my head, wondering if he's just given me a piece of his battle trauma.

"You were having a nightmare," I tell him, picking up my water and taking a sip. "Does being on this plane remind you of something? You must be having flashbacks from all the stress. I can't imagine what it's like being a SEAL. How do you blow off steam?"

"Eh, usually just by fucking with gullible little girls like yourself." His smile breaks into a huge grin. "I said Kirkuk because I knew it'd get you wet. I know you like the news."

Bastard! This time, I do form a fist and smash it into his bicep as hard as I can. It's like hitting a wall of pure muscle, sending sheer force back through my knuckles.

Chris laughs it off like it's nothing. "Come on, babe. Just a little while longer. We'll be in Vegas soon, and you can work that shit out the fun way. You wanna hit the casinos tonight, or what?"

I roll my eyes. "You're guessing I want to do *anything* with you. That's an awful big assumption when you're being a total...dick."

I hesitate on the last word. Part of me wants to call him a tease, a manwhore, but I don't because I'm afraid of him proving me right. I can't shake the feeling he's still flirting with me, working me over, trying to make me humiliate myself again when I stroke him, or lean in for a kiss.

But why?

That's the part I can't figure out. All I know is when I look into his swirling green eyes, I see nothing but mischief. More damage, frustration, and humiliation in the making.

"You heard what daddy said, Delia. I'm along for the ride to help you out, and I help you find some fun too.. You ever been to this town?"

I shake my head. "Not as an adult. It's a first for me."

His hand slides up my arm, giving me goosebumps. He perches it on my shoulder and squeezes, then trails his way up my neck, tracing my jawline, my cheek with his fiery thumb.

"Cut the shit. There's more than a prissy, rich little college girl under that sweet face. I've known it since that night on the beach. You're a wannabe wild child." He leans in, rumbling in my ear, reminding me of the night we were free to be lovers. Everything between my legs pulses hot and wet. "No more games, babe. You want to let the bad girl out, yeah? Take my hand. I'm gonna give her a chance to frolic."

WHAT HAPPENS IN VEGAS... (CHRIS)

I've never changed my mind about a chick before. Strange thing is, I'm pretty damned close by the time our plane lands, and she's snoozing next to me, my dick throbbing each time I look up and down her curves.

I can't believe she's a goddamned virgin. Or my stepsis.

Why is fate such a miserable, cruel bitch?

Maybe it doesn't matter. By the time the plane touches down on the runway and she's rubbing her eyes, I've got my hand on hers, squeezing it, warming her, offering her...I'm not sure what.

If she was any other conquest, I'd have already had her all over my dick. Instead, Delia's a landmine, and one wrong misstep *will* blow my entire world apart, making her collateral damage too.

I don't know what the fuck is going to happen between us in sin city. I'm going to find out.

"We're here, baby. Stop sleeping through your fun."

She gives me a shy, way-too-fuckable smile. Christ, those lips. They're dangerous competitors with her ass, everything I can't stop imagining under me.

She makes me see sex in broad daylight. I've got her hair in my fist, open mouthed, owning her soft little tongue with mine. I reach for her ass and hold on so tight my knuckles go white, slamming her plush globes with the full might of my hips.

I want to shake her the fuck apart. I want to watch every curve dance and swing for me, rippling to the music I know she'll make when she's coming on my cock.

Half an hour later, we've got our rental, and we're heading into the city. It's been a couple years, but I remember Vegas like the back of my hand. It's a

natural spot for rowdy troops looking for fun. I hit the town twice a year ever since I enlisted, but it's been awhile since I got tapped for the SEALs.

I'm not blind to the weird shit Vegas keeps dredging up. When I spooked her on the plane by mumbling about Kirkuk, I knew I was playing with fire, using her nosy little games against her.

If she wants to pump me for info, she's not getting shit. Not really. But when you've relived imminent death in your own head a hundred times from that mission, making a mockery of it's all you've got left.

It's all I can do to keep my sanity together. The brain clings to humor like a desperate fucking lounge girl – or at least if it's a mind as twisted as mine.

Her eyes pop out when she sees the hotel. We've got a prime spot, courtesy of daddy's family fortune. She reaches across from the passenger seat and squeezes my arm, digging her nails in. It shouldn't feel so natural to have her there, but hell if it doesn't.

"Look at this place! Please tell me I've got a window view?"

I smile and nod. "Yup. Your old man wanted to give my mom the finest, for some reason I'll never understand, and we've got his reservation. Oh, and that shit about separate rooms? I lied. We'll be sharing the same suite."

Her lips twitch and she goes bright red. I pop the door and put my hand on her ass, pushing her inside, leading her through the place we'll be staying for the next week. One good look around, and she forgets all about chewing me out.

The room is built for sex. It's full of sleek edges, polished curves, and about a thousand reflective surfaces. It's meant for beautiful people to watch themselves fucking from every angle, and we fit the bill a hundred times better than our parents.

We'll put it to better use than Bruce and Evie too. The only question is whether I'm going to blister my ego and haul her into bed, or find some faceless Vegas chick to fuck when she's not looking.

Sneaking around with another woman won't be easy when we're sharing a suite, even though it's as big as a luxury apartment, with at least two or three distinct rooms and its own kitchen.

It's also rough when the only hot, wet cunt I want to sink my dick into is Delia's, own her virgin silk, find out how hot she looks when she's wearing a sheen of sweat, about to come for the third time as I slam my balls against her ass.

Fuck. I wait for her to wash up and try to kill my hard-on, staring out across the city. It's a gorgeous view. The place promises to light up like a maze of

palaces and wonders at night, everything I've seen in Baghdad, but better because there's no traces cutting through the air or violent explosions here.

Standing out on the balcony isn't doing shit for taming my dick. Several long, sexy looking deck chairs sit waiting for us, and I'm forced to see myself pulling her onto my lap, naked and wet and wanting in the sultry Vegas night.

When she comes out of the bathroom, she's fuming, a delayed reaction to the single room we'll have to share. I wonder if she's been coaching herself in the mirror, working up the courage to lay into me, and I laugh.

"This is so wrong. I just can't fucking believe dad didn't think to book an extra room. Ugh." She stamps her little foot as I hand her a key card for the room. "Roommates."

"For the last time, babe, I'm not gonna watch you shower or whatever. I'll turn my back like a good boy when you're changing."

Yeah, right. She shoots me a dirty look and purses her lip. Some of that fire in my balls goes straight to my fingers, and I want to wipe that bratty look off her face by slapping the shit out of her ass.

What the fuck is wrong with me? Maybe Kirkuk did more damage than I ever thought. There's got to be some wires crossed in my head if I'm hot to tan my own stepsister's ass, and then plow her 'til she can't walk.

"Cut your old man some slack. Dealing with Evie's shit isn't easy. Doesn't take much to lose track of a million things when she gets under your skin – trust me."

Her eyes widen in a sympathetic look. That shuts her up, but I pop the door and head inside, looking for a distraction before she tries to get all touchy-feely.

She decides to let it go, turning her attention to the room instead, taking another long, wonder struck walk around it like we're visiting the goddamned Taj Mahal.

"Oh my God. Look!" she yells at me from out on the balcony, her hands clenched tight to the banister, overlooking the Vegas strip shining in the high Nevada sunlight.

I come up behind her, using the opportunity to get a good look at her ass. "Yeah, I was admiring it earlier. It's really something, babe."

Yeah, something, I think, glancing at the deck furniture. *Something that makes me want to rip your dress off right here and fuck you in front of the whole city.*

I'm not sure what makes my dick throb harder – the chairs or her ass. I go

back and forth, and the last time I've got my eyes glued to her hips, she catches me. Her hands hit my chest and she pushes with all she's got, trying to get me away, flushed and smiling.

I laugh. Something makes me lunge forward and grab her, spin her around, dig my fingers into her soft little belly 'til she can't stop laughing with me. It takes a sharp slap across the face to make me let go. I love the sting the same way I like sharp whiskey.

Shit, she's so feisty, even though she can't move me a single inch, pushing with all her might. I want to pick her up and fling her around, discover some new acrobatics I can do with her mounted on all ten inches of me.

"Don't do this crap again, Chris," she whines, genuine sadness filling her eyes. "I can't mess around and get shot down again. We're here as brother and sister, right?"

Not exactly. But she doesn't need to know that now.

I smile, push my hand into hers, and give her a gentle tug. "Whatever, babe. Let's go have some fun."



I GRAB her hand and lead her out. It's a damned good thing I've had plenty of practice with tactical driving. I navigate the Vegas traffic, heading for the casino.

My dick doesn't give a single shit about my brain catching up. As far as that fire in my trousers is concerned, I'm on a mission to fuck my own stepsister, and I'm coming closer to making peace with it by the second.

I watch her walk a little ahead of me. She's unsteady on those short heels, and it makes her ass bob. My balls ache to unload inside her, screaming in my head, hounding me to let go of all my reason and spread her legs wide open behind her head.

I know right there I'm a goner. It's Vegas, and I'm here to sin.

I don't give a shit who Delia is anymore, or what kinda mark I'm going to leave on her. I have to protect her. I have to know her. And yeah, I absolutely, positively *have* to own every virgin inch of her.



WE POP in and out of casinos and attractions, walking along the strip. Even I've forgotten just how lively Vegas can be. The telltale signs of a few thugs and biker brutes lingering in the shadows reminds me the place can get lively in other ways at night.

I can't keep my hands off her, and it's not just the hellfire scorching my veins that's doing it. I want to keep her close. Protect her, especially while she's stepping up her drinks at every place we hit.

By sundown, Delia's so drunk I have to pull her steady as we maneuver along, heading into the next casino. There's a new VIP section in this place with high stakes blackjack. I'm here to have some fun too, and I make a beeline for the table, jerking her along.

"Oh my god, Chris, you have to let me play. I've always wanted to try cards."

I grunt. "Not 'til you've burned some of that venom out of your system, babe. You'll be throwing away money piss drunk. Just watch me and look sexy. Pretend you're my date for moral support and eye candy."

She hasn't gotten pissy about my not-so-subtle hints since we left the hotel room. I'm sure it's the booze, and that puts me on edge.

I don't want her laughing and clinging to me because she's fucking drunk. I want her sober, hungry for every inch of me, ready to rip off her clothes and open her legs.

She's warm and clammy when I hold her hand. Drunk or not, she looks fucking hot in the dark black cocktail dress she's chosen. I take a bench at the nearest high stakes table, thinking it's a damned good thing I've been pacing myself with drinks.

Delia's distraction enough, and staring at her too long makes my dick feel like it's about to explode.

I pull some cash out of my wallet and exchange them for chips. Two thousand dollars.

There's one other guy playing at the table with the dealer, an older Asian guy in a suit. Delia watches excitedly next to me.

The first few hands are rotten. I'm down a couple hundred before I start to get pissed and focused. The SEAL instinct takes over, and I eye every card, remembering the card counting my old buddy Joe taught us on lazy nights at the barracks.

The guy in the suit loses big. I'm up, down, and even, but the trend starts to flip, and I'm ready to go all in.

"Come onnnn, big brother. You can do better than this," Delia purrs. "Show them what you've got. Bet big. All or nothing. We'll drown ourselves in beer or hit the fanciest place in town tonight."

It's a ridiculous idea. I'm not made of money like her father. I've always been

responsible as hell growing up under my mom's slow motion self-destruct sequence.

I can't stand a challenge, though, especially when it's coming from my playful and dangerously fuckable stepsis. I look at the dealer and split my hands, pushing big bets on all of them.

The Asian man starts to sweat. He stares at me like I've lost my mind, and ups his own bet, while the dealer manages a friendly smile.

The first cards are aces, one in each hand. Fucking great. I take a quick survey and tap the table for another hit, never falling for the wishful thinking that Lady Luck might actually give a damn about me tonight.

Five more seconds. The dealer finishes up, ends with a queen and a seven. It's too good to be true.

The Asian guy goes bust, and the dealer comes up short.

I'm staring at a king and an ace in both hands. Perfect twenty-one.

Delia jumps out of her seat and lets out a yelp. The dealer frowns, grudgingly passes me my winnings, and I throw a chip back for a tip.

By some freak miracle, we've just hit it fucking big. The thousands that stack up in a neat pile when I cash in are almost like half a mission's hazard pay. I tuck it into my wallet and head to the ATM for a deposit. It's never good to carry too much excess in Vegas, especially when we're going out after dark on the streets.

"Holy shit, Chris, what're you going to do with all that money?"

"Give some back to my lucky charm," I tell her with a wink. Maybe it's the casino's humidity, but there's a light, sexy glow to her underneath all the lights, a gentle halo of sweat along her brow.

I can't resist. It's a fairly lonely spot next to the cash machines, so I corner her, push her against the wall, and brush my lips over hers.

It's insane, it's wrong, and I can't fucking stop. She gasps pure pleasure when I grab her bare thigh. I dig my fingers into her flesh, all I can do to fight the burning urge to slide my hand up, find out what kind of panties she's wearing, how damned soaked they are.

I'll only feel them for a heartbeat before they're gone for the night, leaving her wide open for all the rowdy, savage things I want to do between her thighs.

"Chris...what the hell..." she's half drunk, but not so gone that she doesn't understand that look in my eyes.

“I was wrong about you, babe. Dead fucking wrong. I don’t give a shit if you’ve never had a man between your legs or if our parents shacked up like idiots.” My voice turns into thunder as I drag my hand off, wrap both around her back, and cup her ass, pulling her to me. “I fucking need this. Pick a place for dinner, and load up. No more drinks. I want you sober, well fed, whatever you need to stay up all night and take my cock.”

She trembles so hard I can feel it. At first, I think she’s going to flip, overwhelmed with my about face. Then she jerks forward, shoving her lips into mine.

I push back. *Hard.*

We kiss, wet and hot and wild, for the next few minutes while people walk behind me. I can’t pretend with her anymore.

I need, need, *need* to fuck her, claim her, show her what she’s done to me. The taboo only makes it worse. I want her because she’s hot and pure, because my stupid mother made her off limits.

Or, I should say, she tried. And she’s about to fail miserably.

Truth is, no woman’s off limits for Chris Cleveland, and Delia’s going to be my best fuck ever by the end of the night.



“COME ON, baby, hurry up and pick a place.” I’m dragging her down the Vegas strip, reading every other menu, going toward the edgy part of town.

“Holy crap, wait, look at this!” Delia points to this goofy looking comedy club, one more thing we’ll have a whole week to see. She needs to make up her mind about dinner.

My stomach keeps growling and I barely care. I know she’s got to be hungry too, and we need to eat.

My cock won’t stop begging me to skip dinner and deal with the much more pressing hunger first, but I want her ready for me with *no* distractions.

The girl can’t keep up. She falls behind me, dizzy and wowed by Vegas at night, the city of lights yawning wide in all its glory.

It’s like the third time it’s happened. The first two times, I found her gawking at some Vegas sight, and had to march backwards to take her hand and lead her along. This time, I’ll drag her if I have to.

We’re getting further away from the lights and all the tourist areas. Stone faced men sulk in the shadows, looking out at us from the alleys, beggars and

bastards who'd love to lay their hands on a drunk, rich girl who's lost in Vegas.

It's not just about playing protector. I'm moving this night along.

I *need* that pussy tonight, and every second we waste gallivanting around Vegas is delaying me from sinking inside her hot, tight sweetness.

"What the fuck, babe? You need me to carry you around in those heels, or what?"

There's no reply, and I turn around. Shit.

Delia's gone.

She's disappeared inside what looks like this cheesy fortune telling and magic show. I curse and fly up the short steps, consoling myself because it's one more reason to find out how nice that ass of hers bounces underneath my palms.

I'm going to spank her ass raw from getting away from me like this.

When I get inside the place, sex is about the last thing on my mind.

There's not even a door concealing the entrance, but a cheap burgundy curtain. The place smells dank the instant I walk in, and I nearly trip on some old boards.

Fucking hell. It's abandoned, and it clearly hasn't been locked up very well by the city. My heart shoots adrenaline into my system, and I scan the darkness for her.

The place is like a small theater inside, with several rooms full of seats and separate stages. It's dark and seedy as shit. I'm wondering what the hell she was thinking by rushing in here alone, but something isn't right, and it's hard to give a shit about anything except finding her safe.

It's too damned quiet in this place. I need to take a risk.

I cup my hands over my mouth and yell. "Delia? Where the fuck are you? Come out right now!"

Shit. There's a narrow hallway with some restrooms, and I wonder if she's ducked in there, either lost or looking for a real bathroom. The girl drank like a fucking fish before I hit the blackjack table, and we only made a quick pit stop before leaving the casino.

My gut tells me that's too damned easy. I walk up to the women's room and press my ear to the door, listening for Delia, listening for anything.

A second later, there's a loud smacking sound, like somebody throwing flesh

against a wall. “Shut the fuck up and stop struggling, bitch, or we’ll cut you wide open. You can suck us off or bleed out on the floor here with the rats and the roaches. Your choice.”

My teeth pinch together so hard they’re about to break. My hand shoots down and I squat, ripping the knife out of its holster around my ankle. I carry it everywhere, naked without it, and our Vegas getaway is no exception.

I’m in full mission mode now, feeling the kind of angry, survival-focused adrenaline spiking through my veins that always hits during a big operation.

The last time it seized me was in Kirkuk, when those Iranian bastards started shooting. We were outgunned and surrounded then, and it was only their fear of creating a bigger international shitstorm that caused them to backoff.

I don’t know how many vicious motherfuckers I’ll find behind the door. I don’t know if they have guns, or if they’ll tear into Delia the second I walk in.

I just hear their brute laughter, listen to her muffled sob, and I know exactly what I need to do.

I have to fucking save her!

I let three more seconds go by – all I’ll spare to assess the situation.

“Gag her with her fucking panties,” the same gruff voice inside growls. “Take a pic once you’ve smeared your load across her eyes. The boys in LA’ll eat this shit right up. She’s got nice skin. Young. She’ll fetch a pretty penny for sure.”

My heart thuds as Delia whimpers again. Fuck, fuck.

“I dunno, Bumble, I kinda wanna go easy on this meat. She looks like she’s never seen a grown man’s dick before. It’s fucking hot, but we can’t break her ‘til we get her back to the van, yeah? We’ve got more shit in there to really loosen this bitch up.”

“You goddamned pussy,” the older man growls, his boots stomping hard on the tile. “Let me have at her. Step outta the way, I’ll show you how it’s done.”

The next sound I hear is a belt coming undone. No more.

My boot hits the dirty old door so fucking hard it almost comes off its hinges. Two big, dirty men are inside, mafia or sex traffickers, maybe. Right now, I don’t really care about anything except slamming my blade through both their skulls.

My eyes flick to Delia. The assholes are tall, lean, nasty looking men. The fucker must’ve had his hand on her throat a second ago, and he’s got her dark lace panties in the other, staring at me like I’m a fucking ghost.

They move fast, but they've got nothing on a SEAL. The next five seconds are a blur. I don't think about anything except dispatching them, kicking them away from my girl, washing away the tears I saw streaming down her cheeks with their filthy fucking blood.

That's right. *My girl*.

I don't even have time to process it. There's too many bones snapping underneath my boots.

They barely have a second to realize I've shattered their ribs with the roundhouse kicks that put them on the floor. I'd love to torture them longer, but snuffing their evil asses out is the best option.

Each asshole gets off half a yelp before I drive the blade right through their skulls, silencing them forever. Everything melts into a three second blur of pain and blood and terror, the same confusion I always see on missions, right as I blow some terrorists' brains out.

It's over just as abrupt too.

The bastards are dead and barely twitching, out cold in the grimy, dark bathroom. Delia makes a sound like she's choking, and I look up, seeing the insane shock in her eyes.

"Fuck, baby, I wish you didn't have to see that." I drop the knife. It hits the floor with a loud clatter, and I head toward her, wishing I could kill the thugs all over again for screwing up her clothes, darkening her brain forever with this sick, fucked up memory.

Stopping in my tracks before I reach her, I realize my hands are coated in blood. Shit.

I stumble to the sink between us, praying the plumbing isn't shot. There's a brutal hiss behind the wall, and rusty water comes spurting out a moment later. It's a weak trickle, but it'll do, all I need to clean up.

I have to punch the broken mirror hanging off the wall to see my own reflection. My fingers dab the few spare flecks of blood I've got along my neck, and I stare at the dead boys on the floor, long trails of crimson snaking out of their bodies.

Delia steps carefully over the streams of blood. She staggers over to me and throws her hands around my waist, pushing her face into my shoulder from behind, and just holding it there. She's breathing like she just ran a marathon.

"Jesus, Chris. God. You...you saved me."

When my hands are clean – or as clean-ish as I can get them with the rusty

water – I grab her little wrists and press them tight, running my other hand across her cheek. It's smooth and flaming hot.

My dick throbs. Against the odds. Against all reason.

I still want her, even when I'm standing in a shitty broken down bathroom with two sick bastards starting to rot behind us. Hell, maybe I want her *more* because I did what I had to, saved her from a twisted fate.

I can't stop seeing those fucks with their hands on her. It fills me with a deep, primal rage, something that explodes in my head behind a curtain of blinding red. The only man who *ever* ought to have his hands on her is *me*.

Only me. Nobody else. Not these evil sonsofbitches trying to force her into god knows what. Not some gawky little pissant in an Oxford shirt talking about his trust fund, or what a man he is for hitting the gym twice a week.

Delia's deserves better, and I'm it. I don't know why the virgin shit put me off for so long. She needs a *man* for her first time, her second time, maybe her first hundred times between the sheets. If I can give her that, then I absolutely fucking will.

I turn around, giving her a little jerk. "You're holding up better than I thought. You ever seen a man die before?"

She shakes her head, giving shallow, stricken looks at the dead men on the floor. "I don't know. Maybe I'm just...numb. I'm scared, Chris. What would've happened if you hadn't come through that door?"

"Nothing you ever need to worry about," I growl into her ear. "As long as we're in this town, you're not stepping out of my sight. You drank too much and I let you get away. That's my mistake, babe, the only one I'll make on this trip. I don't do repeats. Keep your fingers wrapped around mine and let's get the fuck out of here."

I lead her to the door, reaching down for my knife at the very end. One more quick rinse and it's clean enough. I also shove my hands into the pockets of the dead men, looking for ID. Predictably, there's nothing.

Good.

We need to get back to the hotel ASAP so I can clean up better.

I don't bother doing shit about the bodies. There are murders in this town every week, and this place is totally abandoned. By the time they stink enough for anybody to notice, my DNA will be untraceable, and if anybody identifies these sorry fucks, they'll never know a thing.

She doesn't say a word while we're outside, me holding her close, hailing the

nearest cab. I step out and bang on the hood to make sure it stops. The driver looks irked, but he lets us in without a complaint.

On the ride back to our room, a bitter smile crosses my face. I'm a damned fool for worrying about screwing up her head with sex. Now, I'll be lucky if she doesn't need therapy just to live down this night.

There's only one thing ahead that'll sweep the agony of danger and murder away. Tonight.

No bullshit's getting between us. I don't care what the hell's going through her psyche every time I shove my fingers through her soft dark hair, stroking her while she's curled up against me, trying to forget what just happened.

She can, and she will. I'll make her. I'll erase every filthy mark left by their fingers on her gorgeous body, and then I'll leave her something to remember forever.

Watching me kill those motherfuckers is gonna be a footnote by the end of the week. After I'm done showing her all the things I can do to her, she'll have too much sex on the brain to ever understand the word 'murder' again.



"EAT, babe. You need to. You'll feel like shit tomorrow." Okay, so it's not as easy as I thought.

When we get back to the hotel, I order the fanciest shit, and room service brings it up on two huge carts. She picks at her lobster bisque and takes tiny bites of bread, setting them down every few seconds like she's about to be sick.

"Was all that just normal to you?" Delia looks up, her eyes wide and bright, rippling. "I mean, is this what it's like to be a SEAL? Killing without hesitation?"

"I don't hesitate when I've got a mission that needs to be done. Every man on a SEAL Team makes a pact with God, the universe, whatever you want to call it when he signs up. It's their job to sort the rights and wrongs. It's ours to serve justice and follow orders."

I throw a glass of wine down my gullet and then dig into my steak. My eyes flick across her chest, admiring how her tits bounce every time she draws a deep breath.

Killing those bastards hasn't done shit to my appetites – neither of them. It's Delia I'm worried about, and I need her to get something in her belly.

The brain can survive any trauma as long as it's got the bare essentials. It's

plastic, one of many things we learn in BUD/s training, and the same truth goes double for civilians.

“This is the first time you’ve killed outside the force, isn’t it?” she says, shaking her head. “Jesus, I’m sorry. This is my fault. I shouldn’t have fallen behind you, Chris. If I hadn’t stopped to look inside that scummy old theater —“

“The next sounds I hear coming outta your mouth better be chewing, babe.” My fist hits the small black dining table in our room with a bang. “I don’t need your apologies. Nobody does. Those freaks I mopped up are the only ones who should be sorry for fucking with our special night, and they’re too dead now for remorse. You didn’t do a damned thing. I let you wander.”

“No, no.” Her gorgeous brown eyes pinch shut. She scratches at her bread and dunks it in the orange tinted bisque, swirling it like paint. “This is my fault. Everything, Chris. You know I wanted to pump you for information? I wanted to get into a SEAL’s world, find out what makes you tick. I wanted to use you like my pet project for my senior thesis, to see a SEAL’s psychology when he’s not on the clock.”

I swallow a big bite of my steak and grin. She really thinks I’m clueless, doesn’t she? It would be cute, if it wasn’t so pathetic.

“I know all about your senior project. You’re a bad tease, Delia. I played along to get into your panties. I don’t give a shit what you write, as long as it’s not classified. Nobody walking around without a trident patch on their skin knows shit. It’s all fantasy to them, all pop culture, and I’m okay with you serving up exactly what they want to hear.”

She sighs. “I wanted to do something more. Get to the truth of all this, I mean. It’s not just the project...I want to know you. I meant that the first time I ever told you, and I still do.”

I reach across the table and clasp her hand. “You will. Don’t let the shit that happened in the theater take anything away. That’s up to us. Now, you done playing confessional, or are you gonna drag your bread through that soup ‘til it’s cold?”

She shoots me a grudging smile and finally lifts it to her lips. I watch her chew, trying to keep my cock from splitting the seams in my trousers.

Fuck, those lips are kissable, biteable, and everything in between. I’ve tasted her before, but never as deeply as I want, and tonight’s day one of gorging myself on everything quintessentially Delia.

Good girl. I need to keep her eating, so I decide to distract her with something

more pleasant.

“Once you get writing, I hope you realize it’s not all about death and destruction being a SEAL.”

She quirks her eyebrows, wondering what I’m getting at. “Oh. Yeah, I’m sure you guys boast about your women all the time...”

I laugh. “Not a lot of memorable fucks against the other shit guys get into on their off hours. This one mission, a new recruit snuck contraband rum on the last day of our training exercise in the Aleutians. He was so trashed by the next morning he tried to put the moves on a walrus.”

She laughs. She needs it, and so do I. Her happiness is sexy, a medicine we both need to bleach the dead men from our skulls.

I go into detail, telling her about how the idiot got down with the beasts, and almost got a tusk through his face before we pulled him away.

Somewhere in between the giggling, she’s pushing steak and glazed asparagus into her mouth. Perfect.

I don’t let her have more than half a glass of wine with her food. Letting too much booze into her veins could set her off all over again, even though it’s starting to feel like a halfway normal evening. I work her with jokes and stories, trying to focus on her sweet face instead of the cleavage spilling out her top.

“Chris – stop! You’re going to make me choke.” She kicks her legs underneath the table, brushing her bare foot against my leg. Lust starts seething in my hot veins.

I tell her about a soccer game we played with these kids in Afghanistan, and how we let them beat us, rewarding them handsomely in all the chocolate rations Uncle Sam gave us that month.

It’s the least we could do after half of them lost their dads, executed by the Taliban fucks who rolled through their town before the military sent in my team for cleanup. I keep that last part to myself.

Even if it weren’t classified, she doesn’t need more melancholy shit tonight. She needs laughter, passion, my mouth all over her body.

I keep talking. She can’t stop smiling, pecking at her food. I don’t let her stop – not ‘til she’s happy and satisfied every damned way I know how to make a woman. Maybe even a few I haven’t tried yet.

I reach underneath the table, grab her foot, and hold it in my lap. My hand works her arch, admiring its beauty. It’s impossible not to think about the way

her toes are curling soon, wrapped around my ass while I drive my hips hard between her legs.

Fuck.

“I never realized SEALs kicked back so much,” she says, her laughter fading as she notices my hand massaging up her ankle. “I’m not going to lie – I thought you were just an arrogant jackass when we first met.”

“Still am,” I tell her with a shrug. “Yeah, we’re America’s finest, but we’ve gotta have our fun. I also know exactly what I want in life, and I don’t have time for anybody or anything who gets in my way.”

Her smile softens. I think she understands, even if I’m ruining the five minute head trip where she saw another side to me than badass killer.

I don’t care about giving her a glimpse. But I’m not doing illusions either. I’m still Chris Cleveland, and there’s nothing more I want right now than to finally fuck this girl, burn everything wicked and wild out of our systems for good.

I polish off the last of my wine and stand up, heading over to her. “You still want that brownie sundae? It’s huge, even for me, and I’ll need your help if I put the order in.”

“Oh, no.” Delia looks at her almost empty plate in surprise. “I’ve probably eaten too much. I really got kinda carried away while you were talking, and I shouldn’t have –“

“Nonsense.” I take her hands and jerk her up, spinning her smartly into my chest. “We can do the sundae later. Right now, I’m hungry for something else, and I know you are too.”

I don’t give her time to react. I push her against the wall and throw my lips on hers, pouring out my heat, my need, all the molten desire I’ve been bottling up for the first time since I laid eyes on this woman.

The kiss takes her by surprise. She’s still for about ten seconds, but finally she melts into my arms, opening her lips for my tongue to stroke deeper, wetter, sexier. I kiss her the same way I want to fuck her, hard and so damned deep, reaching all the way to her soul.

My hands slide down her back, and I use my hips to keep her against the wall, pinned down, her legs gradually opening for me. It’s a great position to fuck her right through her dress again, grind against her clit ‘til she goes off like a rocket, exploding underneath me.

But I’m sick of this cat and mouse shit. I don’t want anymore barriers between her pussy and me, and I want to feel her coming on my mouth, on

my fingers, convulsing on my raging cock.

I gaze into her eyes, letting her see the full force of my building hunger. “You ready to get that V-card punched for good, sis? Or are we just going to share a bed and pretend we don’t want to fuck each other’s brains out every waking second?”

Her cheeks flush and her lips tremble. Fuck if it doesn’t make me want to bite them harder, drag her wet little lip into my mine and never, ever let go.

“Yes!” It comes out her lips in a shallow gasp, and my dick jerks. It’s all I need to hear. I let her up from the wall and feel her pulse quickening in my hand.

I walk us over to the bed before I take her in my arms again, feeling for the zipper lining her spine. The tight black dress those bastards soiled is coming off. She’s lucky I don’t just tear it to shreds.

Delia’s mine now. Every beautiful inch of her. Whenever I decide to let her get dressed again, she’ll be a whole new woman.

The only thing that makes me pause before I give her dress its final pull is the electric warning surging in my nerves, the threat of something too damned good shining in her eyes.

Once I start fucking her, I might not ever stop.

What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas, sure, but if she’s half as hot as I think, I’m going to want more when she’s back to being my stepsis at home. *What then?*

I don’t have a fucking clue. I can’t think anymore. By the time her impatient little lips connect with mine again, I don’t care about anything except feeling her wrapped around every inch of me.

ONE WEEK IN PARADISE (DELIA)

“**C**an’t believe we’ve waited so fucking long to do this, Delia. It feels like half a lifetime. I never waited with girls before – I’d fuck them in twenty-four hours or move on. With you, it’s different. I gave you another chance, I gave myself one too. I need to know *why*.”

I can’t believe he killed them like it was nothing. I can’t believe he’s this insatiable, this ready to fuck me, only hours after he slaughtered two men in cold blood.

I’m even more surprised I’m going to let him.

Every time his skin meets mine, it’s like some crazy chemistry I don’t understand. I can’t think about the way I was almost brutally raped, or how dumb I’ve acted since our plane landed. There’s nothing – and I mean *nothing* – in my head except how incredible his hands feel on my body.

It’s like lightning entering my bloodstream. My heart pounds, sending fire to every crevice, every nerve. My temples start pounding, but it’s got nothing to do with the imminent hangover tomorrow.

It’s lust. Desire. *Need*.

The dress comes off in his hands and drops on the floor. I swear I’m about to self-combust as I step into him wearing nothing but my bra and panties, more naked than I’ve ever been for a man, but ready and willing.

He kisses me hard, pushing his lips against mine with so much force he bends my head. One rough hand slides through my hair, forms a fist, and jerks my head lower, all the better to conquer me.

His other hand rubs up my back, feeling for the clasp to my bra. He’s not screwing around and wasting anymore time, and I’m reeling from the shock.

“Goddamn, you taste so fucking good,” he growls, jerking my bra off and throwing it over his shoulder. He notices me pinching my thighs together,

trying to hide the crazed wetness seeping through my panties.

Chris tears at my waistband, brushing my pussy with his thick fingers. “These are coming off, girl. You’ve got nothing left to hide from me, understand? Now, lay down and spread your legs so I can suck what I should’ve tasted weeks ago.”

Whimper isn’t an accurate description for the fearful desire pouring out of my mouth. He pushes my butt down on the bed and opens my legs, tearing at my panties, jerking them down my legs in one fluid movement.

I’m completely bared to him before I know what’s even happened.

His calloused hands push my thighs apart and he works his lips, stamping new hot, aggressive kisses up my legs, stopping at my inner thighs. The same tongue he’s teased against mine a hundred times works virgin flesh.

I can’t stand it. I’m never going to live it down if I start coming before he’s even put his mouth on my clit. My fingers dig at the Egyptian cotton sheets, feeling their softness, trying to anchor myself for the storm rising up between my legs.

Chris stops for one long second to give me a look. His green eyes are violent, wanton, glowing mirrors for all the ways he’s about to fuck me. He’s going to make me forget what virgin even means.

The same rough stubble that’s made me come undone before rips through me when it brushes up my thighs. He’s stamping his lips up, feral and hungry in a way I never imagined, heading right for the slick heat throbbing in my center.

My legs kick reflexively. A terse moan rips out my mouth, and the sound makes him put both his hands on my thighs, spreading them, pinning them down, opening me for his insatiable mouth like he owns me.

And when his tongue brushes my pussy, he absolutely *does*.

I almost explode the very first time his strong tongue slaps my clit. His strokes tease me at first, hurling me toward the edge, tasting my virgin folds. With my legs locked down, his hands rise up my body, roaming. My nipples pulse between his fingers, puckering into nothing, becoming his toys.

My whole body becomes his, his, and only his with every flaming lick. His tongue speeds up, pushing deeper through my virgin folds, catching my cream. He’s desperate to fuck me with his tongue too, I just know it, but not until he’s had his dick there.

His chin rides up, and he focuses on my clit instead, lashing me over and over and over in ferocious waves of pleasure.

I can't take more than a minute. My fingernails tighten on the fistfuls of cotton sheets until it feels like they're about to tear, and I don't give a crap either.

My body arches up, riding him as I come, and I scream like I'm losing my mind. Hell, I guess I am.

After tonight, nothing will ever be the same. It's like the world's ripped open and I've fallen into an alternate universe, one where kissing heaven and hell is just routine. But all I really want to do is kiss him a thousand more times, savor all the unthinkable ways he's going to bring me over the cliff, into the blinding white heat that melts every inch of me.

He won't stop licking me the whole way through the fireworks exploding in my veins. My body won't stop convulsing, trailing his mouth, bucking up and down until I can feel his stubble, teeth, and tongue all over my pussy.

No joke, I almost black out. When I remember to breathe and the aftershocks finally die down, I look up, and see him standing over me. He's taking off the neat vest he's been wearing all night, and then he starts working on the button down shirt underneath.

My legs pinch shut awkwardly, feeling a new rush of wetness.

He shakes his head and gives me a stern look. "You keep those legs open for me, princess. We're not done. Not by fucking half."

When he's on the last button, something comes over me. It feels almost like a ritual, watching Mr. Prime and Proper unveil the bad boy underneath in all his mad glory. My hands shake, but I force them to reach out to grab both sides, and rip his shirt back against his shoulders.

"Oh my God." It spills out when I see his naked chest again, everything I've missed since our very first night together, when I saw him half-naked on the beach.

The dragon painted on his skin seems more menacing now. The trident around it bounces as he shrugs his shirt to the floor, bulging on his muscle, hard slabs ready to carry me to new ecstasy.

"Go ahead. Run your fingers down my abs. Feel my strength. It'll help you guess how hard I'm going to fuck you in about two minutes."

"Chris..." I let go and do it. Speaking his name while I'm touching him like this sends a shiver down my spine.

My pussy throbs all over again, aching to feel him deep inside me. The rest of my body simmers, ready for the dark, rough ride he's promised. I crane my neck down near his belt and kiss, right in the middle of those perfect hills and

ridges forming his abs, a perfect core cut by danger and destruction.

He runs his hand through my long dark hair and pulls. My face tilts up and he reaches down with his free hand, starting on his belt.

“Do the rest, babe. Pull out my cock and suck it. I’ve been thinking about your lips wrapped around me since our first night on the beach.”

He works off the belt and his pants fall open. I manage to stop my hands from shaking as I reach around him, pushing his pants and boxers down.

His cock snaps out, angry and thick. I don’t know whether to drool or be afraid. He’s way thicker than anything I imagined, so big it looks like he can split me apart. I grip just underneath his swollen head, and his fist goes over mine, adding to the pressure.

“Like this. Harder. Just like we’re going to fuck, baby.” He’s teaching me how to please him, and I’m so eager to learn it hurts.

My free hand slides down between my legs, unable to resist toying with my clit as I pump him up and down. His head rolls back on his perfect shoulders and he groans. The thunder in his throat makes me imagine it’s coming from the dragon on his chest, the beast I’m awakening inside him.

I stop flicking my clit just long enough to lower my mouth down carefully. He gives my hair another tug and I watch the green gems in his face light up.

He’s hot, hard, and salty. I’m bathed in his intoxicating scent, everything I want to smell all over me soon, that curious mix of earth and strength and cinnamon.

“Suck it deep. I want your little tongue all over every inch of me. Fuck, yeah, just like that.” His words come hoarse, tense. “Don’t stop playing with your clit. Keep that pussy hot for me, babe. I’ll be balls deep soon.”

His fingers add more tension to my hair, pulling on my locks, guiding me up and down the motion. I’m trying to focus on his pleasure, rather than my own, but it’s hard as hell when I’m circling like mad between my legs, pumping my lips across his shaft harder.

My tongue starts to understand the shape of his dick, all the spots that make him jerk and hitch his breath. I lick deeper into the crown around his head, tasting his pre-come trickling into my mouth, ears humming as he flexes and curses.

“Ah, shit. You’re a goddamned natural. You’re lucky I don’t just slam my balls against your chin and unload down your throat.”

Holy shit. He’s so crude. It should turn me off, but instead I’m getting wetter.

The fire in his eyes says he actually might do what he threatened. It's rough, it's more than I can handle, but damn if it doesn't make me cream myself on the spot.

I'm steadily building toward another climax, flushing the entire time, pumping my lips up and down his magnificent shaft as quickly and firmly as I can.

My eyes are narrowed and I'm about to explode. There's something shamefully decadent about being crouched on the bed with my mouth full of my badass stepbrother's cock, hand between my legs like a porn star.

It's crazy. Up until a few minutes ago, it was unthinkable. So is the way he fists my hair and jerks hard, tearing me off his cock. I look up, wondering if I've done something wrong.

No, his eyes tell the truth. *This is right. We're right, Delia.*

"Get down and spread your legs," he growls, giving me a gentle push. I feel the big bed sink beneath his weight, and he's holding me in his arms, pulling me to him as we shift toward the center of the bed.

Sweet Jesus. It's really going to happen. I'm about to fuck my arrogant, handsome, hero of a stepbrother, and nothing in this world's going to stop me.

My legs feel like they're on fire as I open them. He's snuck a condom out of his pocket before losing his pants, and I watch him tear the foil with his teeth, rolling the sheath on his enormous length.

He moves forward, guiding his bare cock against my slit. He pushes the tip of his length across my pussy, melding himself to my folds, one small angle away from pushing in and claiming what's his.

"Fuck, you're beautiful." He stops and his mouth comes down on mine, frantic and hotter than ever, a savage hunger building in his tongue as he shoves it against mine. "If you fuck half as good as you suck, Delia, we'll spend this whole damned trip in bed. I've been crazy about having this pussy for almost a month. Once I take it, I'm never gonna stop. *Never.*"

Oh, God. The way he says it flips my heartbeat onto turbo. I force myself to look at him and suck at my bottom lip, reaching out to touch him, really feel him in all his hardened Navy SEAL wonder.

In my wildest fantasies, I never imagined a man like this fucking me. *Never.*

I never imagined I'd actually have him after I found out who he was, even though I wanted to.

I *never, ever* thought he'd save my life, never thought he'd give me something

no one else ever has, never expected my heart to skip every time I look at him.

We haven't even fucked, and it's already about more than that. I'm afraid to admit it, but I know.

Luckily, I don't have to think or talk about any of that right now. His hands are all over me, cupping my breasts, pushing my nipples between his palms. He brings his hot lips down my neck, then stops at my right globe, pulling the bud there between his teeth.

Shit. It's too damned good. Everything about him.

By any sane measurement, I'm the one who's too good for him, daughter of a multimillionaire with a 3.9 GPA, on my way to a happy, successful life. And here I am coming apart for this ruthless badass, begging him to fuck me with every gasp and scratch and soft little roll of my hips.

Why does it feel like he's too good for me? Like I'm barely even worthy to be surrounded by this rock hard, heavily inked flesh?

He releases my nipple with a moan, and kisses back to my mouth, pulling me in for another long round of lips and teeth. I'm losing my mind, and I'm finally okay with it.

Moving my lips off his, I push my mouth to his ear, brushing my nails on the back of his neck. "Fuck me, Chris. I'm ready for you. I'm yours for tonight."

And I want to be for a whole lot longer than this trip in Vegas. I keep that part to myself, and it isn't hard with his jade green eyes beaming pure desire into mine.

There's heaven and hell and worlds I don't even understand in his gaze. I think I'm addicted.

He shifts, pushing my legs around him with his hands, then aims his tip straight into my wetness. He pushes into me slow and steady. There's a force between my legs, the feel of flesh giving way for the first time.

I clench my teeth and moan, feeling the pleasure already behind the small sharp pain. I never imagined being so full.

"You're so fucking tight," he snarls, taking a new fistful of hair, holding me down. "So hot, so wet, so beautiful, and so completely mine."

Mine.

I whimper incoherently when he says it. It's all I can manage as he pulls his hips back, one jerk, before rolling into me harder again.

My legs hook tight to his. Several strokes in, I start to grind back, my pleasure building through the discomfort. My pussy stretches tight to his cock, struggling to adjust to him, but I know I will.

He glides through me, bringing his mouth to mine as we fuck. Our tongues thrash together, matching the rhythm of our bodies. Everything beneath my skin turns molten, like a great lava wave rising up, setting every nerve on fire.

“This pussy, fucking hell,” he growls, quickening his pace. I’m not sure how he can even talk over the explosions that are imminent. “I love it, Delia. Every ripple, every inch, every time you clench. I love how goddamned perfect you feel wrapped around my dick.”

The L-word triggers something deep within my brain. For a second, I hear *I love you*, but I know that’s not what he’s saying.

This is just fucking, after all. Amazing, mind blowing, bed slapping sex. And I’m okay with that tonight.

I’m too busy clutching his skin and feeling him rampage into me to care about anything else. Just before I start to come on his cock, he shifts up, grabs my ass and starts pulling me up to meet him for deeper, harder strokes.

“Chris! *Chris!* Oh, fuck –“

My orgasm chokes off whatever nonsense I’m about to say. I come hard, pulling at his length, and he pounds into me harder still, slamming my ass deep into the mattress, jerking me onto every inch of him.

My pussy clenches, explodes, sends shockwaves through my entire body. At some point, I’m screaming, especially when the hard impact of his flesh on mine jerks to a stop.

There’s a noise like an avalanche crumbling in his throat, explosive and wild.

I feel him swell inside me as my pussy sucks at his cock. Then, a second later, he explodes, growling like a feral animal. I swear there’s heat beneath the rubber shaft ballooning inside me, filling with his come.

He comes hard, his cock jerking deep inside me, emptying his heat into mine. His hips slam mine into the bed, forcing out a few last shallow strokes, and his pubic bone grinds my clit until there’s nothing but hot white lightning filling my eyes.

I wonder what he’ll feel like when we’re fucking skin-to-skin.

Wait, when? I barely have the energy to catch myself as my brain sizzles in a thousand directions, oozing out my ears, sated but hungry to do it all over again.

He pulls out and yanks the condom off his dick, leaning toward the small waist basket next to our bed to get rid of it. God, he's gorgeous, even when he's doing something so mundane like this.

"Just as good as you've been dreaming about, yeah?" He gives me a wink like he already knows the answer.

He's so damned cocky. But right now, I can't help it, because I smile back, and haul my exhausted body up for another long, salty kiss.

I can't keep myself away from his lips. For the next week here, that's okay. *Thank God* we have an entire seven days.

What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas, and that goes double for us, as long as we're step-siblings. I want to see more of the town, and forget about my traumatic first encounter with sin city in that dirty abandoned theater.

But if he keeps me chained to this bed. I won't complain.

We have to do a lifetime worth of fucking, passion, and love in this bed because it's all we'll ever get.

It has to end here, even if it'll be a hundred times more painful when it does. We can't keep this going when we get back to California. I have to get him out of my system, and I'll run my body ragged doing it, and deal with the bitter memories later.



I RUB my eyes when I wake up the next morning. There's something hot and huge wrapped around me, more comfortable than anything I've experienced.

I roll toward him and reach for his arm, giving it a squeeze to make sure this isn't just a dream. Chris grunts in his sleep.

It's real. All of it. I'm not a virgin anymore.

The full realization that I actually fucked my stepbrother doesn't hurt as much as it should. Maybe it's because he saved me last night, or maybe it's just because this feels so fucking right.

And that's what worries me. Deep in the pit of my stomach, I know our paradise is temporary.

It can't last. It won't. Las Vegas is our break from reality, and in six more days, we'll be heading back into the numbing gray sands of our ordinary lives again.

As if on cue, Chris wakes up, opening his eyes. The jade green color turns teal when his irises catch the sunlight streaming in through the blinds.

There's something hardening against my thigh. I brush my hand beneath the sheets, feeling his cock, and he grinds it against me.

"My, my. Can't you say good morning?" I smile, feeling a delightful new wetness between my legs.

"No, I save that shit for virgins, and you're not one of them anymore." With a wicked grin, he kisses me, bringing one hand between my legs.

All it takes is a few strokes with his fingers to open me up, make me aching wet, ready to surrender every inch of me.

"We need to wake up," I moan, suddenly excited to see the city again.

Remembering how the dead men threatened me, ran their vile hands all over my body, doesn't sap my excitement. I'm going to be a lot smarter today, and hang close to Chris. It's surreal how far away it seems, like it was all a bad dream.

I wonder if that's shock setting into my brain, or if his cock has some kind of magical memory altering powers.

Chris ignores me. He rubs his cock against my clit, dangerously close to fucking me right here. I need to stop him before he goes in bare. I've been on the pill since I turned nineteen, but I don't know if he's clean after all the women he's had, a world of experience that dwarfs my one brief night with him.

Sex is happening before we do anything, and I'm not going to protest. It makes me smile that he hasn't gotten bored yet. I guess he really meant everything he said last night, and it's good to know it still stands, here in the full white light of a summer day in Vegas.

"Fuck the coffee," he growls, breaking our latest kiss. "It can wait. You wanna get up, babe? Then come with me."

He pulls me up from the bed and leads me by the hand, stopping only to grab his pants. Probably for more condoms.

A minute later, we're naked behind the luxurious glass, feeling cool water splashing our backs. He eyes the rivulets running down my body like a thirsty animal, and he leans into my neck, trailing the biggest droplets down to my breasts with his tongue.

Being so exposed, so wanted, makes me feel more self-conscious than last night. I still can't believe this sex crazed badass actually wants me.

But I'm starting to believe it.

He pulls at my nipples and sucks each one soft, growling into my chest,

sending his vibrations deep underneath my skin. The sensation joins my blood and I moan. Our bodies sing, attuned to taste and touch, scent and sight.

Every sense I've ever had, plus several I didn't know about, come alive like never before.

"Put your hands against the wall, babe. Bend your hips. I'll do the rest."

I let out a little whine, but I'm not protesting. I'm struggling to imagine his mouth all over my slit again, or his dick mounting me from behind, slapping my ass with those forceful thrusts.

He sinks down on his knees, and he spreads my ass cheeks. His mouth finds my pussy from a whole new angle, and I jerk my hips from the sensation. Good thing I'm boxed in by the slippery wall after all.

I lean into it as he starts to tongue my clit. His licks alternate this time, moving from my clit to push deep inside my opening. He licks and sucks and even uses his teeth until I'm almost on the brink.

"Let yourself go, baby," he orders, wrapping his arms around my legs for support. "I've got you, and I'll taste every fucking drop that gushes out of your hot little cunt when you come on my tongue."

His tongue focuses on my clit again, but he adds two stiff fingers to my pussy too.

Oh, shit. Oh, damn.

Oh, oh, oh!

My whole body explodes in another tense, five minute O. The sensation of the water striking my back makes me think of a storm, and nothing else.

Hurricane Chris owns me, works me over the way only a man with too much carnal knowledge can. He's obsessed with my body, and I'm becoming addicted to him.

Dangerously addicted.

I come, bucking against his hand, his lips. A scream tries to make its way out of my mouth, but the truth is I'm too breathless, too lost in the raging pleasure ripping through me.

I don't even notice he draws away until I start to come out of it. I feel his shadow standing over me, pulling at my hips with his hands, hearing a condom packet ripping open.

He reaches behind me for my chin, twists my head, and makes me look at him before he fills me again. "Thought you deserved to know you're built to fuck,

princess. I'm going to use the fuck outta you 'til I've spilled every drop of come in my balls. This week, and this week *only*, you're mine."

That word. It makes everything inside me coil, build, and want. Turns me so wet and horny I want to turn around and beg him to fuck me, to own me, to make me come so many times I can't stand up.

The cruel reminder comes hidden in his need. He pulls my face to his and we lock lips. He won't stop kissing me as he pushes inside me, fucking me faster than last night.

We fuck freely. I don't need to loosen up anymore. I have a tiny inkling what to expect from his cock.

I can handle him and enjoy it without any crazy surprises.

So I think, anyway, until he starts hitting stroking that spot deep inside me that causes my knees to buckle.

"Oh. My. God."

Chris makes a rough sound, somewhere between a gasp and a chuckle. He quickens his thrusts, swinging the full force of his body into me, making my ass ripple. His balls swing up and slam into my pussy each time he drives deep, and I'm catapulted out of my mind.

"Come for me again, beautiful. Come as hard as you fucking can."

There's no holding back. Pleasure cascades through my veins like the steady patter of the shower all over us. Somehow, he manages to hold me up, keeps me from crashing onto the tile floor.

I'm melding with the water by the time I start coming down from my latest convulsions. And Chris won't have it, he won't let anything carry me away from him.

His hips speed up, and he throws himself into me like a jackhammer. One hand finds its way between my legs. His fingers assault my clit, hard and wild, while I'm already on overload.

I never thought I'd learn to come again only seconds apart. But Chris is full of surprises, and he's owning every inch of me right now.

My eyes pop open and I gasp, holding my breath. That wave I thought I'd lost rises up all over again, and his cock hits my depths, forcing me to leap off the edge all over again.

"Don't stop coming now, babe," he whispers, deep and gravely. "I'll scorch you from the inside-out by the time we're done. Come with me!"

And I do. I keep coming as he swells and explodes inside me, releasing a pent up growl from the pleasure. His hips pinch me against the wall as he fills me, pulsing deep inside me, unloading the fruits of his pleasure in that damned condom.

We come together, hard and long, both of us straining for breath by the end of it. Chris pulls out and cleans up. Then his hands are all over me again, rubbing soap into my skin, exploring me in a calmer, tender way that still gives me butterflies.

Our kisses say more than words can. It's too perfect, except for one little thing.

Fucking him like this isn't enough. I need him deep inside me, bare and unsheathed, giving me those deep strokes with nothing separating his cock from my silk.

I know I'm losing my mind when I want to feel his come inside me.

Seriously, what the hell is wrong with me? Maybe I really did lose my mind yesterday, and sex is my way of dealing with the terror.

I have to listen to reason. We can keep having fun, but we can't go too far... right? And if we do, I might not be able to stop wanting him.

Later, when we towel ourselves off and throw on our robes, heading out on the awesome balcony for our morning coffee, I realize I'm already in too deep.

He had me from the very first kiss. *Mine* is just a highlight, an afterthought, a reminder that there's no earthly way we'll ever share the same room with a quiet heart and dry panties.

I'm scared. I don't know how I'll ever find my way back to normal.

UNDER THE SKIN (CHRIS)

By day five, I don't know what the fuck's happening to me.

I'm spending every waking minute deep inside Delia. My dick's been everywhere by now, but it still feels like we've barely begun to explore. I've been in her hot little lips, wedged between her tits, shoved balls deep in her slick, perfect cunt, fucking her every way I know how, plus some ways I invent.

It's ludicrous.

I've never fucked the same woman for a full week straight in my entire life. Chris Cleveland doesn't do that shit. I get my dick wet, makes my girls happy, and then forget, disappearing every time duty calls.

Except this time it's not so simple. It's like she's crawled inside my skull and hot-wired my brain. I've fucked her a couple dozen times, and I still want more. I can't get enough.

She can barely get me to leave the hotel to take her out on the town. It's not just because my dick never wants to rest. When we're out, my hands are always on her, holding her on my lap by the waist, or guiding her through the casinos and down the strip with my hand wrapped tight around hers.

She's never getting out of my sight in this city again. We have our fun, sure.

But having her like this only makes me rage even more about the men who almost took her away from me, pulled her into the darkness forever. I want to head back to that abandoned theater, douse their rotten bodies in gasoline, and torch them 'til they're ashes.

Of course, I'm not an idiot, and I won't attract attention to myself. I keep scanning the local news, but nobody's found their carcasses yet. Or if they did, it was such a non-incident there'll be nothing more than a footnote about two unidentified bodies in the Vegas police blotter.

Our last full evening out, I take her to this fancy French place. Aside from the hotel, I use all my own money. I won't take shit from her father, no matter how nice he is.

I'll never be blue blooded rich, and I'll never be able to comprehend her fancy world. But when I'm dressed up in a nice vest and she's in her hot red dress, staring up at me over the spotless table over wine, I don't fucking care.

My body reacts to hers at some caveman level I can't wrap my head around. Fuck it, I don't need to. All I know is I want her coiled around my dick twenty-four seven, legs spread, digging her nails deep into my flesh 'til I pump every drop of come I've got into her womb.

I want to lose the rubber and sew her deep. I want to fuck her 'til she comes on command, sucking at my mouth like it's precious oxygen after she's been underwater. I want to feel her pussy clenching on my cock all fucking night, digging my fingers into her ass as she rides me, growling 'til my thunder matches her pulse, bending her to me forever.

"It's been quite a week, hasn't it?" she asks shyly, twirling the burgundy in her glass.

"Yeah, and we're damned lucky we got it too. The commander called me up last night, told me needs me back at base the day after we land. Duty calls, babe."

"You really take it seriously, don't you? I didn't realize until I had a chance to see your tattoos. I mean, *really* look at them."

Her eyes dance mischievously for me. Last night, I finally gave myself a breather after we exploded at least three times. She laid on my chest, running her fingers over each and every patch of ink on my skin.

I told her about the trident on my flesh, and even the three black triangles on my left bicep. They're the newest on my skin, one for each man on our team who died in Kirkuk. I wouldn't say how or where, but I cracked and told her it was for them, something I never thought I'd tell anybody who's not a SEAL.

Certainly not my hot, sweet, and infuriating stepsister. Yeah, the same one I need to stop fucking in about twenty-four hours, when we leave the paradise we've created here for the bland hell back in California.

"You know what I said – my ink, my life. I don't hide behind walls, Delia. You know exactly who I am."

"Do I?" She quirks an eyebrow and shakes her head. "I saw what it means to be a SEAL the first night we were here. But there's a lot I don't know, Chris."

I shrug, tucking into my escargot. “Just ask. Stop being so shy. You ought to know there’s no need for that after the things we’ve done since I took your cherry.”

I say the last part under my breath, leaning in, grabbing her hand. Her fingers squeeze mine back and she blushes.

The girl has no reason in the world to be shy. I wish she’d get over it for her own good, but damn if it doesn’t make my cock throb in the meantime. Pink glows on her cheeks, and she takes an extra long sip of her wine, like there’s something she’s trying to find the courage to say.

“Okay, so why is Evie such a bitch?” The way she blurts it out nearly causes me to drop my fork.

“I’m not sure what you’re getting at. Give me something specific.”

Bullshit, I know exactly what she’s saying. Too bad my mom is the last thing I want us talking about on our final night in this town. It’s supposed to be about her and I, even though I know that’s only going to make a clean break harder once we get home.

“I’m worried about my dad. It’s obvious to us this whole thing is a big mistake...but he’s blind. He doesn’t see it. She’s already screwing him over, I just know it. What I haven’t figured out is why.” I stare at her, trying to comprehend why she gives a shit. Our parents’ problems aren’t mine. “She knows about us, Chris. She came after me before we did anything, warned me to stay away from you and stop screwing you up.”

Fuck, I temporarily lose my appetite. I pick up my glass and suck down the last of my wine before I answer, feeling it slip straight into the fire in my guts.

“I don’t give a damn what she says, and neither should you. She’s always been a selfish, greedy, train wreck. Your old man’s got no backbone. Tell him to break up, throw her out, and pray to God he’s got himself a pre-nup before it’s too late. I’m stuck dealing with her bullshit because we’re blood.”

She shakes her head sadly, staring into her onion soup. “No, he’s really in love. I haven’t seen him like this since mom walked out. I can’t get in the middle. He has to leave her on his own. It’s not my place to twist him into doing something he doesn’t want to.”

Right now, it’s awfully hard to give a shit what Bruce wants. If he’d man up and leave the tornado blowing through his house, then maybe I wouldn’t have to try like hell to forget Delia the instant we get off our flight in NorCal.

It’s going to be hell. I’m disappearing to base and never coming back. Every instinct I’ve got keeps fighting me, though.

I can't think about anything except all the ways I want to keep kissing, touching, and fucking her, pleasures that go way beyond anything we can condense into one final night.

"I'm just trying to figure out what I'm dealing with, Chris. What *you*'ve been dealing with all these years. What's her deal? What made her so awful?"

I rip my last piece of escargot out of its shell the same way I pulled the trigger on Abu Alhazred before the Iranians showed up. It's gone in an instant.

"Mom can't handle failure, Delia. She can't take getting old, losing her career, having nothing to look forward to except a few more wrinkles and half a dozen more exes, assuming she doesn't OD first. I spent two summers trying to get her off the junk before I enlisted and left her shit behind. You can't help the people who don't give a fuck about saving themselves, and Evie stopped trying around the time I was five."

"Jesus," she says softly. "I read about her, you know. She wasn't always like this, right?"

I roll my shoulders again, wishing this damned conversation would disappear, just like the delicacy sliding down my throat.

"How the hell am I supposed to know? The past was a long time ago. She went to pieces after my old man walked out. She divorced him because he was no good for her – too poor, too savage, too violent. Mom wanted to be another Hollywood princess. Why she thought she could ever make it work with some biker badass she met at a sex club, I'll never know."

Delia almost chokes on her water. "What? You're kidding. That's really how your folks got together? Not that there's anything wrong with that, I mean."

I laugh. She's so innocent, and she really doesn't have a clue. I look her up and down, wondering if I'm drawn to her because she's giving me a chance to follow in dad's footsteps.

Part of me wants to. I want to wreck this girl, every fucking inch of her, brand her as mine forever. I know it's insane, I know it's wrong, and fuck if I care.

"Babe, you're a smart chick, but there's a lot you've got to learn about the world. People don't always marry and pop out kids because it's sane and loving. Sometimes they just make a big goddamned mistake because the sex is that good, and mom's drug was kink before she got into the other shit."

No, I can't do this shit. She's too good, too innocent.

I tell myself I've got no interest in corrupting a sweet, rich, smart girl, one who's from a world I don't want to understand – especially when she's my own damned stepsis. Then I think about that little whimper she makes when

my cock's driving into her, slamming her into the mattress, and I want to ruin her *forever*.

Honestly, I'm fucking out the things I should've dealt with years ago. And it's even worse that I've got to stop, but there's no choice. I have to end this back in California, before I really hurt her, and leave her just as screwed up as my mom.

"I'm not as naïve as you think," she says with a pout. "Is that what really has her all torn up? A bad breakup and pining after some biker boy? All the tabloids say it was her career."

"My old man's dead," I growl. "Road accident, or so I heard from a guy in his club when I got older. He belonged to the Grizzlies MC. They were dirty, outlaw sonsofbitches in the old days. Whatever really happened to my pops, I'll never know. I don't care. It's not going to fix all the ways mom's fucked up her life."

"I have to keep dad from getting hurt."

"His problem. He's – what? – pushing fifty? That's old enough to know better. You're right about one thing, Delia. You have to let a man make his own mistakes. He'll find out she's been stringing him along as a sugar daddy soon enough."

A waiter comes by and interrupts the conversation. We get our entrees, some kind of rustic French chicken I can't even pronounce. Damn if it doesn't take the edge off as soon as I stuff the juicy meat into my mouth, tasting the way it blends with the wine.

She's picking at her food again. I want to fly home and drag Evie out of that mansion, kicking and screaming. She's not ruining this. None of this shit between our parents is wrecking our last night together.

"You'd better dig in, baby, and put that negative crap aside." I lean forward and reach across the table, cupping her chin, stroking her cheek with my thumb, harder than any romantic gesture should be. "We're not letting what's going on with them get to us tonight. This is *our* night, Delia. The last one we're ever gonna have together. Don't make me fuck the bad thoughts out of your head on an empty stomach."

She reaches for my hand and I let her pull it off her face. For a second, she holds my big hand in both of hers, and gives it a little kiss.

"I wish it weren't over. Do you know how hard it's going to be to let go? Maybe things could be different if our parents weren't married and so...so fucked up."

I've never heard her drop an F-bomb in public before. I know she's upset. Still, I can't lead her on, even when every part of me knows just how right she is.

"But they are, babe. We can't pretend there's no understanding about what's going on here, with them and us. You want to give your old man a chance to sort out his shit? Then you can't let him find out his perfect daughter's sharing a bed with her own damned stepbrother."

She nods like her head's made of cement. I can see the sadness in her eyes, melancholy over how screwed up our situation really is, the thousand and one things standing between us.

Fuck, *us*. The very idea makes me want to punch myself in the face for even thinking it. It's not like she's my girlfriend.

We're trained in the SEALs to find the flaws in our own thinking before they become fatal mistakes, and I catch mine now. I don't care how beautiful she looks, or how much I wish I could burn away the lonely regrets in her big brown eyes.

We've got one more night to make our memories. One more night of splendor, booze, and passion before it's back to reality. And the reality is, I don't do relationships.

Delia's one more fuck – an amazing, unforgettable, mind bending fuck – and nothing more. I know she'll be okay in the end.

Evie and Bruce will self-destruct sooner or later, and she'll help pick up the pieces. I hope there's a man waiting for her someday to help sweep away the fallout forever, but it won't be me.

It can't be. Her future's too bright to end up with a military man who's fucked more girls in the past year than he can even name.

Reality sucks, but reality rules. I know what I need to do.

Tonight, I'll make her happier than she's ever been in her whole fucking life. Then I'll be gone.



WE'RE OUTSIDE on the balcony, overlooking the city of lights. It's an otherworldly sight out here, but I can only stare at the lights in quick snatches, before turning back to what I really want to gaze on tonight.

Delia's curled up on my lap, her legs slung over me, her breath quickening as she inhales my scent. I let her bury her face in my shoulder as I fist her hair. My dick wants to rip straight through my trousers and take her right here,

right now, but the mutinous bastard beating in my chest wants to savor this.

I let him win, just this once. We actually *cuddle* – a word that was never in my vocabulary – and it isn't half-bad. Too bad the sex is a thousand times hotter, and after about twenty minutes, I can't take this easy, tender shit.

"Babe, look at me."

"What?" She's got tears in her eyes, reflecting the Vegas lights below us. I expect it, but it's still a punch in the guts.

"You can't be upset. We're siblings, Delia, brother and sister thanks to one serious mistake some numbskulls made. You know what has to happen tomorrow, and so do I. We don't need to obsess about that right now."

"It still hurts. I don't want to lose you, but I have to, Chris. Why? Why does it have to be like this?" I wonder if she's lost her mind and she really doesn't understand. "We're not even related. It's not that crazy, this thing between us...or maybe it is."

She twists her lips, deep in thought, before she sighs softly. "Whatever."

She reaches for my neck and presses her hands into my skin. Hard.

Christ. I've seen women look at me with lust before, but this is something else. The brutal intensity in her face almost causes me to shoot my load. There's an overwhelming urge to rip her dress off and fuck her right here, out above the city, and I don't give a fuck who sees or hears us.

"You're right," she hisses, a strange energy coming over her I can't resist. "Fuck me like I mean something to you tonight, Chris. Let's make this last time the best. Give me something to remember for the rest of my life."

Shit. It's like she's possessed. A second later, so am I.

My hand reaches for her back and rips her zipper down. I give her just enough space to fumble with the dress, and she doesn't even protest, sliding briefly off my lap to stand up and let it fall to the floor.

I'm ripping off my vest, my trousers, my boxers, anything and everything I need to get naked and sink down inside her. By the time I'm done, she's standing next to the glass door, one arm folded across her breast.

No fucking way am I letting the shy girl come back. I grab her by the hand and pull her toward me, guiding us into the long deck chair, where I throw her down first.

"This isn't what I meant. Are you insane?" she asks, and I answer her by holding her down, pushing my face between her legs. "Jesus, Chris, we're outside and –"

The moan that slips out her mouth when I slide my tongue against her clit tells me all I need to know. She keeps shifting uncomfortably for a little while, like she wants to fight, but I lick her into submission.

I can't keep my hands, my mouth, my own goddamned mind off her. She doesn't know, but everything's coming down like an avalanche inside me as I fuck my tongue into her pussy.

I'm not supposed to feel this shit, much less say anything, and I won't. Not with words. I use my mouth the only way I know how instead, growling as I take her pleasure higher. Her clit comes deep between my teeth and I give it the perfect pinch, sweeping my licks across her bud faster.

Her nails drag through my hair, so hard I wonder if she's about to draw blood. I'll fucking let her.

The only thing that matters right now is how loud she's going to scream before we're done. I want the entire city to hear it, the whole fucking world to know our dirty secret, if only for tonight.

"Chris...Chris...Chris!" She says my name like a mantra, slow and hypnotic, a little faster and shriller each time.

She's close, and I send her over the edge. Delia bites the hell out of her mouth to keep herself from filling the bright Vegas night with our music. And that's not good enough for me.

The girl's struggling to breathe when her pussy finally relaxes. I pop up, checking to make sure the chair can support some seriously hard fucking, before I push between her legs.

I reach for my pants and pull out a condom, carefully bundled up with ten more for tonight. She puts her hand on mine when she hears the foil crinkle and whispers.

"No...I'm on the pill. I want to feel all of you, Chris. Everything. Just as long as you're clean."

"You kidding? I sleep around but I'm not a damned idiot." I study her, wondering if she's really serious, or if it's just the emotion and the orgasm making her crazy. "Last chance to take it back, babe. I want this so fucking bad, there's not a chance I'll be doing any pulling out once you spread your legs."

"Do it." It's a quiet, sensuous, dick grabbing whisper, a plea wrapped in desperation.

My hips go straight for hers, hard and focused as a submarine sliding through the waves.

My cock's inside her before she even opens her eyes. That does the trick.

She finally looks at me like she's reconciled herself to being taken like an animal tonight. We're doing shit I've never done with anybody else, fucking out in the open, and I'm going to give it to her like she's my stepsister – like I actually care.

We kiss forever. I lead her tongue in a tango that stops her breath, resisting the insane effect her heat has on me as long as I can, holding my bare cock deep inside her pussy.

"Fuck, you feel incredible." Breaking the kiss, I lay my forehead on hers, and even that tiny patch of skin is hot and ready to come undone.

"Come on," she gasps, wiggling her hips against mine. Her pussy slowly slides around my dick, teasing me, begging me to fuck her fast, hard, and bury my seed deep.

Wish. Fucking. Granted.

The chair creaks beneath us as I fist her hair, pumping my hips, slamming into her a little harder each time we connect. She's so wound up it only takes a few strokes before she's biting her lip and coming all over again.

"Let it the fuck out," I tell her. "It's the only way you'll feel sane next week. Let me know you want my come tonight, everything I'm gonna give you in spades."

I speed up my thrusts, and she buckles. Her arms and legs pinch so tight it's like she's part of me. I don't know how the hell I stop myself from blowing inside her just then, but I do.

I feel the heartbeat pounding in her veins, the way her pussy convulses on my cock, listen to every frantic moan and scream leaving her lips, spilling into the open night. I fuck right through her climax, so hard she arches and comes for a small eternity.

We plow right through it. When she's finished, she's panting like a cat in heat, her mouth hanging open, pouring hot breath on me. I bring my mouth down on hers and pull her hair tight, launching my hips into her, faster and harder than I've ever fucked in my life.

I'm afraid I'm going to bruise her, but I can't stop. Not now. Not tonight.

Maybe not ever.

She pushes herself into me just as hard, all the worries and passions and future agonies hidden in our tempo. Her tits swing like soft round pendulums on her chest, and feeling her nipples graze my chest does me in.

“Fuck, Delia. I love this hot sweet cunt, love every inch of you, love the way you make me come. I fucking love you.”

I can't believe I said it. Neither can she, not with the imminent explosion ripping through my balls, about to set her off all over again.

My cock swells deep inside her and fire slashes through me. I'm locked in an inferno for the next few minutes, pumping seed inside her for what feels like forever; bucking, coming, and emptying myself inside her 'til she overflows.

I fuck so long and hard I can't even think. She's screaming and I'm roaring out my pleasure, drilling the molten come I've pumped into her pussy deeper, never wanting it to end.

It's only her kiss that brings me back to earth. We both know I fucked up with...whatever the hell that was spilling out of my mouth.

I fucking love you.

Christ, what the hell did I say? It was the heat, the moment, the fire screaming through my balls. It had to be.

We don't talk about it. I pull out of her and push my hand between her legs, feeling our combined slickness, and feeling proud of it.

I've never wanted to mark a woman so badly before. I've never wanted to keep doing it either. With her, it doesn't feel like I can ever take her enough times, fill her all the way, even when she's leaking sex everywhere.

I'm worried about her? How the fuck am I going to survive next week? How the hell can I ever let go?

I don't have an answer. I've never had a woman do this shit to me before, and it's bending my brain in a hundred directions, like a rollercoaster built through my brain.

This night, I can handle. I do the only thing I know how. I take her by the hand and lead her inside, where I get her on all fours, splayed out on the bed.

We can sleep on the flight home tomorrow. I'm not planning to shut my eyes, and I'm sure as shit not going limp. I'm hellbent on milking every last drop of pleasure out of tonight, and I'm going to fuck my girl 'til we're both too sore to move.



I DROP her off at home the next day and return to base. Are we really here already, everything we had this past week dashed like a dream?

My orders are pretty damn insistent about ramping up training for the recruits

tomorrow. Probably because the Korean DMZ is just a hair trigger away from blowing the fuck up, and we'll need manpower.

I can't stop thinking about Delia's sad, woeful eyes the last time she kisses me, just before stepping out of my truck. Don't have a damned clue when I'll ever set eyes on her again, or that huge, lonely mansion.

I need to keep my distance. Even if it turns my stomach to know I'll never feel her warm, wet heat wrapped around me again.

The next day, I watch the smoke contrails roaring overhead. My SEAL team hits the shore first, and it's a live chemical drill. The whole world turns stuffy, gray, and blurry behind my Nuclear-Biological-Chemical mask.

I'm yelling through the dummy rounds exploding, martialing recruits ashore, while the rest of the boys do their damndest to give us a taste of what Dear Leader's got waiting for us if we have to wreck his pretty toys.

The drill runs for hours. We plant our explosive charges on the dummy rocket sites, and watch from a high hill as the shit billows up, sending thick black smoke into the air. The choppers come roaring in when it's over, and we pile into them like ants after honey, lifting off into the smoky sky.

There's a strange thud in my chest, a sickly feeling that has nothing to do with the imminent danger we're about to face from the latest geo-political inferno.

Why does it feel like everything inside me goes up in the blaze? I can't get Delia out of my head. Not even when ninety percent of my focus is on the drill, the mission, everything I've been trained to do to keep the red, white, and blue flying free.

It's hellish, but we get through it with flying colors. We always do.

By the end of it, Commander Jones comes up behind me, slaps me on the back. He's an older, bigger man with a face that always turns beet red from barking orders and bulldozing his way through the harshest ground.

"Haven't seen you move like that since Kirkuk, Cleveland. Keep it up, and we won't have a repeat."

"It's going to be completely different over there than Kirkuk if we're called up," I tell him. "The Norks are better equipped than the Iranians any day. We're going to need more practice for all this fresh blood."

He nods and smiles. "What? You think I don't already have it on the books? Get some sleep tonight, Cleveland, we're going to be drilling hard over the next week until everything's picture-fucking-perfect."

"You think it's really gonna happen?" I cock my head and feel my eyes

narrow.

The commander frowns and lets out a grunt. I already know what he's going to say in words, but his face tells me everything I need to know.

"That's up to the boys in DC to decide. If they do, we'll be ready to give 'em hell. Our worries begin and end right there."

Yeah, hell, I think. He's not exaggerating.

It'll be the most dangerous mission I've ever been on once the order lands. It's easy to draw parallels with fire and eternal torment when you're talking about war.

But for me, I can't imagine anything worse than eternal silence, torn away forever from the forbidden chick I can't pry out of my skull.

Fuck. I need to see her again. I need to feel Delia wrapped around me.

Her arms, her lips, her soft, wet cunt...

We fucked over our week in Vegas together more than I ever gave it to any woman, and it's still not enough. Our last night together, feeling her draw every drop of come from my balls, is burned into my head for life.

My head's spinning at about a thousand miles per hour, and it's not just the week long drills and imminent war threat driving me loco. It's her.

I don't break my promises, dammit. But Delia's underneath my skin, alive and perfect, singing to me like a Siren. I can still feel her pheromones caressing every fucking pore, igniting some primal chemistry in my blood.

I can't forget her. Can't ignore her. *Can't*.

We made a vow to get this shit out of our systems and then forget it as soon as we returned from Vegas.

It's the first vow I've ever hated, and I know what I need to do. I'm going to march in and shatter the miserable piece of shit into a thousand pieces.

UNFORGETTABLE (DELIA)

It's been a day since we stepped off the plane together, and he dropped me at home. My heart sank when his lips pulled away from mine. He told me he wouldn't be coming back.

Bracing myself with a hundred inner pep talks on the plane didn't do a damned thing. It *hurts*.

I spend the whole day cooped up in my room, straining to force out something on my laptop. The words just won't come. Not when Chris flashes in my mind every time I type the word SEAL.

Hell, it's not just him. It's everything that's happened.

The way he led me through town like a brash, possessive playboy, confident as ever. The men he killed. All the times we fucked in our room, discovering layers of ecstasy I didn't even know existed, coming unraveled on his cock again and again as he spent himself inside me our final night.

God. There's a fiery pulse between my thighs every time I think about it.

On the flight back home, curled up against him, I seriously believed we might be able to put it all behind us. Maybe we'd actually gotten it out of our system with all the wild, screaming, sheet ripping sex we'd had.

But by the second day, I'm a fucking mess. I close the laptop, ignoring the latest passive-aggressive warnings from Professor Thosser about dragging my feet. I need to get out of the house, so I go for a run.

Dad and Evie are mysteriously absent. When I get home later, I see the screwed up bitch in the hall, berating our cleaner, Maribell, for something she probably didn't do.

Evie looks over the poor woman's shoulder and gives me the evil eye. I put on my best bitch face and glare back, before heading to my room.

This whole week has been too much. Like something out of a twisted movie.

I don't know how I'm supposed to deal with almost being kidnapped, watching the only man I've ever fucked murder two demons in cold blood. And that's not even half of it.

My hero, my lover, my ultimate obsession, is my *own fucking stepbrother*. Unless something insane happens, he always will be. And even if he wasn't, I don't think he's the type who settles down.

It was just sex, Delia, I tell myself, hoping if I say it enough times, I'll really start to believe it. But every time that vow we made courses through my mind, it's the feeblest crap I've ever heard.

I have to forget him sooner or later, but it's not going to be easy. I'm going to suffer a broken heart first.

By the time I collapse, exhausted in my little bed, I'm too dumb to think about anything at all.



A BANGING SOUND wakes me up in the dead of night. I sit up in my bed and peer towards the door to my balcony.

When it sounds again, I know it isn't a dream. I race to the door, too shocked to worry about the t-shirt and jeans I've fallen asleep in.

Who cares what I'm wearing? He's back!

"What the hell are you doing here?" I ask, as soon as I push the door open.

Chris smiles in the darkness, swings the screen open, and steps through into my room. He doesn't say anything – not with words.

His hands lock around my waist, pulling me in, and my lips find his. Instant hunger.

It's like the Vegas loving happened years ago. My body feels famished, insatiable. We stumble toward the bed and he pushes me down, hovering on top of me, just twirling his tongue against mine.

Deep. Fast. Hungry.

"Fucking shit. How can I miss your taste when it's barely been forty-eight hours?" He breaks the kiss, and I see the sheen of summer sweat lining his face.

I'm feeling it too. An animal heat ignites my whole bloodstream, causing every nerve to tingle and glow. I thought I couldn't resist him in Vegas, but I've never wanted anything between my legs as badly as I do now.

"Why did you come back? We made a promise." I'm speaking like a

surprised, reasonable girl, but deep down inside, I'm fucking thrilled.

"Fuck the promise. I need my tongue on your clit, babe. I need to feel you clenching on my dick, everything I felt in Vegas and then some." He stops, shoving his hand my jeans, my panties. I melt when his fingers find my clit, stroking too hard to ignore. "Don't give me that shit. You're not gonna get caught up on practicalities when I'm here with my fingers on your pussy."

I shake my head, feeling lust overpower all the *wrong* like it's some kind of lion attacking a gazelle.

"No, no...Chris. We can't do this. We have to get over it." So I say.

"Get over fucking what, Delia?" His fingers sink deep into my pussy, finding the spot that always makes me squirm.

Holy shit. I'm breathless. Again. Completely and utterly conquered by his touch, his scent, the rays in his eyes that say, *it was over the minute I stepped in. We're fucking no matter what.*

His fingers piston in and out of my pussy so fast my mouth drops open, and I moan.

"Exactly," he growls, taking advantage of my creeping pleasure coma to start working off my clothes.

I don't fight him anymore. I can't. It was stupid to begin with, when everything I'll ever want is right in front of me – or should I say between my legs?

It's strange to have a man *here*, in my own bedroom, caught in our parent's house. I know Evie sleepwalks sometimes, and I haven't even seen the time, so we'll have to be careful. I'm not hearing any vacuuming or voices in the halls, so I'm assuming it's late, past time for the staff to go home.

Chris bends me like a doll, undressing me, saving my panties for last. He rips them off in his trademark bestial way that sends fire up my spine. Everything below the waist tightens, anticipating his touch, his tongue, his manic, perfect cock.

"Chris, we have to be careful. We can't be too loud," I whimper, softly covering my mouth with my hand.

It's all I can do not to groan like we did in Vegas when he starts kissing up my thighs. His tongue lashes hot, wild, leading me around in circles.

"Stuff your knuckles in your mouth and bite down, baby. That shit always helps guys cracking up under fire."

That's all the warning he gives me, all I get, before his tongue plunges deep

inside my pussy. My hips rise to meet him, and his hands catch my thighs. He pushes me down, pinning me to the mattress, growling as he takes control.

I crack after about a second. I bite down *hard*, so rough I can feel my small teeth digging into my skin. It's all I can do to stop myself from crying out.

He lashes me to the bed with his hands, sucking and fucking me with his tongue, stroking his way across my entire pussy in every lick. He pulls his tongue up from my slit, flutters it against my clit, a strange, teasing sensation that feeds the frenzy in slow motion.

A minute later, I feel like I'm going to scream bloody murder.

I'm panting, biting so hard I'll probably leave teeth marks the next day. My whole body heaves, begging for precious breath, every time he does those long, wicked strokes.

"Don't keep me holding like this!" I pant, when his tongue gives me a second of rest. "You're killing me, Chris. *Killing me*. I need you on my clit."

He ignores the pleas for a few more seconds, driving me out of my mind. Then his mouth shifts up, and his fingers replace his tongue inside me, fucking with the same hard, alpha vigor we shared on our first night at the beach.

Heaven help me.

But there's nobody saving me from the climax that rises up and explodes all at once. My hips tighten up and I throw myself against his mouth like a madwoman, gasping and retching shrill little growls, coming on his face.

Chris keeps tonguing me the whole way through it, gliding me through the molten white pleasure. He licks for what feels like forever, snarls and sends his thunder through my flesh. I can't believe how long I'm coming, and my body doesn't want to stop.

It's built to be his and nothing else in this insane moment.

I'm flushed, completely covered in sweat by the end of it. His naked skin rubs against mine, bringing me down to earth, and he slowly rolls me over.

Then he's at my level, one hand jerking on my dark hair, pulling my ear to his lips. "We're not done yet, beautiful. Let's find out how hard we gotta fuck to break this fucking bed. Can't believe your old man doesn't get you anything nicer."

He's right. The bed isn't much – a mid-quality single – and squeaks more than it should. Before I can protest, Chris covers my mouth and sinks into me, silencing my fears forever.

I can't let our parents hear! But I can't bring myself to care when his cock takes me from behind, slamming into me in harsh, overwhelming jerks. It's not like our last night in Vegas where every fuck came frantic, fast, and often, trying to get in as much as possible.

He fucks me slow, but hard, his rhythm rising into a full on jackhammer sensation. My entire body shakes, and I can barely hold myself up on my hands and knees. The fist in my hair does the work too, and it's getting tighter all the time, pulling at the roots while he growls with each powerful thrust.

Another ten strokes, and his balls are swinging up, slapping my clit with some insane pressure that's perfectly aligned to bring me down. I fall into another climax, crashing my head against the sheets, desperately kissing and biting at the bed to stifle the shrieks about to rip out of me.

"Fuck!" I hear Chris cry out behind me and stiffen. That pushes me completely over the edge, off this fucking planet. I'm leaving this world and entering nirvana.

We come together. The bed sounds like it's about to explode, and I can't stop. Not for one meager second as our hips collide, rutting like animals, drunk on the pleasure erupting in our own bodies.

He swells, bursts, and floods my emptiness. Rope after rope of his hot come fills me, and my pussy tightens, greedily drawing it all in. It feels like he's about to rip the hair out of my head. The sheer, rough climax pulls me deeper than anything I've ever felt, so deep I don't ever want it to stop.

I'm lost in flames, awash in him, transported to a world of nothing but sweat and sex where none of the crap between us matters. There's just Chris and I, free lovers, unbound by time or brutal obstacles.

Our bodies, minds, and souls bond together on some higher plane I'm too drunk on sex to understand.

After he pulls out, we lay together. He never keeps his hands off me, even when he's spent. He's got one hand on my ass and the other in my hair, keeping me wrapped around him, using his magnificent chest for a pillow.

"Why did you come back after Vegas? Seriously?" I ask him, running my fingers over his chest. It's nice to slow down and admire him. I brush my nails along the dragon and the trident on his torso, admiring all the little details, rich black ink as dark and dangerous as the rest of him.

"Why do you think?" There's a sharp edge in his tone. "Jesus, Delia, don't you know? If you think I'd let pussy like this go without a fight, you're crazy."

“Oh?” I smile, raising my eyebrows. “So, you’re just here for the sex? Thought you could get plenty of that outside base.”

“Look at me, woman.” Shrugging, he grabs my chin, repositioning my head so it’s perfectly level with his eyes. “I don’t have a damned clue what kind of voodoo shit you’ve got going on, but I want more. I’m not an idiot. I know I shouldn’t be in this house, much less in your bed, but I don’t care. I’m running on instinct here, and my instincts are never wrong.”

I love how his skin feels against mine. It’s almost like he’s getting warmer, slowly and gradually heating up, as if there’s a chemical reaction between our flesh.

“Yeah? What’s your instinct telling you now?”

He grabs my hand and pushes it down to his thigh, then slowly drags it across to his cock. I gasp when I feel how hard he is again, ready to go. At least we had a good, five minute break.

“Put your little lips on my dick and find out, *sis*.” It rushes out of his lips like a filthy curse, and something inside me tingles.

What the hell is wrong with me? I shouldn’t be doing this, sucking my stepbrother’s cock in my own bed, much less getting wet when he calls me *sis*.

I want to laugh in his face for acting like I’m the one with the love spell here – if it isn’t just a fuck spell. But his cock feels so good when I wrap my fingers around his huge, throbbing length, and soon I can’t ignore the urge to taste him.

I crawl down the bed and get between his legs, blushing as his green eyes follow me. God, why does he make me feel so self-conscious, even after we’ve fucked so many times?

He tells me I’m a natural at giving him pleasure, but I’m still not used to the spotlight. I’ve got to get over it if we’re going to keep doing this, and tonight’s a good time to start.

I lick my lips slowly, watching his jaw clench, lowering my lips very, very slowly. He swears when I kiss the tip of his dick, oozing fresh pre-come.

My fingers bob up and down. I’m going to give Mr. Badass Tease a taste of his own medicine.

I’m smiling, ready to engulf him in the slowest blowjob a girl ever gave. The loud bang at my bedroom door makes me jump, and a second later, feeling him in my mouth is the last thing on my mind.

“Honey? Are you up? We need to talk.” Dad’s strained voice comes through the other side.

Chris and I swap one agonizing look. He shoves a stiff finger against his lips and jumps up, grabbing his clothes. I stand up gently from the bed while dad knocks again.

It’s not soft. There’s something urgent, frantic in his fist, like he’s in trouble, but holding back so he doesn’t worry me.

“I’ll slip outside and we’ll catch up later. Find out what the fuck he wants,” Chris whispers, launching himself out onto the balcony before I can say anything.

I watch him jump into a huge oak tree with a panther’s grace, sliding down the trunk, into the sprawling garden below.

“Honey?” Dad knocks again. His voice is cracking, and it’s freaking me out. “*Please.*”

Shit. I’m not even dressed. I scramble for my clothes, my ears pricked up the entire time. Whatever he wants, it can’t be good since it’s the middle of the night. I’m straightening my gown when I hear his footsteps turn, angrily padding down the hall.

My heart keeps thumping like it’s going to beat out of my ribs. I want to go after him, but I’m afraid of the reaction if I pop up in front of him, wide awake, after ignoring him for several minutes. Never mind the fact that I’m sweaty and smelling like pure sex.

Thirty seconds later, it doesn’t matter. He’s back, this time beating furiously on the wood, screaming in a way I’ve never heard in my life.

“Goddamn it, Cordelia! Wake up – please! I need your help. Help me!”

That’s it. I run over and tear the door open. Dad reaches through the frame and pulls me out into the hall, swirling me around so fast I almost blackout.

“Whoa, dad! Calm down. What’s going on?”

He looks like hell. He’s clammy, panicked. Dark circles surround his eyes, looking like bad smears of makeup. I’ve never seen my father like this, and it’s scary as hell.

“It’s Evie, Delia. She’s not breathing – she’s not fucking breathing!” He spins angrily, slams his fist on the wall.

Holy shit. I grab his shoulder, trying to calm him down, remembering all that emergency crap you always learn in school, but never pay attention because you don’t ever expect to need it.

“Call 9-1-1! Don’t tell me you came to me first? What happened? Start at the beginning.”

“I already did, they’re on their way,” he snarls, grabbing me by the hand. This time, there’s no stopping him, and he marches me toward the bedroom in a blinding storm of fury and terror. “Jesus Christ, it’s bad. She was just like this when I found her, passed out, wheezing up a storm. I came upstairs after a late night, heard strange noises. I thought she was doing her yoga routine or something on the bed, but she was out cold. Then her lungs quit working... shit, we’ve got to do something!”

My belly tightens up when he talks about the noises in the night. He’s probably too shocked by what’s happening to pin down Chris and I fucking, but later?

Stop it, I tell myself. This is no time to get selfish. We have to make sure this woman doesn’t die.

Yeah. Something about having Evie around the house as a ghost, forever, makes me want to move into the crappiest high rent apartment the Bay Area has to offer if it’s the only way out of here.

Dad tears himself away and runs over to the small, limp shape on the bed. Evie looks like a rumpled mess, the blankets slung off her, dressed in what looks like a cocktail dress.

“Come on, dammit. Come the fuck on!” Dad’s cracking up.

He never swears like this, never shows such harsh, bright tears in his eyes.

He’s covering her mouth with his, pouring every drop of oxygen he has into her, pumping his hands on her chest so hard I think he’s going to break her ribs. It won’t take much. I swear she’s lost even more weight during the week I’ve been away. She looks like a mummy with one too many plastic surgeries.

“Dad, get her on the floor! Maybe it’ll help,” I suggest, walking up.

He stands and gives me an angry wave. I grab her feet and we lift her. She’s just as light as I feared. Her head rolls like she’s already dead, and that’s when I notice the crap coming out of her mouth, something foamy, unnatural.

I don’t know what a drug overdose looks like, but I have an awful feeling. Dad hits the floor again, blinded by his tears, shaking her tiny body as he pounds her chest again and again.

I’m so hooked on the freak show happening in front of me that I don’t see Chris. The door bursts open so hard it whacks against the wall, and then he’s in, pushing my dad aside.

I watch my stepbrother secret lover take over where my father left off. He works with more precision than dad, timing his CPR perfectly, an eerie calm lining his face.

Dad's jaw clenches so hard it looks like his teeth are going to break. I'm holding his hand, trying to keep him out of it so Chris can do his thing.

"Are you sure you know what you're doing, son?" dad growls, his brow furrowed. "Where the fuck are those paramedics?"

He looks at me. I give him my best sympathetic look, trying to stay positive. Truthfully, I have no clue what's about to happen.

Chris doesn't answer. He just keeps working on his mother, shirtless and heroic, more like a force of nature than a man trying to save another human being's life.

Evie's face has gone completely white – well, whiter than usual, I mean. She's downright ghostly, and her ankles are swollen too. I found out when I helped guide her to the floor.

If she lives, she's going to be a wreck. I tell myself I don't want her to die, even though it would simplify so much. But it's not worth leaving my poor father a broken shell of a man.

"Dad? Why don't you come with me. Let Chris do his thing..."

I try to guide him away, but his grip is so limp, so far gone.

He's not even angry or scared anymore. He looks like he's a million miles away, haunted as though he's already seen his wife die in front of him.

For all anybody knows, he *has*, and that makes me want to strangle the stupid, suicidal bitch all over again.

Dad won't move beyond the bedroom. We stop several feet away, watching as Chris works frantically. The muscles on his back ripple like moving stones, masculine and powerful. If anyone can save her, it's going to be the son she's treated like absolute crap all along.

How ironic

And it is a second later, when Evie jerks, so sudden and sharp I almost go through the ceiling. Dad rushes forward while he's coughing and spluttering. He hits the floor and catches her, holding her up when her frail body buckles again.

"Oh, baby. Oh, Christ. You're going to be okay, honey. Help's on the way. Remember, long, slow, deep breaths." Dad holds her so tenderly it makes me sad and angry all at once.

He cares so fucking much – and she almost offed herself without giving a damn. I wonder if we'll find out what kind of junk she has screwing up her system?

Chris backs away, stands up, and gives me a sharp look. I'm about to say something when our doorbell chime blasts through the house, announcing the paramedics.

"Come on, Delia. Let's make sure they get in okay."



I CAN'T REMEMBER the last time I caught up on sleep. Sometime before Vegas. Hell, maybe sometime before Mister Badass SEAL walked into my life, dragging his psycho mother behind him.

It's morning, and I'm exhausted. Evie was stabilized by the time the medics hauled her away, with dad right behind them.

Stepbrother and I are curled up next to the pool, sharing a single lounge chair. When some of the early help arrives to start their day, they could notice us, but I can't bring myself to care right now.

I need his arms around me, his heat. It feels right. It's safe.

His embrace gives me one sane thing to cling to in my crumbling world – even though it's anything but normal.

"What do you think she was on? Do you think she tried to...you know? Intentionally, I mean?"

Chris shrugs. "She's been through this shit before, babe. Mom stopped thinking things through when I was about five years old. I'll put air in her lungs, but I'm not gonna sweet talk her and tell her everything's gumdrops. Decided I was done with all that years ago."

I'm so worried about my dad. Even though they're both gone, it's like there's a thick anxiety descending over the house, more stifling than the summer heat. It's a hot day, and this coffee isn't helping.

Part of me wants to bury my face in Chris' dragon and trident. I want to cry all over his beautiful skin until I can't anymore. The rest of me wants to reach between his legs, reignite what we had last night, finding my peace in having myself joined to his flesh.

"He really loves her, you know." I tighten my grip on Chris' neck and stare into his bright green eyes.

I'm talking about dad and Evie, yeah. But really, I'm talking about us, and I

think he knows it.

“Yeah, he’s a good guy, even if he could really use some manning up.” Chris smiles bitterly. “It’ll be a real fucking shame when she rips his heart out. They always do in the end.”

I frown. “Not always. Maybe this’ll be a wakeup call. I don’t like her either, but there *has* to be a heart in there somewhere behind all the ice. It’s not right, marrying a woman who’s so far away from everything he ever wanted. I can’t believe my dad would –“

Chris cuts me off, laughing. He puts a possessive hand on my thigh and squeezes, so hard it makes me squirm, and not from the pleasure.

“Come on, babe. Don’t tell me you really believe in roses and rings and all that ‘til death do us part sales talk. It’s bullshit. So’s all the true love crap that goes with it.”

I don’t know why it’s so hurtful. I look up, running my hand along his face. His jaw feels so strong, so tight, a sample of everything he’s still hiding underneath his gorgeous surface.

“If you believed that, I don’t think you’d have come here last night. You’d have stayed away after Vegas, Chris. Just like we promised.”

It’s his turn to caress my face. He reaches up, dominant as ever, running his hand along my cheek.

“Don’t get too excited, sis. Truth is, I couldn’t have stayed away from your tight little cunt if I tried.” Growling, he slides his hand the rest of the way up my thigh, shifts my panties aside, and shoves two fingers deep inside me.

I gasp, arching, feeling the raging hard-on rising in his jeans. “Don’t ruin a good thing by trying to put shit into it that isn’t really there. You’re not my girlfriend, Delia. You’re just the best goddamned fuck of my life.”

His words are like knives, but his fingers...*holy shit*. I should slap him across the face and run back inside, if only he didn’t stroke me so good, tethering my body to him like I never imagined any man doing.

He’s a bastard. He’s relentless. And, of course, he’s right.

I won’t admit it to myself. I can’t. It hurts too much to have this kind of pleasure with him, knowing there will never be any love behind it.

My body drowns out the ache in my heart as he works his hands deeper, stamping his hot lips down my neck. His hips push against my ass, aggressive as ever, rutting the erection in his pants. He fists my hair and holds me to him, finger-fucking me fast, hard, and angry.

I go flying right over the edge. The tears that have been building since last night burst out, and my cheeks are wet as my brain short circuits.

I come hard, bucking against his hand, loving the way he touches me, works me, owns me. And I wish he'd keep me too – wish so fucking bad there weren't so many awful things between us.

"Keep it going, babe. You don't stop 'til I say so," he orders halfway through. My pussy clenches harder, and his thumb adds more pressure to my clit, forcing me to feel it all.

The hurt. The passion. The twisted romance between us, and the future that'll never be.

It's officially too much. So is this thing we're doing – whatever it really is – fucking like newlyweds and living like strangers.

He pulls me in close when it's finally over, holding me down with his powerful arms. His lips meet mine in a rough, forceful kiss.

"Stop crying, Delia. I won't be out on my next big tour 'til summer's over. We don't have to stop 'til you're heading back to school in the fall. One summer, baby. One summer of *this*, every fucking night. I'll teach you to stop worrying about Evie, and how to make some boy extremely happy whenever he settles down and I'm a distant memory."

He wraps his fingers around mine, brings them to his cock, and I squeeze him. Harder than I intend, because he's still pissing me off. He growls happily, enjoying the roughness.

Why does he have to be so rude? He thinks he's doing me a favor – is that it? Like I'm some kind of shy little ex-virgin with nothing else going in my life besides his swinging dick?

I look up, refusing to hide the anger, the hurt, anymore.

"Why do you have to be such an asshole, *brother*?" I say it with the same contempt he always uses when he calls me *sis*. "We're siblings, and we're lovers too. If you don't start treating me with a shred of respect, I'll forget all about this, and I won't even wait until I'm back in the dorms."

I give his cock one more hard pump through his jeans, then rip my hand away.

God. It shouldn't be so hard to take my hands off his body. I force myself to stand up.

He looks at me like I'm a living, breathing challenge. He shrugs, pops up off the lounge chair, and slugs down the last of the cold coffee next to us.

“Whatever, babe. I’ll leave you here today to think that shit over. It’s your choice. I need to get to base. I’ll drop by tonight to hear your answer.”

He hooks his thumbs through the loops on his jeans and pulls, straightening them, intentionally giving me one last look at the bulge raging in his pants. Then, without another word, he marches back inside, heading out.

I want to throw shit at him, wondering why the most beautiful spot on our property always has to be ruined by these stupid fights. I hate him, but I’ve got ten times as much anger howling through me, all aimed inward.

Chris is a natural asshole. A walking contrast. He’s greedy and dangerously generous, arrogant as he is panty melting handsome. I won’t change him anymore than I could stop a tiger from pouncing on a pile of meat.

He’s right about one thing – it’s totally my choice whether or not I walk away.

Ending this summer fling while it’s just a sad, tumultuous episode is the smart choice. At least losing him now won’t leave me paralyzed, like he’ll be in the autumn, if I let him use me like this all summer.

But I can’t imagine ending it now either. It hurts as much as it did when I thought about our last time in Vegas, all the years ahead without him, all the years I’d have to settle for...I don’t know what.

I don’t know, but it won’t be Chris fucking Cleveland.

Asshole. Stepbrother. SEAL. And also the one man on the planet who’s stealing my heart.

UNNATURAL (CHRIS)

I can't believe how fucked I am. I hide it well, but I can't hide how out of focus I am at the briefing. Commander Jones calls me out twice for zoning out, asking me if I want to return to the states in a body bag.

Shit.

"No sir," I tell him, all I can manage before he returns to the intel images on the big board, using a laser pointer to identify the North Korean missile sites.

I force myself to pay attention while my fellow SEALs snicker. On the way out, Brandon slaps me on the shoulder, and takes up a spot next to me in the gym for our workout.

"You're always sharp as a tack, Cleveland. What the fuck's going on? Your ma get into the junk again?"

I shake my head, adjusting the machine I'm about to give my pecs and shoulders hell on. He's one of the only guys I've told about the demon in my family tree.

"Oh, shit." Brandon pauses, grins at me from his leg press. "It's pussy then, isn't it? You've started fucking some chick more than one night. Jesus, you should've let me know sooner. I'd have told the commander we've got a damned double-agent in our midst."

I give him the middle finger once I've got my arms in place. He laughs it off, and I'm quietly stewing because he's right.

I keep telling Delia the same damned thing I've been telling myself – it's just a summer fuck. An extended version of what we started in Vegas, yeah, but it doesn't mean anything more than that. It can't.

I don't do love, and I'm sure as shit not *dating* my own goddamned stepsister. It sounds insane every time I put it together like that because it is.

Too bad my dick decided a long time ago it isn't listening to a lick of reason. I

workout for more than an hour, stressing every muscle in my body to failure, and I still can't get her out of my head.

I haven't even followed up on the family shit with mom yet because it's only going to make things worse. I'm too busy thinking about all the times Delia's hot, tight cunt sucked the come from my balls, how bad I want to feel her do it over and over and over again.

That's when I realize Evie's not the only one in this family hooked on some bad shit. Hers is heroine, or whatever the fuck she's got herself on now.

Sex is mine, especially when it's causing me to think too much about a chick when I ought to be thinking about how to survive the most dangerous mission of my life.

I know what I need to do. I need to quit her like a bad habit *before* the boys in DC send us over the DMZ. If I'm still thinking about her pussy when there are bullets blowing by my ears, I'll probably be coming home in a thin black sac, just like the commander said.

What'll little sister think then after we've been fucking half the summer? I shake my head, stopping to wipe the sweat off my face with a towel. I'm the only bastard left, putting in overtime, trying to work out all the shit rattling around in my skull.

It's no good. I'm only going to hurt her worse by dragging this out, especially if something deadly happens overseas.

I'm used to people disappointing me. Evie's done it my whole life, and now I'm just numb to her shit. But I can't do that to Delia when I've already got my hooks in too deep.

I'm going to break it off the second I get a whiff of us heading off to war on the fastest transport across the Pacific.

You'll do it, I promise myself, *quick and clean so she doesn't get fucked up*. I'm serious about it, and determined as all hell.

But before I do, I'm going to get in one last fuck.



It's a warm evening by the time I leave base. I head for the mansion, expecting to find Delia out by the pool, where she always sits and reflects.

I've never seen her swim. All I can think about is dragging her into the cool, turquoise waters and getting my lips all over her body, drowning in so much ecstasy I blow her brains out. Make her forget what we've got, or at least settle for this summer fucking without any strings.

There's somebody else out there instead. Mom looks up at me when I step outside, turning her head. She looks like hell, laid out in the evening sun, her pale body wrapped in what looks like several layers of towels.

She's got a drink in her hand too. Just fucking great, when I know she's under orders to detox. All she needs is a cabana boy in a speedo, and her evil queen act will be complete.

"Christopher!" I simmer when I hear her say my name, watch her beckon me forward. She points to the big chair next to her.

I keep standing. "Are you feeling any better, or what?"

"Yeah, Bruce has been amazing through this whole thing. He's made friends with some very good doctors too. I'll be just fine, son. Thanks so much for your calls of concern while I was trying not to choke on my own vomit."

I snort. There's the bitch I know. Her smile disappears into the long pull of green margarita against her lips. She slams the glass down when she's done, glaring at me like I just put my hand in the pool and threw it in her face.

"I kept you breathing, ma. That's all I'm obligated for. You're the only one who can fix your life."

"Stop passing judgment," she snaps. "I didn't ask for this. I asked for your comfort, Mister SEAL. A few kinds words or a hug would be really nice."

"Oh, please. Haven't you gotten plenty of that from Bruce? Looks like all the money in the world can't buy a doc who gets you off the sauce." I motion to her empty glass.

She smirks, sloppy and angry all at once, telling me she's already pretty wasted. She rears up in the chair and has to pull the towel tight to keep it from slipping.

I twist my head away. Fuck that shit. The last thing I need is a look at her overbuilt boobs, the only investment she ever dumped money into over the years.

"What? Nothing there you want to see, kiddo? Hm?" She snaps her fingers, forcing me to look at her again. "Oh, that's right, I'm too old for you. Too blood related. You'd rather fuck your little sister instead and tear this family apart, piece by piece, wouldn't you?"

I'm stunned, but I shouldn't be. I've put up with these vicious tirades my entire fucking life, and I learned a long time ago the only defense is to turn around, leave her to stew, and walk the hell away.

She picks up her glass, twisting it on one hand, contemplative the way I

imagine a foreign interrogator being during torture.

“I don’t know what the fuck you think’s going on. You’re flat out wrong, mother,” I say, trying not to let the growl overtake my voice. “I didn’t come out here to listen to your shit. Why don’t you go crawl back inside and dry yourself out? Or are you out here because you finally feel a shred of guilt over making that poor sap fight your demons?”

She smiles, sweet and poisonous as a jungle snake. This time, she throws the glass so hard it shatters. I don’t even flinch, despite several shards landing at my boots.

I watch her hand jerk back, and she studies the fresh cut she’s given herself. It’s one more wound that’s so small in the grand scheme of her fucked up situation she probably can’t feel it.

“You think Bruce is the one playing hero here? *Really?*”

I need to turn and walk the fuck away – before she says anything else about Delia. It’s a perfect time. She’s lazy, drunk, and now her only weapon is gone. But part of me wonders if she’ll throw herself into the pool the instant I step out, yet another attempt at drowning herself, jumpstarting the drama all over again.

“I don’t think anything about this shit, mom, because I’m done.”

The latest overdose was her fifth stab at suicide in about as many years, and it worked better than anything else. The crazy bitch really almost offed herself, unlike all the other times, when she stopped short of putting herself in the danger zone. Just close enough to get her fill of sympathy.

“Go ahead and run back to base, soldier boy,” she chimes. “Jesus, you really don’t have any balls, do you? I gave you tough love, Christopher, tough fucking love. Now look at you – just look! Living like a robot, loving like one too. No family. No friends. No father. The only one in this house you’re on intimate terms with is that brown eyed bitch you’re sticking your dick in, and that’s because she’s just as screwed up as you are. I’m *all* you’ve got, son, and the sooner you realize that, the –”

Fucking shit. I tune her out.

If she weren’t so goddamned crazy, anybody but my own flesh and blood, I’d have picked her up and thrown her in the pool about ten words in.

My skin feels like it’s going to melt. She’s kryptonite, my Achilles’ heel, my own personal demon, all rolled into one.

I’ve survived drills that left me sore for days. Bastards shooting at me, planting IEDs on the road, hearing my fellow SEALs scream as they’re cut to

pieces. And I still don't know what the fuck to do with the bitter psycho in front of me, sucking in her cheeks like she's chewing on the world's most vile lemon.

I turn sharply like I'm on parade, and I'm about to go when she gets up. I can't resist looking over my fucking shoulder, even though everything in my skull is screaming not to.

Her eyes are tiny pinpricks, angry and red. Hot tears are falling down her cheeks, and she's shaking, holding the towel so tight against her throat it looks like she's going to choke.

"You're really just walking away? You can't even argue back anymore? Are we that far gone, Chris? I'm your own fucking mother!"

"I know what you are, Evie," I say, channeling my rage into the fists hanging at my sides. "I know what you do to people, and how you're a thousand times more fucked up than I'll ever be. I know I'm done, and I won't be around for the fallout. Not anymore. Not ever. Save your shit for Bruce, as long as he's willing to put up with it, which won't be long."

"No, no, no..." I hear her whispering it behind me as I start to walk away.

I'm about halfway back to the house when she runs toward me. She's barefoot, so I don't hear her until it's too late. She tackles me, wraps her hands around my throat, tries to throw me on the ground the way she used to when I was twelve years old, before I bulked up and became a man.

I threw her off easily, slamming her into the pavement. It's a strange irony to see how things have changed over the years. She's lucky she's got that towel to cushion her blow. The last thing the bitch needs is a cracked hip, but it's her own damned fault.

"You ungrateful little shit! I gave you *everything*. Food, shelter, drove you into your career, that stupid fucking job that takes up everything, sucks the life out of you." She's given up fighting, and her fingers are in her eyes, digging in as she rattles off all her insane bad son litanies.

"It's not a job, mother," I say coldly. "I'm serving this country, protecting communities here at home and overseas. It's duty. I feel sorry for you some days because you'll never grasp those concepts. You're too far gone, and so's this whole goddamned situation with your sugar daddy."

Her hands drop, and she shoots me the most hateful look I've ever seen in my life.

"Go. Walk out. You're a disgrace, Christopher, and I won't let you ruin this. Bruce is all I need. He's going to take care of me forever. He understands

what love is, something you'll never know after all this SEAL crap shut down your emotions. They tore out your heart, son, and there's no getting it back."

The shit coming out of her mouth is just total psycho babble now. I turn and keep going, even when she starts screaming gibberish at me, trying to get one last rise.

"No, come back! You don't *get* to walk out. I'll have you thrown out if you don't fucking listen to me. We'll see how much of a fight you put up when five deputies are hauling you off!"

I roll my eyes. It's the same thing she used to threaten me with when I rebelled in my teens. It scared me then. Dad left me with a healthy fear of the cops. Then one day when I was sixteen, she cracked and did it, called the police when I refused to get in the car with her and her drunken beach bum boyfriend to go to the beach.

The officers showed up and nearly hauled her away instead. It's tempting to remind her. If I thought there was any tiny spark left inside her, some mirror that would show her how fucking nuts she is, I'd hold it up in a heartbeat.

But there isn't. My mother's been fading for years, and now she's gone completely dark, plunged into a pitch black pool of pain, regret, insanity.

I know what's coming next, and I stop at the door with my hand on it for a second, ready for the explosion.

"You stupid piece of shit! I'll cut your dick off before I let you stick it in Bruce's little slut again! You're not going to use that girl and toss her away like one of your soggy condoms. You've chosen to be a total robot, fine. Go right ahead, SEAL. You can ruin your life, but you won't wreck mine. If you think I'm going to sit here like an idiot while you're screwing her, right under our noses, I swear to Christ I'll –"

I step through the door and slam it tight behind me. The seal chokes off her threat. I don't need to fucking hear it, because I already know what she's going to do. I walk toward the main entrance, stopping along the way to flag one of the house staff. I tell the maid to keep an eye on Evie to make sure she doesn't do something stupid in the pool, or maybe with one of those thick glass pieces laying on the deck.

Sooner or later, she'll tell Bruce what's going on. Maybe he'll man up and punch me in the face like he should.

I stop near the big sprawling staircases and run a hand over my face. My heart's pounding, throttled like a hot engine.

Delia won't leave my brain. All I want to do is run upstairs and fuck her

brains out, slam my dick into her perfect pussy over and over and over, spill my seed inside her 'til I'm too exhausted to think, to hate.

Robot. I hear Evie calling me that again, and I snort. It's insane, but if there weren't a little shred of truth, it wouldn't bother me like this.

My mother always has an uncanny way with tapping into my fears, and right now, I'm scared shitless. If I go upstairs and get naked with the hot, brown eyed beauty again, it's only going to be harder to pull away later.

I'm going to break her heart, and rip out my own in the process, hurl the whole mess at my feet. I ought to turn away and walk the hell out of this house forever, just like I keep intending, leaving this shit behind.

It's toxic. It's wrong. Everything, *everything*, including her.

But I can already feel Delia's taste on my lips. My dick's hammering so hard in my pants I think I'm going to pass out.

Mom's right in her own sadistic way about me being fucked, but she doesn't have a clue. The only way to keep myself sane is to move, march upstairs, haul the best thing that's ever happened to me into that big Victorian bed, and slam my hips into hers 'til all we can focus on is remembering to breathe.

SHE LOOKS like she's surprised to see me when her door opens. I grab her by the wrist and pull her tight, slamming her against the wall. My lips find hers, silencing all the questions she wants to ask.

What are you doing here?

What's going on?

Why?

She knows. Delia can feel the heat in my lips and the fire in my blood. My dick finds the soft space between her belly and pussy, and starts to grind, reliving our first sultry night on the beach.

I tear my lips away before I fuck her right here in the hall, in front of our parents and the staff. We head for my room and I kick the door shut, then walk her over to the end of the bed.

"Jesus, Chris. Why do you have to be so rough? Can't you just say hello?"

"We're past good manners, babe. Everything I wanna do to you is about as uncivil as it gets, and I'm not gonna hide it. Put your hands on the bed. Tonight'll be so good it hurts."

"Hurts?" She looks up at me with those big brown eyes, shaking her head.

“Haven’t you done enough? I can’t keep living these head games. This hot and cold, on-again off-again crap.”

Our last evening on the pool deck did more damage than I thought. Regret hits me in a sharp pang, and I almost apologize.

Too bad it’s against everything in my nature, humbling myself in words. She’ll find out how sorry I am, how deep I feel, when I’m balls deep, curling her toes. She’ll understand I never meant to hurt her, never meant to blow us up, never meant to drag this out ‘til it’s become an addiction I can’t give up.

Can’t.

For a second, I reach for Delia’s perfect face, cup it, and squeeze. My mouth finds hers and I lead her tongue in a whirlwind, pulling the air from her lungs, all the sweetness she has for me.

“Love isn’t always easy, babe.” Her eyes light up when she hears the L-word. I don’t give a shit, there’s no more hiding it. “We’re going through one fuck of a rough patch. There’s only one way I know to work through it.”

“Sex can’t fix everything,” she says, unsure and whiny, like it’s the right thing to say but she doesn’t believe it.

“You’d be surprised. We pissed each other off last night, and Evie screwed us royal before we could make up. Guess how much my dick gives a fuck?”

Hell, I’ll show her.

I reach underneath her skirt, find her panties, and rip them straight down. She moans as the fabric snaps tight around her smooth calves, and I lift her feet one at a time to get them on the floor.

“You didn’t answer me, Delia,” I growl, moving one hand to her breast while my fingers sink into her. She’s even wetter than I thought, and my cock jerks when I feel how hot, how wet, how ready she is. “How much do you think my cock cares about all this emotional soap opera shit? Do you think any of it matters when I’m hard as a rock, and you’re leaking all over my fingers?”

“I don’t...I don’t –“

Know? No, she fucking doesn’t. And I’m not going to hear anymore bullshit that can’t be said with our bodies.

I don’t kiss and make up. I don’t love. I don’t get my head all screwed up by girls I’m not supposed to be nailing in the first place.

Except I realize I’m doing all those things. I crossed the damned Rubicon the first time I put my cock in her body, and now I can’t stop, no matter how hard it is now, or how much it’s going to ache like a motherfucker to kill this when

summer ends.

I toy with her clit while she pants, breathless and thoughtless, pushing her full, bare ass into the ridge underneath my jeans. I should've fucked the urge to come every time our skin touches right out of my system by now, but it seems like it's getting worse every time we're rutting.

I don't understand it, and it's pissing me off. I take her to the edge with my fingers fucking fast, stroking her hot cunt while my thumb works her clit, poised to make her convulse any time I want.

"Let's fucking go," I snarl, pulling my hands off her at once, dragging her by the hair a couple steps away. I take her hands, put them on the tall bedpost, and start to work off my belt.

It's everything I've been dreaming about since I first saw the bed. She gives me a small whimper of surprise when I drag her hands up above her head, getting her at the perfect angle, and lashing her to the post.

"What the hell? I didn't know you were this kinky."

She sounds so excited I want to laugh. Instead, I shove my pants down once she's bound, grab her waist and pull her sweet ass against my cock.

"This isn't about playing with chains and blindfolds. I do whatever feels natural, babe, and right now that's making sure you can't go anywhere 'til I'm done fucking you. You don't want to hear what's coming out of my mouth lately, so I'll let my cock do the talking instead. This time, you'll listen."

And she does as I sink inside her. The girl's voice cracks in this sexy, overwhelmed way that nearly causes me to lose my load right there.

Thank fuck for all the discipline I've built up over the years.

I slide my hands underneath her top and feel her tits. I pinch both her nipples so hard she gasps, and it's all the signal I need to swing my hips, digging deeper, claiming what's mine.

We're fucking hard and fast, trying to find some balance. It's a desperate fuck, one so intense I can feel her heartbeat in the hot, wet flesh wrapped tight around my dick. It only makes me thrust harder, so deep I want to break her, smash us both into a thousand pieces.

A minute or two in, and she's coming. I have to power fuck my way through it not to explode with her. For the first time in my life, I wish I had a cock ring.

Her pussy pinches me tight, like she's got a second tongue down there sucking me off, teasing the come from my balls. I grab her by the throat,

digging my fingers in, and tilt her face to mine. She gets her lips against mine mid-climax, and I taste her coming, snarling my lust back into her mouth.

“Don’t. Fucking. Stop.” It’s all I can thunder as I keep slamming into her, fucking straight through her release, hornier than ever for mine.

I have to throw my weight into her to hold her up. I’ve brought her to a new zenith. Her knees want to buckle, send her crashing to the ground before she hits her second wind.

I don’t let that happen. I slow my strokes, fucking into her more tenderly, pushing my tongue in and out of her mouth, stroking both holes at once. Her lips and pussy belong to me.

Everything about being wrapped up with this woman feels so goddamned right.

She’s blown my whole world apart, and it’s not just her body. I want to destroy her, merge into her, hook my cock into her feminine heat twenty-four seven.

When I feel her heartbeat in every kiss, every moan, every slide of her sopping wet velvet over all ten inches of my dick, I know I’m *gone*.

The *robot*, as Evie called it, short circuited when I pulled Delia Burr into my life. All the BUD/S and psy-op training in the world can’t undo whatever the fuck she’s done to my brain. Feeling her doesn’t stop at my dick.

She’s found her way inside me somehow, and I can feel her there as I deepen my strokes, pulling one hand off her tit to stroke her clit instead. It warms her up all over again. I watch her forehead sink to the bedpost, fighting for leverage, completely swept away by the pleasure I’m giving her.

Normally, it’d be hot as fuck. Of course it is now, too, but I can’t get over this other sticky, strange warm feeling I’ve got inside, causing my heart to thump like a rocket going into orbit.

“You feel it building in my balls yet?” I growl, twisting her hair in one hand, pouring fire in her ear. “It’s all yours, babe. Every fucking drop. All you’ve got to do is beg.”

I pull her long dark locks and listen to her whine. It’s *the sound*, that whiny note she makes when she’s coming undone.

Fuck. My strokes quicken, instinctively meeting hers.

We’re bucking faster. Harder. Desperation growing. She moans again, trying to form words, sticky need oozing out her lips.

That’s when I start to get pissed.

I can't believe it, what's happening to me here, what she's done to me the whole damned time.

This fuck was supposed to set us straight. I was supposed to take full control of her pussy for hours, and I've got her eating out of my hand like usual, but *I'm* the one going down like a titan.

Then I hear her voice, like she's calling to me through a tunnel, shrill and otherworldly. "I want it, Chris. Come inside me. Come hard. Come until I can't hold it."

Shit! I'm finished.

Her hair wraps around my hand and I throw the other arm across her waist. Her wrists swing tight in my belt as I smash my hips into hers again and again, so frantic I'm like a stag in mating rut.

I want to fill her completely, and I absolutely fucking do a second later when my balls jerk, hurling the first hot jet inside her. My cock roots deep. I'm growling, throbbing near her womb, unloading everything between her legs.

All my tension, all my seed, all the raw shit in my head I've always tried to hide.

She's torn me open. It's all coming out, and it won't fucking stop, especially when her hips pulse against mine. Her pussy squeezes hard, pulling more come from my cock. Her fingers curl like they're going to snap right off as her lungs stop working.

It's so tight and hot and wet I lose my damned mind.



WHAT THE FUCK JUST HAPPENED? I ask the question in my head when I finally come to.

We're both panting, trying to recapture the air in our lungs. Thick come trickles down her thighs, mixed with her own cream. I run my hand between her legs to feel what we've done, right as my dick slides out.

"Chris?" She whispers my name, soft and unsure. "My arms are getting tired."

I reach up and unfasten my belt, hurling it on the floor. I turn her around to face me, and we kiss. Her eyes are practically glowing, and I'm hard again in record time.

I've had my fill of seeing her bound to this bedpost, but I'm not through with her pussy. I strip off the rest of our clothes, mine first and then the last of hers,

then lay her down on the big old bed, completely naked.

The entire evening is a flurry of sucking, fucking, and my hand over her mouth, a half-assed attempt to keep what we're doing hidden. I don't know why I care.

Kiss by kiss, fuck by fuck, I'm finished playing games. I'm done hiding what I feel from her, and it's only a matter of time 'til our parents find out. Evie has a nose like a feral bitch, and she's going to try to use us against Bruce, try to paint me as the bad guy who defiled his precious daughter.

I let her ride my cock, holding my hand over her mouth the entire time. She bites me when she comes, and my balls spit more fire, come I didn't know I had. I'm crazed to pump it into her at some wild, animal level I don't understand.

It doesn't compute, and I can't control it. We barely even speak as our bodies collide, only stopping to rearrange ourselves, one long conversation in flesh and sweat and come.

I've lost track of how many times she comes, and my own count isn't much better. Only the growing soreness in my balls reminds me of how many times we've fucked, and how much I'm still aching to fill her, fuck her with a fury and intensity beyond any woman I've ever been with.

She's curled up on my chest when she runs her hand across my stubble. It feels good, natural, as incredible as her soft brown eyes gazing into mine.

"Maybe you were right about this talk," she says softly. "You're not just an arrogant fling who's come to screw my brains out, Chris. I wish you'd stop acting like it. There was more there, wasn't there?"

"I already said the L-word once, babe. You're not getting that shit more than once a day unless you come for me again."

She laughs as I slide my hands between the well used softness between her legs. My fingers do all the work, feeling the wetness, the fire, all the pent up energy we've unloaded with our friction. I wait 'til she's almost on the edge before I break down and say it.

I jerk her by the hair, one ear close to my lips, loving the way she always fights me by twisting her head. If this keeps up, the poor girl's gonna be bald before summer.

"In case you didn't figure it out yet, Delia, I fucking love you."

I don't let her say it back. She clenches her jaw and tries her best not to scream as my fingers fuck her, stroking her clit, sending her over the edge into a whole new storm of blinding ecstasy.

Somewhere in the maelstrom my hand pulls away. I flip her over on the bed, pin her hands over her head, and shove her legs up. I fuck her hard and fast, sending her into another blizzard somewhere between consciousness and dumb pleasure.

I can't believe I said it. Hell, I can't believe I didn't say it *sooner*.

Her body's been working its spell on me all summer, binding me to her a little more each time we fuck.

It's insane. I can't imagine giving her up. Thinking about letting her go off and live her rich girl life, finding some other bland asshole to sink his dick in, makes me want to start tearing the whole damned world apart.

I'm seething at all the boys she'll never have – all the ones I'll keep from ever coming in sniffing distance.

She's *mine*, goddamnit. Mine tonight, mine tomorrow, mine 'til I'm ash.

I thrust harder, slamming into her in deep, long strokes, feeling my balls boil up even more uncontrollably than when she was leashed down.

"Fuck, babe, I'm coming!" I bow up and plant my cock deep, holding it against her womb, emptying my balls.

She wraps her legs around me and screams, fighting to put her hands on my body, but I keep them pinned. The very thought of her fucking anybody else makes me rage as much as those two thugs I destroyed for her in Vegas.

She's my property. She's off limits. I've laid my claim, and I'm not done yet, not even by half.

Mine tonight. Mine tomorrow. Mine forever.

It's like a mantra I can't stop hearing, one that makes me harder, hornier, and psycho possessive.

I don't know how the hell we're gonna make this work. We're stepsiblings from two different worlds. But we'll figure it out. When I lay my eyes on something I want, it's a mission, and my track record in the SEALs, just like in life, says I *never* fail.

DISTORTIONS (DELIA)

We can't stop fucking.

Ever since the night he barged in and told me the truth...said the word I never expected to hear from a crude, cocky asshole like him, I've been in pieces. I don't know how to deal with it, so I just keep pushing myself down on his cock, taking him in my mouth, cushioned in my breasts, between my legs.

He's stealthy about it too. For the last couple weeks, he's been coming to my room after leaving base every night.

It's a small relief with the summer being so quiet. The Fourth of July passes, and we don't even stop to watch the fireworks, fucking in my little room instead.

Evie's still a broken mess, wandering the house at all hours. I worry he's going to run into her every time he slips into the house, and start a shitstorm all over again.

Dad's been strangely distant too. He's spending extra time at the office, whenever he can bring himself to leave the house, trusting his maniac wife won't do something insane.

All he wants to talk about with me is school next fall. A couple times, he teases me about the hot new intern working for him as his PA, and I blush. I have to pretend to laugh it off, pay lip service to a date with this fraternity kid in business, who I have zero interest in meeting.

If he knew about Chris and me, it would be the final blow. I honestly don't know how to break the news to the world, much less our screwed up parents. I can't bring myself to do it anytime soon, when he's at his wit's end, driven to madness by Evie's endlessly bitchy, ruthlessly crazy antics.

One hot July evening, Chris takes me out. He really does know some lovely little bars along the coast. They aren't fancy, nothing like the high-end

watering holes I'm used to, but they feel real. Everybody inside them looks alive, like they're actually listening to each other's conversations, instead of just eye-fucking their next fling for the night.

Marnie and her new boy toy join us for drinks. I honestly can't tell if it's the big, tanned bodybuilder from the beach or someone else. The type of men she goes for are always tall, burned, and dumb as rocks.

"How's the big project coming, Delia? Did that jackass, Thosser, get off your ass?" She flashes me a perfect white smile. I watch big boy glance down at the thong she's probably got sticking out behind her for emphasis.

Ass is right.

Not that I have much room for judgment. Chris listens in silently, one hand on my thigh underneath the table, dangerously close to telling my best friend I'm not just being lame for bringing my stepbrother along because I can't find a real date.

"It's slow going," I say with a sigh. "Finally got my thesis out. Now I'm working on the intro and the outline. Tentative title? Conquering Fear: A SEAL's Journey Back to Civilian Life."

She claps her hands and laughs. "Love it, girl. It's pompous and flashy, just the way he likes. Hey, Erik, why don't you go bring us some more, hmm?"

She passes the boy toy her empty glass, smiling like a shark. He shrugs and gladly does as he's ordered. I'm not sure if it's just Marnie's overbearing style, or if she has a real knack for bringing these big boys to their knees.

"You must be helping my bestie with all this, Mister SEAL," she says, folding her hands neatly under her chin. "How hard is it to come home and stop all the killing? Do you ever get a break, like, for real?"

"Marnie!" I gasp, giving her a soft kick underneath the table. I'm not exactly thrilled with the way she's eyeing my man either, looking at him like he's her next conquest.

Chris takes a long pull of his beer before he answers. "About as hard as it is to keep your eyes off me while your boyfriend's sitting right next to you."

Her eyes blow up and she coughs. I throw a hand over my mouth. I'm shocked, but I'm really suppressing a laugh, stunned because no one has ever put her in her place like this.

"You're a very bold man, aren't you?" she asks, toying with the straw in her water. "I like that. Delia's a very lucky girl...to have you as her brother, I mean."

Marnie's shooting me a sharp glance like she knows. *Shit.*

Clearing my throat, I sip on my own margarita and try to deflect. We just need a few more seconds before the boy toy returns with more booze to shut her up.

"Yeah, she is." Chris beats me to the punch. "I take care of family."

"It's sweet two people can become so close when their parents hook up at an older age," Marnie says, just as the walking orange returns with a fresh drink for her. "Help her out of her shell, Chris. Lord knows I've tried to get her mingling with the boys. If she's still a virgin by the time she gets her cap and gown, I swear, I'll –"

I put my hand over Chris' and lean forward, narrowing my eyes. "Marnie, we don't need to get into this. Not with these guys here. FYI, I'm working on it."

I watch pink, sugary liquor go down her lips, a little too rapidly. She's already tipsy, and that means she's going to get on edge too. Normally, I'd be careful what I'm telling her, but I'm sick of her crap, being pushed around like she's some kind of alpha bitch.

"Yeah? Well, I wouldn't know. It seems you've been busy with other things for half the summer. What are you now, Delia?" She cocks her head. "Too good to invite us down to the beach again? Last year, we had about ten parties under our belt by now."

"Dad's been using the land for his own stuff," I lie, desperate to cover up the fact that I've been caught in my stepbrother's whirlwind, nearly sold into white slavery, and addicted to Chris' cock. "It's mid-summer now. Maybe we do need a bash."

"Agreed!" That perks her up, and she pulls on boy toy's arm, who gives her a silent, dopy smile. "How about a house party too? Your folks are still going out of town a lot, yeah?"

I hesitate. Dad's only allowed me to use the house a few times. He's generous that way, but he wants it left spotless. Last time, I had to race to clean up burned out joints, beer bottles, and even a few used condoms tucked underneath the furniture.

I wouldn't dare leave my garbage there for the servants either. They think I'm such a good girl, even though they've seen sides of me that aren't.

"I'll have to check in and find out his schedule. I think he said something about a big conference in Atlanta next week. Only thing is, I'm not sure if Evie's going to be tagging along. She's been going through some crap lately."

"Forget about her. She'll be too whacked out of her mind to know what the

fuck's going on if you do decide to host." Chris waves a decisive hand through the air. "I've got something coming up too. I'd love to have some fun before I have to go overseas and shoot people."

Marnie laughs. The bodybuilder chuckles across the table too, then drains his drink and smiles. "Yeah, me three...or is that me four? I've lost count."

"Then it's settled! Check in next week, Delia, and let us know what's up. See if we can use that awesome pool. I've got a new bikini I'm going to be trying either way."

She's looking at Chris again when she says it, and I slide my hand to his thigh, stopping just next to his cock. *Don't even think about it, SEAL.*

I smile sweetly at her, and then look at the man next to me. My heart relaxes when I see him staring right back, his green eyes as intense as ever, swirling with lust, none of it directed across the table.

That's when I know I've landed myself a bad boy. If only I can keep him without destroying every other thread of my life.



LATER, we're walking along dad's private beach, the same place where I first saw him clamber ashore. The bar is empty when there's nothing going on, but I instantly remember how my body tingled the first time he dragged me back there, pushed me against the wall, taking what was destined to be his.

I hope. I don't want this to end. As much as I know it has to, I'm going to fight it tooth and nail.

"Just a little bit further, baby. Take my hand." He guides me up the hill. It's uneven ground, but it's perfect time to catch the summer sun over the Pacific, and the short, rugged journey is worth it.

We pick a spot and sit together. It's as picturesque as it is cliché, my head tucked into his shoulder, watching the hot July sun slip below the horizon, shimmering off the sea.

"What are we going to do, Chris?"

"Party our asses off. Your old man really does have a helluva spot for it. Hope your friend keeps the guest list light so we can still find some place to fuck, though."

"Idiot!" I laugh and punch him in the arm, shaking my head. "I'm talking about *us*. We can barely hide it in front of Marnie, much less mom and dad. They're going to find out."

“So let ‘em. We’re not doing anything illegal, babe. I’ve come to terms with how fucking bad I want this.” Growling, he grabs my thigh, and pushes his hand right up my skirt, tugging at my panties. I gasp, and it’s a struggle to keep listening to what he’s saying. “I’m not letting go, Delia. Never. I don’t care if I have to keep calling you sis every time we’re fucking. I’ll call you Cleopatra if it gets you shaking and whimpering under me.”

He moves in for a kiss. His mouth covers mine just as his fingers find my pussy, pushing their way inside, making me flush when he sees how wet I am.

He thumbs my clit until I’m laying down on the sandy bluff, legs open, perfectly positioned for him to push my skirt up and shove his face between my legs. Which, of course, he does about five seconds later.

I can’t hold back my moans out here. If anyone looks out at just the right angle from our house, they’ll see us tangled on this rock.

But once he starts, there’s no stopping, and this proves it. He wants me. Deeper than just another fuck. I run my nails through his short hair, feeling his powerful neck, running them down, down, down into my pleasure.

His tongue quickens across my clit. I tense up, push my hips into his mouth, coming to the steady clap of the ocean against the calm shore.

He pins me down by the thighs when I cry out. There’s no escaping this mad desire between us, just like there’s no more hiding what’s in my heart, this fuzzy, blind love that won’t listen to reason or taboos.

I want him. I need him. And as long as he’s with me, I’m ready for anything, even my father suffering a nervous breakdown when he finds out his only daughter is head-over-heels in love with her own fucking stepbrother.

Or should I say getting fucked heels-over-head?

When I finally come down from my high, he’s got his belt off, and his pants are down. He sinks into me with a growl, pushing my legs up to my chest. Thank god the workout getting up here loosened me.

“Fuck me, Chris. Just like we’re meant to be. I need to feel every inch of you.” I reach up and run my hand across his face, staring into his jade green eyes.

He bares his teeth, and thunder comes out as he comes in for a kiss, dragging his cock back to the tip before slamming it into me again. His balls clap my ass. They’re warm and puckered, making me think about how he’s going to flood my pussy all over again.

Oh, God.

“I’ll fuck you like you’re mine, babe, because you always were.” He deepens his thrust, picking up speed, making that delicious friction across my clit with his pubic bone. I whimper and melt into the motion, too lost for words, wondering if it’ll always be like this.

“You were built for my dick, and mine only, Delia. I can’t believe you’re still doubting this shit.” He moves his hips like he’s angry, and there’s a wildness in his voice. “You think we’re gonna get screwed over? Derailed? Torn apart?”

“No,” I whimper, but it’s not convincing enough.

I do have doubts. Dealing with the stepbrother and the SEAL part scares me. I never imagined becoming a military man’s girl, much less shacking up with my own stepbrother. What the hell am I supposed to do when he’s away on leave? I’d better get a mold of his cock or something.

“Say it like you mean it,” he snarls, fisting my hair and fucking me harder.

His hips crash into me like the angry Pacific, rattling my whole body with his energy, his need to dominate, to control, to possess. I don’t know whether to slap him across the face or orgasm on impact.

“Never, Chris. We’re solid. We’re lovers. We’re –“

“No, no, no, no.” It comes out like a mantra, perfectly timed to his next four thrusts, body shaking strokes that leave my clit humming and breasts flopping. “We’re meant to be, baby. I don’t give a shit if it’s crazy. I’ve never fucked anyone like you. Never wanted to spend time outside bed with a woman ‘til you got your little nails in me. I’m never letting go of this, and if anybody wants to pull you away, I’ll fucking kill them.”

Holy shit! His cock sinks deep, and he holds it there, then pulls back and begins power fucking me in quicker, shallower strokes.

There’s no holding back. He jerks my hair tight, pulling my lips to his, swallowing the pleasure that comes screaming out of me when my pussy clenches a second later.

Soon, I’m not the only one screaming. Chris buries his length to the hilt and explodes, pouring his essence into me, pumping so much come into me I wonder if my pill will even protect us. In the moment, it’s not such a sick thought. I’m thrilled by him knocking me up, taking full possession, owning me the same way he means with his words.

I know, I’m crazy. I know I’ll feel something different once the spell is over, but maybe someday, we could have kids together. Maybe I could call him my husband. Maybe the whole world won’t wag its finger at us for kissing,

passion, making love...

We come together, locked like animals, thrashing in the stray sand that's blown up from the beach on this high cliff. I'm grateful for his strong arms holding me down, or else I might roll right off it. It's not the widest space, but it's the most amazing place we've ever done this.

Or maybe it's just his body digging into mine, filling me completely. I come so hard, I see stars in the rolling, red blackness my eyelids have become. There's a current flowing through both our bodies.

I've never been into supernatural crap, but it's almost mystical.

His kisses soften as our bodies stop convulsing. His cock tips into me, forcing out a few last strokes of pleasure, the last of his seed. I can already feel it running down my ass, onto the ground below us like some kind of ancient mating ritual.

"I love you," I moan, when he finally lets me come up for air. Why is it still so hard to say it?

"You'd better. Whatever shit you're gonna say about me in your college paper's gotta be flattering."

I laugh, and once it starts, I can't stop. He hasn't even pulled out of me yet. Something about the scene is quintessentially Chris, and my heart throbs, finally understanding his strange, magical enigma.

It's everything I can't keep myself away from. Everything that's pulled me into his embrace, so tight and deep I never, ever want him to let go.

We kiss a few more times before he pulls out and cleans up, before he straighten our clothes. I carefully stand on the cliff, wiping the dirt off my butt. I'm about to roll my panties back on when he grabs me, fisting my hand by the wrist that's holding them.

"Save yourself some time and leave those fuckers off. You ought to know by now I'm not a once-a-day kinda guy. Let's go get some dinner, and then we'll pick up right where left off."

I blush, smile, and don't fight as he pushes the panties into my purse. I feel so vulnerable out here like this with nothing on underneath my skirt. But if there's any man who can make me feel secure, it's him, and tonight he's going to get whatever he wants.



LATER THAT WEEK, I'm eating with Evie and dad for the first time in forever. It's an awkward, tense dinner.

Nobody's talking since he tried to tell her about the latest crap with the airlines, some ups and downs in the stock prices making the shareholders nervous, all the worries I've heard a million times since I was a little girl.

Evie mutters incoherently and picks at her food. I down some extra wine so I don't explode, grab her by the hair, scream at her until she acknowledges my poor father fucking exists.

He's dying a little more day by day, and it's awful to watch. It's been months, and their relationship is already on fire. He can't take another collapse – I just know it. I look on sadly, feeling as if I'm replaying the last days of our family life before mom walked out and moved east, running off with her fitness trainer.

"Ladies, I'm going to be gone next week at the North American division conference I told you about. I trust you'll both be able to make do without me. I've got all the usual arrangements in place for the staff. And Cordelia, if you're going to have people over, please respect Evie's space. I don't want anyone coming upstairs to –"

Suddenly, the bitch slams her fork down, giving us both a look like a scolded cat. "Do you ever shut up and stop worrying, Bruce? You really think she's going to drag one of her little friends upstairs to disturb me with her fucking? She's too busy riding my son for that, and they like to keep it away from the house most nights."

I almost drop my empty wineglass. Dad gives me a look of total horror. It's the first time since mom walked out that I've seen him looking like he's staring down a ten ton train, heading right for him, ready to obliterate what's left of his miserable world.

"I don't know what she's talking about," I say weakly, clearing the nervous lump in my throat.

"Evie, Evie, Evie," Dad shakes his head, fighting off the nightmare image she just painted so vividly for him. "This is stress talking. You need to eat. Don't worry about these things, they aren't even real. Please, baby, do it for me."

He stands up, walks over, and throws an arm over her shoulder. It's such a pathetic scene my heart would've melted in my chest, if only it wasn't too busy pounding like a hummingbird on speed.

They almost caught me. And I *hate* the way I'm reacting, ice in my blood and cotton in my mouth. I thought I was ready to say fuck everybody, to bring my love for Chris out in the open.

But when I saw that look on dad's face...

My own fork slips and clatters, causing my parents to look up. Evie gives me another look, a cruel focus filling her eyes, all directed at me.

“I suggest you have a talk with your dear daughter, Bruce. She’s going to slip up one day, and then you’ll see the truth. I’m not imagining *anything*.”

“I’m sure if there were anything untoward happening, Cordelia would let me know,” he says softly, brushing aside her mad concerns.

He doesn’t believe her. Good. Too bad lying is the only thing holding me back from total disaster.

Evie grabs his arm and throws him off. She staggers up, throwing her napkin down over her half-finished food, and glares at my poor whipped father.

“Your little slut has some backbone, I’ll give her that. She’s woman enough to go after a man, even if he’s the last boy in the world she ought to be with. That’s better than I’ve gotten, I suppose.”

“Evie...shut up.” Dad’s eyes narrow. “If you call my daughter a slut again, I’ll drag you back to that goddamned doctor’s office, kicking and screaming if I have to. You’ve been through hell, and we’re all here for you, but that doesn’t give you the right to be such a...such a...”

Evie cocks her head and purses her lips. “Bitch? Oh, Bruce. I would’ve given you a kiss if you’d had the balls to finally say it. Whatever’s left of that pathetic shit between your legs will just have to crawl up your stomach when you finally see the truth. I’ll let *you* find out the hard way. You won’t have to hear it from me, hubby. Good fucking night.”

My eyes are on my food. I’ve totally lost my appetite, but it seems safe, just in case I decide to grab the nearest thing within reach and throw it at her vicious face.

Dad sticking up for me lends a shred of hope, but he can’t hold her off in the end. He rips out a chair and sinks angrily into his seat. We both listen to her heels clacking away, loud and lonely, like the hooves of some creature that just dragged itself out of hell.

With anybody else, I would’ve been exaggerating, but my stepmother really is a crazy bitch.

“Dad, it’s going to be okay,” I whisper, reaching for his hand and squeezing it tight. “Don’t listen to her. You defended me when she was accusing me of all that crap. You put her in her place.”

Well, almost, I think to myself, but of course I don’t say it. I’m not sure he’ll survive another blow to his fragile ego.

“I just don’t understand why they all go crazy in the end,” he growls, pulling his hand away from mine. He pushes both across his tense forehead, ruffling his salt and pepper hair. “This is worse than with your mother, honey. At least her affair...well, I saw it coming. I worked too many hours. I ignored her too much. I screwed up.”

I shrug. He’s beating himself up again, and I’m not going to hear it. Maybe there’s a grain of truth to everything he’s saying, but mom walked out on us both, and I haven’t gotten more than a Christmas card from her and the new dick she’s attached herself to every year since the divorce.

They moved across the country my last year of high school. Since then, it’s always been dad and his favorite daughter. I know I’m the only thing in the world he can count on.

For a long time, that went both ways.

We were happy. We were one little, imperfect, happy family.

Until Evie. Until Chris.

Now, she’s tearing out his heart in slow motion a few centimeters a day, and I’m lying to my own father for the last man in the world I should be falling for.

Jesus, what the hell is happening?

I shouldn’t have had so much wine trying to ignore the tension over dinner. I start tearing up, and next thing I know, I’m blotting at my eyes with my napkin. Dad looks more shocked than me, wounded because he sees me hurting.

It’s strange, guilt inducing, when I know he’s bleeding rivers inside. He’s just too proud to show it. However weak he is about calling her out, he keeps a shield around his own agony. The only times I’ve ever seen him cry are at funerals.

“Dad, you haven’t done anything wrong here. It’s all her baggage, and she has way too much of it. I’m surprised you want to keep fighting it...isn’t the writing on the wall?” I’m too gentle.

Another lump forms in my throat. I can’t bring myself to take him by the shoulders, shake him, tell him to divorce this fucking woman.

It’s his decision to make. But it’s also dishonest for me to want her gone when I have a very handsome, painfully emotional conflict of interest.

Chris keeps running through my mind now, even when I shouldn’t be focused on anything except dad’s screwed up relationship with his mom.

“I can’t give up yet,” he says coldly. “The only thing worse than a middle aged executive whose name gets dragged through the mud every time the airline cuts costs is a middle aged executive with mud on his face and two divorces behind him.”

“I just want you to be happy,” I say softly, and I really mean it. “I’m serious. You’ve done so much for me, and I’ll never forget it. Not as long as I live.”

Dad gives me a big smile and wraps his arms around me. “You’re so sweet, Cordelia. Thanks for being my rock, like always.”

I slowly let go, feeling him pull away. He looks past me, staring down the hall.

“Well, I guess I’d better go see if she’s going to keep me locked out tonight. Or she would, if I hadn’t had the locks removed on our bedroom door while she was in rehab.” He shrugs. “They said it’d be a long road to getting all the junk out of her system. Please don’t be too hard on her, honey, whatever nonsense she says. She’s not in her right mind. She can’t tell right from wrong, fantasy from what’s real. It’s my job to help her out.”

My fists tense at my sides, so hard my hands start to shake. He doesn’t even look back as he walks away, and I let out a heavy sigh, offering him one more burst of encouragement.

“Whatever makes you happy, dad.”

Happy. There’s that word again.

It’s like a bullet to the heart. My happiness will *never* be compatible with his – not when he finds out about Chris and I. And he’s going to, sooner or later. I’m going to slip up and spill it, or Chris’ SEAL courage will get the best of him, and he’ll march right up and tell our parents himself.

I’m not ready for that. I’m not sure if I’ll ever be.

Fuck. What does that mean?



It’s like I’ve just stepped out of a time machine. Marnie insisted on costumes and formal wear for the mid-summer party, and the entire house looks so elegant. Bows and bells are all over the place, orange-white stripes and red-white-and-blue, the wholesome décor of a simpler time.

The staff helped me set things up only hours ago, and the guests are already filing in. Dad’s going to be away over the weekend at his conference, just as planned. I struggle not to step on my long, flowing blue dress that reaches to the floor.

I'm anxious to see what Chris looks like. He's supposed to wear something military, and I'm sure he'll be dashing. Of course, the finery and pretend manners won't last once the dancing starts and the liquor flows. I expect it'll be about thirty minutes before people start to lose the costumes and disappear across the property, filling every little nook and cranny with their own private fucking.

It's my last year of college. I'm almost ready to move on from this wild, free spirited stuff, but going out with a bang a couple more times won't hurt, right?

There's a loud chime as I'm taking the stairs gingerly, one at a time, careful not to trip on my skirt and break my neck. I get to the door ahead of any staff.

When Marnie shows up with her tangerine man, she throws her arms around me, wearing something that looks it belongs in a lounge from the roaring twenties.

"Delia, darling!" she says in her best aristocratic accent, pecking me on each cheek. "Where's that handsome soldier boy of yours?"

The warm smile I greet her with vanishes. She's still eyeing my sexy, badass stepbrother a little too close for my liking, and tempting me to pull the big secret out of the closet too.

She knows we're doing more than just having drinks and taking walks as siblings. I force my sweetest smile, greet the gorilla next to her, and then lean in.

"He'll be by a little later, Delia. Why don't you go mingle with everybody else and get your man a drink for a change?"

"Fine, we'll do it your way." She rolls her eyes, walking past me without so much a second glance.

I'm about to head after her, hoping I can change the subject and smooth things over, when somebody grabs me by the shoulder.

I know it's Chris before we're face to face, and his lips are on mine. Nobody else puts his hands on me like this, like he already owns every inch of me. Nobody kisses like he does.

"Sneaky jerk," I whimper, when his tongue glides off mine. "Do they teach you that stuff in SEAL training?"

"Nah. Handling my woman comes naturally. I came ready for you tonight, babe." He steps back so I can get a look at his costume.

I almost faint on the spot like some goofy nineteenth century romance

heroine.

Swoon-worthy is the only word that fits. His clothes cling tight to the hard, tattooed muscle underneath. He's wearing an elegant white uniform that almost looks like a tuxedo, studded with more medals on one side than I can count.

The buttons part his magnificent chest neatly, and when I look up to his face again, I notice the final touch. I can't stop myself from laughing, more amazed than anything else.

"A *bow-tie*? Are you kidding me? Don't tell me – you added that yourself!"

He smiles and shrugs. "Guess you've never seen a SEAL's dinner dress before. You told me to look like a prince, yeah?"

"I meant something a little less modern." My hand flows out instinctively, flattening on his chest, slowly creeping down it. "I guess this'll do."

Yeah. Understatement of the century.

He makes me think of a sailor, a knight, and a classy billionaire all at once. If it wasn't for the tiny splash of ink sneaking out one cufflink, nobody would ever know about the animal underneath, the one I've met night after night, and desperately want to meet again.

"You said prince, beautiful. I figure this shit's about as antiquated as royalty. Not really my style, but orders are orders, and you're the CO of this bash tonight." He winks.

The heat between my legs officially goes nova.

God. I already want him to rip it off. Something about the thick, formal layers only accent the perfection underneath. It reminds me what he can do when he's got me under him, between his legs, fucking me with those powerful, unforgettable strokes that take me to another world.

"Shit, woman, sometimes I think you're hornier than I am." His eyes tell me I'm not the only doing the eye-fucking here.

With a growl, Chris takes me by the hand, and sneaks in a rough pat on the ass. I can barely feel it through the thick dress, but it's just enough to get me moving, gladly holding him by the arm.

The doorbell keeps ringing behind us, letting in more of Marnie's crowd. She handles all the party planning crap. I trust her because she sticks to the good kids, the ones who just like to drink too much and get down with their boyfriends and girlfriends. Nobody truly harmful who'd steal from us or light the house on fire ever gets in.

We saunter into the big dining room off the kitchen. The doors are propped open, leading out onto the pool deck. Frowning, I look through the window, and see several people have already lost their tuxedos and dresses, stripping down to bare essentials for swimming instead.

“That didn’t take long,” I say, tugging on Chris’ arm and pointing.

He grins and laughs. “What? You expect people to wander around out there in these getups and bake underneath the sun? Stripping to cool off comes with a high summer party’s territory, Delia.”

I elbow him gently. I don’t like it when he chides me, even though he’s completely right. He’s so damned bossy and sure of himself. He knows it doesn’t take much to get me wet, and I hate it almost as much as I love it.

“Aw, don’t give me that sass,” he growls. “Let’s stop worrying about everybody else and enjoy ourselves.” Before I can say anything else, he jerks me over to the alcohol, where I let him serve me a glass of punch.

He’s strangely lit today, humming to himself as he does. It’s like the weight of the world is off his shoulders. Or is it another kind of tension? Something I’m seeing underneath the surface, but can’t quite pin down?

It’s hard to study his face without feeling everything below my waist go hot. This damned dress makes me like a dozen times more hot and bothered too. It won’t be long before I’m begging to lose my panties if this keeps up.

“Drink up. Cool off.” Smiling, he shoves the punch into my hand, and gets himself a glass of beer from the huge keg next to the table. “I want you to loosen up. We’re dancing when it kicks off later.”

“No way!” I almost choke, coughing strong punch down the wrong tube. “Chris, I don’t dance. Not when I’m wearing this!”

I look down, and he laughs at me again. It’s all the signal he needs to grab me by the waist and pull me into him. For just a second, I see that spark in his eyes.

It’s not just my imagination. It’s *different*, but I’m not sure if it’s because we know we’re in love, or because everything we’ve built is about to come crashing down.

“You danced with me our first night. Remember how good we felt together on the beach?”

His hand slides down my hip, cups my ass through the waves of blue, and squeezes. *Oh, shit.*

“That...wasn’t exactly...dancing. It’s going to be crazy tonight, Chris. All

these drunken people spinning around, trying to dance to classical.”

Well, at least for one song. Knowing Marnie, the waltz will be a short-lived prank, before she falls back on the usual hip-hop, dubstep, and rock.

“Bullshit,” he growls into my ear, clenching my ass cheek harder. It makes me think about all the times he pulls me open, pushing his tongue into me from behind, and I shudder. “You dance just fine when you’re skin to skin. I know you can do it dressed up with me too. Have a little confidence. It’s like you really think all these skanks are prettier than you.”

His free hand sweeps over my face, tucking a stray lock over my ear. “I’m not having it tonight, Delia. This is our big blowout. You’re *mine*, and I don’t give a shit if everybody knows it. I want every asshole jock here to eat his fucking heart out when he sees your lips on mine. I want ‘em to shake their girls all night because they’ll be jealous, thinking about us.”

“Chris...” I’m speechless, and he pushes a finger over my lips, signaling he isn’t done.

“I want everyone to see how goddamned amazing you are, how lucky I am, how hard I’m gonna fight if anybody ever comes within sniffing distance of what’s mine.” He pauses to kiss the nook between my shoulder and my ear, and my hips instinctively tilt into his. “That’s you, babe. All mine. Forever. No going back.”

Crap. How the heck are we supposed to dance when I’m already coming apart?

“We’ll figure out some way to tell your old man later on, when he comes home. For now, we’re coming out as a couple. I’m claiming you for everybody to see, Delia, and I don’t give a shit if they’ve heard me call you sis.”

My heart sputters, tries to stop about ten times, before I can finally catch my breath. His iron grip releases me, and I stumble away, eyeing more punch. I need a break, a distraction, before I lose my mind.

I never imagined half the things he’s saying coming out of his arrogant mouth. But today he’s so sweet, so humble. What’s going on? Is this real life?

“Why tonight, Chris? Why now?” I ask softly, letting him ladle more drink into my cup. “There’s something up, isn’t there?”

“It’s nothing you need to worry about. Unless you count all the ways you’re gonna batten down the hatches before I fuck you through the floor tonight.” His smile sharpens, and that hunger in his green eyes I know all too well turns them into spotlights. “You think we light it up every night we’re naked? Just

wait ‘til you see what feeling your curves against me for a few more hours does before I’m balls deep.”

The thought makes me shudder. I can’t resist as he moves in for another kiss. My panties are past uncomfortably soaked, and it’s going to be a long haul to heading upstairs, or wherever the hell he plans to take me tonight for the grand finale.

“There you are! My, is it just the uniform, or do you two always do this?” Marnie’s voice sneaks up behind me, and I’m beet red by the time we break our kiss and turn around.

Shit. She’s in full gloat, staring at us like she just caught our hands in the cookie jar. Or just his rough hand on my ass like it belongs, his lips on mine, moving and drinking me in with the skill of a man who’s tamed dozens of girls before me.

“Good to see you too, Marnie,” Chris says. “We were gonna save it for the dance floor, but I guess you’ve got yourself an early preview. Here’s one more.”

My limbs freeze up as he pulls me in for another kiss. My palms slap his chest, wondering if he’s lost his mind. Something about having my snooty best friend watching us lock lips makes the heat greater, intense, moving through my body like lightning.

When he finally breaks away and I look up, her nasty smile is gone. She’s looking at us both like she wants to sink into the ground and die of shock – something I’ve *never* seen before. Marnie doesn’t do speechless – until now.

“Well? Any questions?” Chris beams at her. He won’t let up.

She shakes her head, still totally lost for words. I want to laugh, but he does it for me, chuckling in his rich, sexy baritone.

“Good, good. Now show us what’s happening out by the pool so we can get this party going.”



HOURS BLUR BY, and we’re still dancing. I’ve never needed him this badly, never been this turned on, never felt every inch of my body pleading to stay pressed so tight to his.

Heavy bass throbs in my ears each time I lift my head off his chest. Chris just presses it back down with a possessive growl, running his hands all over me, swinging me with grace and power across the pool deck.

When we first started, beneath the evening sun, all eyes were on us. I swore I

saw a couple people turn away in disgust the first time he put his mouth on mine, knowing we're stepsiblings, but everybody else broke into applause – even Marnie.

It's a strange, fantastic truth he's pulling me into. I don't want the fairy tale to end.

"You think if I hike up that skirt and fuck you right here, anybody will notice?" he leans in and rumbles in my ear, clasp my ass as our bodies lurch together one more time.

"I'm not an exhibitionist, Christopher," I gasp back, hoping the long, formal version of his name might slow down the beast dragging his hands all over me, grinding my hips into his in a way that already resembles full on fucking.

He's right about one thing – everybody else is too wasted to notice. We're one of the only couples left out here since nighttime came. Everybody else is off lounging by the pool, floating lazily with a drink in their hands, or finding some quiet corner to get hot and heavy.

It's young lust and revelry at its finest. Sex is in the air, but it's really his scent that's completely intoxicating.

"Fuck." His hands pinch my ass tight, so hard I can't help but roll my pussy against the insane ridge in his trousers. "You call me Christopher again, and you're gonna get another spanking, girl. I won't even wait 'til we're out of sight neither."

"Yeah? How do you know Evie isn't watching us from some window, perched up there like a cat?"

It's a legit worry. I haven't heard from the bitch all day, not since dad left. It's almost *too* quiet with this party going on, after the threats she made.

Chris just snorts, and shuts me up with another kiss. "Forget about her. She's probably too whacked out on her sleeping pills to know what a fucking window is, much less find us. Your old man's really a goddamned angel for putting up with her as long as he has."

I can't deny that. It also freezes my blood, wondering how dad will react to Chris and I. It's all but inevitable now, especially since my friends have seen him putting his lips all over mine.

Chris starts spinning me again, pulling me into him, turning me over and rocking his cock up and down the dress stretched tight over my ass. God, he feels good.

So amazing he carries me away from all this, lifts me higher than the worries trying to bury me. There's nothing that can come between us. He's staked his

claim, and I'm ready to catch hell to keep it, whatever it takes to keep me in his warrior embrace forever.

There's no more time for heady thoughts when he makes me bend over and grabs his hips. I flush for a second, embarrassed because we're dressed *way* too nice to be dancing out here like we're doing it doggie style. But I feel his hand across my thigh, and his thrusts grind my clit through all the clothing, cranking the firestorm in my blood to ten thousand degrees.

Damn! I *need* him to fuck me again, just as bad as I need a cool glass of water.

My hips start rolling back against his. For at least a minute, I'm honest-to-God twerking, and I wonder what kind of big slut he's turned me into.

My eyes don't want to focus through the sultry summer heat, the lust, the pleasure he's pushing through my system. I look up and see several drunken, grinning faces from the pool leering at us, frat boys and sorority girls alike.

Crap. I tear myself up, but Chris catches me, takes my hands in his, and he won't let go. He turns me around so I'm facing away from the crowd before it's right back into the same position, bent over and dangerously positioned against his unstoppable cock.

"We're not leaving this dance floor 'til you come for me, beautiful. I want you to lose it just like that first night." He leans in, brushing his sandpaper stubble across my cheek, breathing into my ear so hot I think I'm going to combust.

"Are you crazy?" I'm trying to be serious. Too bad *crazy* comes out as a moan when I feel his friction on my clit, pulling me deeper into this nasty, animal heat. "We can't do it out here! They're watching us."

"Let 'em." He's dead serious, and that's when I know I'm in too deep with a man who's totally nuts beneath his handsome exterior. "I meant everything I said after I got here, Delia. Everybody's gonna see us dance, baby, and I don't give a single fuck."

He rips me up, spins me in his arms, and my whole world shatters. One hand grabs my ass, stiffens me against him, and the other somehow shoots all the way underneath my skirt, slowly making its way up, down beneath my panties.

He shoves his fingers inside me, giving my clit a rough stroke with his thumb, before I can even protest.

Oh, God. Oh, fuck. Oh, no!

"Chris, it's too much. I can't come like this. I can't come standing up with everybody just staring at us..."

“Nobody’s seeing shit,” he growls. “You’ve got your back turned. Looks just like we’re dancing. And we are, babe. Bring it home. Give me your finest moves now, and I’ll give you mine all goddamned night. Deal?”

I lick my lips. My throat feels like a desert. I’m probably dehydrated from the sopping wet mess I’ve made in my pants, and my pussy still won’t stop creaming on his fingers.

He’s swaying me gently, moving his hand just perfectly. I still think the assholes behind us can see everything if they really look, but it probably looks like a gentle waltz, like two drunken, overdressed lovers at a wedding swaying to the rhythmic drumming pouring out the speakers.

Deal. I can’t say it, but it’s all I can think as he strokes my clit harder.

My knees buckle, ready to send me crashing to the ground, but the badass SEAL holds me up. Just when I think I can’t do it, he proves me wrong.

His lips come down on my mine. My body explodes. I come so hard I see stars, feeling my pussy clench around his fingers, fucking me with deep precision. My clit aches, burns, and pulses against his hand.

I fight crying out, but I end up doing it in his mouth instead. He devours my pleasure, and keeps stroking my cunt, a prelude to all the ways I know he’ll be taking me with his magnificent cock later tonight.

I’m literally collapsing by the time the storm passes. I fall down against him and he holds me tight, wiping sweat off my brow, kissing me more gingerly.

“J-Jesus Christ! I can’t believe you made me do that,” I stammer. “We’ve got to set some boundaries, Mister.”

He chuckles, low and masculine. Christ, even his laugh makes me burn for him, makes me want to drop to my knees and suck his cock right here in the open. I don’t know what the hell I’m turning into.

“You leave that to me, baby. I know where you’ve got your hard limits, and I’m gonna push them all.”

“But why?” I bite my lip and look into his eyes.

“Because you’re *mine*, dammit. You were a fucking virgin just a few weeks ago, Delia. I’m the only man you’ve ever had, the only one you’ll *ever* have. I’m going to burn these memories into you, leave you something to fuck yourself to every minute I’m overseas, taking care of business for Uncle Sam.”

My heart drops. Is that what he’s worried about? He thinks I’m going to run off with another man or lose interest when he isn’t around on those long tours

of duty?

It should piss me off. I want to believe I've earned his trust, but something about this chink in his armor, disguised in all his usual dirty language, feels sweet.

Regaining my strength post-climax, I stand up on my tip-toes and push my lips against his, kissing him with a whole new hunger. No, it's not just about his insecurities.

He's opening up to me right now by telling me this, showing me a single glaring crack in the ruthless testosterone I'm used to. My hand comes up, and I run it across his face, admiring his powerful jaw.

We kiss for several more minutes. My thighs shift together, desperate to lose these panties, hungry to feel him wedged between them.

"You know there's nothing to worry about, right? I don't know how I'll be a military girl, but I'll learn. You're worth it." Smiling, I tell him everything, hoping it's everything he wants to hear.

"These missions don't always go smoothly, babe. Sometimes guys get killed. Or captured. They might not come back for years." There's an edge in his voice like he's preparing me for something, like he knows we're about to run headfirst into the worst challenges a military love can face.

"Come on. I've done my research for that stupid paper I need to have drafted in a couple weeks. I have some idea what it's like for those poor military wives..."

He cocks his head, smug disbelief lining his lips. "You've got theory and no experience. Not yet. You really ready to put your life on hold for me? To accept there's a chance I might not come home at all?"

He's giving me one more chance to back out. For a second, it all swirls around in my head, foggy and anxious. Then I shake my head furiously, brow furrowed. I want to slap him across the face and tell him to pull it all together – I've been able to handle everything before, right?

Why the *hell* would I crack up now? I never, ever want to let go of this man, and I'm ready to face the threat that one day his job could make me.

I lean in and whisper in his ear, doing my best imitation of something I know he'd say. "As long as you keep bringing me off like you do, I'm ready for anything. Are we going to stand around talking all night, Chris, or are you going to take me downstairs and fuck me?"

His eyes light up and he laughs. "Good thinking, princess. Guess you've learned a thing or two about pleasing a military boy after all."



FIVE MINUTES LATER, my dress is falling off, and I'm pressed up against the wall. There's too many people lounging around the house or sleeping, so we sneak downstairs, into the basement.

Dad's wine cellar is always locked. Thank god, or else we'd probably find a few partiers down here, drunk and passed out in a puddle of thousand dollar booze.

We've got to be careful with all the bottles. There's a granite counter with a sink in the center, and that's where Chris makes me perch, tearing off my dress as he sucks at my neck.

"Come on. You can go faster than that. Get me naked." I rake my nails across his chest, so overwhelmed with need. "I have to feel you inside me."

Holy shit. It's like I'm in heat, and all I can think about is that dragon on his chest swaying while he fucks me, the trident moving across his muscular canvas like a lightning bolt.

"Working on it. I'm doing you a courtesy, babe, trying not to shred this fancy dress that's had my cock throbbing all night. We're gonna be doing this again."

"Who cares?" I hook my legs around his hips and run them along his strong ass, begging to feel him. Right now, I wouldn't give a crap if he tore it off me. "I'm a trust fund girl, you know, and a really kickass bargain shopper."

He stops, looks at me, and grins. "Suit yourself."

His powerful hands reach behind me and my mouth falls open as I hear the shearing sound of fabric. He *completely* tears my dress off, and flings it on the floor, moving his hands to my bra and panties next.

They're gone in a half a heartbeat. I'm trying to work on him too, but my fingers keep trembling like a prom girl's. I'm just too damned horny to get more than a few buttons off.

He moves his hands over mine, helps me do it quicker. The princely military suit he's been wearing all evening opens up and reveals the bad boy underneath. His inks fill my eyes, stamped on every rock hard inch of him. The delicious contrast between gentleman and bastard in his body makes my pussy tingle, and I help shove his jacket completely off him.

"All these wines," he growls, taking a quick look around. "Shame all I wanna taste in this damned room's right in front of me."

Without another word, he drops down, grabs my ass, and pulls me to his mouth. I'm clenching at the non-existing sheets the instant his tongue slides up my folds, picking up where his fingers left off, before rising to my clit.

"Chris!" I squeal, hoping the thick glass door sealing this room can contain us.

I'm amazed once again how quickly he unravels me. My muscles limber up, then tighten as the pleasure mounts, bound by his tongue smacking my clit again and again and again.

His green eyes are gazing up at me the entire time too. He pulls me tighter, halfway off the counter. Holding me up with his rough hands, he forces me to ride his face, introducing a whole new pleasure.

I should've gotten used to his tongue working its magic in Vegas. Or if not, then certainly all the weeks we've been fucking, but it still feels brand new, something I'll never stop wanting like it's our very first time.

He licks me deep, building to a crescendo, playing the tension in my body like a master conductor. My hips buck against his face as he growls and holds me down. The great wave I know all too well every time I'm with him rises up and swallows me whole.

Fire. Pleasure. Climax.

I come hard and cry out, digging my nails into his head, holding him so hard against my pussy I'm afraid he's going to suffocate.

Thankfully, SEALs are too tough to drown between a woman's legs. Chris just licks me more aggressively, sweeps his tongue across my clit while it's pinched between his teeth, carrying me through the brilliant, screaming storm.

I never know when I stop coming. When I open my eyes, he's naked and on top of me, shoving his cock through my wet silk. I feel his balls jerk to a stop against my ass, and my pussy twitches, flexing around him.

He's so fucking perfect. We're perfect, molded to fit together in the fullest carnal sense.

"There's a good chance I'm leaving soon, baby. Make tonight count," he growls, stopping to stamp his hot lips and stubble across my throat. He sucks the nook below my ear so hard I know he'll leave a bruise, and I don't care.

"What? There's a mission?"

"Never can tell. That's up to the higher ups. But I know when I smell shit going down, and right now it's an open sewer." He runs his hand through my hair, tugs my locks in one fist, and pulls, just as he rears back and drives his

cock into me again. “Fuck me just like that. Fuck me like you’re gonna take my dick when I finally come home. Let’s do this thing so hard I’ll feel like I’m already having homecoming sex.”

“Chris...”

I say his name softly, but the time for tenderness is over. All the wild energies from the party take over.

His cock slams into me again and again, so much force my hips flex off the table before smashing back into it. I pinch my legs around him, tighter than I’ve ever held him before. I love how he feels just gliding through my hot, wet pussy, straight up to my womb, and then coming down again, only to lunge forward and fill me all over again.

It’s rhythmic. It’s fiery. It’s so intense I’m on the verge of tears when he starts to grunt and tense up.

The wine cellar always feels a little humid, but tonight it’s a damned sauna. Sweat rolls off us in rivulets, and I impulsively rise at one point when he slows his strokes, kissing the drops off his chest.

He tastes salty, masculine, strong.

Just like the sea that keeps calling him away from me, the ocean that wants to pull him away from our love, into dangers I can’t comprehend.

His mouth covers mine, owning it. His tongue punches deep, fucking me with the same rough tempo in his hips. I kiss him back harder, sucking him as hard and long as I can, throwing my hands over his neck and digging my nails deep.

“Fuck!” he grunts like a wolf, and I see the killer instinct sparkling in his dark green eyes.

I thought our night was crazy before, but now I feel like a total psycho. A deprived, depraved, sexually famished lunatic. The only cure in the world is his cock, his come.

His sweat, his scent, his thrusts.

“Fuck me so hard it hurts,” I tell him, digging my nails into his neck. “Show me what you’ve got, Chris, before you take it all to the battlefield. I want you to break me. Leave me something to remember, no matter what happens. *Mark me.*”

I hear myself saying this crap, and I know I’ve lost my mind. But deep in my heart, it all feels right, and I realize I owe it all to him.

The virgin good girl died in Vegas. I’m his woman now, and I want to be

everything he wants, the brightest, most beautiful spark in his churning inferno.

He doesn't say a word. He starts fucking me faster, faster, *faster* than we've ever gone before.

His hands squeeze my ass so hard it hurts, lifting me off the granite countertop and slamming me back down again. It's probably going to lose a few bruises, but so what?

The pleasure arcing through my body overwhelms everything. His chest moves so fast the dragon moves like a comet. My arms and legs are burning, and it's hard to breathe. All the oxygen in my lungs drops out as the most intense orgasm of my whole life rips out.

"Chris!" His name rockets out before I'm overwhelmed. It takes all the energy in my body to squeeze out the last two words. "Love. You."

He's slamming me against the counter like a ragdoll, just as breathless as I am, right on the edge. My pussy clenches as his cock starts to balloon, a prelude to the fire about to fill me, hot come flooding my depths in waves.

He shoves his face against my neck, sucks my flesh into his mouth, and bites down. Hard.

The shock makes my explosion ten times harder.

I come like it's the last time. Ever.

A thousand futures roll before my eyes in a single heartbeat, all the futures with Chris I want and need. Pleasure roars like rising flames, crackling all around me, blinding me, fusing me to him.

I hear him grunt through the swirling chaos, and feel his seed split me in two. We're hooked. One.

Pumping, twitching, groaning, melting...

This time the ecstasy hits like a tornado, stronger and wilder by the second, pulling me deeper into its undertow. I can't let up, can't breathe, can't even recognize who the hell I am. There's just him and I, his cock and my pussy, plus about a million bolts of lightning tearing me apart.

Everything goes white. Then red and black. My clit feels like it's going to burst if it doesn't drown in his come first, overflowing all around us. I want to hold onto it, the pleasure and his seed, root it inside me while his cock continues to jerk, taking his last pleasure while my pussy convulses.

But I can't. I've come close to passing out a dozen times with him before, and this time I actually do.

Fuck.

SWEET DELIA (CHRIS)

“**D**elia! Wake the fuck up. This isn’t funny.” If I weren’t so freaked out, I’d slap her.

She’s been out for like five minutes, barely breathing. I’m about to spin around, pop one of these two hundred year old corks, and splash thousand dollar wine all over her face when she finally moans.

I wrap my hands around her and lift her up, kissing over the dark, red stamps my teeth left on her neck.

I’m not sure what the fuck I was thinking. The girl went crazy, completely loco on my dick. I matched her with my own mad thrusts, fucked her so hard she’d break. Now, I’m trying to make sure I didn’t short-circuit her whole system for real.

“Did I really black out?” she whines, running her hands down my chest.

I laugh and kiss her forehead. It’s slick with sweat and bathed in her hormones, some wild, feminine scent I can’t ignore. It also makes my dick throb like a greedy motherfucker, and right now I know she needs to rest.

“You scared the shit out of me. I was about to start CPR. Always fantasized about fucking a chick senseless, but it looks like the reality is something else.”

“Well, you were good. It was worth it,” she says, running her tongue gingerly along her lips.

Fuck. If some crazy bastard offered me a million bucks to hang with her like this without getting turned on, I’d lose in about ten seconds flat.

This girl’s a natural at getting me hard, bringing out the wild animal inside me. When we’re fucking, it’s like nothing else in the world matters – especially not the fact that she’s my step-lover, and I’m about to leave her behind for the most dangerous mission I’ve ever dealt with.

“You’re talking like it’s already over,” I tell her, teasing my lips against hers. “Let’s go upstairs and get you some water. Breathe some fresh summer air. We’ll pick this up in my room, and this time you’re staying with me through the whole damned thing.”

She laughs softly. Fuck, do I love that sound. If I have my way – and I will – it’s all I’m gonna be hearing when she’s around, nothing but bliss to make up for all the bullshit we’ve been through on our way here.

I throw on my pants and look for her underwear. I’ve destroyed one bra strap, completely snapped it in two. She gawks at me, trying to fix it on, holding one arm across her tits.

“You wanted me to leave marks,” I remind her. “Guess that extends to the clothing too. Save that shit for the long nights when you’re missing me. I’ll keep these.”

I stuff her cool, soaked panties into my pocket. She bugs her eyes out and laughs, shaking her head, unable to believe I’m not just screwing around.

I’m dead serious.

She’ll find out soon. These are coming with me all the way to North Korea, where the poor oppressed fucks have probably never seen a pair of sexy lingerie outside Dear Leader’s palace.

“Better get that dress on quick unless you want me to carry you upstairs naked.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” she says, lifting it off the floor and trying to struggle her way into it.

“Try me. I already got your pussy hot in front of about a dozen people.” I step toward her, reaching for her open dress, helping get it over her shoulders again. “You don’t know half the shit I’m gonna do to you, babe. You think you’ve seen anything? Give it a few more years. I’m gonna make you the sexiest chick on earth.”

She replies with a kiss, and I taste her as long as I can. It’s only a few seconds with the way my dick starts to ache, begging to plow her again, so I grab her by the wrist and we’re out the door.

She’s still laughing and brushing her fingers on my arm as we step outside.

I barely notice what’s in front of us, at first, too lost in the pleasure. That makes it so much fucking worse when I finally do.

When I see the bitch, Delia’s soft little nail strokes become tiny daggers.

“Mom?” I push her hand away, bowing up like I’m staring down a viper.

“What the fuck are you doing lurking out here?”

She smiles sweetly. Or, rather, imitates what Evie thinks a sweet, friendly smile looks like coming from normal people.

“Oh, you know how we all are with our phones these days, son. I’ve just been out here enjoying the show.” She flips through something on her screen, never shaking off that wicked ass grin. “Wow, and I thought the pictures I snapped upstairs while you two danced were pretty hot! Your father’s going to have a coronary when he sees these, Cordelia.”

Fuck! I want to run up, rip the phone out of her hands, and smash it into a million smithereens. But I already know how futile it is before her phone pings, and she opens her mouth again.

“Oh, that’s Bruce now,” she purrs, looking up at Delia. “He’s got the message, loud and clear. Looks like daddy’s coming home early from Atlanta. He wants to have a heart-to-heart with his son and daughter, and who can blame him?”

Delia’s little hand was shaking in mine before, but now it’s like she’s coming apart. I pull her tighter, step forward, between Evie and her.

“So what? We weren’t gonna keep this under wraps forever anyway. I was planning on telling her old man myself next week, but thanks for sticking your damned nose where it doesn’t belong once again, mother.”

The same green eyes I see staring back at me in the mirror jump around in her head. She’s pissed that I’m not more rattled. I won’t let her see that it’s taking all my military focus to hold it together right now, to avoid carrying Delia upstairs, jumping in my truck, and leaving this fucking asylum forever.

It’s not good enough for mom. She marches up, shoots her hand out, and slaps me across the face. It barely stings compared to the shit I’ve been through overseas, but it resonates through me like a fireball, threatening to turn everything I’ve built with my girl to ash.

I hear Delia snifle, feel her reach up with her free hand to wipe her eyes. The urge to put my own devilish mother out of her misery with my bare hands has never been greater than it is right now.

“You hit me like that again, and you’re going away in handcuffs. I’ll have the cops here in a heartbeat.” All my reason is hanging by a thread in those words.

“Sure you will, you dickless little shit. You’re just like your father. Not *man* enough to deal with me on your own terms. Always having to run away, or get somebody else involved.” She looks at the ground for a second and honest-to-God spits, before our eyes lock again. “You’re such an

embarrassment. You think you're stronger than everybody else, including the woman who suffered to squeeze you out? You think running around playing SEAL means everybody has to worship the ground you walk on, including this slut?"

Evie gestures at my girl with one bright green fingernail, and I swear I'm going to break it the fuck off. My muscles are totally wound up, ready to strike, ready to kill.

If only it were that easy. I've never learned how to handle her shit when she's this evil, and now she's just dropped an atom bomb on our heads.

I do the only thing I can. I turn around, squeeze Delia tight, cradle her in my chest. All the pain inside her comes ripping out. I push my fingers through her hair, a human wall between the psycho hellbent on ruining our promises.

"Uh-huh, go ahead, keep ignoring me, Christopher. Typical. You've got about – hmmm?" I hear her pause, as if she's checking the time. "Three hours until Bruce gets back. Better start packing. I'd tell you to bring the college girl with you, but something tells me there isn't room on base for her. Never mind the poor dear being a fish out of water without this glamorous life. I don't think she's ready to be without her father's riches and no man. She knows it's just a matter of time until you leave her to go on another mission to some God forsaken, savage land."

"Shut. Up!" Delia tears herself away from me and it comes tearing out. Before I can stop her, she puts her hands on my mother's shoulders, and pushes her hard.

"Why are you such a freak? Why!? Is it the drugs? Why do you think it's your place to get between our love?"

I'm ready to restrain my mother, expecting her to fight back. Instead, she just straightens herself and smooths her skirt, the same freakishly calm smile on her lips.

Sonofabitch. I wonder what the hell she's got pumping in her system now, giving her this cruel, otherworldly focus.

"Dears, I haven't had so much as a non-alcoholic beer since leaving rehab. I'm completely sober. That's what's so amazing about this – I can see how insane this...this *thing* between you is. How wrong, how confused you both are. And I'm going to put a stop to it. It's taken me a long time to save myself, and now I'm ready to save my family too."

It's so goddamned eye rolling I almost go blind. So, she's in her manic phase today, up on her high horse, ready to swing her sword and take everybody

else's heads off for her own ego.

"And Cordelia, if you ever put your hands on me again, Christopher won't be the only one calling the cops," she says with a smirk. "Haven't you done enough damage by fucking your own stepbrother and destroying your father's fragile psyche? Are you really going to make him pick you up from jail too?"

Delia looks like she's going to explode. I need to shut this fucking demon up, before she gets us right where she wants us, in too deep. She wants us to hurt her so she can play victim. I'm not gonna let that happen.

"Get out of our way," Delia snarls, walking several paces ahead, stopping just short of Evie in the hall.

"What's the matter? The basement was perfectly fine while you were defiling my wine cellar, kids."

"Move, mother. I won't ask again."

"Then knock me to the ground, big boy. Throw me flat. I know you'll try to get in touch with Bruce and twist his righteous anger into supporting this sick fling you're both enjoying. I'm going to make good and well sure you're truly separated."

I'm about to push past her and pull Delia with me when she lunges. The crazy bitch goes right for my eyes with her jade fingernails, and I twist away. Delia and I both catch her, shove her, fling her so hard against the wall she hits with a loud smack.

I'm surprised there isn't a hole in the drywall. Mom spins, sputtering, one hand near her abdomen like she's got a broken rib.

Shit.

"Now look what you've done," she growls, pressing her fingers gingerly into her side and wincing. Delia's hand goes clammy and cold in mine as we watch her dial something on the phone, lift it to her lips, and start talking.

"Hello, Sheriff? It's Evie Cleveland at the Burr estate. There's an emergency here. Yes, Bruce and Evangeline Burr, that's..."

She starts rattling off our address. I jerk Delia forward before my asshole mother can block our way again. We're flying upstairs.

She's in full tears, barely able to move, so I hoist her up and carry her. The house is completely dark upstairs, but it doesn't stop me from leaping over drunken stragglers on the ground, heading for the garage.

"Jesus, Chris, what's going on? What are we going to do? We're *fucked*."

I clench my jaw. It's the last time I ever want her saying that word unless there's something sexy behind it.

I don't say a word until I throw her in the passenger seat and start buckling her seat belt. She isn't protesting anymore by the time I start the engine. The slowest garage door in the world opens, and I'm tearing down the long, winding road downhill.

My fingers tap the alert for the snob in the guardhouse over and over again, but he isn't opening shit. I stop next to his window for about three seconds.

A single look inside tells me everything I need to know. He's standing up at full attention, a stern look on his face. He doesn't even open his window, just shakes his head and points back at the house, one hand near the taser on his hip.

He's got balls for wanting to tango with a Navy SEAL in full combat mode, I'll give him that. Tonight, balls aren't enough.

"Baby, hold on."

It's all the warning I give her before I floor it. The guard panics, shouts, and then there's nothing at all but the screaming crunch of metal-on-metal as my truck smashes through the gate.

Delia bursts into tears all over again and covers her face. It takes us a full minute on the open road, roaring down it like we're riding a bullet, before she starts laughing.

"What's so damned funny?" I snarl, trying to decide where the hell we should go. I remember the mid-tier motel the navy set us up at, and I start heading in that direction, wondering if my beautiful girl's truly lost her mind.

"It's nothing," she says, wiping at her tears. "I knew what we're doing is wrong, Chris. Taboo. But I never thought it'd make us wanted. How many laws did we just break? How long before Evie sics the entire city PD on us?"

It's a good question, and I don't know the answer. All I can do is reach across the space between us and clasp her hand. I don't let up 'til we're in the hotel parking lot, ready to see if they've got any spare rooms.

Fuck me. This isn't how I imagined my last night going before deploying to Korea.



AN HOUR LATER, we're holed up in a room with the AC on full blast, and Delia still feels like she's melting. I've got her on my lap, stroking her hair, doing all I can calm her down.

She's panicked. The poor girl's never had to deal with the cops before, much less being a possible accomplice to property destruction.

Whatever, I plan to turn myself in. I'll shell out the money to replace Bruce's gate myself. I doubt her old man will let her get in hot water too, and between his money and my commander's national security excuses, none of us are going to be serving any time or drowning in debt.

I've already placed a call to base. Commander Jones was irate, but he's more worried about me missing the flight tomorrow morning than my bullshit antics.

Too damned bad. I've got my connections, and I'll use 'em to help us both. Only thing I regret is having Delia sitting there listening to the call, overhearing the gravity in our voices when we're talking about *tomorrow*.

It sets her off all over again, and I've been trying to unwind her for the last twenty minutes. It's the first time I've been able to put a cap on that raging hunger in my blood each time her body's against mine.

I still want to fuck her. I *always* want to fuck this chick, through tragedy and triumph, morning, noon, and night. But I want her heart to slow down first, and I want to taste her lips on mine without so many salty tears in the way.

"Goddammit," she moans, shaking her head for the thousandth time. "What if this was all a big mistake? I have a really bad feeling about what's going to happen when we leave this hotel room."

My finger flies to her lips, and I push it in hard, right down the center.

"Quiet. You're whipping yourself into a frenzy, babe, and as shitty as this all is, it's gonna blow over. I don't want to hear anything else leaving your lips unless it's to talk about our future after I get back, or how much you still love me despite the way I've put you through the grinder."

Her eyes flash, warming the cold glazing her soft brown rings. The death grip she's got on my neck loosens, and she pulls her nails more softly over my skin. It's the same soft touch that makes my heart pound and my blood sing, especially when she does it to my cock.

I can't help it anymore. I push her face into mine, and our lips collide, hot and passionate as ever.

I already feel better, and I know she does too. There's nothing – absolutely nothing in this fucked up world – that's gonna come between us.

Not my bitch mother. Not her spineless daddy. Not even all the rifles, barbed wire, and grenades I'll be dealing with tomorrow while my team infiltrates a North Korean missile base.

When she's trembling, her whole body begging for breath, I finally break the kiss and grab both sides of her head. I hold her just like that, steady, forcing her to look into my eyes with total crystal clarity.

"I'm coming back for you, babe. Fucking count on it. We'll get through this. Every last bit of it. I'm not drawing my last breath 'til you're wearing my ring someday, and we've got a couple kids in our family portrait."

Her mouth trembles. She tears up all over again. But this time there's a smile, and that's what I kiss next. It's all my lips are able to focus on for the next hour, 'til we hear the banging at the door.

"Police!"

"San Francisco PD! Open up!"

We share a long, agonizing look. Then I take her soft hand in mine and we stand up together, walking toward our fate, one more bump in the road to our happy ending.



WE NEVER EVEN SEE A PROPER cell. Delia's pulled off to a separate room at the police station, and later I see her walking out behind the glass, a very angry looking Bruce at her side. It's the first time I've seen her old man oozing more emotion than a steamed turnip.

The commander shows up about an hour later. He drives me back to base and tells me he's made arrangements to have my truck taken to a trusted chop-shop he knows.

It'll be coming totally out of my own pockets since I was the reckless asshole. Never thought I'd look forward to receiving hazard pay.

The next forty-eight hours are a blur of briefings, intermittent sleep, and a whole lot of nervous bullshitting with my teammates. We're in the transport with two more SEAL teams by dawn, heading for Okinawa, Japan, our last stop before enemy territory.

There's going to be a jump to get our feet on Nork soil.

I've practiced it plenty of times in training, but this is the first mission where the sky'll be carrying us down like deadly razors, into the gauntlet.

Fuck. I need to stay sharp. I need to let my blood crystallize into ice. Becoming a killer robot for the next twenty-four hours is the only way I'm sure I'll make it home alive, the only thing that's never failed me.

But I can't keep my mind off Delia.

Even when the commander's pushing us out the transport, parachutes and survival gear strapped to our backs, she's on my mind. There's a cold, dismal rain spattering down on us while we're falling, and it's hard as hell to make sure we're on target.

Everybody lands in one piece just a few paces outside the missile base perimeter. Guys hit the ground running, heading for the fence to plant the charges so we can break through.

That's when everything goes to shit.

The whole place lights up and the bastards are screaming, firing at us from their guard towers. I watch a couple guys get mowed down in a bloody mess – critically wounded or worse – just as they're blowing their way through the barbed wire fences.

“Go! Go! Go! Execute Red Justice,” Commander Jones roars into the radio, the only thing that's blasting in my ear over the gunfire, the cold rain, and the howl of angry, foreign voices.

I almost run straight into another explosion. It's an airstrike from overhead that takes out the guard towers, and lights every corner of the base on fire.

We're heading for the silo control station, the antiquated little building where they still control all their shit like it's the cold war. It's a thick concrete bunker lined with deadly weapons, but we've caught them by surprise.

Two scrawny soldiers in dark gray and red star fatigues come running out, shooting wildly. I cut them both down without even looking into their eyes. That's how it's done. I don't have time for guilt.

I've handled terrorists on missions before. They're all passionate, crazed devils who die like true believers.

Dealing with these Koreans is different. Most of the poor bastards here are brainwashed conscripts, cogs in the machine, malnourished and forced into our deadly fire by nothing but blind fate.

There's no time for sympathy or morals on the battlefield. It's kill or be killed, just like always, and I don't hesitate when it's them or me.

This is survival. This is for Delia. It's supposed to be for my country, my duty, and it is, but the only motivator I've got is probably crying her eyes out in a Bay Area mansion.

I can't leave her there.

Tommy, Brandon, and several other guys plow forward on my command, hurling their charges inside the bunker and clearing anything inside. We move

fast. It takes less than ten minutes to break into the control room and wire the whole place up.

There's still gunfire and blasts happening outside, shaking the concrete walls like a tornado, but it seems to be tapering off. I run my hand over my face while the commander does the final checks.

We might actually make it out of this alive, as long as we can beat their reinforcements, undoubtedly streaming in from all directions by now.

We'll find out later if the mission was a success, if it hasn't triggered a wider war. Seoul and a hundred other cities across the peninsula might be burning up right now, and the DMZ could be a total wreck, but we've done our jobs here.

"Coordinates?" I hear the commander bark into his field piece. "Roger. We'll be there in four minutes."

All the guys inwardly sigh with relief when we see our officer waving us out. The coast is clear. We just have to get to the center of the base where the other teams are working like dogs to clear a landing site for the choppers, and then we'll be on our way.

The commander lights a cigarette and watches intently as we all work to help the other team sweep up the debris. The rain picks up, and so does the wind. It's hard to hear the choppers over the storm.

Not 'til they're right on top of us.

Huge, whirling helicopters descend at last. Men pile on the first helicopter as soon as it hits the ground. It takes off without a hitch. The commander and I are the last ones to board number two with our team, and soon we're soaring.

I can't fucking believe it. I let myself think about Delia again, and I clasp my knees as the realization sets in that we're all in one piece.

It's a good thing I do because half a second later, I'm upside down. There's a noise like shearing metal, and I see the Commander suspended in the air, the last of his cigarette dropping out of his mouth like a cartoon character whose jaw is about to hit the ground.

But there's nothing funny about this. There's a terrible sound a thousand times louder than a car accident, and everything goes black.

When I wake up, my head hurts like a motherfucker. There's a bright, brutal light; too warm and too close to be the sun. I can't figure out what it is 'til I hear the strange, cold voice.

"Cleveland? You are conscious, yes?"

I open my eyes, thinking I'm in a military hospital.

No, that isn't right.

No US field hospital ever looked this shitty, with cracks in the walls and rusted out furniture. I try to move, and something jerks against my hands. It's the same with my feet, totally pinned down to the old chair.

There's a sharp dressed Korean man with spectacles in front of me, red stars on his uniform, and the icy stare on his gaunt face they all seem to have.

"You've been taken prisoner as an imperialist intruder in the peace-loving Democratic People's Republic of Korea. You will tell us everything about what happened before the crash. Do you understand?"

His monotonous, awkward English fades out. All I can hear are my own thoughts pounding in my head, over and over, a mantra that kicks off the savage torture I'm about to face.

Delia, forgive me.

ALONE (DELIA)

24 Hours Earlier

“DAD...” I lick my lips and swallow, clenching my hands neatly in my lap, staring at the madman across the kitchen table. “Before you say anything, I need you to know this was never meant to be malicious. I don’t know what she’s been telling you, but –“

“Cut the shit.” His hand moves through the air like a knife, and I’m instantly silenced. “Evie didn’t have to say anything. I saw it all, the way you were tangled with him, defiling our home. Jesus Christ, Cordelia.”

Dad’s face softens, but only because he’s so disgusted. He can barely bring himself to say it. I watch him spread his hands on our big table, and they’re shaking, overwhelmed by the memory of what he saw on the screen.

My eyes burn when I look at him. I cross my arms, angry, vowing that I won’t apologize. I don’t care how hard he hits me with those puppy dog eyes.

“I’m trying to understand,” dad says softly, running another clammy hand across his face. “What the hell drove you to this? You’re a beautiful college girl in your prime, honey. You could’ve had any boy on campus. Why Chris? He’s strong, he’s ballsy, and I get that. But I also know he’s a complete bastard, and he can’t be any better with his women.”

Dad’s anger matches mine. I can’t help but soften because he’s hurt, thinking Chris really did shred my honor or something ridiculous. I don’t blame him, but he doesn’t get it.

“We’re in love, dad.” The words just fall out.

Am I really trying to explain my love affair with my badass stepbrother to my own father?

Yes. Yes, I am.

“Love.” He repeats it, sounding so neutral, giving me a shred of hope. “Goddammit. Evie was right. Look, Cordelia, I don’t know what he’s done to you or what kinds of thoughts he’s put in your head. She told me he has a way of doing that.”

There goes that hope.

“What!?” Dad tries to reach for my hand, and I push him away, jerking back in the chair. “It isn’t like that at all, dad! I’m not some stupid little girl who decided to throw my panties at the first handsome jerk who gave me the time of day.”

Okay, maybe that isn’t quite true. But what I feel for Chris deep inside is *real*, and I shouldn’t have to explain it, or make any apologies.

“We love each other. We really do. We were coming out at the party, the night Evie sent you those pics. Sure, we got carried away, and it happened way more messy than we meant. We planned to sit you down when you came home, tell you all about us.”

His face goes pale. I watch him slick back his hair again, looking like some middle aged broker who’s just watched his favorite investment plummet on the ticker.

“I’m worried about you, honey. For real. I think you need some help.”

His last sentence reaches through my chest and strangles my heart. That’s it. I’ve had my fill. I can’t sit here a second longer and listen to this slimy, sympathetic crap – especially when I know it’s *her* twisting him.

Evie’s going to ruin everything if she has a chance.

“I’m not crazy. There’s only one person in this house who still needs help, and I wish you could see it.”

Dad’s brow furrows. “If you’re talking about my wife, frankly, she’s turned out to be the sanest all this time. I only wish she’d brought this thing between you and Chris to my attention sooner. I would’ve stopped it before it became a bigger problem.”

“Stopped it? Like, you think you get to control who I choose to love?”

It’s dad’s turn to get up. He steps toward me, trying to twist his face into a mask of concern, but I only see anger. Shame. Bitter disgust.

“You don’t love him, Cordelia. That’s bullshit. You’re not going to wreck your life with some kid who’s too busy chasing skirt when he isn’t getting shot at. There’s about a month left of summer. Before you head back to

campus, he's going to be out of your system, one way or another. I don't care how much in therapy fees I've got to throw at it."

Therapy fees? He wants to force me to go to a fucking shrink?

Something inside me snaps. I'm channeling Chris when my hand shoots up and my middle finger pops out. Dad stares on in shock, his mouth hanging open, too stunned to say anything else.

"Fuck you, dad. This is my choice. Not yours. I only decided to sit down and talk about it as a courtesy. I thought we were both adults." I pause and sigh, readying the final blow. "When Chris gets back, we're taking off together. I'll move in with him while I'm waiting for the proposal. If you settle down and get over yourself by then, maybe I'll send you an invitation to the wedding."

I stop right there. He's not the only one who's paralyzed. I'm seething, too angry to do anything else except march past him and towards the stairs, heading for my room.

I'm up on the second floor before I hear him running after me. "Delia! I didn't excuse you. We're not done talking about this yet!"

Yes, we are. I keep going, straight to my room, and slam the door behind me.

He doesn't have the balls to come after me. The wicked contrast with my father's weakness makes me think about Chris, and it hurts.

I can't stand it. I wonder where he is, what he's doing, if he's still alive. He wouldn't come out and say it, but I know he's on a dangerous mission. And it's a special kind of hell when I need him more than ever.

I'm so confused. So alone. So trapped, caught between this screwed up family and the last man on earth I ever expected to care so fucking much about.

There's no denying it, though, especially when he's on my mind every waking second, the whole reason I'm fighting with my dad like never before. The only person on earth who ever loved me and pursued me like a lion is thousands of miles away, doing God knows what, and I need him more than ever.

I'm not a religious girl, but I stare out my window and pray that night. I ask whatever gods or forces of nature are out there to protect him, bring him back to me, mend our hearts.

I can't lose him now. And I'll never let another human being tear him away from me either.



THE NEXT COUPLE days are a blur. I throw myself into my work, finishing up my seventy page research draft in a matter of hours.

It's a good thing too, because the professor is hounding me again. But this time it's because he likes the synopsis, and he's eager to see if the rest of it lives up to his high expectations.

I make myself scarce. I hear Bruce and Evie talking in the hallways, muttering about me, adding their voices to this sick, dark cloud that's descended over our house.

As far as I'm concerned, it's all in their own damned heads.

All my worries are focused on Chris, Chris, and only Chris. I haven't heard a thing for several days. I keep watching the news, eyeing the Middle East and Asia especially, two hotspots that are always ready to blow.

I'm worried. I wonder if he's in some desert hellhole, alone and dying of thirst, or if he's gotten himself locked up in some third world prison.

Will he ever be the same if he comes home with a broken body, mind, or spirit? Will the same man come back to me?

I'm starting to understand all the agonies of a military wife, and we're not even married.

It's hard to admit it to myself, but I wish we were. I want to be his, for the rest of my life, and if worrying about him being a super soldier thousands of miles away is the price, then I'm willing to accept it.

I'm ready to suffer for this man, the same way I know he'll hurt for me too. I only hope whatever he's gotten himself into now still lets him return in one piece.

It's late evening before I go downstairs for dinner. I think about going out, but it's after ten thirty, and I'm not keen on driving into the city after dark with limited pickings.

I find some leftover curry from my parents' dinner and reheat it, grabbing a coconut water on my way out. Maybe I'll go out for a run around the property, burn off this energy and tension knotting up my muscles.

It's not just the constant worry about Chris that's leaving me on edge. This is the first week he hasn't given me a good, hard fucking since Vegas, and my body reminds me how much I miss it.

I'm wearing the same panties I did on our first trip now, and they're making me wet. I sit down on the patio next to the pool and tuck into my food, trying to savor it.

Anything to get my mind off being wrapped around that bad boy's body, clinging to his muscles, remembering each and every way he drove between my legs like he owned every inch of me...

Shit.

I'm still in la-la-land when she steps in front of me. My desire instantly flicks out the second I see Evie, the last person in the world I ever want to think about when I'm horny.

"What do you want?" I snap, looking at the dark green liquid in the cocktail glass she's brought with her. "Did you come out to hide your booze from my dad?"

So much for being sober. That lasted about a week, if the lying bitch wasn't just hiding her drinks from us the whole time.

"Of course not, dear. He'll be out here to join us in a few minutes. My request. It's a cool, pleasant summer evening, isn't it? I want to put this all behind us as soon as I can, Cordelia."

"So you've decided you're okay with Chris and I together?" I'm not surprised when she rolls her eyes, but I can't figure out what the hell she's getting at.

"Okay with incest? Ha!" Evie flashes me that man eating smile and steps up, cranes her neck down, way too close for comfort. "You know there are a thousand other boys out there to fuck, right? I've done plenty of it in between my husbands. Sometimes during them too. Grow up, little Delia."

"Back off." It's all I can manage.

I swear, if she doesn't get out of my face, I'm going to slash my nails across her cheek and push her to the floor. I can't stand this insufferable, controlling, vicious witch, the first person in my life who makes me want to get violent.

"Ah, there's your father now, coming down the hall." She takes a long sip of her drink and looks up at the long windows through the gardens, stretching out to the pool and the scenery beyond. "You're in deep shit, missy. Don't say I didn't give you a chance to drop this stupid fling before it got messy."

Next thing I know, her hand moves and there's a sound of glass shattering below us. Something cold and sticky splashes me, and she rocks back, like I punched her.

What the fuck? I bolt up, and it's only then I realize she threw her own drink in her face.

She's wailing by the time my dad runs up, staggering around like she's blind. And I *know* that's bullshit. Glass shards are all over, crunching underneath my

flip flops, the only proof of her psycho act besides the drink that splashed us both.

“What’s going on?” my father yells, pulling her into his arms and shooting me a dirty look. “Christ, do I smell whiskey? Midori?”

“It’s horrible, Bruce! I only came out to talk. Things got a little heated, and she threw her drink right in my fucking face. I’ve got it all over me! This poison, after I’ve tried so hard to be good. I just –“

She stops herself as my dad crushes her into his chest. I listen to her exaggerated blubbing for the next thirty seconds, too shocked to roll my eyes.

“Come on, darling. Let’s go in and get you cleaned up.” He takes her hand gently, wiping the drink off her face with his sleeve, before he looks at me again. “As for you, Cordelia...we’re way past disappointed. I expect you in my office in thirty minutes. Don’t try to leave. This time, the gate stays shut. Don’t even think about getting any bright ideas from your brother. If you wreck anything around here, if you damage my property, I won’t be bailing you out next time.”

They turn and start heading for the house. No fucking way.

I run forward, stamping my feet, feeling several shards of glass stuck to my shoes. Ugh.

“Dad – wait! She’s lying to you! I watched the bitch come out with that cocktail and throw it in her own face. She’s nuts. Rehab hasn’t helped her a bit.”

Evie makes an exaggerated whimpering noise and then rips her face off his shoulder, wailing into the open. It’d be embarrassing if it weren’t so sick.

Dad stops, turns around, and gives me a look like he’s ready to kill. “Cordelia, shut your damned mouth. You’ve already said enough about my wife. I can’t believe I trusted you once. You’re in *no* position to judge anybody else’s relationship when you’ve been bedding your own goddamned brother.”

I’m not sure what’s crueller – his words or his glacial tone.

I stop in my tracks and watch them go inside, her clinging to him, and him holding onto her every miserable word. It’s an open sky tonight, just a little after sunset, the stars struggling to come out through all the Bay Area’s intense light pollution.

For once, I know how they feel in the infinite blackness. I’m being suffocated in my own home.



DAD'S WAITING behind his desk, angry as an interrogator. I've rarely seen him like this outside the office, and right now, he's all angry executive.

"Dad, before you start, I –"

"This isn't about you, Cordelia. Not anymore. This is about the good of our family, and a future you're too damned immature to deal with. You *won't* be seeing any more of Evie's son. If he steps foot on my property again, I'll have him thrown behind bars."

Oh, this is starting out great. So now he's going to treat the love of my life like a fucking criminal?

"You're overreacting. She's playing you dad, playing you *again*. I can't believe you're so blind. Evie was in my face a little more than a week ago, calling me a slut, and you stood up for me."

Dad purses his lips. His eyes darken, and he folds his hands, giving his knuckles a swift crack.

"She was right. I was wrong. The only thing I regret is how blind I was when she tried to warn me about her screwed up, piss poor excuse for a son. I gave him the benefit of the doubt because of what he does for this country. I let my guard down, and yours too."

"But dad..." I pause, hating how determined he sounds. I can't believe he's already made up his mind on lies. "It's not like that. You have to talk to Chris, let him explain. He'll tell you everything from his point of view. You'll see he's not just trying to get me into bed."

"Oh, give me a goddamned break, Cordelia." He rolls his eyes and sits back in his chair. "I've heard it all. I know what these Navy guys are like, especially the elites. They'll tell a woman anything she wants to hear. It's not about love. Even if I thought he was Prince-fucking-Charming, he's still your stepbrother, and I'm not going to have my colleagues staring at me like I'm some kind of fruitcake who thinks anything goes with his daughter."

"I'm not a little girl anymore," I shoot back, digging my nails into my thighs so hard it hurts. "You can't control me. I'll be out of school soon, on my own, making whatever way I want."

"That's where you're wrong." He folds his hands, leans forward, staring coldly into my eyes. "I'm giving you an ultimatum – if you want that fancy college degree, you'll go to therapy and forget all about your SEAL stepbrother. And no, talking to a doctor isn't an option anymore, not after you threw an alcoholic beverage in my wife's face."

I'm too stunned to fire back. My heart feels overloaded, like it's been paved over in stone. All I want to do is run upstairs, stuff my face into a pillow, and scream and scream and scream until I pass out.

"I'm proud of you, and I've been glad to pay your tuition all along to move you in the right direction. However, you'd better believe I'll leave you out in the cold if you insist on losing your mind. There's no shame in getting help, honey, and we all need it sometimes. Lord knows I did after your mother walked out. I'll support you the same way I'm supporting Evie. But I'm not going to sit back and watch while you're lashing out, thinking I'll ever endorse this sick, twisted tryst you've had with that man. I swear, sometimes I think he's turned you into a crazy –"

He stops just short of saying *bitch*. It's not like it matters.

Dad has never, ever been so harsh with me, so hurtful, so threatening. It's all I can take.

I'm blotting at my eyes and tearing out of his office before he can say anything else.

"Think about it!" he yells after me. "You'll come to me tomorrow with the right answer. I know you will, Cordelia, I spent my whole life raising you better than –"

I cover my ears and rush upstairs. The queen bitch is sitting in the nook near their bedroom, letting the pale moonlight spill over, a fresh drink in her hand that's almost drained. I know by the amber color she's hitting the bottle again, and the evil smile she gives me confirms it.

I won't look at her. I get inside my room and slam the door, knowing it's my only safe haven from this prison my house has become.

I can't give up, can't let them win, can't let them destroy the love of my life. I need to talk to Chris. I pull him up on my phone and send him another text.

It's completely futile until he responds to the last five I've sent him, sure, but I can't help it. Where the hell is he?

I'm sick. Worried to death. I really shouldn't be scanning the news right now, but it's all I can do to soothe myself. I'd kill to hear something, find out he's okay, anything that tells me he'll get in touch soon.

There's nothing for the next hour. Then my news app sends an alert after I've started screwing around on social media:

BREAKING: Three American Special Forces Held in North Korea!

MY STOMACH CHURNS before I even open the link. And when I do, I have to cover my mouth, all I can do not to vomit.

Chris' face is front and center. Bruised, beaten up, bloodied. He'd sitting at a table underneath a huge North Korean flag, two grim faced guards next to him and two other SEALs at his side. They're parading them like special prizes for their own sick propaganda.

"No...no, no, no." I say it over and over again, and then I completely lose my voice.

The phone slips from my hand. A few minutes ago, I could've kept it together. I was ready to fight my parents tooth and nail to stay with him, even if I had to skip the next semester.

I'd show dad that I'm *not* losing my mind – I'm doing the only sane thing in the world by embracing the man I love.

But now, something is falling, breaking apart deep inside me like a huge ice shelf coming down.

I'm numb. I'm scared. And for the first time in my life, I think I'm going truly crazy.



"TRULY, I wish it didn't have to come down this way, Cordelia. We'll do everything we can to make sure he comes home safe." Dad's eyes flick nervously back toward mine in the rear view mirror.

I barely shrug.

I haven't sat in the backseat while he's driving since I was a kid. Today, I feel like one, broken and completely helpless.

When the bitch pushed for checking me into the same psych ward she'd went to this morning over breakfast, I didn't say no.

I keep thinking I'll go through the motions, get out of the house, and try to come back for fall semester fresh. You know, not sick to death over wondering if Chris will come home alive, or what kind of brutal torture he's suffering.

I'm kidding myself. I'm the one who's sick and screwed up. Losing him *hurts*.

I'm so alone. Lost. Loveless.

“We’re almost there. You’re going to feel much better soon, honey. Honest. Just listen to what the doctors tell you. I’ll be here on Friday to see how you’re doing.”

“Oh, back off the girl, Bruce. She’s just sick in the head. She hasn’t reverted back to a baby.” Evie looks up at him from the passenger seat, filing her nails.

There’s a steady rain coming down across the hills, spattering the entire metropolitan area. It’s cold for summer, and I stare out the window, wondering if it’s a fraction as dismal and hopeless feeling as the place where Chris is being held prisoner.

The raindrops blend with the sound of Evie scratching her nails to perfection. It’s a rough, edgy sound, like my whole world is ripping in two, plunging me into a gray, empty pit I don’t know how to climb up from.

I see the clinic looming large in the distance. It’s one of those spacious places with incredible gardens and sleek, white wards. Celebrities and rich people go there to detox or unwind from their myriad emotional traumas.

I can’t say dad hasn’t always offered me the best in everything. I stare at it through the window, wondering how I’ll actually feel once I’m locked in, institutionalized, a small team of quacks hovering over me everyday.

My stomach starts knotting up. Then I think about Chris, the only thing I truly want to think about, even when he’s causing me the greatest anguish of my life.

This is going to be torture, no doubt about it. But I know it’s less than a shred of the brutality he’s suffering.

What those monsters did to his face...Jesus Christ.

I’m worried they’re going to ruin him. Not that it matters to me – he’s handsome, even when he’s wearing deep purple bruises on his face and his jaw looks like it’s been broken and crudely reset.

I won’t give up on him. I can’t. I’ll never stop loving him.

“Why are you slowing down?” Evie snarls, giving my dad a sharp look. I open my eyes, and realize we’re moving at a crawl. “Jesus Christ, Bruce, man up and let’s get this over with. We’re never going to get our daughter back if we dilly-dally all day. She’s all we’ve got now. I don’t have a son anymore.”

“We don’t need to talk about that now,” dad snaps, sighing. “Sorry. I just need a moment.”

He’s not looking at her as he pulls up to the curb, more distance than he really needs from the door. His eyes are glued to mine in the mirror.

For a second, we share our hurt.

I finally understand why he's doing this. And I wonder if he's beginning to understand Chris and me, our love shining through the dense, twisted wreckage of all our baggage.

I won't blame you, dad, I think, trying to send him the message without wasting any words. *Go ahead. Walk me in.*

I start to fiddle with my seat belt. The sound annoys Evie, who starts thumping her overdone fingernails on the car's interior, tapping loud and hard in time to the rain.

"Cut it out," dad growls. "This is stressful enough."

"Oh?" I see her face turn and she smirks. "Poor baby. I'll fix you a drink or two as soon as we get home. We're doing what we should've done months ago, and she isn't even kicking and screaming. It's a miracle, really."

I don't have the energy to be mad at this bitch anymore. I just want to get this over with, so I tear off my seat belt and pop the door, heading out into the rain. Dad turns off the car and runs after me, yelling.

"Honey – wait!" he runs up and takes me by the hand. "I can't let you do this alone."

I stop, feeling the hot tears come as dad hugs me close. The wet splash I feel on my forehead isn't just the rain. There's a drop of something hotter, just like my tears, and I completely lose it when I look up and see him crying too.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Evie's sharp voice rings out behind us, slamming the car door as he gets out. "Move! You're both making this harder than you need to. The girl's way past hugs and kisses, Bruce. She needs drugs, doctors, shock therapy."

Okay, now I'm pissed. I look up, beaming all my hatred at her, but it's nothing compared to dad's.

"Evie...shut the fuck up." He's storming, and I recognize the same rough thunder in his tone I've heard in Chris' a dozen times before.

"Oh, so now you finally channel the tough guy." She pauses and laughs, an irritating sound that makes me want to slap her across the face. "Where the hell were you while your family was falling apart, Bruce? Where are you now? You're a few steps away from getting her the help she needs to get off her sick, cancerous crush on my idiot son, and you're standing here blubbering like a baby."

Dad slowly releases me. The rain picks up, like something out of a bad movie,

and Evie makes a face. She just won't let up.

"Ten seconds. That's all I'm giving you before I check her in myself. I'm not going to stand here all day watching this ridiculous heartbreak in the rain." She reaches up and brushes her hand through her hair, wrinkling her face in disgust.

She's way too done up for dropping me off with shrinks. It's almost like she's...celebrating or something. Which, I guess, isn't completely out of the question. She's taller than both of us on her heels.

They look like they're ready to flatten us any second, walk over our bones, solidifying her triumph. I can't believe she doesn't see it.

She's still blaming Chris for screwing our family? The only one doing the sabotage here is standing right in front of me, counting down on her fingers, a vicious smirk plastered on her face.

"Okay, ten!" she yells, tapping at the clock on her phone. "Come on, Cordelia, it's time for mama to do the job daddy won't."

She starts toward me and I step back. There's no fucking way I'm going to take her hand. I'll push her down into the gutter and watch her roll around in the cool, wet drainage before I do that.

She's fast, determined, and I'm really screwed up. Before she can grab me, dad throws his arm around my shoulder and spins me around. We're walking, quick stepping back to the car. He pops the passenger door and shoves me inside.

I blink, not understanding what the hell just happened. Dad pops his door and slides into the driver's seat. He's about to shift the car in gear before Evie runs up, raking her long, green fingernails on his window until he puts it down.

"Asshole! Have you lost your fucking mind? What the hell is *wrong* with you? Both of you!"

"Check yourself in, Evie. You're going to need a reset before I send in the divorce paperwork next week."

My heart stops, and for the first time since I saw Chris in the media, I crack a smile.

"You're making a huge mistake, little man," she snarls, fear and rage souring her face. "Do it. I fucking dare you to. I'll take you to court and squeeze every penny out of your miserable, selfish accounts. I'll go to your finance bloggers and tell them all about your whore of a daughter, your spineless little tantrums, how bad you are in bed. I swear to god, if you cut me out, Bruce, I'll —"

He floors it. Dad and I are laughing like angry, emotional lunatics as the car rockets away, doing a hard loop around the clinic before heading back to the road.

The last glimpse I ever catch of Evie is the car's tires kicking water in her face, ruining her outfit. She stands there the whole time in full meltdown, soaking wet and stamping her feet, cursing us for ruining her life.

When the sheer adrenaline wears off, we're back in the city, tooling along the streets. We're stopped at a long light when I finally grab his hand and ask.

"Dad? Is that really you? What set you off?"

He smiles softly. "I knew I was going to drop one of my girls off for some serious help the whole way here. Evie made the choice very, very easy. I couldn't have gone through with you, honey, however angry I am about Chris. I'm just sorry it took me this long to see it."

I nod and swallow, pushing down the bitter lump in my throat so I don't start blubbering all over again.

"You made the right choice, in case you wondered."

"Damn right I did," he says, punching the gas hard when the light goes green. "I'll take the woman who's in love with an asshole, my own flesh and blood, any day over the asshole pretending to be in love with me."

It's going to be a long road home, an enormous journey to fix everything else in my life. But for the first time in forever, there's finally hope, and I realize there's more than one person left on earth who loves me.

HEARTS THAT BLEED TOGETHER (CHRIS)

D*elia, Delia, Delia!*

I'm running toward her on the warm California beach, and I'm going to push her completely into the sand. It's been too long. I need to grab her, savor her, taste her, fuck her.

I want to kiss this woman with my entire body, the full force of my soul, all I can do to stay sane while the fire in my blood hits crescendo.

Our lips are so damned close. I've got my fist in her hair and I jerk her head back as she moans, opening her lips, ready for me to claim everything I've been missing all these.

Her nipples are so fucking hard my dick throbs in my pants. I need to rip our clothes off *now*, throw her in the sand, and dig into her, even if it causes us to sink into the earth.

I'm about to bring my mouth down on hers when we lock eyes. She gazes into my eyes, opening her soft, perfect lips.

Fuck me, Chris. I love you so much.

That's what I'm ready to hear.

Nothing prepares me for the harsh, cold, foreign gibberish that comes out.

My eyes snap open. The door to my cell slides open, and three skinny Korean People's Army soldiers step inside, an overseer in a suit with a flag and a shiny Dear Leader pin fixed to his lapel.

I tense up. My hand twitches from the last week, when the fucks took a hammer to it, threatening to smash every damned bone in my body if I didn't tell them everything I knew about the specs on the stealth chopper wreckage they've got stowed in some hanger.

It's been weeks, maybe months. I lost track of time long ago, shortly after my

hell began. The beard growing on my face is the only thing that tells me I've been here for a long fucking time.

"What the hell do you want?" I look up and spit on the floor after I say it, showing my disgust like a good SEAL should. "You come to fry me with those jumper cables like you did with the commander last week? Or are you going to play chiropractor on my joints again?"

The man in the suit gives me an icy stare and starts speaking in that slow, jerky English he always uses. Everything is way underfunded in this hellhole, including whatever they spend on training their interpreters.

"It is a good day for you, Cleveland. We have a deal. Maybe the sun will feel you shine on her face again."

I clench my jaw, feeling the pain from months ago, when they cracked my goddamned bone. I'm not getting my hopes up. These bastards are awfully crafty at their psy-ops, and chances are this is one more of them, communicated in broken English.

"I don't buy it, Kim."

It doesn't help that his English sucks. The way he talks about the sun makes me think of Delia, but then everything does these days.

It's her on my mind when they're holding my head under water, making me suck cold, acrid water into my lungs. I remember our kisses when they've got me on the table underneath a blinding, hot lamp, punching me in the face over and over and over.

It's her I feel when they give me the shock treatment, when my heart's racing a thousand miles per hour, ready to explode because the fuckers shoot me up with too much of that truth serum that never works.

She's my sanctuary. My love. My life.

She's the reason I'm going to survive this. I'll come home alive and breathing, instead of ground up ash in a tiny metal canister Uncle Sam will get in fifty years, after this sick regime collapses.

Delia, Delia, sweet fucking Delia. Forgive me.

I'm the one getting brutalized, but I can't stop thinking about her. Knowing she's in pain, worrying about me, is a thousand times worse than anything these motherfuckers can do to me.

The Korean smiles – it's the same faceless, plaster smile he always gives me. The same thing I've seen before he tells his goons to take pliers to my toenails, before he has them push me into that rotten pit full of rats and lice,

before I spit in his miserable face when he's leering over me, wondering if I'm finally broken and ready to talk.

The man I call Kim paces the small cell while the stone-faced guards look on. He spins around when he's behind me, putting his face next to mine, so fast and sudden any other man would flinch.

I never do. He doesn't scare me, and it pisses him off. Our dealings are about more than about pulling information from an 'imperialist enemy of the state.'

It's become a war of egos, a war between men. He can't stand the fact that I'll never let him dominate.

"A dog until the end," he snaps, motioning to the guards. "Get him on the plane."

I wonder what vicious torture 'plane' is code for. I force the bastards to lift me off the bench and drag me outside my cell before I let my own two feet do some of the work.

They've made my life hell. I'm not making anything easy.

Soon, we're out the big steel door, the first time I've been outside since I got here. The wind is crisp, cool, savage like a North Korean winter should be. I don't see any snow, but maybe it's just a thaw.

I wonder if I've already missed Christmas. The thought makes me want to introduce these sick sonsofbitches to my face more than ever. I don't give a shit about repaying them for the torment – not that it wouldn't feel good to.

What really sends me into a blind rage is thinking about all the time they've stolen off my life, all the moments I would've had with Delia.

"Up! Up!" One guard bangs the door to a rickety military transport truck, and two more guards inside jerk me up. They sling me around and throw me on the ground, holding me down, next to the only other person I recognize who survived the chopper crash.

Commander Jones is inside, looking like he's lost fifty pounds. Fuck.

They've been starving me too, but nothing like my C.O. The raging, confident officer I knew on all my missions is gone. Some survival mechanism I don't understand has pulled him under, leaving me staring at this shattered robot, this man who only slurs his speech in faint whispers when they force him to.

I've overheard his interrogations. The walls are surprisingly thin and prone to echo at the prison camp, and the vents carry too.

The only time he makes noise is when he screams. It's usually so precise I can tell exactly what they're doing to him several walls away.

He doesn't even acknowledge me. I pinch my eyes shut and turn my head away, wondering if they're finally done with us. Is this the beginning of the end?

They've already violated the Geneva Convention and all the articles of war several times over. What's one more by taking us out to some rural pit and putting a bullet through our skulls?

Delia comes and goes in my imagination, ghostly and angelic. If I'm about to die, if they're about to make me break all the promises I made about coming back, then I'm going to go into the blackness thinking about her, her, and nothing else.

I don't think about Evie or Bruce or even my fucked up mission. I don't think about the dozens of women I picked up over the years, the ones who begged me for the honor of riding my cock.

I remember that night with Delia in Vegas, right before we came home, the way I jerked her body against mine.

Feral, hungry, insatiable. If there's a god, and he isn't ready to collect on my karma debt, then he'll bring me home.

He'll give me one more taste of her beautiful, perfect fucking lips before I die. He'll let me have her pussy, hard and aggressive. I'll fuck her like I own her, because I do, anchored in everything I want like nothing else, and always will.

I visualize it so damned hard I swear I hear her whimper in my ears.

Chris! The way she calls my name before she comes, sharp and staccato, is all I want to remember when I'm going to my grave.

Except I'd rather do it on my deathbed when I'm a dried up old fuck, instead of being shoved into a cold mountain pit with a hole in my head.

About twenty minutes later, the truck jerks to a stop, and the soldiers roll us out. The commander and I both topple onto the hard pavement.

There's a whirring noise. I look up, and I'm thrown into disbelief.

Christ, there really is a plane. It's an old transport flight, Chinese make and model by the looks of it.

We're going home. But the assholes aren't done with us yet.

There's a feeling like a heavy rock hitting my spine. They're screaming at us to get the fuck up and walk, jabbing their rifle barrels into our backs. I struggle to my feet while they force off the handcuffs, and help Jones up too.

We march toward the open stairway leading into the aircraft, and a few minutes later, we're airborne.

It's a short flight to some base in China. I can tell by the red flags with gold stars flapping overhead when I come out again that we're on neutral ground. There's a US military delegation on the other side with a Korean prisoner.

It's a goddamned exchange. They're giving us up for one of their own, probably some rat caught funneling nuclear secrets from the States, or working sabotage in South Korea.

Kim barks at the soldiers again, something in their language, and I feel the barrels in our spines. The commanding officer across the tarmac from the US frowns, but we all know it's par for the course with these insecure motherfuckers.

Let them rub our noses in it. I'm going home, and judging by the fact that this exchange is happening at all, World War Three hasn't broken out either.

I don't even care. I'm going home alive, I'm going to see Delia, and she's gonna be my wife.

That's all that matters.



A MEDIC CHECKS US OVER, and then some wiry guy who sounds like a military shrink. They pay a lot more attention to the commander because he's a fuck of a lot more screwed up than I am.

They tell us something about saving the rest for debriefing, and shuffle us onto the flight. The boys serve up some MREs, which tastes like five star barbecue after the slop the Norks fed us. I can barely eat through all the adrenaline, swirling with the urge to sleep.

I need to rest. I need to get ready for her.

I spend the long flight across the Pacific snoozing in short, sporadic fits. Every time, it's the same dream, the one that sustained me the entire time they tried to break me.

It's Delia. Sweet, naked, cock rocking Delia, everything I'll ever need, as soon as I get my lips on hers, where they belong.

I'm beat up, and I've probably melted twenty or thirty pounds away over the last few months. They've left me with a few traumas I'll only realize some dark nights, waking up in a cold sweat, ready to strangle the motherfuckers who treated me like an animal.

I don't give a fuck.

All I know for sure is I'm alive, and that means I'm going to fuck her harder than I've ever done it in my life. I'm going to marry her. I'm going to start working on our family the second she graduates and launches her career – hell, maybe before.

I wake up when the plane touches down at a base in Washington with a raging hard-on. It's only going to be a few more hours to San Francisco. One more briefing before I've got her in my arms, squeezing her tight, pulling the hot breath from her lungs 'til she gives me the sexy whine that's been keeping me alive.

I use the computer on the plane during the short flight to quickly scan the news. There's a bunch of shit about the mission going bad, a close-as-nails brush with war, and then the agreement we were just part of, ending the infamous Korean Crisis this year.

I look at the date. It's only early December, thank fuck.

There's still time to get my ring on her finger by Christmas. And once I finally collect the hazard pay I've been owed for months, I'm gonna get her a rock that'll make her rich daddy blush.

Shit, speaking of rich daddy...

Our last disastrous night with Evie hurling a grenade into our relationship hits me.

I know how to deal with my bitch mom. She won't last with Bruce, if she hasn't gotten herself the boot already. But I can't expect Delia's family to fragment over me.

I need to win him over, so he doesn't end up hating me and shaming his own daughter. I get on the machine when there's just a couple hours left to go on the flight, and begin typing out two emails.

One goes to Delia. When she gets it, and sees I'm coming back, she's going to lose her mind.

The other goes to Bruce. I tell him everything, how much this woman means to me, how I've already decided to claim her sweet ass forever, and I'd like him to accept it instead of eyeing me like I'm some kinda wolf who swept up his beautiful, blushing, perfect virgin daughter.

Truth be told, maybe I am. I'm going to take her like an animal the minute I get her alone, get my mouth on hers, push my fingers between her creamy thighs.

Fuck. I have to convince her daddy first. I have to convince him what I've already realized – this is about more than her body.

I love her with everything I've got. Before Evie crashed our party, I was dead set on showing the whole damned world exactly what we were, what we're destined to be.

Rotting in that Korean shithole took me off course for several months. Now, I'm back with a vengeance, and if I can get Bruce on board before I shove my ring on her finger, then there's nothing on earth that'll ever hold us down.



“CHRIS? CHRIS! OH MY GOD!” she runs toward me screaming.

I've just gotten off the plane, and I see her standing with the officers, right next to Commander Jones' wife and ten year old daughter.

My legs still hurt like hell from the cramped, hellish living conditions in that prison. I'm sure I'm deficient in about a dozen vitamins too. Damn if it stops me from running full steam ahead when I see her coming.

We collide so hard I have to grab her to keep from knocking her onto the pavement. My hands wrap around her back and pull her into me with the raw, vicious hunger I've had building all these months.

She's crying as my tongue finds hers and pumps in and out of her mouth. I've missed this so goddamned bad, and I can't stop myself from tasting her right here, in front of family, officers, and a few political dignitaries who've come to grandstand.

“How the hell do you do it?” I growl, when I finally let her off me for air. “You taste even better than I remember. Are you trying to make me rip off your clothes and fuck you right here?”

She wipes her face and breaks into a laugh. Then she rears back a little and swings her fist into my arm, giving me the playful punch I've been missing just as much as her laugh.

“Jerk. I see they haven't changed you one bit. I was worried about that...”

“You kidding? It takes more than a few months of beatings to break this dick. Especially when it's up close and personal with you.”

I can't resist. I pull her in for another long, wet round of kissing. I pick her up and smash her tits on my chest, feeling my cock throb, hands on her ass while I spin her around.

Feeling her is like having some crazy drug injected into my system. My heart

keeps roaring like a jet engine, and pure adrenaline shoots into my blood. Tasting her over and over and over is the only thing that stops me from doing everything I've threatened.

Guess the threat of the military psychologists hauling me off in a straitjacket helps too. They'd be on my ass checking for signs that I've totally cracked if I start fucking her out here.

"Come on. Let's get out of this place." I take her hand and we walk out, though the airport and straight for her car.

I'm supposed to be back at base in the morning for a formal debriefing. Hell if I care about any of that just now.

I've got the woman who kept me alive through hell at my side. She's wearing a smile on her face, confirming all the love I stirred up before is still there.

No, fuck, it's grown. She can barely keep her eyes on the road. I reach over, tuck my hand on her thigh, and squeeze, all I can do to verify this isn't some fucked up fever dream I'm having in that dank, dark cell.

"You finished your thesis, right? Don't tell me all this bullshit delayed your graduation?"

"I'm getting my grades back next week. I know the professor loved it. I couldn't have done it without you, Chris. I put a lot of you into my SEAL psychology, and probably some of me too."

"Just some? You didn't write it from the perspective of the chick who's fallen head over heels for her cocky SEAL stepbrother?" I grin, and goddamn it feels good.

She sticks her tongue out. "It was a research paper. Maybe there's a dash of passion in there somewhere."

"Yeah, whatever, babe. I'm gonna read it."

She instantly flushes and jerks the steering wheel. "No way! That's for my prof's eyes only, and the university's archives."

"Bullshit. I know it'll end up going online somewhere. You're too good to have your work hidden, Miss Reporter, and we're too fucking good to stay in the dark too."

We laugh and make small talk the rest of the way into the city, heading for our hotel, before she drops the next bombshell.

"You're not my stepbrother anymore."

I stare at her like she's just given away the secrets of the universe. "What?

You mean –“

“They’re divorced. It was finalized last month. Evie put up a terrible fight, but dad’s lawyers were better, the best money could buy. The prenup stayed iron clad.”

“Thank fuck,” I growl, happy that he’s managed to keep his assets out of her greedy little paws.

Then it really hits me.

“Holy shit, that means there’s nothing keeping your dad from being pissed about us.”

“Well, nothing except your colorful history,” she says with a wink. “It’ll take some convincing, to be honest.”

Convincing? Fuck that. All I’ve got on my mind is what I’m gonna do after I’ve had a hot shower, a fuck, and a nice dinner with the finest woman in the world.

I’m marching to the bank when she isn’t looking, where I’ve got my vault. My grandmother’s ring is there, something she passed to me through dad after he died, before my bitch mom could pawn it off.

I thought about buying her the biggest diamond I could while I was rotting away in my cell. But diamonds are everywhere, and she deserves nothing but the best. This is the only ring like it in the world.

Who the fuck else’s hand would it belong on besides the only woman in the world who keeps bringing me back for more?

Today, I’m the one who’s experiencing shock and awe, thanking every lucky fucking star in the sky that I’m alive and loved. Tomorrow, it’s Delia’s turn, and I’m gonna blow her panties off.

“WHERE DO you think you’re going?” We’ve just checked into her room, and she tries to walk past, the little minx. I grab her, pull her into the bathroom, and put my lips on hers.

“I need a shower, and you’re gonna join me.”

Her hands slide down my chest. It’s winter, and I’m missing her skirts, but I still can’t wait to get her jeans off so I can feel how wet she is. My hands wrap around her ass and start peeling off her clothes, her going loose and lithe, opening herself to be taken and ravaged.

And I’m gonna fucking do it too. When she’s naked, I kick the door shut and

flatten her against it, breathing deep, inhaling her scent.

My fingers sink into the pussy I've been waiting to feel for an eternity. It's just as good as the first time on the beach. Hell, she's wetter than she was then, aching for me, her slick, feminine scent filling the air.

I breathe deep. I stroke deep inside her cunt while my tongue winds around hers, telling her we're picking up right where we left off. Then I lift my hand up and suck my fingers, staring into her eyes.

"This taste is all I thought about when those fuckers were hurting me." The words just spill out, and her eyes go wide, concern swirling with her lust. "Your taste, your body, your heart, Delia, baby. You kept me sane. You kept me alive."

"Chris..."

Hearing my name on her lips is dangerous. It's almost like the sound I've been waiting for months to kiss my ears, the one she makes when she's about to come. I spread her legs, push my hips between them, rocking my hard-on against her clit.

Pleasure oozes out her hot red lips. She starts tearing at my clothes.

I help her, kicking them all to the floor, ready to show her my battle scars, ready to show her how ready I am to purify, to heal, to love.

"Oh, god." She finds the fresh scars next to my trident, cutting across the dragon. "They must've hurt you *bad*."

I shrug. "It's not like it's permanent. The military doc told me it'll fade in a few more months. The fuckers took a whip to us one day, going full medieval."

I remember it. The scars on my back were worse, fissures that bled for days. Thankfully, they healed faster.

She looks shocked, amazed, maybe a little frightened.

Not the reaction I'm going for. I grab her hands and thrust them around my back, rolling my cock hard against her pussy, teasing her, raking my stubble over her throat extra rough when I suck at her neck.

She melts into me, moaning and pawing. I'm going to start slamming her against the door and fuck us right through it if I don't take her now.

Grabbing her hand, we step into the shower, and I twist the knob. Hot, steamy droplets spray across our bodies. She stands there and studies me like she's underneath a warm rain, hot and curious and wet.

Her nipples are in full bloom, hard as rocks, calling me to suck them, pinch them, own them.

I push her against the tile wall and take a handful of one tit. She arches her back and grinds her ass against my cock when I ratchet up the tension, whimpering louder than I'm used to.

It's close to that sound, but not quite. It's time to do some fine tuning.

My free hand wraps around and feels for her clit. I start making circles, squeezing her other tit, pushing my lips down to her slick, round ear.

"Is it really you?" she whines, just as my thumb starts to speed across her bud.

"I'm still the same man, Delia. The only man you're gonna be fucking for the rest of your life. They didn't break me. They didn't take our love. They didn't strip my desire. I want you more than ever. I want every fucking inch of you wrapped around me. Fuck, I want to be inside you..."

And I'll have it too. I spread her legs and push into her, grinding my pubic bone against her ass. She cries out and jerks up when she feels my cock filling her, giving me a perfect opportunity to grab her wet, dark hair.

We start rocking good and hard. The heat of the shower feeds our sexual frenzy. I rear back, crash into her, grunting the entire time, hard enough to bruise her hips.

I want to light this girl on fire, burn us both alive. My thrusts quicken, dragging her gasps along. She arches her back and I feel her pussy clench. Her mouth forms a perfect O, and then I hear the glory I've been waiting for.

That high, whiny, sweet little sound. My hips go ballistic and I fuck her harder, rutting like a wild bull, hurling her deep into the pleasure zone she's edging into.

"Fuck me harder, woman," I growl. "Show me you remember how to make your cunt suck every last drop of come from my balls."

And she does. She's like the world's softest, wettest vice, screaming when it becomes too much to take.

I lose it right there. My balls tighten up and my free hand digs into her shoulder while the other yanks her hair, merging her into me. I power fuck her the entire time I explode, burying my seed inside her.

The dynamite lasts a long time. Thank fuck, because it's like making up for lost time after all our months apart.

When I finally let go and pull out of her, she collapses, catching herself by the knees. It takes us both a minute to catch our breath after the way we've been

drained. Then I reach for her, gently twirl her around.

We kiss and tongue forever underneath the hot shower. I take my time washing her, admiring her body slowly, watching my seed trickle out of her pussy so I can fill it all over again tonight.

She pushes her hands around me and digs her fingernails into my skin on our next embrace.

“I missed you so bad, Chris, you have no idea.”

“Leave that shit in the past, baby. It’s done. After the crap I just went through, they’ll probably shove me behind a desk for awhile and pump me for intel on everything I saw. I’m gonna be here in the Bay for a long time, babe. We’ll make up for every day we missed together. Every fucking second. We’re gonna do it twice as hard.”

“I can’t wait!” She says it with such enthusiasm my dick jerks, lively and hungry in record time. “Don’t ever leave me again.”

“I don’t plan on it, Delia. Not ever.”

And I prove it by grabbing her ass and pulling her into me.

HIS (DELIA)

A few days later, we're all back at the house. We're sitting across the table from dad, and I can't believe how well it's going.

"Look, this whole thing is weird, and I'm not going to pretend it's got my full support," dad says, cautious and businesslike. "But you two, together, that's something I can live with in time. Your mother had me all twisted up, pointing my anger and disgust in all the wrong directions, Chris. I realize that now."

"I knew I'd bring you on board, Bruce. You're a reasonable man – too reasonable to put up with her shit forever. Where is she?"

I grab Chris' hand and squeeze. He doesn't even know. I'm not sure he cares about his mother anymore either, and I won't blame him one bit if he wants to cut her from his life forever.

"She took off up the west coast last I heard. She wanted to cut town pretty fast after our last meeting in court. It was a wipe out. She made her last stand, and the boys I hired crushed her demands like a bug."

I can't help but grin at that. Putting Evie in her place is bringing dad's confidence back, and I hope he'll have a sane new woman at his side next year.

Still, it's not like their relationship was a *complete* disaster. I look at Chris, then at my dad, wiggling my fingers in my SEAL's hand.

Would I have him at my side if we'd never been anything but a one night fling on the beach? Would I be his if we hadn't been through love and hate, forced to confront our demons thanks to their screwed up marriage?

"As crazy as she is, we ought to be thanking her," I say softly, waiting for both men to look at me like I'm the one who's nuts. "She brought us all together."

Dad leans back in his chair and takes a long sip of his beer. "Yeah, I suppose the psycho bitch did."

"I'll dissent. If she hadn't held us back with that fucked up marriage, I'd have had you sooner." Chris shoots me a sharp look, and his hold on my hand tightens.

I blush, but can't resist smiling, even as dad frowns across the table. Mister Blunt catches himself.

"I meant everything I said in that damned email," he says, locking eyes with dad. "I love this girl."

I'm sure my heart skips about ten beats as he pulls me onto his lap and puts his mouth on mine right there. At first, I can feel dad's hesitation, a shred of his disgust. But when I look back, I'm wrong.

He's actually smiling with his eyes, studying us, watching like we've managed to capture something that's eluded him his entire life.

"If you don't mind, Bruce, I'm gonna take her for a walk. It's decent out there today and we'd better enjoy it."

By Bay Area standards, it's actually fairly chilly. It doesn't stop him from pulling me into his arms and helping me into my coat. Then we're off, riding in his brand new truck, something he picked up after coming home with some of his big bonus. The old one would've been fine with a few repairs, but he wants a clean slate.

He wants to start over, and I'm read for anything, as long as I'm at his side.

Chris is oddly tight-lipped the whole trip. I recognize dad's private beachfront as we're pulling into it.

"Really? Jesus, it's going to be like forty degrees out here by the water!"

"You've got me for warmth, babe, and that's all you need. There's something we've gotta get done by Christmas. Come on."

He kills his ignition and steps out, heading down to the beach. Cold or not, I'm curious, and I follow quickly behind him, as fast as my new boots will carry me.

He can't keep his eyes or hands off me since I broadened my wardrobe. I'm going to need it for the internship coming up now that I've got my degree. Dressing to impress landed me a SEAL, and it's going to get me an awesome job too.

The breeze isn't as bad as I expected. The Pacific looks stormy as ever, slapping the sands in loud, angry waves. Chris stands next to the little bar he

took me behind our first night, after I watched him coming out of the sea like something from a legend.

My warrior prince. My destiny.

It's all true, as cliché and campy as it sounds.

"This is where it all started," he says, wrapping an arm around my waist, pulling me close. "You remember that night like I do, babe? I relived it a thousand times while those fucks were bashing me in the face."

"Of course. It's all that kept me from breaking down every night too. I mean, that night and all the others, everything we've had together. Here all alone, trying not to click on the latest news to see if they'd executed you..."

I don't mean to tell him about that, but it all comes seeping out.

"I'm alive, and so are you." He parts my legs and pulls me in, grinding my hips on his, reminding me how alive and insatiable he really is when I feel the bulge. "Believe it or not, I didn't drag you here to fuck."

"No?" That surprises me.

I was sure he had something kinky in mind. Maybe he'd throw me down in the sand, strip off my clothes, and force me to get warm with him on this cool, December beach. Why do my nipples feel so hard just thinking about?

"That's for later. You'll ride me all goddamned night after I show you this."

What's he doing!? The world condenses and swells a little brighter as I feel him put his lips on mine, then watch as he sinks to his knees.

He grabs my hand with the same ferocious confidence he always carries, only now it's stronger, mysterious. When I see his other hand reach into his pocket, producing a little black box, I almost pass out.

"Oh my God! Chris, are you...?" I bite my tongue.

I need to let him speak. If this is what I think it is, riding him is just the beginning of how we're going to spend our night.

He pops the box open and I catch a glimpse of a gold ring studded with jewels. *Big* rocks, far more than any SEAL ought to be able to afford. It looks antique too, and I want to pick it up, but my eyes are too glued to him to do it.

"Marry me, Delia Burr." It's a command, not a request, and I smile so hard my cheeks sting. "You burned me up the first time I ever got my hands on you, and showed me how good a woman can be in Vegas. I killed for you, and I'll die for you too. Something this intense only comes along once in a lifetime. I'll be damned if I'm gonna let it slip away. We started out fucking,

having fun. I teased you like you were my kid sis, and I loved you like it too. I love you more now, and I want the entire package. I want forever. No retreat, no going back, and no regrets.”

He stands up, shoving the warm ring against my palm, holding it there so tight and hot it’s like my palm is on a heating rock.

“You feel that, babe? That’s our entire future. Everything I’m gonna do to you. This world’s a cold and dark goddamned place at times, and you’re my light. You’ll be my wife, plus the hottest mom I’d ever want for my kids. You’ll have time to write more stories with a smile on your face in between how knocked up I’ll be keeping you.”

“So confident,” I say softly, barely able to speak through the giddy, heartwarming storm in my blood. “What if I say no? What if I want to take things a little slower, just to wear your bad boy act down, take the edges off?”

He grins and chuckles. “I’ll break you first. Stop fucking around, woman. I know you want the entire package, and I’m the best one you’ll ever have.”

I can’t help it anymore. The way his palm keeps pressing into mine, wiggling the hot, circular metal against our skin, like he’s previewing the rest of my life.

“Okay – yes! Yes, Chris. I’m ready to be Mrs. Cleveland.”

There. I said it. I’m suddenly wishing for an icy breeze to blow in from the Pacific, something to keep me from feeling like I’m about to melt through the ground.

Chris goes nuts. He grabs me by the wrist, stretches my hand out, and pushes the ring on my finger. It’s a good fit. The right fit.

I have about two seconds to admire the strange new wonder on my hand before he picks me up and flings me around, tossing me high before he pulls me back to him. I crash into his arms and land with a kiss.

His teeth sink into my bottom lip, hungrier than ever. My hands dig at his shoulders, desperate to get naked, famished to feel the man I’m going to spend the rest of my life devouring me.

It’s a long, cold make out session on the beach. Probably the last time we’ll visit this place before the sun shines warm and high again.

But with him, there’s always a spark, always a fire. I start crying when the realization hits me that we’re going to be enjoying it for the rest of our lives.



Seven Months Later

OUR NEXT TRIP to Vegas begins in a whirlwind. It's a quick, luxurious wedding, a fusion of my dad's wealth and Chris' military honor that's so magical it's almost surreal.

I meet everyone in his SEAL team, plus several other guys he goes back years with. He meets my entire extended family, including my ice cold mother.

She's easy to handle after Evie. Nothing's going to ruin what's coming. Mom also spends half the wedding glaring at my dad, seething quietly at how happy he looks with the lively new redhead on his arm.

Jenny is the complete opposite of Evie, a bubbly anthropology professor with a good heart and a dash of her own special awkwardness that melds with dad's just perfectly. I smile when I watch them, wondering if Chris and I will be just as cute someday when we're older.

Then the pleasantries vanish. Next thing I know, dad's leading me down the aisle, and I think he's tearing up just as much as me.

My knees don't start shaking until Chris grabs my hands at the altar. He never takes his eyes off me – not for a single second – while the minister rattles off lip service to the heavens to appease our older relatives.

Good thing they don't have a clue we shacked up from our parents' failed marriage. Their arrangement was mercifully brief, and nobody's connected the dots.

It's our dirty little secret, and it makes us one of a kind. He's being so well behaved, standing there in his full dress uniform, a few new medals lining his breast.

God, he looks princely, and I should be ashamed for soaking the fancy new lace panties I'm wearing underneath my gown. I mentally count the seconds, trying to listen to everything the wiry old man next to us says, talking about our vows.

I don't need a reminder. I'm going to love and serve this man until the day and I die, and I know he'll do the same for me. Mostly, I can't wait to feel him carry me to our room later, lay me on the bed, and give me everything my body's been aching for the last three months.

Kiss the bride.

I hear him say it and look up, darting away from Chris. Big mistake. The SEAL pulls me in with the same rough precision that always makes me gasp.

His hands pinch around my waist and he rips my veil back, twining his tongue with mine, the way he does before he rips my clothes off and sinks into me.

But we can't do that here. Not yet.

Sweet Jesus. I don't know how I'm going to survive an entire evening of being teased at the dinner reception. Maybe dancing with him for the first time since our disastrous summer party will help...or else make me wish there's another wine cellar for us to sneak away to.

People are still clapping and cheering by the time he breaks the kiss. I can tell he doesn't want to, feeling the same lava in his pulse each time his tongue brushes mine, sucking me deeper.

"You'd better keep that pussy good and wet for me, babe. I want you soaked 'til I get your legs apart," he growls, brushing his stubble over my cheek. "We're going to have a helluva time walking this town tomorrow after I'm through with you tonight."

Shit. My pussy tingles so sharp and hot I can feel my pulse pounding in my temples.

My new husband takes me by the hand and leads me out, past the screaming throngs, and into the limo downstairs. We cruise down the Vegas strip with me perched on his lap, dangerously close to the cock I want inside me so bad.

Every time I brush my hand against him, he takes my wrist and stops me, shooting me a devilish look.

"Not yet. Good things come to girls who wait."

"Tease." I straddle him. It's hard in the dress, but somehow I manage, gripping his shoulders harder. "Don't tell me getting hitched is softening you up already, bad boy. The Chris I know would hold me down and fuck me right in the back of this car."

"It's called being responsible – pretty damned important with what we're gonna do. Besides, I know I'll knock you up sooner if this sweet little cunt's on fire for me all day." Without warning, he reaches underneath my skirt, pushes up my thigh, and shoves my panties aside.

Gasping, squirming, I push my face against his neck until I'm practically drooling on his nice new uniform. It's so wrong, so dirty, so fucking insane to get married and start a family like this.

It's supposed to be all about love and devotion, a lifetime together. Instead, I'm thinking about our pleasure, how much I love this man, and how complete I'm going to feel when he's planted his seed inside me.

I dropped my birth control a couple months ago. We've gone back to condoms the last few weeks, saving ourselves for this night, the beginning of a non-stop fuckfest that I *know* will bring us closer than ever. He's going to give me everything I ever wanted, some amazing miracles I can't yet imagine.

I want it all. I want him. I need him to bring me off right here!

Too bad the car pulls up to the fancy spot where we're having the reception. His fingers press deep into my pussy, and his thumb whirls around my clit, sending me so close to coming my legs shake.

"Hold that thought, baby. We need to get out. Here comes our chauffeur."

I look at him like I've just bitten into a lemon. I barely manage to get off him in time and straighten my clothes, finally understanding the meaning of *blue balls* – and the only thing I know about any balls at all just now is how badly I want his emptying deep inside me.

The reception is just a total blur of lust and laughter and love. Our food and friends are exquisite, everything I expect from a wedding as amazing as ours.

Marnie and dad keep teasing us through the whole thing, telling us we'd better get to work making babies. Oh, if only they had *any* clue.

My best friend shows up with her new date, this lean computer geek from Seattle. He actually looks like a normal human being instead of someone who's been roasting in the sun too long. I have to do a double-take every time I watch them moving, dancing, laughing together. It's a big change for her, and she seems to like it.

I'm not the only one here who feels all grown up.

Life keeps shifting into a higher gear, and I'm more thankful than ever I have this incredible warrior along for the ride so I don't get lost in its wake.

We dance like we haven't ever before, even that fateful night at dad's house.

He holds me closer, and his breathing matches mine, a slow, gradually building thunder. There's something sweet, liberating, and primal in his touch tonight.

We don't have anything to hide. We're free from our taboos and our screwed up families. We've survived the hell in our hearts and the storm in our bodies.

I know there will be hills and valleys in the years ahead, like any couple. But he's my flint and I'm his spark, and we're going to continue kindling something so bright and beautiful it makes my eyes start to water through the happiness, the desire, the need rubbing my veins raw.

"Oh, now you're getting sentimental? I was wondering how long it'd take."

He brushes away the tears streaming down my cheeks and kisses me until I smile.

“People are drunk, Delia. They’re tapering off and going to find their own fun. You ready to make a baby, or what?”

“Yes!” I whisper back.

He rolls his hips against mine in a long, arching, intense hook. Somehow the deeper layers of fabric drag against my clit. I shudder in his arms, feeling like a fuse that’s finally closing in on its charge.

God, yes. He grabs the back of my neck and holds me, domineering as ever, gazing into my eyes.

It’s so hard not to get lost in each other. But right now I need to get lost in his flesh, and I lean in for a kiss, probing his tongue with mine in long, carnal strokes that leave no doubt about what I want.

“Then shake your pretty ass. I’m not sleeping ‘til I find out how my new wife fucks in every damned position.”



“NO WAY! YOU DIDN’T!” I’m in his arms, running my hands over his rough, handsome face as he carries me in. I do a double take and start laughing when I see the bed.

It’s even more ridiculous than the one in his old room. It’s like a Victorian thing on steroids with posts reaching almost to the ceiling, and a burgundy canopy threatening to envelope us for days, leaving us stranded together.

“I specifically requested it. Didn’t get a chance to do half the shit I wanted to with that old bed, and this thing gives me all kinds of ways to hold you down ‘til you’re pregnant.”

Pregnant. Just the word makes me grab him and kiss him, hungry and hard as I can.

Okay, yeah, it’s a little early in my new career for a baby, but writing is always family friendly. He’s talked about having a big family for months, and my panties burn a little more each time I think about our future.

I’m ready. I’m willing. And I’m going to give him the greatest gift of all.

“Get this damned thing off before I shred it,” he growls, pushing me onto the bed. We climb in together as he shoves the curtain shut.

I pick at my dress, trying to unwrap it, while he effortlessly drops out of his fancy uniform. There’s no brakes once he’s naked.

“Too slow. Now, you’re losing those panties first, then everything except the heels.” I laugh and try to slap him away, but he’s too determined.

He reaches up beneath my skirt and rips them down, spreading my legs. He doesn’t bother getting my dress off before he shoves his face between my legs.

My fingernails reach for the smooth sheets and grab fistfuls. I pull them hard, tense, all I can do not to lose my mind as I’m sweating rivulets in my wedding dress, staining it with wild lust for this crazy, beautiful man.

Chris growls as he licks through my folds, tonguing my pussy before driving up to my clit. He draws it deep, holds it when I start to buck my hips, panting and calling his name.

Chris, Chris, Chris! His name becomes a curse and a prayer before I’m too blitzed for words at all.

His fingers stroke my pussy while he laps my bud with insistent, fiery licks, sending me crashing into ecstasy. The white of my wedding gown engulfs everything as I see stars, coming on his face for the first time as a married woman.

I glide down from the high, but it fades less than ever. He pulls me up and lifts me out of the dress, surprisingly gently, using his SEAL precision.

“Hands on the post, babe. Don’t move ‘em ‘til I say so.” He takes my hands and wraps them around the big corner post, spreading my thighs. “I’ll hose you off in the morning with the champagne chilling in that bucket, whenever we’re too exhausted to fuck again.”

Oh, God. With the edge in his voice, it sounds like it’s going to be days, and my pussy pulses. He doesn’t even need a belt or a rope this time – his words are enough to keep me bound where he wants me.

I’m still marveling at it when I feel his hands on my ass. He pushes into me with a firm, powerful thrust, grunting when he his cock drives deep into my unprotected depths.

My sex drive is off the charts since we went natural. I don’t know if I’ve been off the stuff long enough to truly get pregnant, but I’m certainly going to try.

And with the way he’s fucking me, so is he. He *plows* into me, stretching me open, shaking my entire body with a passion that’s ten times more intense than every other time he’s been inside me.

I’m thrown onto the precipice in a matter of minutes. He’s drilling me, fucking me, owning me like the ring on my finger gives him permission to ravage me on demand, any way he wants.

Of course, it does, and I love it.

I'm screaming from the tension building between my legs when I start to come. Everything below my waist turns into a hot, twisted, sticky mess. My body explodes an instant, gushing on the sheets.

"Fucking shit, is finding out you're a squirter part of tonight too?" he growls, grabbing at my hair. "Doesn't matter, babe. Here it comes. I love you so goddamned much."

It's the last thing he can say before his sounds become one long, drawn out growl. I feel his cock stab into me and stop, rooted, swelling in my pulsing silk. He's come inside me dozens of times before, but never like this.

When I feel his ropes shoot into me, it's somehow hotter, wilder, rich and mysterious with the stuff of life. My pussy convulses all over again, taking everything he has to offer, fusing with him until we're throbbing and groaning as one.

I'm his furnace that moment, and he's the fuel.

He's given me his energy, his life, and he's turned me into something marvelous. Now I'm going to take his love, his seed, and give him our entire future.

When the firestorm finally releases us, we lay tangled together, his huge inked body cocooning me. His cock feels good against my ass half-hard. I know it won't be long before he's ready again, and this is a perfect place to lift my leg and start while his hand covers my breast, flicking my nipple as we kiss.

"You're the hottest woman on the planet when you're wrapped around my cock," he says, stamping his lips over my neck. "The new recruits are fucked. I'd tell 'em to find a good woman to push them through the bullshit overseas, but I've got myself the best. Nobody compares to you, *sis*."

I turn my head, smiling into his bright green eyes. He hasn't called me that for awhile. It shouldn't be this exciting – especially when it's not even true anymore.

"We're not stepsiblings anymore, Chris. You shouldn't keep pretending."

"Yeah, thank fuck. Pretending? Babe, I don't give a shit who or what the fuck you are. You're my woman, my bride, my property, my cement in this perfect family we're about to make. Is it so wrong I love you like a sister, a soul mate, and a whore all in one?"

His filthy words should shock me, but instead I just smile. The passion rolling out of his mouth still scares me sometimes in the best ways.

He's crazy, he's wonderful, and he's a badass. He's everything I'll ever want and all I'll ever need.

When I'm finally ready to answer him, I reach down and wrap my fingers around the length hardening against me, pulsing with new need that won't be satisfied until I'm his vessel again.

"I don't think anything with you will ever be wrong," I say, gently stroking up and down, waiting for him to push my hand away and spread my legs. "I love you so much, husband. SEAL. Stepbrother."

He grins, tangling his fingers through my hair, and pushing me onto my back. I watch as he moves between my legs, holding his cock at my entrance, full and teasing.

"Good. Let's use some of that love to find out who we'll be when we're complete." He lowers his face to my ear, nipping at my earlobe before he speaks more. "Don't think I'll ever stop fucking you through the nursery rhymes and family holidays. I'll never get enough of your body, your taste, or the way you make my heart boom like a damned rocket."

I run my hands over the angry dragon that's been re-inked since his scars healed, and the trident that reminds me every day I'm safe forever with this man.

He's right. I can feel his heartbeat. I let my palms linger there, pushing into his hard muscle as he sinks inside me, claiming me again.

We're both getting better with words, but there's still so much only our bodies can say. And right now, his talks loud and clear, telling me he'll love me forever.

Chris isn't just my stepbrother or a cocky SEAL I've fallen madly in love with. He's everything that makes me smile, want, and love.

He's my entire life. Unsealed, a little unhinged, and glorious.

MAN ENOUGH EXTENDED PREVIEW

Man Enough: A Single Dad Romance

By Nicole Snow

[Extended Preview. Get the full book here!](#)

I: Cupcakes for Room 205 (Tabby)

They say a woman knows it's obvious when she's found the one.

Prince Charming isn't subtle.

She remembers every first with Mr. Right. Every second, third, and fourth.

Every beat of her own enchanted heart.

His face, his smell, the mischief dancing in his eyes that makes her all tingly and weak-kneed looking back on their wedding day, and then again many years later through the fog of love.

The lyrical cadence of his voice etches on her brain forever. His first kiss – the one that *has* to happen with storybook perfection – leaves the heart drumming on infinity shuffle, an echo of sweet nostalgia in her blood.

When I first saw Rex Osborne, there was none of that.

Just the roar of his old truck pulling into our lot. Two doors slamming shut. A half-second glance at him from behind while I hoisted the snow-packed shovel over my shoulder.

Another second spent staring harder. Maybe I thought his shoulders looked a little out of place in this small town.

Too big. Too broad. Too tall. Too *heavy*.

Too much urgency in his step.

Too much man for Split Harbor, and for me.

I heard two distant little voices at his feet, murmuring the happy nothings children do. Then the three of them disappeared inside the lodge.

It lasted all of three seconds before I tucked my head down and went back to work, scraping snow off the path. I only stopped for one more thing.

A growl rumbled in the sky, almost like thunder, totally out of place in frozen dead February.

I still don't know if I imagined it.

But I didn't imagine him.

I didn't know I'd met the man who'd ruin *imagining* for good, who'd tear what I thought I knew to pieces, who'd dynamite my heart, and who'd ground himself in my life's smoking crater.

Rex taught me so many things and showed me many more. Like what's real, what's undeniable, what's worth every shred of passion in two fiery souls.

Rex taught me how to live. How to love. How to hurt.

And then Rex set me free.



I tuck the shovel into the corner of the porch railings right next to the bucket of rock salt I'll need again first thing in the morning. So far we've only gotten a light dusting of snow, but more is predicted.

No surprises. It's winter. In Michigan.

My cheeks puff as I hold in the heavy sigh burning my lungs, wanting out. It is what it is. This is my home. My livelihood. My future.

I need to be thankful for that. All of it. And I need to be satisfied, too.

I owe Gramps big time. If not for him, Lord knows where I'd be right now. Rather than living in a lodge where people pay good money to rest, relax, and enjoy life, I might've ended up in a foster home.

Shaking off the melancholy that's been weighing heavier and heavier lately, I push open the employee entrance and remove my boots, coat, hat and mittens before sitting down on the bench to change into tennis shoes.

It'll be better when Russ returns, I tell myself. Who'd have guessed a guy could break an ankle so bad he'd need two surgeries by just stepping wrong off a ladder?

One less pair of strong hands. Which also means I'll be shoveling a whole lot more yet this winter.

“Break time’s over.”

I glance up and crack a smile at my grandfather’s words. “Break time?”

The wrinkles around his twinkling blue eyes increase as he chuckles while walking down the narrow hallway. “I’ve been looking to hire someone to take over Russ’ duties, but –”

I laugh, interrupting him. “Everyone knows you too well, Gramps. Most who’ve worked for you before aren’t willing to do it again.”

“Only the lazy ones.”

“So, everyone in Northern Michigan?” I can’t resist poking fun at my Gramps’ impossible standards.

He scowls at me, which only makes me laugh harder. Pushing off the bench, I step closer to him and pat his upper arm. The softness my hand encounters reminds me he’s not as big and strong as he once was.

He’s run the Grand Pine Lodge for over fifty years. He’ll continue until his old heart stops beating. And I’ll be right beside him. Probably after, too. This lodge has been in our family since the first building sprung up over a hundred years ago.

Like it or not, I know my destiny. My place. Some days, it’s just harder to accept than others.

“I don’t mind shoveling the sidewalks. Never have and never will,” I tell him. Truth be told, it’s partly my fault that Russ broke his ankle. Fixing up the stables was *my* idea. A way to expand the services we offer, and hopefully increase occupancy and revenue. “Wes Owens will still plow. Just as long as Russ comes back by spring so we don’t have to hire lawn care, we’ll be fine.”

Gramps wraps an arm around my shoulder, nodding his thanks. “We make a good team, Tabby-kitten.”

“That we do, Pops.”

He scowls again, but then we both laugh. He doesn’t like being called Pops any more than I like being called Tabby-kitten. Never have liked nicknames. Tabby is close enough to a nickname all by itself, and it’s all I’ve got. But I do love the old man, despite how ornery he can be sometimes.

“We got a late arrival,” he says, kissing my temple.

“Oh? I didn’t see a reservation.” I saw the man with two kids from a distance while I was busy shoveling, of course, but I don’t say anything. Some days, we have more quick stops here looking for directions than proper guests.

“Didn’t have one. I put them in room 205. You’ll need to take something up for them to eat.”

I nod. None of this is unusual. Exceptional guest service in the middle of nowhere is our specialty, and being as small as we are, it’s not like we’re ever bursting at the seams. However, this time of year, after the holidays and before spring, we can go weeks without a single guest. “How many?”

“Three. I already told Marcy.”

“All right.” I plant a kiss on his soft and wrinkled cheek. “I’ll see to it, no problem. You head on up to bed and I’ll lock up after delivering the food.” With a grin over my shoulder as I start walking towards the kitchen door, I add, “I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Not if I see you first.”

The joke is almost as old as him, but I still laugh, mainly because he expects it. Life here would be nothing without reflexes, habits, and little rituals. I wait near the kitchen door until after he turns the corner that leads to the back stairs. Then I let out the sigh that was still inside me and push open the door.

Hustling around the large kitchen like it’s on fire, Marcy takes a couple single serving milk cartons out of the double-door fridge and sets them on an already full tray. She’s been with the lodge as long as I can remember, a wonderful cook. With my baking skills, we make a good team.

I lift the metal lid off the plate on the tray. “Yum, chicken salad.”

“I have a sandwich in the fridge for you, too,” Marcy says with a smile.

Skipping meals is my specialty. Comes with running the lodge, where there’s never enough hours in the day to cover everything. “What would I do without you?”

“Me? Nonsense, Tabby. This place wouldn’t run without you,” she answers. “Everyone knows it. Including that grumpy old man.”

Marcy loves Gramps as much as I do, and works just as hard. “I’ll clean after delivering this and then lock up.” Lifting the tray off the center island, I say, “Goodnight.”

“Sleep tight,” she says, removing the apron she wears day and night.

She has dozens of aprons, all handmade. I still don’t know when she finds the time to sew them up in her room on the third floor. Both she and Gramps have rooms up there.

In that respect, I’m lucky. I live in the cabin out back – except when I have to evacuate due to a huge group of guests rolling in. Thankfully, it doesn’t

happen often.

I exit the kitchen and head towards the back service stairway. The large front steps, as well as the small but serviceable elevator, are reserved for guests only. I try to tread carefully. These stairs are known to creak and I don't want to disturb the few guests we have, making my way up them and down the hall to room 205.

There, I shift the tray in order to balance it against me so I can use one hand to knock. Before that happens, the door flies open. A huge hand grabs my arm, pulling me inside the room.

I manage to keep the tray from falling, but when I meet the nasty glare of the man still clutching my arm, I dang near drop it again.

"What the hell do you want and why are you sneaking around in the hallway?"

Holy crap. Guests have rarely dumbfounded me and never scared me. Until now.

I open my mouth, but nothing comes out. Tongue-tied? Since *when*?

"Well?" he snaps before my mind has a chance to force my tongue loose.

I finally take a good look at Mr. Porcupine. My heart skips a beat. If he wasn't so scary demanding, he'd be damn near gorgeous.

"Are those cupcakes?"

"Are they for us?"

The little voices coming from across the room snap me out of my deer-in-headlights mode. My heart slides out of my throat and back down in my chest where it belongs as I turn and see two little boys. Adorable little boys dressed in red and white striped pajamas with sandy-blond hair and big blue eyes.

The same shade of blue as the man still clutching my arm. No man, at least not one with an ounce of sanity, would accost a woman in front of his kids, so I jerk my arm out of his hold and carry the tray to the table in the center of the room.

"Yes, they're cupcakes, and they're yours." My nerves are settling. Teasingly, I add, "But only if you like chocolate."

"We do!" they sing in unison.

Twins. Identical, and with those eyes, the man could never deny parentage. Thankful my mind works again, I turn to their papa, whose scowl could rival Gramps any day of the week. Slowly exhaling my relief, because I know

grumpy men far too well, I say, “I *wasn’t* sneaking. I was busy bringing you something to eat. Your sons are obviously hungry.”

His piercing blue eyes practically burn holes through me, but I hold my own. He’s mad, that’s a given, but there’s something deeper in those eyes. Fear almost.

Odd.

What would scare a man like him? He’s over six feet tall, buff, and certainly not a weakling. His jawline looks strong pinched tight, built like it’s made for kicking butt and kissing girls stupid. And the rest of him...sweet baby Jesus. The longer I stare, the harder it is believing there’s such a bastard stuffed in this Adonis. I rub my arm, hoping it won’t bruise tomorrow from my grabby mystery man.

“Can we have one, Daddy?”

“Please?”

I bite my tongue to keep from answering. We’ve had enough kids at the lodge to teach me a thing or two. Whether I like it or not, it’s never my place to get between a guest and their children.

Cagey, like a trapped beast, he walks towards the table, keeping his eyes on me. I don’t move, not even a step when he stops close enough to lift the lid off the plate of sandwiches. I’m not about to let him know he’s frightened me, but I do get a whiff of his cologne. That has me biting the inside of my cheek. Damn if he doesn’t smell as good as he looks.

Another suspicious look from his haunting eyes breaks the spell.

Clinging to the good sense God gave me, I say, “Again, sir, I wasn’t sneaking around. I’m not trying to poison you, either. Whenever guests check in after meal time, we provide them with an evening snack.” He doesn’t look convinced. “Try it. Simple. Delicious. Yummy.”

He doesn’t respond, but picks up half a sandwich and takes a bite before nodding to the boys.

You’re welcome, jerk, I think to myself. *Some people.*

The boys each take a cupcake and as they peel back the paper holders, I open the two cartons of milk and insert the straws Marcy included on the tray.

Then I pour him a cup of tea, using the hot water provided. “I can make you coffee if you’d prefer. It’s instant, but it’s not half bad.”

“No, this is fine.”

He's still grumpy, but his voice has lost some of its growl.

I hand each of the boys a milk carton, who both have pink frosting mustaches by now. "My name's Tabby."

"My name's Adam."

"I'm Chase, and daddy..." The second sweet boy pauses, his eyes going big as he looks at his father.

"Rex," he growls. My sinfully handsome porcupine has a normal name. Small relief.

"Well, I'm happy to meet you, Adam and Chase." I purposefully don't extend my welcome to Grumpy. "I hope you'll have fun here at the Grand Pine Lodge."

"Do you live here?" the one I think is Adam asks.

"Yes, I do, and I work here, too. So, if there's anything you need, just ask."

"Like more cupcakes?" Chase asks hopefully.

My first instinct is to say yes, but I hold back. "That would be up to your father..."

His eyes, as cold as ever, are on me. Not my face, but my sweater. It might be because it's the same color of pink as the frosting on the cupcakes and his sons' faces, but I doubt that.

Chills criss-cross my spine. My poor battered heart beats faster. It's like he can see right through the heavy wool. My nipples tingle, harden, adding to my shame.

Why? I've been hit on by men three times my age and boys alike, but I've never had *this* reaction.

"I think one's enough," he says. "You each eat a sandwich now and drink your milk."

I grab the menu off the tray before my mind, and body, reacts to how kind and gentle he suddenly sounds. "How long will you be staying?"

He picks up the tea and drinks it down before answering. "Just a few days."

"Well, here's the menu for the next three days. You can either have your meals delivered to your room or eat in the dining room. We're small, so the meal times are also listed, however, we can provide sandwiches and other items all day."

"And cupcakes?" Adam beams like the sun.

I can't help but smile. I used to dream of having children as adorable as these two, but it'll never happen. Reality and the roots I've laid down here go deep. I'll have to just enjoy the kids who visit the lodge. There aren't many men out there willing to give up their lives in order to help manage a place in the middle of nowhere. The few who might think they're willing would soon change their minds. This is a twenty-four hour, three-hundred and sixty-five day job, that also includes one very grumpy old man. My life has no place for children.

Besides, this is a small town. Split Harbor's dating pool isn't exactly extensive or quality. One very lucky lady already landed the resident billionaire a couple years ago.

"More cupcakes?" Chase echoes.

Touching the tip of Adam's nose, I say, "Some days it's cookies."

"I love cookies!" Chase yells.

"I like cupcakes more," Adam says.

"Well, then, I guess I'll have to make both, won't I? Cookies and cupcakes. I like staying busy." I wink at them before turning back to their father and hand him the menu. As he takes it, I get another whiff of that amazing cologne mingled with his scent. It's faint, but intoxicating and very good at making heat swirl deep inside me. The sandwich must have done him some good because he's no longer scowling. He's no longer *quite* as scary. His hair is darker than the boys, but I imagine when he was young it was just as sandy blond as Adam and Chase's. He was probably as adorable as they are, too.

"Where are you from?" I'm pulling my mind back where it belongs.

He sets the menu down on the dresser. "We'll be eating in our room, but aren't fussy. Whatever gets brought up will be fine. Along with coffee and milk. The earlier, the better."

I get the hint. It's none of my business where he's from. His clothes, jeans and a flannel shirt, could be worn in the city or country, but his accent reminds me of Russ, who is very proud of being born and raised in Chicagoland.

I should leave, but for some reason, it's hard peeling my eyes off him. I'm intrigued. Curious to know where his wife is, the boys' mother, but can't simply blurt it out.

He's staring back, harder than before, which has my insides tingling again in ways it shouldn't. *Ridiculous*.

"Well, Cupcake," he says slowly. It takes me a second to realize he means *me*. "You going to stand there all night, or let us finish eating in peace?"

Fine, whatever. I deserve that. He is a guest, after all.

Still, I'm irritated. And know I need to leave before saying something that will really piss him off. "I'm going," I say, "but the name's Tabby. I'd appreciate it if you'd –"

"Short for Tabitha?"

"No. Just Tabby." I cringe a little more than I usually do, giving up my nickname masquerading as a name.

He gives me one more solid toe-to-head stare that has me holding my breath before he whips around. "Let me get the door, Cupcake."

Nicknames. They shouldn't irritate me the way they do, but I can't help it.

Not when everyone always assumes Tabby is a nickname. It's the only thing my father ever gave me – whoever he was. One among many boyfriends who came calling on mom. My throat thickens slightly as I glance towards Adam and Chase. Those two boys don't know how lucky they are. Neither does their jackass father. I give them a small wave, walking out the door that's being held open impatiently by daddy's huge hand.

"Goodnight, Rex," I say, simply because he's a guest. A jerk, but a guest nonetheless, and we can't afford to lose customers in the winter. Not even a giant asshole.

He merely shuts the door.

I huff out a breath, and though I'd like to take a moment and lean against the wall to catch my bearings, I need space pronto, so make a beeline for the stairs.

Once I'm in the hallway safely downstairs, I place a hand on the wall, taking a few deep breaths. I've never had a man affect me like Rex. For no apparent reason, too.

It's so perplexing anger mingles with the heat he's left in my blood. Okay, so most women would be intrigued by six feet of mystery and muscle, especially one *that* freakin' sexy. But it doesn't explain why I'm coming undone for a Neanderthal who just wiped his feet on my back.

Annoyed, I push myself off the wall and head for the front desk. There, I move the mouse to wake up the computer and type in the password. The main screen appears.

Rex Osborne. Blue Chevy pick-up. No license plate number listed.

No, of course not. Gramps thinks that's a silly question even though I've

warned him it might be important for security. Paid cash for two nights.

I log out and walk to the front door. Tall, dark, and sometimes handsome strangers are nothing new to the lodge. Insta-fascination I really shouldn't be experiencing is.

Maybe it's because our other handsome strangers come here to unwind, relieve the stress in their lives. Not this one. The man upstairs was wound tighter than a drum, and the blue pick-up backed up so it's practically hidden beneath the trees confirms something tickling at the back of my mind since he accused me of sneaking around outside 205.

Rex Osborne is hiding *something*. Or maybe, he's hiding from someone.

Either way, I want to know more. After locking the front door and turning down all the lights, and checking the kitchen, where I also leave a note for Marcy, I put on my coat and leave through the employee entrance. Rather than taking the shoveled pathway to my cabin, I walk around the lodge, to the far end of the parking lot. I'm able to get a better look at his truck from here.

Illinois plates. I knew it.

II: Settling In (Rex)

I stay hidden behind the curtain so she can't see me. She's already looked up at the window twice, as if sensing she was being watched, or she might just be that nosy – something that'll get her into more trouble than she'd ever bargain for.

Cupcake. I'd called her that out of defense, needing to keep my distance. Distance from everything and everyone.

Especially soft spoken girls who look as delicious as their dessert namesake. Her with the scorned looks lodged in her honey-hazel eyes. Her with the dark chocolate hair warning me it'd feel like velvet on my fingers. Her with the hips, the legs, the ass that's divine, hopelessly hidden behind her Ms. Average outfit.

Shit. I catch myself hard and shake my head, remembering she's one more problem I don't need.

How the fuck did I end up in this predicament? By fucking, that's how. At least at the beginning.

Of all the men in the world, all the one-night stands, I'm the one who's getting royally fucked long after the fun ended. As my anger churns harder and hotter inside my guts, guilt rises to meet it. Cupcake has already walked away from the truck, back around the lodge, so I move away from the window. Stopping near the foot of one of the double beds, I stare at my twin

boys

They're sleeping soundly. So innocent, so good, they almost take the edge off old mistakes.

Yeah, they came out of that one-night stand causing the present woes, too. I don't regret that. *Never will.*

It's ever screwing the bitch who bore them I regret. Should've known six years ago when I met her she was more trouble than any man needed. She'd been hot, sexy, and all over me. I'd had a hard week laying custom shingles on the roof of a frigging Senator's mansion.

I was ready to get drunk and wet my dick. We barely made it out of the bar. I fucked her in the front seat of my work truck parked in the alley. Afterwards, we'd gone back inside and partied some more, then we both left without another word.

Typical party at a watering hole on Chicago's rust belt. I never planned on seeing her again. Nine months later, when I was served the papers about submitting a blood sample, I'd long since forgotten her name. Until reading the second page of the court document, where our history was described, vividly.

I'm no deadbeat. I gave a paternity sample, accepted the DNA results, and agreed in court we'd share visitation to Adam and Chase. Limited and supervised visitations for her. Nelia claimed she hadn't known how to get a hold of me before the boys were born. An obvious lie. The name of my construction company, T-Rex Builders, was on the side of every work truck. Any number of people from the bar that night could've told her who I was, how to contact me.

She knew what she was doing from the start. Never attempted to get a hold of me to see the twins she abandoned, just thought I'd hand over child support, and lots of it, on a monthly basis.

She'd been dead wrong.

In more ways than one. Too fucking many to count.

And now she's dead.

Only saving grace about that is Adam and Chase didn't even know who she was. When, if ever, they heard about her death, they wouldn't mourn. Mommy is something they hear in fairy tales, not a fact of life.

Call me a cold-hearted bastard, but it's a small relief. Both that my sons won't suffer her loss, and that she's permanently out of our lives. She wasn't any type of mother to the boys the past five years, nor would she have ever

changed. Didn't have it in her.

Raising kids takes heart, and Cornelia Hawkins didn't have a loving bone in her body, or the slightest clue what it took to be a mom.

Hell, Cupcake's already shown more affection towards the boys than Nelia ever did. Tabby, as she prefers to be called – the very reason I'll keep calling her Cupcake – may never know how badly Adam and Chase needed those chocolate treats tonight.

Not only had they been as hungry as me, and that was a damn good sandwich, the boys needed an ounce of kindness. Two weeks of driving around, spending nights in sleazy hotels and eating greasy drive-thru burgers, was taking its toll on all of us.

If Adam hadn't had to pee, and I hadn't pulled off on a side road to give him some privacy, I'd have never seen the faded sign advertising this place.

Grand Pine Lodge: A secluded hidden gem.

That's what the sign said, and that's exactly what we need. Sanctuary. A couple days off the road to wrap my head around what's happened, and what I can do about it next.

Because I'm not spending the rest of my life in jail for murder.

Fucking bitch. I knew what she was doing, but sure as hell hadn't expected this outcome.

Worst part is, I'm not the one who killed her.

I run my hands through my hair, scratching at my scalp. It itches like hell from not being washed good and proper in a couple days. The other hotels were too run down, too caked in dirt, I'd barely had time to run my head through the sink.

This place is old, but it's actually clean. Time for a real shower. Then a good night's sleep. I'll be clearer headed in the morning, able to think things through.

I grab the duffel bag I purchased in some dinky roadside town and head for the bathroom.

The shower helps. Bed's comfortable, too. So I let my mind wander free while I'm waiting to fall asleep. Even crack a grin as the Cupcake's face forms in my mind. That pink sweater hugged her in all the right places, didn't it? And those eyes...they're not really hazel. I remember more.

A brownish-green with specks of gold that sparked hellfire at times. Especially when I'd asked if she was going to stand there invading our space

all night. Her long hair was thick and dark brown, pulled back in a ponytail, making her look even younger. So did the way she hadn't worn makeup. She hadn't needed any. There was a natural beauty to her. A grace, almost. Something I haven't seen in a woman in ages.

Chicago's full of girls with hair as colorful as rainbows and decked in cosmetics. Plenty of them are pretty, some teetering towards beautiful, but there's something about Cupcake's naturalness that takes my mind off everything else. At least briefly.

Or maybe it's her attitude. I'd startled her, frightened her even, but the moment she'd seen the boys, she'd turned friendly and kind. Sweet as the name I've given her. That stirs up more than it ought to. Makes me wish things were different for Chase and Adam.

Hell, I wish that for myself. If Nelia was more like Cupcake, life would be pretty damn good right now. I wouldn't be in this mess. I'd be home, probably with something pink and delicious to come home to.

I like that thought, insane as it is. I drift off imagining the boys enjoying their colorful frosted cupcakes all over again.



My lungs are on fire, my breathing ragged, coming in gasps that hurt going out as much as the air burns going in. I grab my head as the spinning slows and the faint sunshine coming in the window confirms I'm not in a penthouse apartment, standing over Nelia's dead body.

Sweat pours down my neck and my hands shake as I tell myself it was only a dream. A fucking nightmare that I've already lived through and will continue to. Have to for Adam and Chase.

A knock at the door makes me realize that's why it ended. In the dream, Aiden had knocked on the door. That's not what happened in real life. He'd come at me like the crazy drugged up shit-hole of a man he'd been. I'm not sorry that fucker's dead either. Never will be.

The knock sounds again. Now, wide awake, the idea Cupcake could be outside my door has me tossing aside the covers. I grab a pair of jeans out of the duffel bag. "Coming."

Without bothering to zip or snap the jeans I shove my legs through, I open the door. The gray-haired old man who checked us in last evening stands there with a grimace. I can't tell if it's a frown or a smile.

"Tabby's note said you wanted breakfast early," the man said. "If she made a mistake, I can bring it back later."

“No,” I answer. “No mistake. Thanks.” I open the door wide enough to take the tray. “The boys are still sleeping, so I’ll grab it.” They’re always starving when they wake up. As he hands me the tray, I say, “Hold on, though, I’ll get the one from last night.”

I set the tray on the table, find the one from last night, and carry it to the door. The man was hard to read, but knowing I can’t afford anymore enemies, I say, “Thanks, the boys enjoyed the cupcakes.”

“Tabby will be glad to hear it. I’ll give her your compliments. You need something, just push one on the phone. That rings the front desk.”

I nod and close the door, then give myself permission to crack a smile. The phone system in the place is as horribly outdated as everything else here. Damned if I care, it’s not a dump like some of the other roadside motels we’ve stayed in the past two weeks. The lodge is clean and well maintained, just old.

The building must date back to the 1950s, maybe earlier. Being the carpenter I am, I’d noticed all that when we’d checked in. The place has solid bones, and with the way it’s been kept up, it could stand for another century.

By the time I turn around, still trying to gauge how ancient this place really is, Adam and Chase are up. They’re sitting on their bed, scratching their mops of tousled hair. Whether the sound of voices or the smell of food roused them, I have no idea.

“Hungry?”

“Yeahhhh!”

“Shhh,” I say, even though it’s too late. Their shout has my ears ringing, let alone any poor souls in the rooms next door. “Other people are probably still sleeping. Don’t be rude, boys.”

“Sorry,” they say, once again at the same time.

It’s uncanny, but deep down, I love it. They do most everything at the same time. They’re like any kids making innocent mistakes as they grow, but they’ll never need to apologize for who they are. “It’s okay,” I say softly. “Come on and eat.”

“Are there cupcakes?”

I smile and rub each of their heads before reaching down to remove the cloth covering the tray. “Most people don’t have cupcakes for breakf...” My words fade away. Besides three plates covered with domed metal lids, there are cartons of milk, a pot of coffee with a single cup, and three pink frosted cupcakes on the tray.

I can't help but chuckle. "I guess we aren't most people, are we?"

"Nope," the boys say while climbing onto the chairs.

"Are we going home today?" Chase asks.

"No, not today." Not ever is what I really mean.

"Yippie!"

They eat the cupcakes first and I let them. It's no great sin when I feed them right most days. The scrambled eggs, bacon, toast and hash browns fill me up. Damn good. I sit back to drink my coffee while the boys devour their smaller portion of the same breakfast I just had.

It's not long before I'm pouring myself a second cup. Hot and black, just how I like it. A sinking feeling gels the food in my stomach as I watch them eat.

I have to figure out what to do. These two need me. *Will* need me for years to come.

Since freeing them from the penthouse apartment, we've bounced around Illinois, Iowa and Wisconsin, zigzagging from ATM to ATM, drawing out my daily limit. If only I'd had the foresight to up that amount. I have enough money for us to live on for years in the bank, but hadn't thought about upping the amount. Worse, knowing the transactions left a trail anyone could follow, I pitched the card out the window over the side of a bridge and headed for Canada.

What choice did I have – money or demons in hot pursuit?

We could jump in the truck right now and make it to the border in a few hours, but that's just as risky as it was yesterday. I'd have to show my ID to cross the border. I don't know who's watching or what the Chicago press is saying back home.

Hunkering down would be the best bet, let things cool off till I can contact my lawyer. Granted, Justin was a business lawyer, not a criminal one, but he'll know someone who can help.

While the boys are finishing up, I dig the tablet out of my duffel bag and turn it on. I'd bought it along with clothes, duffel bags, and a cart full of other essentials the day after leaving Chicago, using a credit card which I then flushed down the toilet in the men's room of the gas station after using it to fill the truck's tank.

My grandfather's old truck is a gas hog, but reliable. I took it out of the pole shed on his property, where it's been parked since grandpa died ten years ago, and where I left mine. My cousin lives on the farm now, and probably won't

go in the shed until summer. Hopefully. If he does, I hope he sees the note I left behind. It simply says I'd borrowed it. John takes the truck out on the roads every summer, just to keep it in running order, so I knew it'd take us wherever we needed to go, about as untraceable as we could get. Which is exactly what we needed and why I threw my phone in the back of a shipping truck with Florida license plates at a gas station.

Fucking-A. What a mess.

After punching in the internet password written on a slip of paper and taped to the front of the phone book on the desk, I search hotels, resorts, and all sorts of other lodging options along the Canadian border for an hour or more. I'm not sure how long it's been, but I do know my options are crap. I only have a couple of grand, tops, in my billfold. Spending three hundred a night isn't feasible. This place, the Grand Pine Lodge, doesn't even have its own website. The price is very reasonable, too.

What I need is a job. Income. Enough money so I can pay our room and board here, saving my cash for when we have to leave. The dollar stretches a bit further over the border, but only if I've got plenty to stretch.

It's far from my biggest worry, too. The Stone Syndicate won't stop looking. They know where Nelia's money came from, and they know who killed Aiden.

They know my fucking name, who my kids are, and every sacred stretch of Chicago soil I ever frequented. We can't stop for long. We *have* to keep moving.

"Dad, there's a horse out there," Adam says, breaking my quiet panic.

"Can we go look at it?" Chase asks.

"Or ride it?" Adam pipes in.

They're getting restless. I've kept them busy getting dressed, combing their hair and brushing their teeth, all on their own, which takes ample time considering they're only five.

"Sure," I say, suppressing a sigh. "Fresh air will do us all good, I suppose." It'll give me time to look around, too, maybe see if there's a back road out of this place. Valuable info I may need if the time to leave comes sooner than I think. "Get your coats on, and don't forget your mittens."

"They're gloves, Dad," Chase corrects.

"Right, don't forget your gloves." I smile. Nelia may have given them half their genes, but they've got my looks and brains. My focus.

Small blessings. Can't fathom what the hell I'd do right now without them.

It's only a little after seven and the hotel is pin-drop quiet, so I tap my lips with a finger as we walk down the stairs. Their hushed giggles make me shake my head. This is how they've been since we left. Following my commands without questions, acting like the entire thing is one huge adventure.

Technically, it is. Just not the joyous kind they think.

I open the door and close it again behind us as quick as possible. The boys can't hold back their shouts of freedom any longer as they tear across the wide front porch and down the stairs.

Whoever does the shoveling around here must get up early. The porch, steps, and sidewalks are clear from last night's snow, as well as a wide pathway to the barn that's a good hundred yards off to the east side of the lodge. Shoveling that much wouldn't have been easy. A good two inches fell, the wet, heavy kind that makes good snow balls, snow forts, and snowmen. The boys run on toward the barn, stopping to scoop up a handful every now and again.

I scanned the area, looking for signs of trouble, or anything out of the ordinary. Whoever shovels, must not also plow because there aren't any tracks in the parking lot. It's still got my truck and the two other SUVs that were there last night.

Nearly deserted. That'll do fine.

As satisfied as I can be given the circumstances, I follow the boys, catching up with them on the backside of the barn, where they're crouched down looking between the two bottom rails of the fence at the two shaggy looking horses.

"Can we go in there, Dad?" Adam asks.

"No."

Just then a door on the barn near the fence opens and I take a double look at who comes strolling out.

Cupcake. She must love pink. I didn't know they made canvas work coats in that shade. Her hair is in another ponytail and a thick head band covers her ears. Pink again.

My morning wood is back with a vengeance, straining against my denim.

"Well, good morning!" she says to the boys, never once looking at me. "What brings you early risers out here?"

“We saw the horses,” Chase says.

“Can we pet them?” Adam asks.

“And ride them?” Chase grins.

“These two are too old to ride anymore,” she says softly, “but you can pet them, if it’s all right with your father.”

The boys look up at me, hope sparking in their eyes. So does she, which makes my heart thud oddly.

It’s got to be the stress. I’ve had women since Nelia, yeah, but always kept them at a distance, far from me and the boys. I’m never getting burned like that again. But fuck, I’m not a monk, and a woman as attractive as Cupcake has the bewitching ability to turn me hard in a heartbeat.

“Can we, Dad?”

I turn to them and nod.

“You’ll have to come through the barn.” She points to the side of the building. “The door I shoveled a path to.”

Testing my hearing, I ask, “You shoveled the path?”

“Yes.”

“And the sidewalks?”

“Yes, why?” she cocks her head.

The boys are already running, so I simply say, “No reason.”

I’m impressed, and that’s got nothing to do with her dick-teasing looks. A woman who bakes and shovels is a certain rarity in this day and age. Then again this isn’t the big city.

By the time I get to the door, the boys have shoved it open and darted inside.

“Be careful,” she says. “Slow down.”

The boys listen, slowing to a brisk walk as they make their way around piles of lumber.

“We’re in the middle of a remodeling out here,” she says.

I nod, taking it all in.

Big and solid, the barn is what I’d call a clean slate. This is the part of construction work I’ve always loved. Envisioning the potential, what the final project could look like restored. Unfortunately, I don’t get to do it as often as I’d like anymore.

Most of the time, my customers have professional blueprints ready to go for my crew.

Shit, the crew. Just thinking about them twists my lips sourly.

That was one of the two phone calls I'd made before I threw my phone to the wild. To Randy, my construction manager. I told him to cut the men a month's worth of paychecks and shut everything down. It was the best I could do and it still pisses me off, but I had to make a choice. Fast.

A day or two more, and the Syndicate would be all over my company. They'd go after my men for info, hell, their families. I couldn't put more lives in danger. Protecting my boys is enough. More than enough.

The other call had been to Mrs. Potter, the nanny and tutor I'd hired for Chase and Adam in better times. I told her I was taking them out of town on business and would call when we return. I'll cut her a severance check, eventually, but she already screwed me once. *If she'd said no to Nelia that fucked up day she came...*

No. I can't go there again.

Holding in a sigh, I follow the boys, who are following Cupcake, taking my time to examine the space. Whatever helps get my mind off poison. Like the lodge, the barn was built well and it's still solid. Even the floor. By the time I catch up to them through the back door, she's given each of the kids a bucket. A horse eats out of each one, both snorting happily to the boys' delight.

"What type of remodeling project?" I finally ask.

She eyes me critically while continuing to pet one of the big brown horses. I don't blame her, I wasn't friendly last night. After a few tense seconds, I walk over and pet the other horse, acting as if I don't care if she answers or not.

"We're turning it into more of a stable, with a large tack area room, feed storage, and office."

"For these two?" I'm not much of an animal person, but I recognize old when I see it.

"No. We'll keep them, but also bring in more, so we can offer trail rides to guests."

"What are trail rides?"

She laughs at how both boys speak simultaneously, word for word. "Horse rides."

"Yippie!" They both jump, no doubt hoping to be the first happy customers.

Picturing a layout inside the barn, I ask, "How many horses?"

"I'm thinking six," she says, "but it depends on Clayton. He's our neighbor and this will be a partnership of sorts. The man boards horses and always has more than he can exercise on his property. He doesn't have enough acreage for trails, either. I think the guests will like it, and hopefully, we'll both make some money."

It's a solid plan, though I'm not about to say it. I'm also seeing a job for myself. One that won't take long, but could pay the money I need.

"Unfortunately, the remodel is delayed right now."

"Why?" I snap, trying not to show my hand. Not easy.

"Russ broke an ankle and probably won't get back to work for a couple months. He's kinda our jack-of-all-trades around here. He was spearheading this before the accident."

Shitfire, this is too perfect. My mind goes a hundred miles per hour, estimating how long it'll take me to complete the remodel as we stand quiet for a short time.

Then Cupcake glances down at the boys and then back up at me, breaking the silence. "So, not to break up the party, but I've got other chores. Can't let you stay out here, sir. Liability reasons."

I nod. "Fine. Thanks for letting them feed the horses. Boys, what do you say?"

"Can we do it again?"

I give them a look. "Boys..."

"Thank you, Tabby!" They both lower their eyes and I give a satisfied nod.

Cupcake laughs. A soft, airy sound reminding me what kind of trouble I'm in getting too close to this woman. "Adorable. Do you two *always* talk at the same time?" she asks.

"Sometimes," the boys answer shyly.

The sound of more singsong feminine laughter makes me wonder if the boys ever heard such an angelic sound before. *Hell, have I?*

"Just you working in the barn while the help is out – Russ, right?" I ask.

Cupcake nods. "Yes. Well, I fill their water tank and feed them grain every morning and hay every evening," she says while collecting the buckets. "It's easy enough."

“How do you keep the water from freezing?” I wonder aloud.

Her eyes say she still doesn’t trust me, yet she answers, “There’s a pump house in the far corner of the barn that we keep heated.”

Room for improvement. Another opportunity, if they’ll bite.

I wave for the boys to follow. They have more questions for her as we walk through the barn. She answers each one while I scan the area again, making mental notes. The old man who checked us in last night said he owns the place, so that’s who I need to talk to. Once we exit the barn, she says goodbye and walks towards the back of the lodge, a plastic salt bucket in hand. I keep the boys outside until they’ve worn off some energy, then lead them inside.

Off the foyer where the large front desk is located, there’s a big front room with a TV and a large game of checkers set up on a coffee table. I get the boys settled in first. I haven’t let them out of my sight since that night our world caved in. Don’t want to now, but must, in order to talk to the old man.

I won’t be far, knowing this is the safest place we’ve been in two weeks, so I leave the room and cross the foyer again. There’s a door behind the desk marked OFFICE. Unable to remember what the man said his name was, I scan a magazine on a side table with a subscription label. Morris Danes.

That’s right. I’ve sold multi-million dollar construction jobs, convincing Morris Danes to pay me to remodel his barn should be like taking candy from a baby.

I knock, fully prepared to open the door upon invitation.

Instead, it opens as someone leaves.

Shit.

It’s Cupcake. The old man sitting behind her bristles hostility. My shoulders want to sag. If she has anything to do with it, I won’t get this job.

III: Hard Bargains (Tabby)

My heart thuds so hard I can’t breathe. Why does he do this to me? It happened outside, too, the minute I saw him standing next to the barn. Those blue eyes are the definition of piercing. Like they can see right into my head, read my thoughts. Earlier I’d become a babbling idiot, telling him all about my plan for the stable and trail rides. Which he obviously didn’t care about. The dark and brooding expression that crossed his face when he’d walked into the barn made that clear. Even though he’d tried to hide it later.

Well, I can hide a few things too. Like how easy he knots my stomach.

Lifting my chin, I ask, “Something you need, Mr. Osborne?”

“I’d like to speak to Mr. Danes.” His gaze goes past me, settling on Gramps.

I’m about to say I’ll help, whatever it is. Mainly because Gramps was never completely sold on the trail rides idea. It won’t take much for him to re-think and shut it down. If this dark, coarse stranger blurts out anything I told him...

“Come in then,” Gramps says. “Tabby, shut the door behind you.”

Crap. It’s too late to worry.

Rex’s eyes meet mine as he brushes past. There’s a hint of triumph in them, as if he’s won a game I didn’t know we were playing. I pinch my lips together to keep from saying something rude.

“If you’ll excuse us, Ms. Danes?” Oh, suddenly, I’m Ms. Danes? Not Cupcake like he’d called me last night?

Shouldn’t annoy me, but of course it does.

Keeping my composure, I leave the office and pull the door closed after he enters. Frustration pricks my blood. Gramps is dead set on nothing changing at the lodge. He won’t even consider proper listings on travel sites online. It took me a year to convince him to partner with Clayton Williams for the trail ride idea. No, it’s not a million-dollar game changer, but every dollar counts right now. Besides, Clayton’s horse boarding has a basic website and he’s promised to include our resort along with the trail rides next time he updates.

Again, not a huge money maker, but baby steps are all I dare take with Gramps. If Rex Osborne screws this up for me, he’ll be sorry.

“Hi, Tabby!” Two little voices chirp.

Their father makes me steam like an engine overheating, but his children are adorable. Looking at them is sunshine. It simply fills my soul with a carefree warmth. “Well, hello again,” I say, walking into the front room. “Are you two playing checkers?”

“Not really.”

I’m unsure which is Adam and which is Chase, so don’t know how to address the question. “Why’s that? Good way to pass the time, boys.”

“Because we don’t know how to play,” the other one says, looking down.

“You don’t know how to play checkers?” I smile.

They both shake their heads. “Well, then it’s high time you learned.” I sit down on the floor and show them how to set up the game, and then play a couple rounds with them. They’re smart and catch on quick, which is good, because I have tons of work to do. It had only snowed about two inches

overnight, but Wes hasn't plowed yet, and Sarah, the weekend cleaning woman, hasn't been able to make it up the hill off the main road. I'm the lucky one filling in for her.

Gramps took the phone call while I'd been out shoveling, told Sarah she should have walked if her car couldn't hash the snow. That's what he'd have done. Gramps, who has a million stories on permanent repeat about running the lodge under waves of Michigan snow, in every recession, without anyone around to drag him down.

Ugh. This also means I need to call and smooth things over with Sarah, which will probably include begging her to keep working here. If our part-time cleaning lady goes, I'll never get a full day off.

"Great game, boys, but I have to get to work," I tell them, hearing someone's heavy footsteps on the stairs. "You two have fun."

"We will, thanks, Tabby."

"You're welcome," I say while tousling their hair. "Both of you." If they were mine, I'd have to put a dot on one of their foreheads so I could tell one from the other. I've heard of that. New mothers putting a dot on one baby's heel when she has twins, in order to keep track of who's who.

Of course, that's a silly notion to be contemplating. Rex has paid for two nights, so they'll be leaving tomorrow. Sunday. Makes sense, the boys most likely need to be back at school Monday. I'm assuming they're in school. Kindergarten, I'd bet. They look about that age.

I shuffle to the front desk, help the older couple from room 203 check out, and then collect the cleaning and supply cart.

The boys take up a portion of my mind while I'm busy, but their father takes up more. I'm working upstairs, first the third floor and then the second, so don't know if he's still talking with Gramps or not. Can't tell if he and the boys entered their room or not, either. That could have happened while I was busy cleaning Grandpa's room, or vacuuming the hallways, or resetting the room left vacant by the elderly couple who checked out this morning.

Their door has the DO NOT DISTURB tag hanging off its knob, meaning he doesn't want any cleaning. Most people staying two days don't. Just like the couple in room 202, who claim they're on their honeymoon, but arrived in separate cars, with license plates from different states.

Okay, I'm nosy, but I also mind my own business by keeping my thoughts to myself. Comes with the territory in this little town. The most excitement Split Harbor's had in years was a murder-mystery involving our resident

billionaire, Ryan Caspian. Him and his wife, Kara, the high school sweetheart he settled down with after a mountain of drama, practically lived through a romance thriller. And the town lived it vicariously, too.

Newly-weds or not, the 202 guests both paid in advance and haven't left their room since arriving on Thursday. They'll be leaving tomorrow, too. There are two reservations for next weekend, but the entire week we'll be empty. Not so good when it comes to making a profit. Advertising is what we need, but other than a listing in the yellow pages, and one old worn out billboard off the old road, Gramps is against that too.

Almost as strongly as he dug his heels in against my trail rides.

I'll be thoroughly pissed off if Rex changes his mind, however carelessly. That chiseled jaw and rock hard muscle sending lightning down my spine won't be enough to save him.

The more I think about it, the madder, the more worried I become. I'm holding my breath while rolling the cleaning cart off the elevator, wondering what happened. Gramps' office door is open, the room empty.

Now, I'm spitting mad. Damn him to *hell* on a fucking white horse. This stranger knows nothing about us. He can't just waltz in here one night acting all grumpy and uppity – yes, he's uppity, too, like he's better than everyone else – and start telling us how to run this place.

My mind replays the worst scenarios as I refill the cleaning cart and then stow it and the vacuum away, and carry the used bedding to the basement, where I put it in the washer before heading back upstairs and to the kitchen.

Gramps is there eating lunch. I hold my breath for a moment, waiting for an explosion, or an 'I told you so.'

He barely looks up. Marcy, on the other hand, is as bubbly as ever.

"Sit down and eat, Tabby!" She motions to the chair. "I already carried trays up to the couple in 202 and that man and his cute little boys in 205."

"Thanks," I say. If only she knew *that man* and his cute little boys are driving me *insane*.

"It's broccoli cheese soup and turkey sandwiches on rye, just how you like them!"

Is it that obvious I'm upset? I sit down, fill a bowl from the tureen in the center of the table and place half a sandwich on a plate. "Guilty as charged," I tell her.

"I know you too well," Marcy says, placing a large glass of iced tea in front

of me. “Hey, if you have time this afternoon, we *are* out of cupcakes. I gave the last few to the guests. They loved them.”

“I’ll whip up another batch soon.”

“White with chocolate frosting?” Gramps asks.

“Sure.” I wait for more, eyeing him suspiciously. Still mad enough to make sure he listens to my point of view.

He just keeps eating. Weird.

Marcy sits down and fills a bowl of soup for herself. She sees me moving like molasses, sifting my spoon through the soup. “Eat before it gets cold.”

Only good advice I’ve heard today. I eat a few quick mouthfuls of soup, and just when I take a bite off my sandwich, have my mouth completely full, Gramps speaks up.

“Good news, Tabby-kitten. I hired someone to finish the barn stables.”

I almost choke trying to get down enough of the food in my mouth so I can ask, “Who?”

“Rex Osborne.”

I do choke then, and have to take a drink of tea to soothe my throat before I can speak again. “Who?”

This has to be a joke. He’s pulling my leg right out of its socket.

“Rex Osborne,” Marcy says. “The man with those adorable twins in room –”

“I *know* who he is,” I say, cringing at how the shine in her eyes behind her wire-rimmed glasses dulls. “I mean, I’m surprised. Thought he was only staying two nights.”

“He’s decided to make it an extended stay, until he’s done with the restoration.” Gramps pours himself a cup of coffee from the insulated pot on the table, turning a sip over in his cheek as he often does. “Here’s your bonus: I told him the job includes shoveling the sidewalks. You’re welcome.”

I’m not relieved. Not even a little.

I hold up a hand. “Wait. An extended stay?” My head spins with questions. What about his boys? School? Their mother? Where *is* she in all this?

“We need that place fixed pronto for peak season. Man’s a bit down right now and needs the work. Wasn’t a hard decision.” He taps his chest proudly.

“Down, you said? From what?”

Gramps lets out a long sigh. "Life. The mother of his kids died recently."

I press a hand against my stomach, where a sickening sensation erupts. "When? How?" I feel my anger wilting.

"Didn't ask." Gramps shrugs. "Figured it was none of my business, but suspect it wasn't long ago. That's why he's here. Soul searching. Giving the boys some different scenery, trying to get their minds off it." He tilts his head. "Also means a man like that'll be reliable. He'll work his keister off to forget."

I don't care. I'm just...stunned isn't even the right word.

This explains everything. His moodiness, how sweet and patient he is towards his sons. Yet, I find it hard to believe the Rex I met last night and again this morning, poured his heart out to Gramps on a whim. "He told you all that?"

"Didn't need to. Once he said their mother died recently, I put the rest together." Gramps frowns. "I thought you'd be happy? The stable will be done before spring, which is what you wanted. We need it if we're gonna give your little happy trails notion some motion."

"You didn't want to," I point out.

"I never said that," Gramps says sternly.

I can't believe this. "You fought me *every* step of the way. Now, you're on board because of him?"

"No. I fought against us paying for everything out-of-pocket. Once Clayton agreed to pay for a portion of the remodel, well, that changed things. It'll be his horses living in the barn, after all."

"We'll be profiting off his horses."

"Yes, but it'll take years to recoup the remodeling cost. Clayton's portion makes business sense. I explained all that to you."

He had, but not exactly the way he is right now.

"Rex is smarter than he looks. Man's got some ideas for a few minor fix-ups and upgrades I really liked."

A flash of anger hits me all over again. "What ideas? Clayton and I laid out the design for you months ago. One that'll work for the horses, guests, and us."

"Yes, you did, it's only a few minor changes." Gramps pushes away from the table, a sure signal he's done with this conversation. He crosses the room, but as he pushes open the door, he says, "Rex starts tomorrow morning. Be sure

to drop off breakfast early.”

“Isn’t that wonderful news?” Marcy asks. Her smile fell then as she says, “Oh, those poor little boys, and that man. How sad.”

She’s right, of course. I try to calm down, feeling guilty how I’d condemned Rex to hell before knowing his situation. So guilty I pick up my half eaten lunch and carry it across the room to the sink, dumping the remnants in the trash on the way. “I’ll clean up the kitchen and bake some cupcakes if you want to go up to your room for a while.”

“No, I’ll help,” Marcy says. “Busy hands are happy. I won’t be able to sew anyway, thinking about those little boys and their loss.”

I know the feeling. That’s what’s weighing on my mind, too.

“I wonder how long ago that was,” Marcy says. “A month? Maybe weeks? More?”

“No clue.”

“Well, there would have been a funeral and such.” With a shoulder, she shoves me aside. “Let me get the dishes. Need something to occupy my mind or I’ll go nuts with crazy thoughts.”

I feel the exact same way and open the pantry door to pull out the ingredients for cupcakes.

“You know what? I have a roast in the freezer. I’m going to pull that out and put it in to bake. Nice and slow so it’ll be tender and juicy. It’s probably been *ages* since those little boys had a good home-cooked meal. I mean if she’d been sick for a time or something...yeah, that’s exactly what I’ll do. I’ll make mashed potatoes and gravy and candied carrots. Everybody loves candied carrots!”

Marcy rattles on, and I hear her, but don’t. My own mind’s too busy. Had Rex’s wife been ill?

Ill for years and then passed away? The more I think about it, the more tragic my thoughts turn. Until tears sting my eyes. Not wanting Marcy to see them, I turn off the mixer. “I have to go put the laundry in the dryer, be right back.”

I keep busy all afternoon, baking and helping Marcy, between taking care of any lodge business. There’s very little. A couple reservations for later in the month. I also speak to Sarah, who agrees to continue working for us, but not until next weekend. That’s not an issue with just the two rooms occupied, and I call Betty, the week day housekeeper, and say she doesn’t need to come in on Monday unless things change.

Both women are wonderful that way, working when we need them and taking days off when we don't. I fill in the gaps and there are a lot of them. But we're like family here.

There are so many little issues with running a lodge that Gramps doesn't seem to fully understand. Or maybe he does and I don't understand his way of relaying it to me. It seems that's how it was with the stables.

It seems that's how it was with Rex, too. I'd jumped to conclusions without knowing all the facts.

By the time supper finishes, I've worked myself into a minor frenzy, wondering how I'll face Rex again, knowing how I condemned him. Or Adam and Chase for that matter.

It's not like I have a choice, anyway. I carry the tray up to the couple in room 202 first, just to give myself a bit more time.

My nerves literally have me shaking in my shoes. I carry the tray for his room slowly across the hallway. It's not like he completely knows all the bad things I thought about him, but I do. And that's the problem.

God, Tabby Danes. Get on with it. You're being ridiculous.

I find my nerve. Can't stall longer anyway – if I do their food will get cold – so I knock. When there's no response after what feels like an hour, I knock again. This time, louder.

Still no answer.

Surely, they haven't left. They don't seem like the type to go into town for dinner. I think I'd know that, so I hold the tray against me with one hand and slowly try the knob.

It's unlocked. Just as slowly, I push the door open a crack to poke my head in around the edge.

"Hey," I say quietly to the boys lying on the bed.

"Hi, Tabby," they say together, as if expecting me.

One of them holds up the tablet they'd both been staring at. "Dad downloaded us a checkers game!"

Glancing around the room, I ask, "Where is your dad?"

"In the shower."

I can't stop the sigh of relief that oozes out of me as I hear the water hissing. We're alone. I got lucky.

Pushing the door all the way open, I carry in the tray. “I’ve got your supper, boys.”

“And cupcakes?!”

They’re too sweet. My heart skips a beat, thinking of their loss. “Two for each of you.”

“Yippie!” They launch their little bodies in the air, jumping like monkeys several times.

Closing the door, I gently warn, “But, I think your dad will want you to eat your dinner first.”

“Yes, he will,” one of them says, a bashful look in his eyes.

They’re so well behaved.

I set the tray on the table, making sure the cloth is evenly situated, hoping it helps keep things as warm as possible until Rex is ready to eat. My smile hides how my heart bleeds sympathy every time I look at them, so I sit down on the edge of the bed. “Show me your checkers game while we wait for your daddy.”

They climb across the bed and sit down, one on each side of me.

“It’s fun!”

“Dad never lets us play games like this.”

“Nope, never.”

“Mrs. Potter doesn’t either.”

My neck is getting tired from twisting left and right as they each speak. “Oh, who’s Mrs. Potter?”

“What the hell are you doing?”

I bolt off the bed, spin around, and find myself dumbfounded all over again. Or maybe just frozen in place.

Rex. Rex freakin’ Osborne, in the flesh, and *holy hell* what kind of flesh is this sweet sorcery?

Water drips off his hair, the droplets trickling down his shoulders, his arms, his chest. He’d looked buff with clothes on, but without – Holy hell! Again.

I’ve never seen anything like it in my life and I can’t stop my eyes from going lower. It’s like God smashed an underwear model, a Spartan warrior, and a screaming rockstar together. He’s big, ripped to the bone, and inked all over. Explosions of color flash on the canvas of his body when he catches the light,

wild beasts and flowers with thorns.

My eyes move on their own. Straight to the towel wrapped around his waist.

I can't stop myself from thinking about his wife, how she must have enjoyed this sight on a regular basis. I can't help but feel a bit jealous, either.

What the hell is wrong with me? Jealous of a dead woman.

"I asked you a question." His growl is as fierce as his muscles.

End me.

I close my eyes because they refuse to move upwards, to his face. "I, uh...I brought your supper tray. No one answered, so—"

"The old fat woman just knocked and set it on the floor."

My eyes snap open and meet the glare he's casting my way. "Her name is Marcy and she's not fat. Or very old." She's only in her late fifties, pleasantly plump and middle-aged.

"All right, the *plump older* woman just knocked and set it on the floor." It's barely politer, but I'll let it go.

His poor wife might have loved his body, but probably despised his attitude. Or maybe not. Maybe it's just me he's this grumpy with. No longer feeling a strong desire to apologize, I say, "Did you really agree to work for my grandfather?"

"Yeah. That a problem, Cupcake?"

Hell yes. Him. That body. Inked and hard and oh my God. Nearly naked and dripping wet, or fully clothed, it's not something I need to see every day. "He's not easy to get along with," I warn.

"Good. Neither am I."

"Really?" I don't hide my sarcasm.

The grin that lights up his face is a bit cock-eyed and it nearly knocks the air out of me. A man this good-looking should have a red danger sign taped to his chest.

"Really."

I huff out a breath. "Color me shocked."

He steps closer, and though warning bells ring loud and clear in my head, my feet are still frozen. Glued to the floor.

"You'll be glad knowing it'll only take me a couple of weeks to have that

barn looking better than new. Ready for horses and guests alike. Easy work, solid pay, I would've been a fool to turn it down."

I nod, pressing my feet harder against the floor, hoping it might stop my eyes from roaming lower again, past his bulging tattooed chest, washboard abs, and that line of dark hair that disappears beneath the towel.

A bolt of heat shoots down my neck as he touches the underside of my chin with a single finger and slowly forces me to look up, into his face.

"Said you'd be glad, didn't you, Cupcake? You'll have guests for this place. Other guests a lot more pleasant than me, and probably more boring. Because they won't turn your eyes into magnets."

Damn it to hell and back in a chicken basket. Flustered, I jump back, mainly because my feet still hadn't wanted to move. "Right. Glad, Mr. Osborne. I will be."

He chuckles.

"Keep laughing. You won't find it so funny after a day or two working for Gramps," I warn. "He expects an early riser, and a full day of hard, quality work."

"That's me. Man enough for the job, darling."

Darling?! And I thought Cupcake was bad. Time to go.

I'm retreating toward the door, trying hard not to stumble, but I really don't dare take my eyes off him. I'm not sure why. Maybe because I don't want to even after his crap and the rude remarks.

Yes, I'm fully aware how messed up this is.

I step into the hallway. "We'll see if you're truly up for the task."

"Oh, I'm up for the task, Cupcake, don't worry." Again, *that* name. One brow arches as he grasps the edge of the door and eyes me up and down. "I'm up for a lot of things. Just sayin'."

Fire rushes through me just as the door closes in my face. Unable to take more than a single step sideways, I lean my head against the wall and whisper to myself, "Tabby Danes, I never knew you were such a fucking idiot."

IV: Fresh Baked Disaster (Rex)

I've only been working for an hour, and already have a fucking blister. Who would have ever thought? Not me. The past few years is why.

I had to do more managing than real labor. Not just my company, but keeping after the money Nelia kept sucking out of me. She kept threatening to haul me

to court for full custody. No judge in their right mind would have agreed to it, but that had also been the problem.

The Stone Syndicate is one of the oldest crime families in Chicago. Justice is corruptible and they've got more than one judge in their pocket, and Nelia had been fucking Aiden Stone. I'd have lost any court case she dragged me into, that much was a given.

That bitch sucked more than money out of me. She sucked out my life, maybe my soul. I can't find any remorse over the fact that she's dead. I just have to find a way out of the mess she left behind. That's what still matters. The one I'm smack dab in the middle of, in more ways than one. It's not just their deaths that set the hounds loose on my trail, it was the money laundering.

I grab the handsaw and start cutting a board in two, shaking off my dilemma. When I'd estimated the time this job would take, I mistakenly figured there'd be power tools I could use.

There are. *Hand-powered* tools. Honestly, I don't mind, delays aside.

It's a release for the anger that fills me to the point it feels as if I'm being swallowed by some hellish beast and spat back out, more pissed off than I was before. These hands are used to working miracles, and when they do, they also make me smile.

Working, building something that'll last for years, grounds me. Gives me the first sense of normalcy I've had in years. Certainly since my life went to hell in a hand basket after that one fateful fuck.

Her pussy hadn't even been good. I would have remembered if it had. I don't. I know it happened, can't deny that, and won't ever regret Adam and Chase coming out of it.

I glance towards the corner where they're sorting the bent nails from straight ones out of an old coffee can. Had to give the kids something to do to keep them busy. The sun is barely up, and it's cold, well below freezing, but they haven't mumbled a single complaint. They won't either.

Even as young as they are, they're made of tough stuff. Thank God and the blessings I'm not sure I deserve that they've got no idea killers are out there right now, somewhere, searching for us.

There are times since arriving here I've forgotten that fact. I have to make sure I never get so focused on the here and now I forget the past. Or the present. Or the reason we're here, and how fucking evil the men looking for us are.

The click of the door latch sends a shiver up my spine, and I wheel around,

ready to take out whoever walks through the door.

Then I see it. Pink. The relief rushing over me is uncanny.

So is she. Pink coat, headband, and gloves. Panties? Fuck, I wouldn't be surprised if they were pink, too. Pleased. But not surprised.

"Hi, Tabby!" the boys shout together, coming back to life.

"Good morning," she replies.

I catch the way she glances my way, her frown. She's clearly not impressed the boys are out here with me. Too bad. This is where they are and where they're staying. Within my sight at all times. Not like I've got a better choice.

"What are you doing out here?" Adam asks.

"Are you here to work, too?" Chase asks. "Like us? Helping Daddy?"

"Smart guess. That's exactly why I'm here."

A chill claws through me. Shit.

I was counting on not seeing her all day. Don't need the distraction. By the time she left the room last night after delivering our supper, I'd had a hard-on like no tomorrow. An ice-cold shower had barely helped. Neither had the second one I took after I woke up, the heat flowing through my fingers as I jerked off my frustration, my sick dreams, my unholy fixation on wanting to fuck this girl.

Now, conveniently, my boss' granddaughter. Hell, boss *and* landlord. Old Morris could snap his fingers and throw us to the wolves on a whim. I have to get my head straight. *Focus*.

"But my work is feeding the horses."

I'd forgotten that. How? I don't know. But I had.

"Can we help?"

"Only if it's all right with your father," she answers.

The boys don't ask, they just give me that look, the faces I can't say no to. Even as young as they are, they know it, the little miscreants.

I mull it over. They'll still be close, within hearing distance if not seeing, so I nod.

"Yippie!" Their little screams echo off the rafters.

She holds out both hands and they run towards her, each one grasping one of her hands. I'll never admit to being a soft-hearted man, but the sight of that

does something to me. To the point my throat thickens. Irritated she can do that to me, I growl, "Boys, remember: behave."

"We will!" they say. Not just Adam and Chase.

Tabby joins them. I bite back a grin at how all three of them had spoken at the same time, and how they giggle after.

Damn it. I need to keep a clear head. She makes that near impossible.

The saw does its job, cutting through the board, and I'm surprised at how straight the cut is considering how I had my eyes on the other end of the barn, where she'd shown the boys how to pull the hose out of the small corner room and out the side door, and then how to turn on the water, the entire time I'd been working.

I take my time collecting and measuring another board, still watching her as she answers the multitude of questions the boys ask about turning the water on and off, and reeling the hose back into the small corner room. Then she helps them dump grain into two buckets and carry them out to the horses.

I have several boards ready before they're back inside. I'd been able to hear them the entire time, but even if I hadn't, I instinctively knew the boys would be fine with her.

Strange. The few times Nelia was around them, I'd been on needles. Ready to pounce. *Had* pounced more than once. She couldn't be trusted to even feed them a bottle. The one time she had, Adam almost choked because she'd shoved the nipple so far down his throat.

She'd never been able to tell them apart, either. Her own sons. That was Nelia. One hell of a mother.

Hell, where I hope she is now.

I hadn't realized the anger inside me was being taken out on the board I'd been sawing until the end split off and I looked up. Just in time to catch the way Cupcake looks at me. There are wrinkles between her brows. Something inside her eyes I can't quite describe, other than it makes me feel a touch of embarrassment.

She doesn't say anything. Neither do I.

Still holding one of Adam and Chase's hands each, she guides them to the corner and their can of nails. I can't hear what she says, but the boys both nod. Then she pats their heads and stands up. Without looking at me, she walks out the door.

Frustration bubbles inside me, but I push it down, ignore it, and pick up

another board.

Hours later, the boys have long ago finished their nail job, as well as several other things I'd come up with to keep them busy. They're getting bored, and cold.

This isn't going to work. Fuck me.

I can't have them out here all day, every day. Michigan in late winter is just too damn cold, too mind-numbing. They're good kids, but five year olds have limits. I can't afford for them to get sick, either, and being out in the cold for so long...

Shit. But I *need* this job.

They need me to have this job.

There's a Podunk town not far away, Split Haven or something. The idea of finding someone to watch them crosses my mind. I instantly shove the thought aside. I can't have them that far away, nor can I trust anyone. Not when it comes to my kids.

I finish pounding two boards together, and then walk over to the duffel bag I'd brought with us. Pulling out the tablet, I ask, "How about a game of checkers? You've earned it."

The boys readily agree, perking up as I lead them to the hay bales piled along the end wall. "Climb up," I say, patting the top of the lowest stack. Mrs. Potter was dead-set against any type of electronic toys, saying the screens are bad for children's eyes and minds.

Totally overblown. It's only checkers.

The boys settle on the hay and I pull their stocking-caps down over their ears after setting the tablet between them. I'd let them pick out the hats while buying the necessities of being on the run. Adam chose a black Batman hat and Chase a green Hulk one. Mrs. Potter was also against watching TV, but there are some shows every boy needs in his life. Every kid needs a hero or two.

I carry the ladder to that end of the barn and secure it so I can climb up to mark where I'll need to connect the wall studs.

That's what I'm doing, nailing in a stud, when the door opens again. This time I'm expecting pink.

The boys are excited to see her, but don't display the same enthusiasm as earlier. They're tired. I already knew that, but this confirms it.

She's carrying a basket and uses one foot to shut the door behind her. "Who's

ready for lunch?”

My stomach does a bear impression, but I don't reply. The shouts from the boys are the answer she's looking for. Her smile says it all.

“Hope you like chili,” she says. “Marcy made a big pot, and it's so delicious.”

“We do!” The boys jump down and run to where she's unloading the basket on the boards I'd left stretched between two saw horses.

I climb down and follow.

She sets out three bowls with lids and several sandwiches wrapped in plastic, as well as a thermos that I hope is full of hot coffee, plus small cartons of milk.

“I also have these.” She holds up two brown paper bags with Adam and Chase's names written on them, along with smiley faces. “But you have to eat your lunch first.”

“That won't be a problem,” I say.

She glances my way, a brief, sideways peek out of the corner of her eyes that sends a trickle of electricity zipping through me.

“I have one for you, too,” she says, lifting another brown bag out of the basket with Daddy written on it.

It's crazy, but for some reason, my cheeks heat up. “Thanks.”

“You're welcome.” She helps Adam get situated with his lunch while I help Chase.

Even something as simple as this, her bringing us food, affects me like it shouldn't. Without attempting to in any way, she has my blood heating up and shooting to specific areas.

It's annoying how frustratingly hard she makes me in no time flat. She's the exact opposite of every woman I've ever known. Of all those I left behind. The high-maintenance broads and the sleazy ones with bad habits like Cornelia. They were fuck and dumps and I was too damn busy for anything different. Cupcake doesn't know that, of course, but I do. I know better, too. No woman will ever come between me and my sons. Cornelia had run that road right to the end, and got what she deserved.

I just wish it hadn't cost us so much.

Cupcake circles around the barn while the boys and I eat, looking at the work I've completed. I try to act like I don't care what she thinks, but I do. *Shouldn't. But do.*

“Why are you putting a wall up here?” she asks, leaning against the ladder.

“For the office.”

She shakes her head and points to the area behind me. “The office goes down there.”

“Makes more sense to be on that end. Near the well that you already keep heated.” Meeting her gaze, I ask, “You want water in the office, right? The sink?”

“Yes.”

I gesture to the ceiling. “Plumbing water the length of the barn leaves you open to frozen pipes if you have any heating issues.”

“The office over here won’t work. I don’t want the guests to have to walk the length of the barn to check-in.”

I walk over and plant a hand against the outside wall. “I’m going to put the entrance right here. You can have a nice sized parking lot outside this wall, too.”

She nibbles on her bottom lip for a moment before saying, “These are the changes you talked to Gramps about?”

“Yes, and foregoing the bathroom entirely.”

“We can’t lose the bathroom. People will need it, especially those not renting rooms at the lodge.”

“Then rent some porta-potties.” I shrug. “You’ll never recoup the cost of putting in a septic system, or the issues that come with it. Winter can be hard on toilets, the lines will freeze up, and that can get costly.”

I’ve got her thinking. Seriously thinking. Both that I know what I’m talking about, and that I have her best interests in mind. I have more than that in mind, and have to shift my stance to lesson the tension in my groin.

She walks towards the front of the barn. “What will be over here then, if not the office?”

“Stables mainly,” I say, and then proceed to tell her how I intend to lay out the tack area near the office, and the few other minor changes I’d suggested to Morris.

By the time I’m done, she’s nodding, and the smile on her face has me putting both hands in my front pockets in order to stretch my jeans enough to relieve some of the pressure on my swelling cock. Damn it to hell, but she’s getting under my skin. And I can’t let her.

“A part of me doesn’t want to admit it.” Her smile increases as she shrugs. “But some of what you’ve said makes sense.”

I have to look away, it’s like she’s sucking me into some kind of happy hole. That’s when I notice the boys. Sleepy-eyed, probably from being warmed up by the big bowls of hot chili. They’re leaning against each other for support like two kittens ready for a long nap.

She notices, too. “Looks like your helpers need sleep.”

“Looks that way,” I admit, having no idea what to do about it. They’ll never be able to sleep through the sound of me pounding in nails.

“I can take them inside,” she says quietly. “They’ll be more comfortable and you’ll probably get more work done.”

I appreciate her offer, but shake my head. “No, they’re a handful, can’t be out of sight for even a few minutes, and you have work, too.”

“Not really. You’re our only guests. The other couple checked out this morning.” Her smile is soft and serene as she looks at the boys. “I’ll keep a close eye on them, I promise.”

Damn. I want to say yes, but—

“Rex. Please.” She shakes her head. “Mr. Osborne, I promise —”

“You can call me Rex,” I interrupt. I like how it sounded when she said it. Soft. Gentle.

“I promise they’ll be fine,” she says. “And warm. They can’t stay out in this cold all day.”

She’s right about that. Silently I battle myself as she reaches into the basket on the floor.

“Here, I brought these out for you. They’re too big for me.”

I take the pair of leather work gloves she’s handing me and make my decision. “The boys can be a handful, and grumpy when they’re tired.”

Once again her smile strikes me hard and fast.

“Grumpy is something I’ve handled my entire life.” She starts loading the basket. “Don’t worry. They’ll be fine.”

I’ll worry all right, but I’ll also get more work done. The gloves will help, too. The ones I’d bought myself weren’t made for winter labor. “Thanks, and thanks for the gloves.” I tell the boys to behave one more time, and that I’ll be in the barn if they need me, and watch them leave.

With no disruptions outside my own thoughts, which sometimes make me work harder and faster, I make progress. Not as much as I would've done with power-tools, but still a sense of satisfaction fills me as I clean up the wood scraps and get things laid out for tomorrow morning. I'm stiff, overworking muscles that I hadn't in some time, but overall feel great as I grab my thermos and shut off the lights.

It was cold in the barn, but it's freezing out here in the dark. I hurry along the shoveled walkway towards the lodge. A car in the parking lot catches my eye. A big sedan.

Fuck. I hadn't heard anyone pull in, too engrossed in my work. That shouldn't have happened.

I take the steps two at a time, barging into the lodge. The dead silence that greets me sends my intuition into overdrive. There's no one at the desk, in the office, or the front room. I race up the steps and down the hall. Our room is empty. The beds are made.

Fuck, fuck, fuck! I let my guard down for a couple of hours and this happens. Same shit that happened in Chicago.

Two empty beds. The boys gone. There's no note, not like then, stating Mommy took my boys for the night. Nelia had been no fucking mommy to them in this lifetime. They'd only seen her half a dozen times.

Mrs. Potter was out sick that day, so I'd gotten a replacement, a girl I could trust, she'd said. One who also hadn't known Nelia was to never – ever – be near the twins without my supervision.

That was the one time I'd let a stranger watch them. Until now. Whether she's hot as fuck or not, Cupcake is a stranger, too.

I slam the door shut and run down the back stairs, sliding to a stop when I hear laughter. The boys. I shove a door open as if it weighs a ton, and have the sense to catch it from hitting me as it swings backwards when my feet glue themselves to the floor.

They're both there. Jesus. And so's Cupcake. Their laughter comes to an abrupt halt when they see me. All three stop and stare like I'm some crazy lunatic intruder.

That's not far from the truth. "Whose car's parked out front?"

She frowns and wipes her hands on a towel. "A guest's. Why?"

"What's his name? Where's he from? Where's he going?" It rattles out like the automatic rifle fire I remember from my Army days.

Using the towel to wipe Adam's cheek, she says, "Chester Hobbs from Minneapolis. Older businessman. He always spends the night here when he's on his way to and from his daughter's place in Ontario." Turning a cold glare on me, she adds, "Would you like to know how old he is, or that his wife died five years ago?"

I catch the reprimand, the way she bites her lips together before spinning around.

"Time to check on those cookies again," she says, placing a reassuring hand on each of the boys.

"We made cookies, Daddy," Adam says, looking at me over his shoulder.

"Chocolate chip," Chase adds.

The last bits of tension and fear seeps out of my body. "Smells good," I say, emulating a normal person again.

"Now, we're making cinnamon rolls," Adam tells me while crossing the room beside Tabby.

"For tomorrow morning," Chase adds from her other side. He stops what's on the tip of my tongue about them having all this sugar.

She opens a big stainless-steel oven door and peeks inside. So do the boys.

"Not quite done, yet," she says. "Let's give it a little longer."

The air is heavy, and strained. It's my fucking fault.

When she turns around and our eyes meet, hot guilt slices through me. I shrug my shoulders. "Sorry."

"Me, too," she says.

I'm not sure why she bothers. I was the lunatic, belting her with questions about some old fart who's probably stayed in this place a million times.

"We've already eaten, but saved you a plate." She opens a door on the side-by-side fridge. "I'll warm it up. You can wash in that sink over there."

I glance to the left, and hoping to ease the tension, ask, "The one with the hand washing only sign?"

"Yes." She grins slightly. "Health code."

"Gotcha." Actually, she's the one that's got me. Right where it counts.

She's wearing an apron, pink of course, and covered in flour. There's even flour on her face, which turns my dick to diamond, picturing how I'd like to wipe it away.

Shit, let's be honest: everything about Tabby Danes turns me on.

I remove my coat and drape it over a chair before moving to the sink to scrub my hands. By the time I'm done, she's set a plate on the end of the long island that's half covered in white dust.

"Chase spilled flour!" Adam says.

"No! Didn't mean to!" Chase snaps back.

"Of course you didn't," Cupcake says, smiling sweetly at Chase, who looks like a red-faced chipmunk. "Luckily, it landed right where we'll need it. Once those cookies are out of the oven, it'll be time to kneed our dough."

"You make cinnamon rolls from scratch?" I ask. Haven't seen that since I used to spend summers with my grandma down in Kentucky.

"Of course," she says. "Is there another way?"

Clearly not for her. Should've guessed that. "Frozen," I say. "But they're never as good."

The boys pipe in then, telling me what they've done all afternoon, including baking the chocolate chip cookies she rescues from the oven. Two of the cookies end up on a plate beside me. I eat them while they're still warm and at the peak of perfection. Just like her.

I set the small plate atop the larger one that I'd practically licked clean after gobbling down the lasagna. "Where should I put these?"

"Just leave them there," she says while giving the boys each a section of white dough. "I'll get them after we get this dough kneaded."

"I could do that for you."

She eyes me skeptically. "Knead dough?"

I pick up the plates and carry them to the sink. "Yes."

"You've kneaded dough before?" She laughs. "I doubt that."

Keeping my eyes locked on hers, I walk back to the island. "These hands are good for more than just pounding nails and sawing boards."

"I'll have to take your word for that," she says.

"Why? Because I'm not covered in flour?" I swipe the tip of her nose with one finger and hold it up for her to see the flour I'd removed. "Like the rest of you?"

"Accidents happen," she says. She turns away and her cheek is sun fire.

Seeing her blush taunts every inch of my cock.

Before I can respond, she flicks her fingers my way, spewing flour dust into my face.

Tease. Her playfulness sends sparks through me, and I plant both of my hands in the flour spread across the granite counter top.

As if reading my mind, she says, “You wouldn’t!”

I laugh.

“Don’t you dare,” she says, wagging a finger. “I already have enough to clean up.”

There’s a good amount of flour on the counter and floor, true. Rather than flick flour at her as intended, I elbow her instead. “Step aside. Let me show you how a man kneads dough.”

“Oh, please,” she laughs, elbowing me back. “This is mine, get your own dough.”

I point to the empty bowl. “None left.”

“Snooze and you lose,” she says, laughing again.

“I never lose, Ms. Danes.” I step sideways so I’m right behind her, then wrap my arms around both sides of her, just above those lush ass cheeks, burying my hands in her dough. “Never.”

She wiggles, trying to shove me away. “My dough. You hear? I can’t teach the boys how to knead with your big hands in it.”

I can barely think with the way her tight butt bumps into the front of my jeans, making my cock so hard I think it’ll explode. Pinpointing the ounce of attention not controlled by my hard-on, I say, “Then I’ll teach them.” It takes a moment to pull up memories from when I was little, but once they hit, I flip the mound of dough over.

“It’s like this, boys,” I growl. “You have to dig the heels of your palms into this stuff, use them to stretch the dough. Not too hard or fast, or it’ll get tough.”

Her ponytail tickles my nose as she turns enough to look at me over one shoulder. “Who taught you that?”

“Why? Is it wrong?”

Her eyes bounce between my eyes and my lips, which causes a ripple of chaos to jolt through me. So does the way she swallows, and the way she smells. Sweet and sexy. So fucking sexy.

“Unfortunately, no,” she says.

Chase and Adam are barely paying attention. For once, I don’t mind.

I fold my hands over the tops of hers, using them to gently force her hands to knead the dough beneath mine, and I step closer, damn near getting high off the way her ass feels pressed up against my dick. Hellfire churns in my balls.

I feel her tremble slightly, and for the first time since they’d been born, I wish my boys were in another room. Then I’d reach up and knead her tits the same way we’re working the dough – slow, forceful, thoroughly. If these hands could wander, they’d find hard nipples and warm, wet pussy lips. If the boys weren’t here, fuck. It’d be less than ten minutes before I had her bent over with my balls smacking hard on her clit, dick buried in pink, pink, so much pink perfection.

The fantasy owns my mind and it’s hard to remember we’re hardly by ourselves, even if they are distracted. I force her to stretch the dough across the counter top, giving me a reason to press more firmly against her ass. She melts against me, enjoying it as much as I am.

She grabs the dough and flips it over, then stretches it again, as if giving me permission to dry-fuck her. Electricity shoots through me and I give my hips a quick upwards thrust. She swallows a gasp, plants her hands on the counter, as if pulling my dick deep inside her.

It’s fucking nuclear. Taking us so dangerously close to full meltdown.

Until someone clears their throat.

Someone behind us who shouldn’t be there.

She freezes. So do I.

A second later, she twists slightly. “Gramps. Hey.”

The old man’s been behind us for God only knows how long, and must’ve seen the way I’m practically butt-fucking his granddaughter, fully-clothed or not.

Shit!

“We can’t have guests in the kitchen, Tabby.”

“We won’t feed these rolls to the public,” she says. “It’s off hours and we certainly weren’t doing anything that’d get a health inspector after us.”

How the hell can she sound so calm? My blood’s pumping faster than a marathon runner’s. I’ve been slowly easing away from her, not wanting the old man to see just how tightly I’d had her pressed against the countertop, but

if I try to talk, I'll risk my voice cracking like a goddamn kid.

"Doesn't matter who eats them," Morris says sharply. "It matters *whose* hands have been in them."

"Everyone washed their hands," she says, gathering the dough into a ball, defiance creeping into her tone. "Thoroughly."

I drop my hands to my sides as she picks up the dough and drops it into a bowl. "Put yours in here, too," she says to the boys. Once they do, she spins around and hands me a towel.

The old man is still glaring at me. "Health codes," he says.

I nod. It's all I can think to do.

"I'll have this place inspection clean in twenty minutes, Gramps. No worries. Save the white gloves some work." She nods to the boys. "Go wash your hands, please. And don't forget the soap!"

"We won't, Tabby," they say, hurrying towards the sink.

I follow, desperate to get my mind off this fuckery. "I'll make sure."

The sink is large enough for all three of us to wash at the same time, which we do, using gobs of soap.

Morris stands at the door the whole time, watching. As soon as we dry our hands, he pushes the door open. "I'd like a word with you, Mr. Osborne."

"Of course." He wants more than a word. He'd like to knock my head off. Can't say I blame him. There must be some twisted part of me that likes this – the way I keep fucking up my life.

He leads us down the hall and into the front foyer. The boys and I follow. Morris stops near his office door, and his eyes, how they look at the boys and then the front room, tells me what he expects.

"You boys go play a game of checkers," I say. "Practice makes perfect."

They run into the front room while I follow Morris into his interrogation room, closing the door behind me. I've never been in this predicament before, and it's rather hellish, but that's nothing new. My life's been toxic for some time now.

There's a brutal pause. I'm half-expecting him to belt me on the chin, and I'm ready to stand and take it like a man. *Just as long as he doesn't fire my stupid horn dog ass.*

"I'm taking a chance on you, Mr. Osborne, and I want it to work out," Morris says at last, giving me the evil eye. "But I'll kick your ass out that door so far

you'll need wings if you don't stay away from my granddaughter."

I bite my tongue as a thousand come-backs race through my mind. He's got a hold over me, one I gave him, and I can't afford to break it. Fuck.

"You understand, you say so."

"Yes, sir!" I say. Just like I'm back in boot camp.

He walks to his desk and opens a drawer. When he reaches in, I half-expect to see him pull out a gun. Instead, I hear the tinkling of metal. Wound tight, my reflexes are good, and I catch the set of keys he throws my way.

"There's a shed out back," he says. "It's full of power-tools. Get that barn done as fast as you can and then get the hell off my property."

"Thank you, sir," I say, reaching behind me for the door knob. "I will."

Hours later, long after I've read the boys a story I downloaded onto the tablet, I'm staring at the ceiling, watching how the howling wind makes the shadows cast by the moonlight flutter. I see teeth and claws and death in those dark shapes. I see my own life burned, cremated, inching up to the sky in a plume of smoke.

There *has* to be a way for me to navigate this and not fuck up again. The Stone Syndicate is out there. Aiden's bodyguard said they'd be, and I believe him. They'll find us. It's only a matter of time.

I gotta make this money. Gotta make this work. If I don't, we're dead.

Whatever Cupcake does to me, she isn't worth risking Adam and Chase. No woman could ever be.

I'll become a fucking eunuch before I put them in harm's way.

My throat burns as I glance towards the other bed, where both boys are sleeping.

Today was my last warning. If I fuck up again, we're dead.

Dead. All three of us.

V: Cold Shoulder (Tabby)

I wrap the cinnamon rolls in tinfoil and fill one thermos with coffee and the other with hot chocolate, then place everything in the basket, including cups, plates, and silverware. The lodge has an odd vibe to it today, like it's emptier than usual.

It's not just missing people, but something more. Something that's invisible, yet warming and wholesome. It's probably just me. I had a restless night.

When I did finally fall asleep, I had some pretty crazy dreams. I hate when that happens. Stress always does it. Puts nightmares in my head that wake me up early, but I can't remember them.

And the odd vibe, well, that's mostly thanks to Gramps. He wasn't happy about Rex and the boys being in the kitchen.

That, I could have dealt with, but the rest of it?

He's not happy about the position he caught me and Rex in.

I should be embarrassed. Humiliated. Ashamed.

But I'm not. I'm human. Gramps has to understand that. I'm twenty-five. Most women my age have a healthy sex life.

There's nothing wrong with it.

There's nothing wrong with *me*. Except, I'm still a virgin, and woefully aware of it.

Mainly because no one has ever lit a fire inside me like Rex did last night. I should be glad Gramps walked in when he did, but I'm not. Until last night, my sex life revolved around imagining what things would feel like.

Now I *know*.

Know and want so much more.

The heat pooling inside me while I carry the basket out of the kitchen makes me grin. Or maybe it's the thought of seeing Rex that has me smiling. I like him, for all his faults. The whys are a mystery, but I like him. There's more than the brute I met his first night here. Sometimes, when he gets that dark scowl on his face, I feel like he's scared, running from something, and my heart drums sympathy.

Breath-stealing cold, the wind, hits me the second I'm outside. Crap. How stupid am I? Heaven only knows because it takes the icy wind to wake me up enough to realize Rex *is* running from something.

The death of his wife. Pain. Memories, perhaps.

How had I forgotten?

Thinking about myself. That's how.

About how I'd like to get fucked hard and often by Rex Osborne. Soundly fucked so I know exactly what it feels like for real, not just what I've read in dirty books or seen on TV. Or made up in my own mind, like I've been doing for eons.

Great. Embarrassment hits me now. Strong but delayed. Hell, I didn't even pretend to stop him last night, right?

When did I become so...idiotic? So desperate? So sex-starved? It's never bothered me before.

Gramps has chased off plenty of men since I turned sixteen, well before anything could ever happen. It's nothing new. This is just more of the same.

But if that's true, then why am I so worried what Rex thinks of me for wanting to give it up so easy?

I'm almost to the barn door, but seriously consider turning around, until the image of Adam and Chase eating the cinnamon rolls they made last night flutters in my mind. Those two boys are adorable, and so well behaved.

Me, and my nosiness, had dropped a couple of hints yesterday while baking cookies with them about mothers, hoping they'd shed some light on what happened to theirs, but they hadn't. In fact, they'd acted like they'd never had one. The only woman they mentioned was Mrs. Potter again, who never let them play video games or watch TV while their dad worked days.

Their mother was still on my mind when Rex stormed into the kitchen demanding to know every little thing about Chester Hobbs. Of course, I dropped the convenient fact that Chester's wife died five years ago, not-so-secretly wishing it'd make him open up.

Fresh guilt stings me.

Rex was probably thinking about her. Missing her. I'd seen the sadness in his eyes. The regret. And I was the only female for miles around. Just like a siren, I'd offered pleasure, a way to forget, but had I brought him the opposite?

I open the barn door and step in. Rex is at the far end, on the ladder, and barely glances my way while pounding in a nail. The boys are happy to see me.

"I brought you some cinnamon rolls and hot chocolate," I tell them while setting the basket down.

"Cocoa? Yippie!" They do their trademark jumping thing. Makes me laugh every time.

Yesterday, I'd watched which boy took the bag with their name on it and discovered a way to tell them apart – at least somewhat. Adam is left-handed, while Chase is right. Chase also has a dimple when he grins in his right cheek. That's the closest I'll get to having an identifying dot.

"You can eat them after we water and feed the horses," I say, touching the tips

of their noses, first Adam's and then Chase's.

"Okay, we will!"

Rex never stops pounding in nails, not even after we're done with the horses and back inside. The angst turning over in my belly is almost sickening.

"I brought you some coffee," I shout above the noise he's making.

He nods before pulling a nail out from between his lips and starts pounding again.

"Do you want me to take the boys inside?" I ask when the pounding stops.

"No, they're fine."

"It's colder today and –"

"They're fine," he says again, colder than the air itself.

Okay. I bite my lips. I don't need to be hammered on the head to know I'm not wanted, so I tell the boys goodbye and head back to the lodge.



After checking out Chester Hobbs and cleaning his room, I dust the front room and foyer and wash a few windows, then head to the basement to transfer the sheets from the washer to the dryer.

Using the last dryer sheet, I toss the empty box into the trash and enter the storage room to get some more. I grab a new box from the shelf, but it slips out of my hand. Bending down to pick it up, I see the writing on a cardboard box on the bottom shelf.

Julia.

My mother.

I've seen the box a million times. Dug through it at least a dozen occasions, flipping through her old school albums. That's all that's really there, all that's left, along with some pictures she'd drawn when she was young and a few miscellaneous report cards. Gramps saved them all. Just like he'd saved mine.

Once upon a time, mom was his little girl. And I think he sees me as the daughter he wished he'd had.

I pick up the dryer sheets and leave the room, wondering again about Adam and Chase, and if they should be in school. Too curious not to know, I head upstairs, grab my coat, and walk to my cabin.

It's small, but cozy. Familiar. Compact, but home.

There's a tiny kitchen, living room, and two bedrooms, each with their own bathrooms from when it had been remodeled several years ago. There's also a fair-sized storage room where I keep my personal stuff, mementos, old books I like to re-read when I'm in the right mood. Whenever it needs to be rented out, all I have to do is lock my storage room and take enough clothes with me to the main lodge to bunk with Marcy until the guests leave.

I grab a water from the fridge and sit down at the table, opening my laptop. It takes a while for it to start up, being as old as it is, a hand me down Gramps never used for business. Then I Google the age requirements for Michigan schools.

Six to sixteen.

So, the boys are technically too young. They're only five. That much I'd gotten out of them yesterday. Their age.

I turn the computer off, wait for it to fully power down before closing the lid. It hits me then that I should have Googled Rex Osborne, too. *Damn.*

I consider it, but the queasy feeling in my stomach tells me not to. I'm scared I'll find more questions than answers. Worse, I'm afraid I'll just feed this obsession, this stupid crush, this thing that should *not* be happening.

Grabbing my coat, I leave the cabin and head back to the main lodge to help Marcy prep lunch. It goes smoothly.

I pack an extra basket and carry it out to the barn. Rex isn't any friendlier than he was this morning, but he does agree to let the boys return to the lodge with me. I tell him they'll be safe and warm. He grunts, the only reply I get, rude and cryptic.

I'm steaming, but it's not long before the sweet boys take the edge off. Their innocent chatter through a couple board games I have just enough time to teach them makes me forget their ass of a dad for a few blissful hours.

It's the start of a weird routine that continues for several more days. The boys spend the morning in the barn with Rex and the afternoon in the lodge with me, and the two of us, Rex and me, don't say more than three or four words to one another.

I hate his icy silence. Loathe it because I'd like to get in his face, ask him what kind of game he's playing. But I know it'd make me look like the reckless, desperate girl who's more strung up on him than she has any right to be. And Rex Osborne *won't* be seeing me like that.

Also, there are times I sense he'd like to say more, but for whatever reason, doesn't. *Torture.*

I've lived with moody men who hold their emotions like cheap whiskey since I was four years old. I've figured out Rex isn't grumpy. Whatever's bothering him, goes deeper and it doesn't fit him. This isn't the way he's meant to be. I don't know why I'm so sure, but I am. It's like we're in the middle of a poker game and he doesn't want me to see his hand. He's not ready to play them, either. Not even one card at a time. Not yet.

It's driving me nuts. *Fucking nuts*

My only saving grace is the steady flow of new guests. Not many, and none book rooms for long, but at least the constant checking in and out gives me something to do every morning while waiting to collect Adam and Chase for lunch.

Now, I can't believe I ever had a hard time telling them apart. Adam is more curious and asks far more questions than his brother. Chase is more like Rex, quiet and pondering, often figuring out the answers to Adam's questions about the same time Adam asks them. It's odd, adorable, and fascinating all at once.

This afternoon we learn a popular cartoon hero flick will be on TV tonight. The boys beg me to ask Rex if they can watch it, so I do. Surprisingly, he agrees.

The boys help me make popcorn, and here we are, watching a movie about super heroes. I'm a little lost trying to follow all the characters and the powers they have, but the boys are enjoying every second. Rex appears to be, too, when he slinks in later and sits at the far end of the sofa. So does Gramps, who gobbles more popcorn than the rest of us combined.

Then I notice headlights shining through the window, and leave the room to man the front desk, ready to check in our new arrival.

There are no reservations, so I collect his information and give him our standard spiel about amenities.

He states he'll only need a place to sleep.

I assign him a room for the night, and then swipe his credit card. While I'm waiting for the approval to go through, I ask if he's been in Split Harbor before.

"Nope, first time. Heading up to Canada to go ice fishing with my brother. Haven't seen him for five years, since he came down to Chicago."

"Well, have fun, and stay warm," I say, handing him back his card. "You're all set."

With a friendly wave, he heads for the wide staircase. "Thanks!"

I'm about to staple the credit card slip to the printout of the room assignment when the sheet of paper flies out of my hand. Flipping around, I try to re-take it from Rex, who's already scanning the printout. He holds it conveniently out of reach.

"Hey! Private information," I say, trying again to snatch the paper back, but he's too tall and his hold is too firm.

"I heard him say Chicago," Rex snaps.

"Because that's where he's from?" He's reading the slip, so it's not like I'm telling him anything he doesn't already know. I point to the top of the paper. "Sam Walton from Chicago, Illinois."

He flips the paper over, finding only a blank page of course. "Where's he going?"

"What's it matter?"

His eyes turn into narrow slits. "Where's he going?"

I finally jerk the paper away, staple the credit card slip, and file it. "Canada, to go fishing with his brother. Not that it's any business of yours."

"How long is he staying?" He's relentless. "Cupcake, how long?"

"Jesus, one night!" Flustered, I tap my cheeks and say, "What's wrong with you, Rex? Why do you interrogate me about every single male guest who checks in?"

"Just curious."

"Oh, no. You're a lot more than curious. You're like an FBI agent without a badge to flash."

He grabs my arm when I try to walk around him. "FBI, huh? Has the FBI been here?"

"No, the FBI hasn't been here! I said it because you're acting like they do on TV." Pulling my arm out of his hold, I add, "Like a total asshole."

He scowls, but then glances towards the staircase.

Wow. He hasn't actually let this go.

An eerie feeling crawls up my spine, slowly, like a spider on a mission. A creepy-ass scary spider. I can't stop myself from asking, "You aren't wanted by the FBI...are you?"

I swear my heart stops during the silence that follows.

“No,” he finally says.

“You’re sure?”

“Would I be here, with my sons, working on your barn if I was wanted by the goddamn FBI?”

That’s his way, answering my questions with his own. Tired of playing his game, I say, “You’d better be telling the truth, Rex. Because if you aren’t, I’ll –“

“You’ll what?” Rage flashes in his eyes. “Tell me, Cupcake. What’ll you do?”

Hell if I know. Pissed, I skirt around him while hissing, “Rue the day you were born for putting my family, my business in danger.”

“I –“

I stop, waiting to hear more.

“Forget it,” he snarls numbly, walking past me.

He heads to the front door and I march into the front room.

“Anyone need more popcorn?”

Both boys and Gramps say yes, so I grab the bowl and leave the room. Rex is still outside, I can see his outline through the window.

Fine. I’ll forget about it all right. And him. Jerk.

I stomp down the hall. *Such. An. Asshole.*

Why can’t he just be honest? Tell me his wife died and he’s going through a rough time right now. That’s all he’d have to say, and I’d believe him.

But no. Instead, he jumps back and forth in some stupid Jekyll and Hyde routine that’s twisting my last nerve.

I make the popcorn and deliver it to the front room. Rex is back, sitting on the sofa with the boys, acting like nothing happened. I leave again. I can’t do this and I’ve officially had my fill.

I need space. Finding myself back in the kitchen, I dig out the ingredients to make a batch of blueberry muffins, a double batch so Sam Walton can take some with on his ice fishing trip.

Screw you, Rex Osborne.

Flipping off the door while I wait for the oven makes me feel a smidge better, but I’m still fuming.

After the muffins are done, I gather the bowls and glasses from the front

room, which is empty except for Gramps. The movie's over. I tell him I'll lock up after wrapping the muffins and putting the extras on a plate for the front desk in case the guests checking out want to take some.

"You doing all right, Tabby-kitten?" Gramps asks as we walk down the hallway together.

"I'm fine." I'm nowhere close and I think he knows it.

"Is it the boys? Taking care of those kids getting to be too much?"

"No way. Adam and Chase are wonderful, Gramps. Seriously."

I'm glad I don't have to lie. They're not the problem.

He casts me a thoughtful glance before saying, "Well, they won't be here much longer."

"I know." God, do I ever. I hold up the dirty dishes in my hands. "Gotta get these in the dishwasher." After kissing his cheek, I hold the kitchen door open, giving him one last glance. "Night."

Gramps is a better man than Rex. Grumpy, short-fused, but his heart is in the right place. With Mr. Osborne, I don't know what the hell I'm dealing with besides a constant guessing game.

His words ring in my memory while I finish up. *They won't be here much longer.*

Sigh. My mind goes down several melancholy paths concerning both Rex and his sons while I'm wiping the counters. I'll never hear their sweet laughter, or catch Rex's fierce blue eyes stripping me bare, or wonder for the thousandth time what makes him tick like the timebomb he is. Soon, they'll be memories. By the time I've locked the front door, I can't take any more.

None.

I'm done.

Rather than grab my coat and head for my cabin, I march up the back steps. Quietly, because I don't want to wake the boys, I knock on Rex's door.

He pulls it open and scowls. Exactly what I'm expecting.

"Why can't you just tell me the truth?" I ask.

He shakes his head, but his eyes never leave mine. Then he grabs my arm and pulls me inside.

VI: No Escape (Rex)

Nothing good will come of this, but I can't take the sorrow in her eyes any

longer. I can't take the shit-ton of it filling me, either, strapped around my neck like an albatross made of solid granite.

Cupcake's the reason I feel this way. At least part of it. She's done me one hell of a favor, watching the boys every afternoon, asking for nothing in return. I'd offered to pay her, but she'd refused to even consider that.

She just wanted a smile, a few kind words, a goddamned thank you or two. And I've been too screwed up to give her more than a disinterested grunt and a weight from hell she doesn't need.

Fuck. It isn't fair and I know it. I'm not oblivious.

The least I can give her is the truth – a small portion of it.

Still holding onto her arm, I close the door, and then guide her to the corner of the room furthest away from the bed the boys are sleeping in. I can't wake them up with this.

"Look, Tabby, I can't tell you everything, but what I'm about to say, is the truth."

My heart literally swells at how her face softens.

"You don't have to. I never asked for everything," she whispers.

But I want to get it out, have her understand, but there's this ugly fear in my guts she'll hate me once she knows. "You can't tell anyone a word I say."

"I won't," she says. "Promise."

I have no idea where to start, what to say specifically.

"Had she been ill long?"

I shake my head, wondering if I'd already spoken. Convinced I hadn't, I ask, "Who?"

"Your wife."

"I've never been married."

She glances towards the bed. "Grandpa said their mother died recently."

A wave of regret washes over me.

"He said you told him that."

"I did," I admit. I'd said a lot of things to get the job, most of them true, stopping at the part where I'm running for my life after an accidental murder.

"Why?" There's skepticism in her eyes again. "So he'd give you the job?"

"Bingo." I had to give Morris a normal reason why the boys and I are here.

Why I needed the job so badly. He's an intuitive old goat, would've seen through any obvious lies.

"So she's not dead?"

"She's dead all right," I say.

Tabby blinks and her eyes get big. "But that's not what's bothering you. It's not the chip on your shoulder," she says softly.

No. Fuck no. It's far more than 'a chip.' More like a thousand-pound boulder. "Some things happened a few weeks ago. Bad shit, and now I've got bad people looking for me."

The splattering of fear racing across her face has me taking hold of her hand.

"They don't know where we are. I have to believe they won't find us here." Not for a while, anyway. I'm still hoping they're following my pinged phone all the way to Florida. They'll figure it out sooner or later, and by then, I can only hope any trail I may have left is ice cold.

"Who are *they*?"

"Demons. People deep in the criminal world." I can't tell her about the deaths, but can let her know what lead up to it at the beginning. "They needed money laundered. I got blackmailed into doing it."

Her eyes pop wide again. "So, are you wanted by the FBI?"

I have no idea, but for her sake, I shake my head. "They aren't the type to go to the FBI, and no one will report the money laundering. I just refused to keep doing it. That's why I've got problems." That's what I should have done in the very beginning. Instead, fearing Nelia would find a way to take away the boys, I agreed to run a few thousand dollars worth of drug money through my construction company. Then a few thousand turned five figures, then six. I know now, as I should have then, it would never fucking stop. You give these men an inch, they'll be up your ass for miles.

"And now they're after you," she finishes.

"Yeah."

"Jesus. Can't you just...I don't know, go to the authorities?"

I shake my head. "If only it was that easy. I broke the law, Cupcake. Also not sure the police can do shit to protect us from these people. Their Syndicate has tendrils everywhere. I can't start over with the boys in witness protection, growing up with their old lives and me scorched to the ground."

Her eyes are so sweet, so innocent, nowhere cut out for contemplating

something like this. Guilt blackens my heart for laying this on her, but there's also a vicious relief in giving up the truth.

She takes hold of my other hand. "There are people who can help you, Rex. I can help. You just have to let me."

I pull her towards me, close enough for me to place a tiny kiss on her forehead. "No. Nothing you can do, Cupcake. Nothing anyone can do. I'm not putting you in danger."

"Yes –"

I shake my head. "We'll be leaving soon." Nodding towards the bed, I continue, "The boys and me, we can't stay here forever once the job's done, much as I'd like it. Soon as the money comes in from remodeling the barn, we're moving on." I didn't expect this part to be the hardest confession. My heart constricts so tightly my chest burns.

Fuck.

I know this is exactly how it has to be, and if I don't get her out of this room soon, I won't want her to leave.

I lead her back to the door. "Thanks, Cupcake, you're an amazing, compassionate, beautiful woman. I hope you never change."

I open the door then, gently nudging her over the threshold because it'd be far too easy to ask her to stay. She leaves without a fight, or maybe she just doesn't know what the hell to say. I can't blame her.

As soon as I push the door closed, I lock it, as if that'll reconstruct the barrier between us I just tore down. Why did I have to meet someone like her now? When my life's as fucked as it can possibly be?

I back away from the door, watching to make sure it doesn't magically open. When the backs of my legs bump the foot of the bed, I sit.

It's not long before I lose track of how much time passes since she left. I crawl to the head of the bed and click off the lamp. Sleep doesn't come quick or easy.

I can't stop thinking of Cupcake. Of how sad and forlorn she looked when I closed that door, wishes etched all over her face for us, for the kids, for me.

But this is how it has to be. How *I* have to be.

Distant. Detached from everyone and everything. No more midnight confessions where I might slip, say too damn much, or put too many promises in her sweet young heart.

I close my eyes, begging for sleep to come.



She's stretched out in a big tub, naked, one leg hanging over the edge.

I'm pissed.

Yell at her.

She doesn't open an eye.

Blood boils inside me as I storm into the room, calling her the fucking bitch she is.

She still doesn't move.

That's when I notice what's next to her.

Needles. Tubing. Drug shit.

"Neliah!" I shout one more time, roaring so loud my throat shifts on bone.

She still doesn't move.

I lean down to touch her.

Cold. So fucking cold.

Then, suddenly, she grabs my arm.

I jolt backwards. The air stalls in my lungs.

It's not Neliah. It's Tabby! Her sweet eyes empty, scared, lifeless.

"Cupcake!" I scream, reaching to grab her as she slips beneath the water, too deep for me to reach.

"Cupcake!"



I can't breathe. It hurts. Agony like I've never known. I rip my eyes open, cough like mad, trying to catch my breath. It was a dream. A goddamn dream.

I press a hand to my forehead. Another nightmare. Trying to split my soul in two, or at least my head.

Neliah's dead. A fucking overdose, but Cupcake is fine.

She's *fine*.

Too afraid to close my eyes, I get off the bed. Go to the bathroom. Fill a glass with water. Drink it. Then do it again.

She's fine, you fool.

"Fine!" It comes out a harsh whisper. I barely recognize my own reflection.

For now, I'll trust she's fine without acting like a madman. And fine is how I need her to stay.



I work my ass off the next two days, needing to get this project done as fast as possible. The routine is the same: the boys stay with me, playing in the barn, until Tabby comes and gets them at noon. I try hard to think of her as Tabby, not Cupcake. Not the woman Nelia's dead face transformed into during that fucked up dream. And I try harder to avoid her day and night. I'm giving her the cold shoulder again and it makes me feel like shit, only a little less than pouring my heart out again, putting her in danger.

It has to be almost noon, so I climb off the ladder, tell the boys to zip up their coats and get their hats on.

"Why?" Adam asks while zipping.

Chase tugs on his Hulk hat. "Where're we going, daddy?"

"Lodge," I growl.

They race for the door, glad to have the morning over no doubt. We're inching toward spring, but more than a couple hours out here still lets Jack Frost creep into your bones.

Morris is behind the check-in desk. Good. I don't want to run into Tabby looking for him.

"I need a few things." I set the list I've written on the desk. "Mostly nails and pole-barn screws."

The old man frowns. "Can't go to town today. Several guests are due here anytime," Morris says. "But you can go get them. I'll call Walt at the hardware store and tell him you're coming. He'll put it on my charge account."

I hadn't left the lodge since arriving over a week ago.

"The hardware store is right on main street. You can't miss it." Morris picks up the phone and nods toward the boys. "They can stay with Tabby. She's in the kitchen."

"No, she's right here."

Shit. Avoiding her hasn't changed much inside me. The sound of her voice still turns me on. Exactly why I grab the list off the desk and walk out the

door.

Split Harbor's only ten miles up the road, a somewhat rough county road considering the weather keeps trying to fool us into thinking spring might be near. The last two days were in the forties, today even warmer. The ice and snow packed solid on the road for the past few months is melting fast, leaving puddles the size of craters.

By the time I pull onto the main highway and the tires start rolling along the smooth, dry pavement, my teeth feel like they're ready to rattle out of my head.

Trucks as old as this one don't have the same suspension as newer ones. Or the creature comforts.

I glance down to check my speed and notice the fuel gauge. "Asshole. Gas hog," I say aloud. Then, feeling a bit guilty putting the old truck down, I say, "Actually, you probably get better mileage than my new truck, your tank is just smaller."

Damn thing saved our life. Call me sentimental, superstitious, but I can't jinx that.

The hardware store is easy enough to find, and Walt introduces himself as soon as I walk in the door. I have a bag full of supplies in no time. I'm done in less time that it would have taken to walk to the hardware section of those big-box stores back in Chicagoland.

Seeing a gas station a block up the road, I head there next, pulling up beside the pump. After filling the tank, I head inside. No longer having a debit card, paying at the pump isn't an option. There are a couple people ahead of me, so I scan the candy bars and pick out a couple for the boys I know they'll like. One more for me.

Still standing in line, waiting for the cashier to finish showing the customer ahead of me a video of her granddaughter on her cellphone, a rumble makes the windows rattle. The hair on my arms rise as motorcycles, a good dozen of them, swarm into the gas station's lot.

Aiden always claimed to be tight with a large motorcycle gang. Said he'd been a prospect in his younger days and still wore the ink. I never cared one way or the other.

Until now.

Now, I wish I'd paid more attention to Aiden's tattoos so I could match them up against those on the men outside. Not that I can see many tattoos. These guys are all wearing black leather jackets, cuts as dark as night.

Sweat pops out on my temples as a burly guy climbs off his bike and walks around my truck, eyeing it closely. I think of the gun buried deep in the glove box, how fast I could fish it out if needed.

The man turns, and sees me through the glass. The pulse in my neck pounds spikes in my veins as he walks toward the door. Other bikers are looking at the truck, too.

Fuck.

I glance around, looking for an escape route, which there isn't.

"Oh, look," the woman in front of me says. "It's Sheriff Cahill! Now, we know it's almost spring if he's out riding."

The door opens and the biker walks in. The logos on his cut say SPLIT HARBOR PD.

I'm not very relieved and try to hide how my fingers tremble, sticking them in my coat pockets. That's when I realize I'm still holding candy bars in one of them. I drop that hand to my side, squeezing the bars so hard I feel the fucking chocolate melt.

"Hey, Sheriff," the check out gal says. "Got the day off?"

"Sure do," the biker answers. "Feels good, let me tell you. Been busting my balls since my old man turned the department over for retirement. And knowing we might not have another day like this in weeks, the boys and I are taking the bikes for a ride."

"Smart move. How's old Dixon holding up, anyway? Anything I can get for you? Just made fresh coffee in the deli."

"Nah, I'm fine, and so's dad. He's busy writing a book on that Caspian thing and the Drayton assholes, now that they're out of town. Even Ryan's taking a break from employing half the town to contribute. Says it's good for town history and all. Gonna be a bestseller," he answers, looking at me. "Enough said, though. I really just want to talk to this guy."

My heart stops. So do my lungs. With air locked in them like hot coal.

I'm fucking panicking. I never expected the Stone Syndicate to involve the law. Not on this level. A northern Michigan county sheriff? *How?*

My thoughts go to Adam and Chase at the lodge. I tell myself they're at the safest place they can be. With Cupcake.

"That your truck, stranger?" the sheriff asks.

My lungs are searing, melting. I push out air before I can calmly say, "Yes,

sir. Is there something wrong?" It dawns on me then that I've never checked the tabs. Just assumed my cousin bought them every year.

"That's a heavy-ass Chevy. Haven't seen a beast like that in years."

"Yes, sir, it is."

"Chevy only made a few, I think. Back in the seventies if I'm not mistaken. Added a few extra springs to their half-tons so they could haul more."

"That's correct," I say. "My grandpa bought it new for the same reason you said."

My head is about to explode. It's miraculous I'm smiling.

The man nods. "So, you wouldn't be interested in selling, would you?"

"No, sir. It'll stay in the family, I'm afraid."

"Can't argue with that." He turns to look out the window again. "That's a damn good-looking truck. Keep it that way."

"I do my best," I tell him, my heart finally thumping a notch slower.

He nods, gives a single finger wave to the cashier and walks back out the door.

My legs turn into rubber and I squish the melting candy bars more by slapping them on the counter to stay upright.

"Anything else I can get you?" the cashier asks. "Fresh coffee in the deli, don't forget."

"No, thanks." Not unless she's got a tranquilizer.

I drive all the way back to the lodge with the driver's window down, trying to cool my body from the amount of hot sweat coating every inch of my skin. Still hot, and sweating bullets, after arriving, I pull the ladder out of the barn and climb up on the side awning to examine a few loose shingles I'd noticed. There might not be another day this weather will let me fix them.

The fresh air helps my body and kicks my brain back to functional. "Goddamn it," I mumble. I'd never been so scared in my life as I'd been back at that gas station. Nor as jumpy. A part of me wants to run into the house to check on the boys, but there are no new cars in the lot, and deep down, I know they're safe with Tabby.

I also know I can't see her. Not right now. Not after I thought my worst nightmares were coming true.

If we're together, I'll grab on and hug her tight, just to make sure she's alive

and well.

I consider that for a moment, and then make a mental note to write an informal will, stating if anything happens to me, the boys go to Tabby Danes until she can call my cousin.

It's a scenario I never want to think about, but shit, after what just happened...

No choice. I'll include Justin's name on it, he'll recognize my signature, know it's from me. He's a damn good lawyer, but I don't dare contact him. Not yet.

Lifting my head, I stare at the lodge for some time, and then let out the sigh that's grown too heavy to hold in.

There are so many if onlys running through my mind, I'm making myself dizzy. Most have to do with Nelia, her drug addiction, which is how she hooked up with Aiden and then got the idea to start blackmailing me.

I should have left the city then. Got as far away as possible. But I hadn't.

Now, I'm here. Scared shitless of a local lawman on a bike who just wanted to haggle over my ancient truck.

Fuck.

It's only a matter of time before everything catches up with me. The Danes are good people. Cupcake and her grandfather, and their cook, Marcy. They've made the boys feel at home, more at home than they've ever known. Plus they've given me this, a chance to make enough money for us to move on. Which is what I need to do so I don't have to consider Plan B and its worst case scenarios.

Tabby and Morris don't deserve to have monsters on their doorsteps. That's what's going to happen. Sooner or later, that *will* happen, the longer I stay.

I grab the hammer and start pounding, vowing to leave as soon as possible.

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