



He's her boss. She's his greatest temptation.

Indiscretion

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

VI KEELAND

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INDISCRETION

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Table of Contents

[Other Romance Novels by Vi Keeland](#)

[About Indiscretion](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Something Unexpected - Chapter 1](#)

[Something Unexpected - Chapter 2](#)

[Something Unexpected - Chapter 3](#)

[Dear Readers](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[Other Romance Novels by Vi Keeland](#)

[About the Author](#)

Other Romance Novels by Vi Keeland

What Happens at the Lake
Something Unexpected
The Game
The Boss Project
The Summer Proposal
The Spark
The Invitation
The Rivals
Inappropriate
All Grown Up
We Shouldn't
The Naked Truth
Something Borrowed, Something You
Beautiful Mistake
Egomaniac
Bossman
The Baller
Left Behind
Beat
Throb
Worth the Fight
Worth the Chance
Worth Forgiving
Belong to You
Made for You
Jilted (May 2025)

Thriller Novels by Vi Keeland

The Unraveling

Someone Knows (June 2025)

Romance Novels Co-written by Vi Keeland and Penelope Ward

The Rules of Dating
The Rules of Dating My Best Friend's Sister
The Rules of Dating My One-Night Stand
The Rules of Dating a Younger Man
Well Played
Not Pretending Anymore
Happily Ever After
My Favorite Souvenir
Dirty Letters
Hate Notes
Rebel Heir
Rebel Heart
Cocky Bastard
Stuck-Up Suit
Playboy Pilot
Mister Moneybags
British Bedmate
Park Avenue Player

About Indiscretion

He's her boss. She's his greatest temptation.

The first time I met Dawson Reed, we wound up in bed.

The problem was, neither of us knew the other were there.

When I woke up in the middle of the night and found a stranger next to me, instinct kicked in and I attacked the intruder.

Only it turned out, the man wasn't an intruder at all.

Dawson had rented this cabin, too. Apparently, a system glitch allowed a duplicate booking.

We'd soon find out we were in town for the same wedding, and Dawson was the groomsman I'd been warned about. He was as tall, dark and jaw-droppingly gorgeous as my best friend had described. Though she was also right when she'd said *you two will hate each other*.

When daylight rolled around, Dawson and I attempted to straighten out the mess we found ourselves in. But it proved to be more difficult than we initially thought. Since it was a holiday weekend, there wasn't a single room available for more than fifty miles.

I suppose things could be worse than sharing a cabin for a weekend with a handsome man you despise.

Like maybe him winding up *being your new boss*?

Chapter 1

DAWSON

What the hell is my buddy thinking?

I stood on the rickety porch of the cabin I'd rented through Airbnb and looked around. Trees. Dirt. *Smack*. Great. Damn mosquitos, too. Maybe things would look better after a good night's sleep. Lord knows I needed one.

The twelve-hour drive from New York to Michigan had taken fifteen because everyone and their mother was traveling on Fourth of July weekend. It was two in the morning now, and I hoped to hell this shitty shack at least had a decent mattress. The front door was supposed to need a numerical code to enter, but when I reached for the handle, it was unlocked.

The inside was smaller than it had looked in the pictures, but at least it seemed clean. Ben's fiancée had described the area as rustic and quaint, but all I saw was a cabin that might've been featured in a horror movie last year, and a refrigerator so old that I thought it might need an ice block to keep things cold. I sighed and scanned the galley kitchen for an outlet. Finding one next to an antique toaster, I was surprised there was already an iPhone charger plugged in. That must be the *modern conveniences* the house had boasted about in its description.

Whatever. I was desperate for some sleep. Though before that could happen, I needed a shower, so I took one last look around the living space and headed down the only hall. There were two doors. The first one I opened had a full bath with folded towels stacked conveniently on a shelf. I stripped out of my clothes and stepped into the bathtub.

Soon warm water sluiced over my knotted shoulders. I took a few deep breaths, grateful for good water pressure, and let myself relax into the pelting shower. This trip was definitely not my idea of a vacation, but I needed a few days away from the office. Away from *Emily*—and my life.

No criminals telling me their bullshit tale of woe.

No green, newbie public defenders coming into court completely unprepared and requesting a continuance to mess up my packed calendar.

No ex to see all day long.

Nature wasn't my thing. Ideally, a few days away from the office would involve a five-star hotel on a Caribbean island, sipping cocktails at the in-pool bar, and waking up to a sexy naked woman next to me. And I'd thought I was going to get exactly that when my buddy had announced he was having a *destination wedding*. But instead, it looked like I was going to need bug spray, hiking boots, and quite possibly a banjo. *Fuck my life.*

The hot shower actually worked to relax me a bit, or maybe I was just that tired. I'd driven after a morning court appearance and two conference calls, so either way, sleep was next on the agenda. Suddenly too lazy to deal with opening my suitcase, I dried off and wrapped a towel around my waist. There wasn't another cabin nearby, so I could skip the underwear and freeball all I wanted. Hell, maybe I'd have my coffee naked on the porch tomorrow morning.

There was only one other room in this little cabin, so it wasn't too difficult to figure out where the bedroom was. The door creaked open, and I felt around the wall for a light switch, but there wasn't one. I managed to feel my way in the pitch dark and make it to the bed without stubbing a toe, so I decided seeing where I was sleeping wasn't a priority and climbed in. Unlike the rest of the cabin, which smelled sort of mildewy, this room smelled nice, almost floral. They must've washed these sheets with a decent brand of laundry detergent. That was a welcome surprise. The scent relaxed me even more than the shower had. That is, until I rolled over and something walloped me in the face.

"What the fuck!"

I jumped out of bed, reaching for my right eye.

A dog barked and a woman's high-pitched voice screeched, "I have a gun!"

Quickly forgetting the pain radiating from my face, I held my hands up. "You don't need a gun. I'm not armed, and I'm not going to hurt you. I'm holding my hands in the air."

A light suddenly flicked on, and I found a five-foot-nothing woman wearing hot pink lacy pajamas, holding a dog that couldn't weigh more than five pounds. The runt was in one hand while she pointed something at me with the other.

Is that...a pair of readers? My brows knitted. “Is that your *gun*?”

She waved the glasses around. “I’m a green belt, too!”

My eyes widened. “What is that, like two up from white? Did you take three lessons?”

The blonde’s eyes narrowed. “Leonardo bites.”

As if on cue, the dog growled and showed me his gums. But that was *all* he seemed to have in his mouth. I pointed. “Does that thing even have teeth?”

The woman scowled. “Shut up. He has a few, and periodontal disease is prevalent in chihuahuas. What do you want from me, and why are you wearing only a towel?”

“Uhh... Because I just showered. And what I want is a good damn night’s sleep, for starters. What the hell are you doing here? I rented this place.”

“*You* rented this place? I don’t think so. *I* rented this cabin.”

All of a sudden, the bone beneath my eye started to throb. I reached up and felt the top of my right cheek. “What the hell did you hit me with?”

She dropped the glasses on the bed and flexed her hand open and shut. It looked as red and swollen as my face felt. “Oww. My knuckles really hurt.”

What the fuck is going on here? “You must be in the wrong cabin, lady. How did you get in?”

She pressed on her right hand and winced. “I have the code.”

She rattled it off, and that was the right code, alright. I remembered because it was my ex’s birthday in numeral form—July 13. “Who gave it to you?” I asked.

“The Airbnb host, Amy.”

I had no clue who I’d rented from, but this woman sounded pretty believable. Maybe *I* was in the wrong cabin? I could’ve sworn the number on the house said fifty. Could I possibly be on the wrong block? Come to think of it, I hadn’t used the code to get in. Though inside looked just like the pictures online...

“Is this Fifty Dogwood Lane?”

“Yes.”

I shrugged. “Well, then this is the place I rented.”

“That’s impossible, because *I* rented it.” She shook her hand again. “Dammit. My knuckles really hurt.”

“Let me see them.”

“Are you a doctor?”

“No.”

“Then why would I let you see my hand?”

“Because I used to box. I’ve broken my knuckles on faces more times than I can count.”

She hesitated. But at least she put down the toothless dog. The little shit started barking as soon as his feet hit the mattress. He jumped from the bed and ran around me, growling. He wasn’t much of a threat since he didn’t have teeth, so I didn’t move. Though as it turned out, you don’t need teeth to grab things.

Like a towel.

And yank.

And now I was standing buck-ass naked, with my junk on full display.

The woman covered her eyes. “Oh my God!”

Fuck. My. Life. This day kept getting worse and worse—especially since I’d just showered, and my dick was cold and trying to find warm shelter by shriveling up inside my balls as much as possible. Definitely not my best reveal—not that it was a reveal, but a man always wants a good first showing.

The woman spread her fingers and peeked through. “Oh my God. Don’t just stand there! Do something! You’re naked.”

I grabbed the comforter from the bed and wrapped it around my waist. “I just showered...”

“And?”

“Well, I don’t want you to think...”

Her brows popped up. “Are you seriously worried that your manhood doesn’t look its best?”

Well...yeah. But this sounded like a trick question, so I didn’t answer. “Let me see your rental agreement.”

“Let me see *your* rental agreement!”

“Fine,” I grumbled. “It’s in my suitcase in the other room.”

“Maybe while you’re in there, you can find some clothes to put on!”

I looked her up and down. For what it was worth, she was damn cute. Blond hair piled on top of her head in a messy bun, big green eyes, and a few freckles across the bridge of her button nose. Though this wasn’t a bar,

and the last thing I currently needed in my life was a woman, so I took my quilt-clad ass out into the living room.

Blondie with the green belt came out while I was rummaging through my suitcase. She now wore a robe cinched tightly around her waist. Shame. *The outfit underneath is nicer.* She picked up a laptop I hadn't noticed earlier on the coffee table and started clicking buttons. Meanwhile, I pulled out shorts and a T-shirt and the folder with a bunch of papers my assistant had printed before I left.

"Here," I said. "My confirmation is somewhere in there. I'm going to go put some clothes on."

"Thank you."

She frowned when I walked back into the living room. "I think you're going to have a black eye."

"Perfect. Goes with the rest of this awful day."

"I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault. You did the right thing. Someone gets into your bed without an invitation, swing first, ask questions later. My eye will heal."

"Thank you for saying that, but I still feel terrible." She sighed and pointed to her laptop, shaking her head. "Both our confirmations show the same thing. It looks like we both rented this house for the same dates. How is that even possible?"

"Let me see."

She turned her laptop my way, and I compared the information on the screen with my paperwork. Sure enough, we had indeed both booked Fifty Dogwood Lane.

"I don't know what the hell happened," I told her. "But I definitely paid for this. I remember seeing it on my credit card six months ago."

"I booked mine last week."

I shrugged. "Well, then it's clear who the rightful renter is."

"Who?"

"Me. I reserved it first."

"I don't care who reserved it first," she countered. "We both paid for it, so we have equal right to this place."

Her red hand caught my eye. It really was swollen now. "Let me see your knuckles."

She hesitated again.

I rolled my eyes. “I think we’ve established that I didn’t commit a felony by breaking in here. I had the combination, even though you left the door open, which you really shouldn’t do out here alone in the middle of the woods. This is obviously just some kind of a mix-up. Let me see your damn hand.”

She squinted. “You don’t have to swear at me.”

“Swear? Damn isn’t a swear.”

“Yes, it is.”

“No, it’s not. *Fuck*, maybe. Though it’s also a verb, and I tend to use it as an adjective and a noun too.”

“Whatever.” She shook her head. “Just look at my *fucking* hand.”

I chuckled.

Two of her knuckles seemed shifted to the right, and they were difficult to see because of the swelling. “Can you move those fingers?” I asked.

She winced as she attempted it. “Not really. And when I try to, a painful tingle runs up my arm.”

“Do your knuckles usually align with your fingers?”

“Yes! Of course they do!”

“Then I’m pretty sure they’re broken.”

She shut her eyes and sighed. “Great.”

“You should probably go to the ER and have them X-rayed.”

“Are knuckles like broken toes and fingers and you just tape them up?”

“Not usually. When the bone is misaligned like yours seem to be, they often need to manipulate them and set the hand in a cast.”

The color drained from her face. “Manipulate them, like as in *move* the knuckles?”

I nodded.

“That sounds painful.”

It was. Painful as fuck. But her pale face told me I should keep that to myself. “It’s not too bad.”

A noise from the other side of the room caught my attention. I looked over to find Gumby, the killer chihuahua, humping a stuffed animal on the floor. “Uhhh... I think your dog has a new girlfriend.”

The woman sighed. “That’s Kate. She’s not new. Leonardo has been doing that to her for five years. He’s in love.”

“He’s a *he*, with that sparkly collar?”

“Don’t judge him because he likes sparkly things.”

“Did *he* tell you he wanted that thing around his neck?”

She scowled at me again. It was oddly cute.

“Is that supposed to be your threatening face? If so, you might want to flip the light off again and go back to throwing punches in the dark.” I looked over at the dog. The thing was really going to town. “Is that...*a turtle* he’s humping?”

“Yes.”

“Remind me never to bring my pet around yours.”

“Why?”

“I have a tortoise.” I shook my head. “Your dog’s in love with a stuffed turtle?”

She nodded. “That’s why I named her Kate.”

“I don’t get it.”

“Leonardo and Kate—they were in *Titanic* together.”

“Didn’t one of them *die* in that love story?”

She looked down at her hand. “Can I wait until tomorrow to go to the emergency room? What time is it anyway?”

“I’m not a doctor, but I probably wouldn’t, and it’s got to be close to three AM by now.”

“Great. I don’t have a clue where the nearest hospital is, and I don’t even have a car. I took an Uber here from the airport.”

The last thing I felt like doing was going to a damn hospital, but I couldn’t let her go alone in the middle of the night. I nodded toward the door.

“Come on. I have a car. I’ll take you.”

“No, it’s fine.” She grabbed a phone from the coffee table and started to push buttons. “I can call an Uber.”

“I’m up now anyway. I won’t be able to sleep if I don’t take you.”

Her forehead wrinkled. “Why not?”

“Because I can’t let a woman get in the car in the middle of nowhere with a stranger, not knowing where she’s going.”

“Because I’m a woman? So it would be okay if I were a man?”

Another trick question. I sighed. “Just let me drive you.”

She stared at her phone for a long time before turning it to face me. “Oh my God. It says there are *no Ubers* in the area. How can that be?”

“We’re in bumfuck Michigan in the middle of the night.” I nodded at the door again. “Come on. Let me just take you.”

“I don’t even know your name.”

“Dawson.”

“First name or last?”

“First.”

“Interesting.”

“Thrilling. Can we go now?”

She ignored me. “I’m Naomi.”

I nodded. “Great. Now that we’re *besties*, how about we hit the road? I’m awake at the moment, but eventually I’m going to crash. It’s been a long-ass day.”

Naomi chewed her lip. “Fine. But let me get my jewelry first.”

“You need to put on *jewelry* to go to the emergency room?”

“Not wear it, but take it with me for safekeeping. I realized when I got here that there’s no safe, and I brought my mom’s diamond pendant and matching earrings. She passed away, and they mean a lot to me.”

I pointed my eyes down to the little rat, still humping away. “Can’t Gumby protect it?”

Naomi frowned. “Don’t poke fun at my dog. He’s amazing.”

“Why the hell did you bring diamonds to a cabin in the woods anyway?”

“I’m going to a wedding.”

“What wedding?”

“My friend Lily’s. Why?”

Oh fuck. Naomi...her damn name was *Naomi*. “What’s your last name?”

“Heart.”

I closed my eyes. This was really the day that kept on giving.

“You went to law school with Lily and Ben, right?”

“Yes. How did you know that?”

“Because I’m going to the same wedding. Ben is my buddy—been friends since we were kids, even went to undergrad together. Lily mentioned you to me recently. She said you three went to the University of Michigan together, and you’d just moved to New York. I believe her exact words were, ‘*I’d introduce you, but you two would hate each other.*’”

Chapter 2

NAOMI

“Would you like me to call social services for you?” The nurse smiled warmly. “Or the police, perhaps?”

“The police? Why would I want to talk to the police?”

She pointed her eyes to my now-casted hand. “There’s nothing to be ashamed about. My sister was in an abusive relationship for years and hid it from us. It happens to strong people. It’s not a reflection of who you are.”

I held up my arm. “You think I broke my hand fighting my abuser?”

“I saw your boyfriend in the waiting room. He was pacing and looked uncomfortable being here.”

“Well, I’m sure he is since we just met a few hours ago, and it turns out we’re destined to be enemies. But Dawson isn’t my boyfriend, and he definitely didn’t assault me. Actually, it was me who assaulted him. That’s how I broke my knuckles.”

The nurse pursed her lips. Didn’t look like she believed me.

“No, really,” I said. “There was some kind of a mix-up with our Airbnb reservation, and we rented the same cabin. I woke up in the middle of the night to find a half-naked man in my bed, and my first reaction was to throw a punch.”

“Oh my.”

I nodded. “Tell me about it. And it turns out we’re both in town for the same wedding, so I can’t even apologize and pretend it never happened.”

The nurse smiled. “Well, he’s got a pretty good shiner, so you must pack a mean punch.”

It dawned on me that we were going to ruin Lily and Ben’s wedding photos—me with this stupid cast, and Dawson with a black eye. I shook my head. “My friend is going to kill me. She planned this magical fairytale wedding in the middle of the forest, and Dawson and I are going to make it look like the Grimm version instead of the Disney one.”

She laughed. “Well, it could be worse.”

“How?”

“You could’ve punched an ugly man. I’m really glad that guy is not who I suspected he could be, because he’s something else, a real looker.”

She wasn’t wrong. Dawson was ridiculously handsome. I’d been thrown for a loop when I turned the light on. Who the hell notices that their intruder is *hot* in the middle of an altercation? I really needed to get laid. It had been *waayy* too long. But damn...I was glad I hadn’t hit him in that chiseled jaw, and at least he had one baby blue left for me to gaze into.

I nibbled on my bottom lip. “I saw *all* of him, too. He was wearing a towel when I woke up, and my dog ripped it off. I’ll have to remember to give Leonardo an extra treat later.”

The nurse’s eyes sparkled. “And...?”

“He’s the *full* package.”

The two of us cackled like old friends. It wasn’t very nice of me, considering the man had driven a stranger who punched him forty minutes to an emergency room in the middle of the night, but I needed the laugh.

The nurse handed me a packet of papers stapled at the corner, still smiling. “These are your cast instructions. The most important thing is to wrap it in a plastic bag and keep it dry while showering. Sealing it with a rubber band is the easiest. And don’t stick anything inside the cast, even if you’re itchy, because you can injure yourself. But you’re going to do that anyway, especially since you’ll be wearing this thing during the hottest months of the year, and you’re bound to get sweaty. So try to use a nail file or something without a point, at least.”

“Okay, thank you.”

“Follow up with your doctor when you get back to New York. But you’ll likely have the cast on for four to six weeks.”

I frowned. “Great. I’m in the process of looking for a new job. And of course, I’m a righty.”

She nodded. “People tend to punch with their dominant hand. I broke my wrist once, in a car accident. The worst part was trying to hook my bra. You don’t realize how much your hand bends and flexes to get those little hooks linked.” She moved the treatment tray from the bedside and took a step back. “But you’re all done.”

I hopped down. “Thank you for everything. Is there a ladies’ room I can use before I leave? It’s a long drive back to the cabin.” *If* I was even staying there. I still had no idea what the heck Dawson and I were going to do.

Inside the bathroom, I was horrified when I looked in the mirror. I'd had false eyelashes put on for the first time before I flew out yesterday, thinking they'd look nice for the wedding. But apparently the glue hadn't worked so well, at least on the right eye. My left, though? That one hadn't lost a single lash. So it looked as if one eye was twice the size of the other. Not only that, I'd done a face mask before going to bed. The mud had been yellow when I applied it, but it had dried to a greenish-gray color, and apparently, I hadn't removed it all like I thought I had. My face had two distinct patches of gray, one of which was on my nose and made my left nostril appear lumpy. And then there were *the blotches*. I had fair skin that told no lies, so whenever I was nervous or upset, I broke out in patches of red.

"Jesus." I turned on the water and started rubbing the leftover mud mask from my face. "I didn't have to punch the man. I could've scared him off just turning on the light."

A few minutes later, I walked out to the lobby of the emergency room with the remaining eyelashes removed and the clumpy patches of gray gone. There was nothing I could do about my blotchy skin. Dawson stood when he saw me.

"Damn." He looked at my arm. "They out of white casts?"

"No, I thought the pink was cute. Color makes me happy."

"If you say so. I guess your knuckles were broken?"

I nodded. "And you lied to me. It hurt like hell when they put them back into alignment."

Dawson's lip twitched. "I figured you were stressed enough. You didn't need to add anticipating pain that makes you want to throw up to everything else."

"And why didn't you tell me what my face looked like?"

Two lines formed between his brows. "What was wrong with your face?"

"Apparently the lashes I had put on came off of one eye while I was sleeping, and some of the mud mask I did last night didn't wash off."

Dawson's eyes roamed my face. "Huh. So your nose isn't crooked?"

"No! It was *the mud*. I looked deformed."

He shrugged. "I thought you were cute anyway."

I felt an unexpected flutter in my belly, but ignored it. "What are we going to do about the cabin?"

Dawson put his hand on my lower back and urged me to start walking. “Can we talk about it on the drive back? The guy in there on my left is hacking up a lung. I think he has tuberculosis.”

I glanced over at the man coughing. “Tuberculosis? Isn’t that a little over the top? It’s probably just a virus or the flu.”

“The guy’s sweating and thin. I looked up the symptoms. Fever and loss of appetite are common indicators of TB.”

I stopped in place. “Oh my God. I forgot what Lily said when she told me one of Ben’s friends was a defense attorney.”

“What did she say?”

My head bent back in laughter. “That you were smart, super competitive, and handsome, but also a germaphobe. Is that why you showered at two in the morning?”

“I stopped at rest stops. Do you know how much shit grows in those disgusting bathrooms?”

I don’t know why, but I couldn’t stop laughing—not as we exited the emergency room or as we walked to where Dawson’s car was parked.

He opened the door for me with a frown. “It’s not that funny.”

I spoke through giggles. “I think I’m just sleep deprived. When I’m exhausted, sometimes my emotions are oddly strong. You’re lucky I’m not crying—I might not be able to stop that either.”

He pointed to the car. “Get in or I’m leaving you here, and you can cry all you want.”

I kept laughing all through the seatbelt buckling, which took extra long since I normally did it with my right hand.

“So what are we going to do about the cabin?” I asked when Dawson got in the car.

“I emailed the woman who rented it to us via the Airbnb website, but she hasn’t responded yet. It’s only six thirty here, and her bio said she lives on the West Coast. But in the meantime, I texted Ben. Lily’s staying with her sister until their wedding night. He said I can crash on his couch until then. So we have two nights to figure it out before one of us is out on our ass.”

“I feel bad making you sleep on a couch when we both paid for the cabin.”

“I can always share the bed with you...”

“On second thought, rooming with Ben sounds like fun.”

Dawson chuckled and put the car in drive. “That’s what I thought.”

Forty minutes later, we pulled up at the cabin. It was the first time either of us had seen it in the light. “This place is cute during the day.”

“It would be cuter if it was in Barbados and had a pool bar and room service.” He killed the engine, but left the keys in the ignition. “I just need to get my bag.”

“Oh. Yeah, of course.”

I walked in first, but Dawson immediately stepped in front of me. “Go back outside,” he said in a low, scary voice.

Peeking around his broad shoulders, I saw what had made Dawson protective. The inside of the house had clothes strewn all over the place, and we hadn’t left it that way. I looked to where Dawson’s full suitcase had been and found it now empty. Leonardo was sound asleep on the couch, on top of a pair of jeans he must’ve dragged up there.

“Did you happen to leave your suitcase open?” I asked.

“Maybe. I had to get clothes out.”

I stepped from behind Dawson and walked over to the couch, wagging my finger. “Leonardo, what did you do?”

My dog lowered his ears, a telltale sign he was guilty—even if the evidence hadn’t been all over the room.

“I’m sorry. Leonardo loves to unpack. Suitcases, boxes, purses—I can’t leave anything lying around or he’ll empty it when I’m gone. Last week, I took him to the park, and he did it to a woman’s purse while I was texting for a minute. She thought someone had robbed her. Sorry, I wasn’t thinking when we left.”

Dawson shook his head. “Great.”

“I really apologize. I’ll help you clean it up.”

“I got it.” He bent and started scooping clothes from the floor. “I think you’ve helped me enough already.”

I frowned. “You don’t have to be grumpy about it. Leonardo has separation anxiety. He was probably stressed when we left him in a place he’s not familiar with.”

“Yeah, *the dog* is stressed,” Dawson grumbled. He finished picking up all his clothes and stuffed them back into his suitcase. Sighing, he looked

around. “I think that’s everything. I’ll let you know when I hear from the Airbnb woman.”

“Let me give you my number in case you need to reach me.”

Dawson dug his phone out and handed it to me. I handed it back after I’d punched in my number.

“I guess I’ll see you later, if I don’t hear back from her.”

“Later?” I asked.

“The rehearsal is tonight.”

“Oh. Sure. Of course.” I walked to the door and watched Dawson drag his suitcase to his car. “Thanks again for the ride to the hospital.”

“No problem. Thanks for the black eye.”

I smiled. “Don’t forget the saliva and dog hair on all your clothes. I heard you’re a germaphobe, so you must really love that. Oh, and you probably have TB now, too.”

He opened the car door and held onto the top. “And thank the little shit for helping me with my towel, so I could expose myself to a woman who’d just assaulted me.”

A visual of Dawson standing there, with his eight-pack and big dick dangling to his mid-thigh, even soft, popped into my mind. It stayed there as he pulled out of the driveway and drove down the dirt road. It had been one hell of a bad night, yet a small smile found its way to my lips. I sighed. *I’ll definitely be thanking Leonardo.*

Chapter 3

DAWSON

“Only you, Reed.” My buddy Ben’s shoulders shook as he laughed. “Though I am enjoying that you’ve hit the age where you get punched when you slink into bed with a woman. I remember the days when we’d come home in the middle of the night and there’d be a naked woman waiting in your bed in our dorm room.”

I shook my head. “Those days are over. The only time that’s happened in the last decade was when I got a psychotic client out of prison on appeal after a five-year stint, and she broke into my apartment to thank me.”

Ben chuckled. “I forgot about that. Emily was with you, right? She wasn’t happy about that either.”

I frowned. “Let’s not even talk about Emily.”

Ben flipped the pancakes he was cooking at the stove. “How’s that going? She still giving you the cold shoulder even though she’s the one who was in the wrong?”

I shook my head. “It sucks. One of us has to quit.”

“You don’t think things will ever settle down between you two?”

“Not a chance.”

“You can always come to work on the other, more noble side of the table.”

Ben and Lily were both assistant district attorneys. Ben worked in the Manhattan Organized Crime and Racketeering Unit, and Lily worked in the Appeals Division in Brooklyn. We crossed paths once in a while in the courtroom, but not too often. “The only noble people in either of our jobs are the suckers sitting in the jury box for a whopping forty bucks a day. Plus, I’d hate your salary.”

“It’s not so bad when there are two of us to share expenses.”

“Yeah, that’s not on my agenda either.” I was only busting balls, even if the DA’s office paid only a fraction of what I earned. My buddy knew I

didn't choose my job for the money—not at the beginning anyway. These days, though, with some of the people I represented, it kind of felt that way.

“So you and Lily went to law school with Naomi, right?”

“Yep.”

“Where does she work?”

“Nowhere right now. She just moved to New York two weeks ago, and she's working on a change in career.”

“Really? Why doesn't she want to practice law anymore?”

Ben shrugged.

“What area did she practice in?”

“She worked in the Virginia DA's office. Criminal prosecution.”

“No wonder you said we wouldn't get along. Was she any good?”

“If you two had ever gone up against each other, I would've been sitting in the courtroom with a big bowl of popcorn to watch the show. She had the best record in her division in Virginia. Only ever lost one trial.”

“Why'd she move to New York?”

“Looking for a fresh start. She and her fiancé broke up last year, and her sister lives there. Frannie's got some health problems.”

People rarely wanted a *fresh start* unless something big happened to make them walk away from their life. But Ben didn't offer more, and I didn't press. I knew better than most that we all had things we liked to keep to ourselves.

Ben plated breakfast, and we sat down together at the table.

“Any chance you have shredded coconut?” I asked. “I thought I brought some, but I guess I left it at home.”

“You and your damn coconut obsession. Don't you ever get sick of that crap?”

“It's good brain food, filled with iron, magnesium, zinc—”

“I know. I know,” Ben cut me off. “And copper, manganese, and selenium. Trust me, I can recite the nutritional values after four years of rooming with you in college.”

“Then you should have it in the fridge right now.”

Ben chuckled. “You're such a knucklehead.”

I yawned as I picked up a glass of orange juice. It had to be close to nine by now, and I still hadn't slept a wink.

“Lily has me running a million errands today,” Ben said. “I'll be out of your hair as soon as we're done eating, so you'll be able to crash in peace

for a while.”

“Thanks.”

He chuckled, looking at my black eye. “I can’t believe a girl kicked your ass.”

“It was dark. She got one punch in.”

Ben stuffed a forkful of pancake into his mouth. “Naomi’s cute, isn’t she?”

“Lily hears you calling another woman cute, we’re going to be wearing matching purple eyeshadow, my friend.”

“I’m getting married, not going blind.”

“She’s cute, but not my type.”

Ben’s forehead wrinkled. “What about her isn’t your type?”

“She’s got a dog.”

“Since when do you hate dogs?”

“I don’t. But having a dog or a cat or even a damn goldfish takes commitment. My new type is anyone who doesn’t get attached easily. Easy come, easy go.”

“You have a damn tortoise. Those things live so long, it’s a *lifetime* of commitment.”

“I got Sheldon when I was nine. I didn’t know shit back then. Naomi’s dog isn’t that old.”

“So you’re regressing to your college days, a new girl every semester?”

“Maybe.” I ran a hand through my hair. “I was happy then. Besides, Naomi’s high maintenance, and I’m done with that.”

“How do you know she’s high maintenance?”

“Lace pajamas, mud masks, and she got a *pink* cast at the hospital. Her dog has a rhinestone collar.”

Ben grinned. “She’s also vegan. I guess she does have a little Elle Woods in her.”

“Who?”

“Seriously? It’s a character from a movie Lily has watched like a dozen times. *Legally Blonde*.”

“Did someone just say *Legally Blonde*?” The screen door creaked open, and Lily walked into Ben’s cabin, smiling.

“Good morning, my lovely bride-to-be.” My buddy hammed it up with a big, goofy smile.

I rolled my eyes. “Morning, Lil.”

“What are you doing up so early, Dawson?” She walked to the table and kissed my cheek. “I thought you weren’t getting in until the middle of the night, so I figured you’d still be sleeping.”

“Things didn’t go exactly as planned.”

My very-whipped buddy put down his fork, pushed back his chair from the table, and patted his knees. Lily giggled as she climbed onto his lap and proceeded to plant kisses all over his face.

“Ugh,” I groaned. “I’m eating over here.”

“Dawson had an interesting evening.” Ben grinned. “He met Naomi...”

Lily’s eyes widened and a smile took over her face. “I knew you two would either hate each other or wind up humping.”

“The only humping last night was done by Leonardo.”

Lily’s nose wrinkled. “Ugh. Don’t tell me Naomi brought that stuffed turtle? Wait...” She reached out and turned my head. “Oh my God. You have a black eye?”

I nodded. “You can thank your friend for that.”

“Who? Naomi? What are you talking about?”

Ben proceeded to tell Lily the story, while I kept quiet and finished off the pancakes on my plate. When I was done, I plucked the rest of what was left on my buddy’s plate and ate those too.

“We’re going to need to add a stop at Macy’s to our to-do list,” Lily said.

“What for?” Ben asked.

“Dawson needs concealer for that eye.”

“Makeup?” I shook my head. “I’m not wearing makeup.”

“But you’ll look terrible in the photos.”

“Photoshop ’em.”

She sighed. “And here I was worried the fisticuffs this weekend would be you and Emily.”

“Emily? Why would I fight with her while I’m here and she’s in New York?”

Lily’s face fell. “Oh no.”

“What?”

“She didn’t tell you? Emily said she was going to tell you!”

“Tell me what?”

“That she decided to come to the wedding after all.”

“Sorry I’m late!”

Naomi rushed out of the back of a car looking a hell of a lot different than she had last night. Or was it this morning? I wasn’t even sure what day it was anymore. I’d only slept a few hours at Ben’s.

Her hair was down, styled in loose curls that framed her pretty face. The red blotches on her cheeks and neck were gone, replaced by smooth, pale skin. Her big green eyes were the same size now, and they didn’t need false eyelashes to get attention. Full red lips matched the color of her dress. She wasn’t showing much skin, yet she looked sexy as shit, and unlike the rest of the ladies in the bridal party, who were wearing sneakers, she had on four-inch sparkly silver stilettos that I wouldn’t have minded seeing her wear with nothing else.

The car she’d arrived in pulled away, and Cat, the woman that Ben had introduced a little while ago as the wedding planner, raised her hand.

“Alright, I think we’re ready to get started. This is as far into the park as cars can go. From here, we’re going to take golf carts. Tomorrow evening, we’ll all enter the same way we do today, but the guests have been instructed to arrive at a different entrance so no one will see the bridal party until we’re ready for the ceremony to begin.”

I caught my buddy’s eye and lifted one brow, as if to say, *what the fuck is all this?*

He responded with a shrug and a smile just as a caravan of golf carts pulled into the parking lot.

“Each club car holds four people,” the wedding planner continued. “Tomorrow the groom and best man will already be at the ceremony location, but for now, they’re going to take the ride with the bride and her dad. Evelyn and Jack, you’ll be walking down the aisle first, so if you can please take a seat in the front row of the first car, and Naomi and Dawson, if you would please sit in the rear-facing seat in the same car.” Cat rattled off more directions, and then we all headed to our assigned golf carts.

I held a hand out to help Naomi climb on.

“Thank you.”

I nodded.

She smoothed her dress as I took the seat next to her. “Did you hear from the cabin owner yet?”

I nodded. "I left a message on your voicemail earlier."

"Shoot." She opened her purse and pulled out her phone. "I didn't get it. Or at least I don't think I did. My cell service is terrible in the cabin."

I'd wondered why she hadn't responded. "Mine isn't great either. I had to drive up to the highway and park at a trucker rest stop to call my office this afternoon because service kept going in and out."

"What did the cabin owner have to say?"

"Apparently the app she uses to rent the place did a software upgrade the day you made your reservation, and a glitch allowed you to book it even though it was already reserved. She had no idea."

"But I paid a deposit?"

"She initiated a refund already. And she was apologetic, not that it helps our situation. Unfortunately, she only owns the one cabin."

Naomi sighed. "Alright, well... I'll find somewhere else to stay. I thought about it, and you were right. You made the reservation first, so you should be the one to get the cabin."

"It's not a big deal. I asked my assistant to find me a place. She should be calling me back soon."

"Are you sure?"

"You're already settled in. And Leonardo has already christened the place."

"That reminds me. Did you happen to leave a bag of shredded coconut behind?"

"I thought I'd left it at home. I guess you found it?"

"Leonardo did. He tore it open and ate some, so I had to throw it out."

"Damn."

"What were you going to do with it?"

"Eat it."

"It was a giant bag. It looked like it came from Costco."

"I really like coconut."

"Sorry."

"It's fine. Lily promised me coconut cake at the rehearsal dinner."

"Oh, and I think I found something else of yours." She smirked and dug into her purse again, this time coming up with a strip of condoms. "Leonardo came trotting out with these after you left. I'm guessing they're yours. You were hoping to do some christening of your own at the cabin?"

"How do you know someone else didn't leave those behind?"

Her cheeks pinked. “They looked like your size.”

That comment and the big *XL* splashed across the front of the packets had me beaming. And here I thought I’d given a poor showing.

Naomi rolled her eyes. “Alright, alright, don’t let it go to your head. Big dick or not, you still seem like a jerk.”

“What did I do?”

“Well, for one, you’re a defense attorney. That in itself is the biggest clue. But you also insulted Leonardo.”

“And drove you to the hospital...”

“Maybe that part wasn’t so jerky. I’ll give you that one.”

“And insisted you stay at the cabin while I bunked on a hard couch.”

Naomi’s face softened. “Oh no, was the couch uncomfortable?”

“It was fine. But it could’ve been hard.”

She chuckled. “Nope. I was right. You *are* a jerk.”

The brigade of golf carts slowed in a clearing. I wasn’t much for weddings, but even I was impressed at what I saw. We were in the middle of a forest, but every tree around the perimeter of a small square of cleared space had been wrapped with twinkling lights. A wedding arch made of branches stood at the front, and white chairs were set up for guests. I’d never let Ben or any of the guys know, but I thought it looked...

“*Magical.*” Naomi whispered the word just as I thought it.

She looked around, even more wide-eyed than me. In fact, everyone was silent, doing the same thing.

“Well?” Lily said. “What do you all think?” She flaunted the biggest smile, probably because she already knew the answer. This was the coolest place for a wedding ceremony I’d ever seen.

The ladies all swooned.

Lily squeezed Ben’s hand. “This is why we made you come all the way up here to Michigan. We found this spot on our first date during our last semester of law school at U of M. We were hiking and stumbled onto this clearing. It didn’t have the lights or the chairs, of course, but we sat down and didn’t get up for eight hours.” Lily looked at Ben. “When we finally left the park, I knew I’d met my future husband. Four years later, Ben proposed in this very spot, and tomorrow evening we’ll get married here.”

Every woman either had tears in her eyes or was sniffing. Naomi was the former. She used her thumbs to catch droplets. Even I felt a little choked up.

The wedding planner stepped forward and cleared her throat. “We should probably get started with our run-through so we don’t make you late for the wonderful dinner Ben and Lily have planned. Tomorrow night there will be a temporary wooden floor down so it’ll be easier to walk. We had some rain the day before yesterday, and it takes a while for the earth to dry in here, so be careful when you step. The grass is still a bit mushy, and there’s mud under the trees where there isn’t any growth.” Cat walked to the back of the chairs. “If we could please have the bridal party line up here with their partners.”

I hopped out of the golf cart and went to walk around to help Naomi, but before I could get there, Jack, who’d been seated in the front row, already had his hand extended. I wasn’t a big fan of the guy and never understood why Ben was friends with him in law school. But at the moment, I liked him even less.

“I don’t think we’ve met.” He held out a hand. “I’m Jack Renner.”

Naomi smiled politely. “Naomi Heart. Nice to meet you.”

I caught Jack’s eye as he lifted her hand to his mouth for a kiss and flashed him what I hoped he’d understand as a warning not to pull his usual crap. The guy was shady as shit. Nevertheless, he helped Naomi from the golf cart, so I walked ahead. After two or three strides, I realized the ground was so saturated it actually had spring to it. Naomi had pretty thin heels on, so I turned to warn her, but I was a half-second too late.

Her left shoe sank into the grass and stayed there, while the rest of her kept moving forward. She wobbled, her foot came out of the shoe, and her balance went off-kilter. The rest happened in slow motion. Naomi’s knee buckled. She put out her casted hand, trying to find her balance, but there was no stopping the fall. Jack was still walking next to her, but he was too busy checking out the rest of the bridesmaids to notice what was happening until it was too late. I reached for her, but I couldn’t make it in time.

Naomi landed with a high-pitched squeal, right in a giant puddle of mud.

Shit. I shouldered useless Jack out of the way and bent down. “Are you okay?”

“I think so. But where the hell is my shoe?”

Leaning over, I plucked it from the grass. “Here.”

She slipped her shoe back on while everyone stared. Ben and Lily rushed over. “Oh my God. Are you okay?” Lily asked. “What happened?”

Naomi brushed mud from her dress. “My heel got stuck. I’m fine. Just a little mortified.”

I held my hand out to help her up. She went to take it but then froze. Hers was covered in mud. “But you don’t like germs.”

I clasped my hand around her dirty one anyway and pulled Naomi to her feet. “It’s fine. Dirt from the earth bothers me less than the kind from humans.”

Even after she was upright, I didn’t let go. “Is your ankle okay? It looked like you might’ve twisted it.”

“I think so.” She wiggled it around a few times before closing her eyes. “Oh my God. I didn’t tell you, but last night the nurse at the hospital asked me if I wanted her to call the police. Between your black eye and my hand, she thought you were my abusive boyfriend. Imagine if I wound up back there with *two* casts in twenty-four hours? They’d definitely have you arrested.”

“We’ll try to avoid that.” I looked down at her feet and shook my head. “Why the hell are you wearing those shoes anyway? Everyone else is wearing sneakers.”

“I didn’t bring any.”

“Why not?”

“They didn’t go with any of the outfits I’d planned. I brought a pair of flats, but they didn’t go with this dress.”

“That wasn’t very smart, was it?”

She pursed her lips. “Thanks for the reminder, Captain Obvious.”

I looked her up and down but kept my mouth shut this time.

“What?” she said. “Go ahead. I can see you want to say something.”

I shook my head. “Not really.”

“Just spit it out.”

I gave her the once-over a second time and shrugged. “I was just going to say the dress looks good on you, even with the mud.”

Naomi blinked a few times. “I must’ve misheard you, because that almost sounded like a compliment.”

“I figured I owed you one back.”

Her little nose scrunched up. “Back? What compliment did I give you?”

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the packet of condoms, pointing to the XL on the front with a wink.

Naomi rolled her eyes. But not before looking down at my crotch.

Chapter 4

NAOMI

“I think I might have to wrap you in bubble wrap until after the ceremony.” Lily shook her head watching me peel dried mud from my dress in the ladies’ room of the restaurant.

“I feel terrible about the cast. I think we can find creative ways to hide it in most of the pictures.”

Lily waved me off. “I couldn’t care less about the pictures. All I want from tomorrow is to marry Ben.”

Her answer made my heart swell, because I knew she really felt that way. The two of them were ridiculously in love. Seeing the way they looked at each other almost restored my faith in relationships. *Almost*, but not quite.

Lily leaned against the sink and caught my eye. “You and Dawson seem to be getting cozy.”

“What makes you say that? Is it his black eye from our first encounter or him helping me up when I fell in the mud that gives you the cozy vibes?”

She laughed. “I noticed him checking you out when you were getting in the golf cart after the rehearsal.”

I wiped the last of the dried flakes from my dress. “He’s easy on the eyes, but I’m not interested.”

“Why not? You said recently that you missed sex.”

“I do, but that man is gorgeous and cocky. That spells trouble.”

“Are you still texting with Simon? The dentist you went out with in college?”

I nodded. “He’s away on the mission trip he took. But I think we’re going to get together next time he’s back. Maybe he can help me with my dry spell. We had pretty good chemistry back in the day.”

Lily smiled. “You’ll break your dry spell when you’re ready.”

“I hope I still remember how to do it by then. It’s been so long.”

Lily laughed. “It’s like riding a bike, or maybe a horse.”

I thought back to the way Dawson looked naked. That would be *some horse* to ride. Still, my gut told me he would be a bad idea. A *fun* one probably, but still a *bad idea*. “I think I’m going to look for a pony this time, rather than a stallion.”

Speaking of men hung like horses...

Dawson was talking to another groomsman as I approached my seat. But his eyes latched onto me and didn’t let go. Every step I took left me feeling warmer under his gaze.

“Are you here?” He pointed to the chair next to him.

“I am.”

“Excuse me.” Dawson abandoned the conversation with the guy he’d been talking to and stood, pulling out my chair.

“Thank you.”

He sat and stretched his arm along the back of my chair, nodding to the table. “The menu with the dinner choices is there. They’re coming around to take orders now. There’s an eggplant dish. Ben mentioned you’re vegan.”

I lifted a brow. “Do you speak about me often?”

“I mentioned you since I had to explain the black eye I had when I showed up at his door this morning.”

I smiled. “Can you believe that was only this morning? It seems more like three days ago.”

“I feel the same way.”

The rehearsal dinner was in a private room at a local restaurant. There were probably about twenty of us seated at one long table. It was pretty, but there wasn’t a lot of room, so we were tucked in almost shoulder to shoulder. This close, I couldn’t help but notice how handsome Dawson really was. His angular jaw, straight nose, and blue eyes were impossible to miss, even from a distance, but his skin was beautiful too—sun kissed and smooth. It made me wonder about his heritage and if he got facials. He also smelled really good.

I got lost in the moment, only to blink and realize Dawson had just watched me check him out.

He smirked. “I think you’re pretty hot, too.”

My jaw fell open. “Who said I think you’re hot?”

“You just did. With your eyes.”

“I was looking at your black eye. And stupidly feeling bad about it again. Apparently, I shouldn’t.”

His smirk widened. “Uh-huh.”

“You’re pretty full of yourself, aren’t you?”

“Just being real.”

“*Real* full of yourself.”

“I don’t attract women because of my sparkling personality. I tend to be a dick.”

“Oh, at least we agree on something.”

He nodded. “That I’m handsome.”

“God, I was really on point when I told Lily you were cocky.”

He leaned back, and his already big smile grew smugger, if that were possible. “Talking about me to your friend. *Nice*.”

“For the same reason you were talking about me! I was telling her what happened.”

“I’d already told Lily what happened this morning.”

“We were discussing it.”

“You told her how good I looked naked then?”

My face heated. “No!”

“But you thought it?”

“I definitely understand why you don’t attract women with your sparkling personality.”

He leaned in and lowered his voice. “You don’t have to be embarrassed. I’ll admit I thought of you in those pink pajamas more than once today.”

Gah! I hated that I felt butterflies in my belly. But the huskiness in his voice was something else. I was pretty sure it wouldn’t have mattered what he said. The man could read the phone book, and I’d be turned on.

I was grateful a waiter walked over and interrupted the moment. He held up a bottle. “Would you like wine?”

“Definitely,” I said. “And a generous pour, please. I’m seated next to an egomaniac.”

I knocked back half the glass in one big gulp before Dawson even got his. When he lifted his wine to his mouth, I noticed he had a bracelet on his wrist, along with a sexy, chunky watch. I’d noticed the bracelet when he drove me to the hospital too, but it was the first time I realized it had letters.

“Is that a friendship bracelet? Are you a Swiftie?”

“Definitely not.”

“What does it say?”

He held it out for me to read. A-S-S-H-O-L-E. I laughed. “I’m pretty sure you don’t need that thing. People figure it out pretty quickly on their own.”

He smiled. “Ben mentioned you used to work in the DA’s office in Virginia.”

My face fell. “What else did he tell you?”

“Not much, other than you recently moved to New York. Are you thinking about working at the DA’s office with Lily?”

If he thought the DA’s office there would hire me, Ben hadn’t told him much. I shook my head. “I think I’m done with government work.”

“I keep trying to get Ben to leave. He could make twice the salary in private practice. Probably more.”

I was anxious to change subjects. “Did you hear anything from your assistant about a place to stay?”

“Not yet. She was looking at hotels but couldn’t find anything available. There’s not too much close by. That’s why I’d booked the Airbnb. I usually try to avoid them because they can be inconsistent. I’m sure she’ll find a place on VRBO or one of those sites by tomorrow.”

I sighed. “Okay, well, let me know.”

“Are you offering to share your bed with me if nothing pops up?” He winked, and my stomach did another stupid little flippity flop.

“I was thinking more like you could sleep in your car.”

“Ouch.”

I laughed. “I can probably get one of the ladies in the wedding party to let me bunk with her if you don’t find anything. Hannah is here alone. Her husband is a cardiology resident, and I don’t think he was able to get off work.”

“She was the one in the last golf cart, right? With the red hair?”

I nodded. “She’s Lily’s cousin.”

Dawson lifted his chin, motioning to the other end of the table. “Then I hope her husband’s schedule changed.”

I turned to find Hannah now sitting with Rob, her husband, his arm around her shoulder. “Oh. I guess he was able to get off after all.”

“Maybe I’ll get to see those pink pajamas I couldn’t stop thinking about all day *after all*...”

“I’m sure you’ll find a place. I wouldn’t start packing your PJs so soon.”

“I won’t. But that’s because I don’t need ’em. I like to sleep naked.”

The following morning, Lily asked me to stop by Ben’s cabin. He’d put her grandmother’s pearl earrings in his suitcase, and she planned to wear them as her *something old*, but she didn’t want to see the groom on her wedding day until the ceremony.

Though it wasn’t the groom who answered the door when I arrived. Dawson was shirtless and sweaty. The other night, I’d been so startled that I didn’t get a chance to fully appreciate the man. His handsome face had caught my attention, and then when the towel came off, I had other *bulging* things to look at. But I wasn’t surprised to find he had carved muscles everywhere. It sort of went with the rest of the package. Still, my eyes snagged on the thin trail of hair that ran up his glistening torso.

I swallowed and turned my head, diverting my eyes to anywhere but Dawson. “Hey. I’m here to pick up earrings for Lily.”

He opened the screen door and stuck his head out, looking to the left. “What are you looking at?”

“Oh. I, uh, saw a rabbit.”

Dawson scrutinized my face before opening the door the rest of the way. “Uh-huh.”

“I did. He just hopped away.”

“If you say so. Come on in. Ben went to the store, and he didn’t mention any earrings. But he should be back in a few minutes.”

I hesitated.

Dawson smirked. “I’m not going to bite. *Unless you want me to...*”

I rolled my eyes, but dammit if those stupid butterflies didn’t flutter in my stomach upon hearing that deep, throaty voice again. Or maybe this time I felt the activity *a little lower*. My body seemed to have a mind of its own when this man said certain things.

He looked me up and down, eyes lingering on my chest before lifting and meeting mine. “You wear a lot of pink.”

“And...?”

He shrugged. “And nothing. Just pointing it out.”

“I believe in chromotherapy. Dressing in bright colors can help improve physical and mental health.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Orange promotes kindness. Perhaps you should try wearing it sometime.”

His eyes sparkled. “It looked like your mood improved just fine seeing *flesh* color when you walked in.”

“God, you’re such an ass.”

He chuckled and stepped aside. “Come in already. We’re letting the mosquitos in.”

Inside the house, a pull-up bar was jammed between the hallway walls. Dawson grabbed a towel from a chair and wiped the back of his neck. “I was trying to get a little exercise in, in case you decide to invite me for that sleepover.”

“Don’t tell me you couldn’t find a place?”

He shook his head. “Closest thing my admin found was an hour away. I even looked myself this morning. I’m just going to crash in my car and go home early tomorrow.”

“Shoot.” I nibbled on my bottom lip. “I can’t let you do that.”

“It’s not a big deal.”

“Yes, it is. And the cabin is rightfully yours. We can share it.”

Dawson grinned. “Are you soliciting me to sleep in your bed, Ms. Heart?”

“No! I meant...you can have the bedroom, and I’ll sleep on the couch.”

“Nah.” He waved me off. “I was just busting your chops. I can’t ask you to do that.”

“You’re not asking. I’m insisting. You’re not sleeping in your car. Besides, I would never be able to sleep if you did. And I really like my sleep.”

“It’s not that big of a deal.”

“It is to me. We’re both adults. The cabin is big enough for both of us for one night.” I wasn’t sure that was true, but we were going to have to make it work. “It’s fine. We’ll share it.”

“Are you sure?”

No. “Definitely.”

“Alright. But you’ll take the bedroom, and I’ll take the couch. I have to get on the road early tomorrow morning anyway, and that way I won’t wake

you.”

“Works for me. I like to sleep late.”

“And you’re going to have to wear clothes.”

“That’s fine too.” I shook my head. “Wait. Of course I’m going to wear clothes.”

He grinned. “I guess one of us should.”

“We’re *both* going to wear clothes and behave ourselves.”

He pouted. “That doesn’t sound like fun.”

“Don’t make me give you another black eye.”

“No worries. I won’t try to sneak into your bed again.”

“Good.”

“Though I will come when you *beg*.”

Beg. So throaty and sexy. It should be illegal to have a voice like that. “I won’t be doing any begging.”

Dawson’s eyes sparkled. “We’ll see.”

Chapter 5

NAOMI

“*Un-fucking-real.*”

“What?”

The muscle in Dawson’s jaw flexed. “Nothing.”

I followed his line of sight and found a gorgeous brunette wearing a shimmery silver dress. “Who is that?”

“No one.”

We were all standing around in the parking lot, waiting to get on the golf carts and head to the ceremony. Guests were supposed to arrive at the other side of the park, but a few stragglers had shown up here, like this woman I’d never seen before.

Jack, one of the other groomsmen, pointed to the silver Mercedes. “Isn’t that Emily?”

Dawson grunted something that might’ve been a yes and looked away, but a few seconds later, his eyes found their way back to the woman. Lily had mentioned that Dawson’s ex had decided to come to the wedding, and I had a hunch that gorgeous woman was her. They looked like a matching set of hotness.

Ben walked over and laid a hand on Dawson’s shoulder. “I’m sorry, man. I had no idea she was bringing him.”

“Whatever,” Dawson grumbled. “I don’t give a shit.”

But it was clear he gave a whole lot of shit. I stood next to Dawson, watching the woman lean down to the rearview mirror and fix her lipstick before strutting our way. The guy with his arm around her back had highlighted hair and probably could’ve been a model for some brand that liked the look of fraternity douches. The two made their way to the corner of the lot where we were all waiting, but I noticed the woman’s steps falter when she locked eyes with Dawson. *Definitely his ex.*

One of the wedding attendants walked over and pointed to the golf carts waiting nearby. For a second I thought the show was going to end there, but

then the woman headed right toward Dawson and me. She flashed a megawatt smile and acted like there was a chance in hell Dawson might be happy to see her here. At least until she got close enough to notice his eye.

“What in the world happened to you?” she asked.

I felt tension radiating from the man next to me. Something had gone down between these two, and my gut said whatever it was, Dawson wasn’t in the wrong. He looked angry, but I sensed there was hurt underneath.

“Ceremony’s starting soon,” he grumbled. “You should get going.”

Mr. Phi Kappa Douchey put his arm around the woman’s back. “Come on, babe.”

I hated that this woman was standing there with a date and Dawson was all alone. So I decided to balance the score and grabbed hold of Dawson’s arm. “Honey, aren’t you going to introduce me to your friend?”

Dawson turned and looked at me like I had two heads, so I, of course, doubled down and snuggled closer. “You’ll have to excuse him. He’s a little embarrassed about the black eye. We were trying this new move...” I lowered my voice. “It’s sort of a reverse cowgirl, but you arch into a backbend and then...”

The woman looked as confused as Dawson, so I lifted my arms in the air to explain the position better and demonstrated by arching my back. When I felt a dozen eyes on me, I thought maybe I was making too big of a scene, so I brought my arms back to my sides. “Anyway, it’s my fault. When *it* hit, I started to flail and well, poor Dawson’s eye took a punch.”

The brunette’s mouth flattened to a grim line, while the douchey guy next to her flashed a dirty grin, and his eyes went to my cleavage.

I grabbed Dawson’s arm again, snuggling against his side. “Hope that wasn’t TMI.”

Dawson looked over like he was one-more-word-out-of-my-mouth away from feeling my forehead. But I was in too deep to abandon ship now. I fluttered my eyelashes. “Maybe we should make up a funny story like I punched you when you unexpectedly slipped into bed in the middle of the night so people don’t struggle with the truth. I think I made your friend uncomfortable, honey.”

The woman’s eyes bounced between Dawson and me. It was clear she didn’t know what the heck to say or do, so I helped out a little more. I flashed an over-the-top smile and thumbed toward the golf carts. “That way to the ceremony.”

She nodded, still looking confused, but she and her date walked away. I watched them climb onto the golf cart and start down the path into the woods, then grinned up at Dawson.

“She was definitely jealous.”

“Or thought you were insane. What the hell was that?”

My smile fell. “I was helping you.”

“Helping me what?”

“Make her feel some jealousy, too.”

“Too? I’m not jealous.”

I pursed my lips. “Your teeth were clenched so tight, it looked like you were going to crack a pearly white, Dawson.”

“Because that woman has a lot of balls showing up here with that asshole. He and I used to be friends. Not because I’m jealous.”

“I know jealous when I see it.”

“Did you hit your head with that cast on your arm?”

I scowled. “You don’t have to be a jerk. I was only trying to help.”

Dawson pointed to his face. “I have a black eye, and I’m going to have to sleep on a couch tonight. I think you’ve done enough.”

Ben and Lily’s wedding was the most beautiful ceremony I’d ever been to. There wasn’t a dry eye in the forest today. Even my partner had to wipe his eyes a few times. Though knowing him, he’d probably deny he had tears like he’d denied being jealous earlier.

Speaking of which, Mr. Grumpypants caught my eye from the other side of the dance floor and walked my direction.

I looked away, not wasting any more of my attention on a man who didn’t appreciate it. But when he arrived before me, he extended a hand. “Would you like to dance?”

I frowned. “There’s no obligation to ask me to dance just because I’m your partner in the wedding.”

“It’s no obligation.” He added, “Please?”

I rolled my eyes, yet placed my hand in his. Dawson led us to the dance floor and wrapped his arm around my back, pulling me close. I’d never admit it, but it felt damn good.

“I owe you an apology,” he said.

“Hmmm... Would that be for breaking my knuckles with your face, insulting my dog, or yelling at me when I was only trying to help? You’re going to have to be a little more specific.”

He smiled. “All of it. But I was referring to what you did with Emily this afternoon.”

“Her name is Emily, huh?”

Dawson nodded.

“There was a mean girl at my high school who made fun of my winter boots for being Schmuggs and not Uggs. Her name was Emily, too.”

“Must run in the name.”

“Is she?” I asked. “A mean girl, I mean?”

Dawson let out a deep breath. “She wasn’t always.”

“How long were you two together?”

“Not long. Three months. But we were friends for years.”

“Can I ask what happened?”

“You could, but that assumes I know the answer. We were casually dating, not exclusive or anything. One day she asked me if I’d been out with anyone else. I was honest and said yes. She didn’t seem upset about it. A few days later, I walked into our office to find her getting railed by a friend of ours. On my goddamned desk.”

My eyes bulged. “That sucks. Is it that guy she’s here with today?”

“It is.”

“For what it’s worth, he looks like a douchey frat boy.”

Dawson’s lip twitched. “His name is fucking Tad.”

“I bet he says *bro* a lot, and probably pronounces it more like *bruh*, too. *Bruh, did you see that chick I went out with last night? She was smokin’.*”

Dawson chuckled. “That’s pretty damn spot on. Though the ladies do love him, for some reason.”

“I suspect that’s only true when you’re unavailable.”

“Thank you. My ego was feeling as beat up as I look.”

“You said, ‘I walked into *our* office’... Does that mean you work with her?”

Dawson nodded. “She’s my partner.”

“Oooh. Messy.”

“Yeah, no shit.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught Emily watching us. It made me smile that she didn’t seem happy. “Don’t look now, but your mean girl is at

three o'clock, and she looks like she's regretting her bad decisions. I think my ploy to make her feel jealous worked."

"Wasn't a hard job. Emily doesn't like it when people are prettier than her."

That stupid flutter went off in my belly yet again, even if he was just being nice.

"And for the record," Dawson said, "I really wasn't jealous. I'm more pissed off that she's turned shit at work into a living hell. She acts like I'm the one who did something wrong, stomping around like it was me who screwed someone on her desk."

"It sounds like maybe you hurt her by admitting you were seeing other people, and she wanted to hurt you back."

The song we were swaying to came to an end, and the DJ asked everyone to find their seats. Dawson didn't loosen his grip.

"Hang on a minute."

I tipped my head up to look at him.

"Are we still playing a couple? You know, to piss off Emily."

"Sure. If you want to."

He slid one hand up my back, then brought it around to cup my cheek. Our faces were so close, his breath tickled my lips. Dawson stroked my cheek with his thumb. "I should probably kiss you then. You know, if she's watching."

My eyes slanted to where Emily had been standing. She was now sitting on her date's lap, busy playing kissy face with him. But when my gaze returned to Dawson, the way he was looking at me took my breath away. He leaned closer, and it felt like we were the only two in the room. "Is she watching?"

I nodded.

He smiled. There was something almost sinister in the way his lips curved at the edges, and it made me wonder if he knew I was full of shit. But before I could debate it too long, he pulled my face to his and kissed me.

It was just a light brush of our lips. Probably enough to make his ex jealous, if she was watching, but definitely not enough to quell the desire I currently felt. I wasn't sure what the hell came over me—maybe it was the year of celibacy, or maybe it was the glass of wine I'd had a few minutes

before we hit the dance floor—but I needed more. And so... I decided to take it. Right here, right now.

My fingers tangled into Dawson's hair, and I held him to me. Our lips parted, tongues collided, and gentle flew out the window. The kiss quickly grew desperate. Dawson grabbed a thick clump of my hair, and he yanked my head back to gain access to my neck. A moan vibrated between us, and I wasn't sure if it was me or him. It felt like this man wanted to swallow me whole, and in the moment, I would have let him, even on the dance floor.

I was breathless and woozy by the time our kiss broke. Our chests heaved up and down, and I couldn't feel my legs. When my hazy vision came into focus, I found *Emily* watching again. I cleared my throat, but my voice was still small. "She saw."

A slow smile spread across Dawson's handsome face. "Who gives a shit? That was for me, not her."

Chapter 6

DAWSON

Later that night, after the wedding was over and we were back at the cabin, I came out of the bathroom and found Naomi sitting on the couch. Her hands covered her face and her shoulders shook. *Shit. She's crying.*

My gut told me to turn around, go back into the bathroom, and quietly shut the door. I sucked at tears, especially drunk ones, and Naomi was pretty inebriated. But when I looked over a second time, my heart squeezed and I just couldn't do it. So I took a deep breath and soldiered out to the living room.

"Hey. What's going on?" I asked in my most gentle voice. "Are you okay?"

She snorted. "My stupid hair."

"What?"

Tears rolled down her face, smacking into a giant goofy smile. *Thank fuck.* She wasn't crying; she was laughing. Naomi spat words out between fits of giggles, so she wasn't so easy to understand. But I caught the words *hair* and *zipper* and managed to put two and two together. Sure enough, I looked behind her and found a clump of her hair stuck in the zipper of her dress. This woman was a complete disaster.

"Are you always this big of a train wreck?"

Her answer was a loud, high-pitched *hiccup*. We both lost it after that. Tears rolled down my face, and Naomi continued to hiccup between snorts. By the time we were able to control ourselves, there was a streak of black mascara down her cheek.

Without thinking, I wiped it away with my thumb. "Eye makeup," I said.

But when she looked up at me with her big green eyes, something shifted, and our laughter trailed off. We were sitting so close, I could smell the sweet cream frosting from the wedding cake on her breath. It made me salivate. Naomi's tongue traced a line along her bottom lip, making it wet

and ripe for tasting. But we weren't at the wedding anymore, amid the safety of two-hundred-and-fifty people looking at the dance floor. We were *alone*, just the two of us in a house with a bed. And that kiss earlier made me painfully aware that if I started things a second time, there was no way in hell I'd be able to stop. I knew that for a fact, yet I wasn't sure I cared. A little war raged inside of me, debating whether I should lean in the two inches and say *fuck it* or get up and put some space between us.

But then Naomi hiccupped again.

And it was like someone threw a bucket of cold water over me. I had a nice buzz going, but she was *drunk*. I was a lot of shitty things, but I was not a man who took advantage of women—though being this close to her definitely tested my morality.

I stood. "We should probably get some sleep. I need to head out early tomorrow morning."

Naomi blinked a few times. "Oh. Yeah, okay."

She looked as disappointed as I felt, yet I stuffed my hands into my pockets for safekeeping. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight, Dawson."

I swore under my breath as I watched her sexy ass sashay down the hall to the bedroom. For a little thing, she had a decent amount of junk in her trunk. *What I wouldn't do to rip off the thong I know she has under there with my teeth.*

Once the show was over, and the door had shut behind her, I stripped out of my clothes. I hadn't known I was going to have a roomie, so I didn't pack sweats to sleep in or anything. My underwear was going to have to make do. Naomi had mentioned she was a late sleeper anyway, so I'd likely be up and out before she was even awake. I really did need to get on the road early. Plus, she'd seen me naked already, and I wasn't exactly modest.

I flicked off the lamp, shook out the blanket, and did my best to get comfortable on the little couch. But a few minutes later, the sound of a door opening made my eyes pop open. My heart raced as footsteps grew nearer.

"Dawson?" Naomi whispered.

"Yeah?"

"I need help with the zipper. I tried to do it myself again, but I think I got more hair caught."

I'd forgotten all about her hair being stuck. I smiled and sat up. "Fair warning, I didn't pack any PJs, so I'm in my underwear."

“Oh.” She turned her back to me. “I need to face this way anyway.”

My damn heart pounded as I stepped close to her, and my body reacted to how good she smelled—floral, with a hint of sweet. The only woman I’d ever helped with a zipper and *not* ended up in bed with was my mother. It didn’t help that it was dark, and I was wearing only my underwear. I couldn’t remember the last time I was so attracted to a woman. Emily was sexy, but in an almost harsh, artificial way. Naomi was the girl next door. I didn’t want to embarrass myself if she turned around, so when I reached for the zipper, I closed my eyes and attempted to pretend she was my mother.

But my mother did *not* smell this good. And I never had the urge to run my fingers along my mother’s bare shoulder to touch her soft skin. And I certainly never felt myself growing hard as a rock as I worked on her zipper.

I needed to do this fast and get my ass back on the couch and under the covers. But her damn hair was really tangled. After a minute or two, it became clear that I wasn’t going to be able to fix this mess in the dark.

“Do you think we can put on that lamp, so I can see better?” I asked.

“Sure. I’ll do it.” Naomi walked over to the end table and turned the light on. I’d only been in the dark five minutes, but apparently my pupils had adjusted. The shock of light caused my eyes to close. After a few seconds, I blinked them open, still squinting. Naomi was wide-eyed, staring at the bulge in my underwear. I couldn’t even attempt to pretend I wasn’t half hard.

“Sorry. I, uh... You smell really good.”

She smiled and covered her mouth. “I’m glad I don’t have one of those to tell my secrets.”

My eyes dropped to her chest. Her nipples were practically piercing through the silky material of her dress. I groaned. “Turn around or you’re going to get poked in the ass while I work on that zipper.”

Unfortunately, Naomi’s backside looked just as good as the front side, so I needed to get this shit done and pray the bedroom door had a lock on it. I had no idea how she’d managed to get so much of her hair snarled in the zipper, but it took a while to free it all.

“Your hair is out, but the zipper itself still won’t budge.” I jiggled the metal pull. “I don’t want to break it.”

“It’s fine. I can get the zipper replaced. Just break it, if you have to. I don’t want to sleep in the dress.”

“Alright.” This time, instead of a gentle tug, I gave it a good, firm yank. That did the trick. The zipper split open, but unfortunately, it unzipped all the way down to Naomi’s waist, far enough for me to confirm what I’d already suspected: Naomi wasn’t wearing a bra.

“Shit.”

“What happened?”

“Nothing. But you’re not wearing a bra. So you should probably just walk straight to your room and not turn around.”

“The dress isn’t going to fall off because the zipper is open. I’m still covered in the front. I’m decent.”

“You might be. But I’m definitely not anymore.”

She turned, laughing, and her eyes grew wider. “Oh, wow.” She hiccupped. “That thing got even bigger.”

I pointed to the hallway. “Go!”

She nibbled on her plump bottom lip and took another look at my very full underwear.

“Go now,” I said sternly.

“Why?”

“Because I’m trying to be a gentleman.”

Naomi pouted. “You suck.”

“That’s better than *you* sucking when you’re drunk. And I’m about five seconds away from putting you on your knees and showing you all the non-gentlemanly things I want to do to you.”

Her pouty lips parted. When her eyes grew hooded, I knew she was imagining what I’d just said. I dragged a hand through my hair. “You really need to go in the other room. And lock the damn door.”

“Will you at least kiss me goodnight?”

I shook my head. “Definitely not. You’re drunk.”

“I was tipsy earlier when we kissed.”

“That was make believe.”

Her face fell. “It didn’t feel make believe to me.” After a long moment, she sighed. “Goodnight, Dawson.”

I hated that I’d hurt her feelings, but it was better to have her walk away a little hurt than do something she might regret in the morning.

“Goodnight, Naomi. Take care of yourself.”

Chapter 7

DAWSON

2 weeks later

I reluctantly clicked on the photos I'd been tagged in a few days ago—for *what is probably the tenth damn time*. So far, I'd managed to stay on the outer rim of the rabbit hole by limiting myself to the wedding photos Lily had posted. But I craved more. And it was the second time I'd found myself back on social media in as many hours this afternoon. I had damn work to do. But maybe if I fed my curiosity a little, I might be able to focus.

Yeah, that's it.

I *needed* to click through the tag and check out Naomi's page—get it out of my system once and for all. I was doing a smart thing, not a stupid one...

Knowing full well that I'd only be able to buy my own bullshit for so long, I scrolled to one of the group photos and clicked on *Naomi Heart* before I changed my mind.

The first picture that popped up was her and that rat dog. It had been posted two days ago. It must've been one of their birthdays because both Gumby and Naomi had on bright purple party hats with furry pom-poms at the top. It was ridiculous, yet I found myself smiling.

I kept digging. A photo labeled *Happy Mother's Day* led me to her sister, Frannie Heart-Mason, and that vein led me to a shitload of family photos. Naomi and her sister looked alike, though her sister was taller and bordered on too thin, whereas Naomi had sexy curves. Her sister had a couple of kids—a boy and a girl. Both looked under ten, and the boy seemed to be older. Further back, I found one of Naomi in a cap and gown with a big sign behind her that said University of Virginia. She had multiple tassels looped around her neck, so she'd probably graduated with honors and maybe was in a sorority, too. There were pictures of family barbecues, vacations, lots and lots of birthdays—typical shit that women post. But

what was noticeably absent were couple's photos. Ben had mentioned that Naomi had been engaged, and I was curious about the type of guy she went for.

Naomi's Facebook page went further back than her sister's—she'd been a cheerleader in high school, and the top of her graduation cap had been bedazzled with something, but I couldn't make out what. More digging brought me to her law school graduation and pictures of her and Lily smiling. But I still didn't see any photos of her and her ex—no engagement photos or photos of her with a guy at all. Probably she'd deleted them when they split up—the modern-day equivalent of scribbling across someone's face in a photo.

I was just about to dig into another folder of pictures when I heard the door open and close in the lobby. There were no appointments left on my calendar today, and the staff were all long gone. So that meant one of two things—either I was getting robbed, or my partner was here, *Emily*.

Heels click-clacking on the tile made me wish for that masked felon.

“Oh good. You're still here.” Emily helped herself into my office, leaning on the back of one of my guest chairs.

“What do you want?”

“I'm leaving.”

I wasn't sure exactly what she was talking about, but I clasped my hands behind my head, elbows out, and leaned back in my chair. “The country, I hope?”

She pursed her lips. “The office. You win. You can have it.”

“What's the catch?”

“Nothing. I found a new space. It's bigger and better.”

The greatest mistake of my career had been to get involved with my partner. Emily was a good lawyer, and we'd been good friends. I should never have dipped my pen in the company ink. Looking back, I'd always known she was vindictive. If she lost a trial, opposing counsel became a sworn enemy. When her supposed best friend invited someone other than her to a movie premiere she'd gotten tickets to, she never spoke to her friend of *fifteen years* again. And don't even get me started on the evil things she did to her dad when she caught him cheating. But with us, I couldn't understand it. She had nothing to be vindictive about. She was the one who'd done something wrong.

I folded my arms across my chest. “Excellent. When can you be out?”

Emily straightened. “You can at least pretend you’re a little broken up about it.”

“I think we moved past the point of pretending the night I found you bent over my desk getting fucked by my buddy.”

She rolled her eyes. “Get over it.”

“I am. Now I’d like what I’m over to be gone. So I repeat, when can you be out?”

“The movers will be here at the end of the week.”

“Perfect.”

Emily walked to the door, stopped, and looked back over her shoulder. “Oh...and I’m taking the staff, so you’re going to have to find some new people to boss around.”

My brows pulled together. “Who?”

Her lips curved into a wicked smile. “All of them.”

We had *five* people working for us currently—an attorney, two paralegals, an office manager, and our receptionist. Lisette, our staff attorney, was Emily’s friend, so I wasn’t surprised that she would jump ship, and Renee had been Emily’s paralegal at the firm we’d both worked at before we became partners. LeeAnn, the receptionist, was relatively new, as was the office manager, but Margaret, my paralegal, had come with me from the previous firm. Hell, she’d been with me since the day I started as an attorney.

“You’re lying. Margaret doesn’t even like you.”

“Maybe not, but she has three mouths to feed. I gave her a big, fat raise. Oh, and I made them all sign an employment contract already, so don’t bother trying to make them a better offer.”

“You’re unbelievable.”

She looked at her nails and smiled again. “I am pretty great, aren’t I?”

“Get the fuck out of my office.”

The bitch blew me a kiss.

Four days later, I stood in the lobby of the office on a Saturday afternoon, watching boxes being carried out. Not only had Emily taken all of our staff, but she’d somehow managed to transfer the leased equipment from our joint firm’s name to her new solo one. Now I didn’t have any help, and I also had no photocopier or video-conferencing equipment, and some guy was

currently ruining the wall in the reception area by prying off one half of the channel letters that spelled out *Reed & Miller*.

My buddy Ben walked in and almost got run over by two guys carrying out the top of Emily's desk. He'd only gotten back from his honeymoon yesterday. I hated that I'd welcomed him by unloading on the phone this morning. He held up a bottle of tequila. "I figured you'd need a drinking buddy."

I shook my head. "If I start with that shit, I might need you to carry me home after the week I've had."

Sheldon, my pet tortoise, moseyed out from where he'd been hiding in the corner. Ben lifted his chin when he saw him. "Is it bring your son to work day?"

"I was at the park for his daily sunshine soak when I got a call from the alarm company. Emily gave the movers her key, but apparently, she didn't give them the code to turn off the alarm. That's the only reason I knew something was going on. Otherwise I might've showed up later and thought I'd been robbed."

The guy working on removing Emily's last name freed her part of the sign, but there was nothing left to support my last name now, so when he let go, *Reed* dangled from the wall. The guy looked over at me. "Sorry, man."

I waved him off. "It's fine. Though I have no idea what she's going to do with that piece of the sign since her name is connected to the ampersand. She's not going to hang up something that says, *And Miller*."

He frowned. "No, she's not. Miss Miller told us to take this part of the sign down because it belonged to her. But she instructed us to toss it in the dumpster downstairs before we leave."

"Man..." Ben shook his head. "That's cold. Just didn't want you to have it. You'd think you were the one who'd fucked her friend on her desk and not the other way around."

"She's still pissed that I wouldn't accept her apology and pretend it never happened."

"I still can't believe she brought that idiot to the wedding."

"I can. She feels like she won because she had a date and I didn't. Everything is a contest to her. It wasn't enough to end our partnership. She had to steal all the staff and take all the equipment so she felt like she won. I've seen her be this ruthless for her clients, but I never thought I'd be on the receiving end of it." I sighed.

“Think of the bright side.”

“I didn’t realize there was one.”

“Your receptionist’s nasally voice drove me fucking nuts, and now I won’t have to hear it when I stop by. Win for me.” Ben patted my shoulder. “And it’s better you found out now what she was capable of than a few years down the road.”

We spent the next ten minutes sitting in the lobby, watching the movers go in and out. There was an awful lot of boxes, so I was pretty sure there wasn’t even going to be any toilet paper in the bathroom. But it would be worth it to get rid of her. She’d made the last few months since we split pretty miserable.

“That’s it,” the moving guy said.

“You sure? I think there’s some lint in my pants pocket you didn’t take.”

“Sorry. Just doing what we were hired to do.”

“I know.”

He waited a few uncomfortable heartbeats, until I realized he was looking for a tip. “Dude, the tip comes from the bitch who hired you. Not me.”

He frowned, but didn’t argue.

Ben chuckled as the guy left. “You want to get out of here and go drown your sorrows at the bar?”

“Pretty sure she took all the chairs in the office, so I don’t think we have a choice.”

He eyed Sheldon. “What about him?”

“I have his carrier. The owner won’t care. Sheldon smells better than half his patrons.”

O’Malley’s was a dark and dreary old-man bar. A handful of guys sat alone drinking, spaced apart from each other like they weren’t looking for conversation. The depressing setting felt appropriate for my mood. I ordered a vodka seven and Ben ordered a beer.

“So how’s married life?” I asked.

He smiled. “Great.”

I smiled back. It might’ve been the first genuine happy feeling I’d had since I got back from Michigan. Unless you counted the too-many times I’d showed my laptop my teeth while looking at pictures of Naomi.

“How was Italy? Where’d you go again?”

“We started in Rome and then drove down to the Amalfi coast.”

“How was that?”

“Nice. But those people drive like lunatics. They make New Yorkers seem tame.”

The bartender brought our drinks. Ben lifted and sipped. “So what happened after the wedding? You left so early the next morning, I didn’t get to talk to you. Lily said you and Naomi shared the cabin.”

I nodded. “We did.”

“And…”

“And nothing. I slept on the couch, and she slept in the bedroom. I got up the next morning and left.”

“Really? I thought for sure you two would hook up. I saw you sucking face out on the dance floor.”

“That was to piss Emily off.”

“Looked like a lot more than that from where I was sitting.”

I sucked back my drink. “Nope.”

Ben rubbed the stubble on his chin. “You know, Naomi is looking for a job.”

“You mentioned that before.”

“And you need a paralegal.”

“I thought she was looking to change careers?”

“She is. She worked as a paralegal in Virginia for a few months before she left.”

“Why would she want to do that? She’ll make half the money an attorney would for doing all the grunt work.”

Ben shrugged. “Does it matter why? She’s smart and available, and you need someone.”

But the last thing I needed was to mix business with pleasure again. And if I told my buddy that, I’d be admitting I thought of Naomi as pleasure, and then he’d tell his wife, and she’d sink her teeth in and never let it go. I loved Lily, thought she was great for Ben. But she loved doing coupley things, and she’d be relentless if she saw an opportunity for her friend and her husband’s best friend to potentially get together.

“No thanks. I’m hiring an all-male staff.”

“Why would you do that?”

“Because the men in my life don’t abandon me for ten grand extra and an expense allowance.” I shook my head. “I still can’t believe Margaret did that.”

Ben grinned. “It would take at least twenty for me to ditch you.”

“Thanks, buddy.”

“I’m not going to harp on the subject, but Naomi could take a lot off your plate. She can do more than just a paralegal—graduated second in our class, and Lily says she’s the best researcher she knows.”

“Oh yeah? Then why don’t you or Lily hire her to work at the DA’s office? They’re always looking for people.”

“We both tried. They wouldn’t hire her.”

My brows pinched. “Why not?”

“Long story, and not mine to tell.”

That made me curious. But I managed to not push and instead added it as yet another reason to steer clear of the woman. Clearly she had some skeletons in her closet.

Chapter 8

DAWSON

“How much time off will I get?”

“You’ll earn one-and-a-half vacation days each month. It comes out to eighteen days a year.”

“Can I advance them?”

“That’s not currently part of the vacation policy, but I guess I would consider it on a case-by-case basis.”

“Okay, good. Because I might need a week or two this summer if my band gets some gigs.”

“Your...band?”

The guy nodded. “I play in a heavy-metal group. Our gigs are mostly on weekends now, but there might be some Fridays I need to cut out early to make it to a show.”

“Uh-huh.”

“If I could work remotely on Mondays, too, that would be great. Sometimes the weekends are rough, and I need the extra day to recover.” He held up a hand. “But don’t worry. I work hard when my head is in the game.”

“And how often is that?”

“I try my hardest.”

“Great.” I sighed.

This was my tenth interview this week. Sadly, it wasn’t even my worst one. If I didn’t know better, I would have thought someone was punking me. The guy yesterday showed up with his *mother*. Then proceeded to ask if I had anything for her to *nibble on* while we did our interview. The dude was dead serious.

I went through the motions with this guy who wanted a part-time job with full-time pay until he could score a record deal, but I zoned out during most of his responses. By the time he left, I was ready to call it a day.

Unfortunately, I had one more interview left at five o'clock—a guy Lily used to work with.

At four forty-five, the office door creaked open, but I was on the phone with a client, so I pressed mute and yelled that I'd be out in a few minutes. Two more calls came in while I was finishing up, and I had to let them go to voicemail. Meanwhile another client was ringing my cell nonstop. If this last person was halfway decent, which I was banking he would be since he came on referral from Lily, I was going to hire him—at least on a trial basis, just to have some help with the damn phones. At a minimum, I needed a receptionist.

I sprayed some hand sanitizer on my hands and walked into the lobby with my head down, texting the client that I'd get back to him in a little while. "I'm sorry to keep you waiting."

But I stopped short when a woman's voice answered. And it was not just any woman's voice... "Naomi?"

She smiled and stood from the couch that had been delivered only yesterday. "Hi, Dawson. How are you?"

"Umm...confused. What are you doing here?"

Her forehead wrinkled. "I'm here for the interview."

"For the interview? Ben said Lily had someone she thought would be a good fit, a guy she used to work with."

"Oh." Her smile wilted. "I'm not sure what happened. Lily told me to come at five. I thought you knew I was coming."

Could I have gotten that wrong? I didn't think so. Ben had been in court all day yesterday and today, but he'd texted last night and asked if I'd hired any of the people who came in to interview for the paralegal job. When I said no, he wrote back that he had the perfect guy for me. I didn't ask any questions other than *how soon can he come in?* At least I thought he'd said perfect *guy*. I dug my phone out of my pocket and scrolled back. Sure enough, that's what he'd written.

I turned my phone to show Naomi. "He said guy."

"Do you..." She thumbed over her shoulder. "Want me to leave?"

"No, but..."

She straightened her spine. "Good. Because as far as I know, Title Seven still prohibits discrimination in hiring based on gender."

She got the section of the law right, which already made her a better candidate than anyone else I'd interviewed. But...

“You should see your face right now.” Naomi laughed. “I’m joking. But I did think you knew it was me who was coming.”

Her smile made me feel better than I had in days. That alone should’ve been a red flag. Yet I couldn’t very well not do the interview now—not with the federal and state laws involved. At least that’s what I told myself as I waved for her to follow me into my office.

Naomi took a seat across from me. “Your eye is all healed.”

“It’s still painful though.”

“Oh, no.” She lifted her hand to her chest, covering her heart. “I’m so sorry.”

I couldn’t hide my grin. “I’m teasing.”

She narrowed her eyes. “That was mean.”

I chuckled and sat down. “How’s your hand?”

“Turns out I need surgery. The bones set wrong, so they need to put in pins and stuff.” Naomi lifted her pink cast. “I’m going to be wearing this thing for a few more months. That’s why I haven’t been able to find a job.”

“Shit. I’m sorry.”

Her eyes sparkled. “I’m kidding. Gotcha.”

I shook my head. “Guess I deserved that.”

“You did indeed.”

I sat back in my chair and steepled my fingers. “So...do you have a resume?”

“I do.” She opened a leather satchel and retrieved a padfolio. Slipping a sheet of paper out, she set it on the desk and started to slide it over, then stopped. “Actually, would it be okay if we talk about my qualifications first, rather than going over this?”

I shrugged. “Sure.”

“Thanks.” She let out a big breath. For the next fifteen minutes, Naomi rattled on about her experience. She’d spent a few months working as a paralegal at Watson & Portnoy, a small, general-practice firm in Virginia, but it sounded like she knew her shit. She’d done everything from client intake to drafting complaints.

“It sounds like you’re more than qualified. But I have to ask... Why don’t you want to practice law anymore?”

She looked away. “Being a paralegal is a lot less stressful.”

I was certain that was true, but still seemed like there was more to the story. She didn’t offer it, though, even after I waited and gave her time to

elaborate.

“Okay. Well, Ben said you worked at the DA’s office in Virginia.”

She nodded. “I worked at the Richmond County Prosecutors office.”

“You were a trial attorney?”

“Yes.”

“How long were you there?”

“Four years.”

“Tell me more about that. What kind of cases did you work on?”

“I started out doing class five and six felonies—animal cruelty, child neglect, forgery. After a year I was promoted to major cases. I worked on everything from capital murder to racketeering.”

“So you’re familiar with drafting discovery requests, opposition motions, and prepping witness and exhibit lists?”

“Very.”

“And you’re good with doing client intake and answering calls?”

“I’m good with whatever it takes for a job. I’m a hard worker.”

It almost seemed too good to be true. So I dug deeper. “Can you tell me about a difficult case you worked on?”

Naomi nodded and told me about a capital murder case she was part of at the DA’s office. A guy had been indicted for killing his boss, whom his wife had been having an affair with. Midway through the trial, new information came to light that pointed to the wife as the murderer and not the husband who was currently mid-trial. The state subsequently dropped the charges against the husband and indicted the wife, only to have the husband take the stand and confess to the murder. Naomi explained all the complications of the case, including double jeopardy, spousal privilege, and tainted evidence. She even cited civil-procedure rule numbers that she clearly had memorized.

The more she talked, the harder it was to remember it was a bad idea to hire a woman I was attracted to. “What kind of salary are you looking for?”

She frowned. “I made fifty-five thousand at my last job. But I’m hoping for more here because the cost of living is higher than in Virginia.”

Fifty-five thousand with all that experience? Margaret had a lot less, and I’d paid her more than eighty grand. I knew attorneys who paid good paralegals well into six figures. The cost of living was more in New York, but it wasn’t *that* much more than living outside of Washington, DC. Why did everything about this interview seem too good to be true?

“When would you be able to start?”

“Immediately. I’ve been doing some temp work through an agency, but it’s a day-to-day-type deal.”

Someone was going to snap this woman up with all her experience. I was tempted to hire her on the spot, yet something held me back. “It sounds like you’re more than qualified, but I have a few more people to interview. Can I let you know in a day or two?”

She smiled. “Sure. That sounds great.”

I stood and walked Naomi to the door. “Thanks for coming in so late in the day.”

“No problem. Thanks for taking the time after you were apparently bamboozled into interviewing me.”

Awkwardness set in as we stood in the lobby, or at least I felt it. I wasn’t sure how to say goodbye. I suppose it might’ve been because I didn’t really *want* to say goodbye. While I was busy mulling over stupid shit in my head, Naomi stuck her hand out.

“Thank you for considering me.”

I clasped. “I’m assuming your number hasn’t changed from when you gave it to me at the wedding?”

“No, it hasn’t.”

“Great. I’ll be in touch soon.”

Naomi opened her mouth like she was going to say something more, but then pressed her lips together. Eventually, I opened the glass door that led from the lobby to the hallway. “Thanks again for coming.”

She took two steps out, but stopped abruptly and grabbed the door handle. “Wait! There’s something I need to tell you.”

This can’t be good. “What’s up?”

“I wasn’t fully honest about why I’m looking for a paralegal job.”

“Okay...”

“It’s not that a paralegal job is less stressful. Well, it is, but that’s not why I’m no longer practicing law. I actually loved my job at the DA’s office.”

“Okay...”

She took a deep breath and looked into my eyes. “I’m working as a paralegal now because it’s the only job I’m allowed to do. I was disbarred.”

“What the fuck, man?”

After a half hour of sitting at my desk and staring at the wall, I’d finally picked up the phone and dialed Ben’s cell.

He sighed. “You need someone, and Naomi is great at her job.”

“Which job would that be? A paralegal or an attorney? Oh wait, she can’t practice anymore because *she’s been disbarred?*”

“She told you, huh?”

“I’m pretty sure she almost didn’t. And I was this close to hiring her on the spot during the interview, too. Luckily, something held me back.”

“Did she tell you why she lost her license?”

“Felony assault.”

“She tell you the details?”

“No. And I didn’t ask for them. I can’t hire a damn disbarred attorney.”

“I get that you feel that way. If I didn’t know Naomi as well as I do, I would probably feel the same. But Naomi is a good person.”

“Who...assaults people.”

“It was one person.”

“Who the hell did she assault?” I shook my head. “You know what? I don’t even want to know. It doesn’t matter. My gut told me not to even interview her, and I wouldn’t have if you hadn’t played games.”

“Sorry, man. I was only trying to help. Naomi is really smart. Lily really wanted to hire her to work for the City, but the DA couldn’t get past the felony.”

“Because the DA is *smart.*” I shook my head again. “I gotta go. Thanks for wasting my time.” I hung up without waiting for a response and tossed my cell on my desk.

Hours later, back at home, I still couldn’t shake my angry feelings. I kept replaying all my interactions with Naomi, over and over in my head. What was I looking for? I wasn’t sure. But a forty-five-minute run, followed by a half hour of weightlifting, didn’t do shit to help me relax. I felt...restless, the same way I felt during a trial when things weren’t going my way and the case was soon going to the jury.

After a hot shower, I attempted to do some work. Lord knows I had enough to keep me busy for a solid three months now that I had no staff and no partner. But I couldn’t focus. My eyes kept moving from the motion I should be drafting in Word to the Google icon at the bottom of the laptop screen.

I'd told Ben I didn't want to know Naomi's story, but that was the anger talking. And maybe even a bit of disappointment. I was way too curious of a person to put this shit to rest without knowing more. Though I reread the first paragraph of the motion on my screen three more times, giving it the good ol' college try for another ten minutes. But eventually I gave in. Toggling the mouse down to the bottom of the screen, I double clicked the Google icon.

"What the fuck am I doing?" I grumbled as I typed into the search bar. N-A-O-M-I H-E-A-R-T

A shit ton of results came back. The very first headline gave me what I was looking for, and I stared at it a long time. I don't know what I'd been expecting, but it definitely wasn't:

Richmond County Assistant District Attorney Naomi Heart arrested for assaulting an innocent man.

What the fuck?

I needed to know who the hell she'd assaulted.

I clicked into the article, dated a year ago, November 3rd, and started scanning.

Naomi Heart, 28, an assistant district attorney at the Richmond County DA's office, was charged last night with one count of assault. At 5:05 PM on November 3rd, officers responded to a 9-1-1 call at the Richmond County Family Court. According to court records, Ms. Heart was previously the lead prosecutor on a criminal case involving the victim. The victim was transported to Our Lady of Lords Hospital in Richmond.

I clicked into the next link, and it opened to a picture of a man in a wheelchair. His face had been blurred out to protect his privacy. The caption read: Victim of ADA's violent assault leaves MKC Rehabilitation Center.

Jesus Christ. Violent assault? Is the guy paralyzed?

I scrolled through a half-dozen articles. All of them gave the same type of information—previously the lead prosecutor, assault, arrest. But I didn't find anything that explained what had happened, or said anything about the trial since the media won't release the victim's name without permission. Eventually, I went to the Virginia State Bar website and found the disciplinary section. Typing Naomi's name into the search bar, I came up with a hit.

By Order entered February 1st, the Virginia State Bar Disciplinary Board revoked Naomi Heart's license to practice in the Commonwealth of

Virginia. So ordered based upon her affidavit that consented to revocation. By tendering her consent at a time when a disciplinary complaint, investigation, and proceeding was pending, Heart unequivocally acknowledged the material facts of the complaint to be true and acknowledged that she had no successful defense for her actions.

So she didn't even fight being disbarred?

More searching revealed that she'd also plead no contest to felony assault in exchange for a reduced sentence of probation and community service. The last article I read had a picture of her coming out of the courthouse. Her face was partially shielded by a jacket she held up, but there was no doubt it was her.

Damn. Not only had I been close to hiring her, but I'd also really liked her, after our initial altercation. She was funny, sort of quirky, and didn't put up with my shit. Not to mention, she was drop-dead gorgeous.

I stared at her photo a few minutes longer.

What the hell is your story, Naomi Heart? I'd spent the last ten years of my life reading people, mostly criminals, and I was damn good at knowing when I was only getting half the information. Something told me there was a lot more to Naomi Heart than met the eye.

Chapter 9

NAOMI

“This place is amazing.” I looked around Ben and Lily’s living room. “I can’t believe you’ve only been here a few weeks.”

“Ben’s sister is an interior designer, and she picked out all the accessories, like the throw pillows and window treatments,” Lily explained. “I love the way it came out, but don’t go upstairs to the bedrooms because those look worse than a guy’s freshman dorm. Even with Daria’s discount, it’s a fortune, so we’ve only done the downstairs so far.”

Two days after Ben and Lily returned from their honeymoon, they’d moved from a tiny apartment on the Upper East Side to a brownstone they bought in Brooklyn Heights. A few weeks later, they were already throwing a housewarming party.

“Grab the cutting board out of that cabinet for me, please.” Lily pointed. “I still have to cut up the cheeses, make the salad, and—shoot, I didn’t preheat the oven for the appetizers. People are going to start showing up any minute. Oh, and I can’t forget to chop up the stupid coconut for Dawson.”

“Dawson’s coming?”

Lily frowned. “Yeah. I’m sorry if that bothers you. He’s Ben’s best friend, so I really didn’t have a choice.”

“Yeah, of course.” I’d assumed Dawson would be invited, but hearing confirmation that I was going to see him made me a little nervous. Though I had no real reason to be. “It’s fine.”

“I still think he’s a jerk for not hiring you.”

I sighed. “I really can’t blame him.”

Lily grabbed a coconut from the counter behind her and took out a big knife.

“What’s with that guy and coconuts?” I asked. “He brought a big bag of shredded coconut with him to Michigan for your wedding.”

“He’s oddly obsessed with it. He chops up a fresh one every day and makes his own coconut water. If you want his attention, just rub one on your hands. I swear, he’ll salivate like Pavlov.”

I chuckled. “I’m pretty sure Pavlov was the scientist, not the dog. And I think I’ll pass on rubbing anything on myself for that man. Though I will take care of cutting up that coconut and everything else you need chopped. You do whatever else you need to do.”

“You sure you don’t mind?”

“Not at all.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

Lily ran around the house straightening things. When she was done, we worked side by side, prepping the serving trays with everything I’d cut up.

“Any luck on your interviews?” she asked.

I shook my head. “Maybe I should change careers and get out of law completely, become a nurse or something.”

“You passed out when I sliced my finger open that time we volunteered for a beach cleanup.”

“True. Maybe a teacher? Summers off sounds good.”

Lily sighed. “Yes, but you love working in law.”

“You know what I love more?”

“What?”

“Being able to eat. The legal fees after everything happened really depleted what I’d put away. Even staying on my sister’s couch, my savings isn’t going to last much longer. And I’ll need to find my own place to live at some point—maybe sooner than later because on the way here I found myself humming Barry Manilow, and the other day I realized I know all the words to a Neil Diamond song.”

Lily laughed. “Your sister has the worst taste in music. How is she feeling?”

“Tired. Treatments really take a lot out of her. But she’s holding her own and still going to work and stuff.”

Ben came down from upstairs looking freshly showered. He kissed Lily’s forehead and walked over to rub my shoulders while I chopped.

“Are you still mad at me?”

It was the first time we’d spoken since I’d called to ream him out from the sidewalk outside Dawson’s office last week.

“I should be, but no. I get that you were only trying to help.”

Ben kissed the top of my head. “He’s an idiot for not jumping on the chance to hire you.”

I smiled sadly. “I was just telling Lily, I’m thinking of going back to school and changing careers completely. If a criminal defense attorney won’t hire me—people who represent *criminals* for a living—then no one is going to hire me.”

“You’ll find something.”

The first guest rang the doorbell, so it brought our conversation to an end, and I was grateful. Lately, that felt like the only thing people asked me about. *Any luck on your interview? Did you find a job yet?* When I said no, they’d smile and tell me something would pop up. They meant well. I knew that. But I wanted a few hours to pretend I had something more going on in my life.

Half an hour later, there were twenty or so people mingling in Ben and Lily’s kitchen and living room. One particular man hadn’t arrived yet, and my eyes kept finding their way to the front door every time it opened. A glass of wine and another half hour helped me relax, and eventually I started to wonder if Dawson was going to show up. At least until the front door opened and a certain gorgeous attorney walked in—with an equally gorgeous woman who looked barely old enough to drink.

My stomach dropped. *Ugh*. It was bad enough that he didn’t want to hire me; now I had to see him with a date. I attempted to ignore him and keep myself engaged in my conversation with a coworker of Lily’s, but my eyes had a mind of their own. And the second time they wandered where they didn’t belong, they met Dawson’s.

Ben walked over and handed him a beer, passing his date a glass of wine. Dawson kept his eyes trained on me the entire time. He tipped his Coors bottle toward me, and I forced my eyes back to the woman currently talking about...something.

A little while later I went to the bathroom, and when I came out, I walked straight into someone waiting in the narrow hall.

“God, I’m so sor...” My voice trailed off, and I frowned. “Oh. It’s just you.”

Dawson lifted a brow. “Does that mean you aren’t sorry?”

“You should really stop startling people. Though I guess it’s easy for you to forget what can happen now that your eye is healed...”

Dawson looked down at my hand. “Still have the cast on, huh?”

“It comes off this Friday, hopefully.”

A guy I hadn't met yet came down the hall. He pointed to the door behind me. “Are you waiting for the bathroom?”

“I just finished.” I gestured to Dawson. “But he is.”

“What's up, Jake?” Dawson lifted his chin. “It's all yours. I don't need to use the bathroom.”

“Great, thanks.” The guy nodded to me as he passed.

Once the door was locked, I looked to Dawson. “So you were just standing in front of the bathroom for fun?”

His lip twitched. “I wanted to talk to you.”

“About what?”

“I feel bad about the way I acted when you came into the office last week.”

“How do you think you acted?”

“I might've come off as rude because I was caught off guard, as I didn't know Ben had told you to come in for an interview.”

“I didn't really notice. I guess that just seems like your general personality to me.”

Dawson cracked a smile. “Thanks.”

“No problem.”

We stood looking at each other for a few uncomfortable seconds. Dawson stuffed his hands into his pockets. “Did you find anything yet?”

“You mean a job?”

He nodded.

“Believe it or not, the market for disbarred attorneys is pretty bleak these days.”

Dawson frowned. “I'm sorry.”

“How about you? Find a new paralegal yet?”

“No. And at the risk of sounding like my grandfather, what the hell is wrong with the young people today? Every person who walks in expects to work from home and get more vacation and sick time than I do. I'm starting to think I'll never find someone competent.”

I had to force a smile, because inside I was thinking, *I'm competent*. But whatever. I couldn't blame people for not wanting to hire a person who'd had her license revoked. This was the bed I'd made.

I looked over Dawson's handsome face once more. “I should get back to the party.”

“Sure. Yeah.” He nodded. “Good to see you.”

“I’ll text you tomorrow,” Lily said as she walked me to the door a little while later. “I got a lead on someone who needs a new paralegal today. Did you meet Nick? He’s the one Ben plays basketball with on Saturday mornings.”

“I think so?”

“Well, he mentioned he hasn’t played the last two Saturdays because his stepmother died.”

“Okay...”

“His father is an attorney, and his wife was his paralegal.”

My eyes widened. “What are you going to do? Call his dad and say, I’m sorry for your loss, but here’s someone to sit in the chair that’s still warm in your office?”

“Of course not!”

“Thank God.”

“I’m going to stop by basketball practice tomorrow morning and bring your resume to Nick. It’ll go over better with him pitching you to his father than a stranger.”

I sighed. “I’m not that desperate yet.”

“I know. But I hate seeing you so down. That reminds me, you didn’t look so glum when I saw you talking to Dawson in the hallway earlier. There’s something there. I can tell.”

“We spoke for less than five minutes, and then he spent most of the evening next to his date.”

“His date?” Lily laughed. “That’s Dawson’s little sister. She’s nineteen. Sarah’s in town visiting, and he asked if he could bring her.”

“Oh.” I hated that I felt instantly lighter knowing that.

She grinned and pointed to my face. “You like him. Your face was tense all day. I thought it was because you didn’t know anyone here. But your forehead smoothed out the minute I said the beautiful woman wasn’t Dawson’s date.”

“You’re insane.”

Lily stared at my forehead. “Nope. It’s like you just got Botox. The worry is completely gone. Why don’t you stay longer? When Dawson left, he said he was going to try to come back. His sister is in town to see a

concert with her college roommate at the Barclay Center. He went to make sure they got there safely.”

“The first time we met, I wound up with a broken hand. The second time, he passed me over for a position. Sticking around for a third round might make me a masochist.” I kissed my friend’s cheek. “Go back to your company and be the hostess with the mostest. I’ll talk to you soon.”

I’d made it to the bottom of the front steps when I spotted Dawson on the sidewalk two houses down. My steps faltered.

“You’re not leaving, are you?” He rounded the corner into the front courtyard.

“I can only do small talk with strangers for so long before I turn into a pumpkin.”

Dawson smiled. “I’m the same way.”

I tilted my head. “Yet here you are back for more?”

Dawson met my eyes. “I actually came back to see you.”

My traitorous heart fluttered. “What for?”

“I owe you an explanation.” He looked up at the door to Ben and Lily’s, then looked down the sidewalk. “Would you want to grab a drink? There’s a shitty little bar down the block.”

“Wow. A shitty little bar? How can I refuse that offer?”

Dawson chuckled. “I’ll throw in some shitty free peanuts.”

I nibbled on my bottom lip. I didn’t have anything to rush home to, but I wasn’t big on getting rejected multiple times.

“I should get going. This was my first time taking the subway to Brooklyn, and I don’t want to be riding back to the City on the train too late.”

“Just one drink. And I’ll get you an Uber home.”

I’d probably regret it in a few hours, but who could say no to a free Uber? Plus, I was curious what he wanted to talk about. “Okay. Why not?”

Dawson put his hand on my lower back. “Excellent. This way.”

“You really described this place well,” I told him.

“What did I say?”

“You called it shitty.”

Dawson laughed. “Why don’t you grab us a table, and I’ll get our drinks?” He looked around the almost completely empty bar. “They’re

filling up fast.”

I smiled. “Sounds good.”

“What are you drinking?”

“I’ll have a glass of merlot, please.”

“You got it.”

Sliding into a booth, I had a straight-line view of Dawson from the side. He was leaning with elbows bent on the bar, talking to the old man standing behind it. I couldn’t help but notice the way the fabric of his T-shirt stretched around the flex of his biceps. It had taken me the better part of a week to forget what that man’s muscles looked like after the fiasco at the cabin. I suddenly wished I hadn’t chitchatted with Lily at the door and had left five minutes earlier. I’d be on the subway home now instead of rekindling my lust affair with that body.

Dawson carried our drinks to the table and slid in across from me.

“Thank you.” I sipped. “So what did you want to talk to me about?”

“When we spoke earlier, you asked if I’d hired someone yet, and I said something like there’s no one competent out there. I saw your face when I said it, and I realized you thought I was including you in that category. I want to apologize because I wasn’t.”

I shook my head. “I actually didn’t think that. I assumed I wasn’t in consideration because of my disbarment.”

Dawson nodded, but his face didn’t indicate agreement.

“Was...that the reason you weren’t interested in hiring me?”

Our eyes met. I could see the wheels in his head spinning. Eventually he hung his head and looked down. “Not completely. It did give me pause that day, but I’ve thought about it a lot the last week—more than I should’ve—and it’s not the main reason.”

“What is the main reason then?”

“You want the truth?”

“No, definitely not. I really enjoy being lied to. It’s why I loved working as a lawyer.”

Dawson stayed quiet for a long moment before lifting his gaze to mine. “I think you’re really beautiful.”

I blinked. That was the last thing I’d expected him to say. “So...you only work with ugly women?”

“Honestly, I’d prefer that. But no, I’ve worked with beautiful women before. And it hasn’t ended well for me.”

“You mean like Emily?”

He nodded. “Sadly, she’s not the first time I did something stupid like that.”

“Did you sleep with your receptionist, too?” I teased. “Ben mentioned something about her being in her sixties with a nasally voice?”

Dawson smirked. “Wiseass. She’s not my type. I have a thing for blondes.”

I didn’t bother to point out that Emily was a brunette. “Can we back up a minute? Let me see if I have this straight. You think I’m beautiful, and ergo, that means if I were to work in your office, I would wind up sleeping with you and wanting to have your babies?”

“It almost happened already.”

“You mean after the wedding, in the cabin?”

He nodded.

“I was drunk, and we were at a *wedding*. Romance was in the air. Unlike you, I think I can control myself at work.”

Dawson raised a brow. “You sure about that?”

My stomach sank. “Ben told you?”

Dawson shook his head. “Anytime I ask anything about you, he tells me it’s your story to tell.”

“Ben is such a loyal guy.” I smiled sadly. “How do you know then?”

“I was curious after you left, so I googled you. It said you pleaded no contest to assaulting someone you’d prosecuted. After that I figured Ben was right, and it was your story to tell.” Dawson sipped his beer. “I’d like to hear it, if you’re up for sharing...”

“It’s not a pleasant story. Nothing about Darius Flint is pleasant.”

“I can handle it. I deal with horrible all day, every day.”

I sighed. “A nurse at an independent living facility for developmentally disabled young adults reported that she suspected a sixteen-year-old was being abused by her uncle.”

“Jesus Christ.”

“Yeah. It was a heartbreaking case. Lizzie was born at six-and-a-half months to an alcoholic mom. The mother contracted rubella while she was pregnant, and the infection spread to the baby, causing some severe physical and mental issues. Lizzie’s mother died of liver failure when she was less than a year old. The only person who ever visited her was her uncle. He was her legal guardian, and the state had physical custody. It was a difficult case

because Lizzie couldn't speak. But when I interviewed her, she was able to point to the places her uncle had touched her."

"Why didn't the jury convict?"

"Because the piece of shit was not only a pedophile and rapist, he was smart. Unfortunately, smarter than I realized. Lizzie loved routine and was really good at memorizing dances and stuff that she saw on YouTube. Unbeknownst to anyone, her uncle had taught her the 'Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes' song, except he had her point to all the places he'd touched her. So after I got through having Lizzie show the jury all the places her uncle had abused her, the defense pulled out a boom box and blasted that song. Lizzie immediately started pointing to the same places while she smiled and danced."

"Holy shit."

I nodded. "It completely invalidated that Lizzie was reliable to testify. Couple that with having a judge who wouldn't let me bring in *two* prior accusations of child molestation that were never prosecuted—one from a nine-year-old niece and the other from a teen neighbor. He thought it would be too prejudicial. And our physical evidence was thrown out because of a technicality on the search. So the jury just didn't see the same picture we all did."

"That's awful."

"We had her body fluids on the sleeve of his shirt. There's no way he didn't do it."

"So how did you get into it with him?"

"I kept visiting Lizzie after the trial was over. I'm describing all these developmental issues, but she still understood so much. And she loved having visitors. She would light up. I really enjoyed my time with her. We learned some TikTok dances together." I smiled, thinking of how she would laugh when I played back whatever we'd recorded. "Anyway, long story short, a few months after the trial was over, I went to visit her one day, and one of the nurses told me Lizzie was leaving. Her uncle had decided to take her out of the assisted-living facility she'd spent her entire life in and take her home with him."

"How the fuck can that happen?"

"I have no damn clue. I filed a petition with the court to stop it, but the uncle's attorney pegged me as a disgruntled prosecutor. Lizzie's case was the first trial I'd ever lost. And since he was found not guilty, in this judge's

eyes, the man was innocent. I argued that there was a difference between not guilty and innocent, but he allowed it anyway.”

“What a shit show.”

I nodded. “Anyway, to cut to the end of the story, the afternoon the judge handed down his decision, I was beside myself. I knew I couldn’t see that pedophile in the hallway or get stuck riding in the same elevator as him, so I went to the ladies’ room in the courthouse, where I broke down and had a good cry. It was already late in the day, so not long after, one of the court officers popped her head in to tell me they were locking up. The halls were pretty much empty on the third floor of the courthouse—or so I thought, until I rounded the turn that led to the staircase and found Mr. Flint standing there. He smiled as he told me how he couldn’t wait to have Lizzie all to himself in his bed every night. I snapped and pushed him. He lost his balance and fell down the marble stairs. He wound up breaking his neck and is permanently paralyzed from the neck down. The courthouse is filled with cameras, so the entire thing is, of course, on video. I had no defense other than he was a piece of shit, so I took a plea deal on the assault charge and consented to the disbarment to put it behind me.”

“Christ, Naomi. That’s a big price you’re paying for a guy who had it coming.”

I shrugged. “Some good came out of it. He can’t touch Lizzie anymore.”

“I don’t know many people who would have done anything different in your shoes. I’m sorry that happened to you.”

I nodded. “Thank you.” We were both quiet for a moment. Eventually, it was me who spoke. “Can I ask you something personal now?”

He gave a curt nod. “Of course. It’s about eight inches, eight and a half on a good day.”

I chuckled. “No, seriously. How do you represent criminals for a living?”

He looked at his half-empty beer. “I’m going to need another one of these if we’re swapping war stories like this.”

“How about this round is on me? You deserve it after sitting through my depressing story.”

Dawson smiled. “Not so fast. You haven’t heard mine yet.”

Chapter 10

DAWSON

I glanced back at the booth while waiting at the bar for our drinks. Naomi's story was something else. The *woman* was really something else—gorgeous, curvy, smart, a smart *ass*, and a badass, too. If you asked me, she'd gotten the sharp end of the stick. She should've received an award for making it so that piece of shit could never touch a child again, not been stripped of everything she'd worked for.

I returned to the table, trying not to feel even more attracted to her than I was before as I passed her a fresh glass of wine.

“Thank you.” She sipped. “I have to say, you have my curiosity piqued. I expected one of those canned, every-person-has-a-right-to-a-defense answers like all criminal-defense attorneys keep in their cash-lined pocket.”

I spread my arms across the back of the booth. “Based on that statement, it sounds like you don't think very highly of defense attorneys. Yet you came in to interview for a position working for one. Why is that?”

She bit her plump bottom lip. “Truth?”

I took a page out of her book. “No, lie to me. It's what us lowlife criminal-defense attorneys like.”

She smiled. “The thought of representing criminals doesn't sit well with me. But I've been on at least fifty interviews since moving here, and as soon as the person I'm talking to hears about my disbarment, my resume gets round-filed. I thought I might have a better shot with you.”

“Because Ben and Lily are my friends?”

Her lip twitched. “No, because you're a criminal-defense attorney, so your moral standards are likely lower.”

I covered my heart with my hand. “Ouch.”

She chuckled. “Sorry.”

I wasn't sure I could fault her for feeling that way after working in a DA's office. No doubt she'd witnessed some pretty shitty tactics to get some pretty shitty clients off. “It's fine. I get it. Some days it's not an easy job.”

She sipped her wine. “So what’s *your* war story?”

Very few people knew the reason I’d gone into criminal-defense work. Ben did, but he was tight-lipped like me and didn’t discuss a friend’s private life. I wasn’t even sure why I’d mentioned to Naomi that I *had* a story, but maybe her sharing made me want to gain some respect from her.

“I grew up in a family that was pretty well off. My mom didn’t work, we had a summer home, and I went to private school. My dad was an executive at a brokerage firm. In seventh grade, I came home to a team of federal agents swarming my house. There were like thirty of them. My mom was standing on the lawn crying, holding my little sister. I think Sarah was two or three at the time.”

“The feds were there for your dad?”

I nodded. “The firm he worked at was being investigated for running a Ponzi scheme. *He* was being investigated. The feds froze all of my parents’ assets, and all of their friends and family quickly scattered. No one wanted the stench to attach to them. My mom wound up selling her mom’s jewelry to pay for a terrible lawyer, and I remember the guy kept pushing my dad to take a deal because there was so much evidence against him. My dad wouldn’t, though. He was steadfast that he hadn’t done anything wrong, and he was being set up to take the fall. Long story short, my dad was convicted and sentenced to twenty years. Nine months into his sentence, he committed suicide in prison.”

“Oh my God. I’m so sorry.”

I nodded. “Thank you. But it gets worse. Not long after, a guy who worked at the same firm in the accounting department was diagnosed with end-stage heart failure. He was never accused of anything and hadn’t been part of the case in any way. One day, he walked into the local precinct and admitted that it had been him who cooked the books and funneled hundreds of millions into an offshore account. He handed over all the proof to clear my father of any wrongdoing, because he wanted to make things right before dying.” I scoffed. “Make things right for *who*, I don’t know. But that’s what happened. Years later, when I was in law school, I got my father’s case files from the DOJ under the Freedom of Information Act, and I had my mom get my dad’s attorney’s files. I was still a student, and I could’ve poked a million holes in the government’s case that his attorney had missed.”

“So you decided to go into criminal law to try to stop that from happening again?”

I nodded. “White-collar cases are complex. The people running scams are usually smarter than the prosecutors and the defense attorneys. So you have to work harder to put on a defense for an innocent person.”

Naomi sat back in the booth. “Wow. So we’ve both lost a lot because the legal system failed people.”

“I’m not going to lie, the money is pretty damn good, too. But that’s not why I went into the field.”

“That story makes me look at you differently.”

“Yeah?” I drank my beer. “Like maybe you want to come home with me and make me forget for a little while?”

She smiled. “No chance. But maybe, just maybe, you’re not as big of a jerk as I thought.”

“Give it time.” I winked. “I’ll make you question that opinion.”

We both laughed. Too soon, our drinks were empty again. I gestured to her glass. “You want another?”

“I should probably get going.”

Disappointment hit me harder than it should’ve. “Alright. I’ll call you an Uber.”

“Oh, you don’t really have to do that. I can just take the subway.”

I swiped my phone on and called up the app. “No way in hell I’m letting you take the train after two drinks.”

The Uber was only four minutes away, so I quickly closed the app, and we walked outside to wait together.

“Thank you for the drinks,” Naomi said. “And the ride home.”

A black Acura pulled to the curb. I double checked that the license plate matched the driver assigned and opened the rear car door. “This is you.”

“I guess I’ll see you at the next event the happy couple hosts.” She smiled. “Maybe it will be a baby shower next year.”

A bizarre panic washed over me. Pregnancy was nine months long, and I didn’t think Ben and Lily were going to start a family for a few years. The thought of not seeing this woman for any extended period of time made me feel off-kilter. An odd tightness gripped my chest.

Naomi waved one last time and folded into the back of the car. When she reached for the door, my off feeling turned into a full-blown panic attack. I grabbed it just as it was about to close.

“Wait!”

Naomi’s brows drew together. “What’s wrong?”

Apparently I’ve lost my mind. “Come work for me. The job is yours if you want it.”

“It’s not that fucking funny.”

Ben held his stomach while he continued to cackle his ass off. “You’re wrong. It’s fucking hysterical.”

I raked a hand through my hair. “Why don’t you tell her you don’t think it’s a good idea that she works with your friend? Tell her what an asshole I am.”

“Me? Why would I think it’s not a good idea? I’m not the one who’s going to screw myself *again* by fucking around with someone at work. That’s *your* specialty.”

I shook my head, staring down at the carpet. “What the hell was I thinking offering her the job?”

“You were thinking with the *wrong head*, my friend.”

After ten minutes of standing on the street, trying to figure out why the hell I’d done what I’d just done, I walked back to Ben and Lily’s from the bar. Why had I panicked at the thought of not seeing Naomi again? The obvious answer was that I liked her, which I couldn’t deny that I did, but I liked the women I slept with too, and never wanted to spend eight hours a day around them. Lord knows, Emily could attest to that.

Ben laid his hand on my shoulder. “She’ll do great.”

That wasn’t the issue. I had no doubt Naomi was intelligent and could do the job. But...but...she’d gotten disbarred for assaulting a criminal. How was she going to deal with some of my dirtbag clients? Mr. Wendell had been indicted for bribing a public official, but when his wife didn’t back his story, he’d pushed her down a flight of stairs. That would surely hit close to home. And Dr. Elgin was charged with Medicare fraud for billing for reconstructive surgery after car accidents when he was really doing nose jobs and chin implants. When his face hit the news, *twelve* women came forward to claim he’d fondled them during their exams. My clients were the people Naomi loved to put behind bars, not help set free.

“What if she attacks a client?”

Ben shook his head. “You’re just fishing for a reason to get yourself out of the mess you made by hiring a woman you’re already attracted to. Naomi is good people. She’s not violent. That guy just got under her skin.”

“What if one of *my* clients gets under her skin?”

“What if one of them gets under *yours* one day? Lord knows you used to have a temper when we were kids. Anything can happen.”

“Yeah, but it *hasn’t* to me. I don’t have a track record like she does.”

Ben went into the fridge and pulled out two bottles of beer. He twisted the cap off one and passed it to me, then put the cap between his thumb and pointer and snapped his fingers. It flew directly into the garbage can.

“Nice shot.”

“Thank you. You want to know what I think?”

“Definitely not.”

He smirked. “That’s because you know I’m going to say something you don’t want to hear.”

“Then maybe you should keep it to yourself.”

“That’s not how our friendship works. We not only call each other on our bullshit, but we trust the other will. It’s our version of checks and balances.”

I groaned. “Why did I come back here? I should’ve just gone home.”

“I think you hired her because you *feel* something for her, something more than just a physical attraction.”

“I don’t do feelings.”

“No, you don’t *want* to do feelings. But sometimes you can’t stop them, my friend.”

“I’m keeping my distance from her—at least ten feet at all times.”

Ben smiled. “Good luck with that. Especially since her desk is about two feet from the door of your office.”

Chapter 11

DAWSON

“What are you doing here at this hour?”

A week later, I got off the elevator on the fourteenth floor at six forty-five AM to find Naomi waiting outside the office.

“I wanted to get an early start,” she said.

“An early start to nine o’clock would be eight thirty.”

She smiled. “I was anxious.”

I dug my keys out of my pocket, trying not to notice how smooth her legs looked sticking out from that black pencil skirt, and grumbled. “I had new locks installed last week. I’ll get you a set of keys made today.” Inside the office, I flicked the lights on. “Your cast is gone?”

She opened and closed her hand. “Came off Friday morning. At my last appointment, the doctor had said it would *probably* come off, but he wanted to X-ray first, and there was a chance it might need to stay on another two weeks. Thankfully that didn’t happen, because I’d already googled *removing a cast with a hex saw* more than once.”

I smiled. Naomi had been here before, so she knew the way to my office. I started to extend a hand for her to go first, but stopped. “Do you smell that?”

Naomi cocked her head to the side. “Smell what?”

“Do you have hand cream on, maybe?”

“I put lotion on after I got out of the shower this morning.”

“What scent is it?”

“Freesia.”

I leaned in and attempted to sniff inconspicuously, but failed. My mouth salivated as the scent grew stronger. Naomi pulled back, her face wrinkled. “What are you doing?”

There had to be coconut in something she used, even if she didn’t realize it. Or maybe I was coming down with something. I remembered reading an article in a workout magazine once that said a change in

olfactory response is often the first sign of illness, but most people ignore it. *Maybe I should make a doctor's appointment?*

A mental health professional, perhaps, because you've lost it, Reed...

I shook my head. "Nothing. Right this way. After you."

Unfortunately, my attempt at being a gentleman turned into an opportunity to ogle her ass as I followed her down the hall. She had a great ass, and that damn skirt followed the curve of it almost as closely as my eyes.

I nearly got caught when she stopped at the desk stationed outside my door. "Is this where I'll be sitting?"

"Ummm..." *At least ten feet at all times.* "Yeah, that'll be your desk, but I'm going to move it. I do a lot of calls on speakerphone, and when my door is open it can be pretty disruptive. Just give me a few minutes to put my stuff in my office, and I'll relocate it."

"Okay." She looked around. "Is there a coffee machine? I brought Keurig pods and some ground beans and creamer, too. I can make us a pot."

I pointed down the hall. "First door on your right."

"Perfect. Thanks. How do you take your coffee?"

"You don't have to do that."

"I don't mind. I'm going to make mine anyway."

"Alright, thanks. I take it black. There are mugs in the cabinet. You'll be able to guess which one is mine. It was an office-warming gift from Ben."

She smiled. "Okay. Be back."

A few minutes later, I'd moved her desk to a safer location, and Naomi returned with two steaming mugs. She held up the one that read *Fresh out of Fucks to Give*. "I was torn between this one and the one that said *Blow Me, I'm Hot*."

"The jackass bought me that one, too." I shook my head. "I don't know why I tell him shit sometimes. He showed up with that one the day after I fired a client by telling him to blow me and hanging up the phone."

She scrunched up her nose. "This is going to be more different than working in the DA's office than I thought."

"I hope you don't get offended easily."

She caught my eye. "Only when people ogle my ass."

My eyes widened.

Her lip twitched. "Gotcha."

How the hell did she know?

She laughed. "I was teasing. But I guess you just confessed."

I wasn't admitting to shit, so I waved for her to follow. "Come on. I'll show you around the rest of the office." A few steps down the hall, I spoke without turning back. "You better not be ogling my ass."

"I'm more of a forearm girl."

Note to self, do extra reverse wrist curls at the gym tomorrow.

I gave Naomi a quick tour of the office. It wasn't that big, so it didn't take long before we were back at her desk. I pointed. "There's a laptop in your top drawer. We use Caret for billing and timekeeping, and you should have all the usual research software already installed on that computer. You'll just need to set up accounts, which you can do after I assign you an email with the firm's domain."

"Okay, great."

"Every Monday morning, my old paralegal and I used to get together at ten to go over the status of my cases. It took a few hours, but I'm often out of the office for extended periods of time for trials and hearings, and I think it's important for clients to be able to talk to someone when they reach out, without having to tell their story from the beginning. Why don't we do that today? It'll give you a little background on each case."

"Perfect."

"I'm still working on finding a staff attorney and another admin. But I hired a new receptionist finally. She works eight to four. I'll introduce you when she gets here."

"It's okay. I can do that myself so you can get started with your day."

I grinned. "That would be great, especially because I can't remember her damn name at the moment."

Naomi laughed. "I'll fill you in when I find out."

"Thanks." I thumbed over my shoulder to my office door. "I have a few things I need to get done before the phones start lighting up. Why don't you settle in and we can catch up later?"

"Sounds good."

I'd made it to the doorway of my office when Naomi stopped me.

"Hey, Dawson?"

I turned. "Yeah?"

"Thank you for giving me a chance. I promise I won't disappoint you."

I smiled. "I'm sure you won't."

“You were awfully quiet.” I stacked the files I’d brought into the conference room to review with Naomi into a pile. “Did I go over the cases too fast?”

She shook her head. “Not at all. I’m still trying to figure out how to be a paralegal. I don’t want to overstep and act like an attorney.”

“What do you mean?”

“My mind still thinks like a lawyer, even if I’m not one anymore. So when you talk about cases, I want to interject with ideas about making a motion stronger, or if maybe there was some entrapment in a kickback case. But it’s not my place.”

“Entrapment? You mean for the Gregor case?”

Naomi nodded.

“How is there entrapment?”

“Well, the informant is a known drug addict, right?”

“Yeah. That’s how the narcotics division flipped him. Rich bastard uses his silver spoon to put drugs up his nose.”

“Did the DA know the building inspector was a recovering addict? I bet they did. They basically dangled temptation in front of the person they were investigating, and when he took the bait, the informant shared drugs and then handed over government funds in the form of a bribe. That’s crossing the line to me.”

“Hmm... Good point. It’s worth looking into. Let’s schedule a deposition with the informant to see what the ADA instructed him to do, or if they told him about the inspector’s drug use.”

A loud gurgling noise came from somewhere. It sounded like water moving through pipes that had air in them. I looked around and realized the heat wouldn’t be on in August. The AC was. I pointed to Naomi. “Was that...your stomach?”

She covered her face. “I was hoping to get away with that. I haven’t eaten since yesterday. I lose my appetite when I’m nervous.”

“What were you nervous about?”

“My first day.”

“You feel any better now?”

“Yeah, I do.”

“Let’s get you fed then. If you don’t mind a working lunch, I’ll order us some sandwiches from the deli down the block. I’d like to hear the rest of

the thoughts you've kept to yourself over the last two hours while I rambled on about these cases."

She smiled, and my eyes lingered on her lips for a heartbeat too long. I forced them away and cleared my throat, quickly heading for the conference room door. *Ten feet at all times, Reed.* "What are you in the mood for?" I asked from a safe distance.

"What are you getting?"

"Pastrami on rye and an order of steak fries."

Her little nose scrunched up. "I don't eat meat."

A joke was on the tip of my tongue, but I managed to control myself. "They have salads."

"That sounds good."

"What kind do you want?"

"Anything."

"A cobb without the turkey and bacon?"

"Actually, I don't eat eggs or cheese either."

"So...lettuce?"

She laughed. "How about I place the order?"

"Sounds good. There's a menu for Gem Deli in one of your drawers. They deliver, and we have an account there."

"Great. So a pastrami on rye and an order of steak fries?"

"On second thought, make that two orders of steak fries."

"Two?"

"I didn't eat breakfast either. I went to the gym this morning. They have a protein-shake bar there, and I usually pick one up on my way out, but for some reason it wasn't open today."

"You went to the gym today? But you were here at six forty-five?"

"I'm an early riser."

"I need to get my butt back to the gym now that this cast is off."

"Your butt looks pretty good to me." I winked.

I thought her cheeks might've pinked a bit, but I wasn't getting close enough to find out. "Thanks for ordering."

"So what made you move to New York?" I asked before shoving a fry into my mouth. "Ben mentioned your sister lives here. Did you guys grow up in the area or something?"

Naomi shook her head. “No. We grew up in Virginia. My sister met her husband in college, and he was from Brooklyn. They moved to Manhattan after they graduated. I was looking for a change and wanted to be closer to my sister. Frannie has AML, acute myeloid leukemia. She was diagnosed seven years ago, but it went into remission. It came back three months ago, and the treatment has been rough on her. Our mom died from the same thing. It’s not supposed to run in families, but...” She shrugged. “She really needs a bone-marrow transplant. I was her best hope, but I wasn’t a match.”

“I’m sorry.”

She nodded. “Thank you. She’s a single mom now with two young kids, so I figured I could help out. I’m staying with her. She lives down in the financial district. Or Fidi, as they say. I need a New York acronym dictionary.”

I smiled. “Had you ever spent time here before moving?”

“A weekend here and there over the years, but no extended period of time. I was originally debating moving out to California before my sister got sick again. I love San Diego. But I thought if New York couldn’t give me a fresh start, at least it’s big enough to allow me to get lost for a while.”

“Do you know anyone here besides Lily and Ben?”

“One other person. Simon. He’s an old friend. I guess technically he’s an ex-boyfriend. We were a couple for a few years in college. We split up on good terms when we graduated. He went to medical school in Texas, and I went off to Michigan to go to law school. We’ve kept in touch over the years, even though we don’t get to see each other too often. He’s an oral surgeon, but he recently took a three-month sabbatical to do a Doctors-Without-Borders-type program over in India. He specializes in cleft-palate surgeries and jaw reconstruction. He lives up on Eightieth Street.”

“When was the last time you saw him?”

“Four years ago, at a mutual friend’s wedding. But he’s actually flying home today. His sister is getting married Saturday. So we’re going to get together before he goes back to India for the last six weeks. We’re having dinner Friday night.”

An uneasy feeling I didn’t like settled in the pit of my stomach.

“What about you?” Naomi reached over and stole one of my fries. When I looked at her, she halted with it halfway to her mouth. “Do you mind?”

“Does it matter? You already did it.”

She rolled her eyes. “You can take some of mine.”

“I don’t want *salad*. And clearly neither do you, even though you ordered it.”

“Get over it.”

Her attitude made me smile. “You’re going to fit right in, here in New York.”

Naomi pushed her salad around with her fork. “So what’s your New York story? I know you must’ve grown up in Connecticut since that’s where Ben is from, and you two have been friends forever. When did you move here?”

“I came for college. Went to Columbia for undergrad and wound up going to law school there, too. Never left.”

“I’m surprised you and Ben aren’t partners?”

I shook my head. “We both did a criminal prosecution externship here in the City the summer after our second year of law school. Emily did it, too.”

“You? Prosecution? Not defense?”

“I wanted to learn the tricks from the other side.”

“Is that how you met Emily?”

“No. Emily and I met in law school. I was first in our class, and she was second. I was editor-in-chief of moot court; she was editor-in-chief of law review. We competed against each other at every turn, but it made us both work harder, so we got a lot out of the rivalry. The day we graduated, she asked me if I was interested in going to work at her father’s firm with her. Her dad had been the Kings County DA for a decade before he opened his own practice. I figured I could learn a lot from him, so I took the job. A year later, Emily showed up at the office earlier than she normally did and caught her father getting a blow job from a first-year associate. He was married to her mother at the time. The shit hit the fan, Emily quit, and we decided to hang out a shingle together.”

“Boy, are all the lawyers like this in New York? Emily’s father was having an affair with an associate. You started sleeping with your partner. I’m sensing a theme here.”

I shrugged. “We work a lot of hours. I don’t know anyone in private practice who isn’t putting in ten or twelve hours a day. It doesn’t leave a lot of time for outside relationships.”

Naomi closed her plastic salad container. “I guess it’s a good thing I’m not an attorney anymore then. I’ll be safer at work.”

My eyes dropped to her lips. *I wouldn’t be so sure of that.*

I wadded the wrapper from my sandwich into a ball and tossed it into the bag everything had been delivered in, holding it out for Naomi to deposit her trash. Pushing back from the table, I stood. “Stop in my office when you’re ready. I’ll give you the Gregor case file, and you can work on getting a deposition scheduled. Maybe you can also go through it to see if anything else interesting pops out at you. You have a different perspective, coming from the DA’s office.”

“Okay. I’m just going to visit the ladies’ room first.”

A few minutes later, I was on the phone when Naomi came to my door. I was just finishing up, so I motioned to the file cabinet on the other side of my office. She took the hint and dug out the Gregor file. After, I held up a finger, telling her to wait while I got off the phone.

Naomi scanned the office, checking out the art on the walls, books on the shelves, and finally the one framed photo I had displayed. She pointed to it when I hung up, clearly about to ask a question, but I cut her off.

“I just wanted to tell you there’s a police interview that hasn’t been transcribed yet, so it’s not in the folder. The video itself is in the e-file, if you need it for any reason when you’re going over the case.”

“Okay, thanks.”

I thought I’d distracted her enough to forget about the photo, but apparently that was not the case. She motioned to the photo of me and Bailey, arm in arm. “Is this another sister?”

I shook my head. “I only have the one.”

Our eyes met. It looked like she was about to ask another question, so I beat her to the punch once again. “I have to make a call. Let me know if you find anything interesting in the Gregor file.”

Chapter 12

DAWSON

15 years ago

“Cool hat.”

The girl frowned. I’d never seen her before, but we were the only two at the bus stop. “What’s so cool about it?”

Uhh... She was the one wearing it, so didn’t she think it was cool, too? I shrugged. “I dunno. I just like how it’s all different-colored denim pieces, I guess.”

It seemed like she was trying to figure out if I was serious or not. But why the hell would I lie? After a long minute, her face softened slightly. “Thanks.”

I nodded and looked around. *Where the hell is Ben?* If he didn’t hurry up, he was going to miss the bus on the first day of school again this year. Was he shining his shoes or finishing up reading the science textbook he’d checked out *for fun* from the library this summer?

The girl with the hat looked over. Our eyes met, and she quickly looked away. It happened a second time a minute later, so I attempted to break the ice once again. “You new or something?”

She nodded and pointed down the block. “My mom and I just moved in on Oak Street.”

“What grade are you in?”

“Eighth.”

“Me, too. I’m Dawson, by the way.”

She sort of smiled. I think. “Bailey.”

“The bus is always late the first day, usually the entire week.”

“Oh, okay.”

The first month after we went back to school was usually warm, but today it felt more like mid-July than the first week of September. And the

crappy school buses rarely had air conditioning. Most drivers had fans rigged up to the dashboard, but those only pointed to them.

I wiped sweat from my brow. “Aren’t you hot in that hat? I’m freaking roasting.”

Bailey’s face fell. Rather than respond, she turned her back to me and stayed that way while we waited. It was weird, especially because it was just the two of us at the bus stop. *Oh-kay then*. So much for trying to be nice to the new girl.

Ben ran down the block just as the yellow school bus rumbled to a stop.

“What the hell? I thought you were going to miss the first day.”

He raked a hand through his messy hair. “I was studying and lost track of the time.”

“Studying? What the heck could you be studying? We didn’t even start classes yet.”

“Math. Algebra isn’t going to be easy this year.”

I shook my head and climbed onto the bus behind the new girl. “Why do I hang out with you? You’re such a nerd.”

Ben followed me to the last row. Garrett and Will were already seated. Normally only ninth graders got to sit in the back, but these guys were my teammates, so they made an exception. And Ben didn’t play football, basketball, or baseball like I did, but he’d been my closest friend since I moved here last year, and we stuck together, so he reaped the benefits of a good seat. I guess it was fair since I got to reap the benefits of having a brainiac for a buddy and copy his homework when I didn’t feel like doing mine.

The new girl slid into a seat a few rows ahead of us. She propped her violin case up next to her. I didn’t pay much attention as we made our way to the school, at least until I heard her voice rise and saw her reaching over the seat for something.

“Give me that!”

Lenny Gleason was an overgrown jerk. He held Bailey’s denim bucket hat up in the air with one hand and pointed to her head with the other. “Where did you get your haircut? Lawnmowers R Us?”

I took a closer look at what the hell he was talking about. Bailey had short, brown, frizzy hair, and patches of it were missing. Lenny Gleason was a dick, but he was right, it *did* look like someone had taken a lawnmower and shaved random spots.

Bailey seemed to be on the verge of crying, so I jumped up and walked over.

Lenny might be a year older, and an inch or two taller, but I was wider, stronger, and had more balls than him. I'd kick his bully ass in a heartbeat. Snatching the hat from his hand, I stepped up so he and I were nose to nose. "You want to pick on someone, Gleason? How about someone your own size? I'm right here."

His ruddy skin turned red, and his eyes narrowed, like he was considering accepting the challenge, but after a long stare off, he huffed and sat down.

I shook my head. "That's what I thought."

A fat tear rolled down Bailey's cheek when I turned to give her back her hat. "Don't let him get to you. He's a moron. His twin sister sits in the front row. She took all the brains in the womb."

Bailey sniffled and tried to smile as she took her hat back. "Thanks."

"No problem."

A few minutes later, we pulled up at school. Bailey got off the bus ahead of me, and I jogged to catch up to her.

"Who do you have for homeroom?"

"Mr. Johnson, I think. Room two eighteen."

"I'm on the first floor, but I can show you where the classroom is, if you want?"

"Why are you being so nice to me?"

"I didn't realize I was."

"I'm not a charity case," she snipped. "I can take care of myself."

Man, this girl had a chip on her shoulder. I probably should've walked away and let her take her anger out on someone else. I wasn't sure why I didn't. But I kept pace with her. When we got to the door, I opened it and pointed to the stairs on the left.

"These are for going up only. There's a set at the other end of the hall for coming down."

"Oh, okay, thanks."

"My homeroom is down here, but I'll walk you up."

She looked over, and I got the feeling she was about to say I didn't have to, so I raised my hands. "I know you're not charity. My mom and I only moved here last year, and I was the new kid. My buddy Ben showed me around the first day. I'm just paying it forward."

She stayed quiet as we climbed the steps. Midway down the hall on the second floor, I pointed to a door up on the left. “That’s Johnson’s room. I had him for English last year. Try to sit at least three rows back from his desk. He gets these nasty white spit balls in the corners of his mouth, and sometimes they fly off and hit whatever’s in their path.”

“Ugh. Gross.” She smiled. “But thanks for the tip.” Right before we got to her classroom, she stopped and looked down. “It’s not a bad haircut. I have alopecia. It’s an autoimmune disorder that causes your hair to fall out. Sometimes I don’t have any.”

That sucked. Especially since the girls in middle school seemed to spend half their day looking at themselves in the mirror and fixing their hair and makeup. I wasn’t sure what had happened between June and September last year, but they’d all seemed to discover curling irons and makeup. I shrugged. “At least you can wear cool hats and stuff. Gleason can’t do anything about his ugly face.”

Bailey’s smile widened. “Thank you for stepping in on the bus. My mom always says actions count more than words, so maybe you’re not an asshole after all.”

My brows jumped. “Not an asshole after all? That sounds *almost* like a compliment.” The warning bell buzzed overhead, so I had to go. I touched two fingers to my forehead in a salute. “Gotta run. If I’m late, I get detention, and if I get detention, Coach won’t let me practice. Good luck today.”

“What do you play?”

“Football.”

“Are you good at it?”

“I’m the best at everything.”

Bailey laughed, and it made me feel warm inside. It was a different kind of warm than the way I felt around Allie Papadopoulos, whom I planned to ask to the eighth-grade dance, but a good feeling stayed with me all day.

At least until I got home and talked to my mom...

“How was your day, honey?”

“Fine.” I tossed my bookbag on the kitchen island and made a beeline for the pantry, grabbing an unopened package of Oreos. “Where’s Sarah?”

“She went down for her nap late, so she’s still sleeping.” Mom took the milk out and reached for a glass. “Don’t eat too many cookies. Dinner will be ready in an hour. And don’t forget to feed Sheldon. I bought more sprouts at the market today and some tofu.”

“He doesn’t like tofu.”

“How do you know? He eats it.”

I tore open the package and shoved a cookie into my mouth. “Because no one likes that crap.” I pointed to the milk in Mom’s hands. “You’re not going to give me that, are you?”

Mom opened the fridge and swapped the whole milk carton for coconut milk. “God forbid.” She walked around to the other side of the counter and poured me a tall glass. “Tell me about your first day of school.”

“They added chicken fingers to the menu for lunch. Much better than the chewy nuggets they had last year.”

“That’s good. What about your actual classes?”

I shrugged. “Okay. I guess.”

“Make any new friends?”

“No.” I shrugged again and knocked back half the glass of coconut milk. “Wait. Actually, I did. There was a new girl at the bus stop.”

“Oh? What’s her name?”

“Bailey.”

Mom’s face fell.

“What?”

She looked away, shaking her head. “Nothing.”

“Obviously there’s *something*, because I saw your face when I said Bailey’s name.”

She sighed. “I met her mom this morning at the coffee shop in town. We were in line and started talking. She was nervous about her daughter’s first day.”

“Because of her condition?”

Mom blinked a few times. “She told you about her condition?”

“It was kinda hard not to after that jerk Gleason ripped her hat off. Her hair is all patchy.”

Mom’s hand covered her heart. “Oh, that’s terrible. Miriam, Bailey’s mom, said Bailey didn’t want anyone to know. Apparently, at her last school, the kids treated her different, and it made Bailey upset. So she’d

planned on keeping things quiet here. New school, new start. Kind of like us last year.”

“They treated her different because of her hair?”

“Well, I guess because of her illness in general. She was out of school a lot.”

“Out of school? I thought the only symptom was hair loss.”

Mom shook her head. “No, it can get pretty bad. Vomiting, weakness, exhaustion. The treatment destroys the bad cells, but it can damage the good ones at the same time, leaving you sick as a dog. Miriam said once she was out for such a long stretch that she had to start homeschooling her.”

“Wow. I had no idea. There’s a girl on TikTok with that. She’s bald, but she’s always dancing like she feels fine.”

“I’m sure everyone handles it differently, but maybe that person has finished with her treatments and her energy is back.”

I gulped more coconut milk and grabbed another Oreo. “What treatment do they give you for that?”

“Well, it could be a number of things—radiation, stem cells, immunotherapy... But I think it’s usually the chemo that makes your hair fall out.”

“Chemo? They treat alopecia with chemo?”

Mom’s forehead creased. “Alopecia? Bailey doesn’t have alopecia. She has cancer.”

Chapter 13

NAOMI

Friday morning, Dawson had a deposition, so it was quiet around the office. I had work to do, though, lots of it. This was just the end of my first week, but it hadn't taken him long to figure out that he could hand me a task with minimal instructions, and I could run with it.

I stood at the copier, printing the attachments for a motion, when a deep voice came from behind me.

"Those are some heels."

I startled and tossed the stack of papers in my hands up in the air. They floated to the floor as I turned with a hammering heart. "Will you ever learn to not sneak up on people?"

"I didn't sneak up on you the night you belted me. I had no idea you were there." Dawson smirked. "Besides, I said it from ten feet away so I wouldn't have to duck."

"Maybe next time you can just not scare the crap out of me." I bent and swept the papers together.

Dawson squatted and joined me, grabbing the ones I couldn't reach. "You have more makeup on than usual." His eyes went from my face to my gaping shirt. "Pretty red lace bra, too."

I pulled the papers against my chest and stood. "You're an HR nightmare."

"I know. That's why I don't have an HR department." He winked. "They'd ruin all the fun."

I chuckled. "You're really an ass."

"Speaking of asses...you look really nice. Got a hot date or something?"

"No. I'm meeting a friend. I told you about it before."

"A male friend?"

"Not that it's any of your business, but yes. A male friend."

Dawson's eyes narrowed. "Wait. Is this your ex?"

“Simon, yes. He’s in India for a while, but he’s from New York. He’s home for his sister’s wedding.”

“You looking to rekindle that?”

“No.”

“Doesn’t look that way to me.”

“Excuse me?”

He shrugged. “You’re all dolled up. It looks like you’re going on a date. Could give the guy the wrong impression.”

I put my free hand on my hip. “First of all, *all dolled up*? What are you, ninety? That’s something my grandfather would’ve said. And second of all, how is putting on a little makeup and wearing a nice outfit giving a guy the wrong impression?”

“Just telling you what I see.”

“What exactly do you see?”

Dawson’s eyes dropped to my toes and worked a slow path up my body. I could practically feel him on my skin. I swallowed, my mouth suddenly dry.

“You look beautiful.” His jaw clenched. “Enjoy your date.”

“It’s not a date.”

“Whatever.”

“If I didn’t know better, I would think you were jealous.”

I’d said it because I thought I *did* know better, but Dawson’s face turned red. *Oh my God. Is he really jealous?*

He turned and walked away, without looking back. “I got shit to do. I’ll be in my office.”

Dawson’s door stayed shut the rest of the afternoon. It was just as well. The man was distracting, and I had a ton of work too. When five o’clock rolled around, I got ready to leave on time, something I hadn’t managed yet. I was meeting Simon at five thirty for an early dinner since he hadn’t adjusted to the time change and was trying not to since he was only home a short time.

I knocked on the door to let Dawson know I was going to take off.

“Come in!”

I opened the door. I’d wondered if Dawson had been avoiding me all afternoon, but it looked like he was up to his eyeballs in work. His desk was covered in papers and a half-dozen red file folders. He had his shirt sleeves rolled up to the elbow, and his tie was gone. I was pretty sure he’d been

running a hand through his thick hair. I found the disheveled look oddly sexy.

“What’s up?” he said.

“I’m going to head out. I emailed you the motion on the Emerson file and put together everything for the discovery request on Catalano.”

“Thanks.”

“Are you going to be here late?”

“Probably. The ADA sent over two last-minute witness additions on the Fanning case that goes to trial next week. I’m trying to figure out what the hell they have to do with anything. Whatever I find could change my entire strategy, and I was almost done with trial prep.”

“Shoot. Okay, well, if you need help, I can always come in this weekend.”

“Thanks. But I’ll figure it out.” He did a quick sweep over my legs and frowned. “You better get going so you’re not late for your *date*.”

He said the last word like it tasted bad in his mouth. Though his eyes went back to the work on his desk, so maybe I was misreading things again.

“Can I ask you something?”

“What?” He glanced up.

“What do you think might’ve happened if I hadn’t been drunk that night at the cabin?”

He shrugged. “I guess you wouldn’t have tried to seduce me.”

“What if I had?”

“Had what?”

“Tried to seduce you that night, but I was sober?”

Dawson’s eyes burned into mine before he answered. “I don’t have to wonder what might’ve happened, because I *know*. You wouldn’t have been able to walk the next day.”

Oh my. My jaw hung open.

Dawson raised a brow. “Any other questions?”

“Umm... No.”

“Where is your *date* taking you?”

“It’s not a date. He’s seeing someone. We’re just two old friends catching up.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure he doesn’t think it’s a date.”

“You don’t know anything about Simon.”

“Maybe not. But it’s rare a man only wants to be friends with a woman he’s attracted to, and you two have obviously dated before.”

“Simon doesn’t think it’s a date. Neither of us does.”

“No? Where are you going for dinner? I can tell you this guy’s intentions based on that.”

“How?”

“There’s a difference in where I’d have dinner with someone like Lily and where I’d take a date. Le Pavilion, Veronika, or Raoul’s? He’s trying to impress you and wants to take you home with him. Fresco, Meat, or Oscar Wilde? He’ll make sure you get in the Uber but won’t try to climb in after you.”

I felt my cheeks heat. No way in hell I was sharing that this afternoon Simon had texted and changed going *out* to dinner to ordering *in* at his place. So I ignored him. “Have a good night.”

Dawson picked up his pen and started to write on a legal pad. “I’d say the same,” he noted without looking up. “But I don’t say things I don’t mean.”

“Earth to Naomi...”

I blinked a few times and found Simon staring at me. “Sorry.” I forced a smile. “My brain is stuck at work.” Technically, that wasn’t a lie. Dawson had said, “*You wouldn’t have been able to walk the next day*” at the office. Two hours later, I still couldn’t stop his words from replaying in my head.

Simon smiled back. “Some things never change. You used to get lost in your head when you studied too. I asked if you want some wine?”

“Oh, sure. That would be great. Thank you.”

He stood. “I did a cleft palate on a little girl whose family makes their own wine. They brought me two bottles the day they came for her post-surgical checkup. It’s the best Cab I’ve ever tasted. I brought one home with me for you to try, because I know it’s your favorite.”

“I can’t believe you remember my favorite wine.”

“We drank enough of it up at the cabin we’d rented in the Blue Ridge Mountains. Remember, you kept swearing the old guy sitting alone in the bar was Mick Jagger? You put on ‘I Can’t Get No Satisfaction’ and were acting it out on the dance floor.”

I covered my face as I laughed. “Oh my God. Why do you have to remember *everything*? That *woman* was not happy when I asked to take a picture and told her who I thought she was.”

A *pop* came from the kitchen, followed by the *gluck-gluck* sound of wine being poured into glasses. Simon came back into the living room just as I finished unpacking the last of the Chinese takeout from the bag.

“You ordered enough for six people.”

“I couldn’t decide what to get. I’ve missed my Friday-night Chinese takeout.”

He passed me a wine glass and took a seat on the rug diagonally across from me at the coffee table. I liked that he’d suggested we eat like this instead of at the table. It brought me back to our college days. “Do you still do pizza on Tuesdays, too?”

He opened one of the cardboard containers and used chopsticks to dish some shrimp and broccoli onto his plate. “Of course. Except now I don’t eat a whole pie, because the calories don’t incinerate with a half-hour workout at the gym like they used to.”

Simon was being modest. He looked good. *Really good*. Even after traveling all night from Mumbai.

“Thank you again for being okay with eating in tonight,” he said. “I’m wiped out.”

“Of course.”

“I tried to get us reservations at this fancy vegan place, Eleven Madison Park. I would’ve gotten my butt in gear to take you there. But they didn’t have an opening for more than three months.”

“This is perfect.” I shoveled some vegetable lo mein onto my plate, and we exchanged containers and a smile.

“So tell me about this job you got,” he said. “Do you like it? I never thought I’d see the day when you worked for the bad guys.”

“To be honest, I’m just happy to have a job.”

“I still can’t believe you didn’t fight getting disbarred.”

“There wasn’t anything to fight about. I did it. End of story.”

“But you were provoked.”

“Sadly, that’s not a valid defense.”

Simon popped a shrimp into his mouth. “So what exactly does a paralegal do? It’s not like a secretary, is it?”

“No. You assist the attorneys, but not the same way an administrative assistant would. It’s doing a lot of legwork, like drafting motions and prepping witness lists. It really depends on the level of work the paralegal can handle.”

“Sounds like the lawyer who hired you got a total score. The level of work you can handle is *her job*. I hope she appreciates you.”

“She is a he, and while Dawson can be an ass most of the time, I do think he already appreciates that he doesn’t have to explain things to me.”

“The guy’s an ass?”

“Nothing I can’t handle.” *Handle*. Man handle. “*You wouldn’t have been able to walk the next day.*” Great. Now my brain was back there again, where it had spent the hour-long trek to Simon’s apartment, a trek that should have been a half hour, tops. But I’d been so thrown by the comment Dawson made that I’d gotten on the A train going *downtown* instead of *uptown*. And I didn’t notice until we were all the way down at City Hall. Thankfully, an uptown express train had pulled in as soon as I got off the wrong one, so Simon didn’t have to wait too long. But I needed to pull my mind from the gutter.

Simon’s forehead creased. “Naomi?”

My eyes jumped to his. “Yeah?”

He smiled funny, and I realized he was holding a carton out to me. “I asked if you wanted to try a crab rangoon? They’re vegan, so the crab is probably tofu, but I figured we could give them a shot.”

“Oh. Sure. Yeah. Thanks.” My zoning out was rude, and a subject change was definitely in order. “Tell me about the work you’re doing in India.”

Simon lit up as he spoke about the kids he’d been helping. He told me about a six-year-old girl who couldn’t even speak because of the facial deformities she was born with. He and his team had done five surgeries on her, and there wasn’t a dry eye in the room when she’d come back last week and said his name. Her parents told him she’d been practicing *Dr. Andrews* all day and night.

“I’d known I wanted to do this trip for a long time. But I thought I’d be helping them. I didn’t realize how much they’d help me.”

“What do you mean?”

“After I finished my residency, I got caught up in thinking it was my time.” Simon shook his head. “You go to school for so many years, then

make shit money and work like a dog during your residency. When I took the job at the practice where I am now, I finally made a good salary. I bought a fancy Mercedes that I don't even need living in the City, swapped my thirty-nine-ninety-nine-a-month ratty gym membership for a four-hundred-dollar-a-month Equinox one, and I was even considering buying an apartment and leaving this rent-controlled place because it doesn't have a view." Simon shook his head again. "I was putting value on the wrong things in life. India has been a reminder of what's important. You don't get happiness from material things; you get it from the people in your life. That's where my focus should be." He held out a hand, and when I put mine in his, he squeezed. "I'm glad you decided to move to New York."

Chapter 14

NAOMI

I was up early the next morning, even though Simon and I had hung out talking until midnight. After an hour of mindless scrolling on my phone, I dragged my ass out of bed and went to the gym for a Pilates class. On the way back to my sister's, I got an iced coffee and decided to walk rather than take the subway. Dawson's office wasn't too far off course on the route I took, so I popped in to see if he was working today like he'd said he might. I found him at his desk, looking pretty much the same as he had yesterday, only his clothes were more rumpled, and he looked a bit haggard. He didn't even look up as I stood at the door. So I knocked on the doorjamb.

"Dawson?"

His head snapped up, and he pulled an AirPods from an ear and tossed it on the desk. "Shit. I didn't hear you come in."

"Have you been here all night?"

He nodded. "My case is about to explode."

"The one that sent over a revised witness list yesterday? Fanning?"

Dawson blew out two cheeks full of air. "I did some digging. Turns out one of them is the president of a small bank in the Bahamas, and the other is my client's first wife."

"I take it that's not good?"

"It's an extortion case—at least that's what the main charge is. There are also a few smaller ones that have less bite. The biggest thing in our favor was that the government couldn't find the money my client was supposedly collecting, though apparently his ex could. I swear, the DA's office should put ex-wives on the payroll. They can find shit better than any investigator I've ever met."

I smiled, but it didn't sound good for Mr. Fanning. "How much did they find?"

"More than seven million. All because his ex wanted him to pay for half of their son's summer camp. He refused, so she took him to court and let

him tell the judge how broke he was. Big mistake. You never piss off a woman who knows where you used to hide the bodies. Now he not only has to pay for a hundred percent of his son's camp, he's going to wind up serving twenty years for extortion."

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Can you make Mr. Fanning take a deal? I spoke to him on the phone last night, and he's still refusing. I told him to come in this morning after he'd had some time to think about it. I'm hoping the new information that's come to light has sunk in, and he'll think better of wanting to go to trial."

"Will they even give him a deal now?"

"They offered eight years when he was first indicted, which he scoffed at. I'm friendly with the DA who's trying the case, so I called him early this morning. The offer is now twelve. And it's only open until five PM today."

"Can I make you some coffee or something?"

"If you don't mind, that would be great. I need to hit the head and wash up before Mr. Fanning shows. He should be here any minute."

"No problem. If he's here before you're done, I'll stall him."

"Thanks. I appreciate it." He walked to a cabinet and pulled out a dress shirt on a hanger. On his way back to his desk, he stopped and sniffed the air.

"Do you have something coconut on?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"Yep. You asked me that the other day. I think you have coconut on the brain. I'll go make that coffee."

I'd barely had time to press start on the coffeemaker before I heard the clank of the front door. I walked out to the lobby and found a short, balding, unassuming man with Coke-bottle glasses. *This couldn't be the extortioner, could it?* "Can I help you?"

"Dawson Reed, please." He nodded. "Name's Jack Fanning."

Not what I expected, but okay. I put on a friendly smile. "Please have a seat. Dawson is just finishing up a call. He won't be too long. Can I get you a coffee or something in the meantime?"

"Black."

Man of few words... "Of course. I'll be right back."

On my way to the break room, I popped my head into Dawson's office. He was shirtless, the top of his pants was open, and his belt was unbuckled.

My eyes snagged on the happy trail that ran from his belly button into the waistband of his underwear.

Dawson smirked. "Good to know."

"Good to know what?"

He shook out a folded undershirt and pulled it over his head. Tucking it into his pants, he zipped up. "That your date didn't go the distance last night."

"What are you talking about?"

He pulled on the dress shirt and started to button. "If you were full, you wouldn't look hungry."

My nose wrinkled. "You're really an ass, you know that?"

"So I've heard a few times."

"More than that, I'm sure." I rolled my eyes. "Mr. Fanning is here. I'm bringing him coffee now."

"Thank you. I'll be ready in a few minutes."

Mr. Fanning chugged the hot, black coffee like it was a water bottle and he'd just run a marathon, then handed me back the empty cup. "Thanks."

I didn't really have anything to do today, so I figured I'd stick around to see how things turned out. After I delivered the man of few words to Dawson's office, I took a seat at my desk and worked on a petition I hadn't had time to finish before I left yesterday. One paragraph in, the yelling started. I couldn't help but overhear.

"You told me I had a good chance of getting off!"

"And you told me you had no assets other than the ones the feds had frozen."

"That's money from an inheritance!"

"Why is it in an offshore account?"

"Because I'm on my second wife. I've learned my lesson on sharing all the things I've worked for."

"I take it that means you didn't list the bank account on the financial disclosure you would've filed during your divorce proceedings with your first wife?"

"No."

"So your intent wasn't to defraud the government when you were asked if you had other assets, it was to defraud your ex-wife?"

"That's right."

“Can you provide a paper trail of how you came into possession of this money? A copy of the will, a settlement filing from the estate of the deceased?”

“I was just given the money. There was no will.”

“How? Via check?”

“Cash.”

“By whom?”

“An uncle.”

“An elderly uncle, who was about to die, handed you *seven-million dollars* in cash?”

“That’s right. He was old school. Didn’t trust banks.”

It went quiet, and a few seconds later, Dawson’s door swung open. He poked his head out and waved to me. “Oh good. You’re still here. Would you mind coming in for a moment, Naomi?”

“Umm...sure.”

I followed Dawson into the office. He put his hands on his hips and spoke to me. “I’m sorry for putting you on the spot like this, but I want to show Mr. Fanning how things are going to go in court next week.” He glanced over at the client. “Naomi was an assistant district attorney. She started here last Monday and knows nothing about your case.”

The client’s arms folded across his chest. “Yeah, so?”

“Naomi, the government found seven-million dollars in an account under Mr. Fanning’s name in the Bahamas. He just told me it was an inheritance, and an elderly uncle gave it to him. In cash. Would you mind playing the ADA role and pretending he’s on the stand?”

“Oh...kay.”

Dawson leaned against the credenza and casually crossed his feet at the ankles. “The witness is all yours.”

“Umm... Okay. Mr. Fanning, can you tell me how you got the cash to the Bahamas?”

“I carried it?”

“In something?”

“Yes, a bag.”

“What kind of a bag? Can you describe it for me, please?”

“A duffle bag.”

“Like the kind you’d bring to the gym?”

He shook his head, like he was annoyed at the antics. “Yeah, whatever.”

“So one duffle bag?” I held my hands about two feet apart. “Maybe this big?”

“Something like that. I didn’t measure it.”

“Mr. Fanning, a million dollars in hundreds weighs twenty-two pounds and takes up a full backpack. Seven million wouldn’t fit in a regular-size duffle.”

His face burned crimson. “Then I must’ve checked the bag.”

“You *checked* seven-million dollars?”

“I must’ve. Because it got there, didn’t it?”

“Yes, it definitely did.” I started to pace back and forth in the office, finding my rhythm. “I’m not the best at math, but since one million weighs twenty-two pounds, seven million would be roughly a hundred and fifty-four pounds.”

“So?”

“What airline did you take?”

“American, I think.”

I lifted my phone and typed in *American Airlines international baggage weight capacity*. I turned the screen toward Mr. Fanning. “The maximum a bag can weigh is one hundred pounds. They weigh them when you check in.”

It looked like steam was about to billow from his nose. He jumped up from his chair and flailed his arms around. “What kind of nonsense games are we playing here?”

Dawson pushed off from the credenza he’d been leaning on and stood tall. “I’m trying to show you what the prosecutor is going to do to your story if we go in there with this crap. Naomi doesn’t know anything about your case other than what she learned two minutes ago. How well do you think it’s going to go when a hungry prosecutor has had months to prep?”

The two men had a staring contest for a long time. Eventually, Dawson turned to me and smiled. “Thank you, Naomi.”

I took that as my cue and, with a nod, went back out to my desk. After that, there wasn’t much more yelling. Twenty minutes later, Mr. Fanning stormed out of the office. He walked so briskly past my desk, he caused a wind that shifted some papers into the air. Dawson picked them up as they floated to the ground.

“Five o’clock, Mr. Fanning!” he yelled after the client. “That’s our deadline. Get back to me before that.”

The man never stopped walking. Once we heard the front door open and slam closed, Dawson hung his head and laughed. “How the hell do you know the weight of a million dollars cash? I was expecting you to take a totally different direction. I thought you’d hit him with not filling out the required paperwork for traveling with more than ten grand in currency.”

I chuckled as well. “I grew up outside of D.C., so most of our school field trips were to government buildings and Smithsonian museums. In sixth grade, we went to the Bureau of Engraving, where they print the money. They have a glass box with a million dollars in tens stacked. I remember the guy telling us the weight was two-hundred-and-twenty-two pounds. I don’t know why, but that fact stuck in my head. I just divided that number by ten, figuring he’d pack hundreds not tens. Plus, I’ve stood next to stacks of cash that were confiscated in drug busts. I know it would be more paper than he could carry.”

“That was even better than I could’ve done. You must’ve been kick-ass on cross examination.”

I’d been feeling all revved up about getting to interrogate someone again, but his comment took the wind out of my sails.

Dawson must’ve noticed my crestfallen face. “Did I upset you by putting you on the spot like that?”

I lifted my hand and forced a smile. “No, it just...felt good. And now it hit me that I’ll never be able to do that again—interrogate a witness—unless I’m playing pretend like I just did.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“I complain about this business a lot, but I can’t imagine not being able to do it anymore. So I get it. I really do.”

I smiled sadly. “Thanks.”

“How about I buy you some lunch? I’m pretty sure you just scared Mr. Fanning into taking a deal. It’s the least I can do.”

I took a deep breath and nodded. “Sure, why not?”

Dawson and I walked two blocks, and he stopped in front of a small restaurant. “This is the place.”

“Vegan Palace? We don’t have to go here. I can get a salad almost anywhere.”

He opened the door and gestured for me to walk in ahead of him. “I’ll find something. The menu is pretty big.”

“You’ve been here before?”

Dawson shook his head. “I looked it up online.”

“When?”

He shrugged. “The other day.”

Interesting. The man who poked fun at me for eating rabbit food had done research on good local vegan places.

The waitress sat us at a table. I opened the menu and started perusing, but Dawson just sat there. “Do you already know what you want?” I asked.

“No, but I’ll just get whatever you get. Unlike you, I’m not picky.”

“I’m not picky.”

He sipped the water. “Right.”

“I’m not. I just don’t eat meat.”

“Or eggs.”

“Right.”

“Or dairy.”

“Well, that’s part of being vegan. I don’t eat animals or foods that come from animals.”

He grinned. “Like I said, one of us isn’t picky. I’ll have whatever you’re having.”

I ordered us two different dishes. A chicken parm and a sunchoke risotto, and the waitress left us with a basket of sourdough gluten-free bread and garlic butter.

Dawson grabbed a piece of bread. “So let me get this straight, the chicken parm isn’t actually chicken and the garlic butter doesn’t actually have butter in it?”

I smiled. “That’s right.”

“Is the garlic garlic?”

I chuckled. “I think so.”

Dawson bit into his bread. He made a face but didn’t say anything. “So tell me about your date?”

“I told you, it wasn’t a date.”

“Did you eat together?”

“Yes.”

“Drink wine?”

“Yes.”

“And what restaurant did you go to?”

I sighed. “We didn’t. We had takeout at his place.”

Dawson frowned. "He wants in your pants."

"He was tired. It took him twenty-six hours to get home from Mumbai the day before. Not everyone has an agenda. Haven't you ever picked up a friend and shared a meal with some drinks?"

"Sure, Ben."

"I meant a woman."

"Nope."

"So you don't have any female friends?"

"Not good-looking ones I'd share a meal with alone in my apartment."

"Well, that's just sad. Because women and men can be friends."

Dawson folded his arms across his chest. "No, they can't. Not when you're attracted to each other."

"I seem to remember you told me you think I'm beautiful not too long ago. Yet we're sitting here, aren't we?"

"And we'd be back at my place with me eating something a hell of a lot better than the shit we're going to eat here, if you were good with that."

My jaw fell open. "I can't believe you just said that."

"Why?"

"Because it's crass."

"Did I ever give you the impression I was anything else?"

"Actually, yes."

"When?"

It was my turn to fold my arms across my chest. "When you took the time to look up local vegan restaurants and read reviews. That wasn't crass. It was thoughtful."

He bit off another piece of bread. "Or...I'm trying to butter you up."

I narrowed my eyes. "They don't serve butter here."

He smiled. "It's a good thing you aren't a DA. Arguing with you turns me on. I wouldn't be able to focus across the aisle from you with a hard-on."

I acted appalled, but also...the man made me a little insane. Because the thought of him *hard* while in court sort of turned me on.

I took a deep breath and attempted to shake it off, then rounded our conversation back to business and had Dawson fill me in on the other charges Mr. Fanning had been indicted on. It was nice to talk shop again. When our food came, Dawson asked if he could run his defense for another

case by me. Before I knew it, our plates were clean, and two hours had gone by.

“Are you going back to the office?” I asked on the way out.

“For a little while. I need to tie up a few loose ends, but then I’m going to head home and crash for a few hours. I didn’t sleep last night.”

We walked out to the street together.

“What about you?” Dawson asked. “Any plans for the rest of the weekend?”

“I was invited to an art opening tomorrow night. But I’m not sure if I’m going.” I left off that Simon had also mentioned having dinner before.

His eyes narrowed. “With who?”

“Nosy much?”

“It’s with Sam, isn’t it?”

I rolled my eyes. “I know you know his name is *Simon*, and not that it’s any of your business, but yes, *Simon* invited me to an art exhibit *because we’re friends*. I think you’ve become a little obsessed with my personal life.”

“Why aren’t you sure if you’re going?”

The truth was, I’d let Dawson’s comments make me question whether Simon might be interested in more than just friendship. He had said some sweet things last night, and I’d probably read into them because of the stupid stuff Dawson had planted in my head. Simon was just a *sweet guy*. Though there was no way in hell I’d be telling Dawson he’d made me question Simon’s intentions.

“I’ve been a little tired lately.”

Dawson opened his mouth like he had a retort on the tip of his tongue, but then shut it and stuffed his hands in his trouser pockets. “I’ll see you Monday?”

“Yep. Monday.”

He caught my eye. “Thanks for your help today, and enjoy your platonic friend tomorrow tonight.”

I lifted my chin. “I will. You know, not every man has a one-track mind and is incapable of being friends with women.”

Dawson offered a two-finger salute. “If you say so.”

Chapter 15

NAOMI

Sunday morning, I went looking at apartments. It wasn't much fun, especially when I saw up close and personal what I could afford with my depressing new budget. I'd either have to settle for a small studio, or I was going to have to get roommates. The latter did not appeal to me *at all*, so I waited in line with all the other broke people to see yet another tiny apartment, only to be turned away when I finally made it two people from the door because someone had already taken the overpriced place. After the third time that happened, I gave up and called it a day.

"Honey, I'm home!" I tossed my keys in the basket Frannie kept on the table near the door and collapsed on her couch dramatically. Leonardo jumped on my lap and started licking my face.

"No luck?" my sister said.

"It's mind-blowing how fast things move in New York."

"Let me guess—you waited in line for hours, only to be turned away before you got to see the place because someone snatched up the amazing deal on a two-hundred-and-fifty-square-foot, five-story walkup for only thirty-five hundred a month."

I smiled. "Basically. You are so lucky to have this big, rent-controlled apartment."

"I know. And it's really cool that my kids get to grow up in the same place their dad did, since he's not around. Did I ever show you Michael's growth chart in Ryder's closet? He gets a kick out of marking his height every year and realizing he's taller than his dad was at the same age."

Both she and the kids had shown me the wall a half-dozen times over the years since Michael died, yet I wouldn't deny her a moment to enjoy it again. "Let me see it."

After a trip to the closet, Frannie made us some tea, and we sat on opposite sides of the kitchen counter. I noticed she looked pale, almost a little gray.

“Are you feeling alright?”

“Tired, but okay.” She blew into her mug.

“Maybe you should call the doctor.”

“I’m fine. Really. Tired is normal. How was your date the other night?”

“It wasn’t a date.”

Frannie held her hands up. “Oh-kay.”

I guess it had come out kinda snippy. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to jump down your throat. It was a reflex after lunch with Dawson yesterday.”

“Your boss?”

I nodded. “I stopped by the office after going to the gym to see if he needed any help. One of his big cases blew up on Friday, and he was there all night trying to figure out how to fix it. He kept making comments about Simon wanting more than friendship.”

My sister’s forehead wrinkled. “Why does your boss have an opinion about a guy you’re spending time with?”

I sighed. “It’s complicated.”

“Uh-oh. Complicated with the boss? That’s asking for trouble, isn’t it?”

“Nothing’s happened. Not really, anyway. But there’s some undeniable chemistry between us, although more often than not, it bubbles to the surface when we’re arguing.”

My sister sighed. “I miss angry sex. Actually, I miss sex in general.”

“Would you think about dating?”

She sighed again. “I don’t know. Maybe someday, I guess. But it would have to be when I’m done with my treatments, and I know my health is okay. I would never want to get involved with anyone just to have them experience what I did losing Michael.”

“Don’t even say that, Frannie. You’re not going anywhere.”

She smiled. “Maybe I *should* die on you, just so you’re stuck with my two kids as payback for that time you left me babysitting Mom’s friend Alana’s three little monsters when you were supposed to be helping me.”

I chuckled and lifted my tea to my lips. “You have a warped sense of humor.”

“Let’s get back to angry sex with the boss.”

“I didn’t have angry sex with the boss.”

“I know. But it sounds like you’re going to. What’s he look like?”

“He’s tall, dark, and sexy, with broad shoulders and an eight-pack. But he knows it.”

“I like confidence.”

“There’s a difference between confidence and cocky.”

My sister grinned. “I like cock too.”

I laughed. “Dawson is just...not a good idea.”

“Because he’s your boss?”

“That and... This may sound weird, but I feel like the man could annihilate me.”

“Wow. You’re really into him.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Whatever you say.” Frannie sipped her tea. “Are you going to see your ex from college again?”

“Simon asked me to go to dinner and an art gallery with him tonight. He’s only home for a few days. His sister’s wedding was last night.”

“Are you going?”

“I’m not sure. He texted while I was looking at apartments, and I told him I couldn’t make dinner, but maybe I’d meet him at the gallery. I haven’t decided if I’m going yet. Let me ask you, do you think men and women can be friends?”

“Of course. You have male friends, don’t you?”

“Mostly they’re husbands or partners of my female friends.”

“Well, I have lots of male friends at work.”

“Right.” I nodded. “Yeah, of course. Women can be friends with men.”

“So does that mean you’re going to the art gallery?”

I took a deep breath and let it out. “Yeah. I think I will.”

“Hey.” Simon’s face lit up when he saw me. “I didn’t think you were going to come.”

“Sorry about being so wishy washy. It’s just...work has me sort of tangled up at the moment.” *Not a total lie.*

“Well, I’m happy you got untangled. Come on, let’s get some champagne.”

Simon and I found a waiter with a tray full of flutes. We nabbed two, and he introduced me to a few colleagues.

“You know so many people here.”

“Three quarters of the guests are dentists. The artist is the wife of the senior partner at our practice. You come if you want to stay on his good

side.”

We walked over to the first painting and stood in front of it. I wasn’t an art aficionado, but it looked like a bunch of poorly drawn circles to me.

“What do you think?” Simon asked.

“It’s...interesting.”

He grinned. “I’m pretty sure I could draw better circles putting the paintbrush between my toes. What the hell is it supposed to be?”

I laughed. “I have no damn idea.”

We walked to the next piece—a bunch of triangles.

“I’m sensing a theme here.” Simon chuckled. “Do you think she tackles the rhombus?”

“Shhh.” I looked around. “Someone might hear you.”

Simon drank his champagne. “*Someone* should tell the poor woman she’s not a very good artist.”

We made our rounds, checking out all the paintings. Underneath the last one, there was a bunch of numbers. I pointed to them. “How come this is the only one without a colored circle beneath it and instead has numbers?”

“This is the only one that’s not been sold.”

“Oh wow. I’m afraid to ask, but what do they go for?”

He tilted his champagne glass toward the numbers—the *five* digits. “That’s the price.”

“Please tell me someone forgot the decimal.”

“Nope. For the bargain price of twenty-two thousand, four-hundred-and-fifty dollars, this baby could be yours.”

“I should’ve been an artist.”

“Tell me about it.”

A little while later, Simon introduced me to the artist and her husband. We chatted with a few of his colleagues and had a second glass of champagne.

“I’m sorry the art wasn’t great. I’d heard the pieces were expensive, and I dumbly equated that to talent.”

“It’s fine. I’m glad I came.”

“We can sneak out of here now that the big boss saw me, but I’m not ready to call it a night. You want to come back to my place for a while? It’s only a few blocks.”

“Umm...”

“Come on. I’m going back to India tomorrow. This can’t be my last bit of fun before twenty-six hours of traveling.”

I smiled. “Sure. Why not?”

Simon weaved our fingers together during the walk. It felt nice, a familiarity to it, like two old friends catching up.

Once we got back to his apartment, he went to the kitchen. “Go sit. Take your shoes off and get comfy. I’ll pour us some wine.”

My feet hadn’t yet become accustomed to pounding the pavement in heels, so taking them off for a while sounded good. Back in Virginia, I’d mostly driven everywhere. “Okay. Thanks.”

After a moment, Simon passed me a glass and took a seat on the couch next to me. He sipped. “This is nice, isn’t it?”

“Elementary-school art and free wine. What more can a girl ask for?”

He smiled. “It’s been what, four years, since we’ve seen each other? And yet it feels like we picked up right where we left off. There’s a comfort between us, and it’s because of you. You’re just real. That might sound simple, but it’s not easy to find dating.”

I sipped my wine. “Are you still seeing that woman you told me about a few months back? Petra or something like that?”

“We split up a few weeks before I left for India.”

“What happened?”

“Something was missing. How about you? Have you met anyone since moving to New York?”

My mind immediately went to Dawson, which was stupid because obviously Simon was asking if I was seeing anyone. I shook my head. “No. But I did get a marriage proposal from a man who looked about eighty and I’m pretty sure lives in the subway station. So things are looking up.”

Simon tugged a piece of my hair. “I’ve really missed you, Naomi.”

An alarm went off. But...ugh. *I’m being stupid*. I was letting Dawson’s comments about how a man and woman who are attracted to each other can’t be friends influence my thoughts. Dawson didn’t know what the hell he was talking about. Simon and I talked to each other about our dating lives, for God’s sake. So I tamped down thoughts of my boss’s distorted view of the world and took the compliment the way it was meant—*friendly*. “Thank you. I’ve missed you, too.”

But then something shifted. Simon leaned closer, and one of his hands moved to my knee. His thumb brushed back and forth. “We always had

good chemistry, didn't we?"

The alarm in my head blared louder. Yet still, I did my best to ignore it. I had to be misreading things, right? Simon was just comfortable with me. He'd said so himself not long ago.

His eyes dropped to my lips.

Still in denial, I swiped at my mouth. Probably there was something there that had caught his attention.

But there was nothing.

Simon slipped the wine glass from my hand and set it on the coffee table, along with his. And yet I was *still* in denial, even as his mouth moved to meet mine...

Chapter 16

DAWSON

“Morning.” I nodded as I walked past Naomi’s desk.

She frowned. “What’s so good about it?”

I lifted a brow. “Wake up on the wrong side of the bed?”

Naomi ignored me and went back to typing.

Okay then. I’d worked with enough women to know how to handle one in a mood, so I took the bag in my hand—with the coconut cake pop I couldn’t resist buying at Starbucks this morning—and set it on her desk. “Got this for you.”

She narrowed her eyes and growled at me. *Growled.* So I hauled ass to my office and shut the door. I didn’t have time to worry about what was up Naomi’s ass after that. My morning consisted of two conference calls and putting out one fire after the next. It was after one by the time I emerged again, and I’d forgotten all about my paralegal’s mood.

Speaking of moods... My own significantly improved as I walked to the copy machine and got an eyeful of Naomi from the back, wearing a red dress. I smiled as I approached, but when she turned and gave me the *death glare*, it wilted.

“Do you need to use the machine?” she asked.

“After you. I’m not in a rush.”

She sighed. “Just give them to me. I’ll do it for you.”

“I can make my own copies.”

I had a four-page evidence list in my hand. She plucked it from my fingers. “One set?”

“Uh, yeah.”

Whish. Slam. She opened and closed the copier with enough rage that I was surprised the lid didn’t crack.

“Did I do something to upset you?” I asked.

“I’m not upset.”

“So this is you happy?”

She scowled again. “Is it a requirement of my job to smile?”

“No. But it’s a small office, and it’s kind of hard to ignore when someone looks like they want to bite me.”

She ignored my comment and finished making the copies. While I waited, I replayed our interaction from earlier. I was usually pretty good at saying or doing the wrong thing, but I hadn’t had an opportunity to do either yet, so it couldn’t have been me who’d upset her. At least not today. So I thought back further, to our last interaction on Saturday. Had we argued and I’d forgotten about it? Then it hit me. *She had that date last night.*

“How was the art gallery?” I asked.

She whipped around with my papers in hand and put her hands on her hips. “Why would you ask that?”

I shrugged. “No reason. Just making conversation.”

Her lips pursed as she stared at me in silence. I wanted to take a step back, but I stood my ground. Eventually she held out the copies. “Is there anything else you need?”

As much as I wanted to keep needling her, get under her skin until I got to the bottom of what her problem was today, my afternoon was packed with shit to do—even more than my morning had been. So I shook my head and went back to my office, throwing myself into drafting a brief that had to be filed by the end of the day.

In the zone, I’d nearly forgotten all about the woman on the other side of the door—at least until I was filing the case I’d been working on in the credenza nearest my door and heard a cell phone ring. It wasn’t my intention to eavesdrop, but I couldn’t help overhearing, especially when Naomi’s voice rose.

“Where are you? Are you okay?” she asked.

Quiet.

“Did you call nine-one-one?”

More quiet.

“You really should go to the hospital, Frannie.”

And finally...

“Well, then I’m coming to you. Where are you?”

A drawer opened and shut. Right after, a zipper did the same.

“Hoboken? What are you doing there?”

Silence.

“Alright. Well, sit in the café until I get there at least. I’ll be there as soon as I can. Send me a pin of your location. I’m leaving now.”

I walked out of my office just as Naomi lifted her purse to her shoulder. “I have to go,” she said. “I’m sorry. My sister passed out in New Jersey.”

“How are you getting there?”

She stopped short. “Shoot. What subway do I take to Hoboken?”

“You don’t. You take the PATH.”

“The what?”

“The PATH train. It’s how you get to New Jersey from the City.”

“Where do I board it?”

I made a split-second decision. “Let me grab my keys. I’ll give you a ride. My car is parked in the lot around the corner.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“Yes, I do.” I walked back into my office, swiped my keys from my desk, and we rode the elevator down to the ground floor together. I could tell how upset she was by the red blotches that had broken out on her neck and chest—that and she didn’t argue with me enough about driving her. She stayed quiet from the walk to the car all the way through the Holland Tunnel.

Naomi was a million miles away as she looked out the car window. “Her kids don’t know,” she eventually said.

“Your sister’s kids?”

She nodded.

“How old are they?”

“Molly is eight, and Ryder is ten.” She sighed. “They don’t know about her illness, but they definitely know something is wrong. Ryder asked me the other day if he did something to upset his mother.”

My heart sank. “That’s tough. I assume she hasn’t told them to protect them?”

She nodded. “Their father went to work one day and never came home. Car accident. A tractor trailer driver fell asleep at the wheel.”

“Shit.”

“She doesn’t want them to worry that one day she won’t come home.”

I swallowed. “I’m sorry.”

She was quiet for a long moment. “I apologize for being snippy with you this morning.”

“It’s okay.”

She smiled halfheartedly. “It’s not really. Even if I feel like you planted something in my head that had a domino effect, you’re my boss, and I handled it inappropriately.”

“I knew we’d be a good team.” I looked over and winked. “*Inappropriate* is my middle name.”

She smiled again, but this time it wasn’t as sad. “Thank you for taking me to my sister.”

“Of course. Anytime I can help.” The fucked-up thing was, I meant it. It wasn’t just an empty offer. I wanted to help Naomi. I didn’t care that it meant my work would get even *more* backed up.

Once we got to New Jersey, her sister’s location was only a few miles away. Naomi looked at her phone and pointed up ahead. “The red awning. I think that’s it. She said it was called Rosa’s.”

I pulled to the curb in front of a small café. Naomi rushed to open the car door. “Thank you for the ride.”

“I’m not leaving you here. I’ll drive you both home.”

“We’ll be okay. She’ll know how to take the subway or the PATH whatever.”

“Your sister just passed out. She shouldn’t be riding the train.” I didn’t give her time to think it over. Instead, I got out and walked around the car. “Come on. I’m bigger than you in case she’s not steady on her feet.”

I would’ve known which woman had passed out even if Naomi hadn’t made a beeline to the lady sitting alone at the front of the restaurant. Her gray color and frail frame screamed *sick*. I tried not to let the way it made me feel show on my face as I followed Naomi to the table.

Naomi dropped down and squatted in front of her sister. “How are you feeling?”

“Nauseated and lightheaded. I just need to lie down for a while.”

“You don’t look so good, Frannie.”

“I’m fine. The doctor said this could happen. It’s part of the side effects of the treatment.”

“I think you should go to the hospital. You look terrible.”

Frannie started to get up, but fell back into the seat. I rushed to her side and kept the chair from toppling over.

Naomi frowned and looked at me. “This is Dawson. My boss.”

The woman looked up with a weak smile. “The good-looking jerk.”

“That’s me.” I grinned. “Nice to meet you, too.”

Naomi chuckled, but bent and pulled her sister's arm over her shoulder for support. "You aren't supposed to repeat the things I tell you, Frannie."

There was no way in hell this woman could've taken the train home. It was an effort just to get her to the car parked right out front. Once we got back through the tunnel and into the City, she fell asleep and snored a bit.

"I wish she would take some time off work," Naomi whispered. "Her job takes a lot out of her. She has to travel all over the tri-state area."

"What does she do?"

"She's in sales. Sells restaurant POS systems."

When we stopped at the light, I glanced back over my shoulder. "She seems pretty weak to be doing much of anything right now."

"I know. I'm going to try to talk her into going to the hospital once we get home. The chemo has destroyed her strength."

"What will you tell the kids?"

Naomi sighed. "If I can convince her to go, I guess I'll tell them she has a stomach bug, that she ate something bad."

I'd obviously never met her niece and nephew, but kids were smart. I still remembered my mother telling me everything was going to be fine after my dad was arrested—that it was all a big misunderstanding. I'd known that was a lie. Though, it wasn't like it was Naomi's decision to make, and sharing my experience of being lied to as a kid would only add to her stress. So I kept my mouth shut and drove.

Frannie was still asleep in the backseat when I pulled up to her apartment downtown. There wasn't anywhere close by to park, and the less she had to walk, the better. So I pressed the button to put on my hazards and double parked behind a UPS truck.

"I'll let you guys out here. But I'll wait to see if you can get her to go to the hospital. I'll give you a ride, if she agrees."

"You've already done enough. If I can make her go, I'll call an Uber. You don't have to stay."

"And put her in it alone?"

"No. I'll go with her."

"What about the kids?"

"Shoot. I wasn't thinking." Naomi chewed on her lip. "She's friendly with the elderly woman who lives across the hall. I'll see if she can watch them."

“I’m going to stick around for a while, just in case. I can’t park here, but I’ll circle the block in case you can get her to agree. There’s no rush.”

Naomi put a hand on my shoulder and smiled sadly. “Thank you for everything, Dawson.”

Naomi gently woke her sister, and I watched them disappear into the building, taking slow steps that weighed heavily on my heart. Once they were inside, I looked at my watch. It was 4:15 now, so I figured I’d give her a half hour to talk some sense into her sister. If I didn’t hear from her, maybe I’d shoot off a text before I left.

Though I ended up not having to wait that long. Five minutes later, my phone rang. I answered, half expecting Naomi to tell me to leave. But that wasn’t what she said at all.

“Help! My sister just vomited blood.”

Chapter 17

DAWSON

“So do you know a lot of criminals?”

Too many to count, kid. Though that was probably not the answer I should be giving a ten-year-old currently looking at me like I was a suspect. I couldn't say I blamed him. His aunt had practically carried his mother out the door, looking like she feared death was imminent, while simultaneously offering a forced smile and telling him his mother had eaten bad sushi.

“I know a few.”

“Did you ever meet Ted Bundy?”

“How old do you think I am, kid?”

“Forty?”

I frowned. “That was a rhetorical question.”

“A what?”

“Forget it. No, I never met Ted Bundy. I'm pretty sure he was dead before I was born.”

“Were you born before January twenty-fourth, nineteen eighty-nine?”

“No.”

The kid shrugged. “Oh.”

“Is that when Ted Bundy died?”

He nodded. “He was electrocuted.”

“And you know all of this because...?”

“I like to read.”

“About serial killers?”

He shrugged again. “Sometimes.”

“When I was your age, I read *James and the Giant Peach*.”

“That's okay. Not everyone can be smart.”

My brows jumped. Did this little shit just call me stupid? I was pretty sure he had.

“So what's really wrong with my mom?”

Crap. Naomi had been right to look nervous about leaving me here to babysit. I had no idea what the hell I was doing. “Your aunt said she ate bad sushi.”

He gave me a look that screamed *I’m calling bullshit* and rolled his eyes.

I stood from the couch. “Did you guys eat dinner yet?”

“No. Mom was going to order from Razzle, down the block.”

“Razzle, the ice cream place?”

“We eat it for dinner on Mondays.”

Now it was my turn to give the *I’m-calling-bullshit* face.

The kid groaned. “Fine. How about pizza at least?”

“Does your sister like pizza?”

“Who doesn’t like pizza?”

“I don’t know. Maybe you’re dairy free or vegan or something.”

“My aunt’s cool, but she’s got no taste in food.”

I smiled. “How about a Sicilian from Joe’s, with meatball on top?”

Forty minutes later, the three of us were sitting at the table. Well, technically there were four of us, since Leonardo had jumped up on a chair and was currently sitting like a human, watching us eat. Molly still had half her first slice left, but Ryder was keeping pace with me.

“You can really chow down for a little kid,” I noted.

“I’m not little. I’m ten.”

“Right. Yeah, sorry.”

He peeled a sliced meatball from the top of his pizza, tilted his head back, and dangled the piece of meat before dropping it into his mouth. “If you kiss Aunt Naomi, make sure you brush your teeth after you eat meat,” he said as he chewed.

“Uh, okay. Thanks for the tip...I guess?”

“I heard her tell Mom that beef breath makes her want to barf.”

I chuckled. “I’m guessing you weren’t supposed to hear that conversation.”

“Then they should talk quieter. They also talk about you sometimes.”

“Oh yeah? What do they say?”

He extended his hand across the table, palm up. “It’ll cost you ten bucks.”

“I just bought you pizza.”

“No money, no information.”

I shut the pizza box. "It'll cost you ten bucks if you want another slice."
The kid grinned. "I'm full anyway."

"Sure you are."

"You play poker?"

"Not with a ten-year-old."

Molly, who hadn't said more than a sentence in the two hours I'd been babysitting, now smiled. "Afraid he'll beat you?"

I might've been at this point... "Of course not."

Ryder finished chewing the last of his third slice. "If you won't let me sell you information for ten bucks, then at least let me try to win some cash."

"I think I'll pass, thanks."

After I cleaned up from dinner, I had no clue what should come next. Molly and Ryder had gone into the living room and were busy watching TV and playing on their iPads.

"Do you guys have homework to do?" I asked.

Ryder shook his head. He didn't bother to look up from whatever he was doing, yet I could still see the look of disappointment on his face. "It's summer. I thought lawyers were supposed to be smart."

Man, this kid's a handful. "What do you do all day if you're not in school?"

He still didn't look up. "I go to computer camp, and Molly goes to some stupid art thing."

"It's not stupid just because you don't like it," his sister said.

Ryder shrugged. "It is to me."

"That's because *you're* stupid."

Ryder finally looked up. "I'm not the one who can't even add."

"I can to add! I'm just slower at it than you! Mom said speed doesn't matter."

"Yeah, because Mom never lies to us. She's just had a lot of bad sushi lately."

Tears filled Molly's eyes. "You don't know everything!"

"Maybe not. But I know more than you."

"Alright, alright." I motioned with my hands for them to settle down. "Stop fighting. What time do you two go to bed anyway?"

Of course, Molly answered "eight thirty" at the same moment Ryder said "eleven." I pointed to the girl. "Think I'm going to take her word on

this one. Why don't you go brush your teeth and get ready for bed?"

Ryder looked at my wrist. "Your bracelet is right."

Forty-five minutes later, the little rugrats were in their room with the lights off. I doubted either of them was sleeping, both probably too worried about their mom. I wasn't sure what would be worse, knowing your mother had leukemia or the shit you *imagined* she might have. It wasn't the same situation, but I could still remember conjuring the absolute worst-case scenarios after my dad was arrested. I'd thought he was going to get the death penalty, because no one would tell me the truth. Adults sometimes think they're protecting kids by keeping them in the dark, but all they're really doing is scaring them and losing their trust.

At eleven o'clock, my phone buzzed with a text.

Naomi: I'm so sorry to take this long. They're admitting my sister, but they don't have any available beds, so she's basically lying on a stretcher in the hall. I don't want to leave her until she's in a room.

I typed back.

Dawson: It's no problem. Take as long as you need. I don't have anywhere I have to be.

I watched as the little circles jumped around.

Naomi: I can't thank you enough. How are the kids? I forgot to warn you not to play cards with Ryder. He taught himself how to count cards when he was five, and he's gotten in trouble for hustling money out of the kids at school.

I smiled.

Dawson: He tried to get me to play, but I declined. They're both sleeping now.

Naomi: Great, thanks. The ottoman in the living room opens. The cushion from the top lifts off and there are blankets and pillows inside if you want to try to get some sleep. The couch is pretty comfy. It's where I've been sleeping. I'll be back as soon as I can.

Dawson: Don't rush. I'm good. Really.

I didn't think I'd fall asleep, but I must've dozed off sitting up, because I woke with a startle, falling over to one side somewhere around 1 AM. Tomorrow I had a pretty full day, and staying up all night didn't land like it had in my early twenties, so rather than fight sleep anymore, I opened the ottoman and dug out a blanket and pillow. Slipping off my shoes, I tried to catch some actual shut-eye. But on my first big inhale, the smell of coconut wafted through my nose. My eyes sprung open. *I'm not imagining it this time.* It was the scent I'd caught around the office on a few occasions, and I was pretty sure it was coming from this pillow.

I turned my head, pushed my nose into the plushness, and took a deep whiff. My eyes closed. *Definitely coconut.* I took a second inhale, even

though I was sure, because it smelled so damn good. *Absolutely delicious.* A clean scent mixed with something else—maybe vanilla—but there was no mistaking that the main scent was coconut. And it was on the pillow, so it had to be a face cream or a perfume, or possibly even a shampoo. And if I smelled it, there was no way in hell the head of whoever had been lying here didn't smell it, too. Yet Naomi had made me think I was going crazy when I'd asked her if she was wearing the scent.

I tried to relax and ignore it for the longest time, but every time I breathed in, the smell made me more and more curious. Eventually, I pulled back the blanket and decided to do a little exploring in the bathroom. My first stop was the sink. There was a bottle of Softsoap antibacterial hand wash. I lifted it and brought it to my nose. *Definitely not this.* Next I opened the mirrored medicine cabinet. Inside was the usual array of things people kept—toothpaste, mouthwash, deodorant, Band-Aids, a few medicines—nothing coconut scented. So I turned to the shower and pulled back the dark purple curtain. Two shelves had been built into the tile. Nothing suspicious on the first one, so I started to lose hope. Then I picked up the first plastic bottle on the second shelf and turned it around to read the label.

Bumble and Bumble Crème de Coco Shampoo.

There was even a big coconut on the label. I lifted it to my nose and took a whiff.

Mmmm... That was it. As always, the smell made my mouth water. Though at the moment, it wasn't *food* I was salivating for. The scent now made me think of the woman who wore it. *Naomi has to know. She has to be doing it on purpose.*

I stood there with the bottle in my hand for a long time, random questions rattling around in my head. At the forefront of them all was, *why did she lie about it?*

I supposed it could have been innocent enough. Maybe her sense of smell wasn't that good. Women used a half-dozen products when they got ready, so perhaps by the time she finished her shower routine, the rest of the scents were more prominent.

Maybe that was it. Maybe she had no idea there was even coconut in this bottle.

But when I set the bottle back on the shelf, something else caught my eye. *A coconut on a different bottle.* Four different products were jammed onto that little shelf. I picked them up one at a time.

Bumble and Bumble Crème de Coco Conditioner
Native Coconut and Vanilla Body Wash

The last item wasn't in a squeeze bottle; it was in a jar.

Dr. Teal's Shea Sugar Body Scrub with Coconut Oil

Once could be an oversight, but *four* products with coconut? That was absolutely intentional. Now I wasn't sure what I was more riled up about, the fact that she'd gone out of her way to buy things that smelled like my favorite food, or the thought of her rubbing these products all over her sexy body.

Fuck me.

I needed to get out of the bathroom, get away from these smells, and stop thinking about her touching herself naked, or there was a real chance I would start to grow hard. And that was *not* fucking good while babysitting two little kids.

So I went back out to the living room couch. Sometime later—after at least an hour or two of obsessing over what it meant that Naomi had apparently been rubbing coconut scents all over her body—I fell asleep and woke to a soft hand at my cheek.

“Dawson?”

My eyes fluttered open. For a minute I was confused. Was I having a dream that Naomi was in my bed? Then I realized I wasn't home, and all of my clothes were still on. I dreamed better than that. I pushed up to my elbows and rubbed grog from my eyes. “What time is it?”

“It's six thirty. I didn't want to wake you, but I know you have to be in court this morning. I got home about an hour ago.”

Sun streamed in from behind her, causing me to squint. “How's your sister?”

“She's okay. Stable. They said she has a low platelet count from the chemotherapy, which makes it difficult for her blood to clot. Apparently she's been throwing up for a few days, so she's strained and bruised inside.”

I raked a hand through my hair. “Shit. What do they do for it?”

“They started her on a platelet infusion. That should help, but they're going to have to discontinue her chemo for who knows how long, which stinks. She just wanted to put this all behind her again.”

“I'm sorry. That's tough. You'd said your sister was sick, but seeing it and hearing it are two different things.”

“She’s been on the bone-marrow list for a few months, but now it’s more critical. Her body isn’t able to make the new blood cells she needs to fight infection anymore.” Naomi forced a smile. “Anyway, I don’t know how to thank you for everything you’ve done—driving me to Jersey to pick her up and then babysitting two kids you barely got an introduction to as I ran out the door.”

I winked. “I can think of a few ways to thank me.”

Naomi laughed. “I bet you can. But seriously, I really appreciate it, Dawson. Especially when I’d been giving you an attitude all day.”

I’d forgotten about her mood. It seemed like so long ago. “Is that what was wrong yesterday? You were worried about your sister?”

Naomi nibbled on her lip. “No.”

“What was going on then?”

“You were right, and I was pissed at you for it.”

My lip quirked. “I’m always right. You’ll have to be a little more specific.”

She chuckled. “You can’t make it easy, can you? Not even when I pulled the sick-sister card.”

“Nah. I wouldn’t be me if I went easy on you.”

“True.”

“So what was I right about?”

“Simon. He tried to kiss me.”

My jaw went rigid. “And you didn’t want him to kiss you?”

“I thought we were friends.”

“Did he back off when you told him no?”

She nodded. “He was good about it. It just pissed me off that you were right.”

“A man who is attracted to a woman isn’t her friend.”

“I still think you’re wrong, and that’s not always the case. But you were right this time.”

I dug into my pants pocket. “Hang on, let me get my phone out so I can record you saying that last part.”

She smiled again, and this time it reached her eyes. Naomi had momentarily forgotten about her sick sister, the two little kids she was going to have to take care of, the asshole she’d thought was her friend, and losing her license to practice law. It was a beautiful damn sight, her smile. And I wanted nothing more than to give that to her—even just a few

moments of forgetting. Don't get me wrong, I'd like to make her forget *other ways*, too. But I'd take what I could get.

Naomi yawned, and even though I would've rather stayed right here and told her jokes—do whatever it took to keep that beautiful smile on her face—it was a reminder that I needed to clear out. She needed sleep, and unfortunately, I had to get to court.

I smacked my hands on my thighs and pushed to my feet. “I should get going.”

Naomi stood, too. “Okay. I hate to ask for any more favors, but Molly and Ryder's summer camps don't start until nine thirty. Would it be okay if I worked ten to six today?”

“Take the day off. You haven't even slept yet.”

“I'm good. I catnapped on a chair when my sister fell asleep. I just don't have anyone to drop them off for me. Frannie's going to call her sister-in-law to pick them up, so I can work later and still get the hours in. I just need to shift my starting and ending time a bit.”

“Do whatever you need to do. But I think you should stay home and get some rest. Go visit your sister later.”

“I'm really fine. And I can pop in at lunch to see her.” Naomi rested her hand on my arm. It made my barely awake body jump to life. “Thanks again, Dawson.”

“Anytime, babe.”

She walked me to the door. “I just thought of how I'm going to say thank you.”

“Oh yeah?”

“My mother's coconut upside down cake. She used to make it all the time when we were kids. My sister has her recipe box. I'm sure it's in there.”

I was tempted to say something about what I'd found in the bathroom. But this wasn't the time, though I could definitely have some fun until it was. Catching her eye, I smiled. “Sounds good to me. You know I'll eat *anything* that smells like coconut.”

Chapter 18

NAOMI

“How’s your sister?” Dawson stopped at my desk the next afternoon on his way back from court.

“She’s doing much better. They gave her a second transfusion today, but her color has improved, and she has a lot more energy already. They’re going to keep her at least another day, though.”

“Well, do whatever you have to do workwise. If you need to be home to take care of the kids or shift your hours or work half days, it’s all good.”

I smiled. “That’s very sweet of you. But Cynthia, Frannie’s sister-in-law, came to stay for a few days. With the two of us, it shouldn’t be a problem working my normal hours. I do appreciate you offering, though.”

Dawson nodded. “Just a heads up, I have a client coming in with her now ex-husband. They own a mortgage brokerage company and were both indicted for mortgage fraud. They were still married at the time, but the case has dragged on for two years, and it’s become more complicated since they split up. Worse, when they told me they were getting divorced six months ago, I advised that they should have separate counsel, even though they were charged jointly. Now *Emily* represents the wife. So this should be a fun-filled afternoon.”

“Oh my. Yeah, that sounds like an interesting dynamic. Is there anything I can do to help you get ready?”

“No. I’m good. But I have a prospective new client I’m meeting with tomorrow. Maybe you could do some research on him and let me know what you come up with? I like to do a bit of due diligence before I sign on anyone new, to see what I’m potentially getting myself into and know what type of questions to ask when they come in.”

“Sure thing.”

“Thanks. I’ll email you over his name and what I know about his case.”

A half hour later, Dawson was on the phone when the receptionist buzzed to say his client’s wife was here with her counsel. I figured I’d help

out and get them set up in the conference room, so I went out to greet them.

“Hi. I’m Naomi Heart. I work for Dawson.”

The woman who I’d assumed was the client stood. But her attorney was too busy typing into her phone to look up. I waited. When Emily finally dragged her nose from her cell, she blinked a few times. “You...”

I smiled and extended a hand. “It’s good to see you again, Emily.”

She looked me up and down with her lip snarled and left my hand waiting. “Why are you here?”

“As I said, I work for Dawson. I’m a paralegal.”

She cackled. “Oh, that’s rich. Did he run through all the attorneys in the City and he’s been forced to resort to the help?”

The help? This woman really had a giant stick up her ass. Though I was at a place of business, so I wasn’t going to take the bait. Instead, I offered my best pageant-worthy smile. “Why don’t I show you to the conference room?”

Her eyes narrowed. “I think I know where it is.”

I ignored her and looked to the client. “Right this way, please.”

Once the two of them were seated in the conference room, I excused myself to let Dawson know they’d arrived. At the door, Emily stopped me.

“I’ll take a coffee with cream and sugar.”

Not that I asked... Yet I smiled once again. “Sure. And how about you, Ms. Webber?”

“Nothing for me, thank you.”

I didn’t feel the need to rush, so I went to Dawson’s office first. He was still on the phone, but held up a finger telling me to wait. His eyes skimmed their way from my feet up to my face. When they met mine, he grinned. I found it oddly refreshing that he never tried to hide his checking me out, and that the smile at the end told me he liked what he saw. Or maybe I was delirious from not getting enough sleep lately.

Dawson said goodbye to whoever was on the phone, swiped his cell off, and tossed it onto a pile of papers on his desk.

“Ms. Webber is here, along with her counsel, who didn’t look too happy to find out I’m working for you.”

Dawson frowned. “What did she say?”

“Nothing important. Just tried to make me feel small.”

“Sorry. I have no idea how I didn’t see who she was until recently.”

“It’s fine. Doesn’t bother me. I find it amusing, actually.”

“Emily? Amusing? You sure you got the right person?”

I smiled. “She wants to make people feel beneath her, but only an insecure person does that.”

“You have her pegged.”

“Did she make you the *asshole* bracelet, by the way?”

The corners of Dawson’s lips turned down. “No.”

Okay then. I thumbed over my shoulder. “I put them in the conference room. But don’t rush. Mr. Webber isn’t here yet.”

“Thanks. I’ll tell the receptionist to bring him back when he gets here.”

“Okay. I have to get Emily coffee.”

“Did you offer her some?”

“No. She told me how she’d like it.”

“Did the client want coffee?”

I shook my head.

Dawson picked up a case file and started toward the door. “Then we’re all out. I’ll be sure to let Emily know.”

Hours later, I was getting ready to leave for the day. I planned to stop and visit my sister before going home to the kids. Dawson was still in the conference room with the Webbers and Emily. Raised voices had echoed down the hall earlier, but it had been pretty quiet the last hour. I shut down my laptop and straightened my desk, then headed to the ladies’ room. I had to pass the conference room to get there. Dawson’s back was to the glass, but it didn’t look like they’d be finishing up anytime soon. Papers were scattered all over the table. I’d probably have to write him a note before I left.

In the bathroom, I locked myself in a stall and emptied my bladder. Stepping out, I was still tucking my shirt in when I found Emily leaning against the vanity examining her nails. She didn’t look up as she spoke. That seemed to be a thing with her.

“I’m here as a public service, woman to woman,” she said.

I raised a brow, intrigued, though I suspected she was going more for intimidation than intrigue. “Oh?”

“He’s a great lay. But don’t fall in love.”

I chuckled. “I appreciate your concern, but I assure you that’s not a problem.”

She pushed off the vanity and stood tall. This woman was so calculating. She now tried to use her size to make me feel small when her words didn't cut it.

“He can't commit. The woman who damaged him ruined him for the rest of us. It's a shame, really.”

I folded my arms over my chest. “And who exactly damaged him?”

A smile slid across her face. “Oh, my. You haven't slept with him, yet you have it bad.”

“I don't even know why I'm entertaining this conversation, but how would you know if I've slept with Dawson or not?”

Emily turned around. She leaned toward the mirror and used her pointer to fix her lipstick before flashing an evil grin at my reflection. “Because you'd know her name if he ever stayed the night.”

Chapter 19

DAWSON

15 years ago

“Reed, you coming or what?”

I glanced into the classroom again and tried to get my feet to move, but somehow I was stuck in place.

“*Reed*, let’s go already!” Ben yelled. “Or I’m the captain today and picking our team.”

I waved him off. “Go ahead. I’ll meet up with you in a few.”

He shook his head but disappeared into the gymnasium. Twice a month on Thursdays the eighth graders got a *free* period. It wasn’t actually free, because we couldn’t leave school or anything, but we got to pick the activity we wanted to do. My buddies and I had played basketball in the gym last time, but the school also offered a bunch of classes they tried to make fun, like music appreciation where the students were on teams and guessed the names of songs and the year they came out.

I wasn’t sure what activity was inside the room I was currently looking at, but there weren’t any guys participating. Mrs. Kline walked up while I was still standing at the door. I’d had her for home economics last year.

“Dawson? Are you joining us today?”

“Uhhh...” I looked down the hallway to the set of double doors that led to the gym and then back to the classroom. A dozen girls sat on one side of the room, smiling and laughing, while Bailey sat alone on the other. I wanted to play basketball with my buddies, yet I somehow found myself nodding. “Yeah, my knee is bothering me, so I’m not going to play with the guys today.”

Mrs. Kline held her hand out for me to enter the room before her. “Wonderful. Come on in.”

All heads turned to face me as I stepped in, including Allie Papadopoulos, whom I somehow hadn’t noticed was there. Her pretty eyes

lit up. “Dawson? *You’re* doing this class?”

I shrugged. “Sure, why not?”

The girls giggled. “I didn’t think you were the friendship-bracelet type,” Allie said. “Or I would’ve given you one already.”

“Friendship bracelet?”

Mrs. Kline handed me a plastic box. “This is a jewelry-making class. Didn’t you know that?”

Fuck my life. Why couldn’t this be the stupid music one? Though I didn’t want to sound like an idiot who didn’t even know what he was getting himself into. So I nodded. “My mom’s birthday is coming up. I thought I could make her something.”

A chorus of *awwws* went around the room, and hot-ass Allie patted the desk next to her. “That’s so sweet. Come sit here, and I’ll show you how to do it.”

Maybe this wasn’t a bad idea after all. I started to walk toward her, momentarily forgetting the reason I’d stuck around, when my eyes met Bailey’s. I looked between the two girls before responding to Allie. “Thanks. But I think I’m going to sit over there.”

Bailey’s eyes widened as I made my way over. But by the time I sat down, the look on her face I’d thought was happy had turned to something else—something pretty pissed off. “What are you doing?” she hissed.

I plopped down into the seat next to her. “Apparently making a stupid bracelet.”

She lifted her chin to the gaggle of girls. “Why aren’t you sitting with them?”

“Why can’t I sit here? Do you got the cooties or something?”

Her eyes narrowed. “You know, don’t you?”

“Know what?”

“That I don’t have alopecia.”

“You don’t?”

She rolled her eyes. “You’re not a very good liar.”

“What does it matter if I know or not?”

“Because I don’t want your sympathy.”

“Who said anything about me giving you sympathy?”

“That’s why you’re sitting here instead of with the hot girl who was batting her eyelashes at you, isn’t it?”

“No.” I responded *waay* too fast.

Bailey pursed her lips. “Okay, then why *are* you sitting with me?”

I tried to come up with a reason—*any reason*—but drew a complete blank, at least until my eyes found her violin case. “I was hoping if I was nice to you, you might give me violin lessons.”

“You play violin?”

“Well, not yet, but I’ve always wanted to.”

Her already narrowed eyes squinted to slits as she assessed my level of bullshit. “So you’re not giving me pity friendship, you’re using me?”

It sounded like a trick question, but I figured she’d rather the latter. I smiled wide to try to sell that I was an asshole. It wasn’t that hard, since I usually was. “Yeah, I guess so.”

Bailey took a minute to digest my response, but eventually she grinned. “Okay, but we’re making friendship bracelets in here, and you can’t wear your own because that’s bad luck, so we’re going to exchange, and you have to wear what I make you every day if you want me to give you lessons.”

I didn’t understand the current craze of wearing a million bracelets and trading with your friends, but even Ben wore a few, so it wasn’t a big deal. I shrugged. “Whatever it takes.”

For the next forty minutes, I strung a bunch of beads onto clear string. The plastic box Mrs. Kline gave out had letters and beads of all different shapes and colors. A lot of the girls in school wore bracelets that spelled out what their friends thought was their best quality—like the girl who sat next to me in English wore one every day that said *keeps secrets*. And Becca Norris wore a hot pink one that read *smiley*. Bailey was just going to get her name spelled out, and she would be lucky if I didn’t screw that up. I used a lot of blue because I’d noticed she wore that color every day last week. When the bell rang at the end of class, I was just knotting the ends of the bracelet.

Bailey stood and hoisted her backpack to her shoulder.

“I have a doctor’s appointment after school. So I can do it about six, if that works for you?”

“Do it?”

She arched a brow. “Did you forget already? I’m giving you violin lessons.”

“Oh. No. Yeah, six is good. I have football practice until four thirty anyway.”

“Meet me in the doghouse in my yard. The address is 210 Oak.”

“The what?”

“My dog has a big house in the yard. It’s the only place I can go where my mom doesn’t hover around me. I journal out there sometimes in the afternoons. The fence doesn’t lock. Just come around back.”

“Is the dog going to bite me?”

She held out her hand with the bracelet she made dangling. “No, Moose is afraid of his own shadow. You ready to swap?”

“I’m not sure if I knotted mine right, so you might want to check. Otherwise, you may wind up with beads all over the floor in your next class.” We exchanged, and Bailey headed for the door. “Don’t forget our deal!” she yelled without looking back. “You have to wear it.”

That sounded like more of a challenge than a reminder, like maybe she assumed I thought I was too cool to wear a friendship bracelet or something. Nevertheless, I grabbed my backpack and rolled the elastic over my hand and onto my wrist as I walked out the door.

Looking down at it might’ve been the first time I realized Bailey Anderson and I were going to be real friends. Because my bracelet didn’t have my name. Instead, it listed my best quality. *Asshole.*

Chapter 20

NAOMI

“You look better.” I smiled walking into my sister’s hospital room. Frannie sat upright in bed, wearing regular clothes instead of a hospital gown, watching TV, and eating what looked like ice cream.

“I *feel* so much better.” She set the Styrofoam container on the portable tray and pulled out her red T-shirt so I could see the wording on the front. “Like my new threads?”

“*Threads?* I don’t think you’re cool enough to pull off that word.” I chuckled and leaned over to read what was printed on her shirt. “There’s no party like a swab party?”

“The bone-marrow-registry people gave it to me. The website where you can get a free swab kit is on the back. I got you one, too, but yours has the slogan and website all on the back. I figured you’d like the bright red and maybe we could also put that fat ass that Mom gave you to work as you walk down the streets of New York and find me a donor.”

I laughed. “You really are feeling better.”

“Good as new.”

I’d spoken to her oncologist in the hall on my way in and knew that wasn’t true. The transfusions were only a temporary Band-Aid. Frannie needed a bone-marrow transplant, or this was going to keep happening. But she was in good spirits, and I wasn’t going to bring her head down by reminding her of that.

“Did they come in to draw your blood yet? I saw Dr. Stern in the hall, and he said discharge would depend on how your blood count holds.”

“Not yet. But the hematologist is really cute, and he should be in shortly. You should unbutton another button on that blouse. He doesn’t wear a wedding band.”

“Why are you trying to fix *me* up with the good doctor? You’re single too.”

Frannie snort-laughed. “I’m such a catch. A thirty-four-year-old widow with two kids and cancer.”

“You’re a catch, even with all that, *and* terrible taste in music.”

“You’re just jealous that Mom didn’t leave you her Barry Manilow album collection.”

I laughed. “Just because she left them to you doesn’t mean you have to play them daily.”

“He’s the showman of a generation.”

“Yeah, our great-grandmother’s generation. I’ve been introducing your kids to real music while you’re gone. I already have Molly humming Taylor Swift and Gaga.”

“Speaking of Gaga, how are my little monsters?”

Since my sister seemed like herself again, I thought it was time to be honest. “You need to tell them, Frannie. Ryder definitely knows something is going on. You feel better now, but the doctors said this was likely to keep happening until they can find you a donor. What are you going to tell the kids next time? You went to the same sushi place and got sick again?”

She sighed. “I know. I just don’t want to scare them. The C word is a lot to handle. I still remember when Mom told us she had it the first time twenty years ago. I was devastated and terrified. And back then there was no Google to fill your head with awful pictures and outcome statistics.”

“I get it, but they’re scared anyway. Ryder is playing his usual tough guy, but he’s smart. Dawson told me he even asked him what was *really* wrong with you.”

“What did Dawson say?”

“Bad sushi. He wouldn’t say anything out of turn.”

Frannie blew out a breath. “I’ll tell them when I get home.”

“I think it’s the right thing to do.”

“Okay, but no more depressing talk now. All I do is sit here and think about depressing stuff all day. The oncology ward is *not* a cheery place. Tell me something juicy.” She pulled her legs up and wrapped her arms around her knees. It made her look so young.

“Juicy? There’s nothing in my life that’s juicy. Heck, I don’t even eat juicy steak.”

“That boss of yours is pretty juicy.”

I smiled. “Dawson is handsome, yes.”

“He’s into you, too.”

“And you know this how? From the two minutes you were able to assess him from the backseat during the drive home from Hoboken before conking out?”

“He drove you to *Jersey*. Most men who live in New York won’t even do that for a blow job.”

I laughed. “Dawson is a good person. It just took me a while to allow myself to see it.”

“Why would you not want to see it?”

“Because I’m insanely attracted to him.”

“Attractive and a good person. That’s not exactly a bad combination, you know.”

I sighed. “Dawson isn’t the relationship type, and the last thing I need is to get hurt again.”

“You’ve gone out with men since you and Brad split up.”

“I know. But not ones like Dawson.”

“What does Dawson have that the others didn’t?”

I looked into my sister’s eyes. “Everything.”

“Oh wow. You really like him?”

“I think he has the potential to be important in my life, and that scares the crap out of me.”

“I can’t see why you would be gun-shy about jumping into a relationship. You know, since Dad left Mom a week after she was diagnosed, the love of my life up and dies on me in a car crash, leaving me with two little kids, and your ex-fiancé dumped you when you needed him most.” She smiled. “Those all sound like very positive influences.”

I chuckled. “When you put it like that, I’m lucky I drag my ass out of bed in the morning.”

“Listen, we’ve been through some ugly stuff and learned some hard lessons. But the most important one I’ve learned came recently, when the doctor told me my leukemia was back. It’s been a reminder that we don’t know how long we’re here for, and the only things that matter are the people who love you and the memories you can fall back on to give you peace of mind.”

I tasted salt in my throat as I reached for my sister’s hand. “You can’t make me cry. I have to go home to Ryder, who will see my puffy face and grill me until I break.”

Frannie smiled. “That kid is just like someone else I know.”

“Oh gosh.” I laughed. “Me and Ryder?”

She nodded. “He’s mini you. I wouldn’t be surprised if he winds up an attorney like his favorite aunt.”

“His *only* aunt. And I’m not an attorney anymore.”

Frannie waved that away. “Semantics.”

I looked into my sister’s eyes. “You’re going to be okay. I know it in my heart.”

“I am. But so are you. Even if you wind up getting hurt again. You’ll dust yourself off and keep trying until you find the right guy. Because you don’t want to be sitting where I’m sitting someday and have regrets about not taking chances in life, with a man or anything else. This is all we get, so make the most of it.”

I squeezed her hand. “I’ll try.”

Frannie smiled. “Considering you’ve never failed at anything, I think that’s all you have to do.”

Later that night, I had just put Ryder and Molly to bed when my cell phone buzzed. It was my boss.

Dawson: Just read the due diligence writeup on the client coming in tomorrow that you left on my desk. How the hell did you find out the guy has two wives?

Naomi: Public records search. He was married in Wyoming two years before he was married in New York. I figured he was divorced and the records hadn’t been updated. So I contacted the Wyoming registrar and checked. They had no record of the divorce, so I went down a rabbit hole and found both women’s Facebook pages. Both had recent photos with him. I still thought it had to be wrong, so I called both women and asked for their husband. One said he’d be home tonight, and one said he was out of town on business until Thursday. He really may be married to two women.

Dawson: Considering his honesty would be a key part of his defense, I’ll be asking that question as soon as he walks in. Thanks for digging deep.

Naomi: No problem. It was fun.

Dawson: How was your sister tonight?

Naomi: So much better. She seems like her old self again. Though the doctor said the infusions are only a temporary fix. She needs a bone-marrow transplant or this will likely keep happening. Her body isn’t able to produce enough healthy blood cells on its own anymore.

Dawson: I’m sorry. Will they keep her until they find a match, or will she get discharged?

Naomi: The doctors came by for rounds right before I left. They said if her platelet count stays in the same range overnight, she can probably go home tomorrow.

Dawson: Awesome. Glad to hear it. If you need to take the day, it’s not a problem.

Naomi: Thank you. I appreciate that. They said she'll probably be ready to go between eleven and twelve. If it's okay with you, I'm going to come in early. That way if her discharge takes a few hours, I can still get a full day in after I get back if I work until five.

Dawson: You don't need to put in a full day. But do whatever you want to do.

Naomi: Thanks. How did your afternoon with Emily turn out?

The dots on the phone jumped around, then stopped, then started jumping around again before stopping once more. It was a full two minutes before my phone buzzed. Not a long time, per se, but our exchanges had been constant, one after the other, until now.

Dawson: It was...interesting.

Well, now my curiosity was piqued.

Naomi: How so?

Dawson: Do you really want to know?

I felt my brows pull tight. Of course I did.

Naomi: Why wouldn't I?

The dots did the same jumping and stopping thing again for a while.

Dawson: Let's just say your attempt to make her jealous at the wedding succeeded. And then some.

Naomi: She told you she was jealous?

Dawson: Didn't have to. Found her sitting at your desk naked after our clients left. That said it all.

Naomi: What happened?

Dawson: The usual with her. Things got heated.

Chapter 21

DAWSON

Naomi huffed. “Can you please stop whistling?”

“I didn’t realize I was.”

She frowned. “You’ve been doing it all morning.”

“Sorry.”

“Whatever.”

I shook my head. She’d been off since I walked in today. Her responses were curt, and frown lines were etched at the corners of her mouth.

“Is everything okay, Naomi?”

“Why wouldn’t it be?”

“I don’t know. You’ve given me nothing but one-word answers since you got here this morning.”

“Everything’s fine. There, that’s two.” She looked pointedly at the file in my hand. “Did you want something?”

“Oh. Yeah. After you’re done with the Hausman petition, do you think you can go through this trial transcript and mark all the places that Mr. Abrams talks about his son? Mr. Abrams was convicted, and his appeal starts next week. The DA just added his son to their list of witnesses, so I need to memorize everything my client said. I don’t have time to read a five-pound transcript, and the electronic file is missing, so I can’t do a name search.”

“Sure.”

I smiled. “There’s a one-word answer again...”

Naomi rolled her eyes. “I’m just busy.”

My gut told me it was more than that. “Is your sister okay?”

“You asked me that already this morning. She’s fine.”

“That time of the month?”

Naomi’s eyes flared. There was fire lurking behind her irises. “Inappropriate much?”

I shrugged. “There’s Motrin in my top drawer, if you need it.”

She scowled.

I held up my hands and took a backward step toward my door. “I’ll be in my office.”

“Great. Maybe you can turn down the music you have playing in there, too.”

“Is that what’s bothering you? I’m making too much noise? Whistling and music?”

“*Nothing is bothering me. Just keep your happiness down, please.*”

“Fine. I apologize if my *good mood* is disturbing you.”

She scoffed. “Wonder why you’re in such a *good mood.*”

I narrowed my eyes. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Just let me get my work done.”

“Fine,” I huffed. “I have shit to do, too.”

Women. I’ll never understand ’em. One minute they’re smiling, and the next they’re shooting daggers at me. It was just as well, because Naomi looked smoking hot in the turquoise dress she had on. Maybe that’s what it was. Maybe she’d caught me looking at her ass and I didn’t realize it.

A little while later, an email notification popped up on my screen. Naomi had sent me an electronic message to let me know she was going to pick up her sister and would be back in a few hours, rather than walking the ten steps to my office and telling me personally. I guessed her mood hadn’t changed.

At three, I was in the break room making a fresh pot of coffee when she walked in. She frowned upon seeing me, but held up a grocery bag. “I’m just going to eat something quickly.”

“Take your time. Everything go okay getting your sister home?”

“Yes, she’s fine.”

Her response was more than one word and slightly less chilly, but still nowhere near warm. The coffeepot beeped, so I turned and fixed a mug while Naomi unpacked the bag she’d carried in.

It didn’t look like she was much in the mood for conversation, so I figured I’d let her be. But while I was putting the sugar away, I noticed cleaning supplies on the table.

“Is that for here?”

“Yes.”

“Is something dirty? We have a cleaning crew that comes at night, you know?”

“I prefer to do it myself.”

I shrugged. There was a bottle of Lysol spray and a canister of bleach wipes—less cleaning supplies and more disinfectants.

“Are you worried about bringing germs home to your sister?”

“Maybe chlamydia or gonorrhea,” she mumbled under her breath.

“What the hell are you talking about?”

She huffed. “Lord knows what germs were left behind from the naked woman at my desk.”

Is that what had her all pissed off? The thought of Emily’s bare ass on her desk? “You know I’m a germaphobe. I wiped that shit down after Emily was finished.”

Naomi’s mouth twisted in what looked like disgust. “I’m glad she *finished*. But I think I’ll make sure it’s actually clean.” She picked up her plastic lunch container and stood abruptly. “I’ve lost my appetite.”

Huh? I blinked a few times and backtracked through our conversation. “Wait. I didn’t mean *finished* finished. Emily didn’t come on your desk, if that’s what you’re implying.”

My clarification didn’t relax her twisted mouth at all. She walked to the garbage and tossed in her untouched lunch. “Really? And here I thought you’d be better than that.”

“Better than tha...” I shook my head. “I didn’t *fuck* Emily. Is that what you’re implying?”

Without looking at me, she scooped up her disinfectants and hurried from the break room. I followed on her heels.

“Naomi, talk to me.”

She kept walking. “There’s nothing to talk about.”

“Nothing happened with Emily.”

At her desk, she popped the top off a can and proceeded to spray every inch of surface.

“Naomi, stop for a second. Talk to me.”

But she kept on spraying.

“Naomi.” I touched her arm. She pulled it away like my hand was hot. But at least she was looking at me now.

“What do you want from me, Dawson?” Tears welled in her eyes, causing a giant ache in my chest. She quickly looked away, so I slipped two fingers under her chin and nudged until her eyes met mine.

“I swear, nothing happened.”

Rebecca, the new receptionist, walked back at that moment. Her gait faltered when she saw Naomi and me. “Uhh...Mr. Langone is on the phone. He says it’s urgent. I tried to get you on the intercom, but you didn’t answer. I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

My eyes never budged from Naomi’s. “Tell him I’ll call him back.”

“He said it was urgent.”

“I don’t give a shit.”

“Ohhhhhkay. Whatever you say.”

A fat tear spilled down Naomi’s cheek. I grabbed her elbow and started us walking. “Let’s go into my office so we can talk in private.”

“I don’t want to talk.”

“Well, then you can listen.”

I was surprised as shit that she didn’t fight me as I guided her into my office and closed the door. Maybe I should’ve been scared she was going to give me another black eye once we were alone. But I didn’t give a fuck. I only gave a shit that she didn’t think the worst of me.

I motioned to the seating area. “Do you want to sit?”

She folded her arms across her chest. “No.”

My hands found my hips. “Fine. We’ll talk right here. I have no idea what you think happened with Emily that’s got you pissed off, but nothing happened.”

She looked away yet again.

“Damn it, Naomi, look at me.”

This time, her eyes roamed my face, gauging my sincerity. “But you said things heated up?”

I thought back to our text exchange last night. “I said things *got* heated, as in we had a huge blowout.”

“Oh.” Her face thawed a bit, though not entirely.

“Do you believe me?”

She looked away. “It’s not important.”

“Clearly it is.”

“Just forget it. It doesn’t matter.”

“It matters to me.” The tears in her eyes meant she wasn’t as much pissed off as she was hurt. And if she was hurt, that meant it mattered to her, too. And if it mattered that much to her, then... “Were you *jealous*, Naomi?”

Her cheeks pinked. “No.”

But I knew in my bones, that was it. I took a step closer, and the scent of coconut hit me. I had the strongest impulse to run my nose all over her skin, take in every last delicious smell on her body. Instead, I caught her eyes. “You smell good enough to eat.”

She swallowed. My office was pretty big by New York standards, yet suddenly it felt very small.

“Do you believe me that nothing happened?”

Naomi looked deep into my eyes for a long time before nodding.

I smiled. “Good. Because the idea of touching another woman is laughable, really. I don’t even look anymore, which is insane to me. But I have no interest. You know why?”

She hesitated, but eventually shook her head.

I took another step closer. The coconut was all around me now, and it was mixed with the best scent—*her*. Naomi’s tongue ran the length of her bottom lip, leaving it glistening. It was totally and completely mesmerizing, yet I didn’t think she had a clue she was doing it. She didn’t have a clue what she’d been doing to me since the first night I laid eyes on her.

Naomi leaned in ever so slightly, and the tiny movement was enough to tell me so much. I stopped debating what I was going to say and just spoke.

“Because you’re the only woman I’m interested in.”

Her eyes bounced between mine. “What part of me are you interested in, Dawson?”

I’m usually censored around women, especially women I’m interested in, because I don’t want to give them the wrong impression of my intentions. But I got lost in her beautiful green eyes. “Twenty-two.”

Her adorable nose wrinkled. “Twenty-two?”

I smiled. “That’s how many freckles are on your nose. I counted them on about the tenth time I stalked your Facebook page two weeks after the wedding. I’m interested in every part of you, sweetheart.”

She smiled, and it felt like my chest swelled. Maybe some other parts grew swollen too. I closed the distance between us, cupped both her cheeks, and fused our lips together. She tasted even better than I remembered. I’d never been into drugs, but I’d seen plenty of movies where the addict slips a needle into his arm and his world stops spinning, euphoria coming over his tense face. I was addicted in two seconds flat. And that’s also how long it took for slow and sweet to go out the window.

Our tongues collided, arms wrapped around each other, and hands grabbed everywhere. It felt desperate, like I needed her to breathe instead of air. Yet there was also something else going on—something *more*. But for the first time in my life, I didn't want to run from whatever it was, I wanted to grab it and keep it safe.

My cell phone rang in the distant background, but it could've been Jesus Christ himself calling and I wasn't going to pick up. I couldn't stop touching her if my life depended on it. Grabbing a handful of ass, I gave it a good, firm squeeze and hoisted her up into the air. Naomi's legs wrapped around my waist as I walked until her back hit the wall. She dug her nails into my hair and yanked, letting me know she was right there with me.

My head dipped down to her neck, the smell of coconut making me even hungrier, if that was possible. I wanted to feast on her—taste and bite, savor and suck—before swallowing her whole. I have no damn idea how long we stayed that way, glued together and dry humping like two horny teenagers, but when I ground down and felt her wetness through my pants, I thought I might actually turn into a fourteen-year-old boy and come right here.

But then Naomi wrenched her mouth from mine. “Dawson, maybe it's important.”

“Of course it's important,” I said, gulping air.

She smirked. “I meant the phone. It's the third time it's rung in the last two minutes.”

Huh? I blinked myself back to reality, and sure enough, my office phone was ringing. I'd vaguely heard my cell making noise when we started, but that was it.

“Maybe you should answer?”

I groaned. “Seriously?”

She wiped her swollen mouth with the back of her hand. “We're also in the office.”

I gave no fucks. I wouldn't have stopped if we were in the middle of Times Square with an audience watching. But Naomi unlocked her feet from behind my back and lowered them to the floor. Meanwhile, my desk phone stopped ringing, and two seconds later, my cell started again.

“Why don't you get that?” she whispered.

I was still trying to catch my breath and had a steel pipe straining from my slacks. I looked down. “I need a minute before I can move.”

She giggled and covered her mouth. “Okay. I’ll get your cell phone for you.”

I stayed rooted in place. It was going to take a hell of a lot longer than sixty seconds to calm myself. The damn phone was still ringing when she came back and extended it to me. I took it and brought my finger to the screen to swipe and answer, but then stopped. “Wait.”

Naomi’s eyes met mine. “What?”

“I feel like when I answer this thing, all hell is going to break loose, and I’m going to wind up having to put out a fire.”

“Okay...”

“Tell me you’ll have dinner with me tonight. A date.”

Her hooded eyes went soft. “It’s the first night my sister’s home, so I should probably keep her company and make sure she’s doing alright. Her sister-in-law is heading back to Staten Island when I get home from work. She has small children.”

I felt deflated, but I nodded. “Of course. I wasn’t thinking.”

She smiled. “How about Saturday night?”

I smiled back. “Yeah?”

She nodded. “As long as everything goes okay tonight, I think that would be good.”

There must’ve been a shit-eating grin on my face because Naomi laughed and shook her head. “Stop being cocky and answer your damn phone already.”

My grin widened. “Yes, ma’am.”

I’d been right to think the phone call was going to turn my day into a shit show. It was Mr. Langone, an attorney client of mine who was out on bail after being charged with money laundering. The feds had just raided his office and were in the process of taking all of his computers and files. It was complicated because of attorney-client privilege. So I had to head uptown right away.

I walked out of my office only a few minutes after having had Naomi in my arms. Her cheeks were still flushed, hair a wild mess, and lips beautifully swollen. My cell was still in my hand, and without giving it any thought, I lifted it and snapped a picture.

She flashed a lopsided smile. “What are you doing?”

“Taking a picture of how gorgeous you look.”

Naomi patted her blond hair. “I’m sure I’m a mess.”

“A beautiful mess. But I have to go. Mr. Langone’s office is getting looted by the feds.”

“With a warrant, I hope?”

I nodded. “But he’s a lawyer, so I may need to get the judge who signed it on the phone and argue privilege.”

“Cairo vs. U.S.,” she said. “It’s a two-year-old case. I lost a shit ton of evidence on a bad search because of it. I’ll text you a link to the summary.”

“Great. Thanks.”

Naomi’s eyes dropped down. She covered her mouth. “Oh my God. You can’t take the subway like that. If you wind up having to stand, that thing will be right in someone’s face.”

I looked down. When the adrenaline rush had changed from sucking her face to saving a client, I’d forgotten all about my needy dick. But apparently it needed more than a few minutes to catch up. It looked like a small arm was trying to escape from my pants.

“Shit, let me get my suit jacket to hold and cover it up.”

“You should probably drive or call an Uber so you have a little privacy while that thing calms down.”

“Sweetheart, this thing isn’t calming down until after it’s inside you.”

Chapter 22

DAWSON

On Saturday I went into the office for a few hours before going over to Mr. Langone's office to do a quick summary of all the cases the feds had confiscated over my objections. By the time I walked back out to the street, there was barely enough time for me to run home and take a shower before I was supposed to pick up Naomi for our date.

At seven, I stood in the hallway of Naomi's sister's building, dressed in navy slacks and a white button-down. I had a jacket in the car since the restaurant where I'd made a reservation was pretty fancy. I lifted my hand to knock with an equal amount of eagerness and apprehension. I couldn't remember the last time I'd felt nervous about a date. It might have been never.

Frannie, Naomi's sister, opened the door and smiled. "Well, I wasn't delusional from fever after all. You're just as handsome as I remember."

I smiled back. "You look a hell of a lot better than the last time I saw you." Frannie's color had returned. Her cheeks were rosy and her eyes bright. It made the resemblance to her sister much clearer.

The door had been open three quarters of the way, but it suddenly whooshed wide. Ryder stood behind his mom and folded his arms across his chest. "What are your intentions with my aunt Naomi?"

My lip twitched. "I *intend* to feed her a good meal."

"What's in it for me? How about bringing a cannoli home?"

Frannie swatted her son playfully. "Stop being a butthead, Ryder." She motioned me in. "Come on in. Naomi's just finishing getting ready."

I followed the two of them into the kitchen.

"Can I get you something to drink?" Frannie asked.

"I'm good. Thanks."

She leaned against the kitchen counter. "So where are you kids going this evening?"

"Eleven Madison Park. It's vegan."

“Oh wow. Fancy. That’s Michelin starred, isn’t it?”

I grinned. “*Three* Michelin stars.”

Frannie chuckled. “You hoping that gets you bonus points?”

Considering I’d had to bribe a friend of a friend who works as a bartender there with my Yankees tickets for when they play the *Mets* in order to get a reservation, *definitely*. Yet I shrugged. “It’s a big menu. Figured I couldn’t hate everything.”

“She’s gonna love it.”

A door creaked open down the hall, and a few seconds later, Naomi walked out. I’d been in the middle of saying something—I have no damn clue what now—when I forgot I was even having a conversation. I might’ve also drooled a little.

Frannie leaned in with a smirk. “Close your mouth, counselor.”

But I couldn’t, because this woman literally took my breath away. *I am so fucked*. Naomi had on a kelly green silk dress with spaghetti straps that looked like a slip. It draped at the neck, showing the perfect hint of cleavage. Her pale skin contrasted starkly with the color, making it look even creamier than usual, and I couldn’t seem to drag my eyes from her pert nipples. She *definitely* wasn’t wearing a bra, and I might’ve offered a silent prayer to God to thank him for air conditioning. And if that wasn’t enough to turn a man inside out, then the *smell* hit me. Coconut wafted through the air. It made me salivate, but it wasn’t *fruit* I was dying to eat.

Naomi read my face and grinned triumphantly. “Hi.”

“You look...” I shook my head and tried to come up with an appropriate word to use in mixed company. But all that came to mind was *sexy as fuck*, *mouthwatering*, and *like a wet dream*. I swallowed and settled on, “really nice.”

Lame, I know. Though I made a mental note to tell her what I *really* thought once her sister and nephew were no longer around. Kelly green was definitely her color. It might’ve been the first time I understood why she thought bright colors improved her mood. My mood had sure as hell improved getting a load of her in that dress. Then again, I was pretty confident her outfit could’ve been black and I’d be floating on cloud nine.

“You said the restaurant was dressy, but I wasn’t sure how dressy. I hope this is okay?”

“It’s perfect.” *Just like you*. Yeah, I’m fucked. *Totally, totally fucked*.

I looked at my watch, because I knew we were cutting it close. “We should get going. The reservation is for seven thirty, and they’ll only hold the table for fifteen minutes.”

“Okay.”

Naomi kissed her sister on the cheek and mussed her nephew’s hair. “I’ll see you guys later.”

“I’ll walk you out,” Frannie said.

Her sister followed us into the hall, pulling the door closed behind her.

“I feel really good,” she said. “And I don’t need you to drop the kids off in the morning. I think it’s important for me to keep my routine, now that I’ve told them about my illness. So...if you wanted to stay out all night or come home really late, you don’t need to worry about us.”

I grinned. “Did you just give me permission to take your sister home with me?”

“Well, permission would have to come from her, but I’m giving my blessing.”

I rocked back and forth on my heels. “Good to know.”

“Oh my God.” Naomi covered her face. “You are so embarrassing.”

Frannie winked at me. “Just wanted to make sure she couldn’t use *me* as an excuse.”

“I appreciate that.”

“I don’t!” Naomi said. But there was a smile in her eyes.

Frannie disappeared back into her apartment, and I wrapped an arm around Naomi’s waist. “I didn’t think tonight would end in a sleepover. I mean, I was hoping, but didn’t think it would happen.”

“No one said it’s happening.”

I started us walking. “Oh, it’s happening.”

Eleven Madison Park overlooked Madison Square Park. You can tell how high-end a restaurant is in New York City by the amount of space between tables. I bet we wouldn’t even be able to hear the conversation of the people next to us in this place. Soaring ceilings made the room feel bigger than it probably was, and giant, multi-paned windows brought the lit-up outside City inside. The maître d’ showed us to our white-linen-topped table, and I waved him off to pull out Naomi’s chair myself. After, we ordered a bottle of wine.

“I can’t believe you got a reservation at this place. Simon tried to get one, and he said the wait was more than three months.”

Simon. Fuck him. Though I felt a swell in my chest for being able to do something that dope couldn’t. I hoped there would be *two* things he couldn’t make happen by the end of the night... “Apparently Simon didn’t try hard enough.”

Naomi smiled. She took the napkin from the table and laid it across her lap. “How did your day go? Were you able to get Mr. Langone’s files back?”

“I got an injunction to stop the feds from opening the boxes they packed up, but they still have possession—at least until we have a hearing on my motion next week. Thanks for that case, by the way. I used it. It saved me a lot of time researching.”

“Glad I could help.”

“Can I ask you something about your disbarment?”

Her face fell. “Sure.”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to bring your head down. But I was doing some research and read that disbarred attorneys can regain their license in some states by filing a petition for reinstatement after a certain amount of time, usually like three to five years. And you can also apply for your license in one state even if you’re disbarred in another.”

“Do you have a client who was disbarred?”

“No.”

“So you were doing that research for...”

I shrugged. “Out of curiosity. It just seems unfair that you can never practice again. Even criminals who are sent to prison get a second chance after serving their time.”

Naomi sighed. “I can apply, but my attorney said my chances are not the best. You have to demonstrate awareness and acknowledgment of the wrongdoing that caused the disbarment. He suggested I take some anger-management classes and try to make amends, then apply in a few years. But you have to go through a reinstatement proceeding, which is basically like a trial where I would have to testify, and I can’t imagine ever being able to stand there and say I regret my actions and feel remorse for what I’ve done.”

“I get it. But if it gets you your license back...”

“After everything happened last year, I really struggled to move forward. The only way I found I could do it was taking things day by day. Right now, working as a paralegal is all I can do, so I’m trying to make the best of it and not dwell on what could’ve been. I have years before I can do anything. A lot could change, so I’ll see where my head is then and where life takes me when the time comes.”

“Got it. Let’s change the subject.”

Naomi smiled. “Thank you.”

“How about I tell you how beautiful you look instead?”

“You already did that.”

I couldn’t remember the lame word I’d used, but whatever I’d said wasn’t nearly enough to let her know what I’d thought when I saw her tonight. “Your nephew and sister were in the room, so I had to make my comments PG.”

“And now you want to give me the R-rated version?”

My thoughts bordered on X at the moment, but R would suffice. I nodded.

She leaned forward. “I’ll bite. Let’s hear it.”

I wasn’t sure if she was intentionally giving me a better view of her cleavage, but it definitely helped me remember my thoughts from earlier.

“You look sexy as fuck.”

Naomi picked up her wine and brought it to her lips as she leaned back in her seat. “Thank you. Though that’s pretty tame.”

“I was trying to be polite.”

“Why would you do that?”

“Because I finally got you here, and I don’t want to scare you away.”

“I don’t scare as easily as you might think.”

I looked around, grateful no one was within earshot, then cleared my throat and leaned in. “So if I told you that seeing you in that dress made me want to do very bad things, it wouldn’t upset you?”

To my surprise, Naomi put her wine glass down and leaned forward with me. Her eyes sparkled with mischief, making my dick twitch in my pants. “I’d have to hear the bad things in order to be sure...”

Her rising to the challenge was almost a bigger turn-on than that dress. “It makes me want to lick you from head to toe.”

She swallowed. “What else?”

My eyes dropped to her full lips. “I dream about putting you on your knees and fucking that sexy mouth of yours. I wrap my hands in your hair and hold your head still while I fuck your throat.”

She’d asked me to tell her, but it looked like she hadn’t been expecting me to be so graphic. Her mouth dropped open. I smirked. “That’s right. Just like that, sweetheart. But you may have to open a little wider to fit me.”

She laughed nervously. “Oh my God.”

Unfortunately, the waiter had bad timing. He appeared out of nowhere and interrupted the moment. “Would you like to order some appetizers?”

Her. On a plate. I straightened and picked up the menu, looking at Naomi over the top. “What are you in the mood for?”

Her lips curved to a wicked grin. *Fuck my life. If she keeps this up, we’re not going to make it to the main course.*

I pointed to the sheet with the daily specials without even reading what they were. “We’ll take these two, please.”

The waiter nodded. “I’ll put that order in and come back to take your dinner selections in a bit.”

After he disappeared, I took a sip of my wine in an attempt to cool off. I groaned. “You’re killing me, Heart.”

“The feeling is mutual, Reed. Though I think it’s probably harder for me, considering I haven’t had sex in more than a year.”

I choked mid-swallow, and the wine wound up going down the wrong pipe. I started sputtering. The waiter ran back over to see if I was choking. I held up a hand and shook my head, even as my face turned red and I struggled to gulp down a breath. Meanwhile, Naomi looked amused as hell.

When I finally spoke, my voice was hoarse. “A year? Are you joking?”

“Afraid not.”

“On purpose?”

Naomi chuckled. “I might be pushing thirty, but I’m pretty sure I could still walk into most bars and find a willing participant, if I really wanted one. Yes, on purpose.”

“Why the heck would you do that?”

“I needed some time for me. I didn’t just get disbarred when everything happened. I also lost a fiancé. Plus, I wasn’t ready to share my story with a guy I’d just met on Tinder or whatever, so it was easier to not get involved with anyone.”

“When you say you haven’t had sex, you mean with another person, right? You’ve masturbated at least?”

She nibbled on her bottom lip. “I might’ve used a photo of you from the wedding on more than one occasion.”

I shifted in my seat, growing harder by the minute. This was going to be one long-ass night. Though there was something I was dying to know. “Did you let bonehead Simon touch you when you went out with him?”

She shook her head. “Not even a goodnight kiss.”

Thank fuck. “When was the first time you touched yourself and thought of me?”

Naomi smiled. “The night of the wedding.”

I groaned. “I was twenty feet away in the living room, and you were getting yourself off?”

She nodded. “It was the best orgasm I’d ever given myself.”

“I couldn’t fall asleep that night because I was so revved up over you. But I was afraid you’d walk out and catch me, so I managed to control myself. Though you’ve been the only material in my spank bank since the day we met.”

Naomi nibbled on her lip again, and my eyes dropped to follow. There were so many things I wanted to do to that mouth—bite it, kiss it, fuck it. How was I ever going to make it through dinner?

She ran her finger along the top of her glass, circling the brim. “Have you...been with anyone since we met?”

I shook my head. “It seems like we’ve both been busy imagining what it would be like to be together, yet it took us this long to even go on a date. Why is that?”

“I haven’t had the best luck with men, and after everything I’ve been through in the last year, I couldn’t handle any more disappointment.”

“Did every relationship end with disappointment?”

“Pretty much. All except Simon.”

My jaw clenched. “That guy’s name even pisses me off.”

She smiled. “I sort of feel the same way about *Emily*.”

“Then let’s not talk about them. What happened in the other relationships you had?”

Naomi sighed. “I’ve had three other serious boyfriends. The first was my high school sweetheart. We were together for three years, from eleventh grade until the end of our first year of college. We went to different

universities, but weren't ready to break up, so we did the long-distance thing. My semester ended a week earlier than his, so I went up to surprise him."

"Uh-oh. This doesn't sound good."

"It wasn't. After driving nine hours, I found him and some girl naked in bed."

"That sucks."

She shrugged. "Long distance is hard, and we were so young. So eventually I got over it and gave a relationship a shot again."

"What happened there?"

"Gunner and I—"

I interrupted, raising a hand. "No need to explain. Dude's name is *Gunner*. He's definitely a dick."

Naomi laughed. "He was. But it took me almost a full year to figure it out."

"And the last one? He was your ex-fiancé, I guess?"

She nodded. "Brad was older by ten years. He was actually the district attorney. We were together for almost two years. He proposed two months before everything happened."

"What went wrong?"

"He couldn't handle my disbarment or the humiliation I put him through."

"What humiliation?"

"There was a lot of press, and his name was constantly mentioned. The story became more salacious with the DA involved since there was a big conflict of interest. He was supposed to be the one to make the call on how I should be charged criminally, but he had to recuse himself, and his deputy handled it. Brad broke our engagement a month after I caused Mr. Flint to fall down the stairs. That's when I felt like I needed my fiancé the most, and he abandoned me. He said he'd worked too hard to get where he was to have his career ruined."

"What a dick."

Naomi smiled, but I could see it still stung.

"Yeah, so I don't exactly have the best track record with men," she continued. "Couple my dating experiences with my dad leaving my mother a week after she was diagnosed with cancer, and I probably have enough baggage to rack up a few hundred-thousand dollars in therapy bills. But of

course, I can't afford therapy since I blew through my savings paying legal fees and can no longer practice law."

"I'm sorry."

She shook her head and picked up her drink. "It is what it is. But enough about my depressing dating life. Tell me about yours."

"There's not much to tell."

"Have you ever had a serious girlfriend?"

"No."

"Oh."

"Does that set off warning bells for you?"

"I guess that depends on the reason you haven't had a serious relationship."

It wasn't the first time a woman had poked around in my past. Over the years I'd grown adept at responding without too many specifics. "Maybe I just haven't met the right person."

"Did you give anyone a chance?"

"I think so."

"What was the longest you ever dated someone?"

"Probably Emily. About three months."

"Hmmm..."

"What's *hmmm* mean?"

"I'm trying to figure out if three months is an adequate amount of time to get to know someone and decide they aren't Mrs. Right, or if that's the amount of time it takes for a woman to grow close to you and then you to push her away because you're a commitment-phobe?"

"Let me know when you figure it out."

Naomi went quiet. It seemed like she was debating her assessment of me. "Do you have any women friends at all? I know your silly theory on being friends with women you're attracted to, but what about the ones you aren't physically attracted to?"

I shrugged. "I work with a lot of women I'm friendly with."

"I don't mean work associates. I mean good friends—women you spend time with outside of work. And your guy friends' girlfriends and wives, like Lily, don't count."

I shook my head.

"Did you ever?"

Bailey wasn't someone I talked about often, so my first instinct was to lie. It would've been easy enough to just shake my head and move on. For some reason, though, I didn't. I nodded. "My best friend growing up was a girl."

"Do you still keep in touch with her?"

I hesitated. "Can't. She died."

Naomi locked eyes with me. I could see the wheels in her head turning. She was a lawyer, so she wasn't about to let go now that she'd latched on to something interesting. It would lead to an all-new round of questions. I might've answered her question honestly, but that was different than going down a long, ugly road. So I picked up the menu.

"We should probably figure out what we're eating before the waiter comes back. I'm not even sure what I ordered for appetizers."

She held my eyes a moment more, but then nodded. "Sure."

How the hell had we gotten from me telling her I wanted to lick every inch of her body to talking about Bailey? I had no damn clue, but I wanted to go back in time a few minutes. Instead, I settled for changing the subject.

"How long have you been vegan?"

"I guess about seven years now."

"What made you make the change?"

"My sister had just been diagnosed with leukemia for the first time. I spent a lot of time in the oncology department at Johns Hopkins, waiting while she got chemo or had her exams. They have a lot of literature on cancer lying around there, so I started reading. There are a ton of studies that link red meat to various cancers, so I figured it was something I could change easily enough that might give me a better chance of staying healthy. Both my mom and sister were diagnosed by twenty-seven. I started by cutting out red meat. I didn't really miss the burgers and steaks, so I wound up taking the next step and cutting out all animal products. Eventually, I cut out processed foods and dairy, too. I know it's not for everyone, but it makes me feel like I'm doing what I can. I promise I'm not one of those preachy vegans who criticizes what others eat. My friend Mary is like that, and even I want to stuff her mouth with sprouts when she gets on her soapbox."

I smiled. "Does it bother you when other people eat meat?"

"Not at all. Though sometimes the smell can affect me. I'm not sure why, since it never used to."

“Ah. That’s right. You don’t like meat breath.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Your nephew overheard you tell your sister. You might want to talk lower around that kid.”

She laughed. “Oh gosh. Good to know.”

We spent the next hour and a half enjoying our meal and polishing off a bottle of wine. I was glad when she declined a second, because I didn’t want either of us to be drunk. I wasn’t sure anything was going to happen tonight, but on the off-chance I got the opportunity to touch her, I wasn’t about to let the issue from last time get in the way again.

Toward the end of the evening, the waiter brought a slice of dairy-free cheesecake. I had no idea it was possible to make it that way, but it actually looked like regular cheesecake.

Naomi took a spoonful of the creamy dessert into her mouth, and her eyes shut as she let out a moan. “Oh my God. This is so good.”

Maybe I was immature, but I couldn’t *not* imagine her saying that about something else. My cock buried deep, her eyes fluttering shut—*so, so good*.

She scooped up a second spoonful and held it out to me. “Try it. It’s amazing.”

I shook my head. “However good it is, it’s not as satisfying as watching you eat it, trust me.”

She blushed. “Why do I get the feeling you’re imagining something different going into my mouth?”

“Because you’re a very smart woman.”

She laughed. “And you have a one-track mind.”

“I do when it comes to you lately. Does that bother you?”

“No. I probably shouldn’t tell you this, because you definitely don’t need any encouragement, but I find it refreshing that you say what’s on your mind.”

I licked my lips. “That’s good. Because I like telling you, though some things more than others.”

She shook her head, but smiled. “Tell me what you were like as a teenager.” Naomi slipped another bite of dessert into her mouth. “I bet you were a handful.”

“I was.”

“Were you prom king?”

“I didn’t go to my prom.”

“Remember that girl I told you about who made fun of my knockoff Uggs?”

“Emily, right?”

“She was our prom queen.”

“I would’ve voted for you.”

She smiled. “Did you play sports?”

“All of them. Football, basketball, and baseball.”

“Were you the captain of them all?”

“Only of the football team, at least until I got kicked off.”

“What did you get kicked off for?”

“Fighting.”

“Who did you get into a fight with?”

“Who didn’t I? I went through a rough patch my senior year and didn’t know how to channel my anger. Ben actually got me into boxing, which helped.”

“Ben boxed? I can’t imagine him boxing.”

I smiled, thinking back. “He took one lesson. First time the kid he was sparring with landed a light punch, he quit. But he only signed up to get me to try it. He was always looking out for me like that. I’m sure he read some book on different ways to channel anger.”

A few minutes later, the waiter brought the check. After I paid the bill, we walked out of the restaurant hand in hand. I wasn’t generally a hand holder, but I’d take any opportunity to touch this woman.

Once we hit the sidewalk, it felt like we’d arrived at the moment of truth.

“Thank you for dinner,” Naomi said. “I had a really good time tonight.”

“Me too.” I caught her eye. “I don’t want it to end yet.”

She gnawed on that lip she’d been nibbling on all evening before speaking again. “The kids will be sleeping, and I wouldn’t want to wake them, but...we could go back to your place?”

I was going to ask, but her suggesting it was so much better. I grinned. “Abso-fucking-lutely.”

Naomi laughed. “You can work the word *fuck* into anything.”

I brushed hair from her shoulder, then kissed the skin between the thin strap of her dress and her neck. She shivered. “It’s my favorite word. Coincidentally, also my favorite sport.”

“I’m not sure fucking qualifies as a sport.”

I rubbed my nose against hers. “You won’t be saying that tomorrow morning...”

Chapter 23

DAWSON

The car was quiet on the drive to my place, and I wondered if Naomi was having second thoughts about spending the night.

Even though I'd acted confident about what was going to happen once we got to my apartment, the ball was totally in her court. Naomi was a woman worth waiting for. So if all she wanted was to talk some more, have a drink, and maybe make out a little, I was going to have to find a way to control myself. Even if I wanted her more than a starving dog in a room with a raw steak.

Maybe that wasn't the best analogy, considering she was vegan, but that was exactly the way she made me feel. And it didn't even have anything to do with me being in the longest dry spell of my life. No, my hunger for Naomi Heart had less to do with satisfying my own needs and everything to do with my desire to satisfy her. I wanted to make her eyes roll back in her head, make her moan in ecstasy, make her *want me* as much as I wanted her.

When we arrived at my apartment, I walked in ahead of her so I could flip on the lights. Naomi glanced around.

"Wow, it's really big."

I couldn't stop myself. "I'll show you bigger..."

She smiled. "And...*he's back.*"

"Did I go somewhere?"

"You tell me?" She took a step closer and rested her palms on my chest. "You were awfully quiet in the car. What were you thinking about?"

I looked into her eyes. "I was reminding myself to be a gentleman."

"Why?"

"Because it's been a while for you, and my thoughts are anything but gentlemanly when I'm near you."

Naomi's arms lifted and hooked around my neck. She ran her fingernails across the back of my hairline. It made goosebumps prickle on

my entire torso.

“What if I told you I didn’t want you to be a gentleman?”

My cock swelled. “Then I would say you’re gonna be walking funny tomorrow.”

Naomi smiled. “Do you have condoms?”

“A whole box. Bought ’em earlier today.”

She lifted a brow. “Confident much?”

“Hopeful. Not confident.” I dipped my head and ran my nose along her pulse line. She smelled good enough to eat. “You lied to me about smelling like coconut.”

She lolled her head back, giving me better access. I sucked on her creamy skin. “Not technically. You asked me if I had perfume or hand cream with coconut in it. But I don’t. It’s shampoo, conditioner, shower gel, and body scrub.”

I kissed my way up to her ear and nibbled. “You bought them to drive me nuts?”

“Actually, I bought those to taunt you. I bought the one you haven’t smelled yet to drive you nuts.”

“What haven’t I smelled yet?”

Naomi moved her mouth to my ear and whispered. “The edible coconut oil I rubbed all over the lower half of my body.”

Oh fuck.

That was it. There was no going slow after that.

I scooped her off the floor and tossed her over my shoulder, fireman style.

She giggled. “What are you doing?”

I stalked toward the bedroom. “I’m about to eat my two favorite things: you and coconut. I figured you should be comfortable since I might not ever come up for air.”

I flicked on the lights as I entered, wanting to see every inch of her. At the foot of the bed, I slid her down my body before taking her mouth in a kiss. It was hot and heavy the second it started. Naomi pressed her tits against my chest, and when I tried to pull away to set her down on the bed, she sucked on my tongue.

I’d been dying to make her eyes roll back in her head, yet mine were the first to go. She bit down on my lip, sending an ache of pain rippling through my body and ratcheting the desperation I already felt up to near feral. My

hands slid all over her, but when her little hand went to my crotch and squeezed hard, I had to remove it, or I was going to wind up embarrassing myself. “Slow down, babe.”

“It’s been *a year*, Dawson. I don’t want to slow down.”

I smiled. “I get it. But that’s exactly why we need to. Let me take care of you first, so you’re ready for me.”

I didn’t wait for an answer this time. I guided her to sit on the bed and then dropped in front of her on my knees. *Thank God for dresses*. Though the underwear needed to go, and I needed them gone in less time than it would take to slip them down. So I reached up, gripped the lacy material, and tore it from her body. Naomi gasped.

I love that sound.

She’d just made it two seconds ago, yet I already felt desperate to hear it again. I nudged one of her legs wide and grabbed the other, slinging it over my shoulder. The smell of coconut wafting from her beautiful, glistening pussy made my mouth water. I would’ve liked to take some time to appreciate how pink and perfect she was, but I couldn’t stop myself from diving in. Flattening my tongue, I licked a delicious line from one end to the other. When I reached her clit, I fluttered over it before sucking it in.

“Oh God...” She arched from the bed.

I really thought I might come in my pants just from the sounds she made. One lick, and I knew I was addicted. She tasted amazing—like coconut and her. That thought made me grin. “Cococunt.”

“Wha...what?”

“That’s what you taste like, a mix of coconut and pussy. Cococunt.”

“Oh my God. Shut up and get back to what you were doing.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

I licked and sucked, rubbed and nibbled. Hell, my entire face—nose, cheeks, teeth, jaw, and tongue—got in on the action. Naomi dug her fingers into my scalp and yanked at the roots of my hair as she began to moan.

“Dawson...”

I sucked on her tight bud. “Come in my mouth, sweetheart.”

“Ah...I’m...ah...”

The sound of her coming undone was the sexiest thing I’d ever heard. There was no doubt she was close, but I wanted her to explode. So I slipped two fingers inside and started to pump as I massaged her clit with my

tongue. She bucked off the bed, and I reached up and held her down to the mattress.

“Dawson...”

I sucked her swollen bud harder and pumped faster and faster until her head began to thrash from side to side.

“Daaaaawwson!”

Her moaning my name was the sweetest sound I’d ever heard.

“Oh God! Oh...oh...ohhhh...”

And there it was. She jerked, her hands fell from my hair, and she came all over my tongue. I kept at it until every last twitch left her body, and then some.

After, her limp limbs splayed across the bed, and her eyes squeezed shut. “Oh my God. That was...otherworldly.”

My ego was pretty big, but it still enjoyed a good stroking. “Otherworldly, huh?”

Her eyes fluttered open. “You’re really good at that.”

“I’m glad you think so. Because I’ll be doing it often. My daily fix of coconut is about to be replaced with *cococunt*.”

Chapter 24

NAOMI

Dawson opened the nightstand drawer and tossed a long strip of condoms on the bed.

I raised a brow. “Big plans?”

He undid his belt buckle with a groan. “You have no damn idea.”

I laughed. But when he hooked his thumbs into his waistband and slipped his trousers down his legs, the smile fell from my face. *Oh wow.* I’d seen him naked the night before Lily’s wedding, so I knew he was big, but that was only for a few seconds, and it hadn’t been hard like it was now. I swallowed, feeling a little nervous.

Dawson chuckled. “You look scared.”

I pointed. “Have you seen that thing? It’s not a normal size.”

He reached back and tugged his undershirt over his head, then climbed onto the bed and sat me up. “Arms up.”

I was completely wiped out from the orgasm that had just torn through me, so I was happy to do as told. I lifted my arms and let Dawson do his thing. After I was naked, he guided me to lie back on the bed as he slipped on a condom. But he didn’t immediately climb on top of me like I would’ve expected.

Instead, he sat back, and his eyes roamed up and down my body. “You’re absolutely incredible.”

It was a simple compliment, yet for some reason, I felt it in my chest. I could see in Dawson’s eyes that he meant it. The way he looked at me made me feel more than just sexy. It made me feel cherished. Eventually, he weaved our fingers together and kissed the top of both my hands before covering my body with his. He took his time, kissing my lips softly and then smiling as he looked in my eyes. Our gaze never broke while he slowly pushed inside of me. I was wet, soaked even, but he still had to ease his way in.

“Jesus Christ,” Dawson muttered. “You’re so tight.”

He eased in and out, arms shaking like he was struggling to go slow. Once my body relaxed and accepted him, his thrusts grew harder and deeper. My gaze was riveted to the tension in his face—his blue eyes had darkened almost gray, and his jaw and cheekbones were set rigid. It was the face of a man intent on bringing me pleasure, even when he'd passed the limit of his control.

Dawson's eyes came into focus, capturing my stare. Our connection was intense—alarmingly intense—yet there was no way in hell I could look away. Never in my life had I felt so utterly and completely lost in someone, so raw and vulnerable. Yet I wasn't scared; I felt safe.

Dawson smiled down at me, and I wanted this moment to last forever. But too soon, my body took over. I clenched around him, loving how full he made me feel. Everything else in the world faded except for the sound of our heavy breathing and wet bodies slapping against each other. When I moaned Dawson's name, and my eyes rolled to the back of my head, he smashed his lips to mine.

"That's it," he growled. "That's all I've wanted to see since the moment we met. Now give it all to me so I can fill that beautiful pussy up."

"Oh God..." My orgasm hit like a tsunami. First the Earth shook, followed by waves and waves of ecstasy that pulled me under. I never wanted to swim back to the surface.

Dawson bit down on my shoulder, making my already vibrating body quiver. Once I started to come down, he picked up his pace, racing toward his own release. His entire body grew stiff, and his face strained as he pulled out to the tip and slammed back into me. I gasped and barely had time to swallow my breath as he reared back and did it a second time. Then again and again. The view was magnificent as I watched this beautiful man fuck me with everything he had. Eventually, he ground down one last time and buried himself deep, letting out a roar as he released. I could feel heat seeping into me, even through the condom.

After such an intense finish, I expected Dawson to collapse or roll off of me. But he didn't. Instead, his focus stayed on me, easing in and out and swiveling his hips to stroke every last ounce of pleasure from my body. His mouth slid all over my neck, shoulders, and chin, kissing and caressing, soothing and comforting.

With one last sweet kiss, he pulled out and left the room to take care of the condom. He returned a few minutes later with a warm facecloth and

used it to gently clean me up before settling back into the bed and lifting me so my head rested on his chest. I listened to his heartbeat as he stroked my hair.

“Get some sleep,” he said softly.

I yawned and snuggled closer. “I don’t think I could get up if I tried.”

He kissed the top of my head. “That’s okay. This is the only place you’re supposed to be.”

I woke up confused by the unfamiliar surroundings. Then the ache below my waist reminded me where I’d spent the night, and a smile broke out on my face. Pushing up to my elbows, I found the spot next to me empty, and I looked around Dawson’s room, seeing it for the first time in the light of day. Dark wood bedframe and furniture, light hardwood floors, expensive-looking area rug covering most of it. Very masculine, just like the man who lived here.

Catching movement out of the corner of my eye, I jumped. A large tortoise walked from the bathroom in slow motion. “I guess you must be Sheldon, huh?”

The animal stopped mid-step, and his long neck stretched to look up at me. After a good long stare, he went back to walking. I smiled. An interesting pet for an interesting man. But what time was it? There wasn’t a clock on either nightstand, and I had no idea where my cell phone was. I found my green dress wadded into a ball at the foot of the bed, so I stole the sheet from the mattress and wrapped it around me to go searching for Dawson.

And boy, did I find him. Shirtless, wearing gray sweatpants that hung low on his trim waist, he stood at the stove with his back to me, cooking what smelled like bacon. I took a moment to admire the view—the rippled muscles in his back made me wonder if he’d just come from a workout. And were those *scratch marks*? Oh shit. I must’ve gotten a little carried away when we woke up in the middle of the night for round two.

“Who’s ogling who now?” Dawson’s deep voice rumbled. Again, I jumped. I hadn’t made a sound, and he’d never turned around.

“How did you know I was standing here?”

He pointed the spatula at a shiny toaster. “Reflection.”

“Oh.”

“If you’re done looking, you can come give me a kiss.”

I tilted my head and tapped my pointer to my lip. “Hmm... This view or a kiss. It’s a tough choice.”

He turned and smiled, putting his hands on his hips. “Get your ass over here.”

I wasn’t usually much for being told what to do, especially by a man I was sleeping with, but when Dawson did it, it was too sexy to annoy me. I padded over and stood in front of him. He bent for a quick peck on the lips, then turned to put the spatula down behind him. The way his torso twisted gave me my first good look at the tattoo that ran down the side of his rib cage. *Bailey MMXII*. I’d noticed the ink last night when he took his shirt off, but hadn’t been able to make out what it said. And since a minute later he was inside of me, I hadn’t given it another thought. But now the comment Emily had made in the bathroom made sense.

Dawson twisted back, and my eyes shifted to meet his.

He smiled. “How’d you sleep?”

“Good. I just met Sheldon in your room.”

He nodded. “He was hiding in the bathroom. It takes him a while to get comfortable around new people.”

“What time is it?”

“Eleven.”

My eyes widened. “Wow. I haven’t slept this late in forever.”

“You did a lot of exercise last night.”

“I think *you* did most of it. Speaking of exercise, did you go to the gym this morning?”

“No, why? Did you hear me go out? I ran to the store to get this gross-looking vegan bacon, but I thought I was quiet.”

There was a plate of cooked bacon on the side of the stove, wrapped in paper towels. I peeled back the covering and stole a piece, taking a bite before I responded. “Because your back is so muscular.”

“I work out every day except Sunday. The gym is too crowded then, too many germs.”

“So today is your day of rest?”

He winked. “Not when you’re here.”

I was sore and sated, but one wink and I started to get worked up. “Is that so?”

“I spent the last hour scoping out the kitchen for good places to fuck you. I have big plans for after I feed you.”

“Oh yeah? Care to let me in on them?”

He turned down the flame on the stovetop and pointed to the kitchen chair. “I debated bending you over the table and taking you from behind. But the table isn’t that heavy, so it’ll probably move around a lot when I pump into you.” He pivoted and motioned to the granite countertop. “I could put you up here, but I really want to enter you from behind since we didn’t do that yet.”

I thought he’d been teasing, but apparently not. I played along. “Sounds like you were hard at work planning. Did you come up with something that works for you?”

He grinned and walked over to the kitchen table, pulling out a chair. “I’m going to sit here naked and you’re going to face away from me and rise up and down. That way I can see your ass and also watch my cock slip in and out.”

Oh my. That sounded good. Dawson took one look at my face, groaned, and turned to twist the knob on the stove. The flame petered out. “Fuck it. Breakfast can wait.”

He grabbed my hand and dragged me to the table. I laughed and let him take me, but when he pulled down his sweats and took a seat with a semi-hard erection already, the humor disappeared, along with my shame. I licked my lips.

Dawson stroked his length up and down. “Are you sore?”

I was half-tempted to lie because I was afraid he might stop what he was doing. The sight of Dawson touching himself caused an ache of need deep inside me. “Just a little.”

He grabbed a brown paper bag I hadn’t noticed on the table. When he pulled a jar out, my jaw almost fell to the floor. “Where did you get that?”

“Drugstore. I went out for it this morning in case you were sore.”

Dawson had somehow found the same coconut oil I’d rubbed all over myself before our date last night. “That is so sweet.”

His smile was crooked. “Not all sweet. I also plan to rub it all over your body and lick it off. It’s freaking delicious.”

I laughed as Dawson opened the jar and scooped out a heaping mound of the thick oil. He tugged the sheet from my body and positioned me to straddle him facing away. The smell of coconut permeated the air around us

as he rubbed the salve between my legs before slipping one finger inside. My head lolled back, and before long I was panting.

“I have no fucking idea why I never thought of using this stuff as lube before.” Dawson’s hand moved away, and he gripped my waist and lifted, guiding me onto his thick cock. “Shit.” He froze with just the tip inside me. “Condom.”

I wanted to feel him skin to skin. “I’m on the pill, and I had a checkup recently.”

“Me too. I’m clean.” He groaned. “But I’m not going to last going bare.”

“You won’t need to. Trust me.”

I whimpered as he pulled me down, shoving his long length into my body until my ass hit flush against his thighs. Yet I loved the way it felt when he filled me so completely. He guided me back up, and I looked over my shoulder as he slowly slipped inch by inch from inside me.

Dawson’s eyes were locked on our connection, and his voice was ragged when he spoke. “Just like that. So fucking hot. I’ve never seen anything sexier in my life.”

I tightened my muscles around him, and he let out a string of curses as his eyes squeezed shut. One of Dawson’s hands slid its way up to my throat. His long fingers wrapped around my neck, squeezing tight—just enough to leave me at his mercy. Maybe it should’ve scared me, to put so much trust in a man I’d just started sleeping with, but instead I found it exciting and erotic. I rocked up and down once, twice, on the third time he squeezed my throat tighter and we both went over the edge together.

After, I felt liquified—like my bones had turned to jelly. I collapsed onto his lap, unable to support my own body weight. It was the best orgasm I’d had in my life, and he’d given it to me in under five minutes.

“That was…”

Dawson shifted and cradled me in his arms. “A gift. That’s what everything about you feels like. I’m a thousand-percent sure I don’t deserve it, but I’m also too selfish to do a damn thing about it.”

“I should get going.”

Dawson and I had lounged around in a post-sex haze the entire afternoon. Now it was close to four, and I was still in his bedroom, wearing

his dress shirt from yesterday. He came up behind me as I searched around for one of my shoes and wrapped his arms around my middle.

“I’ll drive you.”

“The subway is faster. It’s only a few stops on the express.”

He pouted. It was adorable. “Why don’t we have dinner first? I’ll order us some food. Or we can go out, if you want?”

I planted a chaste kiss on his mouth. “I’ve been here almost twenty-four hours.”

“So?”

“I wouldn’t want you to get sick of me already.”

He grinned. “Clearly you have no idea how much I enjoy eating cococunt.”

I laughed and placed my palms on his chest. “This was fun. But I’ll already be getting the third degree from Ryder. Plus, I should get a decent night’s sleep before work tomorrow. My boss is kind of a hard ass.”

Dawson covered my hand and slid it from his chest down to his dick. “You got the hard part right.”

I chuckled. “I think that thing might be broken. It never fully deflates.”

“Not possible when you’re around.”

“You see? Yet another reason I should go. You’ll never be able to rest until that goes down.”

Dawson’s cell phone vibrated from the nearby end table. He looked over and read the flashing name, then held up his pointer. “Give me a minute and then I’ll walk you out. It’s my mom.”

“Okay.” I smiled. “I need to get dressed anyway.”

Dawson swiped to answer and wandered into the other room to talk while I changed into my dress from last night and found my other shoe. I did my best to tame my wild, just-fucked hair, but it wasn’t easy considering the hair accurately represented my day.

Out in the living room, Dawson sat on the couch with his bare feet propped up on the coffee table. This was the first time I’d gotten more than a quick glance at the central area of his apartment. We’d spent almost every moment in the bedroom, except for a few quick trips to the kitchen to refuel and have some chair sex. So I walked around checking out the space while Dawson watched me and talked on the phone to his mother.

My first stop was to a set of tall bookshelves. You can learn a lot about a person by what they read. Dawson had a few rows of thrillers, some

nonfiction, and a row of various books about the law. I was just about to move on, check out the rest of the room, when I noticed a book stuck between two David Baldacci novels. The spine was more colorful than the rest. Slipping it out, I read the back and realized there was a very good reason for that. The book was a *romance* novel. I turned and held it up to Dawson with a raised brow.

He shook his head and smiled but continued to talk to his mom.

Atop the shelves were three framed photos. One was Dawson in a cap and gown on what I guessed was his law school graduation day. The woman standing next to him was older, and at least a foot shorter, but the proud smile on her face told me it was his mother. Next to that was a photo of a man holding a small turtle. I could tell the picture was old, and it made me wonder if it was Sheldon and if perhaps the man was Dawson's dad. The last of the framed photos was two teenagers, one of whom was definitely Dawson. I picked it up for a closer look. The devilish smile on his face was absolutely adorable. There was no doubt that the girls must've loved young Dawson Reed. He had broad shoulders, shaggy, I-don't-give-a-shit-but-it-still-looks-great hair, a confident grin, and the same sculpted bone structure he had today. I didn't want to think about how many girls had swooned over that face, or that this was probably the reason Dawson was so incredible in bed. So I forced that thought from my mind, and my gaze shifted to the girl standing next to him in the photo. She wore a denim bucket hat and squinted at the sun. If I wasn't mistaken, I thought it might be the same girl in the photo Dawson kept in the office—the *one* photo he had there. I set the frame back down and moved on to look at the two pieces of art he had hung in the room. By the time I was done, Dawson was hanging up.

"I'll talk to you next week, Mom." Quiet, then he lowered his voice. "Love you, too." Dawson swiped the phone off and stood.

I smiled. "First, *aww*, I love that you stop what you're doing to talk to your mother and that you tell her you love her before you hang up."

He raked a hand through his hair. "I pick up because if I don't, she'll send a search party over to make sure I'm still breathing. My mom and my little sister moved to Florida a few years ago. We used to have Sunday-night dinner every week, but now we talk on the phone on Sundays."

"That's so sweet."

"She doesn't ask much else of me."

“Speaking of asking...” I turned to the bookshelf and pointed to the romance novel. “I *definitely* have questions.”

Dawson hung his head. “I don’t know why I didn’t throw that out yet.”

“Does that mean *The Cowboy Next Door* wasn’t a good read?”

“I wouldn’t know. Never read it.”

“Where did it come from?”

“Fucking Ben. Last year, he ordered it on Amazon and had it delivered here.”

“Why?”

“I went on two dates with this woman, and she was getting way too serious. Started talking about moving in together when her lease was up.”

“Oh my.”

He nodded. “Anyway, I took her out to dinner, and at the end of the night I told her I didn’t think we were right for each other. She lost it. Stood up and started screaming at me in the middle of the restaurant. The next day she sent me a long text saying I needed to get in touch with my feminine side, and she suggested I read that book. I made the mistake of showing the text to Ben. That book and a cowboy hat were delivered a few days later.” Dawson shook his head. “I should’ve known I was just giving him ammo he’d use against me for months.”

I laughed. “I love the relationship you have with him.”

“He’s like the annoying brother I never wanted. Half the time I want to kick his ass, and the other half he just drives me a little less nuts. But I’d be lost without him.”

I smiled and motioned to the top shelf. “Is this your mom?”

“It is.”

“She’s so tiny.”

“That’s my dad in the photo next to Mom, on the day we got Sheldon. I got my size from him. I must’ve heard about how I weighed nine pounds eight ounces when I was born and almost killed my mother a thousand times growing up. I still think she should blame the man she decided to have a kid with and not the kid.”

“Good point.” I laughed and gestured to the last pic, the one of him and the girl. “Is this you?”

Dawson’s face turned solemn. “Yeah. It’s me and Bailey.”

The name inked on his skin.

“She’s the one in the picture in your office, too, right?”

He nodded, but didn't offer more. I'd asked if she was his sister when we were in the office, and he'd said no. Since he wasn't volunteering information again now, I tried to gently poke around.

"Old girlfriend?"

Dawson shook his head. "You asked me about my longest relationship the other day. Bailey was my best friend. Though Ben might argue he's always been my number one."

Oh God. When he'd mentioned her, he said she'd died. I looked over at the photo before turning back to Dawson. "How old was she when she passed away?"

"Sixteen. She died the day before her seventeenth birthday."

"I'm so sorry."

He nodded.

"Do you mind if I asked what happened?"

"Cancer."

His answers were short and very matter-of-fact. Bailey might've died a long time ago, but clearly it still wasn't an easy subject. So I let it be. Sometimes it's best to let sleeping dogs lie. "Thank you for sharing."

Chapter 25

DAWSON

14 years ago

“What does it feel like?”

After knowing each other a year, Bailey and I had become inseparable. I even went with her to the hospital for her treatments when I didn’t have football practice, which was where we were currently. An IV dripped into her chest as we sat side by side on plush reclining seats.

“What? Chemo?”

I shook my head. “No, the thing that’s under your skin. The port. Does it hurt?”

Bailey had a rubber tube attached to her chest where her medicines were delivered. Supposedly it was easier than sticking her with needles all the time.

She shrugged. “It hurt for a few days after they put it in. It was sore like a cut. But I don’t feel it anymore really. Just a little pressure when they connect the IV to put medicine and stuff in.”

I grinned and lifted my drink. “What do you think would happen if we put this coconut milk in?”

Bailey chuckled. “I don’t know, but I think I’ll pass on trying.”

“Boring.”

“Do you want to touch it?”

“What? The port?”

She rolled her eyes. “No, my left knee, Dawson. Of course I meant the port.”

I’d been slouching in the chair next to her, but jumped up at the opportunity. “Hell yeah.”

Bailey leaned forward and tugged her blue hospital gown down a bit. Chemo was one of the few times she didn’t wear a hat and sweatshirt, and I noticed her collarbone jutting out. She’d definitely lost some weight, and

her patchy hair was all gone now. It made her look more like ten than fourteen.

“Go for it,” she said.

The port was implanted under her skin, with clear tape all around it and a lone tube that stuck out. I ran my fingers around the raised bump, feeling where it started and ended. “It’s a triangle?”

“Yep.”

Bailey watched me as I felt around. When my eyes lifted to meet hers, the moment turned weird. At least it did for me. She looked down at my lips, and I pulled back sort of abruptly.

“It’s pretty cool,” I said. “Thanks for letting me touch it.”

Bailey nodded and picked up her phone, but the awkwardness continued for the next few minutes while she scrolled—or at least in my head it did.

Eventually, Mrs. Anderson walked in with two shopping bags. Bailey’s mom usually left to run errands whenever I came to a treatment.

She smiled. “How are you feeling?”

“Fine.” Bailey didn’t look up from her phone. “Dawson just felt me up.”

My eyes bulged. “I didn’t... I felt her *port*.”

Bailey pointed to my face. “Why should you be the only one to make things *awkward*, you weirdo?” She laughed. “You are so red right now.”

“And you’re freaking evil.”

Mrs. Anderson chuckled. “You two are worse than brother and sister.”

“If we were brother and sister, it would be even weirder that he felt me up.”

I held out my hands. “I didn’t feel her up. I swear.”

Bailey’s mom set down the shopping bags and rummaged through one. “I was in Macy’s and saw the cutest dress. I thought you could wear it to the ninth-grade spring dance at school.”

“I’m not going to the dance, Mom.”

Mrs. Anderson sighed. “You don’t need a boy to go to the dance. Plenty of girls will go with their friends. I spoke to Katie Arnold, and she said Elaina is going with Laura and Penny.”

“Good for them. But I hope the dress is returnable, because I’m not going.”

Mrs. Anderson frowned and looked at me. “Are you going, Dawson?”

I nodded. “Yeah, I think so.”

Bailey’s head whipped up. “You are?”

I hadn't mentioned that I'd planned to ask someone to the dance. Allie Papadopoulos had pretty much told me that she wanted to go with me already. She was the prettiest girl in school and wasn't shy about saying she liked me. Bailey and I usually talked about everything, but for some reason bringing up asking out another girl had felt weird. I figured it would probably come out at some point, but now I wished I'd said something because that awkwardness was back again.

I nodded. "I'm going to ask Allie Papadopoulos."

Bailey's lips pressed together. "Oh."

Shit. Now I felt bad. I had someone to go with, but Bailey didn't. Though plenty of my buddies were going stag. "You should totally go. Like your mom said, a lot of kids are just going with their friends. Ben is going with the guys."

"Dances in the gym are stupid." She looked away. "I don't want to go."

Bailey's mom caught my eye and shook her head, silently telling me to leave it alone. Not long after, the nurse came to disconnect Bailey from the IV drip, and we were on our way home. It had been drizzling when we came in, but it was pouring by the time we walked back outside. Bailey sat up front, staring out the window while her mom drove, and I sat in the back.

"Dawson?" Mrs. Anderson looked in the rearview mirror as she turned into our neighborhood. "Are you coming to our house or going home? I can drop you if you aren't coming over so you don't get soaked. I think it's supposed to rain all night."

"I don't have much homework, so I can come over."

"Actually," Bailey said. "I'm really tired. You should probably just drop Dawson home."

Mrs. Anderson caught my eye again. She smiled sadly but neither of us said anything else.

Later that night, it was bugging me that I seemed to have upset Bailey about the dance. So I sent her a text.

Dawson: Hey. I don't have to ask Allie to the dance. We can all go together.

A few minutes went by before the dots started jumping around.

Bailey: Go with whoever you want. It doesn't bother me. I don't want to go.

Dawson: Are you sure?

Bailey: A hat with a dress would look stupid.

Dawson: So don't wear a hat.

Bailey: The only thing worse than wearing a dumb hat with a dumb dress to go to a dumb dance is being the only person in the gym who is bald. No thanks.

I sat for a long time, unsure how to respond. Then something Bailey had said when we first met gave me an idea. *Actions count more than words.* For now, I texted back.

Dawson: Okay. See you in the morning.

As usual, Bailey was at the bus stop before me. Her eyes widened when she saw me coming down the street.

“Oh my God. What did you do?”

I rubbed my hand over my newly smooth head. “You like it?”

“You look like a cancer patient!”

“But a *hot* cancer patient, right?”

Bailey just kept shaking her head and staring at mine. “Why would you do that?”

“You said the only thing worse than going to the dumb dance was being the only person in the gym who’s bald.” I shrugged. “Now you won’t be the only person who’s bald.”

“Everyone is going to stare at you.”

I grinned. “They already stare at me because I’m so handsome. What’s the difference?”

“I think the vibration of the buzzer you used might’ve rattled your brain. What if Allie doesn’t like it and doesn’t want to go to the dance with you now?”

“I changed my mind about asking her anyway. She’ll want to hang out with all her girlfriends, and I think it’ll be more fun to go with friends anyway.”

Bailey stared at my head. “I can’t believe you did this.”

“It makes showering so much quicker. Who knows? Maybe I’ll keep it this way.”

She smiled. “You’re nuts.”

This morning when I looked in the mirror, I’d also thought I was nuts. But the smile on Bailey’s face right now made me sure I’d done the right thing.

On the bus, the guys busted my chops about my new hairdo. Though I was bigger than ninety-nine percent of them, so no one pushed too far. Bailey sat two rows in front of me, wearing a bright aqua bucket hat today. She didn’t turn around, but she couldn’t have missed all the jokes. I hoped

what I'd done didn't backfire and upset her. When we arrived at school, we all stood and waited our turn to get off the bus. When Bailey's came, she stepped out into the aisle and started to walk. But before she got off, she stopped, turned around, and took the hat off her head—something she never did at school. Tossing it to me, she smiled. "I guess I was wrong when I made your bracelet after all."

Chapter 26

NAOMI

I wasn't sure what to expect at work the next day.

Our date had been perfect, and the nearly twenty-four hours that followed were spectacular. And it wasn't just the sex. Dawson had opened up, shared a vulnerable side that made me feel close to him. But I had been burned by men before. One minute you're happily engaged, and the next you're being dumped because you might soil his reputation. So my self-protective mechanism had me on guard as I walked into the office.

Dawson's door was already open, and his light was on, so after I settled in, I stuck my head in the doorway. "Good morning. I'm going to make coffee. Would you like some?"

"Sure. Thanks. I have an early meeting in fifteen minutes. New client—kid's only sixteen. He's coming in with his mother and another kid they charged as an accessory."

"Sixteen? What did he do?"

"Cybercrime. He hacked into his school's grading and attendance system and planted a virus. They lost all the information for the last three years."

"Was he trying to wipe out bad grades?"

Dawson shook his head. "That's the nutty part. Kid is a straight-A student and doesn't miss school. He just did it for fun. But when they traced it back to him, they got a search warrant to go through his computer and found that he was in the middle of trying to do the same thing to a cell phone company. It wasn't even the company he had service with."

"I've never understood why people do those types of things. What do they get out of it?"

"I'll be asking that question when they get here. Because it feels like I'm missing something."

The intercom in his office buzzed, and the receptionist's voice came over. "Hi, Dawson. Your eight o'clock client is here."

He looked at his watch. “Is the entire party here? Jared, his mother, Brendan—the other kid who was charged—and Will Archer, Brendan’s attorney?”

“They are.”

“Tell them I’ll be out in a few minutes.”

“Okay.”

Dawson looked me up and down and grinned. “How’d you sleep last night?”

“Like a baby. You?”

“Pretty good. My sheets smell like coconut though, so I woke up with a hard-on.”

I covered my mouth. “I hope you took care of it. It would be pretty inappropriate to go into a meeting with a sixteen-year-old like that.”

Dawson stood and walked—no *stalked*—toward me. “I was hoping you’d help me out with that.”

My eyes widened, yet I couldn’t get the grin off my face as I held up my hands, showing him my palms. “Stop right where you are, Reed.”

Shockingly, Dawson stopped in his tracks. “What? I was just going to the file cabinet.”

“You’re full of shit.”

He smirked. “Just let me near you for a minute. I’ll only cop a quick feel.”

I chuckled. “No way. We are not starting that in the office.”

He stuck his bottom lip out. “You’re no fun.”

“You have a troubled sixteen-year-old and his mother waiting for you, not to mention another attorney.”

“I’ll be quick.”

I shook my head. “Finish getting ready. I’ll go grab them, put them in the conference room, and see if anyone wants coffee. Also, I think we should keep things between us professional in the office.”

“Why?”

“Because this is my job, and I don’t want us to get into habits that will make it weird after...”

Dawson’s brows knitted. “After what?”

“Well, when we aren’t...doing this anymore.”

“When? So you’re already planning our demise?” He shook his head. “Maybe you can pencil it in on the calendar so I know when it’s happening

too.”

“I didn’t mean it like that. It’s just...”

“Just what?”

“Your longest relationship was three months, Dawson. I’m being realistic and trying to protect myself. I need this job.”

“Fine. Whatever.” He walked back behind his desk and started rifling through papers, avoiding eye contact. “I’ll be in the conference room in ten minutes.”

Well, *that* had taken a turn. And now I felt bad. But we were in the office, and I really did want to do a good job. I’d talk to Dawson more about it later.

I went out to the lobby and introduced myself to everyone, then showed them all to the conference room and went to fetch coffee for Will Archer, the only one who wanted any. Dawson’s sixteen-year-old client looked more like Ryder’s age. He also seemed terrified. After only a few minutes in his company, I was pretty sure he was going to break down in tears during the meeting today. I’d had my share of young defendants. Even when they were guilty, it never felt right.

Will smiled when I returned with his coffee. “Thank you. I was running late and didn’t get to stop for my caffeine fix. You’re a life saver.”

“No problem.”

He stood near the conference room door, while the two teenagers huddled with their moms. “You must be new?”

“I am. This is only my third week.”

“Did you come from another firm?”

I shook my head. “I worked at the DA’s office in another state, actually. I only recently moved to New York.”

“The DA’s office, huh? Me too. I left about a year ago to go into private practice.” He lowered his voice. “Not as easy of a switch as you thought, right?”

“No, it’s definitely not.”

Will sipped his coffee. “So what brought you to the Big Apple? Did your husband get transferred or something?” Before I could answer, he shook his head and held up a hand with a shy smile. “I’m sorry. That came out sounding chauvinistic, like the only reason you would move is to follow a man. To be honest, I’m just curious if you’re married. I got divorced last

year from my high school sweetheart. I never learned how to be smooth. I have no rizz whatsoever.”

I laughed. “It’s okay. I only recently learned what rizz was, from my ten-year-old nephew. But no, I moved to the City to be near my sister. I’m not married.”

I said the last words just as Dawson started down the hall. He frowned and nodded at Will. “Archer.”

“Hey, Dawson. How’s it going?”

Dawson grumbled something I didn’t catch.

Will lifted his coffee to his lips with a smile. “Good to see you’re just as chipper when we’re on the same side as you were when we were on opposite sides of the courtroom.”

Dawson’s face stayed stern. “Let’s hope you do a better job when we’re on the same team than you did when I kicked your ass a dozen times.”

“Ouch,” Will said.

Dawson gestured into the conference room. “Let’s get started.”

Will nodded but stayed at the conference room door even after Dawson walked in. He smiled at me again. “It was nice to meet you, Naomi. I hope we’ll see each other around again.”

“I’m sure we will.”

Lunchtime came before the meeting broke up. Dawson walked back to his office with Will in tow. Only one of them looked happy.

“I need the file back,” Dawson said as he entered his office. “Take it to Staples or have someone copy it and messenger it over by the end of the day. The preliminary hearing is next week, and I only received everything from the DA’s office on Friday afternoon.”

“No problem.”

The two men came back out, stopping a few feet from my desk.

Will looked over at me and back to Dawson. “Actually, I’ll probably return the file myself this afternoon. I have some business over here anyway.”

Dawson’s eyes narrowed. “Leave it with the receptionist.”

“I don’t mind walking it back to your lovely paralegal,” he said. “I wouldn’t want the file to get lost.”

Dawson crossed his arms. “I think it’ll safely make the thirty steps it takes to get from the reception area.”

Will looked between Dawson and me. “Or...I can just have a messenger deliver it instead.”

Dawson put a hand on Will’s back and started him walking toward the lobby. “Great plan.”

A few minutes later, Mr. Grumpy returned. He stopped at my desk. “Will isn’t a good idea.”

I thought I knew what he was referring to, but I gave him the benefit of the doubt. “As co-counsel, you mean?”

“His schtick with the ladies is coming off as a bumbling buffoon. But he’s a player. His wife divorced him after the third time she caught him with another woman. She’s a lawyer, too. Nice lady.”

I blinked a few times. “I wasn’t planning on going out with the guy.”

Dawson shrugged like it didn’t matter, yet his face showed anything but indifference. “Just giving you fair warning.”

I wasn’t sure what was more upsetting, the fact that the man I’d spent all day in bed with this weekend thought I might say yes to going out with a coworker of his, or the fact that I totally fell for Will Archer’s buffoon act. Before I could respond, Dawson had disappeared into his office. I sat at my desk for a few minutes, going over the morning in my head, hoping maybe I’d see things in a different light and calm down. But the more I thought about it, the more pissed off I became.

Eventually, I walked into Dawson’s office and closed the door behind me. “I don’t know what your problem is, but I’m insulted that you don’t give me more credit than thinking I would go out with someone you work with.”

Dawson sat behind his desk with his jaw clenched. “And I’m insulted that you’re already planning on me being just a fuck buddy.”

“I never said that.”

“Not in so many words, but you don’t think I have the potential to stick around for more than a few months.” He sighed. “As much as it sucks, I get why you’d think that.”

I opened my mouth to say something in my defense, then closed it when I realized that was *exactly* what I’d insinuated. “I’m sorry, Dawson. I shouldn’t have said that. Sometimes I start talking before I think it through.”

“And sometimes the truth is better off coming out than hiding behind couched words.”

I shook my head. "I'm just scared, Dawson."

"Of me?"

"Of getting hurt again. I don't have the best track record with relationships. And for the last year, I've felt like I was floating in the wind. Then I met you, and you feel like such an anchor already. That scares me, but it has less to do with you and your history and more to do with my own fears."

Dawson's face softened. "And I can't even tell you I know how to be in a relationship. There's nothing in my past to make you believe I'm capable." He looked down and shook his head. "I don't even know if I'm capable. But I like you. A lot."

"I like you a lot, too. Maybe we can just take it one day at a time and try to not focus on where things are going for a while. My trust issues don't have anything to do with you, and I think with time we might be able to grow to believe in each other."

Dawson smiled sadly. "This is already the most adult conversation I've ever had with a woman, and our relationship is only forty-eight hours old. So you might need to be patient with me while I learn how to communicate rather than getting pissed off."

I smiled. "I can do that."

Dawson crooked his finger. "Come here."

All the little hairs on my arms stood up. *Two words*. That was a pretty good trick for a man to keep in his bag. I walked toward him slowly. "Okay. But we're only doing a quick kiss-and-make-up. Sex in the office is still off limits."

Dawson's eyes sparkled. "For now..."

He stood and wrapped his arms around me, locking his hands behind my back. It made my pulse slow and my racing thoughts disappear.

"I'm sorry I was an asshole," Dawson said.

"And I'm sorry for projecting my fears onto us."

He ducked his head and brushed his lips with mine.

"But I'm *not* sorry about steering you away from Will Archer. The guy is not what you think."

"I never had any interest in him. How could I when I have you?"

Dawson's eyes jumped back and forth between mine. "You do, you know."

"Do what?"

“Have me. I have no idea how the fuck it happened so fast, but you do.”

Chapter 27

DAWSON

Lily's eyes lit up as Naomi and I made our way over to their table the following Friday night.

"I love having couple best friends!" She clapped and smiled from ear to ear.

I pulled out the chair across from Lily and shook my head as Naomi took her seat. "Why do I feel like we aren't going to get a word in edgewise tonight?"

Ben lifted a highball glass. "Good whiskey and good-looking women. Yapping makes my wife happy, and that means I'll get to be happy when we get home. I don't need to talk to you at dinner."

Lily rolled her eyes, yet the smile never left her face. I settled in across from Ben, and our dates immediately dove into a two-person conversation.

Lily leaned in. "You look...relaxed."

Naomi picked up her napkin and draped it across her lap. "Did I look tense recently?"

"It's the only way you've looked in the last year. Even over FaceTime, before you moved to New York, you looked stressed."

"I had a lot going on. I was unemployed."

Lily wiggled her brows. "I don't think the new job is what got rid of the tension." Her eyes shifted from Naomi to me and back again. "Anything you two want to share?"

Naomi pursed her lips. It looked like she was debating what to say. I thought I'd make things easier, so I leaned in and lowered my voice. "We're fucking. I'm happy. She's happy. Don't overanalyze it. We're taking it day by day."

Lily's eyes sparkled. "The couple that owns the brownstone next to us is retiring to Florida and selling. You two should buy it so Naomi and I can be neighbors when we give birth to Apple and Olive. We're going to look so chic pushing matching prams."

I dropped my head, shaking it. “What are the boys going to be named? Pear and Lime?”

“Actually, I’ve always had my heart set on Keanu.” Naomi looked over and winked. “He was my crush when I saw my first *Matrix* movie.”

I smiled and rested a hand on her thigh under the table. It wasn’t sexual, but it made me warm in other ways. Normally feelings like that left me unsettled, but with Naomi it was just the opposite. I felt content for the first time in as long as I could remember—maybe ever.

Over dinner, Ben told some story about a defendant’s sixteen-year-old son who was arrested for stealing expensive racing bikes and storing them in the garage of his girlfriend’s parents’ house. Apparently, the kid tried to blame the theft on his girlfriend when he got caught, and now he had cases against both father and son.

“I guess the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree,” Ben said. “The father put all the money he embezzled from his employer in an account in his wife’s name and tried to let her take the fall.” He scooped a mound of red velvet cake into his mouth and pointed his fork at me. “Speaking of bikes, remember when we built that ramp?”

“Remember?” I groaned. “My balls still hurt whenever I walk past one of those stupid Citibike racks.”

Ben chuckled. “When Dawson and I were maybe about thirteen, we decided to build a bike ramp, sort of like an Evil Knievel jump. We had no idea what the hell we were doing, so the thing wound up being way higher than it should have. The part you jumped off was probably more than three feet tall. We weren’t the sharpest knives in the drawer, so we set it up out front on the concrete street, rather than on the grass.” He looked at me. “We built the damn thing on the grass. Why the hell did we drag it all the way out front instead of trying it in the yard where we would’ve had a softer landing?”

I shook my head. “No clue.”

“Anyway,” Ben continued. “We argued over which one of us idiots was going to try it out first. As usual, Dawson won. Come to think of it, the idiot always won our arguments, even back then. No wonder he’s a good lawyer.”

“Yeah, I won alright. A trip to the emergency room.”

Ben laughed. “Typical Dawson. He went all-in. Backed up half a block and pedaled as fast as he could. When he got to the end of the ramp, he

pulled back on the handlebars. I swear, he cleared at least twelve feet of air.”

I squeezed my thighs together and winced. That was a pain you never forget. “Can we please not talk about this?”

“What goes up fast comes down twice as hard.” Ben demonstrated with his hand sailing upward and then hurtling back down. He ended with both hands opening and closing in an explosion-like crash. “His balls swelled bigger than my head, and he had to get eighteen stitches in his sac.”

“No amount of lidocaine took away the pain of the embarrassment of a female doctor and female nurse sewing up my ball.”

Ben laughed. “On the bright side, it gave you an excuse to show your junk to a girl for the first time. Pretty sure that’s what made Bailey fall for you, rather than me. I’m man enough to admit my buddy’s not only got me beat with his courtroom wins, but he’s got me beat in the dick game, too.”

Everyone laughed, though the mention of Bailey falling for me caused a tightness in my chest.

Naomi bumped my shoulder playfully. “Aww... Did you hurt your pee-pee when you were a boy?”

I tried to smile, and even thought I did a pretty good job of not letting it affect me the rest of the evening, but apparently I was wrong.

The restaurant was only a few blocks from Naomi’s sister’s apartment, and it was a nice night, so after dinner, I thought maybe we could walk.

“Are you okay to walk the five or six blocks to Frannie’s in those shoes?”

“Oh. Yeah, sure.”

We walked side by side for two blocks, making small talk until Naomi abruptly stopped. “What’s going on with you?”

“What are you talking about?”

“You’ve been talking about the weather since we left the restaurant. You don’t discuss the *fall foliage* in the City when we’re alone; you say dirty things.” Naomi looked into my eyes like she was expecting an answer. But I didn’t have one. Eventually she sighed. “What’s the deal with Bailey, Dawson?”

I blinked. “What?”

“I know you lost her, and she was someone close to you. But why can’t you talk about her at all?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Yes, you do. We were all having such a great time at dinner until Ben told that story. You clammed up at the mention of her name and...and you’re walking me home instead of walking me to your place where we could be alone and do the dirty things you should be telling me about.”

“I’m just tired. It was a long week.”

Naomi held my eyes. “Please don’t do that, Dawson. I know we agreed to take things one day at a time and not jump into anything serious, but you’re shutting me out.”

I swallowed. If any other woman had tried to dig into my past, I would’ve done worse than shut down. I would’ve had her in an Uber by now. But I didn’t want to shut Naomi out, I really didn’t. So I took a deep breath and looked away when I spoke. “I hurt her. And she’s gone. Most days I’m able to not think about it. But when I do, I hate myself for what I did. I’ll never be able to take it back or tell her how sorry I am.”

Naomi’s face softened. “Oh, Dawson. Have you ever talked about it with anyone? Like a professional or...anyone?”

My eyes slanted to meet hers. “No.”

“Do you think maybe you should?”

I held out a hand. “I don’t want you to go home to your sister’s tonight.”

Naomi smiled sadly yet put her hand in mine. “I was disappointed that you didn’t ask me to come over. I even packed a T-shirt and shorts and underwear in my bag, assuming you would.”

“Is it too late now?”

She shook her head. “No. And thank you for sharing about Bailey with me. I won’t push you to talk about it anymore, but I think you should speak to someone about it. You need to find a way to come to terms with whatever happened between you two.”

Chapter 28

DAWSON

13 years ago

“You know, I can barely fit in this thing anymore.” I crawled into the doghouse in Bailey’s yard. “It’s a good thing you have a Saint Bernard and not one of those little hot-dog dogs. And I guess the saying is true that dogs don’t shit where they sleep.”

Bailey stopped writing in her journal. “I’m pretty sure the saying is dogs don’t shit where they *eat*, not sleep.”

I looked around. “There’s shit in here?”

She laughed. “No. Moose doesn’t poop in here either. He only comes in if it’s raining when Mom lets him out.”

I pointed to her notebook. “What are you writing about today?”

“Just my thoughts.”

“About what?”

“What it’s going to feel like to die.”

Heat rushed through me. “Shut up. Don’t say that.”

“Why?” She shrugged. “It’s going to happen, Dawson.”

“Obviously. I mean, we all die. But you’re saying it like it’s gonna happen next week.”

“Maybe not next week. But I’m not going to live to be old like you most likely will.”

Two weeks ago, Bailey had gotten her regular scans she did four times a year. They’d showed new tumors on her liver. She’d barely finished chemo on the ones she already had on her lungs.

I swallowed and changed the subject. “What do you want for your birthday next week? My mom’s been bugging me to find out.”

She tapped her pen against her lip. “Hmm... You know what I’d really like?”

“What?”

“You to write me a letter.”

My face wrinkled up. “About what?”

“Your feelings, what else?”

“Let me get this straight. You want me to write my feelings down and give them to you to read? So you can use it to what? Poke fun? No freaking way.”

Bailey smiled. “What if I promise I won’t read it?”

“Then why the hell would I write it?”

“Because it’s cathartic, dummy.”

“I think I’ll pass. What else do you want?”

“Nothing. That’s the only thing I want.”

“Come on. There’s gotta be something else. How about a charm or something? All the girls wear those bracelets with the charms that slip on.”

She lifted her wrist, showing me the friendship bracelet I’d made her two years ago. “This is the only one I need.”

I still wore the one she’d made me every day, too. Even if mine did say *asshole*. “What about a new bicycle helmet?”

“After your ball-crushing incident? No thanks. I think I’m done with my bike.” She paused and looked me in the eyes. “I really want you to write me a letter. I think you need to learn how to express your feelings.”

I didn’t say it, but I’d recently gotten to feel up Allie Papadopoulos, and that was all the *feelings* I wanted to express. Though it was impossible for me to say no to Bailey, and she knew it. “Why are you such a pain in my ass?”

She smirked. “Does that mean you’ll do it?”

I wagged a finger at her. “If you open it, I’m never going to speak to you again.”

She made an X across her chest with her finger. “I cross my heart, I won’t.”

“Fine.” I groaned. “But I’m pretty sure you’re the one who should be wearing my bracelet.”

Chapter 29

DAWSON

The following morning, a nightmare jolted me awake at 3 AM in a cold sweat. I looked over at the beautiful lady sleeping peacefully next to me and felt like shit for having a dream about another woman. Technically, the dream didn't feature a woman. But I knew what it meant. I'd had the same recurring dream dozens of times. Though it had been years since I'd last had it before tonight. I never remembered the beginning or saw how it ended. I only saw myself standing alone in white space, and a voice from above asks what I've done in life to repent for my sins. When I can't come up with anything, a trap door opens, and I start falling. I wake up grabbing the mattress so I don't fall off.

My heart was still racing after a few deep breaths. I knew I wouldn't fall back asleep like this, so I slipped out of bed, careful not to wake Naomi. The last thing I needed was for her to know my old nightmare had come back. She already thought I needed to see a shrink. In the kitchen, I downed a glass of water to cool off and opened the window to listen to the sounds of the city that never sleeps until my heartbeat returned to normal. On my way back to the bedroom, I couldn't help myself. I stopped at the framed photo of Bailey and me.

Maybe Naomi was right, and I should talk to someone. Though I couldn't see how that would help. No amount of therapy would ever change what happened. I'd be better off trying to invest my time in being a better person. Maybe then I'd at least have an answer for the voice in my dream, and he wouldn't drop-kick me into hell.

I stared down at the photo for a long time before setting it on the shelf and sneaking back to bed. Naomi had turned over, her back to me now, and I was tempted to lift the T-shirt she had on and wake her up with my head between her legs to get my mind where it belonged. But even I wasn't a big enough asshole to use a woman to help me forget memories of someone else. Instead, I did something I never do. I stared up at the ceiling and made

a silent plea to the big guy above. He'd started the conversation tonight anyway.

Tell me how to stop having these dreams and not screw things up with this woman. Please, I'll do anything.

Of course, there was no magic answer. So after a while, I turned on my side and watched Naomi's back rise and fall. My lids eventually grew heavy watching the rhythmic motion, and I was just about to nod off when my eyes focused on the print on the back of her T-shirt for the first time.

There's no party like a swab party.

Underneath it, smaller letters read, *Join the bone-marrow registry and save a life.*

It took a few seconds to sink in, but when it did, my heart started to pound again. *Holy shit. Did I just get an answer from the big guy?*

I woke hours later to something tickling my stomach. I was lying on my back and reached, half-asleep, to brush whatever it was away. Only to realize it wasn't an *it* but a *she*. And not just any *she*, but my real-life wet dream in the flesh. Naomi sat on top of me, straddling my hips. She bit down on her pouty bottom lip as she grabbed for the hemline of the T-shirt she'd worn to bed and lifted it over her head.

She had the best tits I'd ever seen, full with a natural lilt and pink, perky nipples that made my mouth salivate. I leaned up to reach for them, but Naomi held up a finger, wagging it back and forth.

"Not so fast," she said. "You did all the work last night, so it's my turn to pay you back."

"I don't need to go tit for tat. In fact..." I attempted to reach for her beautiful breasts again. "I prefer *tit* and more *tit*."

Naomi smiled, but she nudged me back again. "After. But first...I'm going to have my fun." She wrapped her fingers around my already half-hard dick and lifted it, bending at the waist to run her tongue along the crown. Her big green eyes held a devilish glint as she looked up at me from under her long lashes.

I hissed out a string of curses and reached for the hair that had fallen over her face, wanting an unobstructed view.

"Teach me," Naomi murmured. "Teach me how you like to be sucked."

Jesus Christ. I fucking loved when she talked like that. I hardened painfully fast and wanted to hear more from her. “Say that again. That you want me to teach you.”

She ran her pink tongue across her bottom lip. “I want you to teach me how to suck *your cock.*”

Fuck. This was going to be embarrassingly fast, and she didn’t even have me in her mouth yet. I could’ve come just from listening to her say words like *teach me, suck,* and *cock.* I groaned and threaded my fingers into her hair, palming the back of her head. I’d teach her alright, but my lesson would be *hands on.*

“Lick the head again,” I growled.

Naomi did as instructed, swirling her perfect little tongue around the perimeter before looking up at me. Swiping the precum from the tip and bringing it into her mouth, she closed her eyes and savored it.

“*Fuck.*” I needed her now. Hot and deep. I couldn’t wait a minute longer. With my palm at the back of her head, I guided her to bend again. “Open wide, sweetheart. I need in.”

Her taking my commands was such a fucking turn-on. Naomi lowered her jaw and slid down the length of my shaft painfully slowly. It was nearly impossible to resist the urge to thrust up and bury myself in her throat. But somehow I managed.

Naomi hollowed her cheeks and sucked her way back up, keeping her tongue pressed to the sensitive underside. She slid down once, twice...by the third stroke my entire cock was wet with her saliva, and she began to make a gurgling sound as she took me in and out. It was nirvana. All of my senses filled with this woman—touch, sight, hearing, taste. I used the hand at her head to guide her to increase her speed, and my orgasm began to barrel down.

“*Fuck, baby. Just like that.*”

She bobbed up and down, taking my cock to the apex of her throat and then sliding me back out. I fisted her hair tighter and groaned. “*More. Take it all.*”

This time, when she got to the point where she had been pulling back, she unhinged her jaw and swallowed me down. *All the way down.* *Fuck. Me.* She could deep throat.

“*Fuuuuck.*”

And all I'd had to do was ask. I pulled her back up by her hair, watching her cheeks hollow as she sucked to the tip, then pushed her head back down again fast. Naomi took me to the root.

"Fuck. Babe." I loosened the hold on her hair. "I'm gonna come."

But Naomi kept going. I wasn't sure if she was ignoring me or couldn't hear over all the sounds we were making. Between my panting and the *glog glog* sound she made as she went up and down, it was easy to miss. I strained to speak louder.

"Babe, you need to let up or..."

Naomi looked up and met my eyes. But rather than pull back she took me in even deeper.

Fuck. She's letting me come down her throat. I only lasted one more suck before spilling harder and longer than I ever had in my life. Her hot, tight throat worked to swallow every last drop of my cum.

After, I closed my eyes, trying to catch my breath. "Holy shit. I see freaking stars. I never knew that was actually a thing. I thought it was just some crap authors wrote in sappy romance novels."

Naomi giggled and wiped her mouth on the back of her hand as she settled her head on my chest. "I'm glad you enjoyed it."

"Enjoyed it? No. I *lovingly* loved it. And you just screwed yourself, you know."

"Why is that?"

"Because I'm going to want inside that sweet mouth all the time now."

"That's okay. I liked it as much as you did."

I sincerely doubted that. We were both quiet as we caught our breath. Naomi's head rested over my heart. She tilted her head to look up at me, then let out a big yawn.

"Your heartbeat is so loud."

I smiled. "Oh yeah? You want to know a secret?"

"Always."

I ran my knuckles down her cheek. "I think it stopped beating for a long time and only started again because of you."

Chapter 30

DAWSON

My Sunday-morning routine was always the same—four egg whites, go for a run, pick up a turkey and avocado wrap from Kaiser’s Deli on the way home, quick shower, take Sheldon to the park for his sun bath, work by ten. But here it was almost four o’clock in the afternoon, and for the second week in a row, I hadn’t seen the inside of my office all weekend. I was also currently walking a chihuahua wearing a rhinestone-studded collar in Central Park.

“Where’d you get this thing?” I asked.

Naomi’s nose wrinkled. “What thing?”

I gestured to the leash in my hand. “This thing.”

“Leonardo is not a *thing*. He’s practically human.”

“Do you think aliens look down at us and think the dogs are our leaders and not the other way around? I mean, they lead their owners around, walk ahead on a leash we’re tied to, and owners feed them, bathe them, and clean up their shit.”

Naomi laughed. “Maybe.”

“How old is Leo anyway?”

“He’s an old man. He’ll be eleven next month.”

I waved her off. “That’s nothing compared to Sheldon.”

“How old is he?”

“Twenty.”

“Are you serious?”

I nodded. “I got him when I was nine.”

“How long can a tortoise live?”

“Some make it into their fifties.”

“Wow. I had no idea. Does Sheldon get along with other animals?”

“We had a dog growing up. They didn’t really have any interest in each other, sort of just coexisted. Ben had a cat that wanted to sniff him all the

time. Sheldon seemed unfazed. Why? You want to introduce our children? I'm not sure we're ready for that if we're taking it day by day."

Naomi smiled. "True."

I'd actually been thinking about our day-to-day arrangement all week. An idea might've sprouted its roots watching dumb-ass Will Archer flirt with Naomi, but the thing had legs, and it stuck around even after my jealousy passed. "I wouldn't want Sheldon to get attached to someone I wasn't sure would be around tomorrow."

"I suppose..."

I took a deep breath. I had no idea how to broach the subject, considering I was usually the one avoiding it. "Maybe we should make more of a commitment? You know, for the sake of the children."

Naomi looked over at me. "What kind of commitment?"

I waited a few seconds before answering so it didn't seem like I'd spent the amount of hours I had thinking about the subject. "I don't know. But I suppose if you were my girlfriend, there would be less risk of Sheldon getting attached to you and Leo in vain."

"Your girlfriend, huh? What does that entail?"

"I don't have much experience in this area, but I would think we'd spend a few nights a week together."

"We're sort of already doing that, aren't we?"

"And I guess we'd prioritize each other."

"That sounds nice."

I cleared my throat. "And...not see other people."

Naomi shrugged. "Easy enough. I'm not doing that anyway. I'm more of a one-man type. But are you sure that's what *you* want?"

It scared the shit out of me, but I wanted all that and *more* with this woman. "I want what's best for Sheldon."

Naomi side-eyed me with a grin. "Uh-huh."

"What? I'm a responsible pet owner."

She stepped in front of me, turned, and stopped, forcing me to stop too. "I would love to be your girlfriend, Dawson Reed."

I tried to play it cool, but inside I fist pumped. "Sounds good."

Naomi pushed up on her tippy toes and pressed a kiss to my lips. "You make me happy."

She had on a V-neck shirt, and when I looked down at her, I got a clear view of a black, lacy bra. "And you make me *hard*."

She chuckled. “I guess romantic time is over. We’re back to our normal pervy self?”

My answer was to reach around and grab a handful of her ass. “Let’s go home. I want to fuck my girlfriend.”

“*Girlfriend.*” She grinned. “I like the sound of it.”

“And I like the sound you’re going to be making when I get you home.”

“Is girlfriend sex different than keeping-it-casual sex?”

“Definitely.”

Her smile widened. “Do tell...”

I pulled an answer I liked out of my ass. “There’s more trust. So we can do things that require that more.”

“Like what?”

“Like sensory deprivation. I’d like to blindfold you with earplugs in and tie you up.”

Naomi swallowed. “Okay...”

“And sixty-nine with you on the bottom so I can fuck that mouth deep while my face is buried in your pussy.”

“I’m sensing a pattern here. You want control.”

“Just in the bedroom, sweetheart.”

Naomi’s cell rang. She pulled it from her pocket, checked the screen, and held up a finger. “Hold that thought. It’s my sister. She had a doctor’s appointment today. I want to make sure everything went okay.”

“Have at it.”

She swiped. “Hell—”

Naomi didn’t get to finish the word because her sister was screaming so loud I could hear her through the phone. She pulled her cell from her ear and spoke into the mouthpiece, holding the phone sideways.

“Frannie! What’s wrong?”

Her sister was babbling, but I couldn’t make out the words. Though Naomi’s face changed from freaked out to wide-eyed excitement.

“Are you serious?”

More babbling.

“Oh my God! I can’t believe it! I can’t believe they found someone!” She covered the phone and beamed. “They finally found a bone-marrow match for Frannie!”

I smiled but played dumb. “That’s awesome! When’s it going to happen?”

“Probably in about two weeks! This can cure her! Oh my God, my sister is going to be okay!”

I’d gotten tested on a whim the morning after my little chat with God. When the registry called to say I was a match, I was pretty damn shocked. After it wore off, I started to question whether I was doing the right thing, or rather whether my *reasons* for doing the right thing might upset Naomi. But seeing the happiness on her face erased any doubt I’d had. The reason wasn’t important—her sister was. That and putting that smile back on my girl’s face. I hoped this was the first of many times I’d get to put it there.

Naomi talked on the phone with Frannie for a few more minutes before swiping off. She was practically bouncing with a newfound energy. “I don’t think I’ve ever been so happy. This is the best day *ever*.”

I smiled. “I’m happy for your sister.”

“A boyfriend and a bone-marrow donor, all in one day. I’d say this is cause for celebration, wouldn’t you?”

“Absolutely. What do you have in mind? We can do whatever you want.”

“*Whatever* I want?”

I nodded. “You name it.”

She nibbled on her lip. “Those things you mentioned before sound kind of celebratory.”

And this day kept getting better, because I was about to keep that smile on her face *for hours*.

Chapter 31

DAWSON

Monday afternoon, Naomi took a late lunch to go with her sister to her doctor's appointment. She came back to the office looking a little frazzled.

"Everything go okay?"

"Yeah." She took a deep breath. "The process is just a bit overwhelming."

"How so?"

"Well, Frannie needs to be admitted to the hospital for a week before the transplant. Her body has to undergo what they call a conditioning regimen. Basically, they load her up with high levels of chemo and radiation to destroy the diseased cells floating around in her bloodstream and stop the blood-forming cells in her bone marrow from producing to make room for the new blood cells she'll receive. That part alone has a full-page list of potential dangers, because you're essentially pumped full of toxins that can inadvertently attack organs."

"Jesus."

"Two days after the conditioning phase is complete, she'll receive the marrow transplant from the donor."

That timeline made sense since they'd scheduled the harvest of my cells for a week from today. I'd asked if the recipient received them the same day, and the doctor had said it was usually one to two days later.

"How long does she stay in the hospital after that?"

"Four weeks, *if* she doesn't get an infection or anything that extends things."

"Holy crap."

She nodded. "You basically have no immune system while you wait for the donated stem cells to take root and begin producing new blood cells. There's another full page of side effects for that part of the process. Not only that, but you have to live in very strict isolation for the first hundred days—no public spaces or crowds, and they stressed that she should have

very few or preferably no visitors at all. The doctor even suggested the kids go on homeschooling or live somewhere else during that period because they bring so many germs home from the classroom every day.”

“Wow.” I hated that Naomi looked like a ball of stress. “What can I do to help?”

Of course, she had no idea what I was already doing.

Naomi smiled halfheartedly. “Nothing. Just listening to me babble is enough. I’m sorry if it sounds like I’m complaining. I don’t know, maybe I *am* complaining. I don’t mean to. My sister’s been given a gift by a stranger, and it’s amazing, but I’m just…” She shook her head.

I reached for her cheek and cupped it. “Scared. I know.”

She nuzzled into my palm. “This can be a cure for her, but getting there comes with a lot of risks. What would happen to Ryder and Molly if…” Her eyes filled with tears. “What would we *all* do without her?”

“You can’t think like that, Naomi. You have to think positive. Not just for your own mental health, but for Frannie and the kids. If the kids see *you* scared, they’ll be even more worried. Same with Frannie.”

She sighed. “I know. I know. You’re right. I’ll have to keep my meltdowns to myself and learn to put on a brave face.”

“You don’t need to have meltdowns alone. I’m here.”

“Thank you. I appreciate it.” She smiled. “Aside from being the lucky recipient of my freakouts, I also need to ask you a professional favor.”

“Whatever you need. What’s up?”

“Do you think you can notarize some papers for Frannie? I lost my notary license along with my law license. She’s updating her will and medical directive and stuff. Her lawyer mailed her the papers to sign, but his office is all the way uptown. This is much closer.”

“No problem. I can also drop by the apartment, if that’s easier for her. I’m sure she has a bunch of stuff to do to get ready before such a long hospital stay.”

“That’s sweet of you to offer, but she’s going to the lab a few blocks away this afternoon. I have to run out later to pick up the files you managed to get back from the feds on the Langone case, but I’ll tell the receptionist my sister might stop by in case she comes while I’m gone.”

“I’ll be around all afternoon.”

Naomi smiled. “I know. I checked your schedule online.”

I chuckled. "I have a conference call in a few minutes. After that, I have to prep for the Wren hearing tomorrow."

"I thought I saw that on the calendar for Monday?"

Shit. This was the difficulty of working with your girlfriend while trying to keep a secret. Your life was pretty much an open book. But I couldn't tell her I'd rescheduled a hearing because I was going to be in the hospital all day on Monday, so I had no choice but to tell a white lie.

"I'm, uh, I'm meeting with the ADA to talk about a potential plea deal for the kid who was here last week, Jared."

"Oh, that was quick. He was only charged a few weeks ago, wasn't he?"

What was I thinking? Of course a former ADA would know it was too early for plea discussions. "Yeah, I thought the same thing. Maybe Will Archer used his pull from working there."

I was definitely going to have to put something else on the calendar for Monday so Naomi wouldn't wonder why I was out the entire day. Luckily, the procedure required very little downtime for a donor, and the tiny scars would be on my back and easy enough to hide.

I escaped to my desk so I didn't have to tell any more lies about next week and dove back into my work. Around four thirty, the receptionist buzzed to let me know Frannie had arrived. Naomi was still downtown at Federal Plaza, so I went out to greet her sister and brought her back to my office.

I motioned to the visitor's chair and opened my drawer to take out my notary stamp.

"How you feeling?"

"Overwhelmed." She forced a smile.

"I can imagine. Naomi was telling me about the process earlier."

"I have so many errands to get done, yet I keep thinking I should be home with my kids. What happens if things don't go well and this is the last time I'll spend with them outside of the hospital? And here I am running around to make sure they're registered for camp because the deadline is in three weeks and getting Ryder batteries for a game he hasn't played in almost a year."

I shut my drawer, walked around to the other side of my desk, and sat next to her. "You're in the cootie phase."

"The what?"

“It’s the time before you go into the hospital for anything serious. I had a friend who was in and out of the hospital when we were teenagers. Whenever she was nervous about an admission, she would avoid her mom and me by loading up on schoolwork or cleaning out her closet. Once she even spent the entire day before a procedure going door to door to get signatures for a petition to change the color of the town’s recycling bins to green.”

Frannie’s nose wrinkled. “Who makes recycling bins any other color but green?”

I laughed. “That’s what she said. But whatever she threw herself into was never about it needing to be done. It was about not wanting the people she loved to see how upset and nervous she was. She was trying to protect us by treating us like we had the cooties.”

Frannie’s shoulders slumped. “The kids are worried enough.”

“Of course they are. You’re their mom, and they were dealt a shit hand losing their dad. But the last thing you need is to get run down dragging yourself around town and stressing. Maybe you can find a way to keep your mind occupied while you’re with the kids. I bet Ryder would keep you on your toes playing a few rounds of cards with him.”

“That he would. *Especially* if there was ten bucks at stake.”

I shrugged. “I don’t have any kids, but doesn’t all your money wind up spent on them anyway?”

She smiled. “Good point.”

I gestured to the thick envelope in her hand. “Let’s get your papers notarized so we can get you home.”

It took less than five minutes for me to stamp and sign a half-dozen documents. When I was done, I tucked them all back into the envelope and held them out to Frannie. “Here you go.”

“Thanks.” She took the papers, lifted her pocketbook strap to her shoulder, and started to get up, but then lowered herself back down to the chair. “I know I don’t know you very well, but can I ask you a favor?”

“What do you need?”

“Will you remind my sister to take care of herself, too, while I’m in the hospital? She’s going to have the kids. Plus, she’ll be worried about me and running back and forth to the hospital, even though I’ll tell her she shouldn’t visit every day. And I’m sure she wants to work sixty hours here because she’s new and cares about you—but also, she loves her work.”

I nodded. “I’ll do better than that. I’ll make sure she takes care of herself by helping her out with stuff at home and making sure she doesn’t put extra time in here at the office. I’ll kick her ass out if I have to.”

Frannie smiled. “Thank you.”

“It’s my pleasure.”

She walked to the door of my office, then stopped and turned back. “Is your friend’s health better now? The one who treated you like you had the cooties before going into the hospital?”

My face fell before I could stop it.

Frannie’s fell, too. “Oh,” she said. “I’m sorry.”

I shook my head. “I shouldn’t have...”

She forced a smile and waved me off. “It’s fine. You didn’t do anything wrong. Take care, Dawson.”

“You, too, Frannie.”

I sat at my desk, kicking myself in the ass for a long time after she left. I never talked about Bailey. And the one time I did, I told *a cancer patient* about another *cancer patient* who died. What the hell was I thinking?

Chapter 32

DAWSON

12 years ago

“Dawson, can I talk to you a minute?” Bailey’s mom stood at her front door, holding it open. I’d been on my way home from the bus stop after baseball practice.

“Sure. What’s up, Mrs. A?”

She gestured to the house. “Come in.”

“Is Bailey home? She usually has violin lessons on Thursday after school, right?”

“She does. She’ll be home in about twenty minutes. But I wanted to talk to you alone.”

My stomach sank. “Is Bailey okay?”

Her smile was resigned. “There’s nothing new with her health. I wanted to talk to you about something personal.”

“Oh-kay.” I walked up to the porch.

“My daughter would kill me if she knew I was having this conversation with you.”

“I can keep a secret.”

Mrs. Anderson smiled. “It’s about the junior prom.”

“What about it?”

“Well, Bailey will never admit it to anyone at school, but she really wants to go.”

“I don’t think Ben asked anyone yet. I’m sure he would take her. You want me to talk to him?”

“Actually, Bailey would really like to go with you.”

“Oh.”

She held up her hands. “That is, if you don’t have a date yet. Bailey didn’t seem to think you did.”

That was only because I hadn't yet mentioned that I'd asked Allie a few days ago.

Mrs. Anderson's eyes watered. "I'm sorry to even ask you, but I just really want to give her everything she wants before she..."

The unspoken words hung heavy in the air. *Before she dies.* I swallowed. "I didn't think she'd want to go with me. That's why I mentioned Ben. Of course I'll take her."

"Are you sure I'm not imposing on your plans? You didn't have your heart set on going with another girl or anything, did you?"

Allie was going to *kill* me. Yet I shook my head. "Nah. All good."

She smiled and pulled me into a hug. "You're an angel, Dawson. I honestly don't know what she would've done without you these last three-and-a-half years. Thank you so much."

"No thanks necessary. I'd do anything for Bailey. I'll ask her tomorrow."

Later that night, I sat in my room, dreading calling Allie. I thought about texting her, but that would be a dick thing to do. I really hoped she hadn't bought a dress yet. Eventually, I took a deep breath and hit Call.

She answered on the first ring. "Hey, handsome."

"What's up, Allie?"

"Nothing much. I don't feel so great, so I'm just scrolling online, looking for a dress for the prom."

"Are you sick?"

"No, I don't think so. I'm just really tired for some reason."

"Oh. Sorry."

"I'm leaning toward royal blue for my dress. What do you think? Is that the color dress you want to take off of me at the end of the night?"

I shut my eyes. This was going to suck, but at least she hadn't spent any money yet.

"Hey... About prom... I can't go with you after all."

"What do you mean, you *can't*?"

"Bailey really wants to go. I need to take her."

"I know she's your friend and all, but this is *junior prom*, Dawson," she whined. "You can have *sex* with me, but you can't take me to *prom*?"

Fuck. "It's not like that. I swear." I blew out a deep breath. "I'm really sorry. You know Bailey's sick."

"I know, but..."

“I’ll make it up to you. I promise.”

“How?”

“I don’t know. We’ll go to the prom next year? This one is only in the gym anyway. I always thought it was kinda stupid to have both a junior prom and a senior prom.”

“So if you’re going with another girl, does that mean I can go with another guy?”

I gritted my teeth. “If that’s what you want.”

“It’s *not* what I want. I want to go with *you*.”

“I’m sorry, Allie.”

“Whatever.” I pictured her rolling her eyes. “I have to go.”

“Alright.”

“Bye.”

“Wait...”

“What?”

“Can you do me a favor and not mention to Bailey that we were supposed to go together? I don’t want her to feel bad that I changed my plans for her.”

“I’m glad you’re concerned about *her* feeling bad. Because you obviously don’t care how *I* feel.”

“I *do* care, Allie. But...she’s really sick.”

“There’s *nothing* going on between you two? You guys have never fooled around?”

“Never. It’s not like that. She’s my best friend.”

“Whatever. I gotta go. I really don’t feel so well now. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

The line went dead before I could say goodbye. *That went well.*

Two weeks later, I walked over to Bailey’s house wearing a suit. My mom came with me, holding her camera. Mrs. Anderson answered the door with a big smile. “Don’t you look handsome, Dawson.”

“Thanks.”

Mom beamed. “He looks so grown up, doesn’t he?”

Mrs. Anderson stepped aside for us to enter. “I know. I’ve already cried twice looking at Bailey in her dress. She looks like a woman. Come on in. She’s just finishing getting ready.”

A few minutes later, Bailey came down the stairs. I felt my eyes widen.

“Wow. You look...” It felt weird to say *hot* to Bailey. But that’s what I’d been about to say. I cleared my throat. “Pretty. You look really pretty.”

Bailey had on a teal dress that clung to her curves. The only thing I’d ever seen her wear was leggings, T-shirts, sweatshirts, and shorts in the summer. And none of those made her look like *that*. She touched her normally short hair. “I have extensions in.”

I hadn’t even noticed that part of her body yet. I’d sort of gotten stuck on other places. “Oh. They look good.”

She eyed the corsage in my hand, and her eyes lit up. “Oh my God. You really got me a black rose?”

“That’s what you said you wanted.”

“I tried to talk him out of it.” My mom frowned.

Mrs. Anderson came over and started fussing with Bailey’s dress. “Now, you know what to do in an emergency, right, Dawson? You call nine-one-one first, then get a teacher and call me.”

I opened my mouth to answer, but she spoke again, “And do you remember her primary oncologist’s name?”

“Dr. Benton.”

“Is my phone number saved in your phone?”

“Mom,” Bailey groaned. “Stop or I’m not going to let you take any pictures.”

I smiled at Mrs. Anderson. “I’ll take good care of her, Mrs. A. I promise.”

She lofted a hefty sigh. “I know you will, sweetheart.”

I leaned close to Bailey because the music was so loud in the gym. “You feeling okay?”

“Yeah, just tired.”

“You want to get out of here?”

“You don’t mind? We’ve only been here like an hour.”

“Nah. This is kinda lame anyway.”

“Okay.” She smiled.

I said goodbye to my friends, and Bailey and I walked to the door together. Mom had loaned me her car, so I told Bailey to wait there and I’d pull it around for her. Once we were inside, she leaned her head against the

back of the seat. She really did look tired. I pulled out of the parking lot and turned left to go home.

“Would you want to go somewhere for a little while?” Bailey asked.

“You should probably rest.”

“I can rest here in the car. We don’t have to get out. I’m not ready to go home yet.”

I shrugged. “Okay. Anywhere particular you want to go?”

She was quiet for a minute. “What about the old Drive-Inn?”

My eyes flashed to her and back to the road, but Bailey’s eyes were shut as she relaxed into the seat. The old Drive-Inn was a place kids went to fool around in their cars. Though I wasn’t sure if Bailey knew that, considering she’d never had a boyfriend.

“You sure that’s where you want to go?” I asked.

“Yeah. Unless you want to go somewhere else.”

It felt strange to take Bailey there, especially since I’d taken Allie there last weekend and we’d fooled around in this exact car. But it would probably be empty since most kids were at the prom anyway, and this was Bailey, for Christ’s sake—we weren’t going so we could steam the windows. I shrugged again. “The Drive-Inn is good.”

One other car was parked in the lot when we pulled in. Since their windows were fogged, I took a spot as far away as possible.

“You want the air or the windows open?” I asked.

“Whatever you want.”

Normally people left the windows up for obvious reasons, but I was with Bailey, so I pressed the button to roll down the windows and then killed the engine.

It was quiet and dark, and suddenly the moment felt awkward.

“You sure you feel okay?” I asked.

She nodded and stared out her window. “The fresh air feels good.”

Bailey and I sometimes sat next to each other in silence for hours, usually in the doghouse in her yard doing homework or scrolling on our phones. It never felt awkward. But now, I couldn’t think of a damn thing to say to her. It didn’t help that the car I’d made a point of parking far away from had started to rock up and down. Even with the windows fogged up, I could make out a woman gyrating around in the front seat. Bailey noticed too, and we both sat there watching it all go down while the tension grew. I

was just about to suggest we go somewhere else when she turned and spoke.

“I don’t want to die without ever having been kissed.”

My eyes jumped to meet hers, and my heart started to race. I was pretty certain what she was suggesting. I mean, she’d asked to come *here*, after all. Yet I was still caught off guard.

“Are you saying...”

“Kiss me, Dawson,” she whispered. “Please.”

She looked beautiful in the moonlight, so it wouldn’t be a hardship by any means. Still, I hesitated. I didn’t think of her like that, and I was dating someone else. “Bailey, I...”

Before I could finish the sentence, she was climbing over to my side of the car. She hiked up her dress and straddled my legs, then pushed her breasts against my chest. My body reacted, even if I was still frozen, and I started to grow hard.

She leaned to my ear, hot breath mixing with a strained and sexy voice. “Kiss me, Dawson.”

Inside I was battling a war. My body was filled with desire and need, but my head wasn’t sure. Though when she slipped her hand between us and wrapped her fingers around my bulging dick, I broke.

“*Fuck.*” My lips crashed down on hers. Things escalated to a frenzy pretty quickly after that. Pants came down, panties got tossed, and we couldn’t get enough of each other. After, we were both still panting when a horrible feeling started to creep in. At the time, I thought it was because Bailey was my best friend and we’d just done something we couldn’t take back. But it turned out to be so much worse than that...

Chapter 33

DAWSON

Naomi: Hey. Do you think you'll be back in the office between appointments today? Mr. Hargrove said he received some documents you asked him to get. He wants to drop them off when you're in so he can speak with you in person. He said it won't take more than a few minutes.

The nurse hooking me up to a bunch of monitors smiled as I stared down at my phone.

"Are we going to have to pry that thing out of your hands when we wheel you into the procedure room?"

"Sorry. Just trying to take care of a few last-minute work things."

"What do you do?"

"I'm an attorney."

She wrinkled her nose.

I raised an eyebrow, and she laughed.

"Sorry. I've learned to control my mouth over the years, but my face? Not so much. My ex-husband was an attorney."

"No problem." I smiled and looked back down at the text from Naomi. Lying to her didn't sit right, even when I had a damn good reason. But it wasn't like I had a choice today.

Dawson: Probably not. I'm running late already. Would you mind seeing if he can stop in tomorrow instead?

Naomi: Sure thing. Have a good day.

The nurse finished hooking me to a bunch of EKG leads and picked her iPad back up. "I just have a few questions to go over with you."

"Okay."

She reviewed the answers I'd already given when they'd checked me in this morning—the last time I ate or drank, what medications I was on—and then she asked if I had any questions or concerns about the procedure and the risks that the doctor had explained a little while ago.

"Nope, no questions."

“Did admissions tell you about our anonymous-update program when you were checked in earlier?”

“No, what’s that?”

“If your recipient agrees, we can provide you with updates on their health status during the first year after the transplant. It’s something we do so our donors can see the difference they’ve made in someone’s life. Would you like to sign up to receive updates?”

“Don’t need to. I know the recipient.”

The nurse lifted her iPad closer. “Oh, I’m sorry. I thought I read this was an anonymous-donation case and not a directed one.”

“It is. To the recipient at least. She’s my girlfriend’s sister, but neither of them knows I matched with her.”

“Wow. That’s amazing. And very generous. But do you mind if I ask why you aren’t telling them?”

“I just want to help, not make a big deal about it.” That was the truth, but maybe I also wanted to right some of the wrong I’d done with Bailey. And I wasn’t sure how Naomi would feel about that.

“Well, they’re both lucky ladies.” The nurse smiled and hugged her iPad to her chest. “I guess the last thing is, I’ll need you to remove your bracelet. All jewelry has to come off before going into the operating room.”

I felt my brows pull together. I didn’t wear any jewelry except a watch, and I’d left that at home this morning. Though when I looked down, I saw the friendship bracelet I hadn’t taken off in fifteen years, except for the half-dozen times I’d had to ask Mom to restring it. “You mean this? It’s just string and a few beads.”

She nodded. “The material doesn’t matter, but germs do. It’s a precaution to prevent infection.”

Of all the days to take this thing off, today definitely didn’t feel like the right one. “It’s—it might not look like much, but someone important made this for me, and I never take it off. It’s been on my wrist for fifteen years. Is there any way I can keep it on?”

“Hmm... I once had a patient who couldn’t get his wedding band off. The only way it would’ve come off was cutting it, and the patient was distressed about doing that, so the doctor let him put a glove over his hand. Our gloves cover the wrist. Let me check with your doctor and see if that would be acceptable.”

I let out a deep breath. “Thanks, I appreciate it.”

The nurse disappeared and didn't come back for twenty minutes. When she returned, she had a tall guy with her. "This is Eric from the transport team. He's going to take you up to the operating room for your procedure."

I held up my wrist. "What about this?"

"The doctor said it was fine to keep it on." She walked over to a box on the counter and pulled out one latex glove. "We're just going to slip this on to make you look like Michael Jackson and keep you safe."

She helped me put on the glove and patted my hand. "I hope your lucky charm there brings you good luck and you have a speedy recovery."

"Thank you." *I hope she does too.*

Two days later, I winced as I settled into my chair. For the most part, the incisions didn't bother me at all, except when I forgot they were there like I just had and slammed down too hard. Ben strolled into my office while my face was still showing the pain. He'd texted earlier to say he was stopping in after a meeting nearby.

"You alright?"

"Yeah. My, uh, back is just bothering me."

"Did you do something to it?"

Yeah, I let a doctor stick a big-ass needle in it. I shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe at the gym."

He nodded and plopped himself in the visitor's chair on the other side of my desk. "I've been instructed to ask you if you heard from Naomi yet? Lily doesn't want to bug her while she's at the hospital. She'd rather bug me so I can bug you."

I shook my head. "Haven't heard from her yet. Frannie's procedure was at eleven, and it takes a couple of hours."

Ben checked his watch. "Got it. I'll tell my wife to hold off sending the SWAT team to search for information until at least one or two."

"Good idea."

He leaned back and clasped his hands behind his head. "How's everything going with Naomi?"

"Is this more recon you're doing for Lily?"

He chuckled. "No. This is me asking. How's it working out?"

"Do you mean here at the office or outside of here?"

"Both, I guess."

I tossed my pen on the desk and sat back in my chair. “I couldn’t ask for a better paralegal. She knows the law and rules of procedure better than me, and she writes a better brief. I don’t know why I haven’t thought of hiring disbarred attorneys before. They’re a goldmine.”

“Pretty sure it’s because most of them get disbarred for a real reason—they’re dodgy or incompetent. Naomi is the exception to the rule. But that’s great that she’s working out well. What about the other front? You two looked happy at dinner when we got together, and I heard through the grapevine that you’re exclusive. You’re usually more the *elusive* than *exclusive* type when it comes to relationships. Are things getting serious?”

I rubbed the back of my neck. “I think I’m in love with her.”

“*Whoa!* I’ve known you since before you were even interested in girls, and I’ve never heard you use the L word.”

“No shit.”

Ben smiled. “Give me the signs. What makes you think you’re in love?”

I made a face. “You want me to braid your hair while we talk about our feelings?”

Ben’s goofy smile widened. “These are modern times, dude. It’s okay for men to talk about their feelings.”

I pointed to the door. “Get out of my office.”

But of course, he didn’t. “You’re not good at sharing. I get it. It’ll get easier. Why don’t I start?”

“Start your ass marching out of my office,” I grumbled.

Ben ignored me. “You know how I knew I was in love with Lily?”

Okay, so I might’ve overreacted a bit, and now I really did want to hear his answer. Though I knew my buddy, and if he thought he was torturing me, he would definitely continue. So instead of asking him to elaborate, I folded my arms across my chest as if I was annoyed.

That did it. He couldn’t resist.

“I’m glad you asked.” He grinned. “For one, I started making plans for our future without even questioning whether it was a good idea. Like, we started dating in April, and a few weeks later I was making plans for a ski trip in November. Never occurred to me that maybe I should wait because we might not be together like it would’ve when I dated other women.”

When I spoke to my mother last week, she mentioned that she redid her guest room, which had two beds. I was happy to know she’d replaced them with one queen, so Naomi wouldn’t fall through the middle when I pushed

the two twins together when we visited. Though I pursed my lips shut rather than share that shit with Ben.

He pointed to my face and chuckled. “You’re doing the same. I can tell by how hard you’re trying to look annoyed right now.”

“Don’t you have to get back to work?” I sighed.

“I also started volunteering for shit I had no interest in doing, just to make her happy. Took a slam poetry class once because the friend who had signed up with her had to cancel. Dude, I *hate* poetry. Even Dr. Seuss rhymes annoy me.”

I’d gotten up to walk Leonardo yesterday. Cleaning up dog shit before six AM.

The receptionist buzzed my desk phone, interrupting our girl talk. “Dawson, I have Mrs. Altmann on the phone. She said it’s important.”

“Alright, I’ll take it.” I looked over at Ben. “Get out of my office.”

He stood and gloated like he’d won something. When he got to the door, he stopped. “Let me know if you hear anything about Frannie so I can pass it along to my beautiful bride.”

I picked up my desk phone but fell short of pushing the button to pick up the call. “I will.”

“You going up to the hospital today?”

I shook my head. “No, I’m picking up Molly and Ryder from school. They have swimming lessons.”

He smirked and lifted a brow. “Volunteer for that?”

In fact, I had. “Go away.”

Ben laughed all the way down the hall. And he didn’t even know I’d also *volunteered* as a bone-marrow donor.

Chapter 34

DAWSON

I smiled seeing Naomi's name on my cell phone screen on Sunday morning. She was always a welcome distraction, but today more so than usual. I'd been at the office since five AM working on a brief to support a client I wholeheartedly despised.

"Don't tell me you just got up?" I asked in greeting.

"Five oh two!" Naomi screamed. "Five oh two! Day three!"

I sat back in my chair. I could see her excited face even though we weren't on FaceTime. "Wow. Your sister's a real overachiever. The doctor said it could take up to a month for her neutrophil count to stay over five hundred for three days in a row."

"Yep. Which means the kids can finally see her."

"Did you tell them yet?"

"I might've accidentally woken them up when she called to tell me at nine o'clock. I got so excited, I screamed."

It was eleven days post bone-marrow transplant, and kids under twelve weren't allowed to visit until the patient's health achieved certain milestones. Getting a blood marker over a certain amount for three days in a row was the first big one. Luckily, these days there was video calling, which made the time apart a little easier, but I knew Ryder and Molly would sleep better once they got to see their mom in person. Even though Frannie looked and sounded good over FaceTime, the kids still asked a ton of questions whenever I watched them. Which was often lately, since Naomi went up to the hospital every night.

"I'm sure they're excited. Molly did a fashion show for me yesterday. She was deciding which outfit to wear to visit her mom when she was allowed. All of them were yellow, because that's the color of happiness."

I shook my head. "Can't imagine where she learned that."

"She's already dressed and ready even though she can't visit for two more hours."

I smiled. "I'm glad for all of you that your sister is doing well."

"And for *you*. I can't thank you enough for all of the babysitting you've done. I promise to make it up to you when Frannie's home and feeling better."

I didn't mind helping out at all. It made me feel good to do whatever I could to take some of the load off Naomi. She'd been running herself ragged between working, visiting her sister, and playing single mom to two busy kids. Nevertheless, I liked the sound of *making it up to me*.

"Oh yeah?" My voice lowered to a rasp. "What did you have in mind for that?"

"I don't think I can tell you with two kids in the other room and thin walls." Her voice lowered. "But it definitely involves me on my knees, and maybe a ponytail for you to wrap around your hand. I know how much you like to have control."

I groaned. We hadn't been together since her sister was admitted to the hospital. It was impossible with her crazy schedule and always having the kids. "Fuck. It's been too long."

"I know. I might have to break my no-hanky-panky-in-the-office rule soon."

"I'll tell the staff to take tomorrow off."

She laughed. "How is everything going there? Did you get the Pendleton brief done?"

"Almost. Although it's pissing me off how good it's coming out. I think there's a real shot I can get the wiretaps thrown out and that wife-beater might get off."

"I honestly never considered how difficult it might be for a defense attorney to do their job when they dislike a client."

"The funny thing is, I really don't think he's guilty of what the feds charged him with. But I hate the thought of that fucker being home to smack his wife around. I still can't believe I heard that shit on the illegal recordings."

"Working in the district attorney's office taught me that people who have no morals always get in trouble again, even if they get away with it the first time. The people who just make a stupid mistake once and truly regret it are the only ones who learn their lesson. Someone like Mr. Pendleton will do something else wrong, even if they don't get him this time."

"True."

“Anyway, I don’t want to keep you. I was just calling to tell you the good news.”

I looked at my watch. “I should be done here in like an hour. Is it alright if I meet you at the hospital?”

“You don’t have to do that. I can have Mrs. Hank next door watch Molly while I run Ryder up to visit and then come back and take Molly while she watches Ryder. She’s offered to keep an eye on them more than once.”

“Yeah, but you’ll spend more time running back and forth than visiting with your sister.”

“It’s not a big deal.”

“I’ll meet you at the hospital at noon and wait downstairs with one while you take the other up. I’m looking forward to trying out the cafeteria’s imitation grilled cheese you told me about anyway.”

“Sure you are.” She laughed. “Hopefully this time they remember to take the plastic wrapper off the fake cheese slices.”

“I’ll meet you in the lobby.”

“Thank you, Dawson. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“Have you ever been married?” Ryder threw down two cards and tossed a Cheez Doodle into the middle of the table. He’d been tapping a foot and biting his fingernails sitting in the hospital lobby, so I’d decided to take him to the cafeteria for a snack. Then I broke out the deck of cards I’d brought to occupy the kids. Somehow we were now using Cheez Doodles as chips.

I slid him two replacement cards. “Nope. You?”

Ryder rolled his eyes. “Any kids?”

“No little monsters.”

He smirked. “Probably why you’re playing cards with a ten-year-old. It’s not very good parenting.”

I chuckled. “You’re a little shit, you know that?”

He wagged a finger at me and *tsked*. “Using bad language with a minor, too. Maybe you shouldn’t procreate ever.”

I was more impressed he knew the word *procreate* than I was offended. I pushed a Cheez Doodle into the middle of the table and then added two more, upping the bet. “Call.”

Ryder turned over three fours. I grinned and turned over a full house, then swiped a Cheez Doodle from the bag and popped it into my mouth. “Serves you right.”

“I dropped the Cheez Doodles in that bag on the floor while you were in the bathroom,” Ryder said. “That’s why I haven’t eaten any. This place is filled with sick people. You’re probably gonna die now.”

I gagged and spit the Cheez Doodle out into a napkin. “Great. I might need to get some shots.”

“Really?”

“Nah. I have a good immune system.”

Ryder went quiet for a moment. “Is my mom gonna die?” He swallowed. “I won’t tell Molly if you tell me the truth. I can take it.”

“No, your mom isn’t going to die. I mean, we’re all gonna die someday, but when we’re old and wrinkly and get those gross brown spots all over our skin that no one wants to look at—not anytime soon. Your mom is doing great. She’s kicking ass. The doctor told her it could take up to thirty days for her to be able to have you guys visit, but it’s only been less than two weeks. That should tell you how well she’s doing.”

“Or...they’re letting us see her because she’s gonna die.”

“She’s not going to die, Ryder. In fact, there’s a good chance she could be cured when this is all over.”

His shoulders relaxed a bit. “Are you gonna marry my aunt?”

“I don’t know. Maybe if I’m lucky.”

“Lucky about what?” Naomi’s voice caught me by surprise. I hadn’t expected her to be back down here so quickly. She and Molly had only gone up to visit maybe twenty minutes ago.

Ryder pointed to me. “He wants to marry you.”

Naomi lifted a brow. “Oh? Did he ask for your blessing?”

“My what?”

She chuckled and put her hands on my shoulders. “They asked that the kids visit for an hour or less, so I’m back to swap out.”

Molly had on a yellow dress and a matching yellow bow in her hair. She joined her brother on the other side of the table, sharing his chair, which he didn’t look too thrilled about. “Get your own place to sit.”

“You’re going to visit Mom!”

Ryder stood, intentionally bumping his sister when he got up. I didn’t have a sister close in age, but I imagined if I did, my relationship would be

similar. He grabbed the cards I'd brought from the table. "Can I take these? I taught myself some card tricks to show Mom. But I forgot mine." He nodded toward his sister. "Because this butthead was rushing me out the door."

I nodded. "Go for it."

A half hour later, Ryder and Naomi returned. Ryder was smiling and laughing. It seemed the medicine these two needed was their mother.

"How was your visit?" I asked.

Ryder shrugged, playing it cool. "Fine."

Naomi smiled. "Frannie asked if you would mind visiting, too?"

"Me?"

She nodded.

"Uh. Sure." A sinking feeling settled into my stomach. Had she somehow found out what I'd done?

"You'll have to suit up because of germs. They'll give you a gown, booties, and a mask and stuff to wear." Naomi smiled again. "You'll love it. It's a germaphobe's dream outfit."

I laughed and stood. "What floor?"

"Eight. Stop at the nurses' station as soon as you get off the elevator, and they'll give you everything you need and show you to the room. Oh, and Frannie is Francesca Mason. Mason is her married name."

"Got it."

My nerves were at war with my curiosity as I rode the elevator up to the eighth floor. As Naomi had said, the nurses at the station gave me everything I needed and pointed me to room 810. I entered, suited up like a doctor about to go into surgery rather than a visitor, and held up my gloved hands. "I'm here for the one o'clock lobotomy."

"Hey, Dawson." Frannie had on a mask, but I could see by the way her eyes crinkled that she was smiling. "Thanks for coming."

"Of course. It's good to see you. You look great."

"Thank you for lying."

An awkward silence fell between us. I think I was waiting for the reason I'd been summoned, but maybe she just wanted another visitor? She'd been here for almost three weeks, after all. I started to say something at the same time she did.

I smiled and held out a hand. "Sorry. After you."

Frannie sighed. "How is my sister doing?"

“She’s doing great. Couldn’t you tell by the all-blue outfit today? It brings peace, calmness, and stability.”

She smiled. “You’ve been well trained, I see.”

“I have. But seriously, she’s managing everything like a boss. I’m not going to lie and say she doesn’t worry about you, because she definitely does. But today went a long way.”

She sighed. “I don’t want you to have to lie to her. So when she asks you what I wanted—because she *will* ask you. She’s a born lawyer, always has questions—you can tell her I asked how she was holding up.”

“That sounds like you’re telling me what I should say, but there are things you don’t want me to say.”

There was sadness in her eyes. “Years ago, when my kids were born, I made a medical proxy and elected my sister to make all medical decisions in the event that I was unable to make them myself.”

“I notarized a new one for you before you were admitted.”

Frannie nodded. “I changed my proxy to my sister-in-law.”

“Oh.” I paused. “Does Naomi know?”

She shook her head. “I was my husband’s proxy when he got into the car accident. He was on life support without any brain functions for a week. I knew in my heart he wouldn’t want to be kept alive like that, but it was still a horrible thing to have to sign those papers. I spent all day and night reading articles about people who came out of a coma after fifteen years and medical advances that could be able to restore brain functions someday. I know I did the right thing, but there will always be a little part of me that feels responsible for his death.”

I rubbed the back of my neck. “I didn’t know that. I’m sorry.”

“Anyway, if something were to happen to me, she’s going to have my kids for the rest of her life, and I don’t want her to ever look in the mirror or look at them and have an ounce of regret, so I made my sister-in-law my proxy. We talked about it, and she’s okay with the responsibility. But I think Naomi will be hurt, and I wanted someone to be able to explain things to her if it comes to that.”

“Okay. I understand, but...you’re doing so well.”

She looked into my eyes for a long time before looking over my shoulder. Then she lifted her arm and pulled back her robe sleeve. A red rash littered her skin. “I found this when I woke up this morning. It’s itchy and burns.”

“What is it?”

“It could be nothing. But...a rash is one of the early signs of graft-versus-host disease.”

Fuck. I’d read up on bone-marrow transplants before making my decision to donate and knew acute GVHD was not good. The six-month survival rate was something like fifty percent. “What did the doctor say?”

She shook her head. “I didn’t show it to them yet. They took my blood yesterday, and my neutrophil count was high enough to let the kids visit. I knew if they saw this they wouldn’t allow them to come. So I waited. I’m going to show them after you guys leave. I’ve also started having some stomach issues, which is another sign.”

“Did you tell Naomi about the rash?”

She shook her head again. “Not yet. I don’t want to worry her unnecessarily. But I promise I will after I talk to the doctors. Just give me a few hours, and I’ll call and tell her.”

“I won’t say anything. It should come from you. But I’ll make sure I’m with her later in case she gets upset or wants to talk about it.”

“Thank you, Dawson.”

My chest felt heavy, like an elephant had just parked his ass on it. “I’m so sorry, Frannie.”

She smiled again, but it didn’t reach her eyes. “Thank you. But it’s not your fault.”

I swallowed. *Yes, yes, it is.*

Later that evening, Naomi and I were watching TV on the couch at her sister’s when her phone rang. Naomi’s spirits had been high ever since the hospital. She smiled as she looked at her phone and swiped to answer. I listened to one side of the conversation. Even without hearing, it wasn’t difficult to tell when Frannie sprung the news about her rash. Naomi’s face dropped, and she jumped to her feet.

“What did the doctor say?”

Quiet.

“What are the other symptoms?”

Silence.

“And you don’t have any of those?”

Then.

“But that could be from the food, right?”

Naomi listened for an extended period of time before taking a deep breath. “Okay, well, if the doctor said there’s a chance it could be nothing but a simple rash, I don’t think we should jump to conclusions. Remember when we were kids you got rashes from bug bites? Maybe you got bit?”

She did a lot of nodding and pacing after that. Naomi’s words were positive, but I could tell by her tone and posture that she was scared. After she hung up, I felt like a dick pretending I didn’t know already.

“What’s going on?”

Naomi’s eyes welled up. “My sister might be rejecting the donor’s cells.”

Chapter 35

DAWSON

A week later, there was a knock at my door at 9 PM.

I opened to find Naomi standing there. While it was a welcome surprise, she should've been home with the kids, so a wave of panic hit me. "What's wrong? Are you okay?"

She waved her hands. "Oh no. I'm sorry to scare you. Nothing is wrong. Everything is fine."

"Your sister is doing okay?"

"She's great."

I let out a long, deep breath. It had been nine intense days since Frannie discovered the rash. Luckily, no other symptoms had cropped up, and her blood count was still holding. "What are you doing here?"

"Standing in the hall, apparently. Aren't you going to invite me in?"

I smirked and grabbed her hand, tugging her inside my apartment and against me.

She giggled, and it immediately felt like all was right in the world. I kissed her lips. "Who's watching the kids?"

"Frannie's sister-in-law had a business dinner in the City. She stopped over to visit afterward, and I asked if she would mind if I ran out to do an errand for an hour."

"Am I the errand you needed to *do*?"

Naomi bit down on her bottom lip. "You are indeed."

Then I noticed what she was wearing—one color, head to toe, even her lips were painted to match. "You're wearing a lot of red."

"I'm feeling a lot of passion."

"Is that so?"

She nodded. "I hope you don't mind me stopping by unannounced?"

"You can come by whenever you want."

She wrapped her arms around my neck and pushed her tits up against me. "I can *come* whenever I want, huh? What about you? Can you *come*

whenever I want?”

“Oh, trust me, I can come anytime I’m near you.” I buried my face in her hair and took a deep breath before licking from the hollow of her throat up to her ear. “You just need to tell me *where* you want me to come.”

It had been way too long. *Way, way* too long.

Naomi pulled back, batting her lashes seductively. “How about I *show* you, instead?”

We were barely inside my apartment when she dropped to her knees.

Oh fuck. My head fell back as she unzipped my jeans and reached into my boxer briefs, pulling out my cock. This woman kneeling before me was pretty much the most spectacular thing I’d ever seen, and that was before I realized her hair was in a ponytail. I briefly wondered if she would mind if I took a photo of her like that. But that thought and all other thoughts disappeared from my head as Naomi looked up at me and circled the full width of my crown with her tongue.

This.

Is.

Heaven.

Her bright red lips opened and wrapped around my shaft, sliding down the length of my cock in one long, painstakingly slow motion. I felt a little woozy, and I wasn’t sure if it was from all of my blood rushing south or the feelings I got when I was around this woman. Maybe it was both.

Her head began gliding up and down, and I was torn between holding back and wanting to come down her beautiful throat as fast as I could so I could be inside her in every other way. I wanted to fill every hole, make her feel me everywhere—so she would know exactly how she made me feel. This woman *consumed* me.

When she opened her velvety throat and took me even deeper, my eyes rolled back in my head. “Fuck, baby.” I groaned and wrapped her ponytail around my palm. “Keep sucking, just like that...”

Then a cell phone started to ring. I had no idea if it was hers or mine, but there was no way in hell either of us was answering it. I fisted her hair tighter, to make damn sure of that, and started thrusting into her mouth. Eventually it stopped, or else I was so far gone I couldn’t hear it anymore. But a few seconds later, the ringing started again, and I realized it wasn’t my ringtone. I wanted to ignore it in the worst way, but a horrible feeling washed over me.

“Babe, what if it’s the kids?”

Naomi slipped my cock from her mouth and blinked a few times. “Oh God.” She fumbled around the floor to find her purse, unzipping in a panic, and swiped to answer on the third ring.

“Hello?”

The room was so quiet, I could hear the person on the other end of the phone.

“Is this Miss Heart?”

“Yes.”

“This is the nurse at St. Matthews. I’m calling regarding your sister, Francesca.”

“What’s the matter? What happened?”

“She sprang a high fever a few hours ago, very suddenly. And just now she had a seizure.”

“Oh my God.” Naomi’s hand clutched her chest. “Is she okay?”

“She’s asleep. We’ve given her medication to reduce the fever, but it’s still very high. We thought you should know. I tried to reach her primary medical delegate, but I wasn’t able to, so I’m calling you as the alternate.”

“What? I thought I was her primary medical delegate?”

“Not according to the system. But I can double check the paperwork, if you’d like.”

Naomi shook her head. “No, it’s fine. It doesn’t matter. Can I come see Frannie now, even though it’s not visiting hours?”

“Yes. Visitors are permitted past regular hours in emergency situations.”

“I’ll be right there.”

One minute I’m answering my door and feeling like king of the world, and the next I’m driving Naomi back home after twenty hours at the hospital. Frannie hadn’t woken up after her seizure. She’d slipped into a coma, and the doctors weren’t optimistic about the outcome.

Naomi stared out the window the entire drive to Frannie’s apartment. When I parked and turned off the engine, she looked around and blinked, appearing almost startled. “Oh my God. I don’t even know how we got here. Did I fall asleep during the drive?”

“Your eyes were open, but you were definitely somewhere else.”

She looked straight ahead for a long time. “I have to tell the kids. Do I let them see her like that?”

I raked a hand through my hair. “I don’t know.”

Tears streamed down her face. “It’s going to scare them so badly, but I feel like I need to give them some warning. When they saw her last week, she was doing so well.”

I tasted salt in my throat and shut my eyes. “Fuck. I’m so sorry.”

“I wish she’d never done the transplant. She could’ve gone into remission without it, like she did last time. I wish I’d never encouraged her to do this.”

This was all my fault. *All my fucking fault.* I needed to tell Naomi what I’d done, that without my *stupid need to make things right*, her sister wouldn’t be in this predicament. But now was not the time. Telling her wouldn’t help anyone but me. I might get it off my chest, but it would only complicate things for her by adding a new layer of emotional stress. “It’s not your fault. All you ever did was support your sister’s decisions.”

Naomi had held it together the whole time at the hospital, but suddenly she broke. Her shoulders shook, and then the noise came. I unbuckled her seatbelt and pulled her over the center console, holding her in my arms as she cried.

“I can’t lose her. The kids can’t lose their mother.”

Silent tears streamed down my face. I couldn’t even console her by saying everything would be alright. It most likely wouldn’t be. *Because of me.* Instead, I stroked her hair and held her tight. “I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry.”

After a long time, she wiped her cheeks with the back of her hand and sniffled. “I have to go in and talk to the kids before it gets too late.”

“Do you want me to go with you?”

Naomi smiled sadly. “No. But thank you. Frannie’s sister-in-law is still here. We’re going to talk to them together.”

I nodded. I had the strongest urge to tell her I loved her as I watched her walk from the car to the door. But it wasn’t because I thought she needed to hear it. It was because I had a sinking feeling I might never get the chance to tell her.

Chapter 36

DAWSON

A week later, Frannie's health had miraculously started to improve. She wasn't out of the woods yet, but she'd been released from the ICU into a stepdown unit. I hadn't seen much of Naomi because Frannie's sister-in-law had been keeping an eye on the kids when she went to the hospital. On the two days she'd come into the office, I'd made myself scarce. And tonight was the second night in a row I'd gone from the office to a bar down the block from my apartment instead of going home and getting the sleep I desperately needed.

The same bartender was on tonight as last night. I took the same stool, and he walked over and flung a hand towel over his shoulder. "Vodka soda?"

I nodded. "Good memory."

He grabbed a glass from beneath the bar and plucked a bottle of Tito's from the rack on the wall. "You don't look like most of my other patrons."

I felt my brows draw together and looked around. Two other guys were seated around the bar—one was probably in his sixties with a bulbous nose and eyes glued to a horse race on TV, and the other I thought was a bit older and I was pretty sure he might've been here last night. Might've been wearing those same clothes, too.

"Older crowd?"

He picked up the spray nozzle and topped off my glass with seltzer, gesturing with his chin to the guy watching TV. "Jack over there asked me if he could sign over his Social Security check in exchange for unlimited beer. I told him that was a losing proposition. Frank..." He nodded toward the other man. "He's usually waiting outside when I get here at ten in the morning. You look like you have a job."

Considering I had canceled four meetings in the last two days, I might not for long. Yet I shrugged. "It pays the bills."

The bartender slid the drink over to my side of the bar and extended a hand. “Remy Soriano.”

I shook, even though I didn’t feel like making small talk. “Dawson Reed.”

“So why are you drowning your sorrows two nights in a row in a shithole like this?”

I slugged back half of my glass. The alcohol burned going down. “Does the owner of this place know you insult the customers and call it a shithole?”

He smirked. “Sure does. I’m the proud owner of this shithole.”

I chuckled. “What makes you think I’m trying to drown my sorrows? Maybe I’m just an alcoholic who needs a new place to drink.”

“You took five hours to kill three not-so-strong vodka sodas last night and wobbled out of here. You aren’t good enough at drinking to be an alcoholic.”

Fair point. But he was still waiting for an answer. So I thought I’d give him one that would make him go away. “I almost killed someone.”

His brows jumped, but unfortunately, he didn’t budge. “Did they deserve it?”

“Not in the least.”

“Was it an accident?”

I sighed. “If you don’t mind, I’d prefer not to talk.”

Remy held up his hands. “You got it.”

I pointed to my glass. “How about making these stronger today?”

“You’re the boss.”

I spent the next three hours drinking *four* drinks. The bartender hadn’t been exaggerating earlier—three made me wobble. So I probably should’ve stopped there because four, well, four made me talk too much.

Remy brought over a dish full of nuts and a tall glass of something. “Water,” he said. “Drink it. And you should put something in your stomach too.”

“You ever fall in love?” I slurred.

“Every other Friday night when I don’t have my kid for the weekend. I go on Tinder and fall head over heels, then get over it by morning and see myself out.”

I snort-laughed. “That’s the way I was. I fucked up, thinking things could be different.”

“What happened? You met some girl-next-door type who promised you a home-cooked meal and love and then banged the pool guy when you went to work?”

“No, I’m the one who fucked up.”

“Can you make it right?”

I caught the bartender’s eyes, though he had four of them at the moment. “The person I almost killed? She was my girlfriend’s sister.”

He whistled. “I’m not sure there’s a Hallmark apology card or a big enough bouquet for that.”

I sucked back the remnants of my vodka soda like it was the water sitting next to it. It no longer burned, at least. Then I pushed my empty glass toward my new friend. “I’ll take another.”

“You sure? It’s always the last one that makes us do something stupid.”

“Stupid is what I’m good at.”

I lifted my head, and it felt like part of my face stayed stuck to the dirt beneath it. *Wait...dirt?* I blinked the rest of the way to consciousness and looked around at my surroundings. *Where the hell am I? In a kid’s playhouse?* Pushing upright, I squinted at the offensive sun blaring in through a small open door and raised a hand to try to block it. That’s when it hit me. I wasn’t in a kid’s playhouse. I was in a *doghouse*. And from the look of the brick home twenty feet away, it wasn’t just any dog’s house. I was in Bailey’s yard.

Oh fuck.

What the hell am I doing here?

And how the hell did I even get to Greenwich, Connecticut?

I struggled, thinking back to last night. It was hazy, but I remembered going to some bar. The bartender was Ren or Rowan or...Remy. It was definitely Remy. And fuck, my head was pounding right now. It hurt so much that I lifted a hand to feel around and make sure it wasn’t cracked. But there was no wetness, no blood.

What the hell happened?

I remembered the bartender taking my phone and helping me call an Uber. And I thought maybe he and some guy who’d been watching a horse race might’ve helped me into it. After that, though, I drew a giant blank.

And I was pretty sure if I tried to think any harder, I was going to puke. *No, no. I'm definitely going to puke anyway.*

I crawled to the entrance of the doghouse and made it in the nick of time. Fluids burned my esophagus as I emptied the contents of my stomach all over Bailey's mother's grass. *If* it was even her house anymore. I hadn't been here in years.

I was still dry heaving when I heard a door open and close. A few seconds later, a woman's shoes walked into my field of vision. I shut my eyes. *Fuck.* I'm going to wind up getting arrested. Worse, I had no choice but to lift my throbbing head and look up.

Miriam Anderson stared down at me. She didn't seem too surprised to see me, or at least it didn't seem to faze her that someone was vomiting on her property. I wasn't even sure she'd recognize me after all this time.

"Good morning, Dawson."

I managed to crawl the rest of the way out of the doghouse and climb upright, using the roof to balance. "Hi, Mrs. A."

"I think you're old enough to call me Miriam now." She smiled sadly. "I was beginning to wonder if I should call the paramedics. Are you okay?"

I started to nod, but stopped because it hurt my brain too much. "Sorry about your grass."

"It'll wash away. Would you like to come in?"

I hadn't seen this woman in over a decade, and I'd just broken into her yard, passed out in her doghouse, and puked all over her grass, and yet here she was inviting me in. People didn't change. "Could I trouble you for some Motrin?" I ran my tongue along the inside of my mouth, trying to find some moisture so I could speak better, but it was like the Sahara in there. "And maybe some water, too?"

She smiled and waved for me to follow her. In the kitchen, she went to a cabinet and pulled out a bottle of pills, then held a glass against the refrigerator door and filled it with filtered water.

"Thanks."

She nodded.

I took the pills and forced myself to drink half the water, even though I was queasy. "Did I wake you when I got here?"

Miriam shook her head. "I noticed feet sticking out of the doghouse when I looked out the window while making my coffee about six. You were fast asleep." She smiled. "You look exactly the same, just a little older."

I rubbed the back of my neck. “Do you know how I got here?”

“I looked at the Ring camera. You were dropped off about two in the morning. Not sure by who, but the car left after it let you out.”

Probably the Uber. I shook my head. “I’m sorry for showing up like this. It’s not exactly how I would’ve liked to have seen you for the first time after all these years.”

She held out a hand. “Why don’t you have a seat? I’ll make you some tea. Caffeine might help with the headache.”

I was in no state to jump in a moving car at the moment, so I figured I might as well sit. Miriam put the kettle on and rustled around the kitchen for a few minutes before setting a teacup in front of me. She took the seat across from me with her own cup and sipped.

“Your mom tells me you’re a lawyer, in private practice.”

“I didn’t realize you and Mom kept in touch.”

Miriam nodded. “A few times a year. I give her the gossip from around the neighborhood, and she gives me updates on you and Ben and rubs in how warm it is in Florida when we talk during the cold months up here.”

I smiled, even though my face hurt. “She’s been down there four years and already needs a sweater when she comes up to visit and it’s seventy.”

I looked around the kitchen, anywhere but at the woman sitting across from me. My eyes stopped at the clock on the wall. I was pretty sure it was the same one from when we were kids. It had cherries where the numbers would normally be. “Is that right?”

She followed my line of sight. “Within a few minutes. It’s going on two.”

Wow. I’d really been knocked out. The cherry clock reminded me that the entire kitchen used to be cherry themed—cherry wallpaper, cherry dishtowels, cherry curtains, cherry salt and pepper shakers. But it was just the clock now. “You redid the kitchen.”

“About a decade ago.”

I nodded. With my kitchen inspection done, I had nowhere to look except down at my tea. Miriam and I were both quiet for a long time.

“Dawson?”

She waited until I lifted my head. It was painful to look into her eyes, knowing what I’d done all those years ago.

“Would you like to talk about it? Whatever brought you here last night?”

“I’m not really sure why I’m here.” That wasn’t true, but it also wasn’t a lie, if that made any sense at all. It felt like Miriam was looking into my soul, and that was more than I could handle, so I diverted my eyes once again. They swept around the room, looking for something, *anything*, to cling to. When they found the refrigerator, my heart skipped a beat.

Bailey.

Without thinking, I pushed back from the table, chair legs scraping along the tile floor, and walked over to the photo.

She couldn’t have been more than thirteen or fourteen. She had on that denim patchwork bucket hat she’d worn the day we met, and she was holding a football that looked bigger than it was in her tiny hands. Her smile was ear to ear. I swallowed and pointed. “This was taken on homecoming night in eighth grade.”

Bailey’s mom quietly walked up behind me. “It was. She was so happy you invited her to go with your friends.” She paused. “You were the best thing that happened to her when we moved here, Dawson. She loved you.”

I didn’t even realize I’d started crying until wetness hit my arm. I looked down, confused by it for a moment. “I loved her, too.” *Though not the way I should’ve.*

We stood at the refrigerator for a long time, staring at the picture in silence. Eventually, Miriam put a hand on my shoulder.

“Your mom told me you met someone recently.”

I froze. I’d completely forgotten I’d mentioned Naomi to my mom. I *never* mentioned anything about women to her. Swallowing, I nodded. “Her name is Naomi.”

“Pretty name.”

“She’s...amazing.” After I said it, I realized how insensitive it was. I turned to apologize, but Miriam smiled.

“You’re allowed to have an amazing girlfriend, Dawson. It doesn’t make my daughter any less amazing.”

I raked a hand through my hair. “Her sister has cancer.”

Miriam’s face fell. “I’m so sorry.”

I still couldn’t look Bailey’s mom in the eyes, but the words...the words needed to come out. My insides felt like a shaken bottle of champagne whose top had just popped off. There was so much pressure in my chest, so many bubbles rushing to the surface.

“It’s my fault Bailey died.”

Miriam stilled. “What are you talking about?”

“I was dating Allie Papadopoulos. We were together in the weeks before prom. She had mono, but I didn’t know it yet. Then the night of prom, Bailey wanted me to kiss her and...I gave it to her and she died.”

Miriam let out a big breath. “Oh, Dawson. It’s not your fault Bailey died. Her white blood count was so low those last few months it was practically nonexistent. Bailey was very, very sick.”

“But she could’ve had more time. Instead, she only had weeks.”

“Dawson, look at me. You did not *kill* Bailey. In fact, I believe in my heart you were a big part of the reason she hung on as long as she did. She *adored* you, and that kiss you gave her on prom night made her feel *normal*. I loved her with all of my heart, but I couldn’t give her what you gave her. I couldn’t make her forget about her illness and be a teenager. *You* could. *You* did. And for that, I will be eternally grateful to you.”

“But—”

“No, Dawson. There is no *but*. Bailey had cancer. Her body was riddled with it. The chemo and radiation destroyed her immunity. She could’ve been in a bubble and she wouldn’t have made it. It was her time, sweetheart.”

Tears streamed down my face again. My legs shook, and it felt like I couldn’t hold my own weight any longer. I sank down to the floor, back sliding down the stainless-steel refrigerator, and covered my face with my hands as I sobbed.

Miriam sat down next to me and put an arm around my shoulder. She stroked my hair and whispered for me to let it out over and over again. When the crying finally stopped, she squeezed my shoulder. “Look at me again, Dawson.”

I lifted my head, resting it against the door behind me, and met her eyes.

“You did nothing wrong. Just the opposite. You were the sun on my daughter’s dark days. And you deserve happiness.”

I wiped my eyes with the back of my hand.

Miriam smiled. “Tell me about her. Who is this woman who was finally able to get through to Dawson Reed?”

“I want to let her in. I really do. For the first time in as long as I can remember, I don’t want to be alone. But I don’t know how to not be terrified.”

She smiled again. “Part of us is always terrified when we’re in love. Love makes us feel vulnerable in so many ways, and that’s scary. But it’s worth it. I promise.” She climbed to her feet and held out her hand. “Come with me. I want to show you something.”

I was emotionally and physically drained, yet I followed her through the house. When we got to Bailey’s bedroom door, I stopped. She opened it and held out a hand to me. “I want you to see what love can be.”

I hesitated but took her hand and let her guide me into Bailey’s bedroom. It looked different, bunk beds in the corner had replaced Bailey’s big bed that was always in the center, and Bailey’s pale pink walls were now lime green with hand drawn artwork hanging all over. I shook my head.

“I don’t understand. You redecorated her room?”

“It’s now Kristy and Kami’s room. They’re eight and identical twins. Six years ago, I decided to open my heart again, so I became a foster parent. I’m in the process of adopting them now.”

“Wow.”

She smiled and looked around. “It was *not* easy changing things in Bailey’s room. I’d turned it into some sort of a mausoleum after she died. I would come in here and sit for hours. I felt like letting anyone else in here, into my heart, would mean replacing my Bailey. But my girl isn’t replaceable, and there’s enough room in my heart to love more than one child.”

I met Miriam’s eyes and nodded. I understood what she was trying to tell me, even if I couldn’t get out the words just yet.

“Hang on a second. I have some things that I believe belong to you. I moved a box into the attic when the twins moved in. Let me grab it.”

A few minutes later, Miriam came back with three envelopes in her hand. She held them out to me. “I believe these are yours.”

“Are these...”

She nodded and smiled. “My daughter gave them to me a few days before she passed and asked me to hold them for safekeeping. She told me she’d had you write to her every year on her birthday, something about getting your feelings out. Bailey never opened them and neither did I. I don’t know what’s inside, but maybe something in the letters will help?”

I took the envelopes. “Thank you.”

“Take care of yourself, Dawson.” She pulled me in for a hug. “You deserve to be happy. My Bailey would want that.”

Chapter 37

NAOMI

“I can’t believe you still haven’t heard from Dawson.” Lily shook her head. “I was worried about you getting involved with him at the beginning because of his track record with women. But when I saw the way he looked at you, I stopped worrying. He’s clearly crazy about you.”

I dipped a French fry into ketchup and sighed. “He has a funny way of showing it.”

It was Friday afternoon, almost two weeks since something had changed with Dawson. It was like he was upset with me, but I had no idea why, and he didn’t allow himself to be around me long enough to figure it out. At first, even though we kept missing each other at the office, we kept texting. But now even his texts had grown distant. They were never more than a few words, and he never initiated them except to ask once a day how Frannie was. And at this point, it was clear we weren’t *missing* each other anymore. Dawson was avoiding me like the plague.

“This morning, I got to the office at six thirty because he’s been coming and going either before I arrived or after I had to leave for the day to pick up the kids. Frannie’s sister-in-law, Cynthia, stayed over last night, so I didn’t have to do the morning routine. But Dawson was already gone by the time I got there. I asked the overnight security guard if he’d seen him leave—pretending I’d overslept and missed the boss and he was going to be mad—and the guard said he came in at midnight and left at around four AM. The man has turned nocturnal to avoid me.”

“I just don’t get it. There has to be a reason. He’s probably freaking out over how he feels about you because he has no experience with relationships.”

“Maybe.” I shrugged. “But I get the feeling there’s more to it than that.”

“Ben thinks it has something to do with Bailey.”

“I wondered that, too. Because she died of cancer. Maybe Frannie’s situation stirred up old emotions that are difficult for him to manage. But he

didn't disappear when the shit hit the fan and Frannie had that awful week that scared us. He went MIA *after* she started to recover and got out of the ICU."

"Whatever the reason, he needs to pull his head out of his ass and speak to you about it."

I sighed. "Could we talk about something else? I need an afternoon off from thinking about Dawson. I feel like that's all I do lately, and it's honestly exhausting."

Lily reached across the table and patted my hand. "Of course. I'm sorry."

I forced a smile. "Tell me something good. How's the second floor coming along? Have you started renovating yet?"

Her lips curved to a cheeky smile. "We started one particular room."

I dipped another fry. "Which one? Your bedroom?"

"No, the nursery."

My eyes widened. "You're..."

Lily nodded with the biggest smile on her face. "I just found out a few days ago. You're the first person I've told besides my mom and obviously Ben."

"Oh my God, Lily!" I got up and walked around the table, swamping my best friend in a hug. "Congratulations! I'm so happy for you guys."

"Thanks. I still can't believe it. The funny thing is, I had my IUD put in a few weeks before I met Ben. I went to the gyno for a checkup two months before the wedding, and she said it was almost time to change it. I told Ben, and his response was a sexy smile and '*I can't wait to put a baby in you.*' I thought it was insanely hot and attacked him."

I laughed. "You two are sickeningly perfect together."

"We'd planned on trying in a year or two, but since the IUD had to come out, we decided to roll the dice and let things happen when they were meant to. I was shocked we got pregnant so fast."

"I'm so excited for you."

Lily's news really lifted my spirits, and I left the diner feeling upbeat for the first time in weeks. Though as the day progressed, I couldn't help but think about where I was in my own life. A year ago, I'd had my dream job and been engaged. Brad and I had talked about having a family in the future. Back then, if someone would've asked me where I saw myself in a few years, I would have described Lily's life—happily married and

pregnant. It was a reminder that life changes, and we have to keep moving forward. I just really wished I was doing that with Dawson.

Sunday afternoon I took Leo to the park for off-leash hours. The minute I closed the gated area and unhooked his collar, he took off with a Pomeranian. Unfortunately, being here reminded me of the last time I was here. With Dawson. He'd asked me to be his girlfriend that day, and we'd talked about introducing our "children," Leo and Sheldon. How we'd gone from that to today still utterly confused me. Until now, I hadn't let myself think about the fallout from our decoupling. While we weren't officially broken up, maybe it was time I took the hint. Could I continue to work for him? I loved the job, and it paid well. Lord knows it had taken me forever to find someone who would even hire me, so I wasn't exactly anxious to start pounding the pavement again. But...seeing Dawson every day? How would I feel when he inevitably started dating, and women called or stopped by the office? Even the thought of it turned my stomach. *This is why you shouldn't mix business and pleasure.*

I closed my eyes.

God, I'd made a mess of my life once again. My *fresh start* had turned into a *sour ending*. Busy feeling bad for myself, I realized I'd lost track of Leo and his little friend. So I got up and went to see what trouble he could be getting himself into. Women sometimes put their purses on the ground next to them, which was an invitation my dog and his unpacking addiction couldn't refuse.

"Leo!" I walked through the dog park calling his name. "*Leo!*"

I finally found him in a quiet corner, humping his stuffed turtle. Except as I walked closer, I noticed the color of the shell was darker than Leo's. And I hadn't even brought his toy! Great. *He's humping someone else's*. I really hoped some three-year-old wasn't watching this go down, being scarred by my dog violating his favorite stuffy.

"Leo! *Stop that!*"

Of course he ignored me and went right on humping, standing on his two hind legs.

I reached for the poor stuffed animal, but quickly pulled my hand back and gasped. Leonardo wasn't humping a toy; he was humping a real, live turtle. "Oh my God!"

But it definitely wasn't God who answered.

"It's fine. Sheldon's head is still out, so he doesn't seem to mind."

My head whipped around. "Dawson?"

I hated that my heart started to race wildly just seeing the man. He smiled sadly. "Hey."

"What are you doing here?"

He shoved his hands into his jeans pockets. "I came to talk to you. Took a chance you'd be here."

My body may have been excited to see the man, but my head wasn't in agreement. I suddenly got very angry and felt my face heat. "You don't need to take chances on where to find me. I've been the same place every day for the last two weeks: at the office. You know, the place you've been avoiding."

Dawson dragged a hand through his hair, and I took a closer look at his face. He looked terrible—annoyingly handsome, yet still terrible. Dark circles rimmed his blue eyes, his normally tanned skin looked sallow, and his face was covered in what looked like two-week-old, ungroomed scruff. His clothes were also wrinkled, when he was *always* dressed crisp. "I have been avoiding you. I'm sorry."

I turned away. "Just say whatever it is you came to say and get it over with."

He stayed quiet for a long time, but I could feel his presence. "Do you think we can sit and talk?"

I folded my arms across my chest. "Fine. Whatever."

Dawson walked around me and lifted Leo. It pissed me off that he looked adorable holding him. So I plucked my dog from his hands. "I can carry him myself."

Dawson frowned and gestured to a park bench under a tree. "Why don't we sit over there? I'll move Sheldon."

We sat side by side on the park bench. I kept my focus forward, watching Leo, not ready to look at the man next to me.

"How's Frannie?"

My lips pursed. "Fine. It's very nice that you've taken such an interest in my sister's health, but it would be great if you gave a shit how I was, too."

I felt Dawson's eyes burning into me, but I still didn't turn.

"Naomi," he whispered. "Look at me."

“Why? Do you want to *see me* cry when you dump me?”

“I never want to see you hurt, Naomi.” He paused. “*Please* look at me.”

I gave him my best icy glare, but when I saw pain in his eyes, it melted.

“I’m sorry.” His voice cracked. “I’m so damn sorry I’ve been avoiding you.”

I tasted salt in my throat, but refused to allow myself to cry. “Why? What did I do?”

He shook his head. “You didn’t do anything. I’m just a coward.”

“I don’t understand.”

He nodded. “I know. And that’s because I shut you out when I should’ve let you in. But I was too ashamed to tell you about my past.”

“Does this have something to do with Bailey?”

“It starts there. If it’s okay with you, I’d like to tell you about her.”

“Of course.”

Dawson looked down for a few moments before starting. “I met Bailey in eighth grade. Girls were just starting to get into boys, and I thought I was hot shit because a few of the popular girls liked me.” He shook his head. “Bailey called me out on my shit whenever my head started to get too big. We were best friends. She had cancer, but in tenth grade she went into remission, and boys started to notice her. Her hair grew back, and she put these blond streaks in it. She wasn’t the sick girl anymore. She was just a regular high school girl, which is really all she ever wanted. She didn’t have a lot of friends, because she was sometimes out of school for long periods of time and her treatments took all her energy. A few guys asked her out, and she even went to a dance with one of them, but she’d always find something wrong with the boys who took an interest. I teased her that her standards were too high, but I suspected she was afraid to get close to people because her cancer had come back twice already.” He paused and took a deep breath. “It came back a third time in the fall of junior year.”

“I’m sorry.”

Dawson looked straight ahead, but I didn’t think he was seeing anything, at least not what was in front of him. “She did a few treatments but then stopped. There was nothing they could do that would extend her life more than a few months, and Bailey wanted to go back to feeling like a regular high school kid again for as long as she could. She started acting strange around me, and I thought she might be trying to distance herself to make it easier when she...”

Tears filled his eyes. It no longer mattered that I was mad at him. Reaching over, I took his hand and laced our fingers together.

Dawson cleared his throat. “Anyway, her mom pulled me aside one day and told me Bailey really wanted to go to the junior prom. I hadn’t told Bailey yet, but I’d already asked Allie Papadopoulos, the girl I’d been seeing, to go with me. But there was no way in hell I could let Bailey miss junior prom if she wanted to go, so I canceled with Allie and asked Bailey instead.”

I smiled. “That was very sweet of you.”

He shook his head. “No, it wasn’t. Because I was an asshole seventeen-year-old and kept seeing Allie even though I’d told Bailey we’d broken up. Allie wasn’t happy about me going to the junior prom with someone else, but by the time the day rolled around, Allie wasn’t feeling well anyway.” Dawson took another deep breath. “Bailey’s treatments wiped her out pretty easily, so we didn’t stay at the prom long. Long story short, Bailey asked me to kiss her. She said she didn’t want to die without ever being kissed. So I kissed her—and, then, and then... I kept on kissing her...and we wound up having sex, even though I had a girlfriend and didn’t have those types of feelings for Bailey. After, she told me she loved me. I didn’t know what to say. I loved her too—just not the way she’d meant it. But I didn’t want to hurt her, so I said it back.” He paused and took a breath. “The very next morning, I woke up feeling like shit, and it wasn’t just because I’d cheated on Allie and crossed a line with my best friend. I *literally* felt like shit. My glands were swollen, and I was shivering even though I was sweating. A little while later, Allie called to tell me she had mono.”

Dawson closed his eyes. “I wasn’t at school the following week because I was sick. But apparently, Bailey told someone we were a couple, and it got back to Allie who was also home sick with mono. Allie got pissed and sent a text to Bailey telling her she was sleeping with me and I’d only gone to the dance with Bailey because I felt bad for her. Bailey called me crying and asked me if it was true that I was with Allie. I didn’t want to lie to her, so I came clean and told her the truth. The next week, before I could see her in person and try to fix things, Bailey came down with mono. I’d given it to her, and her weakened immune system couldn’t fight it. I broke my best friend’s heart and then killed her.”

My heart clenched. “Oh my God, Dawson. You can’t blame yourself for that. You didn’t know you were sick.”

“I knew my girlfriend hadn’t been feeling well, and I didn’t think before I kissed Bailey.”

“You were seventeen and doing what someone you loved wanted you to do.”

“I didn’t make the right decision.”

“What would the right decision have been? To not kiss her and break her heart by rejecting her? I think if I were in her shoes, I would’ve wanted the kiss more than a few more days.” I shook my head. “Did my sister’s cancer bring this all to the surface for you? Is that what’s been going on?”

“There’s something else I need to tell you.”

“What?”

He took a deep breath and turned to face me. “I was your sister’s bone-marrow donor.”

I blinked a few times. “What?”

He nodded. “I was her donor.”

“What? How? Why wouldn’t you have told me that?”

“I didn’t do it for the right reasons. I wanted to save your sister because of what I did to Bailey.”

“Did you think that would upset me?”

“It felt wrong. And then she got sick. And the doctors thought she was rejecting the transplant, and I thought—holy shit, I did it again. I decided what’s right or wrong for someone else, and they’re going to pay the consequences again.”

“Oh, Dawson...” I covered my heart with my hand. “You did something beautiful. *Twice*. And what happened after is just part of life. Even if things hadn’t improved for Frannie, it wouldn’t have been your fault.” I shook my head, feeling awe as I looked at the man in front of me. “I can’t believe you did that and didn’t tell me.”

“I’m sorry I kept it from you.”

Still in shock, I couldn’t stop shaking my head. “I was starting to get jealous because you kept asking about my sister even when you were clearly avoiding me.”

“Can you forgive me for not telling you and then not being there for you these last few weeks?”

“Forgive you?” I pulled him into my arms. “I should be thanking you. You gave her the most amazing gift, and you gave me the gift of more time with my sister.” I hugged him tight. “Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.”

After a long time of holding each other, Dawson pulled back. “There’s something else I need to tell you.”

“Oh God. What else?”

He took my face in his hands and looked straight into my eyes. “I love you, Naomi. I think I have from the first moment we met.”

“I love you, too.” My eyes filled with tears, happy ones this time, yet I couldn’t help but laugh. “Though the first time we met, I gave you a black eye.”

His lip twitched. “But I showed you my dick. So no wonder you stuck around.”

I smiled, feeling hope bloom inside of me. “Welcome back. Believe it or not, I even missed your big ego.”

Dawson rubbed his nose with mine. “How about we go back to my place? And I apologize properly.”

I bit down on my bottom lip. “What did you have in mind?”

Dawson’s eyes shifted over my shoulder. He lifted his chin, guiding me to follow his line of sight. When I did, I found Leo once again bent over Sheldon, humping away. “Maybe a little of that, for starters?”

Chapter 38

DAWSON

A month later, I sat on the damp Connecticut grass watching the sunrise on the morning of Bailey's birthday. The last time I'd visited this cemetery was the day of her funeral. I'd thought about coming here often, but I'd never had the balls to do it. Maybe it was because I'd never known what to say. Or maybe I knew that if I was ever truly going to move on, I'd need to come here and say goodbye. Whatever the reason, I was ready now, so I took a deep breath and spoke to my best friend.

"I'm sorry I didn't visit sooner. I won't even try to give you an excuse, because you were always able to see through my bullshit. Even though I wasn't here, I spent a lot of time thinking about you, and there's a lot I need to say, once and for all.

"I'm sorry, Bailey. I'm sorry I hurt you when you found out I was with someone else. And I'm sorry I wasn't honest with you about my feelings." I reached into my jacket pocket and pulled out four envelopes—the three yellowed ones I'd written to Bailey a long time ago, and a new one that was already addressed with a stamp on it. Setting the four old ones against the headstone, I continued. "Most of all, I'm sorry I got you sick. I went to see your mom not long ago, and she told me it wasn't my fault that you died—that you were sick, and it was only a matter of time. But even if that's true, it should have been on your own terms, when you were ready. Maybe someday I'll be able to accept that I couldn't have changed things and make peace with the idea that God took you when He wanted. But I haven't yet. So instead, I'm here to ask for your forgiveness. Because I need to start to heal.

"I've met someone, Bailey. And I'm terrified I'm going to fuck that up, too, like I did all the other relationships I've had in my life. But for once, the thought of losing her terrifies me more than the thought of getting close to someone again.

“You were always worried about how I was going to deal with things once you were gone. You knew I might keep things bottled up too tight.” I scoffed. “Turns out you had good reason for that. But I want to change. I want to find peace, and I want to find it with Naomi. So today, not only have I come to give you a long-overdue apology, but I’ve also come to tell you what a big influence you still are in my life.” I lifted the last envelope in my hand and looked down at it. “I’m going to have to work my way up to talking about my feelings, but I figured this would be a good start. I’m opening myself up to someone—through a letter, like the ones you made me write every year.”

I put the letter addressed to Naomi Heart back in my pocket for safekeeping. I planned to stop at the post office on the way home and mail it. She’d probably think it was strange, considering we spent all day and a few nights a week together. But I wasn’t taking any chances. I wanted to give Naomi everything I had.

I sat with my back to Bailey’s headstone for a long time, remembering the good times we’d had over the years. Eventually, it was time to go. I stood and wiped dirt from my pants.

“I hope you can forgive me. I will never forget you, even if I manage to stop beating myself up over how things ended. Goodbye, Bailey. I really did love you.”

Epilogue

NAOMI

3 years later

“What the hell are you wearing?” I tossed my keys on the kitchen counter and laughed, getting a look at Dawson’s outfit. “You look ridiculous.”

Dawson lifted his bright green pant leg to reveal even more color, bright yellow socks. He also had on a royal blue shirt and a red tie. “What? You don’t like it?”

“Why are you dressed like that?”

“Because I couldn’t decide on the appropriate color for good luck. I put on this shirt because one website said blue promotes positive energy. But then another one said green means optimism and a fresh start. The yellow socks are for happiness and positivity.”

“What about the red tie?”

“Oh, that’s not for luck. The last website I checked said it’s the color of eroticism.” He winked. “I’m hoping our celebration goes that direction.”

“But what are we celebrating? Wait. Did the judge rule in your favor on the Peterson appeal?”

Dawson reached over to a pile of mail and held up an envelope. We’d finally moved in together last year. “Nope. This envelope came from the Virginia Office of Professional Responsibility.”

My eyes grew wide. “The decision on the appeal to get my law license back is here already? I thought they said it would be eight weeks. It’s only been five.”

“Maybe I’m such a great lawyer they didn’t have to think about it much.”

“Or...maybe they didn’t have to spend much time thinking about it because there is no way in hell they’re letting me practice law again.”

“Uh, excuse me.” Dawson gestured to his outfit. “That does not sound like the positivity I’m putting out into the universe for you.”

I couldn't believe the decision was here so soon. Part of me still couldn't believe I'd even let Dawson file the appeal. But it was pretty hard to say no when he'd surprised me with a thirty-page document he'd already written, complete with compelling case law to support reinstatement, and a dozen letters he'd secretly had my former and current colleagues write to attest to my good character and fitness. He'd even had the doctors and nurses who cared for Lizzie at her assisted-living facility write glowing letters.

Dawson stepped forward and slipped the envelope into my hands. "Open it."

"What if they say no?"

"Then you'll continue to work for me, and I'll keep pretending I'm as smart as you make me look when you do all the legwork and writeups for my cases." He smiled. "On second thought, I shouldn't have done such a great job on my oral argument when we went down to Virginia last month. I'm fucked when you get back in."

I smiled, deciding the letter could wait another minute, and wrapped my arms around my boyfriend's neck. "Whatever the outcome is, I want you to know I think you did a great job and appreciate everything you put into this. Three years ago, I never could've imagined I would be truly happy working as a paralegal instead of a lawyer. But you make me feel appreciated and heard and treat me like an equal."

"Oh yeah? Then I'm doing a damn good job faking it. Because you are not my equal, sweetheart." He lifted his hand high into the air. "You are up here." He lowered his hand to waist high. "And I am down here." Dawson pressed a kiss to my lips. "Now, no more stalling. Open the letter. I made us a reservation for dinner to celebrate."

I wished I had half the confidence this man did. Nevertheless, I stepped back and turned the letter over. My hands shook as I slipped my finger into a corner and used my fingernail to slice open the envelope. There was only one piece of paper inside.

"Wouldn't there be more documents, things for me to fill out if they were letting me have my license back?"

Dawson pointed to the paper. "Read it."

I unfolded and scanned the page.

Decision of the Hearing Panel Subcommittee...

A Statement of Charges containing two counts was filed against Petitioner Naomi Heart, charging her with violations of the Virginia Bar's rules of professional conduct. Petitioner surrendered her law license, conceding that all charges were indefensible. A formal disbarment trial was not conducted. This Board accepted the Petitioner's resignation from practice, citing that the preliminary findings, which were deemed true by the Petitioner's affidavit accompanying her surrender, were violations amounting to offenses punishable by disbarment. The Petitioner filed a Petition for Reinstatement, and a hearing was conducted by the Hearing Panel Subcommittee. A unanimous decision was reached, indicating reinstatement of the Petitioner to the practice of law.

My eyes flared. "Oh my God! They're reinstating me! Dawson, you did it!"

He lifted me off my feet and swung me around. "Holy shit. Congratulations! I'm so fucking happy!"

"I can't believe it. I really can't believe it. This never would have happened if it weren't for you."

"That's not true. You would've gotten there on your own. I just gave you the push you needed."

"You give me *everything* I need. I love you so much."

"Love you, too, counselor." He pressed his lips to mine for a hard kiss. "Now go get dressed in something sexy for our dinner. Because I can't wait to get home and celebrate inside of you."

I licked my lips. "We could...skip dinner."

"Not a chance. You're going to need fuel for what I have in store later."

"Would you mind if we made a stop at the office?" Dawson asked after we'd finished a delicious dinner. "We're only a few blocks away, and I need a file for the morning. It'll save me the trip before court. We can take an Uber. Those shoes don't look too comfortable to walk in."

"They're not bad, actually. I think I'm finally used to heels on concrete. Let's walk. It's such a nice night, and the cold weather is coming soon enough."

"Alright."

We walked hand in hand from the restaurant to the office. Dawson was quieter than usual. I looked over and saw some tension in his face, probably

about the hearing he had in the morning. I smiled to myself. I couldn't wait to help him get rid of that when we got home. Never in a million years would I have imagined the man I'd assaulted in that cabin at Ben and Lily's wedding could morph into the considerate, loving soul who stood next to me today. Life isn't perfect. But each year had gotten better and better since Dawson stormed into my world.

Three years ago, he'd gone to visit Bailey's grave, and things had taken a turn after that. The next time I went to his apartment, her photo that had always been on the shelf was gone. I found it in a box a few weeks after I moved in, right next to the *asshole* bracelet he no longer wears. And he started writing me letters a few times a year. He still mails them to me, even though we live together. He says he does it because he has a difficult time expressing things he feels aloud, but none of that is important, because he *shows me* how much he loves me every day.

We arrived at the office and made our way up to the fourteenth floor. Dawson unlocked the door but didn't turn the lights on in the lobby when we walked in. Instead, he gathered me in his arms. "I have a surprise for you."

"The last time you said that we were at Frannie's new boyfriend's house and you dragged me into the bathroom and tried to get me to have sex."

"That wasn't my fault. He had coconut-scented hand soap. You know how I love my cococunt."

I chuckled. Dawson planted a kiss on my lips and stepped back. "Are you ready for your surprise?"

"I'm a little afraid to say yes, but yes."

He flicked the lights on. I looked around, trying to figure out what the surprise was. There wasn't anything or anyone unusual in the lobby. But then I saw the wall. The *Reed & Associates* sign had been replaced.

"Reed & Reed?"

I was confused. At least until I turned back to find my beautiful man down on one knee, holding a ring box. I gasped. Dawson flipped the velvet case open and revealed a sparkling, princess-cut diamond ring.

He took my hand. "Naomi Heart, from the moment I met you, I wanted nothing more than to be near you—not only because you're beautiful and smart, but because I like who I am when I'm around you. You make me a better man, each and every day, and for that I'm so thankful. I want to spend

the rest of my days making you happy, and I want you to be my partner in all ways—in law and in life. So will you please be my wife?”

I dropped to my knees and crushed my lips to his, happy tears streaming down my face. “Yes! Yes!”

When our kiss broke, I pressed my forehead against Dawson’s. “Naomi Reed. It has a nice ring to it.”

He smiled. “It does.”

I looked over at the wall, at the gold letters that spelled out *Reed & Reed*. “I can’t believe you had the sign made already. You must’ve been pretty sure of yourself.”

“Sweetheart, you are the only thing I’ve ever been sure of in my entire life.”

THE END

Do you love billionaire romances with a unique storyline?
Swipe to check out a sneak peek of *Something Unexpected*, a fan favorite.



CHAPTER 1

NORA

“**YOU’VE GOT TO** be kidding me...” I mumbled and turned, shouting over my shoulder. “Oh, and thanks for sticking me with the tab!”

The bartender walked over. “Everything okay, ma’am?”

I sighed. “Yeah. Guy I met on Tinder just turned out to be nothing like I expected.”

A deep voice came from the other end of the bar. “Shocker. Maybe you should try looking somewhere a little more respectable...”

I squinted down at him. “*Excuse me?*”

The guy rattled the ice in his glass without looking up. “What’s the matter? He wasn’t as good-looking as his picture made him out to be? You gotta give a guy some leeway. You women are the queens of hiding shit. Lord knows we go to bed with someone with long hair, a great tan, and full lips. In the morning, we wake up next to a person we don’t recognize because of all the makeup, hair extensions, and plumping crap you use.”

Seriously? “Perhaps if you weren’t so rude and *looked* at a person when you were speaking to them, you might have noticed that I don’t have hair extensions, wear very little makeup, and I’m *naturally* plumped in *all* the right places.”

That seemed to get his attention. The guy’s head lifted, and he did a quick sweep over my face before his eyes snagged on my cleavage. It gave me my first good look at him. The face that came with that attitude was *nothing* like I would’ve expected. Based on how defensive he was about my would-be date’s looks not being up to par, I thought maybe he had some experience disappointing women. But this guy definitely didn’t let down anyone. He was younger than his grumbly voice hinted at, with dark brown hair that could use a cut. Yet I would’ve enjoyed running my fingers through it had *he* been my Tinder date. He had a strong, masculine jaw peppered with stubble, a Romanesque nose, tanned skin, and aquamarine eyes lined with the thickest black lashes I’d ever seen.

Too bad he was also *a jerk*.

When his eyes finally met mine, I arched a brow. “Which one of us is the shallow one again?”

His lip twitched. “Never said I didn’t appreciate beautiful things. Just that you should give a guy a chance.”

I shook my head. “Not that it’s any of your business, but the reason that guy wasn’t what I expected was because he had an indent from his wedding band on his finger. Probably slipped it off two seconds before he walked in. It had nothing to do with his looks.”

“I apologize then.” He motioned to the bartender. “Her next round is on me.”

I pointed to the half-drunk expensive scotch Tinder guy had left behind—without any cash. “How about that one is on you instead?”

He chuckled. “You got it.”

I sipped my wine, still stewing over the jerk I’d wasted three days talking to. Eventually I yelled over to Mr. Attitude again. “Hey, so what do you use?”

“Pardon?”

“What dating app? You said I should use a more respectable dating app.”

“Oh.” He shrugged. “I don’t use any.”

“Married?”

“Nope.”

“Girlfriend?”

“Nope.”

“So you just what...troll the supermarket pretending to shop?”

“Something like that.” He smirked. “Is Tinder your go-to?”

“It depends on what I’m looking for.”

“What were you looking for tonight?”

I thought about the question. Let’s face it, I found the guy on Tinder three days ago and met him in the bar in the lobby of my hotel. I think it was clear what both of us expected to happen. But it wasn’t really about the physical—at least for me. “To forget,” I answered.

The guy’s mask of superiority might have slipped, just a little. Then his phone rang, and he swiped to answer.

“Tell them I’ll join in five minutes,” he said. “I need to get up to my room where the prospectus and my notes are.” He said nothing more before

swiping off and lifting his chin to the bartender. “I need to run. Can I sign the tab to my room?”

The bartender nodded. “Sure thing.”

“Room two twelve.” Arrogant guy reached into his pocket and took out a wad of cash. Tossing a few bills on the bar, he motioned to me. “Put her bill for the night on my room, too, please.”

“You got it.”

I lifted my wine. “Shame you have to go. Maybe you aren’t such a jerk after all.”

His lip twitched. “I called the meeting, so I can’t miss it. But it’s definitely my loss.”

I grinned. “Sure is...”

Though as I watched him stand and realized he was well over six-feet tall and his dress shirt hugged him *very* nicely, I wondered if it was my loss after all. Nonetheless, he disappeared with only a nod.

Forty-five minutes later, I told the bartender to save my seat—even though I was the only person in the bar—and went to the ladies’ room. Yawning as I washed my hands, I figured it was time to call it a night. But when I returned, a man sat in the chair next to mine. And not just any man—the arrogant, incredibly handsome guy from earlier.

I took my seat, which now had a fresh glass of wine in front of it. “How was your meeting?” I asked.

“Do you really care?”

“No, but I was being polite. Something you should try once in a while.” I turned to face him and tried to ignore that he was even better looking this close up. I’d never used the word *smoldering* to describe eyes before, but that’s what his were. *Smoldering bedroom eyes*. He smelled damn good, too. “You know, just because you’re hot doesn’t mean you can be rude. Maybe that works for you in the supermarket, but it won’t work with me.”

He raised a brow. “You think I’m hot?”

I rolled my eyes. “You should’ve focused on the part about being rude. Figures all you heard was good-looking.”

“Is that why you picked Tinder guy? He was polite?”

“He was nice, yes. He was also funny and made me laugh.”

He lifted his drink. “Nice and funny got you a married guy who stuck you with the tab. Maybe you should try hot and rude?”

I chuckled. He had a point. “Do you have a name? Or do you prefer to be referred to as Mr. Arrogant? Because that’s what I’ve been saying in my head.”

Mr. Arrogant extended his hand. “Beck.”

When I put mine into his, he lifted it to his lips and kissed the top. It caused a tingle all over me. Though I wasn’t about to tell him that.

“Is this how they do it in the supermarket? Kiss a stranger’s hand and invite her back to your place?”

“My place is three-thousand miles away.”

“Oh. So you aren’t looking to replace the guy I kicked to the curb earlier?”

He grinned. “If you’re actively seeking a replacement, I mean, *I am* right here. But I’d like your name first, at least.”

I laughed. “Nora.”

He nodded. “Nice to meet you, Nora.”

“What brings you out to the middle of nowhere, Beck?”

“I came to see family. You?”

“Girls’ trip. We’re just passing through for a few days.”

Beck’s phone buzzed on the bar. He leaned forward to check the screen and shook his head. “I’m gone a half a day and all hell breaks loose at the office.”

“Not going to answer it?”

“It can wait till tomorrow.”

“What is it you do that makes you such a popular man?”

“I’m in mergers and acquisitions.”

“Sounds fancy, but I have no idea what that actually means.”

“It varies. Some days my company helps companies around the same size consolidate and become one big powerhouse. Other days we help a powerful company take over a weaker one.”

“Does the smaller company want to be taken over?”

“Not always. There are friendly transactions and hostile ones. The one all the calls have been about tonight is not a friendly takeover.” He sipped his drink. “What do you do?”

“I make coffee table books.”

“Like the thick ones with travel photos or fashion through the years or whatever that people leave out?”

“One and the same.”

“So are you an author or a photographer?”

I shrugged. “Both, I guess. Though it still seems surreal that I can make a living doing something so much fun. I went to school for journalism with aspirations to be a writer. Photography was always my hobby, but now I write the copy and take the photos for my books.”

“How did you get into that?”

“After college, I queried an agent with hopes of selling a thriller novel I was writing. Back then, I had a blog for fun. I used to take photos of people living on the streets of New York, and underneath each one, I wrote a little story about the person. I had a link to it in the signature block of my email. The agent I’d sent the chapters to didn’t love the story, but she noticed the link to my blog and checked it out. She asked if I’d be interested in pitching a coffee-table-type book instead. I said sure, and over the next eight years I created twenty-five coffee table books about the people who live on the streets in different cities. Last year I started a new collection about graffiti and graffiti artists in different cities.”

“That sounds a hell of a lot more fun than mergers and acquisitions.”

I smiled. “I’m sure it is. I consider myself very lucky, career-wise. I make a good living doing something I love and get to travel all over the place. Plus, I’ve met some amazing people along the way, and I donate a percentage of all book sales to support housing for those who need it.”

Beck’s eyes roamed my face. “What are you trying to forget, Nora?”

It took me a second to realize what he meant. That’s what I’d told him I was trying to do with the Tinder guy. “Doesn’t everyone want to forget life once in a while?”

“Maybe.” He rubbed his bottom lip. “But usually there’s something in particular, like a difficult relationship, stress on the job, financial struggles, or family troubles.”

I traced my finger through the condensation on the bottom of my glass while Beck quietly waited for my response. I turned to face him. “Do you want to know why I like Tinder instead of meeting people in the supermarket or a bar?”

“Why?”

“Because it’s easy to find men who are happy to make me forget, yet don’t care enough to ask *why* all I want from them is sex.”

Beck tipped his glass to me before raising it to his lips. “Got it.”

As he drank, I noticed the chunky watch on his wrist—Audemars Piguet, not Rolex. I'd always felt the type of watch a man wears says a lot about him. Most men use a Rolex as a status symbol, showing off that they can afford to spend the price of a car to decorate their wrist. And they know others know it too, since it's one of the world's most popular luxury brands. On the other hand, Audemars Piguet is not particularly well known to a non-watch person, and it's generally more expensive. Most men wear a Rolex for other people, but an Audemars Piguet is worn for yourself. Mr. Attitude moved up a notch in my book.

The second thing I often used to gauge a man was the drink he ordered. Beck's glass had been full when I came back from the ladies' room, so I wasn't sure what the amber liquid was. I presumed some sort of whiskey.

"Is that scotch?" I motioned to the tumbler in front of him.

He held it out to me. "Whiskey. Would you like to taste it?"

"No, but I'm curious what kind it is."

He tilted his head. "Why?"

"I don't know. I've just always found a certain type of man orders a certain type of drink." My eyes pointed to his wrist. "Watches can tell a lot about a person, too."

"So my watch and telling you what brand of whiskey I'm drinking is going to help you figure out who I am?"

I shrugged. "Maybe."

He finished what was left in his glass and signaled the bartender, who walked right over.

"What brand did you say this was?" he asked.

"It's called Hillcrest Reserve. Made about ten miles away from here by a third-generation distiller."

Beck pushed his glass forward on the bar. "Thank you. I'll take another when you get a chance."

Once the bartender walked away, Beck looked to me. "Apparently it's called Hillcrest Reserve."

My brows furrowed. "Did you not know that when you ordered it?"

He shook his head. "Nope. I asked if they had any locally made, small-batch whiskey. I like to try local foods and whiskey when I travel. I live in Manhattan. I can walk into any bar and get two-hundred-dollar-a-nip Macallan. But I can't get Hillcrest Reserve."

I smiled. "I like that."

“But you look surprised. I take it my selection doesn’t match the type of man you’d assumed I was.”

“Not really.”

“What did you think I was drinking?”

My smile broadened. “The two-hundred-dollar-a-nip Macallan you can get anywhere.”

Beck chuckled. “And what type of man orders that?”

I took a drink of my wine and set it down. “The kind who lives in Manhattan, works in mergers and acquisitions, and wears a fancy suit and Rolex. Basically every Wall Street douchebag standing outside Cipriani for happy hour on a Friday afternoon.”

Beck threw his head back in laughter. I’d just insulted the guy, and he was amused. “I guess I made a pretty shitty first impression.”

I deadpanned. “You told me I should look someplace more *respectable* for my dates.”

“I thought you deserved better.”

“I think you’re full of shit. You’re only being nice now because you know I was looking for a night of no strings attached, and you think you have a shot at being my replacement.”

“Am I out of the running?”

I took a moment to check him out again. *Damn, he’s pretty.* “You’re only hanging on by a thread because you’re gorgeous.”

A slow, sexy smile spread across his face. “I like your honesty.”

“I like your jawline.”

His eyes gleamed. “You’ll like my big dick even better.”

I bit my bottom lip. The conversation had just taken a turn toward most of my Tinder messages—definitely a place I was more comfortable than talking about why I wanted to forget my life for a while. “How do I know you’re not a serial killer?”

“How did you know the Tinder loser wasn’t?”

Good point. I sipped my wine. “How old are you?”

“Old enough that I know what to do with you, and young enough that I don’t have to take a pill to do it.”

I smirked. “Is that so? You know what to do with me?”

He smiled self-assuredly. “I do, yes.”

The air crackled between us. For some reason, I knew this guy could deliver on his promise. Maybe it was his quiet confidence, or maybe it was

that a man who looked the way he did got lots of practice. The latter would've been a turnoff if I was looking for more than one night, but it didn't much matter if it served my purposes for a one-time deal.

I looked into his too-blue eyes. "Tell me then."

"Tell you what?"

"What you would do with me."

The wicked grin that slid across his face almost made me want to take back what I'd asked. *Almost.*

Beck lifted his glass and gulped his drink before leaning over to my ear. "I'd start by burying my face in your pussy until you came all over my tongue. Then I'd fuck you like I hate you."

Oh God. My toes actually curled. *Sold!*

He pulled back to look at me and raised a brow.

I teetered on the edge, debating whether I was crazy for considering taking this man up to my room. While I deliberated, I happened to look down.

Holy shit. His slacks had pulled tight around the top of one thigh, and there was a distinct bulge running down his leg. *A very long, very thick bulge.*

I was a woman who believed in signs, and *that* one I couldn't miss. So I knocked back the remainder of my wine and slipped one of my two hotel keycards from my purse, sliding it over in front of the man next to me.

"Room two nineteen. Give me a ten-minute head start so I can freshen up."

CHAPTER 2

BECK

“WHERE ARE YOU? I just went by your office and it’s dark. The Franklin meeting starts in ten minutes.”

I pressed the button to put my cell on speakerphone and set it on the vanity in the bathroom so I could finish shaving. “I’m in Idaho.”

“Idaho?” Jake said. “What the hell are you doing there?”

“Apparently, Sun Valley is a popular place for jumping off cliffs. I came to talk some sense into our grandmother since she blocked me and I can’t call her.”

“Oh Jesus Christ. Leave the woman alone. She’s living her life, doing what she wants to do.”

“Has she ever mentioned to you that she wanted to go *wingsuit diving*?”

“No, but I probably didn’t mention to her that I wanted to go mudding on that nurse she had when she was in the hospital last year. We don’t announce everything at family get-togethers.”

My brother didn’t worry about anything. Maybe because he was only twenty-three and still thought he was invincible. Ten years and one marriage ago, I probably had a lot fewer worries, too. “I think the friend she’s traveling with may be a little unstable and is pushing her into doing some of these crazy things.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Well for one, yesterday this woman texted that I should bend over and pull on my ankles really hard so maybe I could see my own head up my ass.”

“Gram’s friend texts you?”

“Gram gave me her number for emergencies, right before she blocked me.”

“Let me guess, you’ve been using it to harass this nice old lady since you can’t reach Gram?”

“Nice old lady?” I pulled the skin on my neck taut and shaved a clean line. When I traced the curve of my chin, I nicked it. *Shit. Damn cheap hotel razor.* I got a piece of toilet paper to stop the bleeding. “That nice old lady also told me I was a gray sprinkle on a rainbow cupcake.”

Jake chuckled. “Man, she has you pegged and she’s never even met you. You need to relax a little. Gram is just trying to have fun. If I were in her place, I’d rather have three months of living than a year of waiting to die.”

I frowned. I wasn’t getting into this debate again. Three weeks ago, our grandmother had been told that her pancreatic cancer was back. It was the third time in ten years, and it now had metastasized to her lungs and esophagus. The doctors said another round of chemo and radiation would likely only extend her life expectancy from three months to nine. Though they’d also said there was a one percent chance that treatment could send the cancer back into remission and she could be around a lot longer. Gram had chosen not to have treatment this time, which we’d all supported, even though I’d selfishly wanted her to take the chance to be around in ten years.

But then she’d decided to take a crazy trip with a woman none of us had even met, and lately it felt like she was on a suicide mission.

“I gotta go. I don’t know what time they’re leaving, and I need to get a cup of coffee before I go argue with Gram.”

“What do you want me to do about the meeting?”

“Handle it.”

“You usually hate the way I handle things.”

“Surprise me. Goodbye.” I swiped my phone off and finished shaving. A little while later, I went down to the hotel lobby in search of caffeine. After pouring a cup of coffee, I turned to look for the cream and sugar, and my eyes meet a gorgeous pair of green ones. They were currently shooting daggers at me.

Shit.

Nora. The beautiful blonde from last night.

She was sitting at a table not more than five feet away.

“I see you found your way to the coffee,” she said. “Yet you somehow got lost last night on your way to the second floor?”

I shoved my hands into my pockets, feeling like an idiot. “About that...”

A familiar woman’s voice from behind me interrupted our conversation. “Good morning, my dear.”

I turned to find my grandmother. I'd assumed she was speaking to me, but her forehead wrinkled when she saw me.

"Beckham? What are you doing here?"

"I came to talk some sense into you."

"Wait..." Nora's mouth dropped open. "Beck as in Beckham, Louise's grumpy grandson?"

I turned to her. "You know my grandmother?"

"Ummm... We've been traveling together for the last two weeks."

"You're Eleanor Sutton? I thought you said your name was—" *Shit. You've got to be kidding me.* I shook my head. "Nora...short for Eleanor?"

I'd assumed Eleanor was seventy years old, not a blond bombshell in her mid-twenties.

Gram motioned between the two of us. "You know each other?"

I wasn't about to explain to my grandmother that I'd told her friend I wanted to fuck her like I hated her, then didn't show up to close the deal. So I wasn't sure how to respond. Luckily, Nora was better on her feet than I was.

She put on a smile even I knew was forced. "We just met at the coffee bar."

My grandmother stepped forward and kissed my cheek. "Hello, sweetheart. It's always lovely to see you. But if you've come to give me a lecture, I'm afraid you've wasted a trip, and you can turn your cute little *derrière* around and not let the door hit it on the way out."

I couldn't help but smile. "I see your sparkling personality is intact. How are you feeling, Gram?"

"If the dumb doctors hadn't gone and told me the devil was back, I wouldn't even know it. Maybe a little more tired than usual, but then again, we're on the go a lot."

"That makes me happy to hear. Can I get you some coffee?"

"I think we need to hit the road."

"Actually..." Nora frowned. "I texted you earlier, Louise. I guess you haven't read it yet. They canceled the jump for this morning due to high winds. The company said they'd give me an update by lunchtime to let us know if there'll be an afternoon jump, but if there is, it wouldn't be until four."

"Well then..." Gram turned to me. "I'm breathing, and I've got a full face of makeup on. So you can take us out to breakfast, preferably

someplace that has Kahlua for my coffee.”

I smiled. “You got it.”

“I think I’ll stay behind,” Nora said. “I have some work to catch up on.”

“You’ve gotta eat. Might as well let my grandson foot the bill. Besides, maybe he can show you he’s not as much of a jackass as he seems over text.”

It looked like Nora was going to try to bow out again, but my grandmother was a hard woman to say no to.

“Come on.” Gram motioned toward the lobby. “We were supposed to be on our jump, so there’s nothing you have to do that can’t wait an hour.”

Nora forced a smile. “Sure. Let’s go.”

“I’ll take an eggs benedict and a coffee with a shot of Kahlua,” Gram said to the waiter.

He smiled. “I’m afraid we don’t have Kahlua. We don’t have any liquor, actually.”

“That’s fine.” My grandmother patted her purse. “Got some in here. You can pretend you don’t see me spiking our drinks. I wouldn’t take the sale away from you, but I don’t expect you to take the happiness from me, either.”

The waiter chuckled. “I won’t see anything.”

Nora was next to place her order. While she spoke, I zoned in on her lips moving—the lips I’d imagined wrapped around my cock while I took care of myself in the shower this morning. It hadn’t been easy to behave last night, especially after I realized my room was right down the hall from hers. But when I’d paid the bar tab and saw how many glasses of wine Nora had consumed, I couldn’t do it. I might be a man some women regretted, but it was never going to be because they hadn’t had the capacity to say no.

“Sir?” I looked up to find the waiter with an expectant face.

Nora’s sly grin made me think she knew where my head had just been.

I cleared my throat. “I’ll have the eggs benedict and a coffee with cream, please.” After the waiter walked away, I laid my napkin across my lap. “So how do you two know each other? I don’t remember you mentioning Nora before this trip.”

Gram patted Nora’s hand. “She lives in my building.”

“At least the blog makes sense now.” Gram’s partner in crime had been blogging about their trip since the beginning, taking videos of my grandmother doing all kinds of crazy shit. The page was called *Live Like You’re Dying*.

“What do you mean?” Nora asked.

“Well, I had assumed you were older. I don’t know too many people my grandmother’s age who blog.” I looked at Gram. “No offense.”

Nora folded her arms across her chest. “Well, if she’s not offended, I am. There isn’t a certain age for women to do things. Why is it only a young person can blog or go skydiving?”

Oh Jesus. Now *this* was the woman I’d been texting with.

“I didn’t say older people couldn’t do those things. I just said I don’t know too many who do.”

“Did you ever stop to think that’s because narrow-minded younger people are ageist and discourage their family members from living their lives to the fullest? When they should be encouraging them? Believe it or not, your grandmother didn’t have to go to the library for a technology class in order to figure out how to block you.”

I looked at my grandmother.

She grinned. “Don’t look at me for help. You’ve been digging your grave with Eleanor ever since I gave you her number to use in an emergency.”

“Speaking of those wonderful texts we’ve exchanged,” Nora said. “The next time you’re rude to me or demand I pass along a message to your grandmother—particularly one that you know damn well will upset her—I’m going to block you, too.”

Normally if someone spoke to me like that, I’d be salivating, waiting for my turn to rip them a new asshole. But for some crazy reason, all I could imagine was arguing with this woman in private—then fucking the attitude right out of her.

I smirked. “Noted. Thanks for the warning.”

My acquiescence seemed to diffuse her anger, and for a half a second I considered bringing up how many deaths had occurred while *wing diving* the last few years, just to get into it with her again. But then Gram started talking about a snorkeling trip they were planning, and the way her eyes lit up made the inside of my chest warm. Snorkeling seemed harmless enough...

“And then once we get the hang of it,” she said, “they start chumming.”

“Chumming?”

Gram nodded. “For the sharks.”

And there goes the harmless snorkeling trip. “Seriously, Gram? Swimming with sharks? Why can’t you just snorkel and look at the colorful fish?”

“Why would I do that when I can watch a giant monster with five rows of teeth *eat* all the colorful fish?”

“I completely understand wanting to travel and do things, but why do they all have to be dangerous? You never had a desire to do any of these things before you found out...”

Gram frowned. “Found out that *I’m dying*. It’s okay to say it, Beckham. I’m dying. Chances are, in a few months I won’t be around anymore. So why not do things that give me an adrenaline rush and make me fear my own mortality? Lord knows sitting around at home, I’m not afraid of anything. I mean, what’s the worst that can happen? I cross against the light and get hit by a cab? I want to feel alive. And hell, if I go a little earlier than expected because the wings on my wingsuit don’t flap enough, or a shark thinks I’d make a good dessert, at least I’ll have one hell of an obituary.”

I was smart enough to know when to shut my mouth. I’d talk to my grandmother when she was alone and not feeling so ornery. Right now I changed the subject and tried to enjoy listening to her explain all the things they’d done so far. That made for a peaceful remainder of our meal.

After we got back to the hotel, Gram said she was going to lie down for a while. She claimed she’d been too excited about the impending wingsuit dive to sleep well last night. So I walked her to her room and asked if we could have lunch together, just the two of us.

She kissed my cheek at her door. “I’m happy to spend as much time with you as possible. But you’re not going to change my mind, Beck.”

“I’ll come by and get you around noon?”

On my way back to my room, I decided to knock on Nora’s door. I appreciated her keeping what had gone down between us to herself. And I owed her an apology. I also recognized that I’d have a better shot of getting through to Gram if Nora were on my team. As odd a couple as they made, they seemed pretty tight.

Nora’s face fell when she answered. “I hope you don’t think you’re getting a rain check from last night. You lost your opportunity when you

stood me up.”

“About that...”

She started to shut the door. “I don’t need an explanation. It’s your loss.”

I stuck my foot in the doorway. “Hang on a second. You might not need one, but I’d like to give you one anyway.”

She rolled her eyes. “Say what you need to say and go.”

“You had six glasses of wine. I saw it when I paid the bill.”

Nora shrugged. “Was that too many for you to pay for? I’m not reimbursing you.”

“I’m not complaining about the cost. But the six glasses are why I didn’t come up, as much as I wanted to. And trust me, I *really, really* wanted to. I might’ve even stood outside your door for ten minutes trying to convince myself I wouldn’t be a piece of shit for knocking since you’d invited me. But in the end, I couldn’t take advantage of a woman who’d had too much to drink.”

“Only two of those wines were mine. Louise and I met two ladies for drinks before I met the Tinder Loser. I told her I’d pick up the tab. I was perfectly sober, especially considering I’d been sitting there a couple of hours.” She tilted her head. “And by the way, *I was looking to be taken advantage of.*”

I dropped my head. “*Fuck.*”

“Worked out just as well, anyway. Obviously I didn’t know you were Louise’s grandson—the one who’s been barking at me like I work for him.”

I raked a hand through my hair. “She’s my grandmother. I’m worried about her.”

Nora put her hands on her hips. “Because she’s doing dangerous things for the first time in her life, right?”

“That’s right.”

“Did you know your grandmother is a certified scuba diver? She was one of the first women to take the certification course in nineteen sixty-seven. Her favorite kind of dive was exploring deep-sea wreckage.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Did you know that when she was twenty-three she navigated Lava Falls, one of the most difficult whitewater runs in the world?”

“Really?”

She nodded. “Your grandmother is not the shrinking violet you think she is. She’s a badass. Maybe if you stopped looking at her as someone old and frail who needs to be taken care of, you could see that.”

“Why didn’t she ever say anything?”

Nora shook her head. “Maybe it’s because you never *asked*. Do you know how she and your grandfather met? Or why we’re going to a ranch in Utah to visit a man she hasn’t seen in sixty years?”

She’d made her point. Now she was just pissing me off. “Do you know who sat by her side every single day after her first pancreas surgery? Or after the cancer came back and she was sick for months during her treatment?”

“I’m not questioning whether you care about your grandmother. I’m saying you need to support her in her choices now, whatever they are.”

I was quiet for a moment. “Why are you doing this?”

“Because you knocked on my door.”

I shook my head. “No. Why are you traveling with a woman three times your age? What’s in it for you?”

Nora’s nostrils flared. “What’s *in it* for me? Go screw yourself.”

“People don’t usually do things without there being something in it for them.”

“What are you implying?”

“I’m not implying anything. I’m simply asking why you’re taking this trip.”

Her answer was to growl at me. *Literally growl*. Right before she slammed the door in my face.

I blinked a few times and then a smile crept up on my face, surprising even me. I probably needed my head examined, but Nora Sutton was *sexy as shit* when she was angry.

CHAPTER 3

BECK

“**I REALLY HOPE** you didn’t come down here expecting a repeat of last night,” Nora said.

I took the seat at the bar next to her and shook my head. “Time change is screwing with me.”

She nodded and turned her attention to her wine.

“How was your *wing dive* this afternoon?” I asked.

Nora’s brows knitted. “Louise told you we went?”

I shook my head. “I happened to be looking out the window around three this afternoon and saw you two sneaking out to the car. Two minutes later, Gram called to say she hadn’t napped yet, but was going to probably sleep for a few hours. I put two and two together. Plus, I saw the photo you posted on your blog. By the way, that’s the first picture of yourself you’ve posted. Why is that?”

“I didn’t realize it was. But I suppose because the blog is about Louise’s journey.”

“Well, how was your afternoon?”

Nora grinned. “It was incredible. Though you wouldn’t have liked it. You seem to be fun adverse.”

The bartender came over, so I ordered the same whiskey I had last night.

“You don’t like me very much, do you?” I asked.

“Not really. I think you’re arrogant.”

I waited until my drink arrived and I’d gulped a mouthful. It burned as it went down, but felt good. “I’m not particularly fond of you either. I think you’re righteous and annoying.”

Nora smiled as she brought her wine to her lips. “You seem fond of *parts* of me. I caught your eyes wandering a few times this morning at breakfast.”

“I also stared at the picture you posted on your blog. But you were wearing a skin-tight, rubber unitard. The fucking birds were staring.

Doesn't mean I like you."

She shook her head and laughed. "Well, seems like we're going to have to find a way to tolerate each other, since we both care for your grandmother. Maybe we should shake hands and make peace."

"Or..." I waited until she looked at me. "We can hate-fuck each other and get it out of our systems."

"Hate-fucking seems to be a theme with you. Is that your thing?"

"Never has been before. But you piss me off, and it makes me want to rip your clothes off."

Nora looked down at my crotch and sighed. "Such a shame you're Louise's grandson. Because I'm rather fond of part of you, too."

I smirked. "Maybe you should see that part up close. Right in your face works for me."

She laughed and finished her wine before turning to me and extending a hand.

"Friends?"

I took her hand, but rather than shake, I lifted it to my lips and nipped her finger.

"Oww!"

I kissed the area and grinned. "If you insist. Though I like my idea better."

"I bet you do..."

Not wanting to be a complete pig, I refocused on a safer topic. "So... I've never seen you around. How long have you lived at Vestry?"

"Vestry?"

"Vestry Towers. My grandmother said you lived in her building."

"Oh, yeah." She shook her head. "Right. Not too long. About a year, maybe. I'm moving back to California soon. That's where I'm from. I moved to New York for college and never went back."

We were quiet for a minute. "Can I ask you something without you getting pissed?"

She smiled. "Probably not. But go ahead anyway."

"I asked you earlier why you were taking this trip—"

"Actually," she interrupted. "You asked me what I was *getting out of it*, like I was playing some sort of an angle."

"Right." I nodded. "Perhaps my delivery wasn't so pleasant. I'm sure my staff would attest that I have a habit of speaking bluntly, which can

occasionally be off-putting.”

“I’m guessing it’s more than occasionally.”

“How about if I ask my question this way: When you found out my grandmother was planning this trip, what made you decide to join her?”

Nora stared into her wine glass. “My mother passed away at a young age, only a few years older than I am now. Thinking about that has made me consider things differently. Instead of asking why should I go, I now ask myself why *shouldn’t* I go? Life is short.”

“I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you.”

“Do you mind if I ask how she died?”

Her face went tight, full of pain, and I immediately regretted the question.

“I’m sorry.” I held up a hand. “I shouldn’t have asked that.”

“It’s fine. It’s called rhabdomyosarcoma, a malignant cardiac tumor. It’s rare.”

“It couldn’t be treated?”

“Some can be removed, some can’t. She wasn’t one of the lucky ones.”

I nodded. “Thank you for sharing that.”

She finished off her wine. “Is it my turn now? I don’t have a question, but what I have to say will probably piss you off.”

I smiled. “Shoot.”

“Stop bitching at your grandmother about her choices. They’re hers to make, and she’s enjoying herself.”

“I saw that. Her smile was huge when you two snuck back into the hotel after the jump.”

“It’s scary to know you’re going to lose someone. I get that. But I promise, your grandmother doesn’t have a death wish. She just wants to feel alive, and getting close to death *on her own terms* gives her that.”

“I’ll work on it.”

“She talks about you all the time, you know?”

“*Uh-oh.*”

Nora smiled. “Most of it is good. Though she did want to smack you when you told her you *forbid* her from doing the wingsuit jump. Haven’t you figured out that when you tell a certain type of woman they can’t do something, it only makes them want to do it more?”

I rubbed my lip. “A certain type of woman, huh? I have a feeling my grandmother isn’t the only one who falls into that category on this trip.”

“Maybe not.” She smiled.

I leaned to her. “I forbid you from having sex with me.”

Nora’s head bent back in laughter. It was a pretty damn spectacular sight.

“Your grandmother says you’re a whip,” she said, shaking her head. “I can see why.”

“What else does my grandmother say about me?”

“Lots of things. She says you’re smart, first in your class at Princeton. Successful—you started your own company one year out of college and have invested wisely in Manhattan real estate. You work too much, and apparently that comes from your grandfather. You’re divorced and have an adorable little girl who I think is six?”

I nodded. “Go on...”

“You’re close to your brother—who is ten years younger and pretty much the opposite of you and drives you nuts, yet you hired him to work for you anyway because you’re extremely loyal. Oh, and you once went with your grandmother to pick up your little brother from daycare. You insisted you should hold the infant carrier, instead of her. And neither one of you noticed until you got home that you’d grabbed the wrong baby. When you went back, the police were there because the mother thought someone had stolen her child.”

I hung my head. “Jesus Christ, did she have to tell you that? She was selling me so well with the beginning stuff.”

She grinned. “Another time, when you two were on the subway, a mouse ran through the car. You asked how it got in, and your grandmother told you the skeleton of a mouse allows them to get through small cracks. You slept on your back for a month before she found out you were afraid to turn over for fear one would get into your butt.”

“Seriously? Why would she tell you that?”

Nora shrugged. “We were standing on the subway platform one night waiting for a train, and a mouse ran across the tracks. Louise went hysterical laughing, and then she explained why. She didn’t mention how old you were, so I’m hoping it wasn’t too recently.”

“Wiseass.” I finished my drink and raised a hand for the bartender. “I’m at an unfair disadvantage here. I don’t have any stories about you.”

“And we’ll be keeping it that way.” She laughed.

The bartender came over. He pointed to my drink. “The same?”

“Please.” I looked to Nora. “Another wine?”

She shook her head. “No, thank you.”

“Have another. I’m leaving in the morning, and I’m not even pissing you off at the moment.”

“I actually have some work to do, edits for my next book I need to approve. They’re due today.”

I was disappointed. Even with the chance of going back to her room all but gone, Nora was spirited. I enjoyed listening to what came out of those full lips, even if I still wanted to slip something between them.

She pulled out her wallet.

I stopped her. “On me, please. It’s the least I can do for everything you’re doing with my grandmother.”

She smiled sadly. “You still don’t understand. I’m getting as much as I’m giving from Louise. It’s not a favor or a burden. We only do things we both want to do.” Slipping her wallet back into her purse, she stood. “But thank you for the drink anyway. It was nice to meet you, Beck. At least I think it was?”

I chuckled. “I still have your room key, you know. I could let you finish your work and then finish what we almost started last night?”

Nora leaned down and kissed my cheek. “Probably not a good idea now that I know you’re Louise’s grandson. I was going to use you.”

“I’m good with being used...”

She laughed. “Goodnight, Beck. Maybe I’ll see you around someday.”

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Dear Readers,

I hope you've enjoyed reading Dawson and Naomi's story! I'd love to stay in touch and invite you to join my mailing list and receive back a **FREE** short story.

For a Good Time Call

Ever see *For a good time call* scribbled on the bathroom wall of a bar? Sure you have. Ever wonder what would happen if you had a few too many drinks and actually called the number? Well now you don't have to wonder anymore, because I'll tell you... It blows up in your face when you suddenly realize who Mr. Good Time is.



Acknowledgements

To you – the *readers*. Thank you for more than a decade of support and enthusiasm. Whether you've been reading for years or recently discovered my books, I'm honored to be part of your library.

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To Cheri – Books brought us together, *who you are* made us true friends!

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To Luna – Thank you for your friendship and support.

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To all of the Influencers and Bloggers – Thank you for always making time for my books and years of support!

Much love,
Vi

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About the Author



VI KEELAND is a #1 *New York Times*, #1 *Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today* Bestselling author. With millions of books sold, her titles are currently translated in twenty-six languages and have appeared on bestseller lists in the US, Germany, Brazil, Bulgaria, Israel, and Hungary. Three of her short stories have been turned into films by Passionflix, and two of her books are currently optioned for movies. She resides in New York with her husband and their three children where she is living out her own happily ever after with the boy she met at age six.

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