



Code Name: Omega

(Jameson Force Security 10)

Author: Sawyer Bennett

Category: Romance, Action, Suspense

Description: I joined the team at Jameson Force Security three months ago and it's one of the best decisions I've made. Leaving behind the Marine Corps together, my dog Omega and I made the cross-country trek to Pittsburgh for an exciting new career. Now I get to spend my days doing dangerous missions with my team and Omega gets to spend his days relaxing, unless there are explosives to be sniffed, and then he's all paws on deck.

When Omega—who I affectionately refer to as Bubba—snacks on something he most definitely shouldn't have, an emergency trip to the vet introduces me to Abigail Blackburn. She's a little quirky, a lot smart, and completely captivating. She also has a penchant for trouble and when Abby makes it her own personal mission to expose the puppy mill industry, she finds herself mixed up with unsavory characters who aren't happy with her efforts to cut into their profits

This seedy underbelly is a dangerous place, particularly for a well-intentioned, yet somewhat naïve, small-town vet. What began as peaceful protests outside of local pet stores has escalated into something that threatens Abby's safety, and I refuse to sit by and watch her get hurt. Somehow this raven-haired beauty has gotten under my skin, and I don't hesitate to call in my teammates at Jameson to help keep her safe.

Now I find myself trying to balance my need to protect Abby while helping her successfully complete her mission, but also redirecting her focus long enough to show her that I've completely fallen for her. One thing is certain—this is going to be my toughest assignment yet.

Total Pages (Source): 81

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:06 am

CHAPTER 1

Kellen

My teammate Cage nudges my ankle, and my eyes fly open. I hadn't been sleeping. Merely relaxing and listening to music.

He sits across from me. I pull out my earbuds—goodbye, Soundgarden—and raise my eyebrows in question.

Cage nods at the airplane window. We're on approach for landing.

I bring my seat into an upright position and note that one of the flight attendants had taken my empty highball from the tray that still hovers over my lap.

There were no announcements to have done those things prior to landing, since we're on a private plane owned by Jameson Force Security, and they don't care if we have our seats upright or tray tables put away.

Have to say... I love this mode of travel. Another perk of working for Jameson.

Cage taps Malik next to him. He was sound asleep and now blinks at us with bleary eyes.

"Getting ready to land," Cage says.

Malik grunts and closes his eyes again, crossing his arms over his chest. Cage shoots

me a smirk and I grin back.

It was an absolute fucking pleasure to work this last mission with Cage and Malik, providing private security for a group of American engineers traveling through Mexico to evaluate bridge structures. It wasn't hard-core stakes like hostage rescue, but we were in some dangerous territory, and the threats were real. It's one of the reasons I love this job—I can be a bit of an adrenaline junkie.

This is my third international mission since coming to work at Jameson three months ago, and while I've rotated among various teams, Cage and Malik have actually become close friends. We hang out a lot outside of work and have a lot in common, given Cage was a Navy SEAL and Malik was in the Marine Corps like me.

Yeah... it didn't take long.

I've settled in as a full member of this dynamic group specializing in high-end security services, and there's no doubt I made the right decision to move back east. The original intent was to leave California and get closer to my parents in upstate New York, but after meeting Jameson's owner, Kynan McGrath, at a security conference, I knew he was the man to work for. I applied, had three separate interviews with him, and rejoiced when he offered me a spot.

It's been a good few months.

"Want to get a beer?" Cage asks. The landing gear unfurls and locks into place, bumping under my feet.

"Nah," I say, looking at my watch. "I'm beat."

"That's just loser code," Malik drawls, his eyes still closed, "that he misses his dog way too much and would rather spend time with him than with his buds."

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:06 am

Cage cackles, and Malik's eyes open slightly as he smirks at me.

Can't help but laugh at them laughing at me, and I don't deny Malik's appraisal. I miss the fuck out of Bubba. While I really dig my new teammates and hang out with them regularly, I love my dog a lot more. I've been gone eight days in Mexico, and I know he's missed me just as much.

"Bubba's way more fun than you two." My head rolls on the seat rest, and I watch out the window as the ground comes closer and closer until we touch down with a slight jolt.

Nabbing my phone from the console between my seat and the empty one to my right, I go to my texts.

As expected, I have one from the dog sitter, Julie. Simply a picture of Bubba curled up in his bed with his favorite stuffy between his paws. He has his head tipped quizzically toward the camera and looks beyond adorable.

Below the picture, three simple words: He missed you.

Can't help but smile. I missed that furry bastard too.

Bubba is more than just a dog and calling him a pet is a sacrilege. Bubba—real name Omega, but somehow I started calling him Bubba as a nickname and it stuck—was my partner while I was in the Marines. A Belgian Malinois, Bubba was a single-purpose working military dog trained to detect explosives. We inspected cars that came through entry points at Camp Baharia and cleared streets in Fallujah. We called

Iraq home on two different tours of duty, stationed in California between deployments.

But the United States started pulling out of Iraq and Bubba was getting a little too old to continue such strenuous work. When we returned stateside, my enlistment was up, and Bubba was ready to be retired. It made sense for us to leave the Corps together, so I adopted my boy and gave him a life of luxury. Soft beds, good treats, and lots of stuffed animals, which he loves to shove into his mouth while he sleeps.

Bubba is still a working dog with me at Jameson. He's game to cover events, and we walk venues together as an extra service Jameson provides. A few hours on his feet doesn't bother him at all, but at eight years of age, with early arthritis setting in, anything longer isn't good for him.

I flip my phone around and hold it out for Cage and Malik—who has now chosen to sit up and stay awake—to see. “Isn't he the cutest pupper in the world?”

Cage rolls his eyes. “Yeah... cute as a button for an animal that could rip out my throat if you gave a one-word command.”

Malik chuckles, but they both know that's not true. Bubba isn't an attack dog, although he looks intimidating enough. He's been trained to have a keen nose only, although he is territorial about our house and will snarl and bark viciously at anyone who approaches. Malik, Cage, and all the members of Jameson have heard me prattle on and on about my dog, and while they love to give me shit about it, they understand the special bond we have. They all know that you can't walk along streets in a foreign country with the stress of knowing your dog could get blown up if he's not good at his job.

They have the utmost respect for Bubba because he put himself in harm's way, day in and day out, while on the job. Any given day that dog woke up, it could've easily

been his last if he'd set off a charge while doing detection.

Before I can even turn the phone back around, a new text chimes, and Cage's smile goes sly as he sees who it's from. "Your stalker is back."

I curse under my breath as I flip the phone so I can see the screen, grimacing at the message from Adriana. Just checking in to see how you're doing. I miss you.

My former girlfriend, who can't seem to grasp that we are undeniably over and won't ever be getting back together.

Cage and Malik—as well as most of my mates at Jameson—know about her.

They were, in fact, expecting her to come to Pittsburgh with me. She'd been in California, wrapping up the packing of my house where we'd been living together prior to the offer to come to Jameson. She did most of the work, getting it ready to go on the market so I could get a jump on my new job in Pittsburgh. I went back to California in mid-April with the intent that Adriana, Bubba, and I would drive the U-Haul and her vehicle east to start the next chapter in our lives.

All plans were ruined when I arrived a day early to surprise her. I surprised her a little too well when I caught her fucking the lawn maintenance guy in our bed.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:06 am

There were no dramatics on my part. I mean, sure... I was pissed, but I didn't think twice about leaving her ass back on the West Coast. While there were tears and apologies and promises of fidelity if I gave her another chance, I wasn't swayed. You give me a reason to earn my trust, it's given with a solemn vow to uphold it in return. You break trust with me, and you're cut from my life forever.

I'm a simple guy.

I don't respond to Adriana because that will only fuel renewed apologies and pleas. She'll go several days, even sometimes a few weeks, without contacting me, but then she'll get lonely—and most likely drunk—and reach out. I made the mistake once of trying to just be kind about it, insisting she needed to move on and wishing her the best of luck. She took my kindness as perhaps a change of heart and hasn't let up since. I've found it best to ignore her.

Now slightly irritated by Adriana, I change my mind about Cage's offer. "I'll grab a beer with you guys if we can do it somewhere close by."

"That'll work," Cage says easily. The guys live in the city, just east of the airport, but I live thirty minutes south of Pittsburgh.

Another perk of flying Jameson style is that it takes us all of about five minutes to grab our luggage, deplane, and head to our vehicles in the parking lot of the private hangar. We agree on a bar Malik googled, located a few miles from here, and once we've got beers in hand, we shoot the shit as only guys can.

That involves a vigorous debate with Cage about baseball. He's jumped on the

Pittsburgh bandwagon since he's lived here awhile, but I root for my New York team I grew up with. Malik doesn't follow baseball, but why would he when his two brothers play professional hockey for the Carolina Cold Fury?

Not only doesn't he participate, but he ignores us, engrossed in a text conversation on his phone. Taking in the lazy smile on his face and the speed of his fingers flying over the screen, I have a good idea who has his attention.

I lean over intrusively, nosily checking out what he's doing. Anna's name is at the top of the screen, so I nudge him playfully. "Dude... pay attention to us. You'll be seeing Anna soon enough."

"Yes, I will," he says with enough innuendo that tells me there's not going to be a lot of talk when he gets home. "Her mom has Avery for the evening."

"Score!" Cage laughs.

I've come to learn a lot about my new teammates these last few months, but there's no other as compelling as Malik and Anna's history together. They went through a lot to get to where they are. Anna's husband was killed in the line of duty on a mission where Malik was taken hostage. He was held prisoner for months until Jameson rescued him.

When he returned, he wasn't the same. Neither was Anna, for that matter. Pregnant when her husband was killed, Anna had since given birth to their daughter, Avery. She also worked as Kynan's assistant, and over time, she and Malik grew close.

Very, very close, as in they fell in love, despite the complicated nature of their circumstances. Some might consider it too messy, but I think those are the best love stories.

And make no mistake about it... I'm a romantic. That I wasn't all that broken up about Adriana's infidelity only tells me she wasn't the one.

Of course, I think I'd actually been feeling that way all along, but things had been comfortable and easy, so I didn't make an exit when I probably should have.

"Let me ask you guys something," Malik says as he puts his phone on the bar top.

"Shoot," Cage says, swiveling on his stool and leaning forward so he can see Malik on the other side of me.

"Do you think it's too soon to ask Anna to marry me?"

Dead silence. I blink at Malik, and a quick glance in the mirror behind the bar shows Cage with the same blank expression.

"For fuck's sake," Malik growls, picking up his beer and taking a sip. "Don't everyone rush to reassure me all at once."

Cage shakes his head as if jolting out of a stupor. "My hesitation isn't in reassuring you. My hesitation is in wondering why you even need to ask. I just assumed y'all were going to get married at some point. You haven't proposed yet?"

Malik shakes his head. "It's complicated."

"It's really not," I say, thinking back on how easy it was to split from Adriana. I think the reverse is also true. You just know when to do the right thing.

"You don't understand the complexities—"

"I understand your story just fine." Clapping a hand on his shoulder, I lean an elbow

on the counter. “You’re worried what people might think, and I’m here to tell you, they’d think it’s about fucking time you two got married.”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:06 am

Malik doesn't look convinced, and I let my hand fall away. I get his worry, though. Marrying the woman who lost her husband during a mission you were also on could raise some eyebrows in certain circles.

But not the Jameson circle. I've been able to tell since starting here that everyone at this company is part of a very close-knit circle. It feels like family, and no one would stand in the way of Malik and Anna's happiness.

"You know you're not disrespecting Jim's memory at all," Cage adds. "If anything, I know damn well he's happy knowing Anna is taken care of. Avery, too, for that matter."

Malik's eyes go soft at the mention of Avery. Anna and Jim's daughter just turned one last week, and she is the apple of Malik's eye. He may not have given her DNA, but he's been a father to her in every way.

His expression focuses, eyes moving back and forth between me and Cage. "I love Anna with the entirety of my being. I want to officially adopt Avery. I want her legally recognized as my daughter, but I know the first step is to marry her mother."

Frowning, a thought strikes me. "Are you worried Anna will say no?"

A quick shake of his head. "She'll say yes."

"Then what in the fuck are you waiting for?" Cage exclaims.

"Maybe I was waiting for some reassurance. That I'm not treading on anyone's

memory by doing so.”

It’s a brave and bold proclamation. An admission of vulnerability, which men aren’t keen on doing. I admire him for it.

“I suggest sooner rather than later.” I grab my beer and hold it up to him.

“I echo that sentiment,” Cage says and pushes his beer toward mine.

Malik grins, knocks the neck of his bottle against ours, and we drink. While Cage and I lower our beers after a sip, Malik keeps his head tipped back and he downs the rest of his bottle.

He smacks his lips, eyes twinkling, and slides the empty bottle away from him. “I’m out of here. I’ve got an important question to ask Anna.”

My jaw drops as Malik gets off the stool. “Like, right now? You’re going to propose to her right now?”

Malik digs into his pocket for his keys. “Like Cage says... what in the fuck am I waiting for?”

“A ring, for one,” I point out.

His grin is sly. “Already bought it.”

Laughing, I point toward the door. “Then get out of here. You have something far more important to do than drink another beer with us.”

“That I do,” Malik says, and then he’s gone.

Cage and I share a moment, reveling in happiness for our friend. He glances down at my bottle. “Want another?”

“Nah, man.” I laugh. “Got the love of my life waiting for me at home.”

“Bubba is the love of your life?” Cage asks dryly.

“That he is. Jealous?”

“Hardly.” Cage finishes his beer, and we both rise from our stools. “Got a hot wife waiting at home who always knows how to welcome me back in just the right way.”

“TMI, dude,” I chastise with a laugh as we head out of the bar.

CHAPTER 2

Kellen

When I left Adriana behind in California, I also left behind the house I’d owned for almost five years. In between deployments, I was stationed at Camp Pendleton and liked the area very much. San Diego has the perfect weather year-round, and I thought it would be a good place to put down roots once I got out of the Corps.

Luckily, the house sold after only two days on the market, and with the proceeds, I purchased a house in Washington, Pennsylvania, just south of Pittsburgh. I’m not a city boy, having been raised in the dairy-farm hills of upstate New York, and I couldn’t see myself staying among the glass, concrete, and steel of downtown. I don’t mind the commute and love that my little neighborhood sits off a winding, two-lane road with beautiful views of the mountains and rolling hills.

The house isn’t huge—just an average split-level that could use some updating. My

first project will be redoing the kitchen because I like to cook and spend a lot of time in that room. This house stood out more, though, for its fenced-in backyard for Bubba and a small work shed at the back for my tools. I've got quite the collection and can fix most household failures as well as do minor carpentry.

I turn onto the driveway and pull into the carport attached to the house. I'd like to remove it at some point and add an actual garage, but that's after the interior renovations, which could take a while.

My ears perk up as I exit, pulling my travel duffel out and slinging it over my shoulder. Usually, I'd hear Bubba barking at the sound of my car, but it's eerily silent. I enter the house through the side door that leads into the kitchen, and my chest clenches slightly that my dog isn't there to greet me.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:06 am

“Bubba,” I call out and give a shrill whistle.

Relief rushes through me when I hear the scrabble of his nails on the wood floor, and he comes around the corner from the living room. Tail is wagging—obviously delighted I’m home—but he’s moving weird. Head slunk low, and he looks uncomfortable.

Letting the duffel slide to the floor, I squat with arms outstretched so he comes into me. “What’s wrong with you?” I ask gently, accepting licks on my face as his tail continues to wag. But I can tell he’s not feeling well.

I run my hands along his ribs, over his haunches, and through his thick brown and black fur, under to his belly where I press in to see if that causes him any pain, but it doesn’t.

Taking his face in my hands, my eyes lock with his soulful brown ones. “I wish you could talk, buddy. I can tell something is off, but I’m not sure what.”

That earns me a lick from chin to nose, and I laugh, followed by a long rub on the side of his neck. I press my forehead to his and stand up. “How about some dinner?” I ask.

Normally, that word sends him into fits of rapture, accompanied by excited barks, but now he just stares up at me with mild interest. I frown, because my dog is food motivated, and he’s clearly feeling ambivalent. Still, his tail is wagging, a sign of contentment—probably because I’m home—so I put my fears aside.

I tell Bubba all about my adventures in Mexico as he sits and watches me prepare his meal. Only the best for my boy, which includes high-end kibble that I mix with a dehydrated brand for flavor. I add fresh green beans for his constitution and set the bowl on the floor.

Bubba doesn't move, but that's his training. He's not allowed to eat until I give him his release command.

"At ease," I say, motioning toward the bowl. Any other day, he'd make a diving launch for the food, but now he just saunters over and sniffs. His eyes lift to mine. "Go ahead... eat, buddy."

He samples some of the food but then turns away from the bowl.

What in the fuck is going on?

I follow Bubba back into the living room. He doesn't lie on his bed, though, instead pacing around while intermittently panting. I whip out my phone and call Julie.

The adult daughter of my neighbors across the street, she's been Bubba's dog sitter since I moved here. She lives with her parents due to a recent divorce and works as a dental hygienist. She's a dog lover and has taken over the role of his caretaker when I'm on missions, so I don't have to board him. During the day while she's at work, one of her parents comes over to let Bubba out and check on him, and then Julie stays with him at night.

I know she's at work and have no clue if she'll answer. I'm relieved when she does on the third ring.

"Hey, Julie," I say as soon as we're connected. "I'm home, and Bubba's acting a little weird. Wouldn't eat dinner."

“That is weird,” she says, knowing my dog’s love of food very well. “He was fine this morning. Ate his regular breakfast, did fine on our walk. Want me to call my parents to see what they say? I know they were just there at lunchtime.”

“No, I can do that.” I thank Julie again, and as soon as I disconnect, I e-transfer her money owed for her services as I’d forgotten to pay her.

I consider calling Julie’s parents, Rae and Dwight, but my gut tells me no matter what they say, I’m not going to be able to sit back and wonder if this is serious or not.

“Let’s go for a ride,” I say to my dog, and his ears perk up. The word ride is usually right there with the word dinner on the excitement scale. Bubba’s tail wags harder, and he runs to the kitchen door where his leash hangs.

It makes me pause because, at this moment, he seems fine.

But he wasn’t fine when I got here and when he wouldn’t eat.

So hard to know what to do when your dog can’t speak your language. There’s really no debate needed, though, because I’ll always err on the side of caution. A trip to the vet is money well spent if it helps him and gives me peace of mind.

?

When I moved to Pittsburgh, one of the first things I did was find a good veterinarian. I thoroughly checked out Cove Lake Veterinary Practice and was pleased to learn that the vet had been there for almost thirty years. I met with her—Dr. LeAnne Schoen—and liked her a lot. She gave Bubba a good exam, but it was essentially a meet and greet, as he wasn’t due for any vaccinations.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:06 am

That's where I head now, grateful her clinic is only about a mile and a half from my house.

Situated on twenty-seven acres, the clinic sits beside Dr. Schoen's large, white farmhouse she's restored over the years. She told me it was built in the late 1800s, and she's done an amazing job on it, at least from what I can see on the exterior.

Her vet practice is in a stand-alone building set about a hundred yards off to the left of the house and has its own access from the road. I pull in, and there's only one car parked in front.

When I let Bubba out of my SUV and clip his leash, I give him a few minutes to do his business if he needs to. He sniffs around the lush summer grass and starts pulling up chunks to eat.

That definitely indicates an upset stomach.

"Come on." I give him a gentle tug, and he follows me into the white one-story building. A young girl sits behind an L-shaped reception counter, but she's not the same one who greeted me on my first visit. She smiles cheerily, glances at Bubba, then back to me. "Hi. Can I help you?"

"I don't have an appointment, but Bubba is a patient of Dr. Schoen's. I just got back from an extended trip, and he's not feeling well."

Concern etches her face as she leans up to look over her desk at him. "Poor baby boy," she coos before settling back down. "And what seems to be the problem?"

“He was happy to see me, but not overly exuberant like he normally is. He wouldn’t eat his dinner, and he’s been pacing like he’s uncomfortable. His dog sitter said he was normal this morning and ate all his breakfast.”

The receptionist nods with an understanding smile. “Dr. Schoen’s not here, but Dr. Blackburn is. Would you like to see her?”

“Yeah, that would be great.”

The receptionist swivels to a computer and asks for my name.

“Kellen McCord.”

She taps a few keys, takes a moment to study the screen, and smiles. “There you are. And this is Omega?”

“Yeah, but he answers to Bubba.”

“He looks more like an Omega. Bubba should be for hounds or something.”

I laugh with a nod. “You’re not the first person to say that.”

She smiles and reaches for the phone, presses a button, and says, “Dr. Blackburn… got a patient up here for you.”

I blink in surprise at how casually this is all being done. At the vet clinic in San Diego, we’d get checked in, then wait, then a vet tech would lead us into a room to do preliminaries, and then we’d wait patiently for the doctor to come in.

But a swinging door pushes open, and a young woman walks through. I have no clue if she’s the vet because she’s dressed in jeans, Converse tennis shoes, and a Rolling

Stones graphic T-shirt.

And well... she's gorgeous in a very unconventional way. Her midnight-black hair is cut very short, right to the nape of her neck. The top is a little longer and swept to the side to hang over her forehead. She has an eyebrow piercing, which only makes me focus in on her seafoam-green eyes, so bright they look like jewels.

She's not wearing makeup other than some mascara, and her skin is a flawless ivory with naturally rosy cheeks. Hard also to miss those full lips that are devoid of any artificial coloring but have a slight shine to indicate maybe some gloss.

The woman doesn't spare me a glance, her attention immediately on Bubba. She moves to him, no hesitation, and squats. "And who do we have here?"

"Bubba," I say, but the receptionist talks over me.

"He's an eight-year-old Belgian Malinois. Established with Dr. Schoen two months ago. Retired MWD, early onset arthritis. Prescribed Rimadyl to take as needed. Otherwise, no health complaints and current on all vaccinations."

Well, damn. She apparently gleaned more from his computer file than I gave her credit for.

The woman—who I have to assume is the vet—rubs behind Bubba's ears to make him comfortable. "And what's wrong with you, fur ball? Your eyes are bright, but that doesn't always tell the story for noble creatures like you."

Bubba grins a doggy smile and licks her face. I'm surprised because I'm the only one he usually shows affection to. While he is by no means vicious, nor has he been trained to be that way, he is a well-disciplined dog that holds himself in reserve.

She laughs in delight, gives Bubba a pat on the side of his neck, and rises. Holding out a hand, she says, “I’m Abby Blackburn.”

“Nice to meet you, Dr. Blackburn.” Although she’s petite and fine-boned, her shake is strong and confident. “Kellen McCord.”

She grimaces. “Just call me Abby. I’ve never been one to insist on conventional titles.”

I laugh but feel the need to clarify. “But you are, in fact, a veterinarian?”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:06 am

Abby laughs, soft and tinkling. “Yes, I am a veterinarian. Just not... conventional.”

“As long as you help Bubba, that’s all I care about.”

“A former military working dog,” she says with a tip of her head at the receptionist.

“Were you his handler?”

“Yeah, we were together five years. My enlistment ended right around the time he was being retired, so I was able to adopt him.”

“Awesome,” she says with an open smile before her expression turns serious. “So, what seems to be the problem?”

I recount everything I’d already told the receptionist, adding, “I know that doesn’t sound like a lot, but—”

“If you think he’s off, then I take your word for it. It could be a simple upset tummy. Could be a blockage. Better safe than sorry.”

Reaching out, she takes the leash from me. “If you want to have a seat, I’ll examine him in the back. But X-rays are really the best way to go if we suspect a blockage. I’ll have to give him a mild sedative, though, so he doesn’t move.”

“Yeah, that’s fine... run whatever tests you need,” I say without hesitation, bending over and wrapping my arms around Bubba. I press my face into his fur and whisper words of encouragement. My stomach twists, knowing that it could be serious, but I push the fear back. No sense getting worked up about something that could be an

upset stomach.

Abby disappears through the swinging door and Christy follows her, leaving me with only my thoughts.

When Bubba and I were in the Marine Corps, his life was in serious danger many a day. But I was able to compartmentalize that. I couldn't afford to have my concern affect my attention and focus. He couldn't afford that either.

In civilian life, though, it's not so easy to push away the worries. He's my pet now, not my partner, and that means I can't help but feel nervous about the possibilities. I can't go into cool Marine mode where danger is part of the job. We're civilians now, and I don't want anything to happen to my dog.

I ignore the seating bolted into the wall and pace the lobby. Back and forth past displays of specialty pet foods, toys, and treats. I check my watch a dozen times. I pull out my phone once, thinking I could surf Instagram for a bit but close it right back down when I see Adriana sent another message with a more insistent request for me to call her so we can talk about "things."

Everyone says I need to block her, and I absolutely would, except for one very complicated reason—we have a tangled financial tie that hasn't been sorted out yet. About a year ago, I helped Adriana open a vegan health-food store and fronted her the start-up costs. As such, I have a fifty percent ownership of the business. It does well, so we decided to keep it when it looked like we were moving to Pittsburgh. Adriana would train a good manager, and we considered opening another location when we settled here.

That's obviously not going to happen. Adriana continues to run the store, but the profit margin right now is slim. I want out of the entire thing, but Adriana doesn't have the funds to buy me out just yet. So I'm stuck until she can get financing to buy

my half of the business. Right now, we've agreed to a low monthly payment that she can afford, but I'd prefer she take out a loan to let me out altogether. Part of me thinks she's dragging her feet as a means to keep me involved because she holds out hope I'll take her back.

Which will never happen. I don't feel anything for her other than a faint distaste, like she was a bitter drink that I can't quite wash out of my mouth.

I return to pacing.

It seems like hours, but when I look at my watch as Abby walks through the swinging door, it's only been about forty-five minutes.

"Is he okay?" I blurt out, amazed at how panicky I sound. I'm normally cool as a cucumber under horrible stress. I mean, for fuck's sake... I did bomb detection work, and I just spent eight days protecting civilians traveling through a dangerous country.

Abby smiles reassuringly. "He's fine. A little sleepy, but it does look he ingested something."

"Like what?" I ask dumbly. Bubba's a well-trained dog. He's not even a chewer, much less an indiscriminate snacker.

Abby's eyes twinkle. "Sadly, our technology isn't that advanced yet, but it does appear to be some sort of soft material. Maybe a sock, a stuffed toy."

"Stuffed toy?"

She nods.

"He sleeps with one. I mean... he has several, but all he does is hold them in his

mouth when he sleeps. He started doing that after he retired. I thought that was him starting to show his fun-loving doggy side after spending years doing serious work.”

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:06 am

“But he’s never ingested them before?” she asks.

“No. Never.”

“Have there been any stressors on him?” she inquires.

I frown, wondering if there’s something I missed. I’m usually so in tune with him. “I don’t think so.”

“You said you just came back from a trip,” she prods.

“For eight days to Mexico. It’s the—” And then it hits me like a ton of bricks. “It’s the longest I’ve ever been away from him. Most trips I’ve taken since we moved to Pittsburgh have only been for a few days... three at most.”

“That could be it,” she surmises. “But let’s talk about what this means.”

I listen attentively as she explains the foreign material is in his colon, which means it’s passed almost all the way through his digestive system. “It appears to be moving okay and not creating any blockages, but that doesn’t mean it won’t.”

“Do you have to operate?”

“No,” she replies quickly, her voice calm, which calms me. “Only if it doesn’t move on its own. What we’d normally do in this situation is put him on IV fluids to sort of help lubricate things and monitor him. I’d like to keep him overnight, and hopefully by tomorrow, he’ll pass whatever it is he ate.”

“But what if he’s in distress during the night? It’s why I don’t ever board him but rather have a sitter stay at the house. I don’t like the idea of him being alone in case something happens. We’ve been through way too much together, and I can’t put him in any type of situation—”

Abby rests a hand on my forearm. It’s light, without much weight, but it immediately settles me.

“I sound like a fucking fool, don’t I?” I grumble with a sheepish grin.

She squeezes and shakes her head before her hand falls away. “Not at all. You sound like a good dog dad to me. But you don’t need to worry. I live here... an apartment above the garage of Dr. Schoen’s house, so I’ll come check on Bubba. I don’t anticipate any problems, but if there are, I’ll call you.”

The huge gust of breath—pure relief—loosens the tightness in my chest. Jesus... when did I become such a pansy where my dog was concerned? Especially since he’s done stuff that has put his life in jeopardy more times than I can count and I never felt panicked like this.

“Want to see him?” she asks.

My eyebrows jet upward. “Can I?”

“Sure,” she replies. “We don’t have any other people in, and we’re getting ready to close up for the day. Christy’s settling Bubba into one of our super large kennels, so he’ll be very comfortable.”

I follow Abby through the swinging door to find myself in a large, open space with three examining tables in the center, glass cabinets filled with supplies, and stainless-steel countertops running underneath laden with laptops, microscopes, and other

medical machines that do God knows what. Through a set of double swinging doors with glass panels, I see what looks like an operating room. It's clean and bright and looks far more sophisticated than what I would've anticipated for a small country vet.

My eyes fall on a massive corner cage—four Bubbas could fit inside. He's lying on a soft bed of towels with an IV taped to his shaved right front leg. Christy kneels next to him, murmuring soft words as she hangs the bag of saline solution.

Bubba sees me and raises his head, his tail thumping weakly. His eyes are glassy, and he looks stoned.

Exiting the cage, Christy motions. "Want to sit with him for a bit?"

I look back to Abby, but she's at one of the counters typing on a laptop, perhaps updating Bubba's chart.

The cage is large enough for me to crawl in and sit comfortably at his side. Bubba settles his head on my lap, thumps his tail twice, and closes his eyes with a deep sigh. Within seconds, he's snoring.

"Will he sleep all night?" I ask no one in particular, but it's Abby who answers.

She swivels on her stool. "Yeah, but I'll come and walk him at least twice. He'll need to pee with all that saline running through him. Hopefully, we'll get a big poop out, too, with what I'm guessing is a stuffed animal."

I shake my head, still amazed he'd eat it. Was the stress of me being gone what caused this? Did Julie not take good care of him? I mean, she's nice and all, but I just met her a few months ago. Maybe I made a mistake not boarding him.

"I can see the wheels turning in your head," Abby says thoughtfully. "Wondering

what you did wrong.”

“That obvious?”

“Obvious enough. I’d say cut yourself a break.” She hops off the stool and crosses over to a set of large wire kennels on the far wall. Christy has disappeared. I stroke Bubba’s fur as I watch Abby feed the dogs and cats housed there. I like that she doesn’t mind doing the low-level work. I’ve always been impressed with people who don’t mind doing whatever it takes to get the job done.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:06 am

“How long have you worked here?” I ask as she pours out food in bowls, attaches them inside the wire cages, and refills water bottles.

Abby nods. “For two years now. She’s going to sell me the practice when she retires, which is coming sooner rather than later, I think. She’s been doing a lot of traveling lately.”

She moves with surety and efficiency, but she also has a grace about her that’s hard to describe. Amazing posture, fluidity to her movement. Like a dancer, perhaps.

I know she’s stunning. Despite being dressed in jeans and a graphic tee, she almost seems aristocratic with her delicate facial features. Not many women can pull off that haircut, but her face almost demands it.

She’s a doppelgänger for Audrey Hepburn, except her eyes are light green instead of brown, and her hair is midnight black. “Are you from here?”

Abby doesn’t pause in her work, merely shaking her head. “Kentucky.”

Fascinating, and not what I was thinking. “You don’t have a Southern accent.”

She laughs, again sweet, delicate, and tinkling, which matches her petite frame. “Oh, get a few beers in me, and the accent comes right out. But I’ve been gone almost ten years now, so I think it’s tempered a bit.”

Abby moves to a cage with a golden retriever inside who looks to be in rough shape. Her eyes are dull, hair matted, and she’s shivering. Rather than put the bowl inside,

Abby leaves the kennel door open and sets the food bowl on the floor.

Stepping back, she squats low and murmurs encouragement. “Come on, sweet girl. I know you’re hungry.”

The dog wags her tail as she slinks out of the cage, looking left and right cautiously.

“Why is she walking funny?” I ask as the dog steps tentatively, picking each paw up high from the floor, as if the tile hurts in some way.

Abby grimaces, shooting me a pained look. “She was rescued from a puppy mill. She was a breeding bitch and has never walked on anything other than the cage she lived in.”

I sit up straighter. “Excuse me?”

Abby nods, but then pins her gaze back on the pathetic dog who seems to be starving and is now wolfing down the food as if she hasn’t eaten in weeks. “Her whole life has been nothing but living in a cage and giving birth to puppies. I’d estimate her to be about five years old, and I bet she’s had twelve litters so far.”

“That’s barbaric.”

“That’s only the tip of the barbarism in these puppy mills,” Abby says with a forlorn sigh.

“What will happen to her?” My eyes are glued to the poor dog who continues to shake like a leaf as she eats, and yet her tail wags with what I think must be happiness to be out of her cage. Abby moves closer and strokes the dog’s snarled coat. She lifts her head and stares at Abby with what I swear is pure gratitude before lowering to the bowl again.

“There are some good foster parents in the area. I’ll get her healthy, and then she’ll get fostered. Hopefully, a nice family will adopt her, and she’ll be able to run and appreciate grass under her toes.”

Bubba lets out a tiny yip, and my eyes snap to him as his body jerks repetitively. Only a dream.

I rub my hand down his fur, and he settles.

When I look back up, the golden retriever is snuffling into the bowl for the last bits of kibble. When she’s done, she doesn’t even look around but scurries into her cage, huddling in the back.

Abby utters some curses under her breath, but they’re loud enough to carry across the room. Motherfucking assholes.

Can’t disagree with that sentiment if that’s how this dog was treated.

Or rather, mistreated.

CHAPTER 3

Abby

Flipping through my contacts, I tap on Cecile Tambry’s number and pray she’ll hear me out.

She answers on the second ring. “What can I do for you, Abby?”

I wince because her tone is curt and standoffish. “I have a sweet girl in need of a foster home.”

“Is she tatted?”

Three words that tell me Cecile will turn me down just like the prior two ladies I talked to this morning. My circle of dog fosters shrinks with every call. “Yes, but—”

“No buts,” Cecile says with a huff. “I’m not getting involved in that. You’re bringing trouble to my doorstep, and it’s illegal.”

“No, not at all,” I rush to assure her. “She was loose, and I captured her.”

“Bullshit,” Cecile snaps. “You know damn well Levi Hellman isn’t about to let a single one of his bitches get loose. Just as I know you’ve somehow managed to steal that dog.”

I lose my temper at Cecile’s sanctimonious tone. “How can you think it’s wrong for me to liberate these—”

“Steal, Abby. You’re stealing.”

“I’m giving these dogs a chance at life,” I snap back.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:06 am

“And I admire your gumption... I really do. But you asking me to foster these poor creatures that you steal from Hellman is asking me to hold stolen property, and I’m not about to get arrested for you or for any dog.”

“Then you don’t love dogs the way you claim to,” I say quietly.

I expect her to rail at me some more, attempt to make me feel guilty for my crusade, but instead she hangs up on me.

“Damn it,” I mutter and toss my phone onto the desk. I angle my head toward the kennel where the golden retriever is sleeping. She’s curled into a ball, wound tightly in a defensive position, and my heart breaks even further.

So... yeah, I didn’t find the dog running loose. I sneaked onto Levi Hellman’s property, a massive fifty-acre complex of three huge, corrugated metal buildings that hold nothing but rows and rows of stacked cages, and within those cages, fertile dogs whose sole purpose is to get pregnant and give birth. More cages hold puppies and even more cages hold the sires that “donate” their sperm. It’s not a good life for them either, because the only time they’re let out is to impregnate a female.

My crusade has turned me into a thief. I only saved the one female dog night before last, but it was at least one life. No matter how much I’ve protested, called legislators, and attempted to educate people to put boots on the ground to close these puppy mills, I’ve not made any real headway. I did get arrested once—apparently, peaceful protesting is called disorderly conduct in this state and carries a hefty fine.

But as I stare at the broken golden dog in the kennel, I’d get arrested a hundred times

over just to save one of these sweet creatures.

“Abby.” I jolt and swivel on my chair toward the door where Christy’s head peeks through. “Mr. McCord is here for Bubba.”

“Oh, okay.” I rise from the stool.

Christy steps all the way through the door and lets it shut. Fanning herself, she whispers, “You are not going to believe how hot he looks today.”

I smirk at her. She thought he looked unbelievably hot yesterday when he brought Bubba in.

And she wasn’t wrong about that.

The man is walking sin and temptation all rolled together. Tall, broad shoulders, and muscles. Strong jaw, beautiful blue eyes, and capable hands.

Yes, I noticed his hands and the way they held Bubba’s leash and stroked his fur.

Kellen McCord has scorching sex appeal.

“Why don’t you let him come on back here, and I’ll go over the discharge instructions with him.”

“Sure thing,” Christy says. She turns for the door, takes a deep breath, and smooths her scrub shirt. Tossing her ponytail back, she lets the air out of her lungs and heads into the lobby. I hope to God she doesn’t solicit the man for a date as that would be totally unprofessional and something Dr. Schoen would have a fit about if she heard.

Not that I’d tell, but if she offends Mr. McCord in any way, it could get back to Dr.

Schoen.

As I move to Bubba's cage, I smile at the gorgeous and perfectly mannered Belgian Malinois. I removed his IV about two hours ago, and he's bright-eyed with good energy.

The swinging door opens, and Bubba's owner sticks his head through and locks eyes with me. "I was told to come back."

"Hi, Mr. McCord," I say as I unlatch Bubba's kennel door. "Your boy is as good as new."

"Kellen," he says with a smile as Bubba flies out toward his dad. I watch with a satisfied smile as the man squats and envelops the dog in a big hug. He glances up at me as Bubba wiggles with excitement. "I take it he's okay?"

"Oh yeah." I laugh as I move to them, squatting to pet the dog. "He had a major poop at about six a.m., and I confirmed that, sadly, he murdered what appeared to be a stuffed bunny."

"Hugo," Kellen says with a shake of his head. "That was Hugo."

I burst out laughing. "His stuffed animal had a name?"

"Animals," he corrects me. "As in plural. He has at least seven."

"Does he know them all by name?"

"He does," Kellen says, a proud smile in place. "But now I'm wondering if I need to take them away."

“I definitely wouldn’t let him have one unsupervised. This could have been a onetime event, or he could have developed a fondness for them in his belly.”

“God, I hope not.”

“It could’ve been the stress of you leaving,” I surmise. “Next trip, you might want to have your sitter pay a little closer attention.”

“She’s not with him all the time. Mostly she stays the nights, and then he’s let out a few times during the day.”

“Maybe you should board him, then. Just to be safe,” I suggest.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:06 am

Kellen grimaces. “Yeah... I know. I just hate it.”

A surge of fondness wells within me. This is a man who has an extreme love for his dog. Someone who probably would break the law for Bubba’s welfare.

Without even realizing it, the words slip out freely. “I don’t mind watching him when you’re gone. He’s so well behaved, he can stay here in the clinic during the day. We’ll put a bed out there with Christy, and he can stay at my place at night.”

Kellen blinks at me in surprise, his mouth curving in a smile. “I’ll take you up on that. I’d pay you, of course.”

I wave a hand. “You don’t need to. Maybe buy me a drink sometime.”

“Dinner,” he says with a grin. “I’ll take you out to dinner.”

Wait! Would that be a date? Because I wasn’t soliciting for one. At least I don’t think I was when I mentioned a drink.

Shaking my head, I rise and motion toward the counter. “I’ve got his discharge instructions over here that I can go over with you.”

Kellen stands straight, and I hadn’t realized just how tall he is until he’s standing right beside me. I’m on the short side at five two, but he towers more than a foot over me.

And yes... Christy is right. He looks somehow hotter today than yesterday, but I’m

thinking that's because yesterday, he was in jeans and a short-sleeved T-shirt, and today he's in workout shorts and a tank top, which showcases his muscular arms and legs as well as sexy tattoos on his chest and biceps and one on his calf.

I'm partial to tattoos—except the ones horribly etched inside dog ears to indicate ownership by a particular puppy mill. The golden retriever has a crude one on the soft underside of her ear—HK.

Hellman Kennels.

It should just be called Hell Kennels because the living conditions are akin to that.

The lobby door swings in, and Christy comes through, her expression pale. “Levi Hellman is out there with two other guys, and they have a gun.”

“What?” I exclaim.

“Well, he's wearing his sidearm on his belt,” Christy clarifies. “He's demanding you give him back his dog.”

“Shit,” I mutter, turning to Kellen. I press a hand to his chest and give a short command. “Stay here.”

His head drops, looks at my hand on his sternum, and then his eyes come back to mine. Such a pretty blue I could get lost if I didn't have something more pressing.

“I'll be right back,” I say before spinning away from Kellen and rushing through the door into the lobby, Christy on my heels.

Levi Hellman stands on the other side of the reception counter, and I recognize his two teenage sons, Levi Jr. and Abel. They're both in their teens and I hate that their

father brought them to witness what's going to be a confrontation, but I suspect he considers this part of their training on how to be assholes.

Levi is in his late thirties, tall and thin with a protruding Adam's apple. His face is plain, hair a sandy blond, his eyes a dull brown. He considers himself a legitimate businessman and drives a brand-new Mercedes. Today he's wearing a pair of jeans and a nice button-down shirt, which doesn't fit with the gun holstered on his hip.

There's always a bland smile plastered on his smug face that's completely disingenuous.

"Dr. Blackburn," he says, clasping his hands before him. The gun is threatening enough, he doesn't need to call attention to it. I see it. "I'd like my bitch back."

"No clue what you're talking about," I reply, standing directly opposite him with the desk counter between us.

His lip curls in a sneer. "Don't play stupid with me. I have you on video."

"If you had me on video, you'd have the sheriff here arresting me." That was a big gamble. I knew he had cameras, and I did my best to skirt around them, but I was mostly banking on him being too damn cheap to actually keep them in good working order. The fact he's here and not law enforcement tells me the gamble paid off.

"How about we just go into your back room and let me take a look around?" he says, taking a step to the right.

Before I can protest or move an inch, a deep voice sounds behind me. "This is private property, and you're not allowed in the back."

I angle toward Kellen, who somehow came through the door so quietly, no one saw

or heard him. He stands with his hands tucked casually in his pockets, acting like he doesn't have a care in the world. But his bulging muscles are probably enough to let Hellman know they're going to have to go through him if they want into the back.

If Kellen didn't dissuade him, the hundred-and-twenty-pound Belgian Malinois standing at attention probably did. I'd learned that Bubba was an explosives detection dog and probably wasn't trained to attack, but he sure looks like he could rip out a throat or two.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:06 am

“Who’s that?” Levi demands, cutting to Kellen and Bubba.

“Just the owner of a patient,” I reply, garnering his attention back on me. “But he makes a good point. This is private property, and I’d like you to leave.”

“You got my fucking bitch, bitch, and I mean to get her back.”

My eyes slide to his sons, neither one yet an adult, and they’re grinning like Cheshire cats. Yup. Assholes in the making.

“Those your boys?” Kellen asks, and my head snaps his way.

Levi’s eyes narrow. “What’s it to you?”

“Stay,” Kellen says to Bubba whose butt hits the tile floor. He then heads toward Levi. “You might want to ask your boys to step outside, because I’m getting ready to beat your ass for calling Dr. Blackburn a bitch.”

I gasp, Christy chokes, and the Hellman boys look at each other in shock. Levi takes the threat seriously, though, and backpedals toward the door, holding out his hands. “Now you just wait a minute... You can’t—”

My mouth gapes as Levi’s back slams into the door, stopping his progress. But Kellen keeps moving right toward him.

Fear hikes Levi’s voice by a few octaves. “You stay back from me. Don’t make me shoot you.”

My stomach pitches at the threat, but rather than reach for his gun, Levi makes a push against the door with his backside and stumbles out. His boys bolt after him.

Kellen doesn't stop, so I scramble from around the desk and rush that way. I have no need to worry because all Kellen does is hold the door open so that the Hellmans can hear him. "Consider this your official notice. You are not allowed back on this property. Next time one of you even slows your vehicle going by, the police will be called. Understood?"

None of them respond but instead jump into Levi's Mercedes and peel out of the gravel parking lot.

I press my hand against my chest, trying to quell the hammering of my heart. That was intense.

Kellen turns to face me, one eyebrow raising. "Did you steal that man's dog?"

"What?" I try my best to sound offended, but it comes off as guilty. "No. No way. Why would I do something—"

Before I know what's happening, Kellen takes my elbow and turns me around and marches me into the back clinic area. Christy's eyes go round as she watches him manhandle me.

Through the swinging door, Bubba on our heels, Kellen escorts me through and lets go as soon as the door shuts.

He moves right to the kennel with the golden retriever and squats before it. Bubba moves to his side and sniffs at the door latch while the other dog watches with curious eyes.

Head twisting, Kellen looks over his shoulder at me. “I never would’ve pegged you as a criminal.”

“Levi Hellman’s the criminal,” I retort, stomping over and pointing at the cage. “That poor creature is only one of about four hundred dogs he’s exploiting.”

“So you could only grab one?” he asks.

And though I hear his subtle teasing, I launch into a diatribe. “He has warehouses full of dogs. Wire cages, barely big enough for dogs to stand in, stacked on top of each other three high. The dogs are not let out of the cages, so all feces and urine from the top cages fall on the dogs below. It coats their fur, gets in their food and water, and makes them sick. They have festering wounds, eye infections, and their toenails grow so long and curved, they can’t walk when they’re let out. That’s why this sweet girl walks funny, because she doesn’t know how to. They breed the females over and over again, giving them no time to recuperate. They don’t give them proper nutrition, so they’re sick and starved. The puppies are jerked away from their mothers at four weeks, far too young to be fully weaned, and are shipped off to pet stores to sell, the store owners knowing full well the atrocities going on to get those puppies. And when dogs outgrow their use or a puppy is born with imperfections, they take a hammer to the head because why waste money on bullets, or they drown the dogs. So yeah... I stole this dog, and I’ll steal others. I would have taken more, but I heard someone coming, so I had to make do with saving just one this time.”

Kellen blinks as he stares up at me. “Wow.”

I huff a frustrated breath, brushing my bangs to the side. “Yeah... wow.”

I straighten my shoulders and wish he had not seen all this.

“I’m sorry you had to witness that. And yes, I did something legally wrong but what I

feel is morally right. I appreciate your help in running Levi Hellman out of here, but that only puts you in his sights. He has friends in high places.”

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:06 am

Kellen rises, once again towering over me. “I’m not worried about Levi. I’m a bit more concerned he’s going to come after you. If I hadn’t been here, I bet he would have barreled through this door and found this dog.”

He points down at the cage, and I heave a sigh. “I’m trying to find a foster, but the ones I know don’t want anything to do with one of Hellman’s dogs. They’re scared of him and of getting in trouble.”

“But you’re not.” Simple statement, and not a question.

“Yes, I’m scared. Not for me, but for these dogs.”

“Quite the crusader, aren’t you?” he murmurs.

My eyes narrow at the words, choosing to ignore his soft tone. “Don’t make fun of me.”

Kellen’s eyebrows shoot up in surprise, and he holds out his hands. “Not making fun of you at all. I admire a good crusade. Just don’t like people getting hurt while on them.”

“I won’t get hurt.”

“That man had a gun. I’m guessing that you’re messing with his profits. There are people who will harm and even kill when you mess with their money.”

I can’t argue with that. Most people wouldn’t kill, but Levi is cold and heartless.

Maybe he would, but I have to believe he loves his money and fancy cars more than he loves prison.

“He’ll probably come back,” Kellen says.

I frown at the surety in his voice as he glances down at the golden retriever. “I’ll take her to my apartment above the garage.”

“I’ll take her,” Kellen says, eyes sliding back to mine.

“Excuse me?”

“I’ll take her until you can find someone to adopt her,” he says easily. “She seems sweet but a little shy. Bubba’s a good boy and will give her companionship. I don’t think it’s a good idea for her to stay on this property at all.”

“Um...”

“Is she in heat?” Kellen asks. “Because Bubba-boy isn’t neutered.”

“No, and her last litter was probably only four to six weeks ago. Her mammary glands are still expressing milk and her belly skin is pretty loose.”

“Isn’t that too young to be taking puppies from their mother?”

“Physically, the puppies can survive. They start to wean around three to four weeks and are usually on solid food by five to six weeks. Socially, it’s too young, but you have pet stores buying up these puppies as fast as they can to make a profit, so they’re shipped out as soon as they can pull them from the mothers.”

Kellen grimaces and shakes his head. “Just tell me how to care for her until you can

get her adopted, finish up Bubba's discharge papers, and I'll take her with me."

"I couldn't possibly impose—"

"Not imposing," he cuts me off. "I'm insisting."

"But... it's illegal," she says, leaning in to whisper.

Kellen grins, leans right back toward me. "I doubt the dogs will rat us out."

Wow. This close and his eyes are mesmerizing. His smile is gorgeous and whatever he showered with this morning smells delicious. I try not to inhale too strongly and even step back because his presence alone is overpowering.

Not giving me a chance to argue, he unlatches the kennel door and beckons the golden retriever to come out. She needs a little encouragement, but it's her interest in Bubba that eventually draws her. She does her high step as the tile floor feels weird under her paws and freshly cut toenails, but she should be better with this in a day or two.

"I bathed her last night," I say as Kellen gives a command to Bubba to hold still to let the other dog sniff him. Her tail wags tentatively. "But some of her hair is so matted, I'm going to need to shave her. It will let me also make sure her skin looks okay. I was going to do it after you picked up Bubba."

"Well, let's get it done," Kellen says, as if he's officially a member of the "let's destroy all the puppy mills" team. He squats again, this time calling softly, not to the golden but to Bubba.

I watch in amazement as Bubba comes to Kellen and the golden follows along, still curious about the big black and brown boy. Kellen uses the opportunity when the

golden approaches to stroke her back gently. She jolts slightly as she turns to look at him. He talks in a low murmur, praising her beauty and sweet eyes, and within seconds, her tail is wagging hard, and she pushes in closer to him. I can't help but laugh when she turns, positioning his hand so it scratches right at her lower spine, and whines in ecstasy. It's probably the first time someone has shown her genuine affection for no other reason than to please her.

“What's her name?” Kellen asks, glancing up at me.

“Number two seven one,” I reply bitterly. “At least, that's the number tattooed on her ear.”

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:06 am

Kellen's hazel eyes flash with ire as he looks back to the sweet dog soaking up his ministrations. "How about Princess? Because she's going to be treated like one from here on out."

My heart absolutely melts over his proclamation, and I actually get a little choked up. I cough to clear my throat. "That sounds perfect."

He grins bigger and brighter, and holy hell, my knees almost buckle. He's got a perfect dimple on each side of that smile.

A hot former Marine with hypnotizing eyes, muscles, tattoos, and dimples, who is a crusader for dogs?

I better be careful, or I might just fall in love.

CHAPTER 4

Kellen

With my attention trained on Bubba, sitting obediently in front of me with his focus on the treat in my hand, I say, "I expect you to be a role model for Princess, okay?"

His deep brown eyes speak volumes. Give me that treat, and I'll do whatever you ask.

Grinning, I toss it to him. He snaps it from midair and swallows it just as quickly.

Princess stands to the side, curiously watching our exchange. She's acclimated far

better than I thought she would, but I'm giving all the credit to Bubba. After Abby shaved Princess's fur yesterday, she looked like a completely different dog. Not just with all the tangles gone, but it was almost as if she was shedding her old life. Like the weight of misery had been lifted from her thin shoulders.

Princess was curious when we got home, exploring every inch of the house, and when we went out back, she rolled in the summer grass for half an hour. Within a few hours, she was walking more normally and even engaged in some tug-of-war with Bubba. The only downside was that she had no clue that it was inappropriate to potty inside, so we had two mishaps, luckily both in the kitchen and therefore easy to clean up.

The majority of yesterday was spent taking Princess out frequently, and heavily praising her every time she did her business in the grass rather than on my floor.

Last night, I made a soft blanket bed for her next to Bubba's, but she ended up going to sleep on the cold tile of the master bath. I wondered if perhaps softness was just too foreign a concept for her and that she felt she only deserved a hard surface, but when I awoke this morning, I was shocked to find her curled up at the end of my bed.

I nudged her with my foot. "Hey... interloper... what do you think you're doing?"

Her eyes opened, and her tail thumped the mattress, as if coyly expressing her naughtiness.

I laughed, although I did usher her off the bed and out into the yard for a morning potty along with Bubba.

Now I'm getting ready to leave them both alone so I can run some errands, most importantly to the pet store to stock up on supplies for her.

I have a kennel I bought a long time ago when Bubba first retired, now stored in the back shed. During the time I was his handler, he lived in the kennels on base and not at home with me. Once he retired and moved into my house, I kenneled him whenever I left for errands or appointments, but eventually that sort of fell by the wayside. He's so well behaved that he never did anything destructive, so the crate ended up housing spiders instead.

I considered bringing it out and cleaning it up for Princess, because kenneling dogs at home is as much for their own safety as anything. However, knowing the miserable life she's had—that Abby so passionately schooled me on—locked away in a cage, I didn't have the heart to do it. I decided to hope and pray that Bubba will be a positive influence on her and that she'll be a good girl when I step out.

Taking another treat from a bag on the counter, I hold it up before Princess, right above her nose. "Sit." I push the treat toward her a bit so her head tips back, which forces her butt to the floor. "Good girl," I praise as I slip her the little tasty.

Turning to Bubba, I put my hand under his chin and look at him eye to eye. "You're in charge. You make sure she doesn't get into any trouble, okay?"

His long tongue comes out and slaps my cheek. God, I fucking love my dog. Laughing, I scratch his head, then Princess's. "Be back soon."

In the car, I head to a strip mall not too far from my house. It's where I do my grocery shopping, and it also has a small hardware store I've been to a few times. While I normally buy Bubba's food, treats, and toys online, I need things today for Princess, and I spied a smaller chain pet store called Pet World on one of my prior visits. While Abby gave me food for Princess to get us through last night and this morning (as well as antibiotics for an infected cut on her back leg and eye drops to clear up some gunk), I need immediate essentials. A collar, leash, more food, bowls, a bed like Bubba's so she'll sleep there and not on mine, toys, medicated shampoo, and more

training treats.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:06 am

Not sure how long I'll foster Princess, but I want her to have the best of everything.

I consider the dog's savior, Abby Blackburn, as I drive toward town.

I consider her not just the great veterinarian who helped Bubba and Princess but also a very intriguing, very attractive woman. If her beauty hadn't caught my attention, her spitfire attitude sure would have. That she stood up to an armed man without so much as breaking a sweat was enough to grab my interest, but she's also sexy as hell. Abby's Rolling Stones T-shirt, Chucks, and eyebrow piercing? Yeah, pretty much sealed Princess's fate in becoming my foster dog.

Oh, I probably would've done it anyway, because by the time Abby Blackburn had finished educating me on the horrors of Levi Hellman's "breeding" business, I wasn't going to let that dog go back. But had Princess not been in the equation, I was well on my way to a dinner date with Abby after she offered to watch Bubba. That was just a fortuitous way for me to see her again.

Now with Princess encamped at my house, which makes me Abby's co-conspirator, I'm guaranteed to see more of her.

I'm not the slightest bit worried about breaking the law. As Abby said, if Hellman had proof she was involved, he would've brought the police. There's no way Abby will give me up as the one holding the stolen property. Regardless, like Abby, I feel this is one instance where it's worth the risk. She said Hellman has hundreds of dogs there, but I got the impression just taking one of his breeding females hurt him, and that felt good.

Following a mission, we're always given a handful of days off, and I'm glad to find the strip mall relatively empty. I make a quick grocery run first to restock my fridge and pantry, and just as I'm about to cut through the parking lot to the Giant Eagle, flashing blue lights catch my eye.

In front of the pet store where I'll be going next sits a police cruiser. An officer is talking to a woman and what looks like a store employee, possibly a manager as he's wearing a tie and name tag.

Hoping whatever that is clears up by the time I grab my groceries, I start to move past.

Then I do a double take.

The woman standing next to the police cruiser is Abby Blackburn, and the cop is turning her around to handcuff her. That short, midnight-black hair first catches my attention, followed by her very nice ass clad in a pair of jean shorts frayed at the hem. She has on a pretty, flowered blouse that hangs off one shoulder and a pair of white sneakers. Abby looks like a gorgeous woman out for a pleasant day of summer shopping.

Except for the handcuffs now being snapped over her wrists.

"Fuck," I mutter and pull quickly into the closest parking spot. I exit my car, lock it, and jog over to the sidewalk. As I approach, I call her name. "Abby... are you okay?"

Her head whips my way, as does the police officer's, as he holds on to her elbow. She's fully cuffed and looks pissed. But her voice is calm. "I'm fine."

"What's going on?" I ask, my eyes going to the cop.

“Ms. Blackburn—”

“Dr. Blackburn,” I correct him.

He blinks in confusion, but to my surprise, he politely corrects himself. “Dr. Blackburn. She’s trespassing and wouldn’t leave when asked. The store manager called us.”

The man—who looks smug and superior—smiles nastily at Abby. I look back at the cop as he seems a little perturbed to be here. “You couldn’t have just asked her to leave when you arrived? I mean, surely... that would be the less complicated thing to do.”

The officer sighs. “I would, if I could. But Dr. Blackburn actually has a restraining order against her from coming onto this property, and—”

I’m so stunned, my eyes snap to hers in question. She shrugs. “I thought the sidewalk was public space.”

“You know damn well it isn’t, and you’re a complete nuisance,” the manager yells. He’s an obnoxious-looking man with greasy skin and a walrus mustache.

“For standing on a sidewalk?” I ask, garnering the man’s attention. The cop remains silent, apparently at ease with seeing if we can talk this out and probably save him some paperwork.

The manager points to a piece of poster board on the ground. “With a defamatory sign. She wasn’t just standing there, she was protesting.”

It’s facedown, so I bend over and pick it up.

Boycott Pet World. They support the unethical breeding and murder of dogs.

Fuck. I'm going to assume this company buys from the puppy mills Abby's trying to bring down.

I glance at her, and she lifts her chin defiantly. She's apparently done this before, considering the restraining order, but that hasn't stopped her from coming back.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:06 am

While I admire her tenacity, I don't want her to get arrested, so I try to reason with the man. "How about you agree not to press charges, and I'll convince her never to come back here again?"

I glance at the cop, who nods his agreement to this deal if the manager will only agree to it too. The officer's hand even goes to the keys at his hip to unlock the cuffs.

"I have my orders from the owner to make sure she gets arrested. She deserves to go to jail. Trying to ruin our good name with her lies—"

"Not lies," Abby snarls with bared teeth. "Your company buys directly from Levi Hellman, and he abuses hundreds of dogs on a daily basis, just so both of you can make a profit."

"That is categorically untrue," the manager screams at her and stomps his foot. "His facility has been inspected and—"

"—found to have dozens of violations," Abby yells back.

"Those have been corrected, and he's never been shut down. Mr. Hellman pays his taxes and is a respected member of this community."

Abby's voice lowers, calm and assured. "If that's the case, then how come—"

I step in front of Abby and talk right over her, afraid she's going to incriminate herself by admitting to Princess's rescue. "I'm asking you... customer to business manager... let this issue go. I was getting ready to come into your store and spend a

ridiculous amount of money for my dogs, and if you—”

“Kellen McCord,” Abby hisses. She jabs me hard in my ribs with her elbow, causing me to wince. “If you spend so much as one dime at this place, I’ll never speak to you again.”

The cop ducks his head, smirks. I twist to look down at Abby, cocking one eyebrow. I’m really interested in this woman—more now than ever—and the threat of her cutting me off before I can get started gives me pause. “You’d rather get arrested?”

“You can bail me out, and we’ll discuss repayment over lunch,” she replies smoothly.

The manager mutters under his breath, “She’s a nutjob.”

I grin at her. “Okay... deal. I’ll see you at the police station.”

Abby’s eyes twinkle and she winks. “See you there.”

Surprisingly, it doesn’t take long for me to bail Abby out. The arresting officer was incredibly efficient in processing her, and the county magisterial judge was only too happy to take my money for her release.

I don’t expend any effort scolding Abby when we walk out of the police station. Nothing I could say will make her change her ways. “Please tell me you don’t have other plans that might lead to your arrest in the near future.”

For a moment, she looks chastened and levels an apologetic smile. “I’m really sorry your day was ruined. Thank you for bailing me out.”

We walk across the parking lot, the July sun already raising the temps into the mid-eighties. As I open the passenger door for her, I ask, “Was it worth it?”

Her green eyes are free of regret and shimmer with triumph. “It got your attention, didn’t it?”

I raise an eyebrow, liking the direction of her flirtation. “My attention?”

“You were going to spend money in there, and now you haven’t. So, yeah... it was worth it.”

Well, damn. I guess she wasn’t flirting.

But then she reaches out, grabs my T-shirt near the center of my chest, and gives it a playful tug. “And bonus points... I get to have lunch with a handsome guy who just bailed me out of jail.”

Okay, maybe she is flirting. On impulse, I nab her hand, bring her knuckles to my lips. It’s a move I’ve never made with a woman before. “And,” I say mischievously, “I agreed to foster a stolen dog for you.”

Her eyes flash with humor, and I’m not sure if it’s deliberate, but her voice turns husky as she goes up on tiptoes to put her face closer to mine. “That’s a move that would get most men in a girl’s panties.”

Christ, my blood runs hot just at the thought of what type of panties she might wear, and that is absolutely the kind of flirting I am in no way opposed to. I should kiss her right now, just to see how much bluster she is, but instead, I back it down. “Let’s start with lunch first. Then we can talk about your panties.”

Abby’s smile widens, revealing perfect teeth that in turn bite into her lower lip for a second. “Let’s go get supplies for Princess first. I know a good independent pet store downtown. Then we’ll pick up groceries, and I’ll cook lunch for you. I make a great summer pasta salad, and then we can discuss the matter of your heroics and my

undergarments.”

“And your crusade to take down the puppy mills.” I release her hand and pull open the door wider for her to slide into the seat. “I need a better understanding of just how much trouble you’re going to be so I know if I really want to get in your panties.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:06 am

Abby's laugh is throaty and delighted by my feigned reticence. "Pasta salad and panty discussions. Sounds like a wonderful afternoon."

I close the door to my car once she's settled in and whistle a tune as I walk around the back.

I think it's going to be a fucking spectacular afternoon, even if I don't get in her panties.

CHAPTER 5

Abby

"So, what's your deal?" Kellen asks. He leans against the kitchen counter while I stir bow tie pasta boiling on his stove. I glance over my shoulder at him, and God, is he sexy.

He's wearing khaki cargo shorts and a navy blue T-shirt that's faded and soft looking with some military insignia on the left chest, a pair of flip-flops in a nod to the hot Pennsylvania summer day, and two days' worth of facial scruff. I know it's two days because he was clean-shaven day before yesterday when he brought Bubba into the clinic.

Long legs stretched out and crossed at the ankle, he holds a beer as he watches me with intense eyes.

I turn back to the boiling pot. "What more do you need to know about my personal

crusade against Levi Hellman? You clearly know I'm willing to go to great lengths to save those dogs."

My smile softens as I look over to where Bubba and Princess are lying on the cool tile near the fridge, both sound asleep. When we walked in a bit ago, Princess greeted both Kellen and me with more confidence, and I noticed her gait was more natural. I handed the bags to Kellen to put away while I gave her a quick exam. Her eyes are clearing up even after one day of antibiotic treatment.

"Not the dogs' story," he says, causing me to look back at him again. "Your story. What led you here from Kentucky?"

"Oh." I chuckle because I tend to hyperfocus on my zeal to take Hellman down. "Let's see... born and raised in Shelbyville, Kentucky, where my parents own a horse farm. Pretty much a normal upbringing but wanted to spread my wings, so I came to Pennsylvania for undergrad."

"Racing horses?" he asks.

I shake my head. "American saddlebreds. At any rate, I went to veterinary school in Ohio—"

"Ohio State?" he guesses.

"The Ohio State," I correct him to the proper way to refer to the school.

He snickers, and that tells me he knows the Big Ten well, its insistence as being known with the in front of its name. "But you didn't go back to Kentucky."

The timer on my phone chimes. Pasta's done. I tap it quiet and turn off the burner. Kellen pushes off the counter, setting his beer down. Nudging me out of the way, he

picks up the pot and takes it to the sink, pouring the hot water into the colander he'd set there earlier.

My heart catches because it's exactly what my father would do for my mother when she cooked. Didn't want her to lift a heavy pot or potentially scald herself with boiling water.

I always thought it romantic, and I hadn't seen Kellen as that type. Brave and valiant, for sure, as witnessed when he stood up to Levi Hellman.

A sexy flirt, which very much appeals to me, because I'm a flirt, too, and I definitely like sexy men.

But this move was sweet and without calculation.

Yes... romantic.

"Kentucky?" he prods when I don't answer. "How come you didn't go back there to practice, especially since your family has a horse farm?"

"Lots of reasons." I pick up the beer he'd opened for me and take a sip. "First, I didn't want to practice equine care, and my parents already employ a very good veterinarian."

"Whoa, wait," Kellen says, setting the empty pot on the counter while steam from the pasta billows out of the sink. Turning to me, he asks, "Your family farm is big enough to employ a full-time vet?"

I smile wistfully as I think of Blackburn Farms. It's no small operation. "It's the largest saddlebred farm in Kentucky. Over a hundred acres with breeding and foaling barns, several indoor and outdoor training arenas, five separate housing quarters for

staff, and our family's very own ten-thousand-square-foot colonial house that my great-great-great-grandfather built in 1892."

"Holy shit," he mutters and blinks wide-eyed a second before his gaze narrows. "But something in your voice... bitterness? Regret? Relief not to be there?"

I'm stunned he named every emotion I sometimes feel when I think of the farm. "Maybe a little of all," I admit.

"Overbearing, controlling parents?" he guesses.

"Not really. No."

"High expectations?"

A pang in my chest—anger and sadness. "Very high."

Kellen appraises me, holding his bottle loosely by the neck. "Let me guess... the farm is a big business. Generational, a lot of heritage mixed in. It's probably expected that every generation take their rightful place to help the business prosper. There were a lot of things expected of you, maybe from the time you were born. But you had other dreams. How am I doing so far?"

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:06 am

I sip my beer. “A little too close for comfort.”

Kellen grins. “I’m also going to guess that your family is big. Huge, even, and you felt that there were plenty of others to take on the responsibility, which gave you an opportunity to escape.”

“You make it sound like a prison,” I say softly, glancing down at my bottle.

“Sometimes even a great life with a wonderful family can be a prison if you want to do other things.”

My eyes snap up to his. “Yes. Exactly. How did you get all of that so accurately?”

“I’m a good judge of character,” he explains. “Plus, I’m observant and have a wide and varied history to draw from. Also, there was a picture of you and what looked, I assumed, to be your big family, sitting next to your laptop in the clinic.”

Laughing, I hold up my bottle in a mock toast. “Great job, Sherlock.”

“Just how big is your family?” he asks.

“Mom, Dad, twin sister Katherine, older brothers Ethan, Trey, and Wade. An assortment of uncles, aunts, cousins. What about you?”

“Only child,” he says, taking a swig of beer. “Parents are alive and well in upstate New York. It’s why I moved back to the East Coast... to be closer to them.”

I step over to the sink, nudging him away. I use a jet of cold water to cool the pasta. “Which implies you were on the West Coast.”

“Southern California. But I landed a great job in Pittsburgh with a company called Jameson Force Security. Moved here a little over three months ago and have been loving this area.”

“It’s great, right?” I shake the colander to drain the pasta before dumping it into a large bowl. “I chose Washington because I like the small-town feel, but I can be in downtown Pittsburgh in thirty minutes on a good day. And the rolling hills remind me a little of back home.”

“Same,” Kellen says.

While I cut veggies for the pasta salad, he pops two more beers for us and tells me about the beautiful dairy country where he was raised. His dad is a mechanic, and his mom an operating room nurse.

The dogs snooze while I learn about Kellen’s enlistment in the Marine Corps and how he first became a military policeman and then got accepted into the dog handler program, which is actually run by the Air Force out of Lackland AFB in San Antonio. I’m riveted by the stories of his and Bubba’s time in Iraq, doing incredibly dangerous explosives detection work. Kellen explained that sometimes they’d search checkpoints, other times down random streets. My heart thuds as I consider every single step either of them took could’ve meant death. I wonder how this easygoing, funny man handled all that so well.

Or maybe he didn’t, and I’m just seeing his bright side.

We take the dogs outside and eat on his back deck. I learn more about the company he works for, and I’m shocked at the hazardous missions he goes on. His most recent

trip was providing protection to American engineers traveling through some areas of Mexico that are quite often deadly.

“You mentioned you’re planning to buy out Dr. Schoen from the practice. When I met her a few months ago, she didn’t seem like she was considering retirement.”

I laugh. “She’s sixty-eight years old and acts like she’s forty. But she’s been dating a man about ten years younger, and they’ve been traveling a lot. I think retirement is coming sooner rather than later.”

“And how long has this feud been going on with Hellman?” Kellen asks. It catches me by surprise. He hadn’t pushed for details since bailing me out of jail, and I can tell by the abrupt change of subject he had intended to grill me on this all along.

Sighing, I settle back in my chair. “It’s not just Hellman. It’s the entire industry. And it’s not just those who run the puppy mills. It’s the pet stores that buy from them, knowing about the atrocities, and it’s the legislators who won’t pass laws with any real deterrents built in because they don’t want to piss off their business-owning supporters. There are federal laws, but the USDA has failed to revoke a breeder’s license or even fine one under the Animal Welfare Act in over three years. No level of government cares, so it’s up to me and other like-minded people to hit these breeders where it hurts. It’s very much a boots-on-the-ground kind of crusade.”

“And the arrest today?”

I lift my chin. “Pet World is a regional chain store, and I may or may not have staged some protests in front of their properties during my days off. They buy direct from the puppy mills, and Hellman’s is the largest.”

“And they have restraining orders against you,” he points out.

My smile is impish. “Only the one that came on the heels of an arrest when I was protesting.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:06 am

Kellen's tone is paternal. "And now you have another arrest."

"Does it lessen your attraction to me?" It's a low blow, changing the subject that way, but his tone, while not quite censuring, has what sounds like slight disappointment.

"Not at all," he replies smoothly. "I'm just trying to understand if I need to start saving for bail and attorney fees."

"You don't have to do any of that for me, Kellen," I admonish. "You just happened to be in the wrong place at the right time today. I would've gotten arrested just fine on my own, and I would've had Christy come bail me out."

Kellen sets his bottle on the table and rises. He comes to me, bends at the waist, and puts his hands on the armrests of my chair, effectively caging me in. With his face hovering before me, he says, "The problem is, I'm already complicit by taking Princess. I'm already invested because I find what you're doing endearing. And I am most definitely attracted to you, which means I'm not going anywhere. So indulge me when I have these concerns."

The low rumble of his words causes my skin to prickle, and I'm lost to the intensity of his stare. "You hardly know me."

"I'd like to change that too," he murmurs, gaze dropping to my mouth before coming back up.

All I can think about is him closing the distance between our faces and kissing me. We've flirted, admitted attraction, and I'm not a shrinking violet.

I'm a rebel, for fuck's sake, and always have been, much to my family's chagrin.

If he kisses me, I'm going to kiss him back. I'm going to kiss him back in a way that might lead to other things. This, despite the fact that this isn't really a date, and if we were playing by regular courtship rules, a kiss would come possibly at the end of the first date.

But I'm not sure dating is on his mind, or mine.

I know kissing is.

At least on my mind.

Kellen glances down again to my mouth and then smiles as he straightens. The loss of his presence all up in my space leaves me cold, and a little confused. Why is he playing this so safe?

"Do you have plans next weekend?" he asks casually, picking up our empty plates.

I scramble out of my chair to help him clear the table. I nab our beer bottles and the discarded napkins. "Um... Friday night, I'm free."

Saturday is a no-go because I do, in fact, have plans that Kellen wouldn't approve of, and they have everything to do with my next level of attack against Levi Hellman.

Kellen heads for the patio door. Bubba and Princess lift their heads, and upon noticing the exodus from the world of indoor living, get up to follow him.

When he reaches the slider, he pushes it open and lets the dogs precede him. He glances back at me. "Would you be up for me taking you out to dinner?"

Next weekend? That's like... ten days away. We have a weekend coming up, and I have to wonder what's wrong with this weekend? Perhaps he already has a date set and is just filling up his calendar.

I'd thought we had a connection... a definite attraction.

Hell, he's hiding property I stole and has put himself at risk for me.

But he wants to wait until next weekend?

Thoroughly confused and irritated that I'm feeling a tiny bit rejected, I start to disconnect. I push away the breathless excitement this man brings, and I refuse to wonder about what could be between us. This isn't going anywhere. "Actually... I totally forgot that I'm on call Friday night at the clinic. One vet has to be available for emergency calls and to administer medications or treatments to the boarders."

Kellen's expression flickers with disappointment before he heads into the house. "Well, damn. I wish I could take you out this weekend, but my parents are coming to visit."

I follow behind him, shutting the door. And just like that, I've managed to misread the situation entirely and have boxed myself into a corner.

Setting the plates on the counter, Kellen reaches for the bottles. He rinses and puts them in the recycle bin in the pantry. "Maybe we can do something the weekend after that."

"That would be great," I chirp, sounding overly enthusiastic, which makes me wince at myself. But I relax my expression, and Kellen turns to face me, wiping his hands on a towel.

He tosses it onto the counter, bringing his gaze to mine. “I like you, Abby.”

I frown at that bold statement. “You confuse me.”

Kellen tips his head. “Is that so?”

“Little bit.”

“Good,” he says with a grin. “That will keep you on your toes.”

Narrowing my eyes, I ask, “Why is that a good thing?”

“Because I know damn well I’m going to have to be on my toes around you. It’s only fair, right?”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:06 am

All my doubts melt away. I can tell there's going to be nothing normal about what might occur between Kellen and me in the future, but it sounds like it might be quite the ride.

CHAPTER 6

Kellen

Walking into work, I take note of the similarities between Jameson Force Security and the Marine Corps.

Camaraderie is paramount. I move through the maze of desks set out in the open on the second floor. When not on mission, we're here in this massive, abandoned warehouse Kynan McGrath converted into covert offices, planning out upcoming missions and writing our reports on finished ones.

Several of my new coworkers—teammates, really, depending on who I'm on mission with—call out greetings. Some are nothing more than chin lifts before reengaging in whatever office work they have before them, some are first bumps, and another calls out a crude joke.

Every single one of these guys has not only welcomed me into the fold but several have put their lives on the line right beside me, and I trust them to take a bullet for me if the case warranted. And I'd do the same for every single one of them.

Yet, there are significant differences between Jameson and the military. The first and most obvious is the working conditions, at least while off mission. This warehouse is

all faded, crumbling brick covered with graffiti on the outside, but inside it's a feast for the eyes. Kynan, our esteemed leader, spared absolutely no expense on decorating this place with high-end furniture and décor, as well as state-of-the-art equipment. We have a fully functioning firing range on the third floor, as well as a gym, sauna, commercial kitchen, and even apartments for some of the guys to live in. I stayed in one myself when I first started.

I wasn't required to come in today. Debriefing for our latest mission isn't happening until Monday since Mexico wasn't anything more than security detail. Granted, it was in a highly dangerous area, but it was pretty routine, and we didn't run afoul of any international laws or treaties.

Because many of our jobs require travel to other countries and can take several days—of which we are essentially on the job twenty-four hours a day—Kynan believes strongly in us taking plenty of time off in between. It's why my parents are coming for a visit, since I don't have any work obligations.

But I also don't like sitting at home twiddling my thumbs, so I left Princess under Bubba's careful watch (after picking up all stuffed toys and putting them out of his reach) and came in to hang out for a few hours.

My eyes zero in on Malik sitting at a desk in the very back. He's typing steadily on his keyboard while three other guys—Cruce, Cage, and Saint—toss around a tennis ball and talk. Their desks surround Malik's, and he's so engrossed in his work, he doesn't even flinch as the ball sails back and forth around him. He's also completely tuned out whatever it is the guys are discussing.

I head straight for them, reaching Malik's desk just as the ball flies over his head. My arm shoots out, and I grab it cleanly—thank you, all those years of playing second base—and Cage utters protest. “Come on, dude. We were up to sixty-seven tosses without Malik yelling at us once.”

Laughing, I toss him the ball and sit on the front corner of Malik's desk. He hunches forward, squinting at the monitor, ignoring me. The ball tossing resumes.

I wave my hand in front of the screen, and Malik blinks up at me, like he's surprised to see me there. I lean forward, take a gander at his screen, and see it's nothing more than his written report of our Mexico trip. He was team lead and is responsible for the main write-up, although Cage and I will have to provide our own accounts of the mission.

"What's up?" he says, jolting slightly as the ball sails overhead, apparently noticing it for the first time. Saint snickers.

"What's up?" I ask incredulously. "What's up with you, dude? Three days ago, you left Cage and me in the bar to go propose to Anna."

Saint snags the tennis ball out of the air, his attention now riveted on Malik. Cruce leans forward in his chair. "So, are you engaged or not?"

"Not," he replies.

"What the fuck?" Cage demands. "I thought you were past the whole worrying about what others thought shit."

"Honestly, you two should just elope," Saint drawls, tossing the ball back to Cage who doesn't see it coming. It pings off his shoulder, bounces off an empty desk, and rolls out of sight.

Malik frowns at Saint. "We're not eloping." He looks to Cage, then to me, then back to Cage. "And I am past that. But I decided that I needed to do something more romantic. Just barging into the apartment and falling down on one knee isn't good enough for Anna."

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:06 am

“What do you have in mind?” Cruce asks.

Cage scoots his chair in closer. “I have some great ideas that—”

“Dude,” Malik drawls, holding up his hand to stop Cage midsentence. “You got drunk in Vegas and married Jaime on a whim. I doubt you have any good romantic ideas.”

Clutching at his chest, face exaggerated with faux devastation, Cage says, “That really hurts, man.”

“Trip to Paris,” Saint says. “Top of the Eiffel Tower.”

“A helicopter ride over Pittsburgh at night,” Cruce offers.

“Tropical island—Fiji is nice.” I give a pointed glance at Cage, then back to Malik. “Not Vegas.”

“All suggestions are nice,” Malik says, leaning back in his chair and stretching his arms above his head a moment before folding them on his stomach as he grins. “But I’ve already got it figured out. Hot-air balloon ride over the mountains at sunset.”

“Whoa. That’s good,” I say with an affirming nod. “Really good.”

“It’s no Eiffel Tower,” Saint quips. “But I agree it’s good.”

“I don’t think Vegas should be discounted,” Cage mutters. “My marriage is as strong

as they come.”

Malik ignores Cage and smiles. “It’s booked for Saturday, so come Sunday morning, I will be officially and irrevocably off the market.”

I snort at the grandiose statement. “You were off the market the minute you laid eyes on Anna.”

A little how I felt when I laid eyes on Abby. Not instant love, like I want to marry her, because that’s the furthest thing from my mind.

Rather, it was an intense understanding that I’d never met anyone like her before. It wasn’t just her looks but those first seconds of interaction and her confidence with Bubba, and okay... a lot of it was how gorgeous she is.

Point is, sometimes you just know something is worth going after.

Saint’s phone rings, and he snags it off his desk. Glancing at the caller ID, his face softens and he answers, “Hey, babe... what’s up?”

Clearly his wife, Sin.

His face pales as he stands from his chair. “Like, right now?”

Malik and I exchange a look.

“Did you call an ambulance?” He sounds panicked.

We all stand up, ready to jump into whatever action Saint might need of us.

He takes deep breaths as he listens. His pregnant wife is due to give birth in about

two weeks, but I'm guessing something has happened.

"I'm calm," he growls into the phone, though he's anything but. "Yes, okay... fine. I understand. I'll meet you there."

He listens some more, then his voice cracks. "I love you too. Can't wait to meet the little one."

Saint disconnects and holds out his hands, both shaking like a leaf. "Which one of you wants to drive me to the hospital?"

"Sin's in labor?" Cage asks, grabbing his car keys from his pocket.

"Her dad is driving her there now." Saint sucks in more air through his nose and lets it out slowly.

He's fucking adorable.

"Let's go," Cage says, taking Saint by the upper arm and propelling him through the desk maze.

"Good luck!" I call after them. I doubt Saint even heard me.

Malik and Cruce drop back down into their chairs. "I'm going to shoot a quick text to Kynan and Jos. They'll want to go to the hospital."

That's another big difference between Jameson and the Marines. No superiors would have ever gone to the hospital for the laboring wife of one of their troops. But Kynan McGrath is a very involved boss, and he fosters a family atmosphere. His wife, Joslyn, is like a mother to all, despite not being much older than most of the people who work here.

“I hope to fuck I’m not that much of a basket case when our time comes,” Cruce mutters. His wife Barrett is almost five months pregnant, as I recall.

I glance at my watch. “You guys want to grab lunch?”

Malik shakes his head. “I want to get this debrief report done.”

Cruce looks down at his watch and grimaces. “I’ve got a dentist appointment.”

Scanning the work area, I don’t see anyone else that I’d ask to go eat with. While I’m friendly with all, I haven’t developed good friendships with everyone yet. Most of my work has been with Malik and Cage, and they’re the ones I enjoy hanging with.

Maybe I’ll just head home and hang with the dogs. Princess has fit in solidly and is really coming out of her shell. Maybe I’ll take her for a walk, just the two of us, to do some bonding.

I could swing by the clinic and see what Abby is up to. I mean, sure... it’s her workday, but I could probably use some guidance on what type of exercise Princess should be getting. I don’t want to do too much, given her former sedentary life cooped up in a cage, but I want to get her out and about. Abby would know way better than I do how to handle it.

“I’ll catch you guys later.” I give Malik a light punch on his shoulder. “Good luck Saturday.”

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:06 am

“Thanks, man,” he says with a grin. “I’ll text photos once it’s all done.”

Apparently, this trip into the office was wasted. I could find something to do, but honestly, I’d rather go see Abby. I should probably call first, but where’s the fun in that?

Besides, I don’t like that I have to wait so long to take her out. Truly, why should I confine our time together to a weekend? We could do dinner tonight, if she’s game.

My phone chimes when I make it to the underground garage, and I grimace when I see it’s a text from Adriana. I need to talk to you.

I ignore her as I get in my car, pull onto the road, and head out of the city. I hear two more text chimes and know it’s her, which I also ignore.

Then my phone rings—the tone for Adriana is Fleetwood Mac’s “Go Your Own Way.”

It seemed appropriate somehow after we broke up and I walked away without a backward glance.

I ignore the call like I always do.

Surprisingly, she doesn’t leave a long-winded voicemail like normal, but instead the ringing cuts short and seconds later, another text.

At the next red light, I pick up my phone and see what’s so urgent. I’ve been able to

secure a loan to buy you out. We need to discuss details.

Well, shit. That's the best thing I've heard out of her mouth since the day I caught her fucking the landscape dude. Buying me out of the business will mean our ties will be fully severed.

Without hesitation, I call her back and continue my drive to Washington. I'll stop and pick up lunch to feed both Abby and Christy, who I've learned is the only other staff member at the clinic. They've had some personnel changes in the last few months, and while they had a part-time vet filling in to give Abby a break, she often ended up doing vet tech duties so Christy could have time off.

Adriana answers on the first ring, breathless and accusing. "Why didn't you just answer when I first called?" she demands.

I can feed her some bullshit about being on another call or something, but I'm a straight shooter. "Because I don't like talking to you. However, you getting funding to buy me out means I must."

"Why are you such an asshole?" she mutters.

"You and I both know the answer to that," I reply calmly, not willing to hash out any ugliness. I said my piece to her the day I caught her cheating and walked out. I didn't need to discuss it again. "So, what's the deal?"

Adriana sighs and proceeds to tell me that her parents are going to loan her the money at a low interest rate to buy me out and that an attorney will draft the documents to dissolve the business and put it in her name alone.

"That's great," I say with excitement. "Send me the paperwork to have an attorney look at. If it's good, I'll sign and you can send me a check."

“I’ll email you the paperwork as soon as we hang up, but if it meets with your approval, I’d rather us conduct the signing of the documents and exchange of money in person.”

“Why?” My tone is flat and hard. I mean, I know why, but I’d like to hear what she says.

“Because I want to talk to you. You never gave me the opportunity, and—”

“Because there was nothing you could say that would stop me from leaving, Adriana. Why can’t you just see that and move on? God knows I have.”

“I can’t.” She starts weeping. “I did the worst thing imaginable, and you won’t even let me be appropriately remorseful about it. You won’t give me the courtesy of letting me apologize to your face.”

My jaw locks, considering her words. It’s absolutely true I gave her no time to talk or apologize. I saw what I saw, and I was done. I got my dog and left. I ignored her calls and texts. I waited until she was at work the next day before I went into the house and grabbed a few boxes of my clothes—enough to get me through a few weeks back in Pittsburgh, and I’d had the rest hauled out for me.

Bubba and I drove east, my house sold for a nice sum, and I subsequently bought my house in Washington. The movers brought my stuff, and my life has been just fine without Adriana.

Which does make me wonder... why wasn’t I more brokenhearted? Why wasn’t I more pissed? I mean, I was angry, but it dissipated so quickly. I’d dare say, maybe there was even some relief. Things had been a little too easy with us. We’d been together for almost three years, and we hadn’t progressed at all. We were static... fine with the status quo of our relationship. There was no talk of a future or children.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:06 am

Maybe that's why she was banging the landscaper while I was away.

Because things weren't exciting or romantic anymore.

Regardless, she clearly wasn't the love of my life, but maybe I owe her the courtesy to say what's on her mind.

"We don't need to meet for you to apologize, Adriana. I'm here now and listening."

"But I thought in person would be better."

She thinks in person, she might talk me into forgiveness and taking her back. "Right now is just fine."

"Oh... well, okay." I can tell she's flustered, that she wasn't expecting to have my ear for very long. She sucks in a loud breath. "Kellen... I'm really so sorry for betraying you like that. I don't even have a good excuse. You were so good to me, and we were so good together. I think maybe I was just lonely with you being in Pennsylvania, and—"

"Stop. You apologized, and I don't need to hear excuses about loneliness. I was lonely, too, but I didn't fuck around on you. Let's just agree that you've apologized, and I've accepted it."

"But maybe—"

"No maybes. Send me the paperwork for my attorney to look over, and I'll be in

touch.”

I should have anticipated the outburst, yet I’m still surprised by her rapid turnaround. She screeches, “God, you’re an asshole. I don’t know why I was ever with you to begin with. You can’t even give me an inch, can you? Well, fuck you, Kellen. I’m not paying you a damn dime.”

She continues on and on, and I listen as I navigate through downtown and onto I-79 to take me back to Washington. When she runs out of steam, I’m surprisingly chill. “If you refuse to pay me what you owe for the business, I’ll have the courts step in. They’ll dissolve our partnership, force you to sell the business, and pay me half of the proceeds. If that’s the way you want to handle things—”

The line goes dead.

Chuckling, I crank the music and bop along to Eminem. I stop at a sandwich shop in downtown Washington and grab three Italian subs and chips. I then make my way out to Cove Road, arriving at the clinic by one thirty.

There’s only one car in the small gravel lot, same one that was here when I brought Bubba in and picked him up. Presumably Christy’s, since I know Abby lives in the garage apartment at the main farmhouse.

I grab the food and head inside.

Christy is behind the desk, and her face lights up when she sees me. “Hi, Mr. McCord.”

“Hey.” I set the bag on the desk and pull out a sub and bag of chips. “Brought you and Abby lunch. And it’s Kellen, not Mr. McCord.”

“Oh gosh, this is so nice. Thank you.”

She takes the proffered food, and I nod toward the swinging door. “Abby back there?”

“Actually, she’s down at the paddock. She usually rides on her lunch hour.”

My eyebrows pull inward from confusion. “Paddock?”

“Yeah... Dr. Schoen has horses, and Abby boards her own here. She cares for all of them in exchange for the apartment.”

The riding part doesn’t surprise me—I know she comes from a horse family—but I didn’t realize Dr. Schoen had horses. It’s a huge property, though, and you can only see so much from the road or the clinic parking lot.

Christy throws a thumb over her shoulder. “There’s a path behind this building. It leads around those big rhododendrons and then you’ll see the barn. Go through the back and out the rear door, if you want.”

I don’t question Christy’s decision to let me wander freely around the building. I guess I’ve built up trust by running Levi Hellman off and being complicit in the stealing of his dog.

“Thanks.” I grab the bag with the rest of the food and head off in search of Abby.

CHAPTER 7

Abby

I’m wearing a sleeveless shirt with my jods, and I can feel my shoulders burning in

the midday sun. So much for my mental note to put on sunscreen. And the riding ring isn't close to a single tree that might provide some shaded relief.

This is actually good, though, as Lunar tends to spook when he sees dappled light on the ground. While it would take a lot to throw me from his back, I don't feel like working hard today. These lunch break rides are for pleasure only. I've left my training days far behind.

It was an escape for me when I left Kentucky, running from family obligations and show expectations. When I left the complex world of saddlebreds, there was no way I could leave Lunar behind. He's fifteen now, his showing days long over. He could've led a life of retirement luxury at Blackburn Farms, but he can have that same life here with me.

I don't ride him every day, but the days I do, my world is infinitely better.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:06 am

“Trot.” It’s the only word he needs to launch into the two-beat gait where his legs move in unison in diagonal pairs. I slip easily into a post, my hands light on the reins, leading him around the enclosed ring. We make two full circles before I ask him to stop with a two-word command: “Whoa, walk.”

He halts beautifully, and my butt settles into the back of the saddle.

“Want to stretch your legs a little?” I ask him softly, and his ears twitch at the sound of my voice. Pulling on the left rein, I say, “Canter.”

Lunar’s hind end swings out slightly, his neck arches, and he seems to prance in place for a moment before he lopez off into the three-beat gait.

The faster pace produces a breeze over my hot skin as I settle into the motion, and there’s no stopping my smile. I feel free and alive.

I also feel melancholy to have walked away from it all, but happier to be living my life without the pressure.

As we come out of the curve at the far end of the arena, my eyes catch movement, and I’m stunned to see Kellen walking my way holding a white bag. He’s wearing khaki cargo pants with a short-sleeved black T-shirt that’s molded to his torso. I’m so distracted that had Lunar come across a dapple of sunlight among shadows, he would’ve easily tossed me.

“Whoa, walk.” Lunar falls out of the canter and takes up a steady walk as I guide him to the end where Kellen stands.

He smiles as I approach. “You’re full of surprises.”

I walk my horse right up to the edge of the wood fencing that separates us and give him a pat on the neck. “This is my boy, Lunar.”

Kellen tilts his head back to look at me, shading his eyes from the sun with his hand. “Your boy?”

“Where I go, so, too, goes Lunar.” I give him another pat, and he tosses his head to show off. “He’s been with me since I was twelve.”

“Wow.” Kellen’s eyes roam over Lunar’s chestnut body. “He’s gorgeous.”

“Yes, he is.” Pride swells within me because this horse has been my partner from the start. I helped foal him on the farm, helped saddle break him, and trained him for the show ring. Accepted more blue ribbons on his back than I can count, including three world championships. No way I’d ever leave him back in Kentucky, even though I left the rest of it behind.

Slipping my feet from my stirrups, I swing out of the saddle and hop to the ground.

“Jesus,” Kellen mutters. “That’s a really tall horse to be jumping down like that.”

Moving to Lunar’s head to grab the reins near the bit, I laugh. “How else am I supposed to get off him?”

“A staircase would be appropriate.”

That makes me laugh even harder. “You clearly don’t know much about horses.”

“Want to teach me over lunch?” Kellen holds up a bag. “I brought subs for you and

Christy. She's already chowing down on hers."

My heart flutters over the sweet gesture. "I'd love to. I'll have to make it quick as I've got an appointment coming in soon, so I've got about twenty minutes to give you."

"I'll gladly take 'em."

Kellen follows me around the outer part of the ring to the gate. I lead Lunar to the barn and into his stall. Kellen watches as I quickly take off and set aside Lunar's saddle and bridle until I can put them away in the tack room when I'm all done.

I squat at Lunar's left foreleg and start to remove his wraps. "See that big jar of peppermints on the table outside his stall? Will you grab one and give it to Lunar?"

Glancing over my shoulder, I see that Kellen finds the table. He sets his bag down, pulls out a peppermint—the good ones, large and round and red striped—and removes the wrapper.

"Just hold it under his mouth. Flatten your palm so he doesn't bite your fingers off."

Kellen stares at me, and I can see he's not scared at the prospect, merely trying to gauge if I'm pulling his leg.

I grin at him. "He won't bite your fingers off. He's very gentle, but definitely hold your hand flat so there's not a mistaken nibble."

Kellen does as instructed, and Lunar eagerly uses his lips to grab the mint. "That's a good boy," Kellen praises and wipes horse slobber on his pants. He does so without a grimace and runs his hand along Lunar's neck while I finish his leg wrappings.

Within five minutes, I'm done. I use the sink in the tack room to wash my hands and then I finally turn my full attention to Kellen. "So... we have about fifteen minutes."

"I can wolf down a sub in that time. Where do you want to eat?"

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:06 am

I nab a horse blanket off one of the shelves as well as two bottled waters from the mini fridge, and Kellen grabs the food. I lead him out the back of the barn to a shady area under a sprawling oak tree, and we settle onto the ground for an impromptu picnic.

“Does Dr. Schoen ride?” he asks as he unwraps a sub and hands it to me.

“Not much anymore. She has two horses, and I handle most of their care and exercise. She gives me free apartment rent in exchange.” I bite into the sub, and my stomach does a happy dance. I didn’t have time for breakfast.

“I assume you’re looking to put down roots here since you said you were going to buy the practice.”

I nod as I sip my water. “I really like this area. The people are super nice—except for certain people who exploit and harm dogs—so yeah, I think this will be my home for some time to come. What about you?”

Kellen’s gaze sweeps across the hills of Dr. Schoen’s property to the mountains beyond. “It’s gorgeous here, and I love my job. It’s close to my parents without being too close, if you know what I mean.”

Oh yeah, I knew what he meant. “Did you leave a lot of close friends back on the West Coast?”

Kellen nods. “Military buddies, but you don’t ever really leave them. Those are friends for life.”

“I have friends like that in the horse world.” When I think of those people, I feel a longing I know will never go away, but it’s the sacrifice I made in exchange for freedom.

On the flip side, it was just such a friendship lost that caused me to run.

“Didn’t leave a boyfriend behind?” Kellen teases, although there is an intensity within his eyes that tells me the answer to his question is important and not something he’s taking lightly.

“No one worthy of mention,” I assure him. But that makes me curious. “What about you?”

“Not worthy of mention either, but since you asked, I was in a relationship before I moved to Pittsburgh. We’d been together three years, and she was going to move here, but I caught her cheating on me.”

I reach out without thinking and rest a hand on his arm. “Oh God... I’m so sorry.”

Kellen shakes his head, his smile easy and without burden. “Don’t be. I’m not. And the fact I’m not sorry tells me what I think I knew, anyway, that it really wasn’t meant to be. I think maybe I was supposed to find out she was cheating to avoid a complicated situation down the road if she moved her life to the East Coast to follow me.”

I hold up my sub in salute. “Well, I think she’s a fool for doing you wrong. How could she let someone who brings lunch get away?”

Kellen laughs, tipping his head back, and the sun catches his blue eyes so they sparkle. “Well, thank you for saying that. I thought she was a fool, but it’s nice to have the affirmation.”

“Seriously, though,” I say, drawing his gaze. “Thank you for lunch. It was really nice of you.”

Kellen shrugs like it’s no big deal, but truly... it is. I’ve dated and been in relationships, and no one has ever brought me a sandwich so he could have a few minutes of my time. And let’s not even get me thinking about him keeping Princess safe.

Or bailing me out of jail.

We chat more about our lives as we finish our sandwiches, drink our water, and enjoy the shade. Sitting side by side, hands planted behind us and legs stretched out, it feels like we’ve been hanging like this forever.

It’s just that easy.

Kellen holds up his watch to check the time, and we both know our fifteen minutes are up. He rolls his head to the right to look at me, chin resting on his shoulder. “I know we made tentative plans to go out weekend after next since my parents are coming in this weekend, and you have plans next weekend, but I really don’t want to wait that long to kiss you.”

I’m stunned by how quickly this changed from a chill picnic lunch to my entire being wanting to roll over and submit to him. Just upon the suggestion of a kiss. My throat dries out, making my voice husky. “Are you asking permission?”

“No. Merely stating my feelings.”

God. Why do his eyes have to be so damn mesmerizing, and why did I just look at his mouth? Could I be more obvious?

My heart thunders as he leans my way. “I lied about needing to work next Friday,” I blurt out.

Kellen’s chin jerks inward, and he raises an eyebrow. “You did?”

I nod with what I hope is an appropriately apologetic expression. “I was afraid that the reason you didn’t ask me out for this weekend was because you had plans with another woman, so I was reflexively closing myself off. But you’re not seeing someone else... it’s your parents coming in—” I frown as I consider something. “You aren’t seeing anyone else, right? And the thing with your girlfriend is over?”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:06 am

“She’s indeed an ex-girlfriend,” he says with a grin. “And I think you are more than enough for me to handle, so no... I’m not seeing anyone else.”

“I’m really sorry I lied about it. I’m not like that. I just... didn’t want to get my hopes up and then get hurt.”

“I understand that,” he assures me gently. “But I think you know I’m a straight shooter.”

My loud exhale of relief, coupled with a nod, makes Kellen chuckle. I smile sheepishly but boldly lean toward him. “You may kiss me now.”

Once again, my eyes drop to his mouth and I wait expectantly for him to close the distance. But nothing happens, and I look upward with a frown.

His eyes twinkle, lips curved slyly. “I think I’ll wait.” He pushes up off the ground, and I blink, stunned silent at another abrupt trajectory change. Kellen reaches down, takes my hands, and hauls me from the ground.

Bringing one hand to his mouth, he brushes his lips over my knuckles. “Next Friday... dinner. And what will be an amazing kiss after.”

“After,” I mumble, my head whirling.

Kellen winks at me. “Possibly more than one kiss.”

“Okay,” I say, because clearly he’s in charge. He’s making the rules. He’s

orchestrating this. I think he enjoys keeping me a little off-balance, and weirdly... I like it too.

Kellen's hands come to my shoulders, and he turns me a hundred and eighty degrees until I'm facing the clinic. He gives me a tiny push. "Get back to work. I'll clean all this up."

I glance over my shoulder as I walk away. He's squatting, stuffing our lunch trash in the bag. Then he carefully folds the horse blanket.

Neck twisting, he catches me gawking and smiles. "Watch where you're going."

I turn around and catch myself from walking into the open arena gate. I hastily veer around it, face flaming. I don't look back at him, but I can feel the press of his stare on my backside.

Which gives me a bit of satisfaction as I know I look damn good in my riding jods.

Once inside the clinic, I hastily change into my scrubs and affix my name tag. A quick peek through the swinging door, and I see that the new patient is here. Through the glass door that leads to the parking lot, I see Kellen's car pulling away.

"I need about five minutes," I say to Christy as she looks over at me.

"No worries. They're still filling out the initial paperwork." Today's appointment is a puppy here to get his first round of vaccinations and do a general wellness check.

"Thanks, Christy."

Back at the countertop desk where my laptop resides, I pick up my cell phone and call my twin sister, Kat. "What's up, Thing One?" she says when she answers.

Thing One—that’s me since I’m the oldest by almost nineteen minutes—and Thing Two, which is Kat. Said names were gifted to us by our eldest brother, Ethan (eleven years older than we are), who was often tasked with oversight of his young, rambunctious sisters.

We freaking earned those nicknames.

“I almost just kissed a guy I met a few days ago.” I can’t help the gush of words that comes out. “I met him when he brought in his sick dog—who’s fine, by the way—then he offered to foster a golden I got from the Hell Hole, then he saw me get arrested outside of Pet World and bailed me out. We did lunch, planned a date into the future, then he showed up today—with sandwiches—while I was riding Lunar. He almost kissed me after we ate. Can you believe it?”

“I don’t know what part of that story to even start with, but let’s start with the Hell Hole. Did you rescue one of the dogs?”

Kat is all too familiar with the Hell Hole, a.k.a. Levi Hellman’s puppy mill, as I don’t keep anything from my sister. She knows more than anyone how deep I am into this crusade to take him down. Because she’s Thing Two, and as much a rabble-rouser as I am, she’s always encouraged my bad behavior if that’s what is needed to get the job done.

“Well, rescue is a loose term. I mean, I did rescue a female golden, but not through proper legal channels.”

“You mean, you stole her,” she concludes.

“Yeah, and I would have gotten more except I heard someone coming. But I’m going back next weekend to stake things out.”

“You were careful?”

“Always,” I assure her.

She doesn’t chastise or condemn, simply moves on. “And the arrest?”

“A peaceful protest on the sidewalk outside Pet World. The manager called the police.”

“Douchebag,” she growls protectively. “And this guy bailed you out, huh? Does he know how crazy you are about this stuff?”

“Oh, he knows. His name is Kellen. Former Marine, works in a big security firm in Pittsburgh doing all kinds of dangerous missions and stuff. Naturally, he’s attracted to my brand of crazy.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:06 am

Kat chuckles. “And there was an almost kiss.”

I sigh heavily with how close it came. “Yeah... almost. He was going for it but then decided to wait until after our first real dinner date, which is next weekend.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t jump his bones. I mean, I would have, and what Thing Two does, normally Thing One would have done it first.”

“Right?” I exclaim. “I totally should have. But something told me to let him drive. Not because I think it would ding his ego, but because he’s enjoying himself drawing this out. And well, so am I. And there you have it... my life in a nutshell since I talked to you a few days ago. But I gotta go. A cute puppy patient is waiting for me.”

“Are you coming for Dad’s birthday?” Kat asks hesitantly.

I wince as I hold my tongue, the first inclination to decline. Escaping Blackburn Farms took every bit of strength I had. I tend to stay away, because the pull to return is too strong, and I’m afraid I won’t be able to break away again. Like a magnet on my heart. While in some ways, moving home would make me happy, in most ways, it would make me sad.

“We’ll see,” I finally offer. It gives her some hope and she won’t ride my back, and it doesn’t commit me. “It depends on the work schedule. Dr. Schoen’s traveling again, and I don’t know when she’s coming back.”

“Okay,” she sighs. “But if you don’t come, I’m going to need to come visit you soon. I miss my wombie.”

Short for womb roomie.

“I miss you so much.” I swallow hard and blink to chase away potential tears. “I love you, Two.”

“Love you back, One. You better call me after the kiss.”

“Promise.”

We disconnect, and I take another thirty seconds to get my head on straight. I love my family... every single member. Love them as deep as the ocean, and I miss them all terribly. But none more than Kat. We share the same heart, the same brain, the same soul. If there was ever one person who could get me to return to Kentucky, it would be her.

Thankfully, she’s never asked it of me.

CHAPTER 8

Kellen

It’s a quiet night. Bubba and Princess snooze on the floor beside me. My feet are perched on the coffee table, my eyes slightly glazed as I stare at the TV.

My phone chimes with a text. I grab it quickly, thinking it might be Abby. I’ve been fighting the urge to text her, even though I very much want to. I’m not playing hard to get or making her wonder by staying silent since our lunch yesterday. On the contrary, we’ve been in touch through a volley of texts. Plus, I called her last night, and we talked for about half an hour.

But I haven’t talked to her since my parents flew in. I picked them up at the airport

this morning, and we spent the day together. I took them to Jameson so they could see where I work. It was fun watching them have a near apoplectic fit when we drove into the worst area Pittsburgh has to offer, where our headquarters is located. Dad sputtered when he took in the graffiti-covered warehouse.

I struggled not to laugh, knowing all would be well once they saw the inside.

After they were reassured I'd made a good career move—and I think that mostly had to do with Joslyn serving coffee in the communal kitchen, which totally dazzled them because she's a famous movie star—we went out for a long lunch.

We spent the afternoon at my house. My mom fussed around, rearranging cabinets, doing my laundry, and running to the grocery store so she could make my favorite meal, eggplant Parmesan.

Dad and I hung out on the back deck, watching Bubba and Princess play. My parents were shocked to see another dog, but I assured them I'm just fostering for a while. Even as I said those words, I wasn't so sure this wouldn't be a failed foster. In only three days, the golden beauty has won my heart. She ignores the dog bed I purchased and insists on sleeping on my bed with me. Given the hellish life she's lived so far, I've decided I'm okay with it. Bubba watched, quiet and curious, from his bed on the floor when Princess jumped up and curled into a doughnut at my feet, but maybe he understands she needs some extra grace.

There's no denying the disappointment when I see the text isn't from Abby but rather Saint. Another round of pictures of his baby son, born late last night. I smile at the photo of him holding little Andrew up for the camera, a dopey, lovestruck grin on the new dad's face.

Not Abby, but admittedly, a great text to receive.

Page 28

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:06 am

I type back, That kid is the cutest thing I've ever seen. The guy holding him up... not so much.

Saint texts back immediately. Bite me.

Chuckling, I put my phone on my stomach and focus on the TV.

"What do you want to watch next?" my dad asks. He's cocked back in my recliner, remote control in his hand. We just finished a World War II documentary, and I only paid partial attention, instead thinking about Abby.

Which is very telling since I love history as much as my dad does, and watching documentaries is something we often do together.

"I don't care," I say, my fingers curling tight into my palm to force myself to not pick up the phone to text her.

Pointing the remote at the TV, he turns it off. I'm surprised as it's far too early for him to go to bed. Mom went in about half an hour ago because she has a book she wants to read, but Dad's a night owl like me.

"Okay... spill it. What's got you in a jumbled mess? Is it Adriana?"

I shoot him a chastising look. "Why would you assume it was her? And for the record, no. I rarely think about her."

Unless it's to wonder when I can get the fuck out of the business. She has yet to email

me the documents to review, but since she hung up on me during our last conversation, not shocking. Maybe I should just let an attorney handle this.

Dad looks at me pointedly. “I don’t know. It sort of feels like a girl thing.”

Christ. I scrub my hand over my head, marveling at his uncanny ability to pick up on even subtle nuances in behavior. He’s not a psychologist. He’s never studied human behavior. He’s never tended bar where he might get to hear all the problems in the world and be able to deduce mine.

No, Charlie McCord is a mechanic who is more in tune with cars than people.

But he’s a father, and he knows his only son well.

“Definitely not Adriana.” I feel it bears repeating so we can move on from that. Dad likes to impart wisdom whenever he can, and I don’t need it where she’s concerned. “But there is a woman.”

“Lay it on me,” he says, motioning with his hand to indicate he’s ready to accept my burdens.

So I lay them out.

I tell him all about Dr. Abigail Blackburn without omitting a single detail. My parents are the least judgmental people in the world and wouldn’t ever think bad of Abby for stealing a dog or getting arrested for protesting. In fact, my mother would be the type to protest with her. I tell Dad about the brief time we’ve spent together and that we have our first official date scheduled for next Friday, but that I can’t stop thinking about her.

It doesn’t feel weird to bare these things to my father. He’s always been the best

sounding board, and his advice has never steered me wrong.

He listens thoughtfully, and when I'm done, he says, "I have to wonder why you're here rather than with her. If you like her so much, why are you waiting until next weekend? I mean, you spontaneously brought her lunch yesterday and that pleased her."

"Well, yeah. But I kind of have company visiting this weekend."

Dad chuckles at my snark. "And we had a great time hanging out today. But"—he looks at his watch—"it's ten thirty, which isn't late by you young people's standards and we spent all day together. Why don't you go see her?"

My hand jerks reflexively and without any conscious thought, I grab my phone from my stomach. But I only hold it. "Just call her up and see if she wants to hang?"

"Why call her?" he says slyly. "She seems like a girl who likes the spontaneous in you."

"It's ten thirty. It's late."

"Good God," my dad drawls, "are you seventy-nine or twenty-nine?"

I snicker. "I'm most definitely not seventy-nine."

My dad points to the door. "Go. Drive over there, see if the lights are on. If they are, knock on the door. If they aren't, knock on the door."

"You're a bad influence."

"I'm a charmer, and you get it from me. I also go after what I want, and you most

definitely get that from me. Don't waste the passage of DNA, son. I'd be most disappointed."

And that convinces me right there. I love and respect my dad. I model myself after him, so if he'd go throw pebbles at a girl's window late at night, why shouldn't I?

"Word of advice," he says as I rise from the couch.

"What's that?"

"Don't do the whole boom box thing outside the window playing a corny song. It's not a good look."

He's referring to when I was fifteen and had a crush on a girl who was two years older than me. I'd seen the movie *Say Anything*, and it appealed to my romantic side. I thought I might have a shot of losing my virginity with the same stunt.

Didn't work.

Dad didn't know my original intent, but he knew what I did because I told him. I also told him that she rolled her eyes, slammed her window shut, and cut me off at the knees.

It was a lesson, and he consoled me. I lost my virginity not long after that and didn't even have to humiliate myself. Turns out, genuine feelings for a girl I started dating, mixed with teenage lust, did the trick.

"Don't wait up for me." I grin at my dad as I move to the recliner and lean to squeeze his shoulder. "Will you let Bubba and Princess out one more time before you go to sleep?"

"Got it covered," he says, patting my hand.

I stop by the kitchen and grab something that could be considered romantic. Maybe I should call Abby to ask if I can come over—but I think she enjoyed me showing up out of the blue the other day, so I'm banking on that same reception.

When I pull onto the property, I don't fork left toward the clinic but instead take the gravel driveway that goes toward the main house. As I drive past the mass of rhododendrons that had blocked my view of the barn when at the clinic, I have a clear line of sight to the horse paddock. There's no outdoor lighting, but the moon is bright. From a security perspective, I'd suggest installing motion-activated lights at the least, but that's not my primary purpose.

I'm here for a kiss because I don't want to wait for dinner next week.

The garage apartment is on the far side of the house, so I follow the driveway and park behind a small Honda Accord that I assume is Abby's. Lights are on in the apartment windows, and I spy an exterior staircase that leads up.

Everything is incredibly quiet as I make my way up to her door, illuminated by a soft, glowing outdoor sconce that a moth flutters around. I'm happy to see she has a peephole in the door, and after I knock three times, I stand back so she can get a good look at me.

I hear locks being undone, and my heart is about to leap out of my chest, wondering what she'll answer the door in. Sweatpants? Lingerie? Welcoming smile? Anger for disturbing her?

It's none of the above.

It's better.

Frayed jean short shorts, a white tank top molded to her body so, for the first time, I actually get an idea of just how curvy she is. Bare feet, toenails painted pale pink, and fuck, if I don't find the sexiest thing about her—the reading glasses perched on the end of her nose.

"I didn't know you wore glasses." Not the best greeting, but it's what has my attention.

She grins and pulls them off. "I don't, but I took my contacts out and still had some reading to do, so these help in a pinch."

"I don't peg you as a romance reader. Science fiction?"

“Studies on feline leukemia.”

“Same thing. Nerdy stuff. But the glasses don’t make you look nerdy. In fact, they’re kind of hot.”

Abby rolls her eyes, but they land on the container in my hand. “What’ve you got?”

“Bribery. Hoping I could talk my way inside to hang for a bit, and in return, I brought some amazing pineapple upside-down cake my mom made.”

A smile blooms bright on her face. “Yum. I have vanilla ice cream we can eat with it. Come on in.”

She spins from the door and starts to walk toward the tiny kitchen that’s separated from the living area by a small counter. I enter the apartment, shut the door, and reach out quickly to grab her wrist. She turns back to me in surprise, and I use the momentum to pull her to me. We’d be pressed against each other if it weren’t for the container of cake between us.

“That’s not quite the truth of why I’m here,” I say. She stares up at me with those clear green eyes, head tipped slightly with intrigue. “I came for a kiss. I can’t wait until next week.”

And fuck me... her eyes flash with something hot and needy. “A kiss.”

I nod. “Not asking permission. Giving you fair warning.”

Abby takes the container from my hands, and I expect her to slow things down by turning for the kitchen. Instead, she tosses the cake onto the nearby couch, along with her glasses, where they both tumble off and onto the floor. She doesn’t spare them a glance, and it doesn’t matter... the cake will taste just fine all mushed up. If her

glasses broke, I'll buy her a new pair.

My hand flashes out, grabs the waistband of her shorts, and I pull her hard into me. Abby gasps, but her eyes darken, like ferns under shade trees. I don't touch her anywhere else, and we just stare at each other. I take in the long lashes framing those stunning eyes, the dark sweep of her bangs across her forehead. Delicate nose, aristocratic cheekbones, and a lush mouth. She's a perfect creature, and I memorize the details so when I close my eyes at night, I'll see them clearly.

Page 30

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:06 am

Leaning down, I brush my lips over hers. A soft glide... really, it's the permission I said I wasn't asking for, but I'm a gentleman.

It's only when Abby slides a hand behind my neck to pull me to her that I know she wants this as much as I do. Her mouth opens to me, and our tongues dance. My hands span her waist, and I hold her tight, content to feel her mouth alone.

But when she issues a low moan across my lips, I can't help but let one hand slip down to cup her ass before pulling her flush against my body. And Christ, she feels good.

Way too fucking good as my cock starts to thicken, and that's not what I came here for.

Not really.

I pull free of the kiss, and her eyes snap open to regard me with surprise. Brushing my lips gently against hers, I whisper, "If we don't stop, this is going to go way too far, way too fast. I'm afraid, Dr. Blackburn, that you've got the ability to make me lose control."

Abby leans in, presses her lips to the hollow of my throat, and murmurs, "If you're looking for me to be the good little girl and accept your gentlemanly offer to slow down, you're kissing the wrong girl."

I smile as my forehead drops to hers. "Deep down, I know you're going to be lots of trouble for me. Not sure what it says about me that I like that notion."

Abby's laugh is soft and husky. Her hands come to my face, and she pulls back slightly so our eyes meet again. "We've got two choices. We can go eat cake, or we can have sex, and I really don't think the cake is a good choice, which is a very weird thing for me to say since I love cake."

"I'm a guy, so you know I'm going to choose sex. Also, we can eat the cake after... in bed."

"That might be the most romantic thing I've ever heard," she quips, and I laugh.

She's fucking delightful. Witty, sexy, and I cannot wait to get between her legs.

No sense in waiting when she's given the green light. I pull her tank top over her head, quickly followed with the swift removal of her bra. I step back and get an eyeful, her tits absolutely perfect, nipples already puckered tight.

I put my hands under her ass and lift her into the air, but not to kiss her on the mouth. Instead, I suck one of those perfect nipples into my mouth, causing her to groan. Leaning back, I grin at her. "Point me in the direction of the nearest bed."

"Down the hall to the left."

Moonlight filters through lacy curtains, dappling her bed. I drop her body there, and she gasps when my hands move immediately to her shorts. It's a simple matter of undoing the button, whipping down the zipper, and pulling the offending denim away. Underneath is a minuscule pair of yellow lace panties.

I cup her between the legs, groaning at the heat and dampness I find there. I can't even wait to pull them off her legs, instead inching my fingers under the material to plunge inside of her.

“Oh fuck,” Abby groans, bucking her hips upward. “That feels so good.”

“Going to feel better.” I lean over her, my free hand pressed into the mattress near her head, and crush my mouth to hers. A storm of lust swirls around us both, and I don’t hesitate to plunge my tongue into her mouth while I fuck her with my fingers. She’s so goddamn tight and hot and wet, and it’s crazy how fast this is all moving and yet it’s not going fast enough.

Abby starts tearing at my clothes, and because I need us both naked now, I help her. Able to kick off my shoes as she rips at my T-shirt, I bat her hands away as she’s more hindrance than help. I divest myself of clothing, but before I drop my pants to the floor, I grab my wallet and pinch the condom I’d tucked in there before I got out of the car.

Abby watches with interest, and I grin at her sheepishly. “I stopped at the store on the way. I wasn’t expecting this, but I knew it was coming at some point. I wanted to be prepared.”

Abby laughs. “You’re a regular Boy Scout.”

“The things I want to do to you they don’t teach in the Boy Scouts.”

“Can’t wait to see what you’ve got.” Abby pushes and kicks her panties down her silky thighs while I rip the condom open and roll it onto my cock.

“Scoot back and spread your legs,” I order her.

She doesn’t hesitate to obey, and while I know she expects me to fall on top of her for perhaps a fast and hard fuck, I’ve got other things in mind.

Page 31

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:06 am

I need to taste her because she looks too sweet and tempting to pass up.

I put my mouth between her legs and feast.

She tastes so fucking good my balls tingle, and I have to wrap my hand around my dick and squeeze hard to calm it down. Abby bucks and groans and begs as my tongue works her clit.

She's so fucking responsive, within minutes she's pulling at my hair and begging me to finish her off. I surge up her body, bring my mouth to hers for a harsh kiss that has us knocking teeth, and slam my way home inside her body.

Abby breaks apart, an orgasm tearing through her as soon as I'm planted deep. She cries out my name, and I can feel the ripple of pleasure as muscles clench around me.

I thrust into her as she moans through her pleasure. I want to hear and feel that again, so I bring my hand down between her legs and work her clit, needing her to come one more time.

"Yes, yes, yes," Abby chants as her legs encircle my waist and her arms go around my neck. She clings to me as I whisper dirty words in her ear and drive into her over and over again. I want to slow down, make this last, but it feels so good, there's no way in hell I can back it down.

"I'm going to come again—" Abby screams out another orgasm that hits her faster than she could complete her sentence. Jesus Christ, she's amazing, and I want to join her in that free fall too badly to wait any longer. I let go, and my orgasm rips

violently through my body.

“Fuck,” I mutter with my lips against her throat, my hips still circling against hers to draw it out. “Fuck, that’s good. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.”

I collapse onto her, my chest heaving and every bit of strength fading away. I roll to the side and gather her in close so that our chests are pressed together. I can feel her heart thundering against mine.

Putting my hand to the back of her head, I graze my lips over her brow. “That was fucking amazing.”

“That was more than amazing,” she murmurs. “I’m not sure why we waited. We should’ve just gotten right to it as soon as you brought Bubba into the clinic.”

I bark out a laugh and pull her in closer, my hand sliding down her back to cup her ass intimately. “As soon as I get some feeling in my legs, I’m going to grab that cake.”

“Sorry if I ruined it.”

“You in no way ruined it. In fact, I’m thinking about dumping my portion out on your body so I can lick you clean.”

“Oh God,” she groans, wiggling her hips against mine. “That sounds like a fantastic idea. I’m going to do the same to you.”

And even though I just had the mother lode of all orgasms, my dick twitches at the thought of her licking pineapple off it.

I can tell that Abby Blackburn is definitely going to be trouble, and I’m here for it.

CHAPTER 9

Abby

“I think you’re a hit with my parents.” Kellen bumps my shoulder as we stand at the sink. I’m washing, he’s drying.

It’s only fair since his mother made us an amazing dinner. They’re currently in the living room loving on the dogs while we clean up the kitchen.

I bump Kellen back with my hip. “I definitely see where you get your charming personality... that would be your mom. And the chivalry—which could be considered romanticism—from your dad.”

“You think I’m romantic?”

I smirk at him. “Let’s see... you took Princess in, tried to avert my arrest, bailed me out of jail, brought me a sub and cake. Yeah, you’re totally romantic.”

“So, you’re saying that just bringing flowers doesn’t really do it for you?”

Laughing, I scrub leftover meatloaf from the glass baking dish. “I never said I didn’t like flowers, but if I had a choice, I’d take cake over flowers any day.”

Kellen’s head dips, and his mouth tickles my ear, his voice low and growly. “Especially what we did with that cake last night.”

A shudder ripples up my spine, because we made a mess of ourselves with that cake and then cleaned it up very well with our mouths. Let’s just say when we were done, we were both well acquainted with each other’s bodies.

I blushed so damn hard tonight when Kellen's mom, Lila, asked me how I liked the dessert.

Oh, Lila... it was the best cake I've ever had in my life.

Yes, Kellen and I were intimate last night. It was fast... not even an official date in the books yet, but I don't have a single regret. I'm into this guy in a way I haven't been into anyone in years.

I've not wanted to get close to anyone because it hurts to lose them.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:06 am

But somehow, without calculated effort on his part, he's making me care about him. And I say without calculation, because the things he's done for me so far—taking Princess, bailing me out of jail, bringing me lunch—have been accomplished without any expectation of something in return. It's just who he is, and that is as attractive as his beautiful body and his talents in bed.

When he invited me to dinner with his parents tonight, I didn't hesitate in accepting. I like being around him too much to be wary.

Kellen angles his head and brushes his lips along my neck. "Wish I could stay with you tonight."

"But it's your parents' last night, and you should be here with them." We had this discussion already, and while we're both eager to explore each other again, it won't be tonight. "Plus... you have to get up early to take them to the airport."

"Then what shall we do tomorrow?" Kellen asks, accepting the dish I just rinsed.

Tomorrow I have a full day off, and Christy is covering the boarding guests and overnight patients. Another vet will cover emergencies. It's not often that I get a full twenty-four hours off, and Kellen has asked to spend it with me. I agreed without pause.

"I've got to clean out the stalls and feed the horses, but after that, I'm all yours."

"I suppose we shouldn't waste what's supposed to be a gorgeous day by lounging naked in bed."

“Hiking?”

“That would be good.” He puts the dish in a lower cabinet and reaches out to take another from me. “Or we could go into Pittsburgh and tool around.”

“Let’s be spontaneous.”

“Did I hear someone mention spontaneity?” Lila says as she comes into the kitchen, carrying two empty coffee cups. She hands them to Kellen who drops them into the soapy water before me. “Because I think an unplanned trip for ice cream tonight sounds like a great idea.”

“I think your mom is on to something.” I shoot her a smile, and she winks at me. It’s been a pleasure getting to know the McCords as they are so down-to-earth and genuine. “There’s a great little place across from the courthouse.”

“Oh, not me and Charlie,” his mother says with a shake of her head. “You two should go.”

“We should all go,” Kellen says with a tone that indicates it’s not up for debate. But it’s so sweet his mom is trying to make it so we have alone time.

“Do they have outdoor seating?” Lila asks.

“They do,” I reply, finishing the coffee cups so Kellen can dry. “It’s a gorgeous night out.”

“We should bring the dogs,” Lila says just as her husband walks in.

“Bring the dogs where?” Charlie asks.

“For ice cream. Get your shoes on.” She turns to her son. “You and Abby can take the dogs in her car, and we can follow in your SUV.”

Kellen walks over to his mother and wraps his arms around her. He presses his lips to her head. “I love you to the moon and back, Mom, but stop trying to orchestrate it for me and Abby to have time alone tonight. We want to hang out with you and Dad.”

“Truly,” I say with a heavy drawl of annoyance. “I can only take so much of your son in one sitting. I’d prefer it if you were with us.”

Kellen shoots me a look that says if I were into spanking, he’d oblige me later, but Lila and I share a laugh.

Releasing his mom, Kellen says, “Why don’t you and Dad get the dogs leashed up? Abby and I will clean out my SUV.”

Kellen’s parents head back into the living room, and Kellen grabs my hand, dragging me through the kitchen and out to the carport.

“Your car doesn’t need to be cleaned out,” I say as he pulls the door shut behind us.

“I know.” He spins me around and pushes me into the wall. Pressing his body against me, he frames my face with his hands and kisses me breathless. Lifting his mouth, he murmurs, “I just had to get a taste of you to last me until tomorrow.”

“You can kiss me anytime you want,” I whisper.

“Might do more than kiss you if we have enough shadows.” Once again, the man manages to send a shiver up my spine.

The door to the kitchen opens, and I jolt, knowing his parents are coming through. I

try to push him back, but he won't budge, grinning down at me.

"One more kiss," he says.

"No," I growl low, hands to his chest. My face flames knowing his parents are watching us.

"Oh, just hurry up and kiss her," Lila says as she moves past with Princess.

"See? Mom says I need to kiss you."

I roll my eyes. "Fine." My tone says I don't really care and just get it over with, but when he kisses me again, I forget about his parents, and the dogs, and the ice cream.

There's only him.

We end up taking two cars to the ice cream shop as I plan on leaving from there. We find a picnic table in a small park across the street where both dogs get a vanilla cup while the adults enjoy cones. The evening is warm, and Kellen sits next to me with his thigh pressed to mine. His dad tries to embarrass him with childhood stories, but Kellen's ego is too healthy, and he laughs right along with me.

"Tell us more about your horse," Lila says as she slips the last of her waffle cone to Princess, who has no shame in begging. Bubba lies at Kellen's feet, too well trained to debase himself in such a manner.

Kellen must've told his parents something about me as that had not come up in conversation tonight. But I don't mind talking about my horse.

"He's a sweet boy... fifteen years old. His name is Lunar, and I helped raise him when he was foaled at our farm in Kentucky."

"Kellen said it's a saddlebred farm?" Charlie inquires. "I'm afraid I don't know much about horses, unless we're talking horsepower of engines."

I laugh at the mechanic joke. "Yes, my family breeds and sells saddlebreds. My great-great-great-grandfather started the farm in 1892."

"You were probably riding before you could walk," Lila exclaims.

"That's what my parents say. I know sometimes I feel more comfortable in the saddle

than I do walking.”

“You should’ve seen her riding Lunar.” Kellen crosses his arms on the table and turns his head to look at me. “So graceful, and he has a really high step. He’s a very fancy horse.”

“He’s a show horse,” I explain. “So part of that is training, but it’s also the breed.”

“You didn’t tell me you competed,” Kellen says, eyebrows raised in interest.

“I guess it never came up. But I don’t anymore.”

Never again.

“And do you have brothers and sisters?” Lila asks. I’m relieved to move on from the subject of competition.

I tell the McCords about my twin sister and my three older brothers. They ask questions about the farm, intently curious as most people are about something so steeped in tradition and history. We talk about Kellen’s career in the Marine Corps and their insane pride in their son, and how grateful they were when he moved back to the East Coast so they could see him more.

It’s close to nine thirty by the time we leave the park. His parents each hug me with demands I come to New York with Kellen on his next visit, and truly, I don’t even find that awkward, considering I just met their son a week ago.

Lila and Charlie take the dogs to Kellen’s SUV, and he walks me to my car. He holds my hand, and it feels good and right.

When I unlock my door, Kellen moves in for a short kiss, cognizant that his parents

are no more than twenty feet away. It's almost chaste, and I find I like that just as much as the kisses that curl my toes. There's nothing I don't like about this man.

"See you tomorrow morning." Kellen brushes away my bangs that had fallen low over one brow. "Can I help with your barn chores?"

I smirk at the offer. "It's dirty work."

"If by dirty work, you mean we'll get filthy and must shower together after to get clean, then count me in. I'll bring a change of clothes."

Laughing, I don't hesitate to move into his body. Wrapping my arms around his waist, I put my cheek to his chest and hug him hard. His arms go around my back, and his return squeeze conveys the same message.

We're two people who are falling for each other, and I don't dare question it. I hope he doesn't either.

Pulling back, he gives me one more kiss... this one a little harder, and it causes me to blush. He then holds my door open for me, closes it once I'm settled in, and steps back onto the sidewalk to watch me pull away.

CHAPTER 10

Kellen

I'm flat on my stomach, binoculars held before my eyes as I scope out the shallow valley. The sloped hills, thick plant growth, and moonless night in the Guatemalan jungle provide all the cover I need to remain hidden.

I'm casing a compound that's nothing more than a handful of dilapidated buildings

made of plywood with corrugated metal roofs. Seems innocuous enough, except it's surrounded by chain-link fence topped with razor wire. Scattered around the perimeter, three of my teammates—Malik, Cage, and Jackson—also watch from various vantage points. We flew in late last night for this reconnaissance-only mission.

Working for Jameson is never dull because the nature of our work is so varied. I could spend one week providing security for a VIP in a fancy hotel in Vienna and the next week covered in grease paint to blend in with the night while watching kidnappers.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:06 am

That's the mission—watch and gather intel.

Kidnapping for ransom is serious business in Central and South America and happens way too frequently. Most ransoms are paid and victims reunited with families, but sometimes a family won't cough it up. They want to rescue their loved one and save the money, because they can hire mercenaries cheaper than the price of the return of a daughter, son, wife, or husband.

In this instance, Jameson was hired to gauge the viability of a rescue versus paying a ransom. This isn't something Kynan normally does, but it came as a personal favor from some US congressman who Kynan owes one. It's recon only as Kynan doesn't risk the lives of his men for rescue situations unless it's the only option available.

That's not the case here. Some wealthy fuck in the congressman's district received a ransom demand for his son who was using his trust fund to surf his way around Latin America. He wasn't even able to enjoy the waves of Guatemala before he was plucked off the streets of the capital city.

The ransom is only a million dollars, something his father could easily afford, but he could hire a civilian special forces team to try to rescue his son for a lot cheaper.

Not Jameson, mind you. Kynan told the guy to pay the demand, but he balked. They reached a compromise, and Kynan agreed to send us in to gather intel and report back, but with the distinct understanding that no matter what we found, we would not be the ones doing the rescue.

I had to admire the guy. He's turning down what could be a three hundred thousand

dollar fee for work that would take us a few hours. But he's not willing to risk a hair on our heads for something that just doesn't need to be done. We flew down here with the hope we'd find well-fortified criminals who would make any rescue way too dangerous to consider.

"I'm counting five men on the west side," Malik says through the ear comm. The technology is so good, it sounds like he's sitting right beside me and not a quarter of a mile across the shallow valley.

"Three on the north," Cage pipes in.

"Only two on the east," I say as I stare through the binoculars. "But they have a mounted PKS."

"That'll tear through anyone coming at them from the jungle," Jackson mutters.

He's not wrong. It's a heavy machine gun—Russian made—and it's heavier armament than what you'd typically find in one of these kidnappings. They might even have some crooked police or government backing for a share of the profits.

It's not unusual to find Russian-made weapons in the hands of the criminal element. There was a large influx of them during the Guatemalan Civil War when Communists tried to take over the country, and then the weapons went into the black market system after the unrest ended in 1997.

Lowering the binoculars, I check my watch. We've been here for only a few hours, but we're going to pull a forty-eight-hour surveillance. We'll rendezvous higher up and work in shifts so we can take turns sleeping.

For now, we keep watch from our current positions. It's sometimes boring work, which makes it hard not to let the mind wander.

Not that I need boredom to think about Abby. It seems all that woman does is occupy my thoughts.

Last weekend was one amazing minute after another. With our first kiss, to sex, to cake sex, to dinner with my parents, and then a full day and night with her on Sunday, my fate was sealed. I am fucking falling for her.

I find it weird, too, given that I just got out of a relationship a little more than three months ago. I thought Adriana's infidelity would make me bitter and jaded and wary, but fuck, it's hard to be those things around Abby.

Just this morning, I woke up spooned against her body. She stayed at my house because she didn't have to watch over the clinic, and her warm, naked body put me in the mood for a nice send-off.

I slipped my hand between her legs and stroked her right out of her slumber. It was so fucking sexy watching her body respond to my fingers, even while she was sleeping. She made noises, and her hips rolled, and by the time she was groggily asking what was going on, she tumbled into an orgasm that had her thrashing against my hand as she groaned.

I'd never moved so fast or efficiently in my life. I rolled slightly away from her, used my long reach to nab a condom, and had it on my cock in a matter of seconds.

"Kellen," she'd murmured in a languid voice.

"Shh," I ordered as I scooted right behind her again and lifted her leg. It took some maneuvering and testing angles, and hitching her leg a bit higher and wider, but I was able to thrust into her from behind as we lay on our sides. So fucking tight that way. I swear, when I came, my damn soul left my body.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:06 am

Just thinking about it now is getting me hard, so I shift to my side to rearrange myself. Not going to lie... memories like that are making it hard to like the travel aspect of this job.

“... on the east side through that gate. What do you think, Kellen?”

I blink, pull the binoculars back up, no clue what was just said. “Come again?”

“Dude,” Cage drawls. “Zone out much?”

“Fuck off,” I growl back—all in good fun.

He snickers. “Not fretting over your crazy ex, are you?”

“Definitely not her,” I mutter as I keep watch through the binoculars.

“That implies you are fretting over someone,” Malik chimes in. “Spill.”

“It’s no one,” I assert.

“Spill,” Jackson says.

I curse them all. “We got a job to do.”

“Spill, motherfucker,” Cage demands.

“Spill, motherfucker,” Jackson and Malik echo with laughs.

Exasperated, I give them what they want. “Fine. I met a woman named Abby and have been spending time with her. She’s great. I like her. The end. Now can we concentrate on our mission?”

“Kidnappers aren’t going anywhere,” Malik taunts lazily. “Give us more.”

“Listen, just because you can’t stop talking about your engagement doesn’t mean we’re all sharers.”

“Hey... Anna’s the love of my life,” Malik says smoothly. “I’ll talk about her all the damn time, and nothing will stop me.”

“Kellen’s just trying to deflect,” Cage interjects. “He’s new to the team. Doesn’t get we’re all bros who share. We might need to ease him into it.”

I can’t help but laugh. The guys all share about their significant others, and I give them hell about it, but I truly have nothing to hide. Abby isn’t someone I’d ever sweep under the carpet.

“She’s Bubba’s vet. I met her last week when he wasn’t feeling good.”

“Is she hot?” Cage asks.

I ignore the question. He’s not asking because he really wants to know. He likes to yank my chain. “She’s a spitfire. Within twenty-four hours after meeting her, I was harboring property she’d stolen and then bailing her out of jail on another matter.”

There’s dead silence over the comms, and I grin as I pull my binoculars back up.

It’s Cage who finally speaks. “Okay, forget about the hot question. You’ve got to give us more details if you’re dating a criminal.”

I laugh. “It’s not like that at all.”

I fill the guys in on Levi Hellman and Abby’s crusade against him. I don’t hold back that we’ve spent a lot of time together since then, and that I’d like them all to meet her at some point when we get back.

“She sounds great, man,” Malik says, happiness for me evident in his voice. They all know the shit I went through with Adriana.

“I say we have a get-together when we get back,” Cage suggests. “The four of us and our ladies. Jaime makes these incredible trays of meat and cheese... what do you call them?”

“Charcuterie,” Jackson replies. He’d be the one to know those fancy words as he’s going to be a member of a royal family before too long.

Speaking of which, “When are you popping the big question?”

“Dude... I’ve already popped it.”

“Wait!” Cage says as Malik echoes, “Seriously?”

“Yeah... I mean, sort of. We talked about me being a prince and living in Bretaria with her, eventually.”

I frown at the lack of pomp. She’s a fucking princess, after all. “Without a ring?”

“The ring is in the making, and she doesn’t know anything about it. I’ll formally propose when I get it, but I don’t know anyone who doesn’t talk about marriage to some extent first.”

“That’s true,” Malik agrees. “Anna and I talked about it before I proposed.”

“Jaime and I didn’t,” Cage points out.

I snort. “Too busy getting drunk in Vegas.”

“Whatever,” Cage grumbles. “Back to my original idea... let’s plan a thing when we get back. We can do it at our place.”

“Only if there’s charcuterie,” Malik laughs.

“And those fancy dessert pastries,” Jackson cackles.

A female voice comes across the comms—Bebe Grimshaw, our resident hacker who is back in Pittsburgh monitoring us—and I can hear the smirk within her inflection. “If you girls are done trying to schedule your manicures, I suggest you put your eyes back on the task. You’re supposed to be taking photos and video for me so we can pass it on to the client.”

I snort and lower the binoculars, picking up the small camera with a mega lens that Bebe created for high-powered, zoomed-in photos and video. I get several of the PKS, the gate on that side, as well as close-ups of each guard. They’re wearing ragtag clothing and don’t appear to be particularly vigilant as they stand around smoking cigarettes and laughing.

A rescue could probably be pulled off without much effort to overpower those on the outside. But it still doesn’t mean that the kidnapped victim on the inside wouldn’t be killed. I suppose all we can do is hope that the father will do the right thing and pay the ransom for his kid.

Page 36

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:06 am

I can't even imagine not forking over every dime. My parents would sell the clothes off their backs and live a homeless existence to save me. If I had kids, I'd do the same.

Abby would do the same, too, I'm sure of it.

I jolt, snapping a picture that I know will be blurred from the jerky motion.

Why in the hell would I even think about kids and Abby in the same sentence?

I mean... I like the woman.

A lot.

But I can't be thinking kids, because I'm nowhere close to thinking about forever with her. I'm only at the stage where I'm thinking of next week.

Admittedly, though, I really, really like her. I've never had such a strong connection with a woman before, and that it's happened so quickly is odd, but it makes me take true notice. I have no embarrassment over that. She's incredible. Gorgeous, sexy, brilliant, courageous, genuine, kind, and noble. While her looks and sex appeal are bonuses, all her other traits are things I deeply admire. It's how I try to live my life.

Christ, I can't wait to get back and see her.

CHAPTER 11

Abby

Glancing down at my lap, I study how Kellen's fingers intertwine with mine. He's been holding my hand as he drives the last few minutes to my place, and the quiet between us feels natural.

Just the way his hand does against mine.

We had our first date tonight, and it was everything a first date should be. I spent a lot of time getting ready. Most days for me are without makeup, and I'm lucky if I shave my legs. But tonight, I primped—and shaved—and did my hair and makeup with care. Granted, there's not a lot to do with my hair since I've been wearing it short the last several years, but I used a quality smoothing serum and blew it dry so that my bangs swept perfectly across my forehead.

I pulled out my good makeup and gave myself the works. It's not just using one color of blush but one that shadows, another that colors, and a third for highlight. I have great cheekbones, and I'm skilled at applying makeup from my horse show days. Eyes generally require dramatic shading if you're going all in with makeup. But when you have light-colored eyes, such as my green ones, against almost black hair, I keep to neutral shades and only used mascara.

My lips, I couldn't quite decide. I was graced with my mom's full mouth, and I wear dark lipstick well. But I'd need a stain, given we were going to dinner, and I hate the way it feels. I'm more of a lip balm girl, but I hate stuff sticking to my glass when I drink and I hate reapplying, so I took the lazy route and went without. I more than made up for the failure to call attention to my lips by wearing a beautiful wraparound dress that crisscrossed low on my chest revealing cleavage, with a pair of strappy, high-heeled sandals.

All the effort was worth it when Kellen saw me as I opened my apartment door. His

eyes practically bugged out of his head.

I started to tease him about it, but he held up a hand and said, “Nope. Not a word. Let me just bask.”

He then made a twirling motion with his finger, indicating I should do a three-sixty for him to check me out from all angles, and I did a graceful turn, finishing with a deep curtsy. Glad all those childhood dance lessons weren’t for nothing.

“You are, without a doubt, the most sinfully gorgeous creature I’ve ever seen,” he’d said, stepping across the threshold and putting a hand to the back of my neck. His words were low with a growling timbre, and I shivered. “The beast in me wants to tear off that dress and say to hell with dinner. The gentleman in me insists we leave right now before the beast breaks through.”

I laughed, but it was muffled because he crushed his mouth to mine for a hello kiss that made me want to rip the dress off myself. Ultimately, I refrained, because I knew he would do so later, and I’ve really been looking forward to hanging out with him since he’s been gone all week.

I’ve just... missed him, which tells me he’s become an important presence in my life already.

After that pulse-thumping kiss, he took me out to an amazing dinner at a quiet Peruvian restaurant. It was one of those dinners where the food goes cold and gets ignored because the conversation was so good, and then we laughed while eating it cold and still talking.

His recounting of his time in Guatemala mesmerized me. He’s told me about some of what Jameson does in the security arena, but I never thought he’d be deep in a jungle within view of criminals with big-ass machine guns. It frightens me, and I told him

so. And rather than blowing off my concern or patting me on the head to tell me I'm cute with my worry while it inflates his ego, he took the time to reassure me, to explain safety protocol, training, and the confidence in his teammates' abilities. He made sure I understood exactly the dangers and how they are handled, and while nothing is foolproof, the entire team is careful.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:06 am

I felt better after, and then I could acknowledge that his job was incredibly hot and sexy, and I told him as much.

“Are you sure this is okay?” Kellen asks as he pulls his car beside the stairs that lead to my small apartment. He glances in his rearview mirror into the back seat where Bubba and Princess sit with happy doggie grins, tongues lolling from their mouths.

His gaze comes to me as he puts the car in park.

“In what world would it not be okay for you to bring dogs to my apartment? I’m a veterinarian. I love all animals. And I’m pretty partial to these two.”

“Just making sure,” he drawls with a chuckle and turns off the car.

While I was able to leave for a few hours for dinner, I do have to administer medications overnight and check one of the dogs that had surgery yesterday. So we picked Bubba and Princess up on the way home—this will be an adventure for them.

Kellen undoes his seat belt and turns to look back at them. “Okay... listen up, pups. I’m going to take you both on a short walk around the yard to do your business. My hot date here”—Kellen nods toward me—“is going upstairs to wait nervously for me, wondering what kinds of dirty things I’m going to do to her.”

No... that didn’t make me clench my legs together at all.

“In conclusion,” Kellen continues his monologue to the dogs, “when we get back upstairs, I intend to take said hot date into the bedroom, and the door will be closed.

You two are to be on your best behavior, and if you hear the hot date screaming from behind said closed door, you can assure it's in ecstasy and your assistance is not needed."

I giggle while simultaneously heating up over what's yet to come.

Kellen then turns his attention to me. "Don't you dare take off that dress. I'm going to handle that. It will be like unwrapping a present."

It's the longest five-minute wait of my life, or so it seems. I pace the bedroom, look out the window at him on the side lawn, each dog on leash, sniffing around. When they finish and head for the staircase, my pulse kicks up a notch, and I'm twitchy with anticipation.

Glancing around, I decide for mood lighting. I turn on the lamps and kill the overhead light. From the bedside table, I pull condoms I'd stocked up on this week, setting out two, although with Kellen we might need three. He was insatiable last Sunday before he left, and I'm okay if he wants to be the same way again.

I hear him murmuring to the pups. I'd already put out bowls of water and some moose paddles for them to chew on.

And then, the bedroom door opens, and Kellen steps through. My heart thunders at the predatory look in his eyes.

"I cannot give you enough compliments on that dress," he says as he walks closer. He runs a finger from the base of my throat down my chest, right to the point where the material overlaps. His gaze moves to my hip where the wrap dress is tied. He tugs at the lace, and it comes undone. "See? Like a present."

Kellen pulls my dress apart, finds the inside tie on the other side, and releases it.

Holding the material out, he takes in the black bustier with red satin piping along with a minuscule thong.

“Fuck,” he rumbles. “I guarantee I’m going to use the memory of the way you look right now in a lot of future shower fantasies.”

A purr flutters in my throat, my own fantasy of him stroking himself in the shower turning me on. I’d love to watch that. All the way to completion. “Let’s put that on the agenda sometime.” His eyes snap to mine. “Me watching you do that.”

“Christ, you’re going to kill me,” he mutters before pulling me into his arms and kissing me breathless.

I thought Kellen would move quickly and we’d have a quick fuck to release all the pent-up energy and lust. Instead, he takes his time with slow kisses and nibbles along my skin. His hands stroke me everywhere but the one place I really want it. He bats away my hands when I try to yank at his clothes.

“Kellen,” I growl in frustration.

“Patience,” he murmurs against my collarbone.

Fuck patience. I palm his erection through his dress pants and squeeze. Kellen’s hips jerk forward into my touch, and he practically purrs.

Lifting his head, eyes blazing, he chastises me. “Not nice when I’m trying to explore.”

“We can explore later,” I insist, working at his belt. To my surprise, his hands fall away, and he watches as I work the button and zipper so I can lower his pants slightly. He makes a rumbling sound when I reach inside and take his hard length in

my hand.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:06 am

I'm so intent on the feel of it, the satiny texture as I stroke, I'm barely aware of him removing the belt from the loops on his pants.

I only become aware when I'm somehow in his arms and spun away from him. He gathers my wrists behind my back, and the belt tightens around them.

"What are you doing?" I gasp, even as a bolt of lust shoots through me at this sudden change.

"Taking back control, you greedy little thing."

He can't see my smile, which widens as he pushes me toward the bed and forces me to bend over it, my sandaled feet flat on the floor and my chest on the mattress. My shoulders ache slightly from my wrists being secured behind my back, but that all disappears when his hands go to my panties.

Slowly, he peels them off, dragging them down my legs and helping me lift each foot to get them off. "These sandals are sexy as fuck," he murmurs as he taps one ankle. His breath floats over my backside. I can't see what he's doing, but my legs almost buckle when he runs a hand up the inside of my leg and cups me.

"So wet already," he taunts. "You really can't wait, can you?"

"No," I gasp as he slides two fingers into me from behind. "Please don't make me wait."

"Beg for me, Abby," he whispers, rubbing my clit in a slow circle before thrusting his

fingers back inside.

I instinctively push against him, forcing his fingers in deeper, and he mutters, “Fuck,” telling me he likes my reaction very much.

He also doesn’t make me beg out loud. I’m guessing the demanding way I tried to ride his fingers just now is the only language he needs.

His hand disappears, and I hear the condom foil rip. Within moments, he’s pressed to my entrance from behind. I half expect him to slam into me, but he’s careful to work himself in a little at a time.

Yes, I’m wet, but he’s big, and we’ve not had nearly enough foreplay to relax my muscles into accepting him.

It’s just not fast enough, though. I want to feel him deep inside me, and I’m so frantic with it, I use what leverage I have to push back onto him. He stops me with a hand to my lower back. I try again to push past his strength, and that hand connects with a sharp slap to my ass that I swear starts an orgasm brewing. I gasp from the heat, but then I’m rewarded when he grips my hips and thrusts the rest of the way in until his pelvis is pressed flat to my ass.

I cry out. “Yes... that right there.”

He growls in response and wastes no time fucking me. One hand stays at my hip, the other dives between my legs from the front where he attacks my clit with his fingers.

“Going to be fast,” he says as he hammers into my body. It feels so good, hitting me so deep, and with the stimulation from his fingers, I can only moan as my orgasm hovers closer.

Kellen is breathing hard, and he curses while he drives into me over and over again. Sweet, filthy words. “Abby... so fucking beautiful. This pussy is mine. I own it. Going to spend my days making you come over and over again.”

Never has a man talked to me like this, his words claiming ownership and promising me unmitigated pleasure. I can tell it makes him feel good to make me feel good.

Those words are what drive me over the edge, and I turn my face into the covers to muffle my scream as the orgasm shreds through me.

Kellen doesn't need my cry of pleasure, though, as I'm spasming so hard on him, I know he feels it. He even praises me for it. “Good girl.” He grunts as he slams into me harder. “The best girl.”

He grabs my hips, thumbs digging into my ass muscles. I twist my neck, manage to look back to see his gaze riveted downward where I know he's watching his cock tunnel into me. His teeth are gritted, eyes blazing, chest heaving.

Then he plants deep, throws his head back, and his body arches as he releases. “Fuck, Abby,” he shouts, and knowing how good that feels for him causes more ripples of pleasure. I clench onto him hard. “Yes... goddamn, that's good. So fucking good.”

I feel a last shudder and half expect him to fall on top of me, but instead, his hands go to the belt around my wrists. He releases it quickly, reaches under my stomach, and pulls me up so I can put my palms to the mattress.

Kellen stays planted inside me, his hands now massaging my shoulders, and the thoughtful touch is so unbearably sweet, I feel my heart giving allegiance to him.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:06 am

I know I'm falling hard, and fast, and I don't even think to slow this down. Every bit of this is so perfect—fantastical, almost—that I'm ready to jump feetfirst into the deep end with him, knowing he's not going to let me drown.

Later, when we're cleaned up, have checked on the dogs, and are back in bed, Kellen pulls me into his side as he lies on his back. He strokes along my spine while I listen to his heartbeat, my head against his chest. Strange how fast my life has changed, and to such a great extent. A relationship wasn't even on my radar. I never considered the contentedness that comes with lying in bed with a man, feeling secure.

And yet, somewhere in the universe, someone thought I was worthy of this.

"You said you have plans tomorrow." Kellen's voice breaks the peaceful silence, but it's not what causes me to jolt slightly—it's the statement itself.

I squeeze my eyes shut, resolving to keep him far away from my misdeeds. "Um... yeah. Girls' night out."

Not an absolute lie, but definitely misleading.

"Cool. Maybe I'll see if Cage wants to grab a beer." I let out a slow exhale of relief at his easy acceptance. Until he asks, "Want to come over to my place after? Or I can come here?"

"Oh," I say, mind whirring as I stroke his chest, buying time to figure out an answer. "Yeah... I mean, if it's not too late. But you know how it is when you go out with friends. If we roll in during the wee hours, I'm not going to disturb you."

Kellen's voice is soft and warm. "You could never disturb me, but I get what you're saying. We'll play it by ear." I relax again, only for my heart to thud harder when he asks, "So, who are these girls who are going to have you out until the wee hours? We've talked about all my buds at Jameson, but I don't know a thing about your friends."

Fuck. It's because I don't have friends here. I have co-conspirators, other women on the same crusade as me to bring down Levi Hellman and his puppy mill. They're not women I'd casually hang out with, not because I don't like them, but because we're all busy with careers and family and other obligations. We come together to plot, protest, picket the legislature, and other do-gooder activities.

"Let's see..." I stroke from his chest down his abdomen. "Tomorrow night I'm going out with Marsha, Lia, and Jennifer. Just some girls I've met since moving here. We try to get together when our schedules allow." My fingers play with the happy trail that starts below his belly button. "Marsha is a nurse at the hospital, Lia is a stay-at-home mom, and Jennifer does website SEO." All of this is true, and I hope it satisfies his curiosity.

But in case it doesn't, I let my fingers drift lower. They snake under the sheet, glide across his cock, and wrap around it. He's warm and soft in my hand. His breath catches as I squeeze, and he lets out a hard huff that feathers over the top of my head as I stroke.

He starts to swell and lengthen, his hips pushing upward into my hand. "That's distracting," he mutters. His hand slides from my lower back to my ass, and he squeezes hard.

It was meant to be distracting. I can't have Kellen asking questions about my evening plans for tomorrow because I don't want to lie to him. Everything I've said so far is true, but if he asks me point-blank exactly what I'm doing, I'll have to tell him the

truth.

That me and my cohorts are making another attempt to rescue dogs from Levi's property.

Kellen pushes me to my back, rolls my way, and crushes his mouth to mine. I sigh with both relief and excitement as his tongue invades my mouth and his hand goes between my legs.

I don't like keeping anything from him, because I like him so much and I don't want dishonesty to ruin what we have. I tell myself I'm not lying but rather omitting. I reason this is for the greater good because I won't be deterred, and if he knows about our scheme, he'll try to stop me. I also don't want him getting in trouble in case I'm caught.

So it's best if I continue to distract him and hope he doesn't demand more information.

CHAPTER 12

Kellen

My jaw clenches as I sit in my parked car and watch Abby's apartment. It's almost midnight, and so far, her car hasn't moved. I know she's in there—I can see her moving around behind the gauzy curtains.

I chose a spot about twenty yards away, fortuitously finding a service road to an electrical transformer. I'm sitting back from the edge of the road so other cars won't illuminate mine as they pass, and there're no streetlights to expose my position. It's completely dark, perfect for me to stalk my little troublemaker.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:06 am

If Abby thought she was pulling a fast one on me last night, she'd be wrong. While I appreciated—more than she'll ever know—her efforts to distract me with a hand job that actually led to round two of stellar sex, it in no way deterred me from figuring out what she's up to.

I didn't ask her outright because I already knew what she was planning. No doubt in my mind, she's going back to Hellman's property. I assume she's got three other women along tonight to aid and abet.

I could stop this. I could walk up to her door right now, but I don't.

I don't because I'm not sure if it's the right play. I'm obviously worried about her getting caught. I'm worried about the risk, because I consider Levi a dangerous man.

But I also have some respect for what she's trying to accomplish.

However, the real reason I'm not approaching or calling her out is on the off chance I'm wrong, that she is indeed having a true girls' night out. I don't want her to know I have my doubts. I don't want her to think I don't trust her, because I do. In fact, I think she tried very hard last night to give me nothing but the truth while forgoing details that might cause me concern.

Had she told me last night, I would've done my damndest to talk her out of it. As it stands, I'm waiting to see where she goes, and I'll follow discreetly. If she meets the girls at a bar for drinks or the like, I'll head home. If she heads to Hellman's, I'll have to play it by ear.

The door to her apartment opens, and I sit up straighter. Abby trots down the stairs, and I can see enough of her outfit in the glow of her porch light to know she's not going out for drinks. She's dressed all in black—leggings, long-sleeved T-shirt, and tennis shoes. I'm surprised she doesn't have face paint, but for all I know, she has a black ski mask in the black backpack slung over her shoulder.

“Shit,” I mutter.

To stop her, or not?

I follow my gut on this and wait. I watch as she gets into her car and pulls onto the road, turning left and heading away from where I'm parked. I wait until her taillights disappear around a curve, and I start my car.

Then I follow her.

I know where Hellman's property is because I googled him after our first meeting in the clinic when he showed up armed. I wanted to know what type of man he is.

Levi Hellman owns seven acres about ten miles from the clinic, outside of the Washington city limits. Satellite views show a teardrop-shaped parcel of land with the narrow point sitting on the road. A long driveway heads deep into the property, and a house sits dead center. It's big—at least four thousand square feet—and behind it are several large, rectangular buildings. According to Abby, that's where all the dogs are kept.

Several acres of thick woods surround the property, buffering adjacent parcels. It will provide good cover for anyone wanting to sneak to the rear buildings.

Because Abby is headed in that direction, I keep well back from her. I know where she's going. No sense letting her know she's being followed.

I drum my fingers on the steering wheel, my pulse slightly erratic with concern. Not just for her safety, but what this might do to our relationship. While I admire the fuck out of her heart in wanting to help, I can't support her engaging in dangerous, illegal activities. I mean, sure... go protest and get arrested. I'm cool with that. But sneaking onto someone's property to steal what is rightfully theirs—and who is protecting said property with firearms—isn't something I can let her do.

I'm also painfully aware I have no control over Abby.

All I can do is share my concerns with her and hope she chooses to build something with me and look for other routes to shut Hellman down.

I turn onto Sanitarium Road, knowing the kennels are down about a mile and a half. I drive slowly, giving Abby time to choose where she wants to park and how she's going to meet her friends. It might be that they are doing nothing more than staking out the place, and I feel better knowing three other people will be with her. Power in numbers, I suppose.

When I come out of a curve, I see the mailbox for Hellman's place ahead but don't see Abby's car, nor any others. A road to the left has a handful of houses from what I remember from the satellite view. Perhaps they chose to park there. I slow down, wondering if I should follow or just park out here and wait.

Page 41

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:06 am

My hesitation doesn't last long, as I have a sudden feeling that I need to stop her rather than watch her. Maybe it's the moonless night making it so dark, or the fact she's already provoked Hellman once and stolen from him, that I'm thinking I should've stopped her at her driveway.

But damn it... I wanted to give her the chance to prove me wrong.

I take the left turn down the darkened road looking for Abby's car along the shoulders.

Nothing. At the dead end, I turn around and head back, looking deep into driveways to see if they parked at someone's house, which would not be realistic, but I have to be careful in my search.

When I get back out to Sanitarium Road, I'm confused. Did Abby change her mind?

I hang a left, driving past the Hellman place. A quick glance and I can see the main house in the distance, lights off except for the porch sconces.

Two hundred yards down the road, I'm considering turning back when I glimpse Abby's car up ahead along the side.

My gut rolls as I pull in behind it, and my headlights reveal the interior is empty.

"Fuck," I mutter as I turn off my car. Leaning across the console, I flip open the glove box and pull out my Glock and a flashlight. I don't think I'll need the gun, but given that Hellman carries one, along with a grudge, it's better to be safe than sorry.

I backtrack up the highway closer to Hellman's property and cut into the tree line that surrounds his acreage. I listen intently for sounds of Abby moving around, but there are no telltale signs of pine straw or limbs crunching underfoot.

She has no more than a five-minute head start, but it's enough to put me at a disadvantage if I'm guessing wrong that she came in this way. I can only go off the knowledge that if I were sneaking onto Hellman's property, I'd do it under the cover of trees rather than approach from the open road.

Using the flashlight to illuminate my way, I move as quickly as I can through underbrush and downed trees. It's not overly thick, but it is slightly treacherous with ditches and small hills to navigate, which prevents me from an all-out run.

It seems like hours, but in truth, it's no more than five minutes before I reach the back of the property where it starts to curve northeast. I'm deep into the forested area, but I can make out the faint outline of the warehouses—no floodlights attached to the buildings but rather a few light poles around the perimeter. It's not the best security if you're trying to protect your property as there are too many shadows one could sneak around in.

I push forward another fifty yards, keeping my flashlight aimed downward in front of me rather than sweeping so as not to draw attention if Levi has guards milling about. I'd expect after Abby stole from him once, he would've increased security. It's why it's shocking that the lighting isn't better. He should—

Stopping dead in my tracks, the realization of what might be happening flips my stomach.

What if Levi knew Abby would come back, and he's intentionally making it easier for her to prowl around? Best-case scenario, he catches her and calls the police.

Worst case, the asshole takes a shot at her for trespassing. It's illegal to shoot at someone for trespassing, but someone as egotistical as Levi Hellman might not care about that in the heat of the moment.

A branch cracks, and I narrow my eyes in that direction. I don't dare sweep my light, but up ahead, I see a small, crouched figure.

Abby.

Before I can even take a step her way, she bolts from the trees, aiming straight at the closest building. She's alone, and I wonder where the hell her friends she was allegedly meeting are.

I run toward the tree line and get no more than a few paces before blinding lights flick on, flooding the surrounding area with illumination so strong, I can see Abby in stark detail.

She freezes.

"Abby," I call out, running her way. I don't care if anyone sees me. They know she's here. "Get your ass back!"

Startled, she turns my way and peers into the forest. I break through the tree line and run straight at her. Grabbing her hand, I yank her along with me, heading for cover.

And that's when the first crack of a gun rings out. Abby shrieks, and I push her in front of me. "Run."

Another shot just as we reach the trees, and it slams into a pine, spitting bark and wood right at Abby as she runs past. I consider firing back but decide against it. I don't need my bullets left on this property, and despite the glow of lights, no one was

close enough to get a good look at me.

Page 42

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:06 am

As for Abby, not sure her details could be made out, but it's clear from a distance she's a small woman. It would be enough for Hellman to go to the police, particularly if he has video.

No other shots ring out, but I hear a man yell, "Where did they go?"

Another calls back, "Into the woods."

Goddamn it. We have a few-hundred-yard lead, but it's going to be a damn footrace if they follow us. I don't hear any more voices, but I reach Abby and latch onto her hand again.

"Run faster," I snarl, using my memory of the terrain and the bounce of my flashlight to illuminate the way.

Abby's in good shape. While her legs are shorter than mine, she maintains a full-on sprint with me, and we come barreling out of the forest without breaking stride.

Our cars are up ahead, and I know we have to get both of them out of the vicinity.

"Get in your car and hightail it out of here. Do not go back past Hellman's. Figure out some other way to get home, but get there fast."

"Okay," she gasps, and I hear the fear in her voice from that one short word. It makes me want to stop, pull her into my arms, and give her a hard kiss and a hug.

But there's no time.

Abby flies past my car and jumps into hers while I wait and watch behind us. She manages to jet out of there without squealing her tires. I peer back into the darkness and see no flashlights coming our way. It doesn't mean we're not being pursued, only that I can't see them.

I jump into my SUV and take off after her.

Not knowing my way around these back roads, I rely on GPS to find my way back to Abby's. When I do, I'm relieved to see her car outside the apartment.

Returning my gun and flashlight to the glove box, I lock my vehicle and head up the stairs. I take a deep breath, mainly to center myself, and try to release some of the anger that's been brewing during the drive back.

I don't bother to knock but push open the door to find Abby pacing the living room. She whirls to face me, her expression wary as she wrings her hands.

"What the fuck were you thinking?" Clearly, I didn't do a good job centering myself to displace the anger.

"I was attempting to get more dogs out." She throws her arms wide. "I don't understand. I watched his place each night that you were gone, and—"

"You did what?" I exclaim incredulously.

"I thought I was being careful, Kellen." Her voice is soft, almost meek with shame. "I watched for three days, and it was dark. No movement. It should've been safe for us."

"Us?" I mutter. "Where were your cohorts?"

She shrugs miserably. "They didn't show up tonight, so I went by myself."

“He was clearly waiting for you.” I rub my hands over my face in frustration as I think about possible repercussions. Will he call the police and report Abby?

Would I lie and be her alibi?

I never thought I’d ever consider something like that, but now, I think I might.

“Do you hate me?”

I’m jolted out of my thoughts, the pure misery in those four words clenching my heart. “God, no, I don’t hate you.” I cross the room and pull her into my arms. “I’m pissed as hell at you and want to spank your ass, but I don’t hate you. I hate myself a little as I should’ve stopped you from going. I knew you were up to no good.”

Abby’s arms squeeze me tight, and she buries her face into my chest. “I’m so sorry to have gotten you involved. I’ll take all the blame if the police come.”

I lean back, forcing her to look up at me. “The police come, you and I were in bed all night. You understand?”

Her protest is swift. “I can’t let you lie about it.”

“I ordinarily wouldn’t put my neck out like that, but where you’re concerned, I’m willing to put it right on the chopping block. Honestly, even if we are on video, the worst he’d have on us is trespassing. You didn’t take anything. He clearly has no proof you took Princess or else he would’ve gone to the police. We wait it out tonight and see what happens.”

Abby’s eyes shutter and her head bows. “I’m so sorry, Kellen. I just want to hurt that man so bad. I want to help those dogs, and I can’t stand it that I can’t do anything.”

I frame her face with my hands and force her gaze up. It shreds me to see tears swimming there, as I've come to know Abby isn't the crying type.

Bending slightly, I brush my lips against hers. "It's okay. I understand, and I admire your need for justice." I pull back and stare at her meaningfully. "But you can't go about it like this anymore, Abby. That man shot at you, and he had no care in the world if he killed you. It's too dangerous."

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:06 am

She nods furiously, releasing a little sob. “I was so scared when the gun fired.”

I embrace her again, my hand at her nape to hold her against me. “Shh. You’re safe now.”

Pushing back from me, she shakes her head. “No. I was afraid for you. You made me go ahead of you. It was you they were firing at as we ran. I was so afraid you’d get shot.”

“But I didn’t.”

Abby seems to sag but then pulls back from me until I’m forced to release her. “I think I’m going to be sick.”

She bolts down the small hallway, and I follow with a sorrowful sigh. I find her in the bathroom, on her knees, retching into the toilet. If her hair were longer, I’d hold it back for her. Instead, I squat and rub her back as she heaves, though nothing comes up.

“I didn’t eat tonight because I was nervous,” she gasps as she falls back onto her ass and leans against the shower wall.

“You have tea?”

Abby presses her hand over her eyes but nods. “Kitchen cabinet to the left of the sink. No kettle, so just heat the water in the microwave.”

Standing, I pull the washcloth off the dowel next to the sink. I run it under cold water, wring it out, and hand it to her. “I’ll make the tea. When you’re able, get your pajamas on and I’ll bring it to you in the bedroom.”

Her smile is weak as she takes the cloth. She can barely look my way.

“Abby,” I say, and those green eyes, wet with more tears, collide with mine. “It’s okay. It’s over, and it’s okay. I promise we’re okay, as long as you promise that was your last attempt to hit Levi like this.”

Her lips flatten, and she nods. “I promise.”

I’m satisfied with the truth in her tone.

In the kitchen, I heat a cup of water in the microwave and am pleased to find peppermint tea in her cupboard. I drop two slices of bread into the toaster, hoping to get something in her stomach.

While waiting for the water to boil, I search for a plate. As I walk by the window over the sink, something flashes and catches my eye.

I twist my neck to look through the lacy curtains, and my stomach bottoms out.

The barn is on fire.

CHAPTER 13

Abby

“Abby!” Kellen roars, his voice filled with panic and terror.

I had been lifting a pair of pajamas from my dresser, but I drop them and fly out of my bedroom.

Kellen almost collides with me as he runs through the living room, throwing the front door open with such force, the glass panes rattle violently when the knob strikes the wall. “The barn’s on fire!”

He disappears out the door, and I follow immediately. As soon as I hit the bottom of the outdoor staircase, I smell smoke. I round the back of the house, and my body goes ice-cold upon seeing the flames shoot through the roof.

“Oh, Jesus,” I moan. Where I get the presence of mind, I don’t now, but I grab my phone out of my side pocket as I run, pausing only to unlock the screen to dial 9-1-1.

I’m giving the dispatcher the address as I reach the doors that Kellen threw open on the south end. I almost go numb upon realizing the entire barn is filled with smoke so thick, I can’t see where he went.

The horses shriek in terror, and I can hear them striking at their stall doors. I shove my phone back in my pocket with the dispatcher still talking and rush inside.

“Kellen!” I scream, just as Foxy, a chestnut Tennessee walking horse that Dr. Schoen rescued a decade ago, flies at me through the smoke. I jump to the side, catching a glimpse of wild, rolling eyes as she gallops away from the stable. God, I hope she stays on the property, but getting her safely into the paddock isn’t first on my mind. It’s finding Kellen and freeing the other three horses.

Flames run up the east wall, burning through the roof where the hay is stored in the loft on that side. It’s pure fuel.

I hook my shirt over my nose, hoping to keep some of the smoke out of my lungs, but

it's so thick, I'm already choking on it.

I can barely see, and my eyes sting. I scream again for Kellen, and he answers, "Over here."

I spin around... I don't know where here is, but the kick of a horse against wood echoes through the crackle of fire. I blindly feel my way there rather than trying to locate Kellen.

At Nocturnal's stall, I lift the latch and pull it open. I can't see anything but his hulking frame as he jumps nervously side to side. I slide into the stall, slap his haunches, and yell, "Yah! Yah! Go, Noc, go!"

Page 44

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:06 am

He bolts out, veering right and following Foxy's path to freedom. I step out of Noc's stall and am almost barreled over by Elsa, a sweet, dappled gray pony that used to be a lesson horse but now has gotten fat and happy in retirement. I've never seen her move so fast, but that's three of the four horses out.

My heart slams against my breastbone—Lunar's stall is at the end on the side where it's burning the hottest.

I stumble blindly through the smoke. Chunks of burning wood rain down from the rafters, and I'm light-headed from the lack of oxygen.

"Kellen!" I scream and then hear Lunar shrieking.

I rush toward the sound, tears stinging my eyes not only from the smoke but from the horrific possibility that Lunar might be on fire.

"I've got him!" Kellen yells back. "He's free."

Through the smoke, Lunar thunders toward me, the whites of his eyes stark through the dim air. He races toward the exit where the night air sucks out the smoke. I almost sag to the ground in relief, but Kellen and I need to escape.

And then he's there, hand gripping my arm and dragging me toward the doors. I'm so grateful to see him. I suck in a lungful of what should be air to exclaim my relief and pull in nothing but smoke.

I gag and hack, the lack of oxygen weakening me. The light-headedness intensifies,

and I drop to one knee.

“Oh no you don’t.” Kellen hauls me up with one hand under my armpit and the other around my waist. With his strength pushing me along, we run through the barn. I see it getting lighter amid the smoke, and I want to cry with relief. We can find the horses, and we’ll all be safe.

“Come on,” Kellen urges. I glance over my shoulder, see the flames burning hotter and brighter, and realize this man single-handedly saved all the horses and me.

I wheeze, trying to give my thanks.

We’re almost out when something falls on me... hits the back of my left shoulder, sparks exploding all around.

A chunk of burning rafter.

The weight and velocity knocks me out of Kellen’s grasp, and I sprawl to the concrete floor.

“Abby!” Kellen yells, and it seems so loud, as if he has a bullhorn against my ear. He yells my name again, and I feel him lifting me from the ground, but oddly, he doesn’t sound as close.

Once again, I hear my name, but it’s faint and dull and I wonder where Kellen went.

Then everything goes black, and I don’t wonder anymore.

?

Noise draws me back into the light, and I start coughing. I try to put my hand to my

mouth, a polite habit, but knock up against tubes over my face.

Confused, I grab at them and pull, but then soft hands are on mine. “Don’t, Abby. That’s oxygen to help you breathe.”

My eyes flutter open. A woman hovers over me, smiling gently.

A nurse.

“You’re in the emergency room. The oxygen will make you feel better.”

I’m sluggish, but it all comes rushing back. I do know I’m at the hospital. I came by ambulance as I remember waking up the first time here. Bits and pieces float back clearer as I blink away the sleep. A doctor examining me, a CT scan of my head, X-rays of my shoulder. All clear, I remember them telling me.

I take stock of how I feel. My lungs hurt, and there’s a dull ache in my shoulder.

I remember... getting hit, the burning wood knocking me to the ground. It was so heavy. I’m surprised I don’t hurt more.

Kellen lifted me from the ground and—

“Kellen,” I croak, trying to sit up. The nurse puts her hands to my shoulders and gently pushes me back. “Relax. Your friend is out in the hallway making some calls.”

Okay... that’s right. He got me out of the barn.

I’m so relieved he’s okay.

“Can I have some water?”

“Sure,” she says. “Let me get you some with ice.”

“If you see Kellen, can you send him in?”

“You got it.” She looks back at me. “He’s been so worried about you. I think you’ve got a winner there.” Upon exiting, she pulls the curtain closed behind her.

I smile wanly at the statement. She doesn’t need to tell me how lucky I am to have met Kellen McCord. Not just because of our insane chemistry or the happiness he brings. He single-handedly saved me from death—twice tonight—and saved all the horses.

The curtains flutter, and Kellen enters. I bombard him before he can take another step. “The horses.”

He holds up both hands, palms out. “They’re fine. A neighbor and one of the firemen rounded them up, and they’re in the back pasture. The barn isn’t a complete loss, believe it or not, but it’s going to need a lot of work.”

“I need to call Dr. Schoen.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:06 am

“When you get home,” he says as he moves to my bedside, dropping into a chair. “Right now, you need to take it easy.”

Leaning forward, he crosses his forearms on the bed rail to stare at me. He’s got soot all over his face, and he looks tired.

I reach to touch his cheek, and my voice quakes. “I don’t know how I’ll ever repay—”

“Don’t,” he says, taking my hand and moving it from his face, wrapping it in both of his. He squeezes. “Don’t even go there.”

Tears fill my eyes. “I did something stupid tonight. You could’ve gotten shot, the horses could have died... it’s all my fault.”

“Don’t,” Kellen says again, this time with true ire. “You trespassed on a man’s property. That in no way gives him the right to shoot at us, nor set that barn on fire. That’s all on him.”

“Levi did it, didn’t he?”

“No proof, but you and I both know he did it, or he had someone do it.” Kellen glances back at the curtain, lowers his voice. “Listen... the police are here, and I gave them my statement. I did not tell them about Hellman. I didn’t tell them about him showing up at your clinic or you going out to his place tonight.”

“But why—”

“—because if they investigate him, then they’re going to find out he suspects you of stealing Princess and coming onto his property. You already have the arrest against you, and you’re going to get in more trouble. Hell, he could have you on video at his place tonight, and if we come at him, he’ll come after you. Plus, we’ve got nothing to prove he did this other than suspicion.”

“All my fault,” I say miserably, looking off to the side as I’m unable to meet Kellen’s gaze. I’ve screwed up so much stuff and put Kellen and the horses in grave danger.

“Abby.” His voice is soft but chastising.

“I should’ve just left him alone. None of this would’ve happened. And yes, I did wrong, but now he’s going to get away with almost killing the horses, and you could’ve been killed and—”

A sob tears free, and Kellen is out of the chair, leaning over the bed and wrapping me in his arms. He doesn’t try to dissuade me from my guilt anymore, instead encouraging me to just purge. “Let it out, baby.”

His hand rubs my back while I cry on his shoulder.

With Kellen’s strong arms, reassurances, and refusal to let me blame myself further, I buck up and dry my tears.

When he pulls back, he brushes his lips across my head, and there’s not a touch he’s given me so far—of which there have been some amazing ones—that rivals the light kiss to remind me he’s on my side.

Kellen’s eyes bore into mine. “Your sister called on your phone.”

“My phone?”

“It was in your pocket. The ambulance attendants gave it to me. I had to stay in the waiting room while they worked on you here, and well... she called. The caller ID said Thing Two, and since you told me about your nicknames, I knew it was her and...”

“You answered and told her what was going on,” I finish for him. “Is she freaking out?”

“I don’t think so.” His tone is neutral. “She knew about Hellman, though. Came to the same conclusion we did.”

“I tell her everything,” I say simply. “She’s the only one in my family who knows I’ve been striking at him.”

“She knew who I was.” Kellen’s smile is impish, and I can tell he’s not displeased that I’ve shared him with my twin. “At any rate, I assured her you were okay and that you’d call her once we got you home and settled.”

“And when might that be?”

“Soon. The doctor was finishing up your discharge instructions right before I came in. You’ve been ordered to take a few days to rest. Between your shoulder and the smoke inhalation, you’re not in the best shape.”

I nod. I feel crummy in both body and spirit. I fucked up big-time, and there’s a lot of mess to sort out.

The only thing that makes me feel marginally better is that Kellen is by my side and shows no inclination of running for the hills. I’m not sure why he’s sticking by me, but I’ll take it.

I don't have much else to hold on to at the moment.

CHAPTER 14

Kellen

I listen as LeAnne Schoen talks. Abby's napping, and I've taken point today on handling things. I'm also the one who notified Dr. Schoen about the fire last night once we got home from the hospital. Abby called Kat, her twin, and they had an emotional talk. I don't know much about the twin thing, but those two are as close as it comes. With only a few words from her sister, Abby started crying.

Then Kat was crying (Abby had the call on speakerphone), and I didn't know what the fuck to do. I've never been great with tears from women. With Adriana, they were always manipulative, so I mostly ignored it.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:06 am

But Abby's are born of sorrow and shame, and I could never disregard those emotions from her. So I hovered while they talked, and as soon as they were done, I took her into the shower. It was tight and cramped, but I helped her wash the smoke and soot from her body as well as mine. I washed her hair and massaged her scalp, careful of her bruised shoulder. I dried her off, and even though I didn't do the greatest job, she let me take a hair dryer to style her short locks so she could relax and crawl into bed.

That's when I called Dr. Schoen and told her about the fire. As with the police, I didn't tell her about Hellman or the feud Abby has picked with him. That's not up to me, and while I hate that it caused destruction of property for Dr. Schoen, I'll protect Abby where I can. I don't want her to lose her job when she's so regretful, and I sure as hell don't want anything to ruin the plans for Abby to buy the practice.

However, if Abby wants to come clean to Dr. Schoen, I'll stand by her side and help her pick up the chips wherever they fall.

"I'll have the insurance adjuster contact you when he's on his way," LeAnne says. She's currently in Austria traveling with her man friend and it's nearing nine p.m. there. This is the third time today we've talked, and I've encouraged her to stay on her trip. The horses are safe, Abby's safe, and I can coordinate everything with the barn.

"I've got a call into a few general contractors so we can get repairs started." I open the bedroom door and glance in at Abby. She's sound asleep, and I can't help but smile as I see both Princess and Bubba on the bed with her. Princess, I'm not surprised, but Bubba never gets on the bed. He either senses she needs it or she

invited him up and made him a very bad boy.

“You tell Abby to take care of herself. I’ve got the clinic covered with friends in the area who will split shifts the next few days. Christy will reschedule all nonessential surgeries, so it will be fine. I don’t want Abby rushing back.”

“I agree she needs to rest, but we both know she’ll be back at it as soon as she can. I’m sure she’ll go over tomorrow and make a general nuisance of herself.”

There’s a long pause and then LeAnne says, “I’m really glad Abby has you, Kellen. You’re taking such good care of her.”

Oh, I’m just getting started, I want to say, but I keep that to myself. If Dr. Schoen knew all the ways I intended to take care of Abby, she’d question my sanity.

We chat a few more minutes, mostly about the horses. The same neighbor who helped round them up last night is handling their care. I was worried about them not having the barn, but both Abby and Dr. Schoen assured me they’re fine staying in the pasture with the small run-in shelter available if they need it. I have no clue what that means, but I’ll trust the experts.

With everything managed with Dr. Schoen, I tiptoe into the bedroom. Bubba lifts his head, looks slightly guilty, but then lowers it again. His eyes follow me as I move to Abby.

I touch her forearm, giving it a stroke. “Abby.”

Her eyes flutter open, and she looks at me, bleary, as she tries to sit up. My hand moves to her chest. “No, don’t move. I just wanted to let you know I’m running to the grocery store. I’ll be back soon.”

“What time is it?” she asks.

“Just past three.”

She pushes up despite my hand on her chest, and I let it fall away. I sit on the edge of the bed as she rubs a hand over her face. “I slept all day.”

“I’d say you needed it.”

“Horses okay?”

“All is fine. I’ve talked to Dr. Schoen a few times about her insurance so we can get underway with repairs. She wants you to rest a few days and—”

“I’m fine,” Abby says, sitting straighter but wincing as she rotates her shoulder. “Maybe a few ibuprofen.”

“I’ll get them for you.”

“I can get them,” she says, trying to swing her legs out of bed, but I’m in the way.

I grin. “You don’t like people taking care of you.”

“Not true,” she insists. “I like you pampering me just fine. But I also like doing for myself.”

“Stubborn,” I mutter as I lean in for a fast kiss.

My intent is to pull away, but her hands come to my cheeks and she holds me there. Not to deepen the kiss, but to lengthen the chaste contact. “Thank you,” she says, the words softly tickling my lips. “For everything.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:06 am

I pull back and am caught in her eyes. So beautiful. She's so fucking complex, and I know I could peel layers from this woman for years and never learn all the interesting things about her.

Not wanting her to feel helpless, I rise from the bed and give Bubba a last look as I point my finger. "You're in trouble, buddy."

"No, you're not," Abby tells him as she ruffles his fur. "I think you were made to sleep in a bed."

I roll my eyes and head out of Abby's apartment.

Once in my car, I don't turn in the direction of the grocery store but instead drive the same way I did last night while following Abby.

To Levi Hellman's house.

On the way, I call Dozer. He answers with a cheerful greeting—he's been in a constant upbeat mood since moving to Miami to be with the love of his life three months ago. "What's up, my man?"

"Lots. Can you patch Bebe in?"

"Regular or encrypted?" he asks, picking up on the serious tenor in my voice.

"Regular." He knows something is wrong, but he doesn't know how private this call should be. I don't care if anyone at Jameson knows, and Levi's not sophisticated

enough to intercept nor does he even know who I am.

In less than a minute, Bebe's on the line, and I fill them in on the Levi situation. This includes catching Dozer up on Abby (Bebe heard plenty over the comms when we were in Guatemala), as well as her feud with the puppy mill industry and Levi Hellman. I end with the barn fire—Bebe gasps and curses up a storm—and then I ask for direct help.

“I need to take this asshole down. We can't depend on laws as they're not tough enough, nor are they being enforced. But I've met this guy... he's sleazy to the core. My gut says he's crooked, or he's got skeletons. I'd bet a million bucks he's got something illegal going on and probably has cops and politicians in his pocket. He acts like he's untouchable.”

“If there's dirt, we'll find it,” Dozer says. “Or rather, Bebe will find it. I'm the programmer, but she's the hacker.”

This I already knew. Bebe was the one I needed to ask the favor from, but I was unsure of her willingness to help since I'm new to Jameson and she doesn't know me all that well. But Dozer owes me a favor. When I started here three months ago, I went on an immediate mission to protect his future mother-in-law and goddaughter. I took them out to California and kept watch while a maniacal Russian mobster was on the loose, trying to kill Dozer and Jessica.

So now I'm calling in the favor, and since Dozer and Bebe both run the Research and Development division of Jameson, I knew asking something of Dozer would ensure Bebe's help.

A little cunning and manipulative on my part, but I'm not holding anything back when it comes to protecting Abby.

“If he’s dirty,” Bebe says, keyboard clacking in the background, “I’ll find it. Give me twenty-four hours. Maybe forty-eight.”

“Thank you, Bebe,” I say, relieved to have her on the case.

“Sure thing,” she replies, then sweetens her voice. “And next time, call me directly. You didn’t need to reach me through Dozer, and now you wasted the favor he owes you.”

Bebe laughs and disconnects, but Dozer’s still on the line. “You didn’t waste your favor,” he says.

“I don’t need anything back from you,” I assure him. “I was happy to watch over Claire and Thea. Things good with you?”

“A lot of work setting up the new Jameson office, but yeah... things are perfect.”

I hear it in his voice... nothing to do with the job and everything to do with Jessica and Thea. “I’m glad for you, buddy.”

“Sounds like things are serious with this girl,” he pokes.

I see Levi Hellman’s property up ahead and consider what I’m about to do. “Yeah... it’s getting serious. Listen, man, I got to go, but I’ll touch base with you soon.”

“Later,” he says.

I don’t cruise past the driveway but rather turn into it and head straight for the main house. It’s a two-story red brick that looks about twenty years old. No garage but a carport protecting a Mercedes and a Lexus.

Exiting my car, I pocket the keys and stride up to the large front porch. It's filled with nice planters and blooming flowers. I'm guessing there's a Mrs. Levi Hellman somewhere as I don't see this asshole being into gardening.

I press the doorbell and step back, looking out over the property. The house sits at enough of an angle I can see the first building that houses dogs. One of the things that struck me last night—as well as today—is how quiet it is. You'd think that with so many dogs, there'd be a lot of barking, but maybe those poor creatures are just so beat down by circumstance, they don't have it in them to protest or show interest in anything.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:06 am

A fierce surge of pride in Abby wells inside me, and despite the trouble she set into motion, I admire the strength of her convictions and the warmth of her heart.

The door opens, and I turn to see a woman standing there. Mid-thirties, perhaps, with bleached hair, long fake nails, and heavy makeup.

Exactly the type I'd picture on Hellman's arm. "Mrs. Hellman?" I ask.

"Oh, no... I'm Levi's secretary." She pats her hair, cocks her hip out. "His wife is in Philadelphia visiting family."

Shocker that his secretary is here at his home.

"Is Levi around?"

"Sure he is," she says with a wave of her hand. "Let me get him."

She doesn't invite me in, but I'm glad. I want the openness of the porch.

I hear boot steps on hardwood floors and then Levi's at the open door. He doesn't recognize me at first as he stops at the threshold. "Who are you?"

And no sooner is that last word out of his mouth than his eyes go round as he remembers that day down at the clinic. He starts to say something, but my hand shoots out.

I grab him by the front of his shirt and jerk him out the door. I use his surprise and

momentum to sling him right off the porch.

When he'd first appeared, I checked to see if he was wearing the holster, and he was not. I'm assuming because he feels safe in his own house, but I was prepared to alleviate him of the weapon had it been on his hip.

Levi's feet hit the grass and his knees buckle, but I give the man some credit. He's agile as he does nothing more than roll, springing to his feet.

Doesn't matter... I jump off right behind him, and as he turns to face me, I've got him by the shirt again, this time with both hands. I push him backward, using my considerable size and weight advantage to walk him across the lawn where he slams into the side of my car.

It knocks the wind out of him, and he sags.

"Levi!" the blond secretary screams from the porch. "Should I call the police?"

"You do," I warn her, "and he's going to be investigated for attempted murder and arson."

It's a total bluff, but she doesn't know that, and Levi certainly can't take the risk. He yells at her, "Get in the fucking house, Laverne. And don't call the cops."

"Smart man," I murmur.

As soon as the woman is gone and the door is closed, I lean in toward Levi, prepared to give him my directive. The pansy ass tries to bring his knee up to smash my nuts, but I easily turn sideways so it glances off my hip. I draw my right hand to my left shoulder and launch a backhanded fist straight to his nose. It's not a hard punch, but it doesn't take much to crush the cartilage there.

Levi bellows in pain, cupping his face as he bends over. Blood pours from his nostrils. “You broke my fucking nose.”

“Not like you didn’t deserve it,” I mutter, my hands once again grabbing fistfuls of his shirt to haul him up. “Now listen here, you sick fuck. If you ever go near Abby Blackburn or Dr. Schoen’s property again, I will end you. If you think I’m bluffing, think again. I’m a paid mercenary and former Special Forces, and I can make you disappear so no one will ever find you again.”

A slight exaggeration, but he doesn’t know that.

“Tell that psycho bitch to stay off my property—”

I pop him again, this time hard on his cheekbone with my fist.

Hellman cries out in pain. “Please stop hitting me.”

“Stop being a douchebag. Now... am I going to have any more problems with you?”

His head shakes in the negative, but hatred blazes from his eyes. I don’t care. This visit isn’t about resolution, merely a warning to keep him away from Abby until I can figure some other way to bring him down.

I sling Hellman away from my car hard enough that he stumbles and falls to the ground. He doesn’t stand but pushes up with one hand and wipes blood from his face with the other. I smile at him as I get into my SUV and turn around on his nice lawn.

As I’m heading down the driveway, I see the blond rush out the door and attempt to help him up. He bats her hands away and pushes to standing before stomping into his house.

I have no clue if that's enough to scare him into submission until Bebe works her magic, but it's the best I've got, short of killing the guy, and I don't operate that way.

Feeling better about the situation, I stop at the grocery store and pick up chicken breasts, asparagus, and fresh pineapple to grill. I nab a bottle of decent-looking wine and return to Abby's. I'll order her into the shower, insist she put on fresh pajamas, and I'll cook us up a feast.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:06 am

Maybe we'll watch a movie.

When I pull up to her place, I frown at the dark blue sedan parked behind her car. A rental car company sticker is affixed to the windshield—someone's visiting, but she never said a word about it.

I take the stairs two at a time, grocery bag in one hand and keys in the other. Unlocking the door, I push it open to find three large men standing in the living room, and for a moment, I think Hellman has sent someone to deal with both Abby and me.

The men turn, eyes on me, and I see Abby behind one of them looking uneasy.

“What's going on?” I ask neutrally, setting the grocery bag on the small table by the door so my hands are unencumbered to fight.

“Kellen,” Abby says, moving toward me. The three men step back, giving her free rein. “These are my brothers.”

My gaze moves among the men, and now I see it. All with the same black hair and green eyes. Christ, they're so similar, they look manufactured.

In ordinary circumstances, this is where we'd all smile and shake hands, pleased to make each other's acquaintances. I know damn well her sister Kat is warm and outgoing and in favor of our relationship.

But these three—all as big and tough-looking as I am—glare with open hostility. Something tells me they're not here to check me out or make sure Abby's okay. It

seems they have an agenda, and by the look on Abby's face, she's not happy about it.

CHAPTER 15

Abby

I take Kellen's hand and give it a squeeze. "Let me introduce you."

Each of my brothers is polite and shakes Kellen's hand. Ethan, the oldest at thirty-eight, doesn't crack a smile. He's here representing the family and takes his duties far too seriously. Everyone always says that Kat and I look the most like Ethan because we all have the same dimples.

Only problem with Ethan is we never see him anymore.

Trey is thirty-three, the hell-raiser of the group. He wears his dark hair long, just above his shoulders, and it drives my parents bonkers. He's a ladies' man, though, and supposedly the women love it.

And lastly, Wade, twenty-nine, only two years older than me and Kat, but he's closest to us in age and in loyalty. We three always played together, never a shortage of mischief to find, given our vast farm. He's the daredevil, the one who always egged us on to do stuff even if it got us in trouble. I'm counting on him to understand the reason why I did the things I did.

"And what's the occasion for the visit?" Kellen asks, his eyes moving from me to my brothers.

"Oh, you know... just big brothers checking in on me," I reply, my voice a bit shrill because that's not an accurate representation at all, and the three Blackburn men filling my small living room intimidate me.

“More than checking in,” Ethan growls in disdain. “It’s more like saving her from herself and from bad influences.”

His eyes pin on Kellen with that last statement, who in turn crosses his arms over his chest and cocks an eyebrow. “Bad influences?”

“You threw fuel on the fire by getting into it with Levi Hellman and accepting that stolen dog—”

“Kat has a big mouth,” I mutter with ire, then turn to Kellen. “When you talked to her last night from the hospital, it freaked her out, so she told my brothers. They came to... to...” I turn not to Ethan, because he can be a bully, but rather to Wade, who I’m closest to out of the boys. “Why are you here?”

“To bring you home,” Ethan says, answering not just the question I posed to Wade but laying down a decree on behalf of the Blackburn family. “It’s more than time you took your place, and you’re causing trouble here that could land you in prison.”

“Last I checked,” Kellen drawls, his eyes lasered on Ethan, “Abby is an adult and fully capable of making her own decisions. Now, she might want to return home with you, but if she doesn’t, no way I’m going to let you drag her out of here.”

My heart surges with gratitude and... I don’t know what, but an incredibly strong tenderness for this man who has turned out to be my hero every step of the way.

“Last you checked?” Ethan repeats contemptuously. “Just because you’re checking her out under the covers—”

I gasp.

Kellen growls and lunges for Ethan but is thwarted by Wade stepping in front of him

while Trey steps in front of Ethan. I don't interfere because there's probably close to eight hundred pounds of muscle and testosterone in here.

"Why don't you remove these two boys trying to protect you from the equation," Kellen taunts, stepping back toward the door and placing his hand on the knob, "and let's take this out in the yard. I'll let you check me out so you have no confusion as to what's going on here."

Page 50

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:06 am

“Let’s do it,” Ethan snarls and steps forward, but Trey pushes him back with hands to his chest.

“Just stop it.” I glare at Ethan, hands on my hips. “You are in my home. You came here uninvited. You’re trying to bully me into submission like you always do because you think you know what’s best for me. Just like Mom and Dad, you don’t care what I want, only what serves the farm’s best interests. You wasted your time and jet fuel coming here.”

“Jet fuel?” Kellen asks. The curiosity in his tone overrides his anger.

“The family jet,” Wade answers.

Kellen’s eyebrows fly upward in shock, but he doesn’t say anything.

Yes, my family is rich.

Super rich.

Our horse farm is very lucrative, an empire unto itself.

I sigh heavily and rub the bridge of my nose. With my eyes closed, I say, “I think you need to leave.”

“Not while you could be in danger,” Ethan says stubbornly.

Trey and Wade remain silent, and I know they’re probably torn where I’m concerned.

No one wanted me to leave Kentucky, but some supported me fully—that would be Thing Two. Some didn't quite understand but still supported me—that would be Trey and Wade. And some didn't care to understand—my parents and Ethan.

"If you're worried about her safety," Kellen says, calling all eyes to him, "I can assure you, it's covered. I had words with Hellman a bit ago, and he'll be staying away from Abby."

My jaw drops, and I take a worried step into him. "You did? What did you say? What did he do? Are you okay?"

Kellen rolls his eyes. "Am I okay? Are you serious?"

I'm duly abashed, but I need details. I'm stunned he did this. "What happened?"

"I went to his house. When he came to the door, I had him come outside into the yard to talk." I frown at Kellen, because that sounds far too civil. "Well, actually... I pulled him out of the doorway, tossed him off the porch... same difference."

"Holy shit," Trey mutters, and I hear the respect in his tone.

"I nicely asked him to stay away from you. I let him know I'm former Special Forces—"

"Are you?" Trey asks.

"Close enough," Kellen replies with a side glance before turning back to me. "And that I have ways to make him disappear so no one would ever find him. He tried to knee me in the nuts, so I backhanded him in the nose and broke it. He might have cried. It was a very short conversation."

I stare at this man—my hero—agog. That he'd physically intimidate another human to keep me safe is kind of... hot.

"You've probably only stirred him up more," Ethan says contemptuously. "He'll come after Abby to make you pay for humiliating him. She'd be safer in Kentucky with her family."

My attention goes to Ethan, and I struggle to level my voice. "I don't want to live in Kentucky. I've told you this at least a dozen times."

"You need to quit running away from your problems," he hurls at me. "You need to stop seeing home as a bad place."

I whirl on Ethan and march across the room to him. Wade and Trey scramble out of my way. I stare up at him—the tallest of the brothers—and my green eyes meet his. "You wouldn't know about my problems, Ethan, because you never bothered to ask me about them. You merely hold the party line. You put the farm first over your own sister." Ethan's jaw tightens, and Wade murmurs my name sympathetically. I ignore him. "You're a good little robot, Ethan. You do exactly as programmed, and you have no fucking heart inside that hollow chest."

A flash of pain crosses Ethan's face, but I refuse to feel bad about my words. He's an excellent representation of why I won't move back to the farm.

Tears prick at my eyes as I realize he didn't come here to protect or stand up for me. He'd never go confront Levi Hellman the way Kellen did. He came here for the farm's benefit, not mine. He's using my current circumstances to pressure me, and if I didn't love him so much, I'd hate him.

I can't stop the tears threatening to spill, so I blink once and let them fall. "You need to leave."

Spinning from him, I dash at the wetness with the back of my hand and stride toward the door.

“Abby,” Ethan calls, and perhaps that’s contrition in his voice, but I let it roll off my back. I refuse to be suckered in by a sudden onset of understanding.

As I move past Kellen, he doesn’t stop me. But he does grab my hand and gives it a short squeeze before letting go. No words are necessary, but his action says that he has my back. It’s all very confusing at this moment, but when my head clears, I might consider this the point where I tumbled into love.

Page 51

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:07 am

I exit the apartment, shutting the door behind me. I won't be surprised if one of my brothers comes after me, but I really don't want them to.

As I descend the staircase, I hear yelling inside, distinctly recognizing Ethan's, Trey's, and Wade's voices.

Not Kellen's, though. He'll stay out of that squabble because he let me fight my own battle in there, and I appreciate it more than he'll ever know. Just as he squeezed my hand to let me know he had me.

God... Kellen doesn't even have a clue why I have such a rift with my family. We've never talked about it. Not that I'm hiding anything, but it's definitely not happy, fuzzy memories keeping me away.

I head straight for the pasture behind the barn. My stomach rolls as I take in the blackened wood. Yellow caution tape flutters around the perimeter, meant to keep everyone out except the arson investigator, who came by earlier today. I have no desire to go in and see the damage. My heart thuds painfully upon remembering the panic and terror of last night.

The horses are grazing about forty yards ahead, tails lazily swishing at flies. I rest my hands on the top rail of the wooden fencing and whistle for Lunar. The other three horses lift their heads, but my boy is the only one that comes when called. He trots toward me, neck arched regally, his ears pricked forward. He doesn't high step the way he used to, but that's due to age and the fact we don't train anymore. Anytime we ride, it's purely for pleasure and to spend time together.

Kellen had assured me all the horses were okay, and I believed him. But I have to see Lunar for myself.

“Hey, my main man,” I murmur as he stops at the fence, eyes expectantly going to my pockets.

Smart boy.

When I don’t move, he bumps his head gently into my chest. Come on, lady. I know you have a treat for me.

Laughing, I reach in and grab a peppermint. I’d been on my way out here to see Lunar when my brothers showed up, and now this visit with him feels more important than ever. Horses—Lunar, in particular—have always had a calming effect on me. Even when they’re being jerks and hard to control, I’ve always felt in my element around them.

I unwrap the candy, tuck the plastic film back in my pocket, and offer him the small red-and-white lozenge. He plucks it from my palm with soft lips and lets me scratch behind his ears. I run my eyes over his body, and although a vet came by this morning and checked out all the horses, I want to tend to my boy.

I climb up and over the fence rather than walk to the gate. I sit on the top rail, Lunar’s face level with mine. I rub along his neck, cheeks, jaw, crest. I make sure his eyes look okay. I hop down, and Lunar sidesteps from me, acting skittish but really just playing. He waits for me to pull out another peppermint and then stands still while I inspect his entire body. I’m worried that maybe he hit something on his wild rampage out of the burning barn—a jagged piece of wood or a nail.

He looks good, though, and doesn’t appear any worse for wear. My chest aches when I think of his terror-filled screaming as the heat and flames closed in on him, but my

heart flutters when I think of how fearless Kellen was, rushing into that inferno to release them all, even though he knows nothing about horses. He could've easily been trampled or knocked over, but he didn't let the danger stop him.

The sound of a car engine turning over draws my attention toward my apartment. I can't see the cars, but someone is leaving—I hear the crunch of gravel under tires. It's only when Kellen walks around the side of my house that I know it's my brothers who left, and I'm not sure what it says about me that I'm relieved.

Kellen comes up to the fence and tentatively reaches a hand to Lunar who tosses his head back, again putting on a skittish act. I pull out my last peppermint and hand it to Kellen. "He's a drama queen. Give this to him, and he'll stand still for some pets."

I watch as Kellen holds out his palm without hesitation, trusting that Lunar won't bite him. He smiles and rubs the gelding's neck. "You were a brave boy, weren't you?"

"You were a brave man to run in there and free the horses," I murmur.

He doesn't look at me, keeping his eyes on Lunar with that light smile on his face. I'm shocked when he goes off subject. "So why did you run from home, and why don't you want to go back?"

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:07 am

Kellen's attention sweeps from Lunar to me. "I just ran your brothers off, and they're not too happy with me. I'd like to know what the issue is."

I'd love for Kellen to know all about me, and now is the time. "Let's go for a walk."

I climb back over the fence and take Kellen's hand. I lead him along a path through casual gardens Dr. Schoen has planted over the years. We end up at the lake where there's a bench she placed as a memorial for her late husband. The sun hangs low, painting the water orange with ripples of yellow and red.

"You've obviously figured out that Blackburn Farms is a big deal, not just in Kentucky, but in the saddlebred world. This breed of horse is now bred worldwide, and our farm has a long list of champion stock."

"What do you mean by champion stock? And how do you achieve that?"

Smart man. "You train the horses to show. You train riders to show them to their potential. You enter the horses into shows, and they win championships. Same as with horse racing... the winners produce gold for the owners."

"So Blackburn Farms not only breeds saddlebreds, but you train as well?" he surmises.

"And show. Me and my siblings all took turns in the show ring. These days, Ethan only trains other riders, but Trey, Wade, and Kat still show with their horses in addition to training."

Kellen glances back at the barn, which we can just see the top of in the distance. When his gaze comes back to me, he asks, “You and Lunar. You showed?”

I nod, looking out over the water. “I’ve been showing saddlebreds since I was six, but Lunar was the first I helped foal and raise. I was twelve when he was born, and I helped my dad and Ethan break him to the saddle. I was showing him by the time he was three and I was fifteen, although I showed other horses when I was younger.”

“I feel like those ages are important.”

“It’s not unheard of, showing so young, but I was what one might call an exceptional rider. I won a lot of blue ribbons over the years. I trained hard, of course, but with Lunar, we had this bond where I just knew what he needed, and he knew what I needed. It was almost symbiotic. We won the world championship three years in a row.”

Kellen blinks at me, mouth hanging open.

“I was training with him for a run at a fourth. It was the summer between my sophomore and junior years of college, and we were at a show in Virginia. We were in the ring, at a trot, and there was this girl—her name was Molly—we’d competed against each other over the years. She was very good, but that particular show, her horse was young and a little rambunctious. She came up behind me, going faster than we were. Lunar and I were on the rail, and in that instance, you pass on the right and give wide berth. I don’t know if she wasn’t paying attention or she couldn’t control him, but she got too close to Lunar. He spooked and kicked back with both feet, catching the other horse in the chest. I held my seat, but Molly’s ride went crazy, and she fell off.”

I squeeze my eyes shut because even though that was seven years ago, the memory still makes me sick to my stomach.

Kellen's arm goes around my shoulders, but he remains silent, giving me time to continue on my own terms.

"Her boot caught in her stirrup, and she was dragged around the arena. The fact she was hanging from the stirrup freaked her horse out even more, and he bucked. When a rider is off, we stop in our tracks and keep our horses still, and it was torture watching her horse running around, bucking with her hanging from the stirrup while trainers entered the ring, trying to stop it."

"What happened to her?" He's pushing me gently to get past the details that clearly hurt to remember and to the worst part. He knows the story so far wouldn't have changed my life's trajectory.

"She took a hoof to the head." Kellen frowns as if trying to imagine that. "We wear derby hats in the ring, not helmets. And when she was being dragged and her horse was kicking, it caught her in the head. I watched as it happened. So the exact moment of connection, I knew she wouldn't survive it."

"Jesus," Kellen says on a sharp inhale, pulling me in closer. He presses his lips into my hair.

"I never went in the show ring again. I was done. It was too traumatic to have watched that, and I was scared. I've taken some nasty falls, even broken some bones, and every time my confidence got dinged up a bit. It's natural. It can set riders back months in training, but I was always able to get back up on that horse, so to speak.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:07 am

“After Molly’s death, I had no problem riding... I just couldn’t go into the show ring. It’s all about control in there, and I was one of the best. Molly was damn good, and it happened to her. I just... lost it. Lost every bit of passion and zeal for competition. I was done, and my family couldn’t understand it.”

“They couldn’t get why you didn’t want to show anymore?” There’s disdain in his tone.

“Kat got it, but she always gets me. And I think Wade understood since we were closer. But it was pretty much expected for me to keep going. Lunar was too good a horse, and I was too good a rider. Lunar’s sire would increase in value with another championship, so I was losing money for the farm.”

Kellen utters disapproval low in his throat. “That’s a lot of pressure.”

I pull back from him so I can look him in the eye. “See... that’s just it. I’m used to pressure. I thrive under pressure. It’s why I was a good student and why I’m a good vet. But I think, more than anything, I felt let down by my family when they couldn’t understand that I just didn’t want to do it anymore. I was broken, and they wanted me to hurry up and fix myself. When I couldn’t, it was heavy disappointment. It all felt so smothering, and the walls closed in and...”

“And you decided to leave and not look back,” he concludes softly.

“It makes me a horrible daughter.”

“It makes you brave and resilient.” Kellen puts a hand behind my neck and locks his

eyes with mine. “Let me ask you something.”

“What?”

“Do you miss showing? Do you miss the rush of competition? Do you miss winning blue ribbons and working as a team with Lunar?”

I reach deep inside because my first inclination is to say I don’t.

But I do.

“Yeah... it was such an integral part of my life, and I loved it right up until that moment when Molly died.”

“Hear me out.” Kellen’s attentive survey of my face holds me captive, as if he has all the answers in the world. “Forget about family not supporting you and the need to move away. Forget your fears. A lot of time has passed since Molly died. You’ve changed. You’ve grown. You’ve established your identity away from the farm, and you’ve accomplished so much. Maybe you could have another shot in the ring, if you wanted it.”

I shake my head, ready to deny. “I’m out of shape, out of practice. Lunar’s too old—”

“Excuses,” Kellen says. “Are they legitimate excuses?”

My frown deepens. “What do you mean?”

“You were legitimately afraid after Molly’s fall. You were pushed away—maybe unintentionally—by your family, but that hurt compounded the fear. I can see why you left it all behind. But then... well, you settled into a new life. You became a new version of Abby Blackburn. Maybe that Abby could compete again if she wanted.

You might have been fearful, but you never lost your love of the sport.”

As his words penetrate, I realize I’ve never really considered going back into the ring. When I left that life behind, I thought it was all or nothing.

Maybe it’s not.

“I can see your brain spinning.” Kellen chuckles and leans in to kiss me. “Don’t burn it out, though. You can ponder that, but we have a few other things to talk about.”

“Okay,” I say on a long exhale, my lips tingling from his kiss.

“You have to promise me you’re done with Levi Hellman.”

I study Kellen’s expression, note the hard determination in his eyes. It’s wasted on me. “I promise. It spiraled so far out of control, and I never intended for that to happen. I feel awful—”

Kellen kisses me again. When he draws back, he presses a finger to my lips. “No more with the self-castigation. You’re sorry. I get it. People make mistakes. Let’s move on. Okay?”

His finger still at my mouth, I nod, and his hand falls away.

“I’ve got some people at Jameson investigating Hellman.” My chin jerks inward, surprised Kellen would move against Hellman when he told me to back off. “That guy is dirty in some way. Call it a gut instinct, or call it hope, but if we can’t shut down the puppy mill, maybe we can shut Hellman down in other ways.”

My eyes widen and my heart thrums with possibility. “Like what?”

“I have no clue,” he admits. “But if there’s something dirty, Bebe will find it.”

“Bebe?” A woman’s name, Kellen’s admiration evident in his tone. It flares a kernel of jealousy.

“She’s a hacker who works for our company. Her soon-to-be husband is an FBI agent and...”

I tune him out as relief flushes through me that Bebe isn’t a potential love interest. That green fit of emotion was totally unexpected, but it tells me I’m viewing Kellen as mine.

And I'm okay with that.

"... this weekend, if you're up for it," Kellen says, and I blink furiously, trying to remember what he just said.

"I'm sorry... what?"

"Bebe and Griff's wedding is this upcoming Saturday, and I wanted to know if you'd be my date. I don't know your schedule."

"Yes, I'd love to go. I'm actually on shift, but I know someone who can cover me."

"Perfect." Kellen stands from the bench and pulls me up. "Now, tell the truth. How are you feeling physically?"

I take in a deep breath. "Lungs feel good." I rotate my left shoulder. "Still a little sore, but nothing a few more ibuprofen won't knock out."

"Hmmm... not sure I believe you." Kellen's eyes gleam as he scoops me into his arms and starts back up the path. "I think I might have to examine every inch of your body, just to be sure."

Laughing, I wrap my arms around his neck and hang on for the ride. No part of that offer sounds bad to me.

Abby

It's good to be back in the clinic. My mind has been mercifully occupied today by nonemergent visits. Allergies, vaccinations, one dental cleaning, and a stubborn husky that won't leave porcupines alone so I spent a solid hour pulling quills from his snout.

The routine helps. I feel grounded again.

But I've got a lull until the next appointment in about an hour. Christy ran into town to meet a friend, and I've got nothing but time to get lost in thoughts again.

I glance over to the corner where Bubba and Princess sleep beside each other. They've become best pals in such a short time. Princess now has personality, and she's regaining strength. Kellen is an angel for taking her.

Which makes me miss him all the more. He left this morning for an assignment to work private security for a politician. He's only been gone a few hours, and I miss him already. He'll be back late tomorrow night, but even that's too long.

That's just the woman in me who is completely enamored, though I know travel is part of his job. I won't apologize for liking him so much that I pout when he's away.

Kellen was surprised because he was initially offered an upcoming mission in Turkey. He wouldn't tell me details because it involves operations that he called "black" and "off the books," but he admitted it was dangerous and exactly the type of stuff he loves doing at Jameson. The mission was supposed to last a week to ten days, but he opted out because he's still worried about Hellman. He asked Kynan to bypass him until things settled around here, and Kynan—who, by all accounts, is an amazing employer—agreed without hesitation. It helps that Jameson is apparently stocked with dozens of men and women who can easily step into Kellen's slot.

Kellen is still worried about Levi Hellman, but I'm not.

Two days ago, Kellen and two of his Jameson mates descended upon Dr. Schoen's property and outfitted it with high-tech security gear—motion-activated lights, infrared cameras, alarms, bells, whistles, and all manner of stuff that will either deter a trespasser or record them in the act. They didn't hide this stuff either. The cameras are prominently positioned and signs have been posted at the driveway alerting anyone who pulls in that they are under surveillance. They even stapled signs to trees surrounding the entire twenty-seven acres.

It seemed overboard to me, but it was also incredibly sweet. I was worried about the cost, but Kellen assured me that Dr. Schoen approved it.

That caused guilt to flare in me because it's an expense Dr. Schoen shouldn't have to bear. It's my fault that the security gear is needed, but Kellen told me not to worry about it.

Those two are thick as thieves now. He handled that dreaded call to Dr. Schoen about the barn and since then has been the point of contact on everything. I've only had one conversation with her, that day after I got home from the hospital. She fretted over the phone and ordered me to rest.

God, I feel terrible. She's due back in the States in two weeks, and I intend to tell her the full truth. I can't do it over the phone—it has to be face-to-face. I have to look her in the eye when I apologize.

The thought of that conversation makes me queasy. I'm so ashamed of what I've done. My actions almost cost the horses their lives, and it's going to cost a lot of damn money to repair the barn and replace the ruined equipment, tack, feed, and other supplies that were stored in there.

The arson investigation is complete, but they said it would take up to thirty days to finish the report. Until such time, the insurance company won't move to pay the claim. If it's determined to be arson, insurance will deny payment, and I'm assuming that is what will happen.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:07 am

It doesn't mean repairs can't start now. It only means that anything that's done will be out-of-pocket, and I can't expect Dr. Schoen to cover that. Kellen's boss, Kynan McGrath, has a good friend who's a general contractor, and he can get a crew here tomorrow to start demo on the portions that are too ruined to save.

But I need money to get it going. I'd love to have as much done as possible by the time Dr. Schoen returns stateside.

As a veterinarian only a few years out of school, I don't make a lot. While my education was funded by an educational trust, I still live hand-to-mouth, mainly because it's expensive to keep a horse. But leaving Lunar in Kentucky wasn't an option.

I have an option, though.

It's not ideal, but it's an option.

Pulling out my phone, I call Ethan. We haven't spoken since I told him to leave three days ago. Kat confirmed they arrived back in Kentucky late that night, not happy with the "state of affairs," as Ethan called it.

Big ol' stick in the mud.

He answers on the first ring, and it's so abrupt—I sort of expected him to send me to voicemail—I'm momentarily speechless.

"Abby?" he says gruffly. "Are you there?"

“Um... yeah. Sorry. I didn’t expect you to answer.”

“Why call, then?”

I tamp down the spike of irritation. “I just thought you’d be busy, but I was going to leave a message.”

“I see.” Two small words. A whole lot of empty space in the conversation. He’s making me work for it. He has no clue why I’m calling, but I bet he’s assuming it’s to apologize.

Sadly, he’s going to be disappointed.

“I need a favor.” Short, to the point. “I need money.”

Ethan sighs, and I can imagine him rubbing the back of his neck. Ethan has worn the weight of the world on his shoulders running Blackburn Farms since my parents quietly retired and left all operations to him. He rubs at his neck a lot.

I don’t wait for him to grill me and launch into my pitch. “I want to repair the barn for Dr. Schoen. I’m confident the investigator is going to rule this as arson, because... well, it was. And when that happens, the insurance won’t pay.”

“So you want to rebuild the barn for her?” he asks.

“It’s my fault it happened,” I murmur, my heart heavy with the disastrous fallout of my actions. “I have to do it.”

Ethan is silent a long moment as he considers this. The one thing I have going for me is that my oldest brother is big on personal responsibility, so my intentions will appeal to him. But I also know him... he’s probably trying to figure out how he can

use this to get me home.

I'm surprised when he doesn't offer a solution that will benefit him and Blackburn Farms. "What did you have in mind?"

"You loan me the money, and I'll pay you back at eight percent interest when I access my trust fund."

Yes, I have a trust fund. A hefty one that was seeded with five million dollars on my birth. It's obviously appreciated to a lot more in the past twenty-seven years, but I cannot touch it until I'm thirty. Ethan was able to access his eight years ago, but he doesn't use it. He lives in the main house and makes a ridiculous but well-earned salary as the farm's CEO.

"I'll loan you the money, no interest required, and you can pay me back when you have access to your trust."

I don't respond but rather hold my breath—I know there's more coming. That's a shockingly generous offer, and no business-minded person would ever make it. Ethan is a businessman, and it means he wants something.

So I wait for what else I might have to give.

When the silence extends, I start to sweat. It's going to be big... probably a requirement I come home, which is impossible. I'll have to ask Trey next as he accessed his fund three years ago. But he'll want to consult Ethan, and I'll end up in the same place. Trey wants me home too.

Oh, if only Wade had his trust—he'd gladly offer a loan and would never require me to give up my current dreams.

“Abby?” Ethan says, his voice hesitant. “Are you there?”

“Yeah. I’m just waiting to hear the rest of your terms.”

“There aren’t any other terms.” I jolt in shock, sitting straight in my chair. “Just pay me back when you have access to your trust.”

“I don’t understand,” I stammer.

“I don’t understand what you don’t understand. Do you want the money or not?”

I should rush to accept, but I can’t miss an opportunity to try to understand the enigma that is my oldest brother. The man who carries the entire family on his back, is rigid in his control and outlook, and never has time to consider other people’s feelings. “Of course, I want the money. But I want to know why you aren’t making me jump through hoops for it.”

Page 56

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:07 am

A pause, and I know he's rubbing at his neck again. I know I'm giving him a headache. Another sigh. "I can't make you do anything, Abby. You're your own person."

It's the closest he's ever come to implying that perhaps I can lead my life away from the farm without further recrimination from him. Perhaps a tiny bit of understanding?

Or maybe he's just giving up on me?

Regardless, I never look a gift horse in the mouth. "I accept, then. Thank you, Ethan."

"You're welcome," he says, and he sounds like the Ethan I remember from a very long time ago.

Years, even.

When he was carefree and idealistic and fun to be around.

A rush of love makes my heart ache. "I'm sorry I ran you off. That was rude."

"Yeah, well... so was showing up unannounced and demanding you return to Kentucky."

I smile to myself. "It's definitely the stubborn, hotheaded Blackburn genes. You got the lion's share, of course."

Ethan laughs, and it warms me to my soul. I don't know when I last heard him find

humor in something.

“Will you at least come visit soon? Maybe Dad’s birthday?”

I bite at my lower lip, torn over an answer. Ethan’s opened a door I wouldn’t have bothered to peek through. The pressure to return to the family fold is through my parents, united in their efforts to keep their brood close to maintain our legacy. My parents love deeply. Maybe a little too deep and have a hard time letting go. Ethan’s been the one who’s had to enforce their wishes and has been the one riding my ass.

It’s with regret that I have kept him at arm’s length. “I don’t know if I can handle Mom and Dad trying to guilt me. And it will happen, then there will be a big blowup, and then it’s likely I’ll never return.”

“I won’t let it happen. I’ll talk to them.” Still, I hesitate, and he says, “We miss you a lot, Abby. Please come spend some time with us.”

Well, damn. Tears immediately spill in warm streams down my face. “I miss you all too.”

“Then we can expect you for Dad’s birthday?”

“I’ll try to make it work,” I promise. “Dr. Schoen will be back by then, so it shouldn’t be a problem.”

“That’s good.” True happiness in his voice, but then he turns businesslike again. “Let me know how much money you need. I can have it wired directly to your bank.”

I give him my routing and account numbers. I don’t have a solid estimate for repairs, but Ethan has built his share of barns. He promises an amount that should be enough but told me to call if it isn’t.

I'm thrilled when he hangs up, and I shoot a quick text to Kellen that I have funds for the repairs. He doesn't know I have access to that type of money, so I get an immediate response. What the fuck? How?

One laughing emoji back and a promise to fill him in when he's able to call me, I put my phone down and consider grabbing a yogurt from the fridge. Christy said she'd bring me a sandwich, but my stomach rumbles with hunger. I ran out of the apartment this morning without eating. Having to walk both Bubba and Princess separately put me behind on my morning routine, but I've gotten to love these dogs so much, it doesn't matter.

The front bell rings as I'm walking to the fridge, and I immediately do a U-turn. While we don't get much walk-in traffic or emergencies, we keep the doors unlocked just in case.

As I move past my workstation at the long counter, I glance at the video monitor Kellen set up beside it. It shows all the cameras on the property, but this view is set to the front door.

I don't look at the screen, not expecting it to be anything nefarious, but when I see it's Levi Hellman who's walked through, my blood runs cold. He has a leash in one hand and a gun on his hip.

Glancing back at Princess, I consider whether I can get her and Bubba out the rear exit, but when I look at the screen, I see Levi moving toward the swinging doors that lead back here.

Without considering the timing or if it's even possible, I bolt for the door in an attempt to latch it before Hellman reaches it. I can see his figure looming closer via the round glass windows, and his face peers through. He sees me coming at the door, knows my intention is to keep him out, and he bursts in like an angry bull.

I skid to a stop and back up a few feet, noting the gleam in his eyes and the tight set to his jaw. His nose is swollen and both eyes are blackened, and I take a moment to just relish the damage Kellen did to him.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:07 am

His gaze moves to the dogs, now standing, presumably brought to their feet by the disturbance of the slamming door. My heart breaks when Princess's tail goes between her legs, and she slinks backward.

Bubba is vigilant, though, his eyes pinned intently on Hellman.

"I want my dog back." My gaze swivels to Hellman, and he thrusts out the leash. "Give me back my bitch, bitch."

I scurry backward, putting myself between him and Princess. Bubba doesn't move a muscle, but I notice the hairs on his back rise slightly. "You can't have her."

Levi takes a threatening step forward, and Bubba issues a low growl. His lips peel upward and he takes one... two... three steps toward Levi. This isn't Bubba's forte—he wasn't trained to be a protector. But he's definitely figuring out there's danger, and he's letting it be known he doesn't like it.

My heart drops into the recesses of my stomach when Levi pulls the gun from his holster and points it at Bubba. "You call that dog back, or I'll shoot him."

I don't call Bubba off but instead step to the right and put myself between the gun and the dog. "And I'll have you locked up. You need to leave right now, and I'll forget this happened."

"I'm not leaving without my dog," he snaps.

Bubba growls again, trying to move around me. I reach out and slip my fingers

around the dog's collar, murmuring to him. "Easy, boy."

Levi takes a huge step to the left and aims the gun at Bubba again. "You have ten seconds to put that dog in a kennel, or I'm going to shoot it."

"You wouldn't," I gasp. "You're in my place of business."

"And I'm just here to pick up my dog from the vet when this vicious dog tried to attack me," he drawls.

If the idiot bothered to look around, he'd see the cameras Kellen installed on the inside. I could even point them out in the hopes he'd be deterred, but part of me is afraid this guy is off his rocker and he'll do whatever the hell he wants.

We might have a fight over Princess, but I don't want Bubba getting hurt. It would kill Kellen.

"Come on," I say, leading Bubba to one of the large post-op kennels. He goes in without complaint, and I latch it.

As I turn around, I see Hellman has holstered his gun and is already advancing on Princess who trembles and cowers in the corner.

"No!" I yell as I bolt toward him. I grab onto his arm that holds the leash. "You leave her alone, you fucking monster."

Hellman cocks his free arm and swings at me, the back of his hand catching across my cheekbone. The hit is hard enough that I stumble and fall onto my knees on the tile floor.

Fuck, that hurt.

By the time I'm lurching up, he has the leash on Princess and is dragging her across the floor. She's terrified, trying to jerk away.

"NO!" I launch myself at him again, so furious at this bully that I want to pummel his face in with my fists. I feel strong enough to do it, too, but he swats me away like a gnat.

I reach for his arm again, intent on biting the shit out of him when he wheels on me. "You're fucking batshit crazy, lady." He swings again, slapping me open palmed across the face.

My bell is rung good and truly, and my legs buckle as my vision dims. I stagger, grab hold of the counter, and watch helplessly as Hellman drags Princess to the swinging door.

"No," I bleat pathetically as I try to run toward them. My legs give way as my head spins and spins and spins. I fall face-first to the floor, the impact clacking my teeth together.

Lifting onto hands and knees, I take a few deep breaths before I attempt to stand. It's like I'm drunk. My face is on fire from the slap, my cheekbone stings with a new bruise, and my jaw hinge throbs.

I stagger to the swinging door, through it, and to the glass door leading out. Hellman's vehicle is pulling out of the parking lot, and Princess is lost to me.

CHAPTER 17

Kellen

I stand ramrod straight, hands clasped in front of me. I hate the fucking black suit I

have to wear, but my job today for this small VIP affair is to look like I'm protection. I've even got the earpiece so I can communicate with Ladd, on assignment with me.

He walks the opposite perimeter of the room, looking serious and imposing. He never cracked a smile when I told him a dirty joke five minutes ago, but I heard the snort through the earpiece.

This event doesn't require our security services. But it's a young congressman freshly elected, and he loves taking advantage of the perks that come with the job. Because he's low on the totem pole and doesn't rate high enough for government protection during a private luncheon with lobbyists, he raided some slush fund to hire Jameson. According to Kynan, this is done all the time. "Be prepared to take these boring assignments. They pay the electric bill."

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:07 am

In addition to the luncheon today, Ladd and I will be escorting the congressman to a black-tie gala tonight, then the job is done.

Of course, this particular assignment wasn't given to me. I volunteered after turning down an opportunity to work a black ops mission running out of our embassy in Turkey. We were going to be joining forces with a Navy SEAL team to facilitate a hostage exchange.

Under ordinary circumstances, I would've jumped at that job. But with Abby a part of my life now, and since Hellman has proven to be a psychopath who's willing to kill innocent animals, I'm afraid to go too far away. Bebe has assured me she's working as hard as she can to follow money trails, and she even sent me an encouraging text this morning that she was "on to something."

We'll see.

I step from the private dining room to stand just outside the doorway. If someone wanted to rush in and attack the congressman, they'd have to get through me. But the only thing set out before me are tables of lunch patrons chatting amiably as they eat.

I pull my phone from my breast pocket for a quick look at my texts. And yes, I'm looking to see if Abby sent anything. We've consistently texted every day when we're not together. Sometimes they're funny quips, sometimes they're dirty, and other times, it's sweet.

My favorites are notes along the lines of Just thinking of you, or Hope you're having a great day.

The tripping of my heart when I see Abby has indeed messaged should be all the indication I need that I'm falling hard for this girl. I grin as I start to read, but the smile slides right off my face.

I don't want you to worry, but Levi Hellman came into the clinic today. He took Princess. I couldn't stop him. I'm fine and I've not called the police since she's technically his dog. I'll fill you in later when you can talk.

Rage builds inside me that Hellman would do something so bold when I warned him to stay away. It was ballsy, given the clear evidence that we've added security cameras, but he obviously didn't care.

That's how sure he was of himself that Abby wouldn't call the police.

"Fuck," I mutter, leaning right and looking into the room. Ladd's gaze comes to mine, and I hold up my phone, indicating I need to make a call and then flash him five fingers—I need five minutes.

He gives me a thumbs-up, and I step away from the private dining hall into an alcove. I can still see the doorway but have a bit of privacy.

I dial Abby, and there's surprise in her voice when she answers. "Why are you calling? Aren't you working?"

"I'm on a break, but you didn't think I'd call when I got your text?"

She sighs. "I really didn't want to bother you. I'm fine."

But that right there... I hear something in her tone. A slight crack in the confidence. "Abby... what's wrong? Did he do something?"

“Yeah, he took Princess, and I couldn’t stop it.” Her voice quavers. “I’m upset she’s back in that hellhole and I can’t get her out. I love that dog. But otherwise, I’m fine. You’ll be back tomorrow morning, and we can discuss it, but there’s really nothing you can do. Princess isn’t yours.”

“Ours,” I correct her.

“Ours,” she whispers back. “Please... go back to work. Don’t worry about me.”

“Okay.” My tone is breezy and accepting. “We can talk about it tomorrow.”

We disconnect, and I immediately call Kynan. No fucking way am I accepting what she told me. She’s more than just upset about Princess—she’s shaken up about something else.

Kynan answers, and I need to make this as succinct as possible. “I’m seeing a woman—her name is Abby—she’s a local vet.”

“So I’ve heard. You need to bring her to the next get-together.”

“I will. But she’s gotten herself into a bit of trouble, and I need to get back sooner rather than later. I think Ladd can handle this assignment—”

“We’ve been paid for two agents, and two agents is what they’ll get. However, tell me what the trouble is, and I’ll help you figure it out.”

I don’t have much time, so I lay it out straight. I tell him about meeting Abby and Hellman, about me taking Princess, stopping Abby from sneaking back onto Hellman’s property to take more dogs and getting shot at, and the barn fire.

“That’s why you needed a recommendation for barn repairs?” he asks.

“Yeah... but I thought it was over. I went out to his place, and I impressed upon him it’s in his best personal interest to stay away from Abby.”

“Did you draw blood?”

“Yes.”

Kynan curses and asks more questions, focusing on how this hasn’t made it to the police yet.

“Abby stole Princess, and he shot at us. We both stand to get in trouble, so the police aren’t an option, especially since Abby has an arrest.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:07 am

“She what?” Kynan exclaims.

I tell him about her protests in front of Pet World, the restraining order, and the subsequent arrest. Kynan actually chuckles, but he gets my point why our hands are tied.

“I’m worried he’s going to do something else to Abby,” I say, the ultimate reason for my call.

“But he has the dog back,” Kynan points out.

“And nothing has happened to him. I think that will make him bolder. He hates Abby. I just have a bad feeling he’s not done with her. Can you send someone to stay with her until I get back?”

Kynan gusts a breath of frustration. “I’ll switch out with you. I’ll send Bebe over now to stay with her and put Malik outside to watch over things. Then I’ll head your way and cover the evening dinner, and you can come back here to handle whatever you need to handle.”

Christ, that’s overly generous, but I don’t hesitate to take him up on it. I also tell him he’s the best boss ever.

?

I don’t tell Abby I’m returning early, and I’ve asked Bebe not to say anything. I only sent Abby a text that said I would feel better with people there to watch over her, and

she didn't argue. I have no clue if they told her that Malik would be there watching the perimeter.

It's going on six o'clock by the time I pull up to Dr. Schoen's property. The clinic is closed, all the lights off, and Bebe's car sits behind Abby's in the driveway. I don't see Malik or his car at all, but I know he's around. When I pull my SUV beside Abby's, I shoot him a quick text. Thanks for watching over her. You can head out.

His response is simple—just a thumbs-up emoji.

Slinging my duffel over my shoulder, I trot up the stairs, readying the key to her apartment. I've had a key since the fire as Bubba, Princess, and I have been staying here with her.

My chest squeezes painfully at the thought of Princess, the sweetest girl, now back in the hands of that monster.

I slip my key in the lock, turn the knob, and walk in. My gaze lands on Bebe and Abby sitting at the small kitchen table, and I'm surprised to see Bebe's fiancé, Griff, on the couch surfing his phone. Griff doesn't work for Jameson and is, in fact, FBI. But he's not here in any official capacity. I suspect he just wants to be near Bebe.

Abby jumps up from the chair and exclaims, "Kellen... what are you doing here?"

I don't get a chance to answer her as Bubba barrels at me from the far side of the couch. I drop my duffel and squat in front of Bubba, giving him attention. I'm sure he's sad and confused that Princess is gone.

When Abby reaches me, I stand, prepared to pull her into my arms to console her. I know she's sad too.

But I freeze as I look at her face and take in the bruise on her cheekbone. I reach out to touch it and then pull back. “What the fuck is that?”

At first, she looks confused, then presses her fingertips to her face. “Oh, just a small bruise.”

“From what?” My voice bristles with anger.

Abby cuts a glance at Bebe who shrugs and says, “Might as well tell him everything.”

My eyes move back to Abby. “What’s there to tell?”

“Well,” she drawls hesitantly, “it got a little dodgy with Levi Hellman today.”

“Dodgy? You said he came into the clinic, leashed up Princess, and left. You said you were fine, but you’ve got a fucking bruise on your face. Did he do that to you?”

Abby wrings her hands. “It’s nothing, really.”

“Did he fucking hit you, Abby?” My words are sharp, and she flinches.

And then she lifts her chin, stubbornly refusing to answer me.

There’s more than one way to get the information I want, so I move over to the laptop I’d set up on the kitchen counter when I installed the surveillance equipment. It records everything.

Abby gasps as she understands what I’m about to do. She scurries after me, grabs my shirt, and attempts to stop my momentum. “Don’t, Kellen. It’s only going to make you mad—”

My head whips her way, and I pin her with a glare that has her hand falling away and her mouth snapping shut.

I navigate to the recorded files that are date and time stamped. I easily locate the clinic cameras, including one in the lobby and one in the examination area.

Abby called me today at about quarter after twelve, so I go back ten minutes and easily locate the front lobby. I watch Levi stroll in with a leash in one hand and that fucking gun on his hip.

I move to the camera in the exam room, cue it up to the right spot, and hit play.

Page 60

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:07 am

My teeth clench so hard, I'm afraid they'll crack. There's no audio, but I don't need it to understand what's going on. I see Abby running to the swinging door but not making it in time. She scrambles back as Levi comes through. Princess cowers in the corner, and Abby moves in front of her.

Bubba is baring his teeth, and Abby—fucking Abby steps in between Levi's raised gun and my dog. I tap the button to stop the video.

Slowly, I twist to look at her, and her gaze drops. "Are you stupid? You stepped in his line of fire?"

Abby looks reticent for about one second and then glares at me. "I wasn't about to let him shoot Bubba."

I snarl a curse word at her and turn back to the video. I watch the rest of it play out. Hellman clearly threatened Bubba again, and Abby led him to a kennel. She then tried to physically stop Hellman, and he backhanded her. A low rumble of fury rises through my chest. She goes after him again, and he smacks her open palmed, hard enough to send her to the floor.

That's all I need to see. The video is still rolling as I push away from the counter and head for the door. "I'm going to kill him."

Abby yells. "Wait! No!"

Her hands are at my shirt again, trying to hold me back, and she's no more bothersome than a fly buzzing around me.

But Griff moves quickly, and he's at the door, blocking my exit. "Sorry, dude... can't let you go commit murder. You know, being a federal officer and all."

"Get the fuck out of my way. I warned him what would happen if he came near Abby again."

Griff crosses his arms over his chest.

"Kellen, please," Abby wails, moving between me and Griff. She places her hands on my chest, and I look down at her. "It is not worth getting in trouble. And if you go there and hurt him, you'll get in trouble."

That only infuriates me more. I can't palm her cheek because I don't want to hurt her, so I take her by the chin. "He put hands on you. He hit you... twice. He aimed a gun at you. Now, I can't involve the police because you had stolen property, and that will come out. But I can sure as shit make him regret what he did."

"I'm begging you not to, Kellen." Abby pleads with her eyes and then throws her arms around my waist, burying her face in my chest. "Please... I don't want anything to happen to you. Not when I just found you."

Fuck. That's dirty, but I find myself wrapping my arms around her to provide comfort. I look over her head at Griff, and he's shaking his head with a grin. His expression seems to say, "Women are pure evil genius when it comes to shit like that."

"Justice needs to be served," I grumble. It won't come through the court system, so the only thing I know to do is deliver pain.

"Actually, I might have a way to give you two justice without needing to lay a hand on Hellman," Bebe says from the kitchen table. She's been unperturbed by my

explosion and the drama going on at the door. Leaning forward, she taps away on her keyboard. “Hellman’s got bank accounts in the Caymans. It’s a lot of money. Far more than he’d ever make breeding dogs.”

“How much?” I ask, turning toward her, my arm slipping around Abby’s waist.

“He claims around three hundred thousand a year from the breeding operations, but he’s got over seven million spread among four accounts in the Caymans. The deposits range from fifty thousand to two hundred thousand at a time and extend back at least four years.”

“He’s into something dirty,” Griff says, his interest as a law enforcement officer piqued. He moves behind Bebe and looks over her shoulder at the screen.

“Definitely,” she agrees. “But I can’t tell what. We’re going to need to get a little creative.”

“How creative?” I ask.

“I would suggest planting a tracker on his car and following his movements. I’d plant listening devices in his house.”

“And I’m leaving and not listening to this,” Griff says as he straightens, arms outstretched. He pivots and walks out the door.

Bebe doesn’t spare him a glance, but Abby looks up at me with a frown. “Why did he leave?”

“Because what Bebe’s suggesting isn’t legal, and he can’t be part of it.”

“Oh,” Abby says, and then her eyes sparkle at the thought of doing something

underhanded to investigate Hellman. “I’m up for anything. We can sneak—”

“Yeah.” I clap my hand over Abby’s mouth and pull her back into my chest, wrapping another arm around her waist to hold her in place. “You are absolutely not going to do anything of the sort. You’re going to stay away from that asshole.”

Page 61

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:07 am

“I’m thinking Ladd and Jackson can handle it,” Bebe says thoughtfully as she stretches. “Kynan will have to sign off.”

“Will he?” Because I’m the new guy on the block, and although Kynan is cool as fuck and did me a solid, we’re talking—at the very least—breaking and entering to plant devices. Of course, anything we get won’t be admissible, but we only need enough to get the police interested.

Bebe nods. “Kynan will absolutely approve this. We take care of our own.”

My hand slips from Abby’s mouth, and she gazes up at me. I’m new to Jameson and she’s new to me, and yet, they’re considering us both part of the Jameson family.

And family takes care of each other.

CHAPTER 18

Abby

It’s been two days since Levi took Princess, in the process hitting and bruising me, and since Kellen returned to discover Levi’s handiwork.

I think Kellen has finally calmed down enough that I don’t have to remind him continually of the promise he made not to go after Hellman.

It’s helped that Bebe has reported to Kellen—who shared with me—that she’s getting some “good stuff” on the creep. That, more than anything, seemed to lessen Kellen’s

anger from overflowing rage to a low simmer of fury. However, if those two cross paths, I'm not so sure he'll be able to restrain himself.

Just last night, we were eating dinner at my table—Kellen is staying at my apartment until this is resolved—and he went off on a rant about Hellman.

“You never, ever strike a woman,” he snarled as he took in the bruise on my cheekbone. It's fading nicely, now green with a tinge of yellow. “I don't care what the circumstances are.”

I twirled spaghetti on my fork, and not to make light of anything but because I was truly curious, I asked, “What if a woman is coming at a man with a knife, trying to stab him?”

“He'd better fucking figure a way to defuse the situation without hitting her, or he better take off running and stay out of her reach.”

My fork paused halfway to my mouth as Kellen angrily stabbed at his salad. I know he was recalling with vivid clarity the video—he watched it at least four times—of Hellman striking me.

His gaze lifted with his fork—lettuce, cucumber, and a dangling red onion—held aloft as he stared at me staring at him.

“What?” he asked.

“You really mean that, don't you? That a man should figure another way?”

“Always,” he said. “Men who hit women are pussies because it makes them feel better about themselves.”

I smiled at him with a flush of fondness and admiration. “I didn’t realize you were such a crusader against violence toward women.”

“I wasn’t,” he said, and I jolted in surprise. “Not until you got hit, then it suddenly became very important to me.”

Butterflies erupted in my stomach. It wasn’t just his words, but how he said them. As if I’m a revelation somehow. We went on to talk about the way he was raised—in a loving, secure, and nonviolent household—and that his father always drilled into him respect for women.

We talked about how my upbringing was very similar. Lots of love and security, yes, but there was also duty to our heritage and commitment to legacy.

Regardless, I had to admit, it was superhot that he wanted revenge for what Hellman did to me, though ultimately, I begged Kellen not to retaliate. I told him I understood his anger, and Hellman deserves it for sure, but I just couldn’t bear if anything happened to him.

That resulted in a one-way ticket from the table to the bed where Kellen showed me all the ways he’s possessively enamored with me. He’s a man who channels emotion through action, and let me just say, that’s not a bad thing.

Like now.

We’re on the dance floor, and I’m in his arms. We sway slowly, cocooned in each other, oblivious to everyone around us.

Griff and Bebe’s nuptials were beautiful, and I was surprised when she cried, which made me cry. To my astonishment, Kellen pulled out a pack of travel tissues and handed me one.

“Such a Boy Scout,” I murmured as I dabbed at my eyes.

Now it’s party time, and the huge ballroom is studded with tables that seat eight each, buffet tables loaded with amazing food, an open bar, and a pretty damn good DJ.

“Thank you for inviting me.” I tip my head and look up at Kellen. “I rarely get to put on a fancy dress.”

Kellen glances down at my jade-green strapless number. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything more beautiful. I’m glad you came,” he says with a lopsided smile. “But I can’t wait to get you home and out of that dress.”

“We could sneak off to the unisex bathroom,” I suggest. I have to admit, Kellen can rock jeans and a sweatshirt, but Kellen in a dark suit has me hot and bothered. He’s got the total James Bond vibe going.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:07 am

Kellen groans and pulls me back into him. “Don’t even suggest that. I’d probably do it.”

We sway silently for a bit, and then he says, “I didn’t go to Dozer’s wedding. I was still in California wrapping things up. It’s nice to have everyone together in one place.”

“It’s pretty incredible that so many of the company could come,” I remark, given what I know about Jameson and how they work all over the world.

“Bebe picked a date far enough out that Kynan was able to maneuver jobs and contracts so that most could attend. She’s the heart and soul of this group.”

“I can see that.” I glance over at Bebe and Griff sitting at the main table, laughing, their heads tipped close. “I’ve been to a few weddings in my time, and I’m not sure I’ve ever seen a happier bride.”

Griff says something to her, and Bebe’s smile goes from radiant to soft, as if he just shared the most precious secret in the world.

The groom looks at his bride like the world would end without her.

“Bebe’s had a hard life,” Kellen says as he slowly spins me. “She deserves happiness.”

“I notice she doesn’t have any family here, other than her mom and son.”

Whereas Griff has a ton, along with a lot of personal friends. All of Bebe's are from Jameson.

"Did she tell you about her past?" he asks.

"Not really. I spent the majority of the time talking to Griff as Bebe had her face glued to the computer screen."

"Bebe was in prison before she came to Jameson." I wasn't expecting that, and I stumble. Kellen's strong arms keep me upright, and he uses the opportunity to draw me closer. "She got sent away for a very long time for hacking into our country's nuclear code database."

I gasp. "Tell me you're kidding."

"Not kidding. But she only did it because the Russian Mafia threatened to kill her son. They were going to sell the codes to the Chinese. She accessed the codes as they asked, but she laid a trail of digital bread crumbs leading them to her so she'd get arrested before the codes could be downloaded. She did what they asked to save her son but protected our country by making sure the codes never got out."

My heart squeezes for Bebe. "She sacrificed herself."

"She did. But Kynan busted her out of prison to come work for him." I stumble again, but Kellen holds me up without missing a step. "He did it through legal channels. Called in a very big favor through the federal government."

"Was Griff involved in the case?"

"No. He was actually contracted to kill her—"

“What the fuck?” I whisper harshly, throwing a glance over my shoulder at Griff.

No way.

Kellen laughs and places a finger over my lips. “Let me finish the story. Griff was working undercover, trying to bring down some Russian mafioso on a completely different case. To test his loyalty, they sent him to take her out after they learned she’d gotten out of prison.”

“Well, clearly he didn’t kill her,” I drawl.

“Clearly.”

“You work for a strange group of people.”

“The stories I could tell you would probably have you running away.”

“Never would I run from you,” I vow. Kellen slides his hand to the back of my neck, and he kisses me hard.

He lifts his mouth and grins. “Let me fill you in on everyone.”

Over the next two hours, we dance, hang with his coworkers, who really are more like family, eat good food, and toast with champagne, all while he tells me story after story.

I’m shocked by many of them, and I find myself jabbing him in the ribs when we’re alone just to clarify certain facts.

“Jackson is engaged to a real-life princess?”

“Let me get this straight... Sin and Saint were jewel thieves?”

“Wait... Barrett is the president’s niece? She’s the one who’s pregnant, right? And she got kidnapped and then rescued by Cruce?”

“I can’t believe you didn’t tell me that Kynan is married to the Joslyn Meyers. She’s only my favorite actress in the world.”

“Dozer worked for NASA—like, he’s a rocket scientist?”

It goes on and on and only serves to make me realize how special this diverse group is.

And what a great leader they have in Kynan McGrath. He takes chances on people. He bends rules to protect those who mean something to him. He thinks outside the box, and he’s never afraid to take on a fight.

“You’re really lucky to have landed a job at Jameson,” I tell him.

“I am,” Kellen admits. “Luckier to have met you.”

A thrum of joy skitters over my heart. Kellen is so free with his words and emotions, I know I’m truly the lucky one.

Bebe and Griff do all the standard wedding stuff. He pulls off and pops her garter from his finger, which practically smacks Ladd in the face. When the bouquet is tossed, Anna catches it, which is wasted prophecy since she and Malik recently got engaged during a hot-air balloon ride.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:07 am

It's not just Bebe and Griff setting the tone for relationship contentment. I've watched everyone here carefully, and all the Jameson couples are so into each other.

Just like I'm into Kellen.

He's like no other man I've ever dated or been with.

He's absolutely the real deal.

We're sitting with Malik and Anna when Ladd approaches. He puts a hand on Kellen's shoulder and bends to speak to him. Kellen's eyebrows rise, and then Ladd nods toward me.

Kellen stands and holds out his hand. "Kynan wants to talk to us."

I excuse myself, and we follow Ladd out of the ballroom and into the hallway where Kynan waits. He cuts a dashing figure in his tuxedo, heightened by his crisp British accent.

"Hellman?" Kellen asks as we approach.

Kynan nods and looks to Ladd, who lays it out. "We aren't picking up anything of use from the devices I planted in his home, but the tracker on his car showed some encouraging data. He visited a house over in East Allegheny."

"I don't know where that is," Kellen says.

“It’s one of the more unsavory parts of Pittsburgh,” I say.

Ladd nods. “And the house in particular is in a well-known drug area.”

“He’s dealing?” Kellen asks incredulously.

“Well, one would assume,” Kynan replies. “Based on that info, I’ve had two agents casing the house over the last twenty-four hours.”

“And?”

“And,” Ladd says, taking over the story, “it’s not drugs being run out of there but women.”

I frown as I consider what that means. “Prostitutes?”

That I can see more so than Levi dealing drugs.

“Worse,” Ladd says, eyes coming to me. “Women who don’t want to be used for sex.”

My eyes double. “Sex trafficking. But how is Hellman involved?”

“No clue,” Kynan admits. “We only know his car went there once in the last two days. Given the large sums he’s got in foreign accounts, I’m guessing he’s heading up the operation. But we don’t have nearly enough to turn this over to the police. We need to keep watch.”

Kellen nods in understanding, my mind whirling with implications. If this guy is involved in any way with sex trafficking, particularly with unwilling victims, he’s going away for a long time.

At least, that's how it works in the movies.

It could be the way to get his breeding operation shut down. Bebe had said he has no partners in that enterprise and his sons are minors, so without him at the helm, it would probably fold.

"Put me on the schedule to watch," Kellen says, and I jolt, my fingers squeezing his. I'm prepared to lobby against this idea, but Kynan beats me to the punch.

"Not going to happen." He shakes his head. "You're too emotionally involved."

"I'm not."

But he is. He's too emotional about what Hellman did to me.

Kynan's voice is slightly patronizing. "You were going to kill him two days ago, and we both know if Griff hadn't been there to stop you, you would have."

"I can control myself," Kellen says through gritted teeth.

Kynan appraises him a moment. "Maybe. But I don't think we should discount the danger that Hellman presents to Abby. The motherfucker is bold, walking into that clinic and taking the dog back, especially knowing there are cameras recording him. He's got an overinflated ego, and because he gets away with repeat violations at his puppy mill, he thinks he's untouchable. You add in the fact that he's potentially culling victims and processing them through that house to be sold into sex trafficking, are you really willing to leave Abby alone?"

My blood chills at this prospect. Would Hellman be the type to have me abducted and sold into captivity?

“Surely not,” I say, my voice confident because I need someone to tell me that’s a very low possibility.

“Sex trafficking is a multibillion-dollar enterprise,” Ladd says.

“Granted,” Kynan says, giving me a respectful nod, “you’re not the typical victim. They usually lure runaways from the streets and get them hooked on drugs to make them compliant, but somehow, I think Hellman would relish bringing you under his boot heel.”

Kellen growls low in his throat, like an animal issuing warning over his territory. “I’d like to request a leave of absence until this is over. I can’t leave Abby alone. Even if chances are slim that Hellman would be so ballsy, I can’t risk it.”

My head whips his way, and I note that Kellen looks slightly pale. His eyes come to mine, and he manages a smile. “I cannot risk losing you.”

Kynan shakes his head. “Request denied.”

“But—”

“You’ll stay on payroll and do other work remotely. I’ve got plenty to keep you busy and earning your paycheck.”

“Thank you.” Kellen nods once. “That’s generous. And I know I’ve offered before, but I’m more than willing to pay for the agents tracking Hellman. I don’t expect Jameson to do this for free.”

“We don’t charge for our services for team members.” Kynan’s tone is curt and almost offended. “We take care of our own.”

Page 64

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:07 am

“But I’m not one of yours,” I say. I’m touched by his words, but I feel awful everyone is going to such lengths for me.

Kynan levels a look that says he means business. “You are Kellen’s, and Kellen is one of ours, so you are too.”

My skin prickles and my chest warms. I’m Kellen’s.

I’m humbled, more than I think I’ve ever been.

I also might be a little lovesick over this man holding my hand, calling in a cavalry to bring down my nemesis, putting his neck on the line for me.

Kellen offers a hand to Kynan, and they shake. “I don’t know how I got so lucky as to land a place here, but I thank God every fucking day for it. You know you have my loyalty for life.”

I’m so moved that I fling my arms around Kynan and hug him. He chuckles and pats my back.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you.”

“We got you,” he murmurs before releasing me to Kellen.

We enter the ballroom to the starting notes of “Unchained Melody,” and rather than going to sit with Anna and Malik, Kellen leads me to the dance floor.

He pulls me in close, his mouth next to my ear. “I think the end is near for Levi Hellman, and that son of a bitch will pay for everything he’s done.”

“I can’t believe it.” I snuggle into Kellen as we sway, our feet barely moving, more hug than dance. “I mean, I can believe that about him. He’s evil. But to think he could actually go to prison? That would shut down the mill, which will never happen otherwise. The laws suck when it comes to protecting animals.”

“If there’s incriminating evidence, we’ll find it.”

“And you’ll turn it over to the police?”

“FBI. It’ll be federal since the women are most likely transported across state lines. Kynan will inform Griff about what’s going on, and they’ll be ready to move in.”

“I’ll need to be ready.” I pull back to look up at him. “To go in and save all those animals. If Hellman topples, there will be hundreds of sick dogs to treat and work to get adopted. It’ll be a massive undertaking, and I’ll be damned if a single one gets euthanized.”

“Jesus,” Kellen mutters. “I never even thought of that.”

The prospect that a potential rescue could happen for all those animals causes an excited humming through my veins. “I’ve got a huge network of vets who will volunteer their time for medical care. We can get adoption networks from other states to help. They can mobilize foster families and transportation volunteers. I can totally handle it.”

“You’re amazing.” Kellen bends and presses his lips to mine.

It’s a sweet kiss, but my hand curls behind his neck. I tilt my head, open my mouth,

and slide my tongue against his.

Kellen groans and nips my lower lip. “Want to get out of here?” he breathes into me.

“And do what?” I ask primly, as I nibble along his jaw.

“Everything.” He rubs his nose along mine in a moment of pure tenderness laced with promise. “Going to do everything to you.”

CHAPTER 19

Kellen

Something cold and wet nudges my arm, interrupting my sleep. I slowly open my eyes, note the brightness in the room, and realize I’ve slept in much later than I normally do.

An early-morning person not by nature but thanks to the Marine Corps, I’m usually up and sipping coffee by six a.m. But sleeping with Abby puts me in such a comforting slumber, I’m near comatose when the sun rises.

Bubba’s nose pokes at me, an indication that his bladder is as full as it can get.

I disentangle myself from Abby’s arms and legs as we somehow sleep just fine all tangled up. She groans and rolls over, burying her head under a pillow. She’s off today, and good thing after the extra champagne last night at the wedding.

After dressing, I open the door to let Bubba into the backyard, and step onto the deck behind him. It doesn’t feel right without Princess here. I loved watching her explore the confines within the fence. She never saw the fence as a prison, though, because she was used to living in a small cage. She would walk around and sniff practically

every blade of grass in wonder.

Honestly, it's times like this when I'm watching Bubba do his doggy things that I miss Princess the most. I don't know how that girl got wound up so tight in our hearts in such a short time, but she did. Probably because she's a survivor, and I'm beyond sick every time I imagine her back in Hellman's possession. No matter what happens to that asshole, I'm getting our dog back.

Our dog.

Mine and Abby's.

Ours together.

Definitely thinking long term with this woman. I never looked way down the road with Adriana. We just... were.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:07 am

With Abby, I spend time thinking about what we'll look like years into the future if we stay together. We both love to travel, and I think it would be fun to take off spontaneously whenever the desire hit us. When we retire, maybe get an RV and drive the country. Go to another country, get an RV, and drive around there, seeing all the sights.

And I've thought of buying land here in western Pennsylvania, someplace where Abby can have a barn, and maybe she'd teach me to ride. We could even run a dog rescue.

I think about children with her, and I hope they all get her beautiful dark hair and radiant green eyes.

I'm not sure if it's completely fucked up, but I know Abby and I would make great parents, and the prospect of having a family unit that's more than just me, her, and the dogs is almost too appealing. Like I want to take her hand and both of us run right off the cliff of life without any thought to whether this is too soon or a good idea or if we're being impulsive.

During the descent, we'd do everything together.

We'd build a life.

I fucking want that with her. She is so singularly unique and has every bit of me mesmerized, I actually can't see a way forward without her.

Christ... if I told her that, she'd probably think I was a psychopath.

Laughing at my own internal debate, I ask Bubba, “What do you think of Abby?”

My dog doesn’t bother looking at me. Instead, he walks in circles with his nose to the ground until he finds the perfect spot to shit.

“Don’t play coy,” I tease while he does his business. “You’re as into her as I am.”

After I clean up Bubba’s deposit, feed him, and wash my hands, I head back to my bedroom. Abby’s position has not changed in the last fifteen minutes.

My clothes hit the floor, and I slip under the covers to spoon up against her. She’s warm and smells sweet, and she makes a little purring sound as she wiggles her naked ass against me.

“You awake?” I run a hand along the outside of her leg, then across her stomach to pull her in closer.

“Mmm,” she replies, and I can hear a smile in that wordless affirmation.

“How’s your head?”

“Okay,” she murmurs, still with a smile, her voice laced with morning huskiness.

“What do you want to do today?” It’s Sunday, and the weather forecast looks fantastic.

Abby stretches and then rolls over toward me. I shift my position as she snuggles in close, but she keeps her head tipped so she can see my face. “I sort of wanted to go to a flea market.”

I frown... even grimace a little. I fucking hate shopping. I try to wipe the look off my

face, because I want to spend the day with Abby, but she sees it.

Laughing, she gives a little shake of her head. “Not to shop, I promise.”

My frown deepens. “Then what does one do at a flea market?”

Abby smiles, slips an arm around my waist, and trails her fingers down my spine, which is a bit distracting. “Flea markets are a great place to sell mill puppies.”

I cock an eyebrow at her. “You’re not going to try to steal them, are you?”

Abby glares at me and pinches my ass, which makes my cock twitch. “No, I’m not going to steal them. I’m going to treat them. Most will have skin or eye infections because of the horrible conditions in which they’re raised. I go around and offer free treatment, and most will accept it.”

My eyes roam over her face, consider her lips a moment, but merely hold her close. “You’re a fucking saint, you know that?”

She gives me an offended look. “I most certainly am not.”

“Total saint. I see the glow of a halo above your head now.”

“Hmm,” she hums low as she pulls her bottom lip between her teeth. “Would a saint do this?”

Before I can comprehend the question, her hand is between our bodies, her delicate fingers encircling my dick.

It jumps in response.

She squeezes.

“Fuck,” I groan as I close my eyes. She strokes me, and I swell under her touch.

“Not so saintlike now, am I?” she murmurs in an evil, impish voice that promises dark delight, and I get harder yet.

“On your back, Mr. McCord,” she commands, her hand gone from my dick and now at my chest to give me a shove.

I don’t mind getting pushed around. I flop to my back and then immediately arch as Abby takes me in hand again and strokes me hard.

“Definitely not a saint,” I mutter.

“Too rough for you?” she taunts, easing up.

That’s a challenge, and my hand curls around hers, making her grip me harder. “Do your worst.”

“Oh, you don’t know what you’re getting yourself into,” she whispers softly and leans over for a soft kiss.

Page 66

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:07 am

Just seconds ago, I was digging a little pain with my pleasure, but I immediately fall head over heels for this woman with the sweet touch of her lips on mine while she tenderly rubs a thumb over the head of my cock.

Lifting up, Abby gazes down at me with dreamy eyes. “Lie back and enjoy, baby.”

She starts to shift downward, and I know her intent is to put that hot, wet mouth on me. But my hand snakes out and curls around her neck to hold her in place for a second.

Our eyes lock.

“I need you to know I’m fucking crazy about you, Abby.”

Her eyes soften, and she tilts her head curiously.

“I just needed to say that now, because words to that effect are bound to come babbling out of me if you put your lips anywhere near my dick. And, well... I just want you to know I mean it, whether you’re touching me or not.”

Abby’s smile splits wide and her eyes sparkle. “That might be the sweetest thing anyone has ever said to me in my life.”

She again moves to slink away, her eyes going to my erection now throbbing in her hand.

I grip her neck a little tighter, holding her in place. Her attention comes back to me.

“I’m serious. I’m utterly fucking mad for you. Just being near you makes my heart slam inside my chest, and the smell of your shampoo makes me hard, and the sound of your voice causes me to shiver with excitement.”

I don’t have time for regrets as Abby scrambles up my chest and kisses me. Deep and slow, but then she puts her lips to the corner of my mouth. Then my cheek. My temple.

She lifts her head. “I’m fucking crazy about you too. My world changed for the better the day I met you.”

Our eyes lock, and we just stare at each other. The moment feels heavy, but not in a bad way. Like in a weighted blanket of comfort way.

She’s the one who breaks the spell. “Now... if you don’t mind... I’d really like to make you come with my mouth.”

My head flops back onto the pillow with a curse.

I’m pretty sure she’s going to kill me.

At the first touch of her tongue along the underside of my cock, I think that if she’s going to kill me, this is absolutely the way to go.

?

I walk into the kitchen to find Abby at the stove, flipping bacon in a skillet. She’s wearing one of my T-shirts that swamps her body. Her hair is an absolute mess, mainly because my fingers were gripping onto it half an hour ago while she gave me the best fucking blow job I’ve ever had.

I think I'm recharged enough that it's worth putting the bacon on hold to bend her over the kitchen table and—

My doorbell rings, and Abby twists to look over her shoulder. She sees me and smiles.

I smile back... a little too goofily.

I throw my thumb over my shoulder. "Better go answer that."

"Whoever it is, we only have enough bacon for me, you, and Bubba, so don't invite them in for breakfast."

"Got it," I reply as I move to the door. Bubba follows along. I never deter him because while he wouldn't be aggressive with a stranger at first meeting, it's nice for any newcomer to see a dog beside me that looks like he could rip out a throat.

Given that I don't trust Hellman not to have figured out who I am or where I live, I definitely want Bubba at my side.

I'm adequately dressed in a pair of sweats and a T-shirt, so I don't hesitate to open the door.

I'm stunned to see Adriana there. She smiles, but then her eyes drop to Bubba and she pushes inside.

His tail wags furiously as she drops to her knees, giving him the baby talk he loves. Whatever our failures as a couple, she was good to Bubba, and he loves her.

"Oh, look at my big brown fur bear monster," she coos as she wraps her arms around his neck for a hug, then rubs his ears. Bubba's eyes practically roll into the back of

his head with pleasure.

Still scratching my dog, Adriana tips her head to look at me. “Hello, Kellen.”

She’s a beautiful woman... all sunny-blond hair, golden, tanned skin, slamming body.

None of that matters because I’m immediately irritated that she’s here. That she would dare show up at my house unannounced and walk in like she—

Fuck... Abby.

My eyes dart to the kitchen, and I see Abby watching cautiously while still at the stove. She’s got a pair of tongs in hand, and I’m not sure if they’re to flip bacon or snap at Adriana.

By the look on her face, I’m thinking the latter.

I’ll quell that look in Abby’s eyes later, but for now, I turn my attention back to the interloper. “What are you doing here, Adriana?”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:07 am

I use her name intentionally so Abby knows who she is. So she at least knows it's not some random woman showing up at my house that could imply she's a past or current hookup.

Adriana stands, reaches into her large purse, and pulls out a manila envelope. "I've got the contract papers for you. Perhaps we can have some coffee and go over them."

Her head turns toward the kitchen, and she even takes a step that way before coming to an abrupt halt when she sees Abby standing there.

She snaps the tongs, and I can't tell if it's reflexively or a threat, but I have to fucking bite back a laugh.

"Who is that?" Adriana asks, her tone scathing and wholly inappropriate, given she's intruded into my home.

My inclination is to take her by the arm and gently, but firmly, escort her right out the door.

Instead, Abby strides forward, utensil in hand. I tense, ready to step between the women if Abby decides to "tong" Adriana, but instead she holds out a hand. "I'm Abigail Blackburn. You're obviously Adriana."

Turning to me, Adriana snaps angrily, ignoring Abby's offer of a handshake. "She knows who I am? Did you tell her about us?"

"Of course I know who you are," Abby replies, and Adriana's head whips back her

way.

I sigh, knowing full well that I'm not going to get a word in at this point. I actually take a step back and cross my arms over my chest. Bubba sits beside me and watches.

Abby smiles sweetly. "You're the woman who cheated on Kellen, causing him to break up with you and leave you in California. Lucky for me."

"It was one drunken indiscretion," Adriana snarls between clenched teeth. "And he wouldn't even give me a chance to discuss it. Wouldn't let me apologize. Just left me behind without a backward glance."

Abby shrugs. "Like I said... lucky me."

I duck my head and bite the inside of my cheek to hold off the smile.

Pointing toward the kitchen with her tongue, Abby says, "Would you like some breakfast?"

"Wait a minute." It's time for me to stop being so quiet. "You said we didn't have enough bacon, Abby... remember?"

"Oh, she can have your share," Abby says, giving me a sugary batting of eyelashes. "I'd just love to sit down with Adriana and update her on your life. I mean, I wouldn't divulge too much... like how we just about broke your bed not half an hour ago. Imagine how embarrassing that would have been if she'd shown up uninvited then."

Damn, that's vicious.

And is it bad I love it?

“Nice,” Adriana snaps, turning her back on Abby to look at me. “You sure know how to pick ’em. Probably from some dive bar. Can we sit somewhere private to discuss this?”

One of the reasons I’m falling for Abby is her confidence. She doesn’t let the insult touch her. Instead, she shrugs again and heads back into the kitchen.

And Bubba’s loyalty is crystal clear when he follows Abby and lies down at her feet, watching me and Adriana.

I stare at my dog and my woman a good long while.

“Kellen,” Adriana says harshly, “can we talk?”

“No.” My gaze comes to hers, and I take her by the elbow as I’d originally considered. “You were not invited here, and we have nothing to talk about.”

I open the door and step onto the porch with her. Only then do I release my hold on her arm and pluck the envelope from her hand. “I’ll read this and get back to you.”

“But—”

“I’m sorry you traveled all this way, Adriana.” I take a moment to look through the open doorway. Abby’s ignoring us. I pull the door shut before turning back. “You didn’t come to talk about the papers. You came for another effort at reconciliation, and I need you to stop. It is never going to happen.”

“Because you can’t find it in your heart to forgive me.” Adriana pouts, and it’s not pretty.

“Because I’ve moved on, and I’m the lucky son of a bitch who has found someone

I'm falling in love with. I'm moving forward with my life, and if you're smart, you'll do the same."

"Did you ever love me?" Her eyes sizzle with anger.

I don't want to hurt her, but I'm going to be truthful. "I'm not sure. Having what I have now, I'm just not sure."

"You're an asshole, Kellen McCord," she hisses and snatches the envelope from me. "You can kiss this agreement goodbye. Sue me."

She whirls on her heel and stomps to what I assume is a rental car parked in my driveway. I watch until she's gone and then return inside.

When I shut the door, Abby gives me a sympathetic look. "Was it horrible?"

I shake my head. "Not for me."

Abby smiles. "How many eggs do you want?"

And just like that, Adriana is forgotten. Abby isn't nosy and demanding to know what was said. She doesn't care if I defended her or held her up in esteem over my ex. She only wants to make sure I was okay, and she moved on.

She's fucking incredible.

"Three," I answer as I move toward her. She moves for the refrigerator, but I grab her arm, spin her into me, and kiss her hard.

When I pull back, she's breathless. "What was that for?"

"Because you're awesome."

Her hand rests against my chest, and she rubs a thumb over my breastbone. "I think you're awesome too."

CHAPTER 20

Abby

For someone who was disdainful of coming to the flea market, Kellen acts like a damn kid in a candy store. He stops at practically every stall to check out the wares for sale.

"Look at these porcelain dolls," he says, holding up one with a chip in the side of its face.

"Creepy."

"It's historical," he says, setting it down gently and giving an apologetic smile to the woman behind the table.

“Hey... look at this,” Kellen says, grabbing my hand and pulling me along. “Lego. I used to love these when I was a kid.”

The vendor has boxes and boxes of Lego sets, some still in their cellophane wrap and others offered ridiculously cheap, but a handwritten sign warns there’s no guarantee all the pieces will be present.

Kellen picks up a sealed box that says Star Wars on it, and I can see it’s a spaceship. Displaying it for me to inspect, he says with genuine reverence, “The Millennium Falcon. And it’s only twenty bucks.”

Kellen thrusts the box at me as he digs for his wallet. He pulls out two tens, gives them to the seller, and beams at me. “Guess what we’re doing tonight?”

“Guess what you’re doing tonight?” I counter with a smirk.

Kellen takes the box from me and hands it to the seller who slides it into a handled paper bag. He then leans into me, his voice low and husky. Shivers dance up my spine. “Help me build the spaceship, and I’ll do that thing with my tongue and your—”

“Okay, fine.” I clap a hand over his mouth because he was loud enough to be heard. “I’ll help.”

He laughs and pulls me in for a rough kiss. “Come on. Let’s see what other treasures await.”

The massive flea market is held at the county fairgrounds the first Sunday of every month from April to October. I let Kellen poke around until I finally lead him to an area near the rear where the puppies are sold.

I have no clue which of these pups, if any, come from Hellman's operation. I know he sells to pet stores, which is far more lucrative, so he might not even mess with this place.

But the puppies sold here come from the same manner of excessive breeding operations. While some breeders might have livable conditions for their animals, most don't and repetitively force their females to birth litters until their poor bodies just wear out.

The pups are always unvaccinated, and because they live in filth, they have a host of gastrointestinal issues, eye infections, and skin rashes. Many are underfed, and because it's a hot end-of-July day, some are dehydrated. These morons don't even provide water for them.

I can't berate these people for it, though. I want them to allow me to treat their animals, so I have to play nice. I've been doing this for so long, I'm actually almost expected to show up when the flea market opens.

The puppy peddlers set up under a huge corrugated metal shelter, and sometimes there are upward of twenty vendors selling dogs. They're all billed as "purebred," and maybe they are. Any buyer gets documentation for registration with the AKC, which is all people seem to care about when they're shelling out five hundred dollars for a Yorkie with feces-matted hair and listless eyes.

"Jesus Christ," Kellen mutters in disgust as we approach the structure.

Card tables sit adjacent to wire exercise pens filled with puppies clamoring for attention. The roof provides shade, and there is electrical hookup. Some of the sellers have fans blowing, not to cool the puppies but themselves.

With a quick count, I note only nine pens set up today. The first one we approach is a

breeder of goldendoodles—not an AKC-recognized breed but a crossbreed so popular, they sell for more than most of the other dogs here.

This breeder has let me treat her pups before, but she doesn't offer a warm welcome. "You bring medicine for the dogs?" she asks without preamble.

"I did," I reply brightly and indicate to Kellen to hand me the large backpack he's been carrying. He puts his bag with his Millennium Falcon on the ground and shrugs off the pack.

From inside, the first thing I do is pull out a pack of silicone travel bowls that flatten for easy storage. I hand one to Kellen and nod toward a water hookup. "Can you go fill this?"

Kellen looks to the pen of sweet goldendoodles who have their paws up on the edge trying to get my attention while a few wrestle in the dirt. His expression communicates that he's stunned to see no water in with them, while the breeder sits in a folding chair with a large iced coffee in hand and a fan clipped to the edge of her chair to blow in her face.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:07 am

“Let’s see what we’ve got here.” I pull out my medical kit and step up to the edge of the pen to take a look.

Six puppies, all with oozing eyes, but they look well fed. Their fur is dirty and they stink, which is typical.

Kellen returns with the water, and he bends over the pen to set it down. The puppies all go running for it, and he ends up holding it for them to drink out of so they don’t knock the bowl over in their rambunctiousness.

One by one, I snag puppies and lift them from the pen. I sit cross-legged on the ground to examine them. I squirt ointment into their gummy eyes and treat the few with fungal infections in between their paw pads.

When I’m done, Kellen and I move to the next setup and repeat the process. He makes sure all the puppies have water in their pens and fills the bowls over and over again while I provide medical attention. We work in silence, unless I have questions for the breeders to help me help the pups. Kellen won’t engage with them, and I can see his anger bubbling under the surface.

The last vendor has golden retriever puppies, and Kellen puts a hand to my lower back as we walk there, giving it a tiny rub. I know he’s thinking of Princess... same as me. These aren’t her puppies, but they probably came from a dog just like her.

I’ve seen a lot of dogs in my lifetime. On our farm, we always had them, as well as many barn cats. But nothing can really beat a golden retriever puppy for cuteness. I treat the ones that need it, and Kellen plays with the others, making himself at home

inside the pen. While we're there, a few people come by, but no one is buying. It's still early, though. The market's only been open for a few hours and the puppies are at the back. Anyone coming to buy a new pet will wait until it's time to go.

When I finish with the last fur ball, I push up from the ground and dust off my pants. Kellen reluctantly sets down a rotund male he's been cuddling and exits the pen.

I stretch my back, feeling a few joints crack.

"How do you feel about an impromptu barbecue at my house? I thought I'd invite some of the Jameson folks over."

That's random, but I'm not averse. "Yeah... sure. Maybe something easy like hamburgers and hot dogs. We can stop at the grocery on the way home."

Kellen's not even listening to me but has his phone out, sending a text. When he's done, he lifts my backpack and slings it over his shoulder.

He pulls his wallet from his pocket and walks over to the seller. "I'll pay you five hundred dollars right now for all the pups."

"Wait! What?" I exclaim, scurrying to his side.

I glance back at the pen, and although I'm well aware of how many dogs are in there, I count again.

Five.

The seller is asking for three hundred apiece, but for the life of me, I can't begin to imagine that Kellen thinks this is a good idea.

I tug at his arm, but he pulls it away from me.

“A thousand,” the seller says, and negotiations ensue.

I watch boggled as Kellen dickers with the guy. They finally agree on eight hundred for all five puppies, and Kellen gets the guy to agree to throw in the pen too.

“What are you going to do with five puppies?” I stammer.

The man grins at me, eyes sparkling. “I’m going to save them. Gotta start somewhere, right?”

This right here... this is the moment I realize I’m hopelessly, deeply, and irrevocably in love with Kellen McCord.

?

We’re able to drive Kellen’s SUV around to the back gate where the puppy pimps are set up. It’s not ideal without a crate to get them home, but he folds his seats flat and drives like a grandma to his house.

The introduction of the pups to Bubba is seamless. He’s such a good boy... curiously gentle as he sniffs them while they run around the backyard.

Kellen pushes me out of the house by handing me his keys and leaving it to me to handle the grocery shopping for the barbecue. I don’t mind—I’m still reeling over him buying the pups. And I’m excited his friends are coming over. I enjoyed meeting them last night at the wedding, putting faces to the names. The women were super nice and inclusive, and I think I made a few new friends.

Kynan told me that I am part of their family now, and as someone who has been

isolated to an extent from family—my doing, admittedly—it's comforting to have this new group willing to welcome me in.

At the store, I get everything needed to grill dogs and burgers, along with sides from the deli counter. I grab beer and soft drinks and three bottles of wine. A quick mental calculation of Kellen's cupboards makes me realize he doesn't have enough plates and utensils, so I go with paper and plastic products, including a sleeve of Solo cups. Last, I hit the bakery and grab cookies and two pies.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:07 am

When I return to Kellen's house, I find him in the front yard with the ex pen set up and the puppies romping around while Bubba lies in the grass, keeping watch. Kellen has one wriggly puppy in a large plastic tub—he's giving it a bath.

God, he's hot. He's wearing a pair of shorts but no shirt. The tattoos covering his muscles ripple as he works shampoo into the pup's filthy coat. He glances up as I park and smiles.

When I grab bags from the rear, Kellen calls out, "Hold on just a second... I'll bring all that in."

"I got it," I reply, heading toward the sidewalk.

While still scrubbing the pup, he twists to look over his shoulder at me with a stern expression. "I said... hold on a second. I'll bring it all in."

"I'm perfectly capable of carrying groceries," I say with an eye roll.

"You did the shopping. I'll do the carrying."

"You're washing the puppies."

"You gave them medical care."

I stop halfway up the sidewalk, smiling at him. "We make a good team."

Kellen grins. "The best." He then picks up the soapy little boy, holds him up before

his face, and asks solemnly, “What do you think? Should I keep Dr. Abby?”

The pup’s feet paddle the air, and he licks the end of Kellen’s nose which makes his hot factor multiply by ten and my ovaries start pulsating.

“What time is everyone coming?” I ask, calculating if perhaps we could work in a quickie.

Kellen sets the dog back in the tub and looks at his watch. “About half an hour.”

Well, crap. Not enough time.

I mean, there is, but we have too much to do yet.

“Why’d you ask?”

I shrug, smiling to myself and heading up the porch. “No reason.”

Within half an hour, Kellen has the puppies reasonably dried off and transferred to the backyard to play, I have the barbecue food laid out on platters and in bowls and the beer and sodas on ice.

Kellen changes clothes, lights up the grill to preheat, and pulls me into a searing kiss just as the doorbell rings with our first guest.

It’s Clay and Corrine with a bottle of wine. She’s the company’s resident psychiatrist, and I wasn’t sure how I felt about learning that Jameson needed such services. I don’t like to think of Kellen doing things that might hurt him emotionally and mentally, but I spent a lot of time talking to Corinne last night at the wedding, and she’s fabulous. I know the Jameson people are in good hands.

Impromptu get-togethers are usually near impossible for this lot under ordinary circumstances, but given that everyone's in town for Bebe and Griff's wedding, we lucked out.

It's amazing that all the Jameson guys are happily tied down, and we have a full house by the time everyone arrives.

Malik and Anna.

Cage and Jaime.

Jackson and Camille. Oh my gosh... a real princess eating burgers with us.

Ladd and Greer.

Kynan and Joslyn. A freaking movie star, and she's so humble.

Dozer and Jessica.

Cruce and Barrett.

The only ones not in attendance are Bebe and Griff, and they get a pass since they're headed to St. Lucia for an extended honeymoon. Sin and Saint also couldn't come, but they have a newborn to swoon over.

When we're all assembled on the back deck—but before Kellen throws the meat on the grill—we welcome and thank everyone for coming on such short notice. A beer in hand and his arm around my waist, Kellen says, "I'm so grateful to have this crew at my back. I've not been here long, but the bonds are tight, and I hope we can do many more of these get-togethers in the future."

He holds up his beer, his sentiment echoed around the group.

“I do have a nefarious scheme in mind, however,” he continues, and I tip my head to look at him curiously. Whatever this is, I’m not privy to it. “You’ve all noticed the puppies out in the yard.”

All heads turn that way, and I giggle as I see one of the pups, belly up in front of Bubba where he lies on the grass, chewing on the big Belgian’s paw.

“There are fourteen guests here. I expect y’all to figure it out, but four of these pups are leaving with four of you today.”

Kynan busts out a laugh, and to my surprise, he immediately says, “We’ll take one.”

The rest of the gang talks, and a few walk into the yard for a closer look. Corinne gets down on the grass, and a puppy pounces on her. I’m pretty sure she’s a goner.

I squeeze Kellen’s waist to get his attention. “Four puppies? But there are five.”

“We’re keeping one,” he says with a smile. “So Princess can have a puppy of her own to take care of when we get her back.”

Oh shit.

Tears bloom fast and copious, and I wheel away from Kellen with a mumbled excuse that I need to set out napkins or whatever. I dart into the kitchen, grab a paper towel, and press it to my eyes.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:07 am

But Kellen is right behind me, arms wrapping around my waist as he pulls me into him. “You big ol’ softy,” he teases.

And I laugh. He knows how to lighten the mood.

I turn and throw my arms around him, squeezing tight. “You are the most amazing man in the entire world.”

“Nah,” he says with a chuckle. “I just like doing things that will ensure I get laid tonight.”

“That’s a given,” I mutter. “Even without the puppy stunt.”

We’re silent a moment, and then I ask, “Do you think we’ll get Princess back?”

“We’re absolutely getting her back,” he says confidently. And although it seems insurmountable, I have utter faith that he speaks the truth. “Now, dry up those tears, and let’s go unload some dogs.”

Kellen kisses me again, and it’s sweet and settling. I feel grounded and sure of myself.

So sure, in fact, that I make a proclamation before thinking it through. “My dad’s birthday is the weekend after next, and I think I’m going to fly home for it.”

Kellen’s eyebrows rise. He’s come to learn a lot about my family—particularly the stilted relationship I have with them—and knows I’ve been battling on whether to go.

Ordinarily, I would not. I'd use work as an excuse like I always do, but I've learned something from Ethan's visit last week and our phone call when he loaned me money for the barn. It's okay to be at odds with what my family wants me to do and what I actually want to do. I don't have to be what they expect, and what Ethan taught me—when he loaned me the money without hesitation—is that they will learn to accept me as I am.

I can't stay away to avoid battles and arguments about my future. I can hold my own path and still accept their love.

"I think that's great," Kellen says with a smile.

"It'll be a quick trip. Fly out Friday afternoon and back on Sunday morning. Dr. Schoen will be home by then, so I know she won't mind me taking a few days since I've covered the practice for her while she was gone. Assuming she doesn't fire me."

Kellen rolls his eyes at that last statement, his hands coming to my hips. "She's not going to fire you. You are not at fault for what happened."

We can agree to disagree on that, but I decide to do so with my inner voice because I have something far more important to ask. "Would you be interested in going with me?"

"To Kentucky? To meet your family?" I don't know how to take the surprise in his voice. Maybe it's delight, but maybe I'm coming on too strong.

My instinct is to offer an excuse to let him out of accepting, but then his grin broadens and his fingers squeeze into my hips. "I'd love to go. I mean, you've already met my parents, so it only seems natural I return the favor, right?"

Everything about this man is perfect. "Right."

“I’ll put in a request for time off,” he says, leaning in to kiss me. “I’m excited to see the farm and meet Kat.”

“You’re perfect.” My unspoken thoughts come out unbidden, but I have to let him know.

Eyes softening, Kellen’s hands move to my face, and he bends down to kiss me again. I sigh into his mouth, not believing for a single second I could feel any more contented.

The door creaks open, and while I jolt, Kellen holds me tight, drawing away slowly. His gaze stays on me a moment before he looks over his shoulder.

Kynan stands there, phone in hand, Dozer right behind him. “Bebe’s on the line.”

Kellen releases me as Kynan and Dozer enter the kitchen, closing the door behind them. Bebe’s on her honeymoon. If she’s calling, it must be important.

“Okay, Bebe... standing here with Kellen and Abby.”

“We just landed at the airport, and I decided to check the taps and bugs we’d placed on Hellman. While I’m recording everything, I’ve programmed an algorithm that will duplicate sections of recording that have key words and phrases. And I hit something big.”

She pauses and calls out, presumably to Griff, “No... our bag has reflective tape wrapped around the handle.”

Her voice becomes clearer. “Sorry... for being an FBI agent, he’s not overly observant. At any rate, it picked up the word ‘transfer,’ which was one of a few dozen I’d programmed. I went back and listened to the entire exchange, and while they’re

talking in code and euphemisms, they're not consistent, so it's easy to figure out that they're selling some girls they've got holed up in that house in East Allegheny. Hellman is going to be there and will be receiving money in exchange for the women."

"He said something clear enough to get police or feds involved, or did he talk only in code?" Kynan asks.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:07 am

“Griff listened to the recording, and he thinks it’s clear enough... the lingo is well known. As soon as we get our bags, he’ll call into his SAC. I need Dozer to go into the office and download the recordings from my server for them. The information won’t be admissible in a criminal trial, but it’s absolutely enough for them to watch and listen when it goes down. They’ll be able to move in as soon as the exchange happens. It’s going down tomorrow night. Hold on... Griff wants to talk to you.”

“Bebe fill you in on everything?” he asks as he joins the conversation.

“She said it’s going down tomorrow,” Kynan says.

“That’s right.”

“Like, he’ll be arrested tomorrow night?” I ask, completely stunned. I mean, we all figured he was dirty and something was happening, but we didn’t expect anything to happen this fast.

“If he follows through with what he’s got planned, yes. The feds will arrest him as soon as he receives the money.”

“They’ll seize his assets?” Kellen asks.

“The dogs,” I exclaim. “What will they do with the dogs?”

“Probably local animal control,” Griff replies.

“They’re not equipped.” I look at Kellen, gripping his hand. “It’s going to take

massive coordination.”

“What kind of coordination?” Kynan asks.

“Veterinary care, medicine, behavioral evaluations, foster homes, adoption coordination. There are at least a few hundred dogs on his property. Animal control cannot handle it.”

“And you can?” Kynan asks.

“Not single-handedly,” I reply, “but I can manage all the components.”

“I’ve got contacts at the county level I’ll reach out to after Griff gets things in place.”

“And we’ll let the US attorney’s office know as well,” Griff adds on. “Technically, the dogs are property and thus assets, but I can’t imagine they won’t let efforts get underway to care for and rehome them.”

I’m afraid to voice the words, but I don’t need to. Kellen says them.

“And we’re going to bring Princess home.”

CHAPTER 21

Kellen

“It’s almost seven,” Abby grumbles as she paces the living room. The early-morning sun warms the floor underfoot as the new pup, who we’ve named Roscoe, follows behind her. “Why haven’t we heard anything?”

Why, indeed?

The sting was supposed to go down last night. Bebe's intelligence didn't say what time, but Griff said there would be a large team in place, ready to move in when it happened.

But while Jameson Force Security may have been the catalyst for all this to happen, we are in no way involved once the FBI takes over. They are not beholden to us for updates or explanations. They could've taken Hellman into custody hours ago, and they don't owe us even a thank-you.

Of course, if Griff were here, I think he would update us, but as it stands, he's on his honeymoon, and I'm not about to bother him with this. Not only is it disrespectful, but he's a big dude—I expect he'd kick my ass upon his return.

“Kellen,” Abby says in exasperation, “are you even listening to me?”

“No.” My tone is biting, even sarcastic, as I move into the kitchen for another cup of coffee. “You’ve said the same thing over and over for the last three hours.”

“Ouch,” she mutters, then flops onto the couch. Roscoe puts his front paws on her leg and she lifts him to her lap. “I’m sorry. I’m just nervous.”

Sighing, I pour another cup, knowing it's going to make me super jittery, but I got no sleep last night. Neither did Abby, for that matter.

I walk back into the living room, step over Bubba snoozing by the love seat, and sit next to Abby. Roscoe chews on her fingers as she pets him.

He's fucking adorable, and I'm glad we kept him. The other four got parceled out to Kynan, Ladd, Cage, and Corinne, and I expect we'll have dog playdates in the future.

Leaning over, I kiss Abby's neck and kick my feet onto the coffee table. “I’m not

sure they would have alerted us if there was an arrest. I'd think they'd wait until he was processed and interviewed, assuming he'll talk."

"I hate to give the asshole credit, but he's probably too smart to talk. He'll lawyer up."

"Maybe," I agree, taking a sip and then setting the cup on the side table. "But there's always a chance he has information he can use to cut a deal. While he might be trafficking women, there's no way he's at the top of this. A middleman, at best."

"What does that mean?" Abby asks, rolling her head on the cushion to look at me.

I shrug. "He'll cut a deal if he's got good info that will lead to a bigger bust."

"He won't go to jail?" She sits up, her eyes wild with worry. Roscoe uses the opportunity to bite her on the chin, but she holds him back with the practiced efficiency of a veterinarian who knows how to manage a wriggly animal. "He could be free to—"

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:07 am

Smiling, I lightly cup her neck and bring her in for a swift kiss, the puppy squished between us. It quiets her instantly. Pressing my forehead to hers, I murmur, “It will be fine. I promise. He won’t go free, but he might not get a lengthy prison sentence if he cuts a good deal.”

“But—”

I pull back slightly, locking my eyes with hers and dropping my hand to pet Roscoe. “No matter how much time he gets, his mill is finished, Abby. He cannot keep that operation going. The dogs will be seized. He’s done, and isn’t that the most important thing?”

“Yes,” she breathes out. “But—”

“But nothing.”

Something shimmers in her green eyes. Not tears, but maybe hope? As if she’s seeing the end of a tunnel, and the light there is reflecting in her irises.

Abby smiles. “You’re too good for me.”

I scoff and settle back on the couch, lacing my fingers over my stomach. “I’ve got you fooled. I really just wanted to make you my sex slave.”

“Oh, it worked.” She laughs and gently sets Roscoe onto the floor so she can snuggle into my side.

The doorbell rings, and we both jolt upward, our eyes slamming into each other in question.

Abby scrambles from the couch, She's closest to the door, but I have longer legs and jump the coffee table, cutting her off and grabbing the knob. Roscoe trips over his own feet trying to catch us, and Bubba shakes loose from a deep sleep, barking wildly with the sudden movement.

And on the other side of the door, there's an answering woof.

I freeze, and Abby's hand flutters near her throat. We exchange a look—both hopeful and cautious. Bubba barks again, and I utter a curt command, “Sit.”

His ass hits the ground, but his tail wags furiously against the rug. Roscoe leaps at Bubba and tries to bite his collar, but I scoop the puppy into my arms.

Abby reaches out and touches my lower back with trembling fingers.

I open the door, and a white-hot burst of joy explodes as I see Kynan standing there with Princess on a leash.

I'm knocked out of the way by both Abby and Bubba flying onto the porch. Abby drops to her knees—I wince, because that's concrete, but she doesn't seem to notice—and throws her arms around Princess's neck. While there's no doubt that the golden retriever loves Abby, she's more interested in Bubba.

My eyes go to Kynan. “Is it done?”

He nods. “Let's talk.”

Abby rises and accepts the leash from him. “I'll take them into the back to play.”

We head outside and spend a few minutes letting Princess sniff Roscoe. She's amazing with him, giving him gentle sniffs before nuzzling him. She's a natural mom who never really got to be one. Before long, they're all running around together.

Kynan, Abby, and I sit at the deck table, and I unfurl the umbrella for shade.

"Do you want anything to drink?" Abby asks Kynan. It's an afterthought, but she's excited to hear his news. When he shakes his head, she leans forward and demands, "Tell us everything."

Kynan smiles, drumming his fingers on the table. "It went down just after midnight. Van pulled up, Hellman came out of the house and talked to the driver for a bit. They went inside—presumably to look at the women. The feds had directional mics so they could pick up the conversation. The van driver was checking out the women, tried to negotiate the price that had already been agreed on, but Hellman stayed firm. Walked back outside with the victims who were ushered into the van. A bag was handed to Hellman, and the feds swooped in."

"Those women didn't fight?" Abby asks incredulously.

"They were drugged... docile. But Hellman had two men there with him who kept them in control."

"I would have given anything to be there to see the look on his face," I say, conjuring an image of Hellman's skin turning green when he realized what was happening. "Did he lawyer up?"

"Immediately," Kynan says. Not surprising. "But the two men he employed to watch over the girls started talking, and that has Hellman reconsidering. Last I heard, his lawyer and the US attorney are negotiating."

“But he’ll do jail time, right?” Abby asks.

“Yeah... he’ll do time. Just don’t know how much. I guess it all depends on the value of his information. But he’s finished doing business here. The state won’t license him to operate the kennel with a felony conviction.”

“Maybe his wife will keep it going,” Abby muses with a frown.

“I don’t think so,” Kynan says, glancing at the dogs playing. “As soon as the feds moved in to arrest Hellman, they descended on the house. Woke her and his boys out of a sound sleep. She’s not a happy woman, to say the least.”

“And how did you get Princess?” I ask.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:07 am

“Well, that was Griff’s doing. He apparently provided one of the agents her tattoo number. Got permission to let her come here, a small token of appreciation for the work we all did in tipping them off. They called me to come pick her up just a bit ago.”

“Thank you so much,” Abby says, her voice cracking. “I made a big mess of things, but you ended up doing what I couldn’t all this time, and that was to shut him down. But mostly, thank you for getting Princess back for us.”

“My pleasure,” Kynan says and raps his knuckles on the table. “Now, I have to get into work and finish up our final report to turn over to the FBI. None of our stuff is admissible, but it could lead them to investigate other areas.”

Once again, Abby gives Kynan a hug of gratitude, which he gladly accepts. She heads into the yard to love on Princess while I walk Kynan out.

At the door, I shake Kynan’s hand. “Now that Hellman’s behind bars, I’m ready to get back to work. Send me wherever you need me.”

“Duly noted.” Kynan steps onto the porch but turns back to look at me. “It’s nice, you know.”

“What’s that?”

“Doing a case that isn’t about rescuing a kidnap victim or black ops in the Middle East. I like taking down a puppy mill villain.”

Laughing, I point out, “Let’s not forget he’s a sex trafficker.”

“Yeah... we got a predator off the streets, but I’m really happy for Abby that this guy is shut down. I expect she’ll be quite busy the next few weeks coordinating the placements for all those animals.”

“She’s totally up for the task.”

“She’s a good woman,” Kynan says.

I glance through the house, and I can see her out the rear door in the backyard, throwing a stick for the dogs. “The best.”

After Kynan pulls out, I walk through and onto the back deck. I plop down on the top step and watch Abby as she dotes on Princess, who thankfully doesn’t seem worse for wear. Roscoe is overjoyed to have another dog, and Bubba struts around like he’s proud of his new pack.

Abby tosses a stick for Bubba, and Roscoe bounds after him. Princess rolls in the grass, kicking her feet, and I feel like my little family is complete.

When Bubba fetches the stick, Abby throws it again, but she doesn’t watch to see where it lands. She heads my way, and when she reaches me, she puts her hands on my knees and leans in for a kiss.

She pulls back, eyes bright and shining. “It’s a really good day.”

“Not sure how it could be better,” I agree.

Glancing at the dogs, then back to me, she says, “I’d love to just chill out here and celebrate, but—”

“You’ve got a rescue to coordinate.”

Abby’s been working on this since yesterday, calling local vets and fosters, and then reaching out to various volunteer organizations in other counties and even states. It’s not the first time a large mill has been shut down, and in a way, it’s almost like she’s been waiting for this her entire life.

To make a true difference.

CHAPTER 22

Abby

It’s quiet as we drive from the hotel to Blackburn Farms. Kellen’s following Google Maps, so I don’t have to direct him. It’s like he knew I needed the silence to reflect and prepare as we made our way closer to my home.

To the legacy I left behind.

Or was it true abandonment?

Kellen reaches out, takes my hand from my lap, and squeezes it. He pulls it over to rest on his thigh and holds on until we see the white fencing that surrounds my family’s property and divides the pastures and training rings.

It’s a perfect—although hot as hell—day in Kentucky. Blackburn Farms sits on the outskirts of Shelbyville, halfway between Lexington and Louisville. Pennsylvania is lovely, but there is nothing more beautiful, in my opinion, than the rolling green hills of Kentucky horse country.

“The main entrance is up on the left,” I say with a nod. “But go past it, and about a

quarter of a mile down, turn into the service entrance.”

We pass the driveway that extends to the main house set roughly three hundred yards from the road. The gravel drive is canopied with towering oaks, allowing only a peek of the huge, red brick mansion in the distance.

Kellen slows the car to gawk. “Lifestyles of the rich and famous,” he murmurs.

It makes me laugh. “The house is posh, and we have a lot of money, but everyone in the family busts their ass from dawn to dusk, seven days a week.”

“You earn your money.” The admiration is clear in his tone.

“Well, I do have a trust fund.”

Kellen grins at me. “That’s right... I forgot I have a sugar mama.”

I snort because Kellen is the last man who would ever take advantage of me.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:07 am

The farm is massive, and I direct him down different gravel roads that service the pastures, foaling barn, training arenas, and boarding stalls.

“Park there.” I point to a large white clapboard building with black trim. “That’s the main tack storage.”

“And you want to show me all the saddles?”

“Kat lives in the apartment above. I want to see her first.”

“So you can have an unfettered, excited reunion before facing the rest of the family,” he guesses.

I undo my seat belt and open the rental car door. Looking back at him before I step out, I smile. “You get me so well.”

He grins back and exits his side.

A staircase leads up to Kat’s apartment, so very similar to my own apartment above Dr. Schoen’s garage. A rush of fondness hits as I think of the sweet veterinarian who returned from her trip abroad to a burned-out barn and instantly forgave my actions that led to it.

I sat her down and shared the entire story, starting with me committing a crime by stealing Princess, which led to Hellman retaliating. Dr. Schoen replied by pulling me into her arms and hugging me tight.

Her words, “Not your fault, dear girl,” made me cry, but I’m still not sure how deserving I am of such forgiveness.

It’s something I need to continue to work through, and Kellen patiently reassures me, never getting frustrated.

“Thing One,” Kat yells, and I look up at her at the top of the steps, standing outside her door, a big grin on her face. My twin. My identical. The other part of my heart and soul, although an argument could be made that Kellen has a big piece of those as well.

Kat trots down the staircase, and she’s a vision with her long, black hair bouncing as she descends. The bright sun makes her green eyes look much paler than they are. She’s wearing a summer dress—guaranteed it’s a high-end designer—and sparkly sandals. Kellen will now see what I used to look like with long hair, and I wonder if he’d want me to grow it out. He’s never said a word one way or the other, except early in our relationship when he mentioned loving the fact that my neck was always bared if he wanted to kiss it.

She slams into me, hugging me hard, and I squeeze the hell out of her in return.

“I’ve missed you so much, and you’re such a turd for not visiting more often,” she whines, hugging me harder.

“You’re a shit for not coming to visit me more,” I counter.

She pulls away and turns to Kellen who’s walked around the front of the car. Crossing one arm over her stomach and raising the other to tap a finger against her chin, she gives him a critical once-over.

With her eyes pinned on him, she talks to me. “He’s gorgeous, I’ll give you that.

Looks like he'd be fabulous in bed."

I choke and elbow Kat hard in her arm. Before I can chastise her, Kellen says, "I am. Your sister is quite happy there."

My gaze swings his way, but he's got his eyes locked on Kat. He's not going to give her the upper hand. He's trying to prove his worth, although how good he is in bed isn't a great standard to judge by, and he knows that Kat's opinion about him is the only one that will ever matter to me.

"I'm sorry, Abby, but if you're going to have a relationship with this guy, I need to ensure that he knows how to find the button. If you know what I mean?" She waggles her eyebrows at me.

I cover my face with my hands, groaning with embarrassment. "Unfortunately, I do know what you mean."

"I definitely know what you mean," Kellen says with a lopsided grin. "And I know exactly where to find it. I'm well acquainted with the button. We're best friends."

Kat cocks an eyebrow.

"And I care deeply for your sister. That is the most important thing you should be worried about."

Kat looks him up and down again, cocks her hip in a dramatic pause, and finally smiles at Kellen. "I like you. You have my permission to continue to see my sister."

She then turns to me. "You have my permission too."

"Gee, thanks," I drawl sarcastically. "I was so worried about it."

We break into peals of laughter, and I hook my elbow with hers. “Let’s give Kellen a quick tour of the farm before we head in for dinner.”

“Somebody’s avoiding something,” she quips in a singsong voice.

“I’m not—”

“You flew in last night and basically stayed away all day today.”

“I was showing Kellen around Lexington. We were sight-seeing.”

“You come rolling in with barely half an hour to spare, and now you want to tour the farm rather than go up to the house?”

I don’t acknowledge her observation. She’s absolutely right... I specifically stayed away until it was close to time for Dad’s birthday dinner to start. And when it’s done, we’re heading straight back to the hotel, and we fly home tomorrow.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:07 am

“You know Mom and Dad don’t care that you’re a veterinarian, right?” Not the first time she’s posed that question.

“I know that and I know they’re actually proud I am,” I huff out as Kellen watches our exchange. But he might as well see it—it’s my family dynamic. “They care that I’m not here, taking my place on the farm and helping to win blue ribbons for their precious stock.”

“Not true,” she says.

“True,” I insist stubbornly. “And we are not getting into this right now.”

I won’t have an argument with my sister in front of Kellen just moments before we’re scheduled to go sit down to a nice dinner where my parents will be meeting him for the first time.

As much as I love my twin sister, our fights can get dirty. She wants me to come home more than anyone and will hit me the hardest, even though she knows deep down why I stay away.

And I definitely don’t want to subject Kellen to any of that.

“How about we give him the tour, and we can talk about this later?” I suggest calmly.

“You know damn well you won’t want to talk about it later,” Kat mutters, and then she wiggles free of my hold and moves to Kellen’s side.

She loops her arm through his and walks toward a four-seat golf cart parked nearby. It's the most efficient way to travel around the farm. "Come, you hot hunk of man who seems to enjoy my sister's brand of crazy. I'll tell you all the juicy details, and then maybe you can talk some sense into her."

Kellen looks over his shoulder at me as Kat leads him to the cart. I mouth "sorry," but he merely winks, letting me know he's amused, not bothered. That he doesn't mind my brand of crazy.

?

We limit the tour to a moving one, showing Kellen the property via golf cart. We're all dressed too nicely to walk through the barns to show him the inner workings. Kellen is in dress pants and a lavender button-down, and I'm wearing a white summer dress with green piping and eyelet trim. Kellen looked dazzled at the hotel before we left. He made me twirl twice so he could see the dress from all angles, and then dipped me low for a sweet kiss.

"You are magical," he'd murmured.

It was the most romantic thing that's ever happened to me, and even now, my heart flutters over his attention because it's not forced and it doesn't come with expectations of anything in return. His compliments, touches, and kisses are so genuine, you can't help but trust in them.

Kat drives us up to the main house and parks near the rear kitchen entrance. Kellen takes in the house as we walk up to it. "Could your house be any bigger?" he murmurs in awe.

"It always seemed too small growing up with five kids. Or at least that's what my mom would tell you." A rush of fondness sweeps through me, because truth be told,

she always wanted us close. It's crushing to her that I live so far away.

"Do just your parents live here?" he asks.

"They live in the east wing," I explain as we enter the kitchen. "Ethan lives in the west wing. He had a house of his own not far from here, but once he took over operations for my dad, it was easier for him to be on-site."

"I've never been in a house with wings." Kellen chuckles. "Unless you count my visit to the White House in sixth grade."

"It's a lot less glamorous than it seems," I assure him as we sidestep around the kitchen staff preparing the birthday meal. "This family spends the majority of its time with horses and dirt."

Kat leads us toward the drawing room where I know everyone will be congregated to meet Kellen. I've never brought a man home to introduce to the family, and I'm not sure how it will make them feel. Kellen lives in Pennsylvania, and if I'm serious about him, they might see it as losing any last hope of me moving back to Kentucky.

I grab his hand and pull him to a halt. He looks down at me curiously. "Thank you for coming," I say.

His eyes soften, and he squeezes my hand. "You're nervous. I got you."

"I should haven't to lean on you to visit my family," I mutter with slight shame.

"I think things are complicated, but I also get the sense that your family might not be as opposed to your life choices away from Kentucky as you think."

It's something I've wondered. I was driven away by everyone's relentless pursuit to

get me back in the ring. I ran away from it, and when they beckoned me home, I thought it was for more of the same.

But Kat insists it's because they miss me.

Not my prowess with horses.

It's still hard to trust that, so yeah... I'm nervous.

My hands move to Kellen's chest, my head tipped back to see him. "I'm sorry if any of this is awkward."

He rolls his eyes. "Woman... I've concealed stolen property for you, bailed you out of jail, saved your ass from getting shot, saved your horse from a barn fire, kicked Hellman's ass, and bought an entire litter of puppies for you. We're past awkward."

"You bought those puppies for me?" I ask in wonder, my eyes stinging.

"Of course," he replies, as if that was the dumbest question ever. "I wanted to do something important to your cause. I admire your activism and want to support you."

The words tumble out before I can stop them. "I love you."

Kellen blinks in surprise, and I can feel his body jerk at the revelation. For a split second, I think maybe it's too soon, and that's beyond any brand of awkward, but then he's crushing his mouth down on mine in a soul-searing kiss that has me clutching to him for dear life.

Someone coughs, and we break apart. I turn to see my mother standing there with hands folded demurely in front of her. "Sorry to interrupt, but we're waiting on you."

Her Irish accent is soft and lilting. She's lived in the States for over forty years but

still has a bit of brogue left.

I uncurl my fingers from Kellen's arms, blushing to the roots of my hair. "Mom," I say in a strangled, embarrassed voice. "Um... this is Kellen."

Kellen brushes past me to greet my mother. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Blackburn."

She bestows a warm and gracious smile on him as they shake. "Please, call me Fiona, or Fi."

Her green eyes move to me. She passed the jade coloring to all of us kids, but our black hair is from Dad. "Got a hug for me?"

She opens her arms, and something cracks inside me. No doubt, the wall I'd built up.

I walk into her embrace, and she squeezes me hard.

"Oh, I've missed you, wee one." That's what she's always called me and Kat, because we're the youngest and smaller than our brothers.

"I've missed you, too, Mom."

She leads us into the drawing room where the rest of my family stands around, drinks in hand. All heads turn our way.

Kellen looks to my brothers, one by one, and nods at them. "Good to see you again."

"You mean, since you kicked us out of Abby's apartment?" Ethan says. His tone is calm, but you can hear the underlying grudge still lingering.

“Do it again in the same circumstance,” Kellen replies, and Wade busts out laughing.

“I like this guy a lot,” he says, moving forward to shake Kellen’s hand.

Trey moves forward next, and then Ethan, though he’s less generous with his smile.

Then my dad is there, giving me a hug. It’s as tight as my mom’s, and he kisses my cheek as he pulls away. It looks like he wants to say something, but I’m terrified what it might be since he was the one trying the hardest to get me back in the ring. So I pull Kellen over and introduce them.

Thomas Blackburn is a larger-than-life character, far younger looking than his sixty-three years. His raven hair is liberally salted, his face tanned and lined from hours outdoors with no protection. But he’s strong as an ox, and while he’s turned over the day-to-day operations to Ethan, he’s still out working the horses and pulling the weight of ten men.

He clasps Kellen’s hand and rests the other on his shoulder. “I owe you a debt, saving Lunar from the barn fire. That horse means everything to Abby, and he holds a special spot in all our hearts.”

Kat passed along that Ethan told my parents what had been going on. I’m half expecting a scolding, followed by them using the fire as a means to call me back to Kentucky into the bosom of family.

“As her dad, it’s comforting to know she’s got someone like you looking after her.” I narrow my eyes at my father, waiting for him to launch into my failed show career after Molly’s death, some jab that I’m hiding in Pennsylvania.

But it doesn’t come.

For the next half hour, most of the attention is focused on Kellen. My parents are enamored—particularly with his career from a US Marine to an agent at Jameson. They relish the retelling of how the Jameson team helped bring Hellman down, and Wade asks him to tell my parents about how he confronted Hellman on my behalf and then punched him.

I feel like I'm in the twilight zone as my parents ask me about the practice and then express pride that I'll own it soon.

When Ethan says, "Looks like Abby will lead the way for future generations of Blackburn veterinarians," and makes no snide comment about me refusing to practice here, I lose my shit a little.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:07 am

“What’s going on?” I demand, looking around the room.

Every member of my family—except Kat, who is smirking—looks at me with wide, unblinking eyes.

“What do you mean, honey?” my mom asks.

I gesture with a circling motion. “This. This small talk going on and acting like you’re okay with me living my life in Pennsylvania and not back here at the farm. Acting like you have pride in what I’m doing, when—”

“We do have pride in what you do,” my dad says, cutting me off.

“I know,” I exclaim, feeling a loss of control. “I mean, I get that you do. But you had more pride when I was here, showing horses and winning. When I wouldn’t get back in the ring, it broke everything. You were all relentless, trying to get me to do something I didn’t want to do anymore. All you ever did was try to get me to come back, and no one took me seriously that I was finished.”

I suck in a deep breath. That was a massive release getting that all off my chest.

“Honey,” my mom says, stepping toward me. “We tried to do what we always do—”

“No.” I cut her off with a raised hand, and my voice shrills. I’m afraid she’s going to say something that will prove I’ve been wrong about my family all along. I’m flooded with embarrassment that Kellen is watching this, knowing I’m probably going to send him scurrying now that I’ve dragged him into family drama. “I’m

sorry... I can't do this..."

I pivot away from the group with the intention of fleeing the house. I have no clue where I'll go. Normally when I'm upset, I go to my horses.

I make it no more than two steps when my arm is caught, and I turn to see it's Kellen. "Stay," he says softly. "Talk this out."

"But..."

I look around at my family, and they're all staring at me, concern etched on their faces—not recrimination.

Not even Ethan, who tried to force me to return home when he came to Pennsylvania.

"Abby," my dad says, moving toward me. Kellen's gentle grip slides from my forearm to my hand. He squeezes it briefly and then steps away from me. I want to grab back onto him, a lifeline, but instead turn to face my father. His hands come to my shoulders. "After Molly's accident, your confidence took a massive hit. And yes, we all tried to get you back on the proverbial horse. It's what we do. We're horse people, and we've all had our scary times—"

"You've not seen someone killed." I look from him to my mom, and then back again. "You didn't set into action a chain of events that caused someone's death."

"You didn't cause that," Ethan says, shifting beside my dad. "Lunar didn't cause it. Molly did by coming up on you and Lunar did what scared horses do. It was a horrible fluke she got hung up on the stirrup."

"Maybe so. But none of you could accept that I just couldn't get past it. You all hounded me to get back in the ring, and—"

“We did what you would have done for any of us,” Wade says. “It’s the way we are. We work hard, we pick ourselves up, and we get back to it. If that was me afraid to get back in the ring, you would’ve been constantly on me.”

“Yeah, but—”

“No buts,” Trey says, stepping forward to add his two cents. “We pushed you, and yeah, we pushed you hard. We wanted you to get back into that ring because you were amazing at it, Abby. You have talent beyond anything any of us have ever seen, and we wanted to make the effort to get you back there.”

“But when you made your choice, we accepted it,” my mom adds. “We wanted you to come back home and practice here. If not Blackburn Farms, then at least in the area so we could all be together.”

“No,” I insist, shaking my head. “You wanted me to show again.”

“You’re wrong.” I jolt as I realize Kat’s speaking, and I turn to my twin. “I love you like no other, Thing One, but no one pushed you to get back in that ring once you made your final decision. If you felt that pressure, it was coming from you and not us. I’m guessing it was guilt, which you obviously still feel, that kept you away. But you want to blame us, and it’s not fair anymore.”

I cover my face with my hands, everything a jumble of facts and overactive imagination. Is it possible I read too much into their words and actions? Did I run to Pennsylvania because of my own guilt and put it on my family as my reason to stay away?

“Abby.” Kellen encircles my wrists and pulls my hands from my face. He looms in front of me with a reassuring smile. “I love you.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:07 am

“What?” I wheeze, the words knocking the breath out of me.

“You said it to me out in the hallway, and I didn’t get a chance to respond, but it seems like now is the perfect time.”

My eyes flit about the room, taking everyone in. They’re all smiling, likely swooning from Kellen’s words and from his commitment to be a part of this conversation.

“I love you, and you love me, right?” he asks, garnering my attention.

“Yes... right.” I feel like I’m having an out-of-body experience.

“Two people who love each other trust each other too.”

That right there makes things very clear. “Yes. I trust you implicitly.”

Kellen’s hands come to my face, and he peers down at me. It’s just me and him at this moment. “Then trust me when I tell you, I hear what your family is saying, and I don’t think there are any expectations you’re not meeting. More than anything, they miss you. They’re proud of you and the decisions you’ve made. And if I’m reading the room right, and I think I am, they admire and respect what you’ve done with your life.”

I’m so lost in his eyes, but his words wash over me with the sting of truth. It stings because I realize I’ve not been able to see this for myself. I’ve been so mired in my guilt.

Guilt over Molly's death.

Guilt over the death of my show career.

Guilt over not being able to win one more championship with Lunar, which would have meant a lot to our family business.

And... guilt for not listening to what everyone was really trying to tell me.

I blow out a quavering breath, put my hands on his wrists, and draw him to me for a soft kiss. "I love you. Thank you for being real with me."

"Anytime," he replies and then presses his lips to my forehead.

Releasing him, I turn to my parents. "I'm so sorry."

"Don't," my dad says and pulls me into his side. My mom's arms come around me, and next thing I know, lots of arms are around me. I look up through the throng of siblings and parents, and my eyes lock with Kellen's.

He grins and looks satisfied with himself. He solved the estrangement in our family, just by being my rock. And I hope he trusts that this reunion will not lead me away from Pennsylvania. I'm staying wherever he is, and if he leaves Pennsylvania for some reason, I'll follow.

But as I snuggle into my family, I vow I will come back and visit Blackburn Farms often.

EPILOGUE

Kellen

A lot has happened in the last seven months. Hellman took a plea deal, giving up the names of those higher up in the sex trafficking syndicate, and was sentenced to six years.

I hired an attorney to deal with Adriana, and we finally ironed out the paperwork. She paid me for my initial investment in the business and is now completely gone from my life.

With a lot of hard work, Abby secured medical treatment for every single dog from Hellman's kennel operation and helped coordinate successful adoptions for each dog. This included us bringing home one more puppy that she simply fell in love with. Abby named him Spud, and he and Roscoe are as thick as thieves. They're also rotten and mischievous and I wouldn't have it any other way. Princess and Bubba, though, still rule the roost.

Speaking of roosts... Abby has moved into my place. More room and all. She's now full owner of the veterinary clinic and has hired one other vet to help with the ever-growing practice. She's been featured in a lot of news stories as the angel who rescued all the mill dogs, so business is booming. The barn has been rebuilt, and Abby paid for it since arson was the determining cause and insurance wouldn't cover.

Ethan fronted her the money as a loan against her trust, but with an initial funding of five million upon her birth, the barn repair won't set her back.

Not that the money matters. Abby is content exactly where we are, doing exactly what we do. I'm more in love with my job at Jameson than ever, and I think it's safe to say that we're settled in to stay. Best of all, Abby repaired the relationship with her family, and we've been back to visit a few times.

Our current visit is particularly special because Abby is doing something no one thought she'd ever do again.

She's back in the show ring.

We're at the Shelby County Fairgrounds for the start of the show season, and Abby is riding one of Blackburn Farms' horses. I'm not even sure how it came about, but one day as she was riding Lunar and I was watching—because I've decided I'm better at watching than riding those huge things—she announced that she wanted to show again.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:07 am

Not with Lunar, of course. He's an old, retired boy these days.

But she started training at a local barn with their horses, and she did it with such determination and grit, I don't know that I've ever loved anyone more. I'm so fucking proud of her because although she's fiercely confident in her skills, she's still nervous, and this is making her confront her fears.

"How are you not a ball of nerves?" my mom asks. She and my dad met us in Kentucky to watch Abby's return to the show ring.

"Because Abby's got this," I say. Truthfully, though, I'm a little anxious. I've watched enough of her rides over the past several months, including her training, to know that dangers lurk all the time with these animals. Saddlebreds are spirited and sometimes spook easily. I've not seen Abby take a fall, but I've seen her stick to her saddle when a horse has gotten wily. It's one reason I've declined her invitation to ride them.

Frankly, I find them a little crazy.

My dad consults the class sheet he's holding and has been ticking off with a pen. "Abby's up next."

None of Abby's siblings are in the stands with us. They're at the facility barns where all the competing horses are kept. Competitions stretch over three days, and the Blackburn clan will all be helping Abby prepare. Trey and Kat will also be showing, but their classes aren't until tomorrow.

The speakers crackle and music starts. The announcer's voice echoes throughout the indoor arena, "Let's welcome the riders for Five-Gaited Pleasure division. There will be seven riders in this class."

The gate at the far end swings open, and horses come in at a trot. The outfits the riders wear are elaborate, bespoke, and expensive as I've come to learn. Abby's is the third horse in, a six-year-old gelding the color of midnight from Blackburn Farms. He's stunning with an arched neck, long, pluming tail, and an incredibly high step.

He doesn't hold a candle to Abby, though, and my heart swells with pride as she directs the horse around the arena. She's wearing a pair of dark navy jods, a mint green coat with tails and a silver vest underneath. Her Windsor-knotted tie is a deep plum, and her derby matches the color of her jods. Her boots are shiny black patent leather, and she carries a whip with a silver emblem on the end of the cherry-wood handle, engraved with her initials.

A present from me.

A large crowd is here from Blackburn, as they have several riders showing, and there's a lot of hooting and hollering for Abby. We're sitting in the front row, and I yell at her as she rides by. "Go, baby, go!"

She doesn't look at me, but she smiles, and it's full of confidence and joy. She may have been nervous before getting out there, but that woman is in her element.

"Riders," the announcer says, "put your horses in a canter. Canter, please."

I've learned a lot about these horses and how they train, and I know Abby at this moment is issuing a simple one-word command to her horse, along with a pull on the left rein and a slight pressure with her left leg, to put him into the proper gait.

Glancing down near the gate, I see Abby's family standing there. Mom, Dad, three brothers, and Kat. They look like they're about to burst from pride.

Abby maneuvers her horse like she was born to do this, and in a way, I suppose she was. I know I'm biased, but she's the best out there, and when they call the riders into the lineup and she's awarded the blue ribbon, I'm out of my seat and cheering the loudest.

Abby takes a victory lap, winking at me as she trots by.

My parents and I exit the stands and head over to the stables where the Blackburn horses are. Wade is leading Abby there as we approach, and she's talking to her dad as the entire family walks beside her and her horse. She sees me and grins, and I give her a thumbs-up.

A photographer appears, and Abby poses on top of her horse, the blue ribbon clipped to the side of her jacket at her hip. Her family crowds in for more photos.

Then Thomas Blackburn motions me over, and more pictures.

Finally, Thomas shoos everyone away, and it's just the two of us.

With pictures done, Abby swings her leg over the saddle and hops to the ground. She doesn't need my support, but my hands go to her hips to steady her landing.

When she turns into me, I don't hesitate.

I go down on one knee as Wade moves the horse out of the way. This was all planned, of course. Her family and my parents crowd in to watch, and Abby's eyes double, she's so shocked.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:07 am

Holding out a black velvet box, I gaze up at her. She looks around wildly, taking in that everyone seems to know what's going on but her.

"Abby," I say to get her attention. "Eyes on me."

She covers her mouth with her hand, but she can't hide her huge smile. "Oh my God," she breathes out. "What are you doing?"

"Proposing." Simple answer to a simple question. I open the box and show her the ring. "I've been wanting to do this for a long time, but I knew this show was coming up and it would be more special to have your family involved. Mine, too, for that matter."

Abby looks toward my parents and moves her hand to her heart to indicate that it is, indeed, special.

I pluck the ring from the box but don't dare slide it on her finger just yet. "Abby... I think I fell a little in love with you the day we met. Seeing how passionate you were about saving dogs and standing up to Hellman. You were dazzling then, just as you are now. I'm so damn lucky to have met you, I'm blessed that you love me, and you will make all my dreams come true if you agree to be my wife. I want you by my side always. I want to build a family with you. And I want to devote my life to making you happy. Say you'll be mine. Tell me to put this ring on your finger, and let's start our forever together."

I barely get the words out before Abby's nodding her head and shoving her shaking hand in front of me. Laughing, I slip on the diamond ring, and it's a perfect fit, thanks

to Kat's help.

Abby throws her arms around me, and I swing her in a wide arc. We're both laughing and kissing and then everyone's crowding around. The women pull her off to look at her ring, and the brothers and her dad surround me to issue warnings about taking care of her and if I don't, they'll kill me and bury me in the back pasture.

All in good fun, but it's not long before Abby is making her way to me.

She embraces my shoulders and hops into my arms, legs around my waist. Abby gives me a deliciously long kiss, which makes me want to cart her off to an empty stall.

When she lifts her mouth, her eyes shine with emotion. She presses her forehead to mine. "I love you so much, Kellen. I don't know what I did to deserve you, but I'm never going to take you for granted as long as I live."

"I'm the lucky one," I assure her. "Doing life with you is going to be my greatest accomplishment."

"It will be my greatest honor," she counters.

"My greatest joy," I say with a grin.

"My greatest endeavor."

I laugh and kiss her again. "How about we just agree it's going to be the greatest thing either of us will ever do?"

Abby's eyes sparkle, and my chest aches from her devotion. "I can get on board with that," she says.

Yeah... I can get on board with that too.