



# Confessions of Pain

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**Category:** Erotic, Romance, M-m Romance, New Adult

**Description:** Gabriel Maverick grew up on the wrong side of the tracks and held absolutely no hope of ever climbing out of the box his parents and society shoved him into. When small town gossip labeled him a failure, he believed it. All that changed, though, when he met Kelsey Morganston.

Kelsey Morganston not only grew up on the right side of the tracks, his family owned the tracks. To anybody on the outside looking in, Kelsey had it all. Small town society gently placed him into his box and failure wasn't an option. All that changed though, when he met Gabriel Maverick.

Young love was immediate and forever. Suddenly, Gabriel felt like he could conquer the universe and Kelsey found an inner strength he hadn't realized existed. In their small corner of the world with their desires hidden from everyone except each other, they believed their love was indestructible. They were mistaken. In one night, lies and misunderstandings destroy their love and forces Gabriel to run away from the town and Kelsey.

Ten years later, Gabriel is back and determined to exact revenge on the boy he used to love. Will hate blind him to what his heart tries telling him...or will love have a second chance?

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# Page 1

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## Prologue

### Gabriel

I'd just sneaked back into my room, squeezing my body through a bedroom window that was borderline too small for me to get back into. I was flying high, my body still vibrating from the endorphins of sexual satisfaction and pure undiluted love. It was my graduation night. I'd finally made it out of high school, and it was the first time Kelsey and I had gone all the way.

Since Kelsey was younger than I was by almost a year, I had wanted to wait until I graduated high school to finally make him mine. And until he was old enough too. It had been difficult—sometimes almost impossible, but we'd done it, and it had so been worth the wait. I could still smell him on me, and as I stood in the middle of my room, contemplating never bathing again, because I didn't want that scent to ever go away, I heard a loud banging on the door. I was thinking that whoever was on the other side needed to tone it down, because that damned door was barely hanging on the frame as it was.

My old man let out a string of curse words that might have made some people blush, but was normal for him, as he staggered across the living room to open the door. How could one man make so much noise when it couldn't have been more than five steps from the couch to the door of our tiny home?

No, not a home, but the place we lived in. It had never felt like a home—even before that night. I had never had a real home—a refuge, a sanctuary like I'd heard other people talk about. And definitely not the cushy mansion Kelsey lived in.

I walked over to my closed bedroom door, cracked it open, and listened to what was going on. The fact that anybody knocked on our door at all was a strange occurrence, not to mention the fact that it was almost eleven o'clock in the evening. Our only visitors, albeit rare, were the other local residents of our trailer park, and I was certain the bulk of that group were already passed out drunk or stoned on drugs by that time of night.

I'd heard my father yank the door open and bellow, "Stop the fucking banging already! You're gonna wake the dead!" Then he belched and the room down the hall got suddenly quiet.

"Is your son home, Jebediah?" a stern voice I didn't recognize asked.

"How the hell would I know, Sheriff?" my father countered. "It ain't my place to keep up with him. The bastard's eighteen years old," he said. It was a sorry excuse to not having a fucking clue where his son was or what he was doing, for basically not giving a shit about him, but that was my dad.

My entire body tensed up when I'd heard the voice ask about me. What the hell? I hadn't done anything wrong. Why would the sheriff be looking for me? A chill of terror washed over me. What if something had happened to Kelsey after I'd left him? We'd only been about a half a mile from his house when we'd parted ways, him on his Ninja motorcycle and me walking. I'd had over five miles to walk to get back to the rougher side of town and then another fucking ten minutes to try and wrangle my ass through the bedroom window. I didn't own a watch, but calculating it in my head, I told myself it couldn't have taken me more than forty-five minutes. Fuck, did he have a wreck? I just knew he'd had a wreck. I was too freaked out at the idea of Kelsey being hurt to even wonder why the sheriff would notifyme, of all people. Unless Kels had asked for me—oh shit, had he asked for me? I had to get to him.

I had been about to yank my door open and go racing down the hall when the next

voice—the next words—had caused me to freeze in my tracks. My blood chilled. My heart stopped beating. The voice belonged to Kelsey’s father, and he sounded positively furious.

“Maybe if you’d known where he was, you could have kept him from raping my boy, you son of a bitch!”

Rape? I stumbled to a halt and stood there frozen. They thought I had raped Kelsey? My mind whirled around what I’d heard, desperately trying to come up with a logical explanation for what they were saying. It couldn’t be what I was thinking...it couldn’t be. Kelsey wouldn’t have said that. He would never have lied about me that way. I loved him. We loved each other.

“Raped your boy? What the hell? My boy ain’t no faggot! I’d kill him myself if he was!” my father roared. His words hurt me but didn’t cut nearly as badly as thinking that Kelsey had told someone I’d hurt him. It wasn’t like I’d lived my life thinking I was loved by my parents and was suddenly faced with the possibility that I might lose that love if they found out I was gay. No, I’d known they didn’t care much for me, but I’d thought Kelsey loved me, and I couldn’t wrap my mind around why he would betray me that way. I felt like my heart was breaking.

“He told me so himself. Are you calling my boy a liar?” Kelsey’s dad countered in a voice loud enough that the entire trailer park had to have heard him. “Think about it, Jebediah! You and yours are nothing but trash in our county. My boy is a part of the upper crust of society. Who in the hell do you think is more believable? My boy or yours?”

I could feel a blush burning my cheeks and pain ratcheting through my chest when I heard the father of the boy I loved saying the words I’d always believed in the back of my mind. I wasn’t good enough for Kelsey. I had fucking known it, but I’d wanted him so badly that I had let him convince me that I was worthy of him.

“Just go get your boy, Jeb. I’m going to have to take him in and question him.” I finally figured out the other voice was our local Chief of Police Jackson Solomon. They’d come for me. I was going to go to jail for rape. Kelsey had told his father I raped him! The pain in my heart was so bad that it threatened to take my breath away, but I knew I didn’t have time to wallow in my despair. There was no way I was going to prison for something I didn’t do. I eased the door shut and turned the lock. It wouldn’t hold long, but it might buy me some time. If they thought I was locked inside, they wouldn’t look for me outside. With a moment I didn’t really have to spare, I glanced around my pathetic room and wished I had time to grab some things to take with me. I didn’t have much, but there were a few things that would have made my run from the law a fraction easier. The only thing I took was the seventy-two dollars I’d saved and hidden from my old man. I’d planned on buying Kelsey something nice with it, to prove how much he meant to me, but now I would use it to run from Kelsey’s lies.

I scrambled out my bedroom window as I heard them banging their fists against my door. And I ran for my life.

## Page 2

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### Chapter 1

Ten years later

“Are you sure about this, Gabriel?” Ethan asked for what had to be the tenth time since we’d boarded the plane earlier that morning. “Because if you aren’t sure, there’s plenty of time to reconsider, or, at the very least, slow things down and evaluate the situation thoroughly. It’s only been nine days since you became aware of this thing and in those nine days, you’ve gone...well, Gabe, you’ve gone kind of crazy.” He smiled in my direction, probably hoping it would take some of the edge off his words. The fact that he might very well piss me off didn’t bother Ethan at all. Not when he knew damned well I was about to cross a line there would be no turning back from.

My stint in Afghanistan was where I had met Ethan, so joining up turned out to be the smartest damned thing I ever did. Ethan, his brother, Titus, and his boyfriend, Jeremiah, all three of whom I had met in the third year of my stint in the Army during special ops training, were my family now. Against all odds, they’d accepted me into their group, and we’d forged an unbreakable bond.

I kept staring at my iPad, waiting for updates from Titus, but a small grin tugged at the corner of my lips, telling Ethan I was at least listening to him. When the final email, the one I’d been waiting for all morning, came through with a little ding, the smirk I was wearing on my face morphed into a full-blown smile. It didn’t quite touch my eyes but then again, the cruel ones never did.

“It’s done. Morganston Textiles officially belongs to me.”

I turned in my seat and looked Ethan dead in the eye. “I know you don’t agree with what I’m doing, Ethan, and I love you for it. You want me to be a better person, one not totally consumed with getting even with my enemies. You want me to forget about my past and focus on my future. Maybe find a nice guy to settle down with and have a couple of kids, two dogs, and maybe even a cat or two. I know you want those things for me, but I’m afraid it isn’t going to happen. At least not until I settle some old scores.”

“Listen, Gabriel...”

“No, Ethan. Look, you know you don’t have to come with me. I’ll completely understand and I won’t have the first hard feeling floating in your direction. I know the kind of shit I’m about to get involved into isn’t your thing, so it’s okay for you to walk away.” I took a deep breath and added, “Just be there for me when all the dust settles after the fallout. I’ll need my best friend more than ever then.” That statement was damned hard to say, even to Ethan, and there wasn’t much I wouldn’t share with him. But over the years, I had trained myself to not ask for anything. That way, I wouldn’t be disappointed if no help came along. It’d taken years for me to learn to trust Ethan, Titus, and Jeremiah, my best friends in the world, and sometimes it was still a work in progress.

Ethan growled in frustration. “You know damned well I’m not leaving you with it, Gabe. Don’t say stuff like that because it pisses me off and when I get pissed off, I’m no fun to be around. You know how I pride myself on being the most fun guy in the room.”

I smiled at him. “Don’t make jokes when I know you really want to throttle me. It’s okay to hate me a little right now. I kind of hate myself.”

“Then why in the hell are we doing this? Just let it go. Lethimgo!”

Him. Yeah, he was the reason I couldn't let it go. Even though I told myself that's all he was to me now. Just a nameless, faceless pronoun I didn't have to picture in my mind. I didn't want to say his name or make him real. At one time in my life, he'd been my everything. One year younger than me, he'd held the power to soothe the anger that always lurked in my heart. He'd been able to charm a smile to my lips when I'd thought it to be an impossible task. Younger, smaller, and practically angelic in my eyes, he'd been the cocoon for my damaged soul. Now? He was justnothing.

I never spoke his name, and as far as I knew, my three best friends in the world didn't even know who he was. Well, maybe they did know, because Jeremiah, Ethan's lover, couldn't stand not knowing everything, so he'd probably dug up all the crap in my file and had also stumbled across his name in the process. It would be in the police records, after all. I'm sure my friends all knew about my past, but out of respect for how painful it was to me, they didn't bring it up.

I know they all hoped I would move past the all-consuming need for revenge that had long been the only beacon of light in my life since I'd been forced to leave home all those years ago. It hadn't been much of a home, but at least I'd been reasonably safe there. Not so much on the streets of Atlanta, where I lived for almost a year after I ran away.

Most teenagers wouldn't have survived being homeless and at the mercy of people determined to use and abuse them, but then I guess I wasn't like most. My hate for the entire Morganston family kept me alive when the ugliness of life had threatened to overtake my desire to live. I'd been able to survive the first time I was forced to sell my body to buy food only because of my rage. When living on the streets, there'd been times when the cold weather almost claimed me as a victim, but the hatred kept me warm enough to live another day. When the hunger became unbearable, thoughts of hurting the people who had put me here kept my mind off the gnawing pain in my stomach. Drugs would have probably been an easy way to forget how bad my life



was, if only for a few blissful moments, but I'd refused them because I'd known they would make me weak. They would replace my addiction, and I only had room for one.

I suppose in some twisted sort of way, I owed everything to the Morganston family. My hatred for them had given me the strength to survive. It fueled my ability to keep me alive on the streets. Finally, when I decided I wanted something better for myself, I joined the military. I wasn't a patriotic all-American soldier-wannabe when I walked through those recruitment doors. I was really only looking for some kind of home, and the military gave me one. A good one. Being homeless, alone, and afraid had made me rethink my future, and the military became the brightest star in a very dark sky.

Unlike me, Ethan, Jeremiah, and Titus had lives built on foundations of love and trust. And money. All three of them came from wealthy families. Not inherited wealth, but the kind that came from hard work and street smarts. Their fathers all chose different paths to make a good living for their families. Jeremiah's dad was in construction, and built log houses for the rich people who wanted to pretend they were being rustic in their million-dollar homes in the mountains. And Ethan and Titus's father was a dreamer, and something of a nerd. He had invented a computer program that had made him a millionaire a few times over. He had passed on a lot of that knowledge to his son, Titus, who had even figured out a way to get himself assigned to his own brother's unit in Afghanistan. I never wanted to know how he'd pulled that off.

The fact that they started out as ordinary guys just like me was a little nugget of truth that was tough for me to swallow at first since I'd spent all of my life hating people who were rich, because I was jealous that I couldn't have what they did or just saw them as a sorry excuse for human beings. It hadn't taken me long at all to realize just how different my friends were from the rich bastards I'd known in the past. They were wealthy, or at least their parents were. They had more money than they could

probably ever spend, but they used it differently. They gave to charities, provided a good wage to their employees, and helped people who were unable to help themselves. It was an alien concept to me. The Morganston clan should have tried it sometime.

Like that would ever happen. Every dime the Morganston men stole from the community and their employees went straight into their pockets. They used people until there was nothing left but an empty, shell, and then they tossed them aside in pursuit of other victims.

Did I sound bitter? Damn right I was.

Ethan, Jeremiah, and Titus all hated this part of me, this part that still was so full of rage and hatred and a need for revenge. They swore there was more to me than that, and each of them envisioned some imaginary good in me that I didn't really believe existed. A part of me worried that what was happening today would finally open their eyes to the fact that I was not the person they thought I was, and then they'd be forced to remove me from their lives, just like a poor, old dog that Ethan found on the streets once in Kabul and tried so hard to rehabilitate, only to have to finally just admit defeat and let him go.

These guys meant everything in the world to me. They'd been there when nobody else was. They'd given me a job in their private business that they'd started after the military and had made me a wealthy man. I certainly hadn't even begun to come close to the wealth they possessed, but I had more zeros at the end of my bank account than I'd ever dreamed possible.

None of that mattered, though. The only money I needed—all the money I needed—was just one more dollar than the Morganston family had. I'd waited nearly ten years for this moment and no amount of internal guilt or puppy-dog eyes from Ethan was going to steal it from me. Kelsey Morganston had earned what was

coming to him, and I was happy to be the one to deliver it.

“Are you even listening to me, Gabe?” Ethan snapped in exasperation, jerking me back to my present circumstances and away from my thoughts of sweet revenge.

“Yes, I’m listening to you, Ethan, but you’re wasting your time trying to convince me to change my mind. I’ve wanted this for so damned long and to be honest, I don’t really care if you agree with my decision or not. You weren’t there. You don’t know what happened and how he betrayed me. He took everything from me, Ethan. Everything. My family. My stability. My damned heart.” I frowned at him, but the scowl was mostly from the fact that just thinking about Kelsey could still threaten to bring me to tears. How could he still have this kind of control over me? We had been kids when we had our romance, for fuck’s sake! It couldn’t have been love.

But it had been...at least for me.

Ethan dragged in a breath and pinched the bridge of his nose. “I know I don’t know everything that happened, Gabe. All I do know is that this boy hurt you. Badly. I get that and it pisses me off. I love you and because of that, I want to hurt him myself. I don’t need to know the facts because I’m on your side, no matter what.” He reached down and squeezed my hand. “I want you to remember that, Gabe. I’m on your side and so are Jeremiah and Titus. We’ve got your back just like you’ve always had ours.”

Frowning, I said, “Then what’s the problem?”

“Revenge has a tendency to rebound. It’s like rolling a heavy stone up a hill and then you fall at the top, and it rolls back over you. I’m afraid your need for revenge on this boy is going to destroy you,” he answered quietly. “It’s all you’ve had for so long. What happens when it’s gone, Gabe? Will me, Jeremiah, and Titus be enough then? Because we sure the hell haven’t been enough up until this point. What happens when

you've finally gotten everything you want? What happens when the Morganstons are financially ruined and you get to laugh in their arrogant faces? What happens when you finally have to walk away from this boy for the final time?" His frown deepened even more when he added, "A boy, Gabe, that's what he was at the time. Clearly, he made mistakes, but he was just a kid."

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“But so was I, Ethan,” I said softly.

“Shit,” he muttered and ran a frustrated hand through his hair. “I know. You’re right, Gabe. I’m sorry. I don’t need to be pulling this shit right now.” His eyes softened and he grabbed my hand and gave it another squeeze. “Whatever you need, you’ll get it from me and the rest of the guys. You’re one of us.”

I wasn’t one of them. They were good and I was...well, I wasn’t good.

“Don’t go with me, Ethan,” I said. “I don’t want you to see this side of me. It’s going to get ugly and I rather like the angelic opinion you have of me. No need to go and fuck that up, right?”

He barked out a laugh. “Angelic? Dude, you are so far removed from angelic that I’m surprised they allowed you to board a plane and fly in their air space.”

He was a beautiful man and even more beautiful when he smiled, and Ethan smiled often. There were times when I suspected my face would crack if I tried to make my lips do what his did on any kind of regular basis.

The pilot’s voice interrupted any argument I might have had regarding my angel status. We would be landing in five minutes. The airport we were flying into was small and about forty-five minutes away from Morganston Textiles. It would take about thirty minutes to get off the plane, gather our shit, and rent a car for the drive into Trenton Falls. This meant that somewhere in the neighborhood of about one and a half hours, I would be face to face with the family I hated. I’d be face to face with Kelsey, the only boy I’d ever loved.

### Chapter 2

Exactly one hour and seventeen minutes later, I was sitting in the board room of Morganston Textiles, with three Morganston brothers, two secretaries, and, of course, Ethan. Kelsey, according to Wayne Morganston, was on the floor taking care of a manufacturing issue and would be joining them soon. My heart thundered wildly in my chest as I sat among my enemies and waited for the precise moment when I would get to deliver the death blow. They were pretty obviously bored, mumbling quietly to each other, joking about something that happened over dinner last night, while I was watching a tiny film inside my head of the last ten years of my life.

The film was a tragedy and began with that last night I held Kelsey in my arms, taking his body with all the finesse a seventeen-year-old, hormone-driven teenager could muster. I didn't have a clue that it probably hadn't been all that great for him because his smile always possessed the ability to make me think I ruled the fucking world. Then my mind replayed the betrayal, detail by disgusting detail. After that, there was just a blur of hopeless and helplessness. The hunger. The prostitution. The loneliness. The need to be loved, but knowing it wasn't going to happen. I saw it all in my head and knew the family sitting around me was responsible for every damned, horror-filled moment of it.

And they didn't have a fucking clue who I was.

They were the people who had made such a horrific impact on my life. They were the people who had driven me to stay alive long enough to exact my revenge. My nightmares were plagued with these men, but they didn't remember me. I'd made virtually no impact on them. I was about as insignificant as humanly possible where

they were concerned.

Would Kelsey even recognize me? Did I even give a fuck if he did?

Ethan was about as tense as a whore in church on judgement day. He had to know what their indifference did to my heart and soul. He knew how devastating it was...and how angry it made me.

They thought they were meeting with their local bank and were only slightly surprised when unfamiliar faces had shown up. Accustomed to getting everything they wanted, they'd merely arched their brows, shrugged, and led us to the conference room. Morganston Textiles was leveraged to the wall and their last three years had been unprofitable. Business had dropped significantly, as most of the industry was being forced to take their business out of the country in order to remain competitive, and still they hadn't adjusted their lifestyles to fit the limited sales. The brothers continued to rape the company of all assets and credit lines to finance their outrageous lifestyles. They'd given themselves raises, but their employees hadn't gotten a pay increase in over four years. The building was in disarray, crumbling down around them in some places, but instead of making any improvements on the property, they'd each built themselves a summer home in Key West. All of their personal finances and properties were tied into the company, so they would lose virtually everything when it finally tumbled down around them.

All the brothers, that is, except for Kelsey. No amount of digging could uncover the true state of his finances. He hadn't gotten a raise with the rest of his brothers. He hadn't built a summer home on the island, nor did he have a private residence on the Morganston estate like the rest of the boys. His bank account was always in the black, but never held more than a balance of five hundred dollars. The money from his paycheck went into his account and then disappeared as monthly bills were paid. It certainly wasn't the financial empire I'd expected, and Titus and I both had determined that he probably had hidden bank accounts that protected the bulk of his

assets. When Titus was able to uncover those, I would somehow find a way to take those from him too. I wouldn't stop until he possessed nothing, just exactly what he'd left me with.

"I don't know where the fuck the kid is," Wayne grumbled with a roll of his eyes and a smile in my direction, which I suspected was supposed to be categorized as good-natured. It failed. I could see straight through his shit. "Can Barb grab either of you anything while we wait for him to show up?"

Of course, he wouldn't consider getting off his ass and grabbing anybody anything. The way he said it made me suspect poor Barb's existence at work was a total horror show. I'd hate to imagine all the bullshit she put up with on a daily basis.

"No, that won't be necessary," I answered. No need to make Barb do any extra running; after all, she was about to be out of a job. I didn't remember her, but she looked older than me so our paths might not have ever crossed. The other secretary was a young beauty, Courtney Solomon, barely legal would be my guess, and evidently her role was simply to be something pretty to look at. Her attitude was cocky enough that I immediately picked up on a vibe that she felt confident in her role at the plant. My guess was she was sleeping with at least one of the brothers, if not all of them. The contents of my stomach curdled when I imagined her legs wrapped around Kelsey, or her artificially enhanced lips wrapped around his cock.

Fury tore through me and I had to mentally force myself to calm the fuck down. This wasn't about who Kelsey was or was not fucking. This was about revenge, damnit. I didn't care in the least who the lying bastard took to his bed as long as it wasn't me. Regardless of that fact, though, I immediately cast her into the pit with the rest of the clan.

Barb, on the other hand, looked tired and defeated, literally worn out and used up by the Morganston family. Jobs were scarce in the small town I used to call home, so she



probably didn't have any choice but to stay and put up with their bullshit. Maybe I would prove to Ethan that I did have a heart after all and give Barb some kind of severance package on her way out the door. I'd used the biggest chunk of my savings to purchase the failing textile mill but could probably manage to scrape up a few thousand to make her transition less painful. Yes, I'd spent a fortune to purchase a failing company that I planned on closing by the end of the week. It hadn't been an investment, it was my revenge.

I would never sell it to another buyer, even at a loss, because of the fear that they would open it back up and one of the Morganston boys would manage to weasel their way back into it. No, it would sit empty until the day I died as a reminder to me of all I'd lost—my home, my family, my integrity, my soul. Correction, I hadn't lost it. It had been stolen from me.

“Barb! Run down to the plant floor and find Kelsey. We don't have time for his shit this morning. These gentlemen are busy, and I'm sure they don't have time for baby-brother to do his babysitting job with the employees. Hell, if they didn't need all of our signatures for the loan, I'd fire his ass, but Daddy dearest insisted on all of his sons owning a portion of his empire, whether they deserved it or not.”

His tone was irritating and his grin was lethal. Before I even realized it, I found myself angry at him for talking about Kelsey like he was useless. Several seconds ticked by before I forced myself to stop feeling anything at all, other than hatred, for the boy I used to love. Barb, however, didn't bother to try and hide her irritation. Her face was red with anger, and it was all directed toward Wayne. Looked like my ex-lover had a protector watching his back. Interesting.

As Barb got up to leave, I could hear her mumbling something under her breath, but I couldn't quite make out what it was. I heard the word *babysitting*, but that was it. As the door closed behind her, Wayne said, “Where are you boys from? I haven't noticed either of you around town before. Has old man Winters finally decided to hire some

new blood down at the bank? It's about fucking time, in my opinion. I get tired of looking at the same tight-assed old men day after day. Hell, he won't even hire any pretty girls to operate the teller lines. I swear he must interview only old and ugly women!" He guffawed at his own words and the rest of the room laughed alongside him.

Well, everyone except Ethan and me. I'm sure my friend was as disgusted by Wayne's mouth as I was. Ethan had some high fucking standards on how people needed to be treated, regardless of their position on the social tree. Wayne's remarks could only be interpreted as sexist. I had no doubts that he was picking up on the same shit as me and it had to be pissing him off. Good, maybe he'd start hating them so badly that he wouldn't hate me for what I was about to do.

"I'm not from around here," Ethan answered with an incredibly fake smile on his face. Yeah, Wayne was getting to him. "I think Gabriel grew up here though, didn't you, Gabe?" He turned his fake smile on me but I saw straight through it. He was ready to kill Wayne Morganston himself.

Wayne's eyes squinted when he turned to look at me. No, he hadn't had a clue who I was...at least not until Ethan opened his big mouth. I returned Wayne's angry stare with an intimidating one of my own. I wasn't the little boy they'd run out of town anymore. I was a grown man, more than willing and able to kick all of their asses. I also held the golden ticket to their destruction.

"Gabriel? What did you say your last name was?" Wayne practically hissed. "You damned well better not be that Maverick kid who assaulted and raped my baby brother. I hope you wouldn't be stupid enough to show your face in this town again."

Beside me, I felt Ethan's body tense when he heard Wayne's words. I guess I was mistaken—Jeremiah hadn't shared all the sordid details with him. Just when I feared that he might believe the bullshit, I felt his heavy hand on my knee and when he gave

it a tight squeeze, I knew he wasn't going to judge me without hearing my side of the story. I should have never doubted him.

"Gabriel Maverick—the one and only," I answered Wayne in a deadly calm voice. "That's me. The Maverick kid who 'raped' your baby brother. And I'm right here in your boardroom, breathing your same uppity air. How about that? Did you miss me?"

"Get the fuck out of here!" he roared as he jumped to his feet. At the same time, the boardroom door opened and Barb walked back in with Kelsey right behind her.

I felt the air hitch in my lungs when my eyes landed on his face. It had been sheer determination on my part to not ever Google a picture of the boy that had owned my heart and then tossed it away like a piece of trash. The first thing I noticed was that he hadn't changed much. He was still the most beautiful man I'd ever laid eyes on in my entire life. His blond hair was still just as seductively sexy, with just enough curl to make it always look like he'd just crawled out of bed. I remember thinking it was tousled enough that he looked like he'd just been thoroughly fucked. His body appeared to be as lean as when he was younger. His eyes, bluer than any blue in the fucking crayon box, were still framed by the longest lashes in the history of mankind. Those eyes used to look at me with love, lust, and admiration...or at least I'd thought they had.

I wasn't sure what I expected his expressive eyes to say the first time he saw me after nearly sending me to prison for twenty years. When I'd fantasized about this moment, I'd envisioned seeing fear in those blue orbs. A terrified fear because he knew he was finally going to pay for his sins. Maybe he would look angry because I'd somehow managed to survive on the streets. Sometimes, I'd thought the warm blue would have turned to a cold arrogance, like you saw when you looked into the eyes of his brothers.

Of all the things I had expected, none of them were what I was actually witnessing at

the moment. After widening in surprise when he saw me, they'd brightened with joy—the same as they used to in the old days when he would see me coming his way. He caught his breath in surprise and a smile curved his full lips, but that smile disappeared when Wayne's angry voice interrupted the moment.

“I said get the fuck out of here, you asshole!” Turning to Barb, he said, “Call security, Barb. I want this piece of trash out of my building right the fuck now! What the hell was Winters thinking? Hiring a rapist to handle his money? You only handle cock, right, Maverick?” He reached for the phone. “I'll have Winters take care of this immediately.”

This was going beautifully. Absolutely beautifully. I kept a lazy smile on my face as I watched Wayne's tirade play out in front of me. Barb, God bless her, hadn't made a move to call security. The other Morganston brothers were looking about as confused as they used to look in high school in Algebra class. Kelsey was looking at Wayne like he was an idiot.

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Why couldn't he have let himself go and get fat and ugly? Why did he have to still be so fucking beautiful? Why did my heart still have to thunder wildly just from being near him?

"Security, Barb. Now!"

The older lady cleared her throat and answered dryly, "You had to lay the security department off two months ago, Mr. Morganston. Remember? You needed the funds to add a pool to your secretary's house. Cuts had to be made."

Oh, she was enjoying herself very much, indeed. I do believe Wayne had himself a hater in the group.

"Then call the fucking police," he hissed through gritted teeth. Turning to look at me, he added, "They've been looking for him."

"Sorry, friend," Ethan broke in with a smug smile. "Not true. Got anything else? Something not so...predictable?"

"Get off my property," Wayne demanded in outrage.

"Sorry, Wayne. I can't do that. This property belongs to me now," I answered, finally playing my trump card. I watched, with pleasure, as the color drained from his face and his ass hit his chair with a thud that told me his legs may have just given out on him.

"That's...that's not possible. I was signing loan papers today. We are getting that

military contract. Winters wouldn't do this to us. We own this town!"

I wasn't sure who he was trying to convince.

"Nope, it's mine now. This beautiful building and, if my lawyer is correct, most of the Morganston private property as well. It looks like you guys hocked about everything to keep this cash cow producing milk." I made a tsking sound. "Too bad. Looks like you gambled and lost."

The next thirty minutes were spent with Wayne and his brothers, all except Kelsey, screaming in outrage and then whining for another chance. Naturally, it all fell on deaf ears. I enjoyed every damned minute of it...except for the fact that Kelsey remained perfectly quiet the entire time. From the first time he'd looked at me, that first leap of what had looked like joy in his eyes, until now, he hadn't shown much emotion. He didn't look surprised or disappointed. If anything, he looked almost happy.

That expression worried me.

Finally, the brothers were gathering their Louis Vuitton briefcases and vowing they would have their lawyers overturn this stupid buy-out that had to be some kind of mistake. My head was already pounding, and I hadn't even had a real confrontation with Kelsey yet. He'd remained perfectly quiet during his brothers' explosion, watching me with those beautiful eyes, but never saying a word. I'd noticed Ethan watching Kelsey, probably trying to figure out how someone so beautiful had ever gotten mixed up with me in the first place.

I'd been prepared to demand that Kelsey stay in the boardroom when his brothers left, but he had remained seated as the rest of them filed out of the room. Barb hung back, protecting Kelsey like a mother hen, until he nodded for her to go as well. She even kissed his damn cheek on the way out, glared at me, and then left the room,

closing the door behind her.

I felt the oxygen get trapped in my lungs when I was finally able to focus my undivided attention on the boy who had nearly destroyed me. The room was eerily quiet while I tried to gather my wits. I'd practiced this speech a million times in my head, knew exactly what I wanted to say to him, but now that it was finally time, my ability to speak was gone. My emotions were too...mixed. I wanted to hate him. I did hate him. Didn't I?

I wanted the last ten years of my life to have been a bad dream. I wanted all of it to vanish and return to the last moment I held him in my arms. The moment that I had called making love, and that he had characterized as being raped. Or at least that's what he'd told his father and the sheriff.

Kelsey spoke first, looking directly up into my eyes. "Welcome back, Gabriel. It's been awhile. After all this time, I was beginning to think you'd forgotten the way home."

His voice was huskier than before, much sexier and more mature. He sounded confident and composed. But he wasn't. I could still read his emotions as easily as my own. I could see the way his hands trembled slightly as they rested on top of the table. He knew damned well what was coming. He had to have known I would show back up one day, demanding revenge for what he'd done to me.

"This isn't my home," I said between gritted teeth. Finally, I found my voice. No, the comeback wasn't much, but at least I'd managed to achieve basic speech patterns.

"It was at one time. I remember."

I snorted in disgust. "Really? It just wasn't that memorable for me, I guess."

Pain flickered in his eyes but then vanished so swiftly that I wondered if I'd imagined it. I must have, because I knew he didn't care.

"No, I guess not. You've made that apparent over the years, haven't you?" he countered in a quiet voice that was probably meant to try and make me feel bad for my comment. He failed. The pain twisting in my heart had nothing to do with seeing him hurt and everything to do with his betrayal. That had to be it.

Then, as if for the first time, he seemed to notice Ethan sitting next to me. Using that same shy smile he'd used to woo me into believing he was different than all the other rich bastards from his side of the tracks, he turned his attention to my friend. "Hi. I'm Kelsey. Since I was late for the meeting, I guess I missed the introductions." He reached his hand across the table to offer Ethan a handshake.

Ethan sat stone-cold still in his seat, refusing to shake Kelsey's hand or even acknowledge his words. A slight tremble in Kelsey's out-reached hand was the only visible sign of the embarrassment or discomfort Ethan's rudeness caused him. The tremble did, however, draw my attention to the two thick leather bracelets wrapped snugly around each of his wrists. I hadn't noticed them earlier since the sleeves of his dress shirt had kept them hidden. The decorations seemed strange with his business attire, and I'd never known Kelsey to ever wear any form of jewelry, not even a watch. They didn't fit him, and I hated them on sight.

They looked sexier than fuck on him, though...which made me hate them even more.

The hand he'd offered Ethan seconds ago dropped back down to the table and then both hands disappeared back to his lap. From where I was sitting and the fact that his chair wasn't pushed close to the conference table, I could see that he was nervously twisting the leather bracelet around and around on his right wrist. He'd always been a nervous kid. When we'd first met, he'd demonstrated nervous ticks like now, but gradually they'd disappeared as we'd gotten closer. I supposed they must have



returned—probably because he'd known I would eventually come back and demand my revenge for his lies.

The fucker should be nervous. I'd waited years to make him pay for what he'd done, and I wasn't about to let his pathetic nervous gestures interfere with my dreams. When I'd lived on the streets, not sure where my next bite of food would come from or if my next john would slit my throat instead of giving me the twenty dollars I charged, I'd been nervous, too. I just hoped to fuck that I hadn't looked so pathetic. Kelsey looked like a puppy that had been kicked one too many times.

“Well, okay,” he said. “I guess I'll be leaving too. It was nice seeing you again, Gabriel.” He nodded politely in Ethan's direction.

## Page 6

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That was a lie. Lies, lies, lies. Had anything he'd said ever been the truth? Even right now, after everything that had happened, I found myself wanting to believe him. My heart wanted to believe what that look in his eyes was saying.

"Take care of the company," he said, not meeting my eyes. "You've got good people working for you, and they deserve good leadership."

He didn't have the Louis Vuitton briefcase his brothers had toted out of the meeting. Hell, from best I could tell, he didn't even have a cell phone with him. He couldn't have looked more opposite than his family. They'd been wearing expensive suits that had been tailored perfectly for their muscular builds. His khaki pants and white button-up looked like Old Navy, if that. Regardless of the expense or lack of tailoring, his looked much better than the shit his brothers had been wearing. Or maybe it was just him.

I let him make it to the door before I said, "I'm closing the company, Kelsey. They haven't had good leadership in the past, so they shouldn't be surprised when they don't get it in the present. Think on that when you are sitting pretty in your comfy home tonight. All these good people are out of a job because of you and your family."

The whispered curse word I heard from Ethan didn't surprise me. Not exactly. Though I'd never heard him say a curse word when he was younger. I'd known he would be angry with my decision, though. The fact that I'd just tossed away nearly five million dollars wouldn't even be on his radar. The fact that I was about to put about one hundred and twenty-five people out of work seemed to be the thing that pissed him off beyond words, but then my behavior was the very thing he fought against on a daily basis. What did surprise me, however, was the fact that Kelsey

stopped when he heard my words and then closed the conference room door, secluding the three of us inside the room. Ah, perfect. Apparently, he wanted to try and change my mind about kicking his ass to the curb.

Good. Let him try.

“What did you say?” he asked after turning around to face me again. “Tell me you didn’t just say you were going to close the doors.”

“It sounds like you understood me just fine, Kels,” I mocked, using the nickname I’d used when we were teenagers.

“Why?” He was frowning and one hand started twisting at the leather bracelets again. “Why would you buy a company and then shut the doors? Are you planning on selling to another buyer? How long will that take? Most of these people live from paycheck to paycheck, Gabriel. Even a few weeks without work could cause some of them to lose everything they’ve got.”

The fact that I hadn’t really considered that innocent folks would suffer because of Kelsey’s lies made me pause. My main objective, my only focus, had been ensuring Kelsey and his family paid the ultimate price for destroying my life. Sure, I guess in some part of my mind, I’d known all the Morganston employees would lose their jobs, but when I’d been making my plans, I hadn’t put faces or families with those nameless people. I’d been too focused on my revenge against the Morganston clan.

“Maybe you and your brothers should have thought about that before you raped the company until it was beyond repair,” I countered in frustration and anger. “Over the last three years, the four of you have stolen every dime of profit old man Morganston built up in the company and when that was gone, you leveraged every piece of equipment, property, and cube of cheese against loans that went directly into your personal funds instead of benefiting the company. When was the last fucking time

any of your employees got a raise, Kelsey? Do you even know?" I snorted out a disgusted laugh. "No, I doubt you do. They haven't gotten a raise since your daddy died three years ago, Kels. Nothing. Every damned dime has gone straight out the door to fund lavish lifestyles. Day after day, week after week, and year after year, this has happened, but now you want to worry about the employees? Maybe you should have started fucking worrying before today! Don't stand there, looking all self-righteous and blaming me for this shitshow. You and your family got Morganston Textiles where it is today. I only took advantage of your stupidity and greed."

Kelsey closed his eyes for several brief seconds and when he opened them, I was once again forced to face the fact that I wasn't completely over him yet. The pain that I saw there nearly crippled me. I wanted to jump across the table and tell him I would make everything all right if he just wouldn't look that way anymore. Even as a teenager, I'd wanted to be his knight in shining armor, which was really ridiculous since I'd been just about as poor as humanly possible. I guess that urge hadn't completely vanished just because he'd proven he wasn't worth saving, and yet...

Of course, there wouldn't be any leaping across the table to rescue him. I was the cause of his pain and it wasn't a mistake on my part. I'd calculated, planned, and methodically set actions into place that would lead to this particular confrontation. I would never hold him again and listen to his whispers of love and devotion. He'd made me, a boy from the wrong side of the tracks, feel like I was worth something, like I had a chance to drag myself out of the hell I'd been born into and become someone worthy of him. Our relationship had been topsy-turvy from the beginning. He'd placed me on a pedestal and pretended to worship me when we'd both known it should have been the other way around.

Well, those days were behind us. Either he'd been lying from the beginning or he had finally woken up and realized I wasn't worthy of him. One colossal lie and years to wallow in the aftermath of that betrayal led to rage being the only emotion drifting between us and apparently that emotion was reserved solely for me. He just stood

there, breaking my heart all over again.

“Okay, I get it,” he said. “Hurting me and my family appears to be the ultimate goal with this buy-out. I see that now. What I’m not understanding is why you would be willing to hurt all these other people just to hurt me.” His pale blue eyes tried to dig into my soul. “That isn’t you, Gabriel. You don’t sacrifice innocent people just so you can hurt others. You have to remember what it was like in this town. There aren’t many jobs available, and, in an area this small, kicking one hundred and twenty-seven people out of a job will devastate them. Devastate this town. Don’t do this, Gabriel. Please don’t hurt them just to hurt me.”

His voice still sounded perfect, husky, but not too much, just enough. Like rich honey slowly dripping over my body, enclosing me in the sticky sweetness that I’d once believed was pure goodness. His eyes still looked innocent and haunted. His lips were still kissable. His hair was still the perfect length for tugging on and still soft enough to resemble fine silk. It was longer, curlier. When we’d been younger, he’d fought a losing battle to try and keep those wayward curls under control. I may have teased him about them, but I’d fucking loved each and every curl. I could still remember how they felt wound around my fingertip as we’d lain under the stars, sharing dreams of the future. I’d told him how I was going to run away from this stupid town and never look back. I was going to make something of myself—be something better than the father and mother who spawned me. There were times when I’d fancied myself being an impressive businessman like Kelsey’s dad. People would nod their heads in respect when I walked by. Other times, I’d pictured myself as a rock star, performing on stage in front of screaming crowds, though my eyes would only see Kelsey.

Not that I could sing or play an instrument. Shit like that didn’t matter when you’re a dumb kid and dreaming of your future. Maybe I’d be a sports star, making millions by throwing a ball. Other times, I’d be something creative like an artist. Never one time had I ever mentioned me being a soldier—a man trained to take the lives of others and then walk away and be expected to never give them another thought. That

was the one dream that never passed through my mind, but it was the reality I ended up living.

Kelsey had lain next to me, staring at me while I stared at the stars above us, and listened to all my crazy dreams. Not one time had he laughed at my silly thoughts. Being smart, he'd found the right words to make my aspirations seem within reach, even when we'd both known they weren't. Kelsey had never shared his hopes and dreams with me. He'd never told me he wanted to be an astronaut or a chef or even a fucking pie-taster. He had certainly never acted like he wanted to follow in the footsteps of his father and run the local textile plant. But whenever I told him about my plans to leave town, his response had always been the same.

Just please don't leave without me.

I felt my upper lip snarl in fury...or an attempt to keep me from crying from the betrayal. The tears I had shed over the man sitting across from me would fill this room. The heartbreak. The betrayal. The fear. I'd almost gone to jail because of him, and yet, I still fought back tears when my head conjured up visions of those nights from so long ago. How messed up was that? How weak was I?

No, the question was how strong was he? How much power did he have over me...then and now?

Too damned much.

He had to be the most beguiling man walking the face of this earth. God created the most deceitful man alive and then gave him the eyes and mouth of an angel to help further entrap the innocent victims lured into his web. His angelic look of innocence wasn't the only weapon God placed in his arsenal, but it was damned well the one that led to my demise.

“Gabriel? Please don’t do this.”

His soft words interrupted my thoughts, reminding me of why I was there. I’d meant to crush him and I would. How many others would have to suffer for me to have my revenge? I guess that would be up to him.

“I think we’re finished here,” Ethan said. “You should go ahead and clean out your office and leave the building, son. I’m sorry, but whatever action Gabriel decides to take, it won’t involve you or your family.”

My eyes cut around to look at my best friend. His words were harsh, meant to send Kelsey scurrying off like a wounded pet, just so he could rip me a new one over what I was doing. Kelsey would never know it, because he didn’t know Ethan, and he couldn’t see the disappointment and anger simmering in his blue eyes. My first love would hear only that he was being dismissed and the argument was over, but I had heard and seen so much more. If the look in Ethan’s eyes hadn’t been enough to tell me he thought I was lower than dog shit, the fact that he had called Kelsey “son” cemented how he felt about the situation. Yeah, my good friend had already fallen for Kelsey’s angel face and sweet voice. Hell, I couldn’t blame him. Even knowing what I knew, every instinct inside me was screaming for me to take him in my arms and protect him from all the evils of the world.

Ethan’s eyes searched mine. He was silently begging me to step back—to take some time to consider my actions. There was a pleading for me to think about what my need for revenge was going to cost—all the innocent people who would suffer just so I could make Kelsey pay for how he’d betrayed me. Ethan, with one troubled look, longed for me to do the right thing. I hated that he was going to see me like this. See me for what I really was. Ethan had been the first to accept me into the group of friends I called family. After today, he would probably be the first to demand I disappear from that same tight group. I couldn’t do the right thing. I was so far past doing the right thing that I wasn’t sure I could even remember what it was. I was

absolutely consumed with my need for revenge.

Ignoring Ethan's dismissal, Kelsey appealed to me again, "Please don't, Gabriel. If you want to hate somebody, hate me. If you want to hurt somebody, hurt me. Not them."

"Leave us alone," Ethan barked at Kelsey.



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He flinched but didn't budge. My Kelsey, the one I envisioned every damned, fucking time I closed my eyes at night, would have scampered away from someone yelling at him. He'd always been so skittish. Nervous. Frightened. I'd thought he was just a timid little pup that needed someone to help him sort out his courage.

Hell, who the hell knew what kind of game he'd been playing with that act. He'd probably read me like a fucking book and recognized I possessed the type of personality that would be drawn to a weaker person. It had to have been a game. And I'd given him my heart, all wrapped up in pretty paper with a giant bow tied around it.

Kelsey's next words surprised me. He looked directly at Ethan.

"He's here to hurt me, isn't he? The business isn't worth a fucking dime right now, but he waltzed in and bought it from the bank. It was leveraged way beyond the hope of being able to make any money off of it. Something had to bring him back, right?" He turned away from Ethan and looked at me. "Somebody had to bring you back, Gabriel. It was me, after all, wasn't it? You came back to finish it."

I would have never thought he would possess the courage to own up to his betrayal. In my mind, I'd pictured all sorts of pretty denials or trying to blame others. I wasn't really prepared to handle him looking me in the eye and owning it. There'd never been any doubts. Hell, that was a lie. I'd desperately tried to convince myself of his innocence. Doubts had been my fucking lifeline those first few months. I'd concocted all sorts of ridiculous excuses as to why he'd lied about us. More than I had wanted my next breath, I'd wanted to believe that Kelsey hadn't really said I raped him. The lies I'd told to try and convince myself of his innocence had been as glaringly

unbelievable as the lie he'd told about me. It had taken months for me to realize the truth and when I had finally accepted it, my heart had nearly exploded from the pain of acknowledging it.

The pain in my heart was worse now. I hadn't thought it was possible, but hearing him admit it, so fucking casually like it was no more than a statement about the shitty weather we'd been having, hurt even more. The hate that had been trying to flicker and die just from hearing his voice and looking into his eyes blazed back to life with a fury. How the fuck could he do what he did, admit it, and then fucking ask me to do the right fucking thing?

My eyes locked with his. "You want me to do the right thing, Kels? You going to bat for all the Morganston employees? Trying to save the fucking day? Here's what it will take, angel," I spat out the nickname that had once been an endearment. "Get on your knees and convince my cock that I care more about people I don't know than I care about my hate for you. Show me if that pretty mouth of yours has learned any new tricks over the years." I shrugged, hating myself more than I hated him. "It's all up to you, Kels. Do they stay or do they go?"

### Chapter 3

The ride to our hotel was long, very uncomfortable, and deathly quiet. Ethan hadn't spoken a word to me since leaving the textile plant I now owned and didn't know what the fuck I was going to do with. The rental car was roomy and luxurious, and I felt like my very presence left a nasty smear on the expensive leather. It was so quiet. So fucking quiet.

There was nothing worse than being left alone with my own thoughts. I hated myself. There wasn't one part about me that I liked at the moment. Not one fucking part.

The words hadn't been spoken, but what had been unspoken said so much more than any shit Ethan could have hurled in my direction. More than any fucking thing in the world, I wished Ethan would pull over, yank me out of the car, and beat the ever-lovin' shit out of me. To be honest, I would prefer he pull the piece he always had on him in some secret spot and blow my brains out. Anything would be better than the silent treatment.

When he pulled into the nicest hotel in town, which was still pretty bad, I expected him to pull into a parking space. Instead, he pulled right up to the door, put the car in park, and just sat there. My mind scrambled for something to say...something to do that would somehow magically remove the last two hours of my life. At one point or another in my life, I'd been about as low as a human could possibly go. I'd sucked cock for money—I'd stolen food just so I could eat. I'd sold drugs and couldn't say I regretted it, because the money I earned put food in my stomach. I'd been a homeless, dirty, hungry prostitute. And I'd still never felt this low before.

Ethan should have never witnessed this side of me. There would be no going back from this point. He wouldn't be able to forgive what I'd done. Ethan could smile through every fucking thing, but he couldn't, smile through what he'd just witnessed.

The silence was suddenly interrupted by his voice. "I love you, Gabriel. I love you as much as I love my family. Hell, you are my family." His head turned and his eyes sought out my own. "I would die for you, and I know you would do the same for me, without hesitation." He took a deep breath. "I might love you, Gabriel, but I don't like you much right now. I need you to go on up to the room and give me some time to process what I just witnessed. I'll be back later and we can grab something to eat, but right now, I can't be with you."

Shame flooded through my system but at the same time the need to justify, if only in my own mind, what I'd done roared to life. Kelsey and his family earned every damned thing they'd gotten. They'd worked harder for this day than I'd worked for that first ten dollars sucking some stranger's cock in a filthy gas station bathroom.

"You don't have to stay, Ethan. I can handle this—"

"Don't!" he broke in abruptly, his tone telling me exactly how hard it was for him not to punch me. "Don't you dare pull that shit with me. Not after all we've been through together. I'm not leaving you behind to handle whatever the hell this is eating at your soul, Gabe, so just shut the fuck up. If you start that shit with me again, I swear I'll take you down faster than you can blink an eye."

He could try. No, he would succeed—I wouldn't raise a hand to protect myself against any of my friends. If they were coming at me, then I had it coming.

I opened my mouth. Closed it. Looked around the parking lot. "I don't want you to see me this way, Ethan. I'm so full of hate for Kelsey and his family. This is a part of me that I would rather have kept hidden."

Ethan snorted out a sound that must have been a mix between a laugh and a curse. “This isn’t you, Gabe.” He ran his fingers through his hair in frustration and then pinched the bridge of his nose. “Hell, I don’t know what happened to get you to this point. Whatever the hell it was, I’m on your side. Never doubt that. This is a part of you that you refused to share with us. We knew it was bad. We also knew you would share when you felt like the time was right. All that’s fine, Gabe, but you’ve put me in a position that I’m not at all comfortable with. I’ve got to get my bearings before I say or do something I’m going to regret.”

“I told you—”

“Don’t,” he hissed. “So help me Jeezus, if you open your mouth and say what I know you’re going to say, we are both going to end up in the town jail tonight. Yes, it might be cleaner and more comfortable than the dump we’re staying in, but I’d venture a guess that the food is shit. Let’s not find out, okay?”

Ethan didn’t realize it, but the food in the local diner was probably not worth a shit, either. I looked at him again and got lost in the softness of his eyes. He was like a freakin’ lifeline when the storm was raging around me. His calm, solid strength had always been my shelter. Yes, he was disappointed in me, but at least it wasn’t disgust I was seeing.

“He hurt me, Ethan. He nearly fucking killed me,” I whispered softly. I’d never admitted that fact to another living person. It had been a mantra I chanted in my own head since the night I’d heard his testimony that I’d raped him. Thinking of that always caused my body to break out into a cold sweat. Fear. Betrayal. Pain. All those emotions were too strong for a seventeen-year-old boy to have to handle alone.

“That little poodle in the conference room? The one with the sad, scared eyes? What did he do, Gabe? Nip at your ankles? Yap too loud for your sensitive ears?” He reached over to squeeze my thigh, letting me know he loved me...and to brace

myself. “You were both kids, Gabe. Kids do dumb shit—really fucking dumb shit. Obviously, this guy took it to the highest level if he left you with all these emotions swirling around in that sexy body of yours, but he was still a kid.” When I opened my mouth to argue, he held up his hand and said, “Yes, you were a kid, too. You told me. I get that and totally agree with you. Standing on the outside and looking in, the whole damned world would think he won and you lost that battle.”

His squeeze tightened. “Looks can be deceiving, Gabe. Right up until you found out that Morganston Textiles was in financial trouble and you might have the opportunity to snatch it out of their greedy hands, your eyes twinkled with happiness and your mouth was the first to curve into a smile. You enjoyed the life you’d built for yourself, surrounded by people who love the hell out of you. Hell, Gabe, you put on a fucking apron at Thanksgiving and cooked us all a huge dinner. An apron, Gabe. Sure, there was that time that the apron was the only thing you were wearing, but on most of our family dinners you—”

“First of all, I don’t twinkle. Ever. Nothing about me twinkles. Secondly, is there a fucking point to your story? I’m having a hard time following how my apron-wearing skills have any damned thing to do with my vendetta against the Morganston bastards.” All of our family dinners were nothing but good times, and I didn’t want images of Kelsey sully those beautiful memories. I didn’t want to picture how things could have been so different if he hadn’t lied about me. Kelsey could have been sitting at that giant dinner table, making fun of my apron and then tasting my cooking. Kelsey’s soft laugh would have probably been drowned out by the boisterous sounds of my adopted family, but I would’ve heard it. I would have known how well he fit in because my eyes would have been on him all day and night. But Kelsey would never be there with the people who loved me...because he didn’t and obviously never had.

Ethan pushed out an exasperated breath. “Jeremiah should be here, he’s so much better at this shit than me,” he mumbled as his head dropped. It was clear he was

trying to come up with some earth-shattering statement that would somehow manage to cause the Gabriel he knew to magically make a reappearance. It wasn't going to happen, not while I was in Trenton Falls. Talk about magic. This place somehow managed to magically turn me back into the poor trash I was before making my escape. The second I'd crossed the county line, I'd heard a whispering—telling me I was finally coming home to the trailer park where I'd spent the first seventeen years of my life. No, not the nice trailer park where the hard-working low-income families lived with their nicely maintained mobile homes, trimmed grass, and children's toys littering the yards. I'd lived in the park where the drug dealers, alcoholics, and folks who just refused to work an honest day in their lives called home. That was my fucking legacy.

“My point is, smartass, that you were happy. You were lost when we first met, but that was a long damned time ago and I haven't seen that look in your eyes in years, Gabe. You have a satisfying, well-paying job. You have family who would die for you without a second thought. We play poker every other Friday night, and you cook those stupidly delicious crab thingies that we all love. You get laid whenever you want and with whomever you want—all you need to do is cast those sexy eyes in their direction and they drop to their knees. And, as if that isn't enough, you've got the best fucking neighbors a person could dream up.”

Naturally, he was referring to himself and Jeremiah, who lived in the cabin north of mine, and Titus who lived in a house south of mine. He was fooling himself. They weren't all that. Jeremiah's dogs barked loud enough that they could wake me out of a sound sleep.

Who was I kidding? They were all that.

Taking a deep breath, I answered, “Yeah, I know I've got it all, Ethan. I honestly do. My life is about as perfect as humanly possible.” Except Kelsey wasn't in it. “Let me just finish this and everything can go back to normal.”

His eyes looked sad as he studied me. “My point wasn’t going to be that you had it all, Gabe. My point was going to be that I don’t think Kelsey had anything except that job. And you just took that away from him.”

His words dropped like a bomb right into my lap. In silence, I sat there, wondering if I should be furious with my best friend for obviously being Team Kelsey when he damned well should have been Team Gabriel. I wanted to ask how in the fucking hell he thought he knew anything about Kelsey, much less sit there and pretend to know what he had or didn’t have going on in his life. Why would it even matter, I wanted to ask. On the other hand, I wondered what Ethan had seen that I’d missed. If Ethan had seen anything. I, more than anybody else, knew just how charmingly deceitful Kelsey could be.

“What makes you think that? He looked to still be living pretty large to me, cushy job where his only requirement is to have the Morganston last name in order to bring home a fat paycheck. He graduated high school. Went to college. Looks the way he does. Explain to me how he has nothing.”

“Look, Gabe, I tried to back you up in there in front of all them, but now this is just you and me talking. Do you think that having money is what’s important in life, Gabe? What’s the most important thing in this world to you? Education? Good looks?”

“Family,” I answered without hesitation. “You guys are my family and you’re the only thing important to me.”



“Exactly.”

I waited. And waited. What was his point?

Finally, he rolled his eyes when he saw I wasn't going to get it on my own. “Let's just say that if my baby brother had done something so bad that another guy had been stewing in hatred, just waiting for the opportunity to get back at him, I sure the hell wouldn't have left him alone in a room with that guy.” He eased back in his seat but continued to look me in the eye. “Not one of them even looked in his direction when they left the room, Gabe. It was like he wasn't even there. They were totally worried about themselves and not another damned thing. Hell, that lady, Barb, was the only one that acted like she might give a damn about Kelsey. I don't know what the hell her role is at that plant, but unless she's Kelsey's mother, I can't begin to come up with an explanation as to why she was the only one in that room that was worried about his welfare.”

Barb was not Kelsey's mother. Barb looked like a woman who spent the majority of her life taking care of her family, mothering and loving them. The last time Gabriel had seen Kelsey's mom, she'd looked a lot like a Barbie doll. Heart not included in package. Shit, Ethan was right, not one of them had been the least bit concerned about Kelsey. Sure, Wayne had gotten all bent out of shape when he'd learned who I was, acted like he might be trying to protect Kelsey, but the minute he learned his wealth and power were at stake, Kelsey was quickly forgotten.

“He called you a rapist, Gabe,” Ethan interrupted my thoughts, reminding me of the shit he'd heard in the boardroom. “I don't for one fucking minute believe that, but I'm merely saying that whatever shit went down between you and Kelsey, I'm pretty

sure it involved sex. I assume they were just pissed that you were banging their baby brother?”

Well, fuck. I’d known I would have to eventually tell them about my ugly past. Now was as good a time as any, I supposed. I had to trust they would believe my side—not the shit Kelsey told his father and the sheriff. My head started pounding. Carrying hate in my heart was beginning to take its toll on me. Ethan was right, this wasn’t me. I hated feeling this way.

“Come on up to the room and let me tell you what happened,” I muttered. “Hell, I should have already told you guys.”

“Yes, you should have, my man. Having said that, I’m still pissed at you. I’m not going up there right now.” When I opened my mouth to argue, he held up his hand to stop me and said, “You fucking tried to blackmail the kid into blowing you, Gabe. That’s one I’m not going to get over in a three-minute drive from the plant to the hotel room.”

I felt heat burn my cheeks. I still couldn’t believe I’d said that to Kelsey. I would have never let him do it, but those damned words never should have left my mouth. Hell, they shouldn’t have even been floating around in my head to begin with. The look on his face after my hateful words caused my heart to bleed. It was in that moment that I knew I needed help. My head was too fucked up. My heart was still broken.

“I wouldn’t have gone through with it,” I muttered softly.

“I would hope to hell not, Gabriel. Seriously? A blow job to keep the plant open? What the fuck were you thinking? A comment like that has a lawsuit written all the fuck over it, not to mention that it makes you a mean son of a bitch! Thank the fuck I know you well enough to know that your head is messed up three ways to Saturday

for shit like that to come out of your mouth. If he sues your ass, I'll laugh at you while you're writing him the check. Dumbass."

"I just wanted to hurt him. Hurt him like he hurt me." I sounded like a seven-year-old kid trying to defend why I took my ball and went home.

"Well...I think you succeeded."

Ethan's words echoed in my head as visions of Kelsey's face in that boardroom flashed in front of me. He'd flinched, literally flinched in pain when I'd told him to suck me off. In an instant, tears flooded his eyes, drowning those beautiful blue irises. His cheeks reddened and his hands started trembling. Long lashes that I used to tease him mercilessly over blinked slowly as he looked at me, Ethan, and then back at me. He hadn't said a word in response. He hadn't punched me in the face like I'd deserved. Without another word to either of us, he'd simply stood up and left the room. Everything inside my body screamed for me to go after him, to beg for his forgiveness. Instead, though, I'd sat there, feeling like an ass.

"Yeah, I guess I did." I closed my eyes and bounced the back of my head against the headrest. What the fuck had I been thinking? Coming here again? Confronting Kelsey and his family? What had I hoped to achieve? Not a damned thing, that was what. I hadn't thought one minute past the look of shock that would come over their faces when they learned that I had stolen their company right out from under them. I literally had not thought past that moment. I'd just spent millions of dollars to buy a company that was not only beyond bailing out, but one that I didn't even want for more than my opportunity to get my "takethat" moment.

Well, didn't it feel just fucking great? Yeah, take that. I'd shown them.

I was so screwed.

“What do I do now, Ethan?” I muttered in disgust. “What the fuck am I supposed to do with a textile company that I know not one damned thing about, and that I’m even less interested in learning anything about? Just give it back?”

“I guess you shut the doors, just like you told Kelsey. I mean, you aren’t interested in running a textile mill, are you? I’ve never heard you mention that job title before, and I’m pretty sure you’ve told me you wouldn’t mind being anything from the President of the United States to Santa Claus.” He shrugged like it was no big deal. “There couldn’t be more than eighty people working there, I wouldn’t think, so not too many people will lose their jobs. No big deal, right?”

“Nobody likes an asshole, Ethan. I’ve told you that over and over again. I know how you feel about this, so quit with the theatrics and help me fix it, okay?”

He grinned, just like I knew he would. “I’m already on it. The other guys will be here by nine o’clock tonight. Get ready to spill the beans on your sordid past, get your ass handed to you by Jeremiah after I tell him what you said to that poor kid, and then, and only then, we will come up with a plan to turn this shitshow around. Got it?”

I looked at my watch. It was almost six o’clock. There was no way they could be here by nine—even if they took Titus’s private jet. “How are they going to be here by nine?”

“I texted Titus the minute that stupid shit fell out of your mouth in the boardroom. That confirmed what I already suspected—you are fucked up in the head where anything Morganston is concerned. I told Titus to get his ass here and to dig up every damned thing he knew about textiles on his trip over.”

“Maybe I should just go home. Being here isn’t healthy for me, Ethan. I’ll work without pay for the rest of my life if you guys can just clean this one up for me.”

“Nope. You made this mess and you’re going to fix it. No, you aren’t going to do it by yourself because you’ve got family to support you. It would have been nice if you wouldn’t have let family walk into this completely blind, but there’s no point crying over that now. Titus is the brains of our group, and he’ll figure something out.”

“Maybe, but what should I—”

“Get. Out. Of. The. Car. I need to be alone and talk to Jeremiah.” He leaned over and grabbed the collar of my shirt. “This is me still pissed at you. We need space. When you see me again, everything will be cool again. Love you. Now get out.”

### Chapter 4

After I got out of the rental car and watched Ethan drive away, I checked us into the hotel and went to hide in my room. Since the moment I'd read Morganston Textiles was in trouble, everything in my life had been going at a super-fast pace. With the help of Titus, there'd been hours upon hours of research as we tried to determine just how bad the Morganston sons had fucked up the company after their father died. Titus hacked every Morganston personal account he could find.

He'd hacked into the business account. Hell, he'd even hacked into the bank's account so he could get a final picture of what the whole deal looked like. Then it had been hours of moving money and selling stock—pretty much blowing every penny I owned. Once the funds had been taken care of, we'd moved to start pressuring the bank to call the loan and sell to us. In other words, I hadn't had more than a few minutes of awake time to do anything other than plan Kelsey's demise and then to picture that demise in my head right before I drifted off to sleep. There'd been no time to stop and ask myself what the fuck I was doing. I hadn't used one extra second to pause long enough to ask why I was doing this. Ethan was right. What happened between Kelsey and me was nothing more than history. An ugly history, but history nonetheless. I should have just left it dead and buried.

Other than my own fucked-up behavior, the one thing that really threw me for a loop was the fact that Titus had gone along with it. Titus was the smartest businessman in the universe. Why didn't he hit pause long enough to knock some sense into me? Why hadn't he pulled Ethan and Jeremiah aside and told them I was being a huge asshole? Titus loved money. He didn't love money for the wrong reasons. He loved money because he knew that those that had been blessed with money were also

burdened with the blessing of helping other people with that money. Titus was generous and kind. Why would he have allowed me to throw away millions of dollars?

Didn't matter. It was my mistake, not his. I would deal with it, and I wasn't destitute.

I sure the hell wasn't as rich as I'd been when I rolled out of bed this morning...before the contracts were signed, but I had some left.

I lay on the bed, hands folded on my stomach, and tried to figure out why Titus let me fuck myself over. I lay there thinking that, because if I didn't keep my mind on that path, I would move on to Kelsey, and thinking about Kelsey was dangerous. He was still obviously my Kryptonite. No matter how much time passed or how badly he hurt me with his lies, my heart had done a funny little jump when he walked into the room. It was that same heart cartwheel that it had always done whenever my eyes would land on him—even after all these years. My heart remembered.

Shit, my cock remembered, too. Every nerve in my body had gone on high alert. It was as if my body screamed “Finally!” when he walked into the room. No, he wasn't the same boy I'd been so madly in love with, but there weren't many changes. He was still thin with lean muscles. His skin was still tanned and flawless. His hair had changed. It used to be a pale blond and now it was more of a dirty blonde. Oh, and it was longer. He had the same high cheekbones, long lashes, and slanted eyes that were a bright blue. His lips were soft and full—he'd always hated that about his mouth. I'd always loved it. Just as I remembered, his neck was slim and long. I wondered if it was still sensitive? He would either giggle like a girl or moan with arousal when I'd toyed with his neck. So sensitive. So...mine. At least, that's what I'd thought.

When we'd been kids, he'd always worn silly khaki pants and a neat button-up shirt. Always tucked in. Of course, he'd gone to a prep school in the next county. I'd worn ragged jeans that were always a size too big because no matter how hard I tried, they

never had my size at the Goodwill store. T-shirts had been my staple. I'd worn chunky boots and he'd worn Converse tennis shoes. We couldn't have been more opposite in our looks or social status.

Silly me, I'd thought none of that mattered to Kelsey. He'd almost convinced me that it didn't matter. All those nights we'd lain under the stars, sharing secrets and dreams, he'd told me that having money didn't mean shit. He'd told me I was a better man than anybody he knew. He'd told me things and looked at me with those big blue eyes in a way that convinced me I could do or be anything I wanted. If I hadn't been a screwed-up teenager, I might have realized that there was something...off about our relationship. I'd shared everything with him. He'd shared nothing with me. He never once told me what his plans for the future were. What his favorite food was. What his favorite color was. Nothing. I'd known nothing about him and he'd known everything about me.

Please don't leave without me.

I felt my hand start to fist. My chest ached. I didn't want to do this, not right now. When I allowed myself the luxury of Kelsey memories, I needed to be alone. In the dark. With a bottle of Scotch. Thoughts of Kelsey were always exhausting. I'd feel empty for hours, days at times. I couldn't do this right now. Titus, Ethan, and Jeremiah would be here in less than an hour. There wasn't enough time. My heart wouldn't have enough time to recover.

"Hey! Your name's Gabriel, isn't it? I've seen you around. Mine's Kelsey." He held out his small hand, offering me a handshake like a stupid grownup would do. I looked down at his offering and noticed the delicate bones visible against the pale flesh stretched over them. I knew who the fuck he was, just like the rest of our goddamned town, and his last name did absolutely nothing to impress me. I also knew he was only a year younger than me, so why were his hands so tiny? He looked like a freakin' fairy from Cinderella or something.



I snorted in disgust, mostly at myself for noticing how delicately cute his hands were, and said, “Fuck off, kid.”

“I’m not a kid, you know,” he spat, surprising the hell out of me when he stepped in front of me to block the path.

I had no idea fairies had balls. Impressive. He kinda made me want to laugh. He kinda made me feel something else, too.

“You are to me,” I hissed. “Now, get lost. Scram. Go back to doing whatever it is you rich kids do. If you’re that desperate for a friend, buy yourself one. You’ve got enough green to do that. Stop messing with me.”

He didn’t budge. Blue eyes flashed angrily. Finally, he crossed his hands over his chest and said, “Fine. How much do you cost?”

What the fuck? “What are you talking about?” I could have stepped around him or shoved him right out of my path without any extra effort, but the sound of his voice was making me want to smile. What the hell was that about? I’d never noticed how anybody sounded before.

“You told me to buy a friend, so I asked how much you cost. It seems like a simple question to me. I assumed you must be for sale for you to make a statement like that. Soooo, how much do you cost?”

I almost laughed out loud. Balls and spunk. It could be a cute mix if he had a different last name. I looked around the busy street to make sure nobody was listening to us or even watching us, for that matter. I didn’t need to be connected to a Morganston for any reason whatsoever; nothing good could come from that. Absolutely nothing. Nobody seemed to be paying us any mind, so I decided to let myself toy with him a little longer. He was cute. A pixie fairy, that was it.

“Not for sale.”

“Hmmm,” he answered quietly. I could tell his mind was going a mile a minute. “Can I rent you then? What are you doing? Want to go get an ice cream or something?”

That time, I did laugh out loud. I had to be on fucking camera somewhere. This was some kind of joke. It had to be. “An ice cream? Are you kidding me? What’s up, kid? Are you trying to be rebellious or something? Talking to the town trash to prove you’re finally getting hairs on your balls? Is that it? What’s this newfound interest in poor people you’ve gotten?” Why in the hell was this kid bothering me? Not only did I know who he was, I’d seen him around town often enough and he didn’t ever seem to talk to anybody—just wandered around with his nose in a book, making the rest of the world go around him on the sidewalk to keep from running him over. I couldn’t begin to count the number of times I’d fantasized about tripping his skinny ass when I’d been forced to sidestep off the cracked pavement just to avoid walking into him. Now, here he was, looking up at me with those bright blue eyes like we were the best of friends. As far as I knew, he hadn’t one time looked in my direction.

“Nah, no hair on the balls yet.” He crinkled his nose. “Does that really happen? Cause it sounds gross.”

He did not just say that. I glanced around again to make sure nobody was overhearing this exchange. At fifteen years old, I already knew I was gay, but I sure as hell wasn’t ready to scream it out to the homophobic world of Trenton Falls. Abso-fucking-lutely-not. Two guys standing around talking about hairy balls just might lead someone to draw the gay conclusion all on their own, even if the intelligence level of most Trenton Falls residents was incredibly low.

“Go away, kid. Why are you bothering me?”

“Cause I think you’re pretty,” he answered matter-of-factly.

I jerked in shock and then grabbed him by the upper arm and yanked him down the sidewalk, kept dragging him until we were well out of anybody's hearing distance. When I was sure we were completely alone in the shadowed alley between the dollar store and the local grocery, I shoved him against the brick wall hard enough to cause his head to smack against the bricks. Those delicate, bird-like hands immediately rose up to rub the back of his head.

“Don't say shit like that in front of people, kid! That fucking shit will get you in trouble! Fuck!” This was just what I needed to get my ass killed. I wasn't stupid, I knew what happened to boys that had urges like I did. They disappeared, that's what. I knew that because my father told it around the trailer about every damned night. Obviously, someone he worked with was gay and dear ole dad went the extra mile to prove he was totally against that shit. Made me wonder if the apple hadn't fallen far from the tree. The only difference was I wasn't ashamed of how I felt. I was just afraid of how I felt while living here.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:47 am*

Wide blue eyes watched me pace up and down the alley, muttering one curse word after another. He would blink slowly, bite his bottom lip, and frown. Other than that, nothing else was coming out of his mouth. I guess that was a good thing. The poor dumb kid had absolutely no filter between his brain and those pouty lips.

“You shouldn’t curse like that. It isn’t very nice.” His sing-song voice interrupted my stomping, cursing alley exhibition.

For a split second, I was torn between laughing out loud at his ridiculous reprimand or running for my life. I watched, mouth hanging wide open, as he placed fragile hands on his even more delicate hip bones and frowned at me. I rarely laughed. It just wasn’t my thing. A smile split across my face and laughter bubbled right out.

I should have run for my life.

It was one of those decisions in life that people looked back on, wondering how their lives would have turned out differently if they’d just followed their instincts. For one thing, there was a damned good chance I wouldn’t have ended up homeless and selling my body for food. My home life was crap, with parents that knew very little about parenting, and there was never enough food to satisfy a young teenage boy, but it had still been home. It had been all I had ever known. Maybe if I had listened to my instincts, I wouldn’t be a twenty-seven-year-old man with a chip on my shoulder the size of the rock of Gibraltar. I probably wouldn’t have joined the military which meant I wouldn’t possess an uncanny ability to kill people...with thirty-seven kills under my belt. War is the devil’s mistress and killing people is a stone cold bitch. I’d loved the comradery I’d shared with the other men in my platoon, but I hadn’t loved another damned thing about it.

Of course, if I'd run away that day, I would have never met Ethan, Jeremiah, and Titus, the magical ropes that kept me held together when all I wanted to do was fall apart.

I would also never have known the love I'd felt for Kelsey.

It hadn't just been love, at least not on my end. I'd been fifteen years old that day when he'd approached me on the sidewalk, and he'd been fourteen. Whatever the hell it was that we shared had started out as friendship, but we'd both known that it would eventually lead to something so much more. Hell, we'd anticipated it with each passing day, him begging me from the very beginning, but me refusing to do any touching until he was sixteen.

I'd loved everything about Kelsey. His beauty. His innocence. His smile.

We'd spend hours talking about nothing...talking about everything. At first, it had been innocent boyhood shit. Who could run faster? Who could throw a rock farther? Nonsense, really. I'd always won at everything, and his sweet angelic smile never once waivered when I'd kicked his ass at every damned thing we'd tried. It was as if he'd expected to lose...no, he'd expected me to win. I'd thought it was some kind of hero worship at the time. Now, knowing how our futures turned out, I didn't know what the hell it had been.

The other feelings we had for each other were always lingering right below the surface.

I was the more mature since I had that whole eight months of wisdom on him, so I'd diligently tried to make wise decisions for both of us. He hadn't made it easy on me. That and teenage hormones, but we hadn't done more than some kissing and semi-heavy petting until he celebrated his sixteenth birthday.

A hard knock at my hotel door yanked me from traveling down yet another memory lane that would undoubtedly leave me feeling empty, lonely, sad, and angry. Dreading what was about to happen but knowing it needed to take place, I heaved up off the bed, checked to make sure tears weren't streaming down my face, and then headed to the door. When I pulled it open, I was surprised to see only Titus on the other side. Where were Ethan and Jeremiah?

"Hey, Gabe," Titus said with a brighter smile than was necessary or called for considering the horror show I'd plunked us all right in the middle of. "Grab your shit and let's get out of here."

Grab my shit? I wasn't a woman, I didn't have a pocketbook or whatever else that shit was they always had to have with them no matter where they were going or what they were doing when they got there. "Uh...yeah, my wallet is in my back pocket and my cell is on my belt. I'm good to go, man. Where are we meeting the other guys?"

"No, grab your luggage, dumbass. We're getting out of this dump. No way am I laying my body on one of these beds. Hurry your ass up. I'm tired and excited to finally check out the place I've got lined up for us."

I turned to yank up my suitcase. Other than dragging the ridiculous suit off my body and putting on some comfortable jeans and a T-shirt, I hadn't bothered with any unpacking. Since the expensive suit was stuffed back into the case, I was good to go. When I turned back around, he was still standing in the doorway, a huge frown on his face. Titus was fucking beautiful...even frowning.

"What?"

"Where is your suit? I distinctly remember you wearing a very nice Tom Ford suit this morning when you boarded the plane. I picked it out. I called in a favor to have it fitted perfectly to your body. Hours were spent selecting just the right color and cut,

and I don't even want to think about how long it took me to pick out the perfect tie." He crossed his arms over his lean chest. "Where, dear God in Heaven, is that suit, Gabriel?"

I was honestly afraid to answer the question. Yes, Titus was the smallest of all of us, almost dainty, in fact. He was also the scariest. You did not mess with his computers or his fashion. Nosiree, one did not. At least not if they wanted to live very long. I was in some serious shit. My lips tightened together, silently pleading the Fifth Amendment.

"Oh, for fuck's sake!" he growled. "You are an idiot, Gabe. A total idiot. Do you have any idea how long it will take to get those wrinkles out of that suit?"

I didn't plan on ever wearing it again. Out of the four of us, Titus was the only one who enjoyed dressing to impress. "No, but I have a feeling you're going to tell me," I grumbled as we both stepped out of the smelly hotel room.

"Stop it with the smartass-ery, Gabe. From the undertones I picked up from Ethan, you are barely attractive right now without adding the whole smartass thing." He looked up and smiled at me as insulting me was his favorite thing. "He wouldn't tell us everything but said you acted like a total motherfucking ass."

"That about sums it up," I said as we tromped down the hall toward the elevator. "Hey, where are we going? There isn't another hotel in Trenton Falls."

His nose crinkled up like he'd smelled a fresh fart. "No, there isn't. This place is...backwoods, Gabe. How did you stand growing up here? What did you do for fun? I looked on the internet, and there's not a gay bar within fifty miles of this place. How did you manage?"

I pushed the button to the elevator. "I was seventeen, Titus."

“I know, I was just messing with you. I’ve got us a place in the next county over. From the pictures I’ve seen, it’s over-the-top gorgeous. I can’t wait to see it in person.”

As we rode down the elevator, I couldn’t help but think how disappointed Titus was going to be. I’d been to the next county over and unless things had changed drastically over the past ten years, there was nothing over-the-top gorgeous there either.

Thirty minutes later, I was whistling through my teeth as I stood smack-ass in the center of the living room of our temporary digs. Titus had been correct; the place was breathtaking. It was once a Catholic church and somebody recently converted it into a living space large enough to house three or four families comfortably. Just from where I stood, I could see it had about everything to create the perfect bachelor pad for like, maybe, the future King of England before he’d gotten married. Giant chandeliers, over-sized leather furniture, massive fireplace, in-ground hot tub over in the corner, giant television, pool table...and I hadn’t even looked past the first room.

“What the fuck? Why would anybody create something so totally cool in place so totally uncool? This place is solid.”



*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:47 am*

Ethan and Jeremiah lay on the couch together, all snuggled up like they'd been apart for two weeks instead of a few hours. Jeremiah's yappy dogs were running around the tile floor with the same enthusiastic craziness they demonstrated at home. Why in the hell anybody thought they needed seven dogs was beyond my comprehension. Didn't matter, Jeremiah wanted them, so Jeremiah got them. It was how Ethan rolled.

"It's nice, yeah?" Titus commented as he breezed past me and plunked down on one of the oversized leather chairs. "I knew it would be. It's so much better than that flea motel you booked us into." His nose crinkled again. Turning to Jeremiah, he said, "I'm starved. Did you guys get the pizzas ordered?"

"Yep."

His eyes flew back to me. "Don't just stand there, Gabriel. Take a load off. I hear you have something to share with us." He patted the space next to him on the chair. "Come on, don't be afraid. We don't bite." His eyes cut back to the couch. "Well, some of us don't bite. Ethan's been known to on occasion."

Why was he so damned chipper? He had to know my heart was wide open and bleeding a fucking river and on top of that shit, he'd helped me waste my entire life's savings. Well, most of it. It didn't seem fair that he was enjoying my downfall quite as much as he was.

I meandered over to where they were and plopped down onto a chair that looked like a Santa throne of some sort. It was surprisingly comfortable.

"Get serious, Titus. This isn't funny or fun and games. Gabe's got serious problems."

Ethan scowled in Titus's direction, clearly having a difficult time understanding his mood, as well.

"Fine," Titus muttered.

Not at all what I expected from one of my best friends. Not. At. All.

Ethan sent me a silent apology. Titus was his younger brother but that didn't keep him from wanting to throttle the high-strung man more often than not. Titus was...different. Eccentric. Book smart but socially challenged. Business genius but couldn't set up a Facebook account if his life depended on it. He said he was gay but we'd never seen him with a man before. Never seen him with a woman, either for that matter.

"You sure this is something you want to give us, Gabe? Because you know that once you've shared this part of your life with us, there's no taking it back. Your battles will be our battles. There's nothing we want more than to help ease your suffering by shouldering some of the shit ourselves, but we don't want you to feel like it's something you have to do."

"Nah, it's something I should have told you guys a long time ago." I took a deep breath. "I was...was ashamed. I didn't want any of you to look at me different." I sure the hell looked at myself differently after it happened.

"Not gonna happen, brother," Titus said, instantly donning his serious persona. "You're one of us. We don't turn on our own. We stand tall next to you."

"I was charged with rape." The words gushed out of my mouth, apparently using the Band-Aid method of revealing my sordid past. I waited for the looks of disgust and horror to pass their faces, but they never came. They looked confused. "Rape," I clarified, as if maybe they hadn't heard me correctly. "I was accused of it. Raping

someone.”

“Yeah, we get that,” Ethan answered. “We know what rape means, which means we know you weren’t guilty.”

Just like that, they believed me. Accepted me. Never questioned my guilt or innocence. They just knew I was innocent. I wondered why the fuck had I waited so long.

“The rape accusation? That’s why you ran from this shit town?” Jeremiah asked softly. Jeremiah could kill a man more ways than Paula Deen could use butter, but the man had the softest heart of anybody I’d ever known. Soft heart. Soft voice. Hard muscles. He was a perfect match for Ethan.

“That would be it,” I answered. “I hit the road. I decided that living on the streets beat the shit out of this place, so I took off. Left Trenton Falls and made my way to Atlanta.” I laughed in disgust. “You know? Cause that’s where all the homeless people lived in my teenaged mind.”

“Shit, Gabe. How old were you?” Jeremiah asked.

I could tell he was picturing every horror story imaginable in his head and, unfortunately, he was probably dead on. I hated them to know what I’d done to survive, but the secrets had to go. I was up shit creek with my latest deal, and if I expected them to help me turn water into wine, then I needed to be totally upfront and honest with them.

“Seventeen.”

“Shit!” Ethan hissed, alongside Jeremiah’s, “Oh, man.”

Titus was being unusually quiet considering the heaviness of the conversation.

“What the hell did you do to survive?” Ethan asked between gritted teeth and then held up his hand to stop me from answering. “No, that shit is yours. Whenever you’re ready, you can make it ours, too. I’m not going to push and pry.” Jeremiah stroked his wrist, letting him know he approved of his lover’s thoughtfulness.

I wanted that. I wanted it so damned bad. Problem was, I still wanted it with Kelsey. What the hell was wrong with me?

Ethan’s eyes darkened. “Damn, and I took up for him after the meeting and told you not to be so harsh on him. I guess it’s safe to assume it was that cute little poodle that made that shit up? He’s the reason you lived on the streets, in the fucking cold and without food!”

I felt something strange invade my mind, a fierce protectiveness that I shouldn’t feel. Apparently, I thought it was okay for me to hate Kelsey with every ounce of my being, but I sure the fuck didn’t like anybody talking shit about him...even my best friend. What the fuck was that about?

“What’s done is done,” I dodged. “I should have let it go. There wasn’t one damned good reason for me to come back here.” My fingers tangled in my hair and I pinched the bridge of my nose, feeling a migraine knocking at my door. “Like you said, he was a kid when it happened. Kids do stupid shit for absolutely no reason. It’s history.” I turned and looked at Titus, the brilliant businessman of our group. “Now I just need to figure out a way to make a hasty exit without leaving myself homeless again. Any hopes of that happening, Titus? Could I, like, break the company apart and sell pieces to somebody?” I’d heard about that shit on television, or a movie, or who the hell knew. I didn’t know a damned thing about business, and I had even less desire to learn a damned thing about it.

“Nuh uh. Can’t do it. He’s going down,” Ethan said in a dangerously low voice. He was pissed. “I wish I’d fucking made him get on his knees for you, now. Would have served the lying son of a bitch right.”

“Stop!” The word bellowed out of my mouth and surprised me even more than it had Ethan. “Just...stop.” I dragged in a deep breath, hating the way my head was so confused about Kelsey. I should hate him. I shouldn’t care if Ethan suddenly wanted to destroy him. I should be rubbing my hands together in glee as we sorted out a plan to hurt him even more than I already had. Instead of that, though, I felt my protective instincts kick in. Fuck.

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“I...I didn’t plan on this,” Titus interrupted. He had a bewildered look on his face. Oh, and worried. He looked really worried.

I frowned. “What do you mean? You didn’t plan on what?”

Ethan’s feet hit the floor with a thud. “Titus, what have you done?” He demanded as he glared at his younger brother.

“I, uh, I thought I was doing something good. You know? Helping Gabe deal with his past.” His pale blue eyes drifted in my direction. “All of it was because I love you, man. I just wanted you to be...complete.”

I didn’t have a fucking clue what he was talking about. “What the fuck?”

“You tried so hard, Gabe. You wanted to be happy, but I always sensed there was something holding you back. I figured it was probably someone, instead of something. I, uh, started digging around into your past. I researched everything I could about Trenton Falls, trying to figure out what the hell messed with your childhood. Nothing. I couldn’t find a damned thing, other than that tiny town is locked in the twilight zone of homophobia and a serious case of refusing to join the rest of us in this century. They don’t even have a fucking McDonalds, Gabe. That’s just messed up.”

He’d dug into my past? Fury raged in my blood. My friend actually hacked my history? Hell, if he’d done that, he had to have known about the rape charge. Why didn’t he say something? More importantly, why the fuck did he let me spend my entire savings to buy a failing company? Wait, even more important than that, why

had he been so damned chipper the entire time if he knew what I'd been walking into? Even when he picked me up at the hotel earlier, he was still grinning like the cat that had suddenly grown wings and had unlimited access to all the little birdies.

“So, you found there was no McDonalds but, in its place, a big fat rape charge against me?” I growled. “And knowing this shit, you didn’t one time try to stop me from making the biggest dumbass move of my life?” I frowned. “Wait, no, you helped me make the biggest dumbass move of my life! When you were cashing in my stocks, retirement funds, and counting the pennies from jars buried in my backyard, you never once considered saying, ‘Hey man, this might be a bad idea. Sleep on it. Let’s talk. Here, let me lock you in the basement until you come to your senses.’” My voice rose to a near-roar. From the corner of my eye, I kept an idea on Ethan and Jeremiah. With only a look, Ethan would let me know when I was about to go too far with Titus. At the moment, his look told me he was firmly in my corner on this one. Hell, he’d been trying to put the brakes on this clusterfuck since the very beginning.

Titus blushed. I would like to call that a victory, tell myself I was getting to him, but he blushed at the drop of a dime, so who knew what was traveling through his brain. Ethan and Titus were not only trust fund babies, but they’d each amassed a fortune all on their own, so there was a damned good chance he wouldn’t be able to understand my frustration over tossing a million cookies to the cookie monster.

“There wasn’t a rape charge on record, Gabe. If I’d read some shit like that, I would have talked to you about it and I definitely wouldn’t have ever allowed any of us into this town if they allowed bullshit like that to happen.” He was shaking his head in confusion. “Definitely no rape charge, man. I’m...I’m sorry. I know it’s all bullshit, but I’m sorry you had to deal with it. Fuck, you were just a kid.”

No rape charge? What the fuck? My mind whirled for a minute before saying, “I was a juvenile, so it would have been in a locked record, right?”

He cocked one eye upward and looked at me like I was the town idiot. Exasperated, he challenged, “There isn’t a locked record in existence that I can’t unlock, Gabe. It wasn’t there. Yes, I’m aware that you streaked across the football field buck-ass naked your freshman year, but then so did one hundred twenty-seven other kids, so I assumed that was a freshman thing.”

“You rebel, you,” Jeremiah said from the couch. Then, in a more serious tone, he added, “Why wouldn’t there be a record, Gabe? Did the kid just threaten to say you raped him?”

I rolled my eyes. “The Chief of Police, a deputy, and Kelsey’s dad showed up at my trailer to haul me in. I heard them telling my parents.”

Jeremiah’s eyebrows shot up. “What? What did you do?”

“I climbed out the window of my room and never looked back. I was scared and I ran.” My mind traveled back to that awful night for a moment and it almost took my breath away. For a second, I was back there, feeling that fear and pain all over again.

“You still with us, Gabe?” Ethan’s voice interrupted my time travel.

I blinked slowly, not caring that I felt a wetness drop against my cheek with the movement. I wasn’t sure if they’d ever seen me cry before, but I wasn’t worried about them seeing it now. The past few hours had proven what they were to me. I took a deep breath and tried to mentally force my pounding heart back into a regular rhythm. “They came me there to arrest me.” I looked up at them. “But I didn’t rape him. What we did...it was consensual. I swear it.”

“Never doubted it, Gabriel. Never once doubted it. Don’t piss us off by thinking for one minute that we would have thought you capable of that,” Ethan said.



“I don’t know him, but he’s a stupid asshole,” Jeremiah muttered. “I’m glad you destroyed his family empire. I just wish there was a way we could hurt him personally.” His eyes darkened with fury. “You know...physically.”

Once again, I felt my ire rise when they said something negative about Kelsey. This reaction? Stupid. Didn’t make sense. Needed to go away. Vanish, like I had on that night so long ago.

I saw Ethan’s face twist into a frown with Jeremiah’s words. Yeah, he’d been in Kelsey’s presence for a tiny window of time and he was already being sucked into his web of feigned innocence. “He...he didn’t seem like the type to do something like that though. I...I don’t know, something’s not right.”

“Are you defending him?” Jeremiah practically roared, knocking Ethan away from him with enough force to almost send the bigger man tumbling onto the floor.

“No! I’m not defending him,” Ethan argued. “I’m merely saying that something isn’t adding up.”

“Seems like pretty simple addition to me. One lie equals one huge asshole,” Jeremiah bit out.

Titus was once again uncharacteristically quiet. He was sitting in his oversized chair, tapping his lip, when he caught me looking at him. He tried for an innocent look. Failed. “What?” he asked.

“Let’s go back to what you said a few minutes ago, Titus. You hadn’t planned on this? You’d only been trying to help? All because you loved me?” I asked, already pretty sure I knew what had happened. Titus never accidentally did anything. Every move he made was calculated, recalculated, and then he would start all over again with the excessive research to ensure he came up with the same conclusion.

Soooo...what had he been up to when he allowed me to purchase Morganston Textiles? Hell, he'd practically handled the entire deal himself, so I'd been confident that I would not only be able to screw Kelsey and his family out of their cash cow, but that I'd be able to turn it for a profit or at least a breakeven.

"Uh...yeah, I was hoping you'd forgotten I said that."

"I didn't."

"Neither did I," Ethan said as he eyed his younger brother from his perch on the sofa. "What's this about, Titus? Why in the fuck would you interfere with Gabe's personal shit?"

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Titus puffed out a breath of frustration and I was suddenly faced with the realization he was younger than the rest of us by a couple of years. Somehow, I'd forgotten that along the way. Maybe because he acted like a grumpy old man most of the time? Maybe it was because he hung out with us and nobody else? Who the hell knew why my brain overlooked important details like Titus's youth or checking the financial status of a company before purchasing?

"I fucked around in his personal life because he's unhappy, Ethan," Titus yelled in exasperation. "You've got your dick so far up Jeremiah's ass that you see the entire world as nothing but cotton candy, Smurfs, and rainbows. Yeah, we get it—you guys are happy together. You have everything anybody could ever dream of having in a relationship. We are happy for you. We get it. Rah. Rah."

Sarcasm dripped off each and every word that spewed from Titus' mouth. Other than when he was putting numbers together for his next business venture or spouting off about some new techie gadget he just had to have, I wasn't sure I'd ever heard Titus so animated. I frowned. Fuck, that was sad. Maybe I wasn't the only one unhappy.

"He's unhappy and I'm unhappy, Ethan. We're lonely. Sure, we're happy that you guys have each other and all that politically correct bullshit I'm supposed to say right now, but being surrounded with all sunshine and roses all the time is hard on a guy." His entire body sagged, indicating he was probably finished with his outburst of emotions. "Really fucking hard."

No, I definitely wasn't the only one unhappy.

Shit, was I unhappy? Was I jealous of what Ethan and Jeremiah shared? I didn't think

I was. Titus wasn't jealous either. We were envious.

Well, fuck, a fucking bad night just got fucking worse. Jeremiah looked like somebody had just sucker punched him in the gut. Ethan looked pissed—which was par for the course when it came to Ethan. He didn't like anybody messing with Jeremiah...including himself.

“What. The. Fuck,” Ethan hissed in frustration. “How in the hell did we go from Gabe purchasing a failing business to get revenge against an old lover that lied about him and tried to have him sent to jail, to you guys being unhappy because of my love for Jeremiah? Again, I ask, what the fuck?”

“Are you unhappy, Gabe?” Jeremiah asked quietly. His gray eyes were stormy with worry. Of all of us, he was the most sensitive. I was the cold one. Ethan was the one with the furious temper and a protective streak a mile long. Titus was the brainy nerd that reviewed every probability with an analytical mind and since emotions couldn't be analyzed, none of us had really thought he had any. Jeremiah, though, he was nothing but sugar and spice.

Before I could answer, Titus said, “Yes, he's unhappy. How could he not be? He's been unavailable emotionally ever since we met him and it has to be because of somebody.” He slumped in his chair. “I simply decided to make him available again and after reviewing all the information, I determined that whatever had him unavailable had to be located in Trenton Falls. So, here we are.”

I stared at him with my mouth wide open and a shocked expression on my face. Seriously? He simply decided? To Jeremiah, I answered, “No, I'm not unhappy.” It was a lie, but I saw no sense in worrying Jeremiah with the ugly facts of my shitty life. To Titus, I said, “So you just simply decided to fuck with my life like I was some sort of math project you were working on? Fuck, Titus, I just paid five million dollars for a company that is so far in the shitter that a spaceship-sized plunger couldn't yank

it back out again. Tell me how again this will succeed in making me happy. I'm all ears. Dying to hear what you've got to say about that particular load of shit."

Typical Titus, he rolled his eyes at my theatrics. He honestly couldn't see where he'd done anything wrong. I could see the tiny wheels in his head turning around and round like a hamster on a wheel as he justified his actions by reviewing all the data once again. Data and research worked fine with business and mathematical equations, but it wasn't worth shit when it came to matters of the heart.

"Don't insult my intelligence, Gabriel. There isn't a failing business in this country that I can't turn around and make profitable. I have a foolproof business plan. I wouldn't have risked your money if I hadn't felt confident it would eventually lead to more money." He shrugged. "Anyway, if something goes wrong, I can always give you the money back."

What was it with me? Why did I always surround myself with people that had more money than a person had the right to have? First Kelsey, and now this trio of cash cows. Clearly, I had a hard-on for making myself feel inferior.

Ethan leaned forward on the couch and propped himself up on his elbows braced against his knees. He had a weary expression on his face. Jeremiah stroked his back, offering a silent strength that the bigger man needed at the moment. He struggled with Titus's strange outlook on life. Hell, he struggled with just about every damned aspect of his baby brother's life. I knew how badly Titus's words hurt him a few moments ago because I knew how much he worried about Titus not having anybody in his life. We'd tried setting him up with girls. We'd tried setting him up with guys. Struck out on both accords. Jeremiah and I had even gone with him to a private seminar on being asexual. None of us knew what the hell made Titus tick and while it worried all of us, it damned near destroyed Ethan.

"You know what you've done is wrong, don't you, Titus?" he asked quietly.

Another eye roll and a huff of breath. “No, Ethan, I didn’t do anything wrong. I simply didn’t have all the information. I didn’t know about the rape accusation. There was nothing on any records, juvenile included. I’ll have to go back and add it into the equation, but I’ll have everything settled before morning. You guys can eat the pizza and enjoyed the hot tub and pool table and I’ll work this up.” He smiled in my direction, like everything was settled and I didn’t have another goddamned thing to worry about.

Sadly, he believed it.

“No, Titus,” Ethan barked. “You won’t have everything settled in the morning. This isn’t that simple. We’re in a big mess here and it’s going to take all four of us to try and fix it. You’ve got to quit doing shit like this.”

Titus stared at him, blinking. At one time, I would have thought Ethan’s words would hurt Titus’s feelings. I knew better now. He didn’t react to things the way the rest of us did. His feelings, if he had them, were always kept hidden away. Sometimes he would try—when he thought we wanted him to behave a certain way—but it wasn’t real...and he wasn’t a good fake.

“You’re being an ass, Ethan. I can fix this now that I have all the information.”

“Emotions, Titus! You don’t know how to calculate emotions! This isn’t something as simple as developing a foolproof business plan that will ensure Gabe gets his investment back. We are dealing with his heart, kid. Kelsey broke his heart and now we’ve brought him full circle and he’s smack-ass right back in the middle of it again!”

“Calm down, Ethan,” Jeremiah murmured softly. “Don’t say something we’re all going to regret. He doesn’t understand.”

This was swiftly turning into the clusterfuck shitshow of the century. I eased back in my chair, thankful that for a few blessed moments, their attention was focused on someone besides me. I needed to get my shit together. I hadn't expected any of the feelings that roared to the surface when I saw Kelsey today. In all the times I'd imagined my revenge, never once had I envisioned me thinking he was even more beautiful than I remembered. Not once had I thought my heart would not only start to beat again for the first time in nearly ten years, but that it would gallop with the same strength as a racehorse nearing the finish line. I had planned on hatred. I had planned on the sweet taste of victory when I watched his world crumble around him. I had planned on closure.

Like Titus, my plan had been flawed. I'd felt nothing but heartbreak and love. How in the fuck could love still linger after his betrayal? After all these years?

"What don't I understand, Jeremiah? I know what emotions are. I have them." Titus snorted out a disgusted laugh. "You all think I don't have emotions just because I don't walk around on fucking cloud nine like the two of you or on a fucking raincloud like Gabriel? That's righteous, Ethan. Don't pretend to know everything about me when you barely have time to—"

"What? I barely have time to what?" Ethan jumped to his feet.

"Forget it. Just forget the whole damned conversation. Everything's perfect, Ethan. We are all perfect. Life's a bowl of ice cream." He reached down and picked up the messenger bag he always had by his side. "I've got some numbers to go over. Yell at me when the food gets here." Turning to me, he said, "Don't worry about your investment, Gabe. I can make this work. I just need you to decide if you want to be a part of it or not."

With that, he stomped up the spiral stairs that I assumed led to the bedrooms. I guess there were bedrooms up there. This place was big enough to be a small hotel.

We all watched him depart, knowing that when he came back down the stairs, he would be a totally different person. He'd act like nothing had happened, like there hadn't been an argument of any kind between him and Ethan. When we saw him again, it would be a blank slate. He'd have a new plan and would be excited about it.



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On one hand, the strange ability he possessed was sad. On the other hand, I wished to fuck that I had it—that I could have a blank slate and start all over again. I wished all memories of Kelsey could be forever erased from my head. A blank slate? No, my slate had Kelsey's name and little hearts drawn all over it.

“Well, that went remarkably bad,” Jeremiah said. “I think you were a little hard on him, babe. You’ve got to quit pushing him. He’ll grow his wings and fly when he’s ready. It’s not something you can force on him just because you think it’s something he’s lacking.”

Ethan's entire body relaxed when a door upstairs slammed shut. I pictured two boxers separating and going to their corners for a break. “I don't understand him,” he muttered.

“You don't have to understand him. You have to love and support him. Period. That's it. Stop trying to turn him into a miniature you. He's his own person, babe.”

Turning to me, Ethan asked, “What do you think?”

I smiled. “I think that although your boyfriend knows how to kill a man more ways than Krispy Kreme knows how to make doughnuts, he sounds mighty gay right now.”

“Asshole,” Jeremiah grumbled.

After we enjoyed a few minutes laughing at Jeremiah's blush, we got our pizza from the delivery kid and hit the hot tub—just like Titus had instructed. When the pizza had arrived, the smell lured him back down the stairs and, just as we'd expected, we

had a blank slate. For three fun-filled hours, we did nothing but stuff our faces, relax, and laugh at nothing and everything. For those three hours, I was able to forget about what awaited me outside the doors of our mini hotel. My escape from reality didn't last long, though. Titus was up, bright and early, at four in the morning, to review his plan for saving Morganston Textiles.

### Chapter 5

It was nearly nine o'clock by the time the four of us filed into the main entrance of Morganston Textiles. The first thing I noticed was that I didn't hear the sounds of production from behind the giant double doors that led to the manufacturing area that I'd heard yesterday morning when we'd arrived. No, it sounded deathly quiet. Not a good sign. Secondly, Barb and Courtney, who had been standing around the front desk talking to the woman who greeted us yesterday morning, snapped to attention. Courtney, with all her beguiling beauty, looked utterly terrified when she saw who just walked in. Barb, with all her wisdom, looked utterly furious and disgusted when her gaze landed on me. Yeah, all the disgust and hate was saved solely for me. The rest of the guys were lucky enough to miss her wrath lasers. Lucky them. Of course, none of that mattered. We had a plan. Titus had a plan to save the business and keep all the employees working. I had a plan to exact my revenge on Kelsey. All was good in my world.

Not wanting to waste another minute, I started talking and went straight for the throat. Looking directly at Barb, I said, "Give me one reason to keep her around." I gestured toward Courtney when I said it. She'd made her role at Morganston pretty plain for me to see yesterday and I didn't need that shit around the office. I thought it would be best to start off cutting the dead weight, and I figured I would win Barb over as an ally when I did it. I was pretty sure I needed at least one fucking ally at Morganston.

Barb straightened and glared at me. "Her baby sister is in the middle of her cancer treatments and it's taking the paycheck of every member of her family to try and keep shelter over their heads and food on their table. Any more questions?"

Okkaayy, so not what I expected. My first attempt at making an ally was an epic failure. I felt like the last piece of shit that just wouldn't flush down the toilet. Perfect way to start what I suspected was going to be a fucking bad day that would go down in the history of fucking bad days. Fuck.

“Do you honestly think she enjoyed putting up with Wayne's shit?” Barb snapped irritably.

Yeah, epic fail. “Well...uh...yeah, I guess I thought she did.” Turning to Courtney, I said, “I apologize.” Behind me, Titus coughed back a laugh. Sorry-ass bastard. Technically, I could blame a huge portion of this shitshow on him. Actually, I couldn't, but I was still going to.

Ethan stepped up and took control of the situation that I had easily lost in a record thirty seconds. He was so fucking smooth. Was it possible to hate and love somebody at the same time? As I watched him put on his sexiest smile that always made men and women swoon, I realized that yes, it was possible.

“I couldn't help but notice how quiet it is out on the floor, ladies. Nobody show up for work today?” Ethan asked.

Without the glare she reserved solely for me, Barb answered him. “No, sir. They're here—just not doing any work at the moment.” She shrugged and then sent a glare in my direction. “I suppose none of us really knew what to do after what happened yesterday. People are worried about their jobs, their future, and their families. On top of that, Kelsey always had their production schedule ready for them when they got to work each morning.” The glare sharpened to a laser of hate as she turned to me. “But then, of course, Kelsey isn't here anymore, is he?” She looked me up and down and sneered, “I hardly think you will be much of a replacement. You'll probably fire me for saying this, but you look more like aWayneto me.”

“Ouch,” Ethan muttered quietly. I felt somewhat better knowing he had my back, but when I glanced in his direction and saw the grin on his face, I realized he was totally Team Barb. Bastard.

“Trust me, I’m not a Wayne,” I answered shortly.

“Or a Kelsey,” Barb countered just as shortly.

“Shit. Are we going to bicker all morning or are we going to try to get this company back in the black?” I snapped. “I get it, you want Kelsey here. Your opinion is noted. Now, can we move on?” I looked around. “Are there offices available for us to work out of?”

She shrugged, not admitting defeat but not exactly claiming victory. “Sure. There are three offices. Who wants to be the odd man out?”

“Jeremiah and I will share an office,” Ethan piped up quickly. “Titus can have one and Mr. Popularity over there can have the other one. Which way do we go?”

Three offices? Why had she said there were three offices? There were four brothers. Was she trying to protect Kelsey’s stuff? As far as I knew, Titus hired a security team yesterday afternoon that had packed up all the Morganston personal belongings and then spent the night and this morning making sure none of them tried to enter the plant. “Three offices? Which Morganston was the odd man out?” I asked.

Barb looked over her shoulder. “Kelsey. Who else? Follow me, I’ll put you in Wayne’s office. It should be a fairly smooth transition.”

I couldn’t see the evil smile on her face, but I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt it was there. Smooth transition, my ass. Why didn’t Kelsey have an office? What game was she playing? “Where’s Kelsey’s office?”

This time, it was Courtney's slim shoulder that shrugged before she looked back at me to answer, "He doesn't have one. He spends most of his time on the production floor. He has a desk down there that he uses from time to time." She stopped walking and looked me dead in the eye. "Well, a desk that he used to use, back when he was here to make the production schedules for the day. You know? So people would know what needed to be done. Got any ideas on what needs to be put through the plant today,sir?"

Wow. Now Courtney had attitude. Come to think of it, she even looked different today. The exaggerated makeup was gone and her face looked even younger...softer. Instead of a low-cut sweater and short skirt, she was wearing a loose T-shirt tucked into jeans. Fuck, she looked like she could be about eighteen years old. Yesterday, she looked the part of a spoiled, pampered bitch that used her body to get exactly what she wanted from everybody. Today, she looked like an intern fresh out of college. Her eyes, a beautiful color of topaz, met my gaze straight on, but instead of the anger and hate that Barb wasn't even trying to hide, I saw mischievous warmth. Well, shit. I hoped to hell she didn't think I was like Wayne and his crew. She was so not my type. She was nothing at all like Kelsey.

Titus stepped between us and shoved an excel spreadsheet in her direction. "Here's the production schedule for the day. Get it into the hands of the right people and start making some fabric. We're already behind schedule, and Gabriel can't afford overtime right now."

She snorted right in his face. "Right, cutie. What do you know about a production schedule? Much less a production schedule for our plant?"

"Aww, you think I'm cute. That's sweet. Listen, I'm sure you're really hot and everything, but you aren't my type." He nodded to the spreadsheet. "And if you're at all interested in keeping this job that Barb implied you needed so bad, then shut your smart mouth and get to work. That's Kelsey's production schedule for today. I

hacked into the computers last night and found it. He'd already made one for today."

Titus was strange, to say the least. I half-expected Courtney to slap him across the face for putting her in her place so rudely, but she merely smiled at him and then quipped, "You definitely aren't my type either. You're funny, though. I'll get this to the production floor right away." Obviously, smiles were available to everyone except me.

As she turned to leave, Titus said, "You realize you could have pulled the production schedule off the computer, as well...without having to hack the system."

She shrugged. "Sure, but what's the fun in that?"

Then she sashayed off into the direction of the double doors that led to the production floor. She was not the same woman I'd met yesterday. What had that poor girl done to try and keep her job? No, what had she been forced to do by Wayne and the rest of the brothers?

Reading my thoughts, Ethan leaned in and whispered, "I know what you're thinking, and I'd say she's probably had to do the same shit you tried to get Kelsey to do yesterday."

My face burned in shame, and I immediately argued, "You know I wouldn't have gone through with that, Ethan. Stop throwing it up in my face. Let me try to forget about it or at least pretend it didn't happen, okay?"

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“Nope,” he popped. “You were a total jackass and you need to pay for it, one way or another.”

He was right. I knew he was right. Heknew he was right. I was already planning on swallowing my taste for revenge long enough to apologize to Kelsey today. Couldn't they just give me a break about it? Instead of trying to defend myself, since there was no defense, I said, “Jackass? Who even says that anymore?”

“I'm bringing it back, baby. I'm bringing it back.” He clapped me on the back. “Now, show me my luxury office. There needs to be some benefits to working this job.” He looked me up and down with one of his cocky smiles, “‘Cause the pay ain't worth shit.”

I smirked and countered, “What do you mean? You get to look at my ass every day, that should be payment enough.” Inwardly, I was thanking the good Lord above for bringing these men into my life. I had no clue where I would be without them, but I was damned sure I would be lost, wallowing in my own hatred and loneliness.

Ethen responded by flipping me off as he and Jeremiah disappeared into the first office Barb stopped in front of. Titus took the office across the hall from them, and I followed Barb down the hall to what I presumed had been Wayne's office. I didn't look forward to my next discussion with good ole Barb. Part of that trepidation was from the pounding headache I was already sporting and the other part, the biggest part, was because of the way she looked at me.

Disgust. Pure, undiluted disgust. She must know me. Where I came from. What they accused me of doing.



She shoved a door open and motioned for me to go in. Under her breath, I heard her say, “Wayne Jr.” Perfect. Surely she didn’t think I was anything like those assholes? I thought of yesterday’s encounter. Hell, I had acted just like those assholes.

When she turned to leave, I said, “Stay, Barb. I’m going to need your help with some things this morning.”

“Of course, you are,” she said between gritted teeth but she obediently followed me into the office.

The security team had packed up all of Wayne’s personal belongings, but they hadn’t been able to pack up his obnoxious scent. The air in the office smelled like stale cologne...and sex. Nice. Poor Courtney. I would need candles, I thought as I looked around the small office. My nose tingled. Hell, I needed to just rip everything out and replace it. Maybe that would help erase all memories of Wayne Morganston. Frowning, I wondered if that could ever happen. Could I ever be cured of the Morganston curse? Would they forever haunt and torment me?

One of them sure the hell would—Kelsey. I wasn’t going to lie to myself anymore, it was futile since I seemed to know me better than everybody else and I wasn’t buying the bullshit I was trying to sell to the rest of the world. I still cared about him. Hell, part of me still loved him, even after everything he’d done and all the time that had passed. I kept telling myself that it was merely because he was my first love and I hadn’t seen him in a while. Once the new wore off, I’d be able to see him for what he was and walk away.

Forever.

I would walk away forever.

See,thatwas a good solid plan. Buying Morganston Textiles? Not a good solid plan. I

sure hoped to shit that Titus could fix my colossal fuck up. We needed to turn this Titanic around, so I could sell it to some poor unsuspecting soul.

“Not what you were expecting, eh, Your Royal Highness,” Barb said with a smirk, interrupting what could have very well been the beginning of a panic attack. I really wanted to show her the door for all these smart-ass remarks, but I knew she thought I deserved them. Hell, I probably did.

Looking around, I had to admit the office was not what I expected Wayne to spend his days in. I’d pictured something much larger, decorated much better, and in my imagination, smelling a hell of a lot better. “No, nothing like what I had pictured.” I turned to look at her and found she was still glaring at me with hate-filled eyes. “Why is that?” I asked. “I know Wayne and the boys. They like nice things. This,” I gestured to the office, “isn’t exactly what one could call nice.”

She crossed her arms over her chest and asked, “What would you call it, Your Highness?”

“Stop calling me that,” I snapped, but there was no anger in my voice. I’d earned all the ridiculous titles they were labeling me with and I would have to spend some time earning nicer ones. “My name is Gabriel, and I would call this office one step above being homeless.”

Her eyes roamed up and down my expensive suit. “Right, you would know a lot about how it is to be homeless, wouldn’t you? Dressed up in your expensive suit that probably costs more than one of our employee’s monthly salary. Forgive me if I don’t agree with you. I’m sure it won’t be the last thing we disagree on.”

I had turned to study a crack in the wall the very second she made the homeless comment—certain she knew about my past and what happened to lead up to me being homeless. Her follow-up remark about the expensive suit allowed me to breathe a

sigh of relief. Thank the fuck she was just cutting on me again.

“Yes, well, I’m still surprised Wayne spent any time in this office. It’s not important, of course. Just surprising.” I turned back around to face her, my face free of the humiliation that had been there when I’d thought she’d known about me. “I assume everyone’s offices are in the same disarray?”

She snorted. “Most of us just have desks and they were brought over on the Mayflower. It doesn’t matter, though. The company is struggling. We are all good with pinching pennies.” Her eyes narrowed at me. “I’m sure, however, that you aren’t. Shall I order you some new furniture, Your Highness?”

“You know I should fire you for your comments and name-calling, right?” I asked in exasperation. What had happened to the kind old woman I’d felt sorry for yesterday?

“I’m counting on it,” she snapped back. “I’m old enough to retire, son. I don’t have to take your shit. I stayed around to look after Courtney, Kelsey, and the rest of the Morganston employees when Wayne was running this company. I won’t do it with you. Kelsey’s gone and Courtney will find another job easy enough. The rest of our employees? That will be on you, young man. All on you. Most of these people will lose everything they own and it will be because of you. If you can live with that, then I guess I’ll have to, as well.” Her back straightened. “Now, is there anything else? I’m going to clean out my desk.”

My day continued to get better and better....

“I don’t want you to leave, Barb. The company needs you and I need you.” Taking a deep breath, I said, “I don’t know how much you know about me but whatever it is, I’d like you to set it aside and let’s try to make this work. I made a mistake, took something that didn’t belong to me for all the wrong reasons. Now I need to fix my fuck-up and I can’t do it if all the key people bail on me.”

She looked totally bored with my heartfelt confession. Totally bored and in her head, she already had most of her desk emptied out, and she was flipping me the bird. “Give me one month, Barb. Just one month to prove I’m not the asshole I’ve been acting like. Titus is brilliant; he’ll be able to turn this company around and make it successful for the employees and the community. Give us a chance,” I pleaded, not even sure why I wanted her to stay so badly. Maybe it was because I knew instinctively her role was a valuable one to the company.

Maybe it was because after Ethan pointed it out to me, I realized Barb was the only person that acted like she gave a flying fuck about what happened to Kelsey.

“You fired the only person capable of saving Morganston Textiles, dumbass. He was the only one that ever fought for the employees or tried to get new business in here. He negotiated with vendors to get yarn in here when all the suppliers in the industry threatened to cut us off because of Wayne’s stupidity. He made out the production schedule, bought the supplies, fixed the machines, and swept the floor if it needed sweeping. He was even working on getting us some military con—”

She shook her head, like she just suddenly realized what she was saying, and then her lips clamped together. “Forget it. It’s your business now. Run it the way you want to, but just plan on running it without most of the employees. When they hear you fired Kelsey, they will be out the doors so fast that you won’t even see them moving until they’re gone.” Her back straightened and she gave me a look that I probably should have gotten many times from my own mother, if she’d cared anything about me, and said, “When they hear that you did something in that conference room that made him cry, they’ll probably kill you and feed your remains to Mr. Wimberly’s hogs.”

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“Maybe they won’t have to know.”

She snorted. “Yeah, like they won’t notice when he isn’t here. Rumors are already flying.” She glanced at her watch. “I’d venture a guess that you’ve only got until around lunchtime before people start walking off the job. The production schedule probably bought you some time since they’ll recognize his work, but it won’t get you through the day. They’ll know what you’ve done, and they’ll be gone.”

Jezus, I guess I wasn’t the only one Kelsey fooled into thinking he was a fucking saint. It looked like the entire plant worshipped him, starting with Barb...and ending with me. Fuck. I was in so much trouble.

“I shouldn’t have fired Kelsey,” I admitted. I wasn’t caving because of what Barb was telling me. We’d already determined that Kelsey needed to come back, for the company and for me. The company needed his expertise and I needed closure. Unfortunately, he was a key component to achieving both of those things. “That was yet another one of my mistakes, and I intend to try and rectify it this morning. Trust me, I’ll do everything I can to get Kelsey back in here.”

I expected her to laugh in my face, so when a huge smile spread across her face, I wasn’t shocked. The words that followed the smile did shock me, though.

“Well, hell, Your Highness, why didn’t you say so? Maybe you aren’t as dumb as I pegged you for,” she ventured, all of a sudden buzzing with excitement. “How do you plan on getting him back?”

Once again, I didn’t really have a viable plan. I was more of a ‘leap before looking’

kind of guy. With that thought, a wave of sadness washed over me. Once upon a time, I'd had a plan. It had been to get me and Kelsey out of this sorry town. Don't leave without me. His words, spoken against my lips before he kissed me senseless, haunted me. They threatened to undo every word from the pep talks the guys had given me last night and this morning.

I cleared my throat and answered, "Well, I thought I would start out by...asking him to come back. You know, play on his love of the employees. I hate to use that against him, but I will if it's necessary."

"You'll have to use it," she answered quickly. "I'm afraid it might be the only thing that works." Rubbing her hands together in excitement, she asked, "When are you going to contact him? I can buy you some time on the floor." A frown suddenly creased her face and she asked, "You aren't planning on bringing Wayne or any of the other brothers back, are you? They are worthless pieces of shit, Wayne being the most worthless of all."

"I'm definitely not bringing the shit back in. It's been permanently flushed."

"God, I hope so. They are disgusting human beings. You wouldn't believe how they treated everybody, especially Courtney and Kelsey."

Ethan had been right. The rest of the brothers didn't give a fuck about Kelsey.

I wished I didn't.

"No time like the present, eh? What's his address? Does he live on the family estate somewhere?" I dreaded facing Kelsey again, but I wasn't a coward. I needed to apologize and I needed him back at Morganston.

I needed him with me, if only for a short period of time. Closure.

“Of course, he doesn’t live on the Morganston estate. He hated it there. Let me grab a paper and pen and I’ll write it down for you.” She hustled out of the room, but then stopped at the door. “Don’t hurt him again, Gabriel Maverick. Whatever you have planned, he doesn’t deserve it.”

One look at Barb and I knew that she knew who I was...had known all along. Was that where the disgust had come from instead of the fact that I’d barged in and taken over their company, threatening to shut it down and leave them all unemployed? Probably. The Maverick name obviously possessed an insurmountable negative stigma. I would never overcome my past, regardless of what I was today or how far away I ran.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” I answered shortly. I was angry that everyone always seemed to side with Kelsey and even angrier that it hurt me when they did. I supposed Kelsey’s dad had been right all along. Who would be stupid enough to believe a low-life Maverick over the Morganston name?

“I’ll get you the address,” she answered sadly.

I guessed our short truce was over.

### Chapter 6

I turned the engine of the rental car off and studied the slip of paper Barb had given me that contained Kelsey's home address. Squinting in disbelief at the small but tidy house in front of me, I shook my head in shock and then tapped the side of the GPS. Yeah, like that fixed everything. The GPS was right, no matter how many times I tapped it, turned it off and on, or frowned at it. Scowling at the house again, I realized this could only mean one thing: Barb had sent me to an address where thugs were probably waiting to either kill me or, at the least, beat the shit out of me. I guess I needed to issue some kudos to the older lady, I never really saw it coming. I wasn't usually caught so flat-footed when it came to dangerous situations.

Fuck.

I sat in the car a few more minutes and contemplated what my next move should be, before I finally muttered out a "fuck it" and threw the car door open. Maybe the tiny Norman Rockwell house was one of his many properties, the one where he went when he wanted to get a taste of what the other half lived like. Nah, somebody was going to whip my ass.

Let them try. My last twenty-four hours had me spoiling for some hand-to-hand combat. Maybe this would be exactly what I needed to calm the fuck down and start moving down the lane of getting Kelsey out of my system for good.

There was a black wrought-iron fence encircling the house and lawn, but the gate wasn't locked. Before opening it, I glanced around for a snarling guard dog, rattled the gate to ensure one wasn't sleeping peacefully under the porch or in the backyard,



and then let myself onto the property. The walkway to the front porch was made from paving stones that someone had laid with painstaking perfection. The lawn was green and rose bushes grew beautifully around the cozy porch in front of me. The furniture on the porch looked comfortable and cute, decorated with colorful throw pillows, but was definitely refurbished with antiques. I would like to tell myself none of it reminded me of Kelsey, but that would be a lie. He'd loved roses, insisting on taking cuts of different colors and giving them to me with a shy but sweet smile. I'd scoffed at them at first, hurting his feelings with my macho arrogance that demanded I ignore the way the beautiful flowers in the hand of the even more beautiful man had made my heart tumble wildly in my chest. One look at his sad pout and I'd caved. My perceived manhood wasn't worth hurting the boy I loved. Now, years later, my eyes soaked up the beauty of God's creation and I knew this was, indeed, Kelsey's home. I couldn't begin to explain why someone of his wealth lived in the cozy-looking home, but that didn't matter, Kelsey's name was stamped all over everything, from the roses to the large metal angel wings fastened to the wood siding of the white house.

Angel. He'd been my angel at one time. He'd basked in the pet name I'd given him, blushing furiously each time, but his blue eyes would darken a shade, letting me know how much he loved me calling him my angel.

I frowned. No, that had all been a lie. He was no angel. Angels didn't lie the way Kelsey had. Angels didn't break hearts the way Kelsey had broken mine.

Much more comfortable with the wave of fury that had accompanied my reminder that Kelsey was nothing more than a very pretty liar, I banged on the front door. Hard. Hell, the pounding caused several neighbors to look over in my direction. I ignored them and waited.

Nothing. No sounds of movement from the other side of the door. Nothing but loud music blaring from somewhere in the back of the house. No curtain fluttered. No one peeked out the window. I banged again...and kept banging. After several long,

uncomfortable minutes of my punching match with the wooden door, I finally stopped. Eying the sturdy door, I wondered if I could knock it off the hinges. Yes, that was a bit of overkill, but I still considered it. He had to have heard me and was choosing to ignore me, probably lounging on his couch hoping I would disappear like I'd done years ago.

Too fucking bad. I wasn't leaving this town until my heart, soul, and mind was finished with Kelsey Morganston once and for all. As a last ditch effort before knocking the door down, I reached down and twisted the doorknob...which turned easily. He didn't even lock his fucking doors?

I pushed the door open, peeked inside to make sure he wasn't on the other side waiting to bash me on the side of the head with a baseball bat, and when I'd decided it was safe enough, I walked inside and closed the door behind me. First things first, his scent, which I had memorized from our brief encounter yesterday, floated around my nose and reminded me of what I couldn't have...what I had never really had.

I squashed that potential pity party down and looked around the front room. Like the outside, it looked cozy and extremely neat and cared for. There was a big screen television on one wall, a large well-worn sofa opposite the television, and a sturdy coffee table in between them. There was a recliner in one corner and then the remainder of the furniture looked like...cat furniture? Two cat towers sat side by side in front of a window and then a few other cat necessities were strewn about the room, including several comfy cat beds, a tunnel for them to crawl through, and some toys. Well, I guess it was safe to assume he still loved cats.

A noise to my left alerted me that I was no longer alone in the living room but before I could determine who or what made the noise, I felt sharp pricks start stabbing my legs. Not having a clue what I was being attacked by, I looked down, prepared for the worst, and nearly burst out laughing when I realized it was five tiny kittens rappelling up my legs, kitty claws digging straight through my dress slacks and into the skin of

my legs. With sheer determination possessed only by a kitten, they kept crawling up my legs and I was forced to reach down and start gathering them in my hands before they hit the promised land and stuck their claws into something way too sensitive for such a weapon. As tiny as they were, it was easy to gather them up in my hands and really take a few seconds to check them out. They were nothing more than tiny piles of fluff with big eyes that were blinking at me like I was some kind of freak of nature. They were cuter than...well, cuter than anything I'd ever seen before.

They wiggled and squirmed in my grasp, but since their weaponry had retracted, I felt fairly safe to take a few seconds just to admire their cuteness. I'd only had one pet in my entire life and I hadn't had her very long. My hasty escape had prevented me from taking her when I'd left and, to be honest, I'd refused to allow myself to even consider what happened to her after I was gone. My parents weren't pet lovers. Of course, they weren't children lovers either. Snowball had been my last pet and I didn't see another one anytime in my near future. Ethan, Jeremiah, and Titus were dog men, so I hadn't bothered trying to add a cat to our family, even though I'd always loved them. A meow, soft and scratchy, drew my attention to the spot next to my feet and when my eyes landed on the fluffy white cat, watching me with familiar pale blue eyes almost as beautiful as Kelsey's, my mind propelled me back in time in an instant.

"Sooooo, you know my birthday is coming up in a very short, will-fly-by-be-here-before-you-know-it six months, right?" Kelsey said, with one of his beguiling smiles that always led to him getting what he wanted from me.

I felt a moment's panic, afraid that he was going to ask for something I couldn't afford to buy him, but that fear evaporated in a split second—that wasn't Kelsey. He would never ask for material things. My baby was more of a 'take me to see the stars' than a 'take me to an expensive restaurant' kind of guy. Of course, that was a hell of a good thing because I was, as usual, broker than a butt crack. Being from one of the poorest families in town was definitely a liability when one was dating the beauty

from one of the richest families in town. Yeah, definitely a liability. I was fairly certain Kelsey didn't consider it a liability, but I sure the hell did.

Smiling, I asked, "Are you angling for a gift, angel?"

Soft laughter, music to my ears, tumbled from puffy lips that were a bright pretty pink because I'd just spent the last forty minutes kissing him with all the stamina of a seventeen-year-old boy. "Well, yeah, I guess I was." Blue eyes fringed with long lashes glanced up at me as he added, "There's something I want and I only want it from you."

I sure the fuck hoped a body could survive with all its blood flowing straight to the cock area, because that was exactly what was happening with me. Between those lips, his come-hither eyes, and me already having a damned good idea where this conversation was headed, my cock had gone from flat to fat in record time.

Playing dumb, I asked, "And what might that be, angel? I already had an idea of what I wanted to get you, so you might be out of luck this year."

His eyes narrowed and he walked me backward off the trail we'd been hiking on and didn't stop until my back was flat against a tree and his lean length was pushed against me. His smaller, more compact body felt like what I knew Heaven had to feel like.

He stood on tiptoes, nibbled at my bottom lip, and whispered, "I was hoping you might finally turn me into a man." His slender hand reached down to cup my junk through my jeans. "Please tell me you're finally going to give in to my begging and fuck me. Please," he whispered again before diving in for a kiss.

For a few, blissful moments, we simply devoured each other's mouths—tasting, teasing, and tormenting. Kissing Kelsey always had the same effect on my body: it

made my heart want to explode with love. I loved him. I wanted to spend the rest of my life proving how much I loved him.

When I heard him whimper with need, I maneuvered us around until his back was against the tree and I was the one pushing against him. Never breaking our kiss, I cupped his ass and then lifted him off the ground. When his legs wrapped around my waist, a possessive growl rumbled in my throat. Our cocks, both burning and rock-hard, pushed against each other and begged for attention.

“You’re too young,” I panted against his lips. He wasn’t much younger than me, only about eight months, but he seemed much younger...much more innocent. I wasn’t worthy. A huge part of me was terrified that the ugliness of my life would somehow rub off on Kelsey as he spent more and more time with me. If we were to have sex, would I ruin him forever?

“Don’t start that shit with me, Gabriel. You aren’t much older than me.” Bumping his head against my forehead, he whispered, “You know I love you. I’ve been in love with you forever. It hurts when you act like I’m not mature enough or man enough for you. Yeah, I get it, I’m smaller than you and I’ve led a sheltered life, but that doesn’t mean I don’t know what I feel...that I don’t know what I want.”

Kelsey always pushed for sex—had always acted as if he knew what he wanted and was determined to go after it with the same enthusiasm he used with everything else.

“I love you too, angel. You know I do. Six months until graduation and your birthday happen to coincide. See, even the stars are lining up. Six months and you’ll be mine. Forever.”

I felt his pouty lips curve into a smile against my neck and all the tension fled out of his lean body. With those words, with that promise, I had managed to erase his worries.

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“The stars aren’t exactly lining up because two dates in June coincide. I can’t believe you’re making me wait. It’s kinda ridiculous, you know? All my friends at school are doing it already. Why can’t we?” Kelsey asked as his cat-like body rubbed wantonly against mine.

“Because you’re special. You deserve better,” I vowed. “This isn’t some high school hook-up, Kels. I’m in love with you. I want you forever,” I growled against his ear. “When I leave this stupid-ass town, I want you to be with me. I...I want us together for the rest of our lives.”

“Just please don’t leave without me,” he’d whispered against my lips and then started kissing me with a tenderness that displayed all his love instead of lust. “I wouldn’t want to live without you, Gabriel. Please don’t ever make me try.”

“Never,” I promised as I kissed him back. “But we’ve got to stop right now...or...or I won’t be able to. I want you so much, Kels. You know that, right? Please don’t ever doubt that. Me making us wait is just my way of you proving how much you mean to me. I want it to be perfect. You’re perfect, so I want our first time together to be perfect.”

He wiggled, letting me know it was okay to put his feet back on the ground. My body begged me not to, but I reluctantly eased him down and put a little space between us. Walking away from him got harder and harder each day. We used to mess around some, starting with heavy kissing, moving to heavy petting, and then straight on to hand jobs. Hell, I couldn’t even do that anymore. My restraint was wavering every damned day, and I didn’t want to risk anything. We were both still underage. There were so many reasons for us not to be together, but none of them compared to the real

reason that we were together.

Love.

I loved this boy more than I loved anything else in this world—more than I loved myself. Much, much more than I loved myself.

“Want me to take care of that?” he asked softly as his hand found the huge bulge in my pants. “I’d be more than happy to. We could call it me putting you on layaway for my birthday.” His hand massaged. “Just a small down payment to make sure it gets set aside just for me.”

Nothing sounded better.

Nothing sounded more dangerous.

My hand closed over his and his pretty blue eyes rolled in frustration.

“I know. I know. No more hanky panky until my seventeenth. I get it. Fuck, you are devious, Gabriel. I can’t believe you won’t even let us mess around anymore.”

“Yeah, well, I know it hurts like fuck, but it’s for the best. We can do this, right? We love each other enough to wait.”

He snorted. “We love each other enough not to wait, asshole. I think you just enjoy leaving me like this so I’ll be horny for you around the clock.”

I laughed. “I do worry about all those private school boys you hang out with. They’ve got so much more to offer you.” I didn’t laugh about that. Those words hurt me every damned time because they were so fucking true.

His eyes darkened. “You know that pisses me off, Gabriel. Stop saying it. They are nothing compared to you. Nothing.”

I opened my mouth to argue, but a strange noise caught both of our attentions. I tilted my head and tried to figure out what it was and which direction it was coming from, but Kelsey took off in an instant, bolting through the woods like the hounds of hell were hot on his heels. He was gone so quick, I didn’t have a chance to ask him what he thought the noise was. My only choice was to try and keep up. Being lean and smaller, he was faster than fuck. There were a few times I lost sight of him altogether.

I was pounding down the woodsy trail, not really paying attention to anything other than my need to catch up to Kelsey, when I almost ran headlong into the small group. Skidding to a stop, I looked up and was shocked at the horror only a few yards in front of me. It was Wayne, Kelsey’s older brother, and two of his college friends. Wayne had his arms wrapped around Kelsey’s waist and was holding him off the ground. Kelsey was fighting and cursing for all he was worth. Wayne’s two friends were taking in the scene, alternating between laughing at Kelsey and poking at the struggling kitten they had hanging from a tree limb with a rope tied around its neck. The kitten was still yowling but not nearly as loud as it had been when Kelsey and I had heard it from our spot down the trail.

This was a fucked-up situation, I knew that much in a heartbeat. It wasn’t like I denied that I was gay, but I definitely didn’t go around screaming it from the rooftops, either. Being alone out here with Kelsey and his lips looking like he’d been mouth-fucked, was practically a neon gay sign exploding over both our heads. While I didn’t really give a fuck what people thought about me, I did care what repercussions this might have on Kelsey. On top of that shit, it was going to be three against one...and they were college boys. I eyed them, wondering how much time I could buy Kelsey and the kitten.

Not enough.



“Put me the fuck down, Wayne! You stupid son of a bitch! That kitten is going to choke to death.” He landed a good shot with the back of his heel to Wayne’s shin. It was good enough to get Wayne to drop him, ass-first, to the hard ground. Kelsey landed with a thump but was back up in a second, reaching his hand up to grab the kitten.

“Well, well, well,” Wayne said with a smirk. “What have we here?” His eyes, the same blue as Kelsey’s but ice cold where my man’s were always warm with happiness, drifted between the two of us. The other two guys coughed out a laugh as they obviously drew the same conclusion Wayne had already gotten to.

“You didn’t tell us your baby brother was a faggot, Wayne. Hope you don’t drop the soap in the shower, man. That could get dangerous!”

I thought his name was Tyson, but I didn’t really give a fuck. All I knew was he looked like he might be the only one between the three that could really match me in muscle mass. The one bit of luck going in my favor was that in general, rich fuckers weren’t very strong and rarely knew how to fight.

Wayne’s smile was sinister. “Oh, Ty, I seriously doubt my baby brother is doing the fucking.” He eyed me up and down. “What’s your name, big boy?”

“Fuck you,” I answered.

“Nah, save that for my brother. Come on, tell me your name. Hell, you might be a member of our family one day. You know, when gay marriage is legal and all.”

“Leave him alone, Wayne. He’s not anybody. It’s not what you’re thinking,” Kelsey said softly, breaking my heart and causing Wayne to burst out laughing at the same time.

He had freed the poor kitten and was hugging it tightly in his arms. It wasn't moving, which meant it could be in shock or already dead. I felt the same way, my heart in shock or dead. I hadn't expected Kelsey to deny me. Hell, I don't know what I had expected, but it wasn't that. A part of me wanted to just turn around and walk away, never once looking back at Kelsey or his rich-ass brother. A part of me wanted to break down and cry like a baby. Another part, the biggest part, couldn't walk away from the look of terror in Kelsey's eyes. Whether it was fear for the kitten or fear that he'd just been outed as not only gay but getting fucked by one of the poorest kids in town, I didn't know. All I knew was that no matter how much his denial had hurt me, I couldn't walk away from him.

“Why did you untie that cat, Kelsey? You know we're just going to put it right back up there.” He smiled and reached out to tuck some hair behind Kelsey's ear. “Don't worry, baby brother. It's not like we're going to just let it hang there until it chokes to death. Mason brought his baseball bat, we're going to practice our homerun swings.”

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If I'd thought Kelsey looked terrified before, it was nothing compared to how he looked the instant Wayne had reached out to touch him. I'd had enough. This shit was about to end. At least it was about to end for Kelsey. I had a bad feeling it was only about to begin for me.

"Kelsey," I barked loudly to try to snap him out of the trance of terror Wayne had put him in. "You take that cat and run, okay? Don't worry about me."

"No, Gabriel. Wayne's not going to hurt the kitten. He's just acting like that to scare me. Aren't you, Wayne? You wouldn't do that to a defenseless animal."

I knew Kelsey didn't believe his words any more than the rest of us did. I just hoped to hell that he did what he was told when I made my move. I would be worthless if I had to worry about him on top of the three idiots in front of me.

"Why would you say such a silly thing, Kelsey? It wouldn't be the first defenseless thing I've hurt, would it?"

That was all it had taken. I remember seeing red because I damned well knew Wayne was insinuating that he'd hurt Kelsey in the past. I charged him and since I was driven by a rage I hadn't even known I possessed, I fucked him and his friends up pretty damned bad before they had gotten the best of me. I woke up in the hospital with the police threatening to press charges against me if I went near Wayne, Tyson, or Jacob again. There had been no mention of Kelsey. I'd thought it was weird, but didn't say a word, just nodded in agreement in hopes they would let me go home.

That attack in the woods could probably be categorized as the beginning of the end of

my relationship with Kelsey. Kelsey had named the kitten Snowball, and it had come to live with me until we could find it a real home. My parents sure the fuck hadn't wanted a pet but even with all their bitching, it was better than sending the poor thing to Kelsey's house. There was no question what would have happened to it there. I found out later that Kelsey had been responsible for the police and paramedics finding me. He'd been different after that day, more desperate for us to become intimate. He was nervous all the time. His hands would start shaking every time I brought up that day...when I asked him why he had denied me. He'd vowed he wasn't ashamed of me but, even then, I'd known better.

I definitely knew better now.

With unshed tears in my eyes, I looked down at the ball of white fluff at my feet. She blinked slowly and I knew it was Snowball. Kelsey had her. I had often wondered what had become of the kitten I had rescued and then been forced to abandon. Somehow, knowing she'd been with him, safe and sound, made me happy and pissed me off at the same time. The kitten deserved happiness...Kelsey didn't.

Slowly, I reached down to sit the kittens on the floor and to pick her up. As soon as she was in my arms, she started purring loudly. It was as if time stood still and we were back in my tiny bedroom in the run-down trailer I'd lived in. Playfully, she pawed at my nose which drew a smile from my tight lips. Yeah, regardless of how I felt about Kelsey, I was thankful that he'd managed to save Snowball. She hadn't deserved to be caught up in our bullshit.

"Hey, girl. I missed you. How've you been? A mommy at your age? I don't think that's very smart of you, old lady." She answered with another purr and pawing. I played with her another few minutes but when the kittens started yowling, I took the hint and put her on one of the cat beds. The little ones immediately attacked her and started sucking greedily for milk.

I stood up and blinked back tears again. She should have been our cat. Those should have been our kittens. This should be our cozy little house. That's how it should have been. The reality was that none of it was ours, it was all his. He'd apparently moved on with his life, forgetting me as easily as it had been to seduce me.

My back straightened and I turned back toward the hallway. This had to end and it wouldn't end until it began. Kelsey was coming with me. We would hash our shit out, say all the things that should have been said, and then walk away once and for all. Finally, I had a plan.

With determined steps, I walked down the hall, not bothering to try and silence my steps because the music was blaring rather loudly. Mentally, I tried to prepare myself for what I might find. Kelsey was probably in a relationship with another guy by now, so there was a damned good chance I would find him in bed with another man. I could handle it.

I had to handle it. I didn't have a choice, because he was no longer mine.

By the time I reached the doorway where the music was coming from, I was mentally prepared to face almost anything. Military training had taught me to filter my thoughts, to focus only on what I had to accomplish. Standing outside the closed door, I took a deep breath and pushed it open.

I had been wrong—nothing could have prepared me for what I saw.

### Chapter 7

Music was blaring and there was some porn, girl on girl, playing on the big screen television sitting on a black dresser. Empty cans of soda pop, packages of cookies, and melting ice cream containers were scattered on the floor and nightstands. The clothes he'd been wearing at the plant the day before had been tossed on the floor and were entwined with the clothes of his bed partner. I swallowed back a growl of confused anger. Lying in the center of the king-sized bed, in the wrong direction, was Kelsey, wearing only a pair of sexy boxer briefs, and...a woman, wearing some skimpy panties and some kind of sports bra.

What the fuck? Kelsey was gay. He wasn't bisexual and I knew that for sure. He was gay.

Or was he? Did I even know him really? Hell, was he even gay? Had my so-called "rape" turned him straight? My hand gripped the door frame until my knuckles turned ash white. No, I hadn't been prepared for this. Anything but this. Was he married? Was this woman, as tall as Kelsey but incredibly thin with hardly any womanly curves, the one who ended up with the heart I used to cherish so damned much?

The cozy porch with the colorful throw pillows crept back into my mind. I hadn't seen much, but there had definitely been hints of a woman's touch in the few parts I had seen of Kelsey's house. My mind screamed that I was wrong, horribly mistaken, but the harsh reality of what I was seeing kept telling me there was no mistake. Kelsey was in bed with a woman. Naked. Well, practically naked. His tanned skin was a stark conflict to the woman's paler flesh. Both their bodies were lean, almost too thin, but definitely toned with athletic muscle. Kelsey's blond hair, much darker

than it had been when we were younger, was closer to a caramel color and tangled wildly all around his face. The woman's hair, inky black, had to hang to her trim waist, because there was enough of it to wrap around the both of them, blocking my view of the man I used to love. From where I stood, I could see her dark lashes, long but not nearly as long as Kelsey's, resting innocently against her alabaster skin. She looked so fucking happy. So peaceful.

I hated her.

Kelsey was on his side, one leg drawn up and thrown over the woman's slim legs, and an arm wrapped around her, his hand resting against her flat stomach. His position gave me a beautiful view of his perfect bubble ass and I knew I should look away...but I didn't dare. This could very well be the last time I saw the ass I used to own, so I kept looking.

The skin-tight boxer briefs and the thick leather bracelets around his wrists decorated his body beautifully. I hadn't liked the bracelets at first and I guess that was because they were yet another thing about Kelsey that seemed different—something I didn't know about. Now, as my eyes feasted on the snug jewelry, I had to admit they were sexier than fuck. Being the pervert that I was, I imagined them as cuff restraints instead of jewelry. I could tie him down, ravish his body until he was forced to admit that he belonged to me. I would make him beg me for forgiveness. I would fuck him so hard...so good...that he would beg me to stay with him.

And then I would walk away.

“Gabriel? What are you doing here?”

Kelsey's voice, rough from sleep and whatever the fuck else he'd done last night, interrupted my fantasy. I jerked, surprised that he'd woken up and I hadn't known it, hadn't heard him make the slightest sound. The realization that I'd been caught

ogling him and his whatever in their bed, caused a blush to start to creep up my neck. I combated that embarrassment with anger and resentment.

“You’re late for work,” I barked. The blush deepened, because I was ashamed that was the fucking best retort I could come up with.

Kelsey glanced worriedly at the woman in his arms and then, as if realizing for the first time that he and his lover were practically naked in bed with me standing there, he reached over and grabbed the sheet to cover her up. Then he gently untangled himself for their limb-lock and eased himself up and away from her.

“I’m pretty sure you fired me, so I’m not late. Let’s talk somewhere else,” he added as he scooted to the edge of the bed.

He’d looked sleepy for a split second, but now his blue eyes were alert and wide awake as they looked at me and then they would skitter back in her direction. Ah, he was scared. How cute. He didn’t want her to know anything. Hell, she probably didn’t even know he used to be gay. Fuck that shit, I wasn’t going anywhere. He hadn’t made it easy on me all those years ago, so I damned well wouldn’t make it easy on him now.

“Nah, I’m good right where I am. Nice view, by the way.” I squinted and then frowned. “Weird though, my eyesight must be getting bad. It looks a lot like you’re in bed with a woman and we both know that isn’t what you really like. What’s up with that, Kels?” I kept looking at her and added, “She’s cute and all, but I hardly think she’s gorgeous enough to turn a gay man straight.” I knew I was being an ass but couldn’t seem to gather the strength up to care or be the least bit ashamed.

He frowned. “What?”

“Who is she, Kels? Your wife? Girlfriend? One-night hookup?” I knew she wasn’t a



hookup—they looked way too comfortable together. No, this wasn't the first time they'd fallen asleep in each other's arms.

His frown deepened. "You think she's my wife? Seriously, Gabriel? Why the fuck would you, of all people, think that?"

"Because we're in bed together, Kelsey," the woman's voice interrupted.

Her eyes were still closed, but clearly, she was wide awake.

"He thinks I'm your wife, girlfriend, or one-night hookup because we are in bed together. Clearly, he's a dumb fuck who doesn't know you very well." She peeked one eye open. "And you have about three seconds to tell me that he's not who I think he is before I am out of this bed and ready to kick his ass. Three seconds to tell me that this is not the Gabriel."

The conversation between Kelsey and his bedmate had me about as confused as the fact that I was still sporting a boner in my slacks. Seeing Kelsey in bed with anybody, much less a woman, should have deflated the traitorous monster called my dick, but apparently, he didn't get the memo about proper responses for bitter betrayals.

"Stop it, Evie. You aren't kicking anybody's ass," Kelsey argued.

"One."

"Seriously, Evie, stop it. You're embarrassing both of us."

"Two."

This time, she sat up in the bed and met his gaze eye for eye. Barely contained fury rolled off her in waves. She actually trembled every few seconds.

“Give me a few minutes, okay? Go grab your shower. I’ll be fine.”

When she started shaking her head in a firm negative direction, he added a soft, “Please, Evie.”

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I crossed my arms over my chest and ground my jaws together so hard that I was afraid my teeth would shatter at any given moment. I'll be fine? Was he serious right now? Hell, had he told everybody that I raped him? Was that why she was afraid to leave us alone?

Her eyes, a chocolate brown, swept in my direction, and I was floored by the amount of hate visible there. Oh yeah, he'd told her his line of bullshit, too. Perfect. Unwilling to back down, because I was the fucking innocent one in the game Kelsey was playing, I met her gaze and dared her to say something to piss me off even more.

"Please," Kelsey whispered again.

Finally, she pulled her eyes away from mine and looked at Kelsey. Her gaze warmed instantly and a sad smile curved her lips. Placing one of her hands on each side of his face, she whispered, "I love you, Kelsey. Jax loves you. You don't have to do this if you don't want to." Her eyes flickered in my direction and she added, "Jax can be here in minutes to take care of this idiot. Actually, he'd love to."

Who the fuck was Jax?

"I definitely don't need Jax here. I'm good. Gabriel and I obviously have some things to talk about." He looked in my direction briefly, but then returned his attention to Evie. "Grab your shower. You're going to be late for work again if you don't start moving."

I didn't know much, but I knew she was incredibly sad when she said, "Remember, babe. We love you."

He smiled. “I know. I’m good.”

I watched as she tossed the sheet aside, glared at me with enough hate to make another person wilt, and then disappeared down the hall. I heard her grumbling under her breath and I was pretty sure she called me every curse word she could think of on such short notice. Too bad I didn’t give a fuck about her opinion of me.

“Why are you here, Gabriel?” Kelsey asked. He was still seated on the bed but had moved to the edge, like he wanted to be able to bolt if I threatened him in any way.

I leaned against the doorframe and tried to appear like I didn’t give a fuck about what I’d just walked in on. I hoped, but seriously doubted, he couldn’t see what kind of effect his nearly naked body was having on me. Testosterone, fueled by anger and lust, flowed wildly through my veins, pushing me to push Kelsey.

“I came here to tell you to get your pretty little ass back to work if you really care about the employees like you claimed yesterday, but it looks like something more pressing has come up.” I took a step in his direction and shivers of delight raced through me when I noticed that he tried to scoot away. “It looks like I need to remind you that you like men in your bed instead of women.” Another step. Another scoot.

What the fuck was I doing?

“Evie’s a friend,” he whispered.

His eyes tracked my movements as I drew closer and closer to the edge of the bed. He looked nervous. Excited. Tormented. His breathing hitched when my body bumped his when I settled myself right between his spread legs. Tight boxer briefs did nothing to hide his arousal, proving he wasn’t as immune to me as he’d like me or Evie to believe. He may have tossed me away like yesterday’s trash, but clearly that didn’t mean his body wasn’t still interested in revisiting the landfill. I could have found

great pleasure in knowing he still got hard for me, but the sadness in his eyes kept my victory dance tucked away. The smart thing to do was walk away...no, run away from Kelsey and this shit town.

Nobody ever accused me of being smart.

“You sleep with all your friends, Kels?” I snorted out a cold laugh and answered my own question. “Oh, yeah, you do. I forgot. I used to be your friend, didn’t I?”

“Don’t, Gabriel,” he pleaded softly, but made no move to try and put distance between us. If anything, his body was gravitating closer to mine. His pupils were blown wide, and his breathing was ragged and wild.

“Don’t what, Kels? Don’t remind you how good it feels to have a man dominating that body of yours? Don’t remind you of what you threw away with only a few words that you damned well knew weren’t even close to the truth?” My hands reached down and latched onto him behind his knees. With a tight grasp, I lifted his legs off the bed and spread him wide at the same time. Before he could do more than let his eyes widen in surprise, I was settled between those lean thighs, my larger body covering his. “Don’t remind you of what you’ve missed the past ten years?”

He turned his head and looked away from me, but I put my fingers under his chin and brought it right back around. “Just one kiss, angel, for old time’s sake,” I begged.

He blinked and then something changed in his eyes. Seconds ago, he’d looked sad and troubled. Now, he looked wild and desperate. I didn’t have time to consider the implications of the change before his lips crashed against mine. Shocked from his sudden assault, I did nothing to stop or assist his plunder of my mouth. Seconds ticked by as he continued to devour my lips and then his tongue slid inside my mouth and flickered seductively against mine. I lost it, completely lost it at that moment.

All my hate, all my need for revenge, all my heart-wrenching pain disappeared in an instant, and I found myself propelled back in time to a time when there hadn't been a moat, built from lies and betrayal, around my heart. All was forgotten...and forgiven...the second his tongue slipped inside my mouth. My mind played tricks on me. With very little effort on my part, I had mentally transported us back to the woods that used to be our relationship playground. We were back beneath that massive oak in the middle of the forest where he'd first kissed me. We were in that hunter's cabin that was abandoned most of the year where his hands had tentatively touched my cock for the first time, the same cabin where we'd shed all our clothes for the first time and spent the next few hours just exploring one another's bodies. We were back at the bluff where we'd finally made love to each other...

I ripped my mouth away from his and was standing three feet away from him in the blink of an eye, or the twist of a knife in my back. Waves of pain washed over me when the harsh reality of what had followed our lovemaking session on the bluff came crashing in. The lie that changed my life forever, and had forced me to run for my very life. The lie that had taken me away from everything I knew and turned me into a homeless teenager who had been forced to use sex as a way of survival. The lie that had damned near destroyed my soul.

Just as easily as it had been cast aside, the anger and betrayal returned. I looked into his eyes and then quickly glanced away before I found myself sucked into another web of deceit. My heart, the poor bastard, desperately wanted to believe what I thought I saw, hope and love glowing in Kelsey's blue eyes. How could I be so ridiculously naïve? He only had to spread his legs for me one time and I was ready to throw the past out the window?

Run away. Run away. Run away. Run away. The mantra chanted around in my head in a desperate attempt to convince me to do the right thing...when I really only wanted to do the wrong thing. I wanted to fall back on him and lose myself in the tight muscles and sweet smell that could only belong to Kelsey. I wanted to ravish his

body in all the ways I couldn't when we were younger. I wanted to fuck him so hard that he wouldn't ever be able to forget me again. More than anything else, though, I wanted to hurt him. I wanted to hurt him as much as he'd hurt me. I wanted to make him feel dirty, and useless, and unworthy...and afraid.

My eyes cut back around to look at him again. He was splayed out on the bed like a sweet sacrifice for my rage. Long, lean legs were still open, inviting me to return to the game we'd played seconds ago. The tight black boxer briefs barely contained his throbbing cock and a wet stain colored the front of them. His bright blue eyes were a shade darker than normal and his breathing was erratic and nervous. Mr. High and Mighty might not want to want me...but his body did. It was clear just how fucking bad he wanted me.

I took a step closer and his eyes closed, but his body stayed wantonly spread for me. He made no move whatsoever to make me think he didn't want this as badly as I wanted to give it to him. Another step and I saw his breath hitch slightly, a nervous gasp, but he remained completely submissive.

"Open your eyes, Kelsey. You don't get to pretend it's somebody else about to fuck you," I growled.

There was frantic movement behind his closed lids but after only a brief battle, his eyes fluttered open and he bravely met my gaze. He opened his mouth to say something and then quickly slammed it shut again. If he'd fought me with every ounce of his strength when I first touched him, it wouldn't have surprised me in the least. If anything, I would have understood that reaction so much easier than this internal battle he waged against himself.

"I would never pretend it was anyone except you, Gabriel," he whispered softly. "It's always you."

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If I allowed it, his words would be like a drug to me. I wouldn't allow it, though. I couldn't.

"Sure it was," I sneered as I closed the small gap that was left between us. My hands wrapped around each of his ankles, and I yanked him to the edge of the bed. "Just me and you together forever, right? Isn't that the shit you used to say to me?" I laughed bitterly. "Yeah, the picture you painted for me with all those sweet words and come-hither looks didn't turn out to be near as rosy as you had me believing it was going to be." Starbursts of pain flashed inside my head as memory after memory assaulted me. All the ways he'd told me he loved me. All the ways he'd shown me he loved me. The love I could have sworn had been in his eyes when we were teenagers was still there, right now, as he gazed up at me.

"Tell me right now if you don't want this, angel," I spat the endearment just so Kelsey wouldn't suspect that I still meant it, that I still wanted him to be my angel. Mine. He was always supposed to have been mine.

"Tell me, because I sure the hell don't want to take something that you aren't willingly giving me. Again," I mocked.

He frowned and looked up at me for several long seconds while I held my breath and hoped there would be something he could say, some believable lie that could justify the pain he'd caused me with his lie. Say something. Anything. Tell me why you did it. Make all my pain go away. Make me believe in myself the way you used to.

Instead of magic words that could soothe my soul, he said, "I want this."



A part of me shattered. Another part of me drew strength from that very heartbreak and used its power over me to continue. “Put your hands behind your knees and pull your legs up,” I ordered. “Spread yourself nice and wide. Show me what I’ve been missing, Kels. Try to make me remember why I ever thought I loved you.”

Pain flickered through his blue eyes and he tucked his bottom lip between his teeth and bit down. It looked like he was trying to gather the courage to continue down a path we’d both regret. Hell, I was already regretting it. Hurting Kelsey, even with words, went against every fiber of my being so I waged an internal war of my own. The logical side of me still screamed for me to run away from him. I closed my eyes and begged for the strength to obey.

“Take whatever you want, Gabriel. Do whatever you want to me,” he finally said in that soft voice that had always held the magical power to make me bend to his will.

When I opened my eyes again, he was still there but, just like I had ordered, he had lifted his legs upward and held himself open and on display for me. His thighs rested against his chest. His lashes rested against his cheeks. The wet trail of a tear stood out starkly against his skin. Hatred, pure and undiluted, flowed through my blood, but it was hatred for myself, not Kelsey.

“Do it, Gabriel. Punish me for what I did to you...what I said about you. I deserve it. I’ve waited ten fucking years to pay for that crime. Just...just do it.”

I jerked back, once again putting distance between us. What the fuck was I doing? What the fuck was he about to let me do?

Don’t believe him. Don’t fall for it. He’s just pushing your buttons, because he knows which ones to push. He’s probably trying to trick you into doing something so he can scream rape again.

I took another step backward. Anger flashed in his eyes and his feet hit the floor.

“What? I’m not good enough for you now? Is that it? Nah, it’s not that, is it? You came here to hurt me...to make me pay for hurting you, but you’re finding you don’t have the stomach for it after all. You were always too kind-hearted for your own good, Gabriel. Being cruel isn’t in your nature.”

I snorted, disgusted that he believed I wasn’t strong enough to hurt him...disgusted that he was right.

Angry at both of us, I said, “No, Kels, I simply decided I didn’t want you after all, but since you think I’m such a softie, let me see if I can come up with something nice to say about you. Hmmm...your kissing has improved...somewhat. While you might not be the best kisser I’ve ever tasted, at least you’re better than you were when we were kids. You tried so hard back then,” I said with a cruel chuckle. “It was cute for a while, watching you try to become a man when you were nothing more than a rich boy who lacked any experience or skill, but cuteness can’t entertain a man forever.” I snorted. “Thank goodness I got out when I did.”

My goal was to hurt him and I’d clearly succeeded. I watched as a look of utter devastation swept over his features, transforming him from something beautiful into something damaged...broken. For a minute, I thought he was going to cry more of those silent tears that had leaked from his eyes earlier. His bottom lip quivered slightly, his eyes looked glassy with moisture, and his entire body literally trembled before he was able to pull himself back together. His body language told me the exact moment that he’d won the battle over his emotions.

When he looked up at me again, his eyes were flat and dead with no emotions visible at all. There was simply nothing there. Empty. Lost. I hated myself and I hated him. Why had I said those things? They weren’t true, I didn’t mean them. Remembering his kisses had kept me alive when all I wanted to do was die. Even knowing what

he'd done to me, he'd been the sole ray of sunshine in my shit life.

"Yeah, thank goodness," he answered in a voice as flat as his eyes. "You always said you would get out of this town, I just never thought I'd hear about it from my brother."

"Life's been full of disappointments for both of us, kiddo. Knowing Wayne, I doubt he was gentle with the news that I'd gotten away before you could suck me into your web of lies." I had tunnel vision. I couldn't see straight. I couldn't think straight. I wanted to hurt him, but it was causing me pain. I needed to run away, but all I wanted was to stay with him.

Finally, I said what I'd initially come there to say. "The employees need you, Kelsey. I don't, they do."

With that final dig, I turned and strode out of the room, never looking back because I knew that if I did, I would go back to him and beg him to forgive me for what I'd said to him. I'd made it halfway down the hall when I looked up and saw Evie blocking the front door. She was dressed and standing there, arms crossed over her chest and legs spread wide apart like she was ready to rumble. A look of pure hatred glittered in her eyes as she watched my approach. I wasn't sure what she was to Kelsey, but she left no doubts at all what she was to me—my enemy. I kept walking, never slowing my pace, in hopes that she would be the one to cave in our little battle of chicken, but I should have known better. I wouldn't get so lucky. No, she stood there, tall and quivering with fury, until we were nose to nose.

"You're in my way," I told her. "Move."

Her eyes narrowed into scary little slits. She was tall for a woman, as tall as Kelsey, and I could easily see she was nothing but pure lean muscle. "Jax will beat the shit out of you for that, Gabriel Maverick. Be ready for it, because he's going to make

you pay for treating Kelsey that way.”

I smiled. Another man, I could handle. This woman? Not so much. “Tell him to bring it on,” I whispered to her and then laughed softly. “And while I don’t think Kelsey’s worth it, be sure this mysterious Jax understands that I can give as good as I get.”

“You’re wrong, you know,” she countered quietly.

“Trust me, doll. I can handle Kelsey’s Jax without any problems.”

“Maybe,” she said with a shrug. “But that’s not what you’re wrong about. Kelsey is worth it.”

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*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:47 am*

Evie's words kept floating around in my head, mocking me with each and every loop I made around the small town I used to call home. Kelsey is worth it. At first, I'd laughed at her stupidity and thought to myself that Kelsey just hadn't screwed her over yet—she'd learn what kind of person he was soon enough and then she'd regret ever getting mixed up with someone like him. That stupid idea kept me entertained for about three loops around town. I imagined the shocked look on her face when he stabbed her in the back. Oh, how the mighty would fall.

But the thought of Kelsey screwing over the woman he'd cuddled so closely in bed, the one he'd tried to cover up to protect her modesty, didn't sit well with my imagination. I couldn't picture him doing anything to hurt her but, then again, I hadn't seen it coming when he'd fucked me over, either. Still, something wasn't right with the picture and that little something, whatever the hell it was, kept me from enjoying my 'you'll get yours' scenario with Evie the Amazon.

For the next five loops, I told myself that it was just me. I was the only one Kelsey enjoyed fucking over. Clearly, he'd made friends over the past ten years. He had protective Barb at work, Evie the Amazon in his bed, even if that didn't make one iota of fucking sense, and the mysterious Jax who would be coming to "kick my ass."

Jax was probably Kelsey's lover, the one who took my place. The one that was good enough for him when we both had known all along I wasn't. Jax probably had money and came from a wealthy family that would make the Morganston name proud. I might not know much about him, but I did know that he wasn't from one of the poorest families in our town.

That pity party caused me to point my rental car into an entirely different direction.

I'm not even sure I knew where I was going until I got there. It wasn't until I'd pulled into the vacant parking area of the wilderness park that even I knew where my heart was guiding me. The coward in me wanted to turn around and drive straight back into town. The man in me forced myself to cut the ignition and haul my ass out of the car. With slow but determined steps, I started toward the path that would lead me to the very spot that had started the whole damned freak show. It was late summer so the heat was stifling but not more than I could handle. I wasn't wearing the proper clothing or shoes for a hike in the woods, but none of that mattered, not right now, at least. I had to go there, to our special place.

Ten minutes later, I ventured off the trail and picked my way through the woods. I followed landmarks that I wasn't even aware that I remembered until I was there in our spot where it all began. Where it had all ended.

I stood completely still for a few minutes and just breathed in the fresh woodsy air that seemed so familiar, yet completely foreign. Years had passed, but it was like nothing had changed. I'd been sure the massive oak had to have gotten bigger, but it appeared the same to me. I heard water rushing along the stream that I knew was only a quarter of a mile north from where I stood. There was a faint sound of city life that hadn't been here before, but I guessed that was bound to happen. Eventually, the population growth might end up taking the entire forest, but I doubted I would be around to see it happen.

I looked at the tree again and I could see Snowball dangling, claws flailing wildly, as Wayne and his friends tried their best to torture her to death. I could see Kelsey standing up to his older brother as he tried to rescue the kitten. His denial of me in front of his brother had been a warning flag that I'd chosen to ignore—one that I'd paid dearly for ignoring.

It was strange how the spot in the forest had turned into our spot. The spot where Snowball had almost died. The spot where he'd denied me, called me a nobody, to

Wayne and his friends. The spot where he had offered me everything...and I had taken it. I blinked and felt a tear escape from the corner of my eye. I started to fight the emotion threatening to consume me and then decided to just let it go. Since that night when I'd been forced to run for my life, I hadn't even had the opportunity to mourn what I lost. Yes, I'd been devastated. Furious. Hurt. I'd been a lot of things, but the need to survive kept me from pausing long enough to mourn.

I'd been forced to leave my home and my family, but that trailer had never felt like home and my parents had never acted like family. No, the only thing I'd lost that meant anything to me had been Kelsey. He'd meant everything to me.

I dropped to my knees and then looked up toward the sky. Tree branches blocked most of the sun, but there were still rays of sunshine peeking through. Kelsey had called them fairy beams and I'd called him a fairy. He'd punched me in the gut and tried to wrestle me to the ground, but he always lost. I'd let him think he was winning for a few minutes before I would flip him over and have him whimpering with pleasure in mere seconds.

I closed my eyes. We weren't supposed to do anything that night. It wasn't his birthday yet, and we had waited so long already. First, I would graduate and then he'd have his birthday and it would all be perfect. But things had happened. Lines had been crossed. Words of love and promises of our future together had been whispered.

And I had loved him so much.

An uncontrolled laugh tumbled from my mouth as I barreled down memory lane. I'd like to at least be able to say I'd made exquisite love to him for the first and last time, but that would be a lie. I'd fucked him with all the finesse of a horny teenage boy getting laid for the first time. It had been messy, passionate, scary, and altogether wonderful. I glanced over at the spot beneath the tree where a canopy of branches and leaves had offered a love cocoon for two teenage boys so long ago.

“Nu-uh. Nope. Not gonna happen. This isn’t working. Something’s not right,” Kelsey hissed as his smaller hands pushed against my chest, shoving my upper body away from him. “You aren’t doing something right. There is no way that is fitting in there.”

Bright blue eyes looked up at me, wide, terrified, and teetering on the edge of a cute Kelsey laugh. He was trying his best to smirk up at me, but his obvious discomfort totally ass-ended that particular look. He was breathing like a racehorse and his upper lip was coated with sweat, which was weird because I was pretty certain I had never seen Kelsey sweat before.

“It’s okay, angel. We don’t have to do it tonight. We’ll just fool around like we usually do.” I leaned down and kissed the tip of his nose just because I knew it would totally piss him off. The look of sheer determination on his face was almost comical. “I love you, babe. We’ll know when the time is right. Now’s not that time. It’s cool.” It wasn’t cool. My cock was aching so damned bad that I wanted to cry like a baby, but I would never let Kelsey know how bad this was hurting me.

He slammed his head back and then grunted in pain when he made contact with the forest floor. Hell, we’d started out with a blanket beneath us but who the hell knew where that had ended up. We’d both been rolling and thrusting like animals for the past thirty minutes. No real sex—just humping.

“No,” he said through gritted teeth. “I can do this. Just give me a minute.”

He started doing weird breathing exercises. Well, shit. That wasn’t going to work for me. If it was going to hurt him that badly, I wasn’t doing it. Like he said. Not gonna happen.

“Stop that shit, babe. You’re creeping me out. I’m not going to do this if it’s going to hurt you like that. Forget it. When you’re ready, you’ll know it. You’re not ready yet.”



His eyes snapped open and he glared at me—which was really kinda cute considering his position at the moment, but I was sure he wouldn't want me pointing that out to him so I bit my tongue.

“Oh, no. You aren't blaming this on me. It's hardly my fault you have a freakishly huge cock.” He leaned up on his elbows and kissed me on the tip of the nose. “I feel like you're asking me to do the impossible here, babe. The least you could do is show a little patience. Maybe offer up an ‘atta boy’ when I make some progress, okay?”

I looked down to the spot where our bodies were not connected in any way whatsoever and once again bit my tongue to keep from asking him what progress he was referring to. He might be smaller and weaker than me, but when he was pissed, he could be vicious. “Maybe you just have a freakishly small asshole, angel. Did you ever think of that?” I asked as I dipped my head to kiss the spot right below his earlobe. He fucking loved that every damned time. That spot was my go-to spot that could get me a pass on just about every one of my screw-ups.

He moaned, and I fucking loved that sound. That was my go-to sound, the one thing that could make all my worldly troubles and worries vanish in an instant.

“Why did you do that? You had to go and make a tender moment ugly by insulting me. Now you're going to have to suck that spot right there for about ten minutes before I'll be able to forgive you.”

My tongue swiped the wet skin I'd just been suckling on. “Me? You're the one that started it. If I'm not mistaken, you said I had a freakishly huge cock.” I went back to teasing the sensitive skin.

“That's a compliment, asshole. You saying I've got a freakishly tiny asshole is not a compliment. Remember that.” He moaned again. “Shit that feels good. God, Gabriel, you make me forget everything when you do that to me. My entire world disappears

and there's nothing but me and you. Forever." He turned, grabbed my chin, and forced me to look him in the eyes. "Forever, right, Gabriel? You won't leave without me, will you?"

I loved him so damned much. "Forever, Kelsey Morganston. You'll be mine forever. I'll be yours forever." I flipped us over to where I was on the ground and he was on top of me, legs straddling my hips. I tugged him downward until his chest was against mine, his heart beating next to mine, and his head resting against my neck. I held him as tight as I could. With Kelsey, I always felt like I ruled the world. I was somebody and he was mine. Nothing or nobody would ever tear us apart.

Minutes ticked by and I was content to just hold him. It was an emotion I only felt around Kelsey and I fucking loved it. I wasn't sure how much time passed, but he started squirming, and I knew Mr. Never Quit was about to demand I try again. Enjoying his squirming more than I probably should have, I held him right where he was and stroked his lean back, up and down, teasing the tip of his crack before sliding my hand back up his back again. Moonlight peeked through the trees and I took the opportunity to enjoy the beauty of what was mine. He was a sexy sun-kissed shade, but I'd never known him to spend much time in the sun, so I guessed it was his natural coloring. As usual, there were bruises, some faded, some fresh, on his back, arms, and legs. He played soccer at his private school and it pissed me off—not that he played soccer, but that he obviously played with a carelessness that led to him getting bruises on a regular basis. We'd talked about it once, but he'd shut me down with one of his fierce frowns, the one where I knew not to argue. Clearly, he must enjoy getting kicked and tumbled.

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“Stop squishing me,” he muttered with another squirm. “You know I hate it when you manhandle me like that.” He twisted his head and grinned at me.

We both knew just how much he enjoyed me manhandling him. “Yeah, right. We both know that, don’t we?” I mocked.

“Let’s try again,” he suggested. “Maybe you could...uh...you might want to try...”

“What?” I frowned down at him. What was he getting at?

His teeth immediately came out and started chewing on his plump bottom lip, the way he always did when he was embarrassed. He gnawed his lip for a few seconds before finally saying, “We could try it like they do in the movies. Try that first. Maybe it would help...loosen things up.”

Even with just a few rays of moonlight coming through the canopy of trees, I could still see his blush. I hadn’t seen any guy on guy movies being shown down at the local one-movie cinema. “What movies?”

He laughed nervously. “You know—porn. Gay porn. You’ve watched some, right?”

Well...no. I didn’t have a computer, the internet, a smartphone. I didn’t have any of the shit Kelsey had. No porn for me, except for the shit starring me and Kelsey that played in a continuous loop inside my head. “Sure,” I lied, not wanting him to know just how inexperienced I was. “What, uh, parts do you want to try first?”

What else could there be? My dick went in his ass. I’d sucked him off, he’d sucked

me off. We kissed. Heavy petting? Check. What the fuck was I missing? It was my turn to be embarrassed but instead of chewing my bottom lip, I scowled at him.

True to Kelsey form, my scowl pissed him off.

“You’ve got about three seconds to knock that scowl off your face before I do it, Gabriel. Don’t look at me like that. At least I have some suggestions to try and make this easier.”

“It seems pretty easy for me right now, Kels. You’re the only one complaining,” I teased as I dropped my lips to his spot again. “Trust me, I can make it fit.”

His forehead smacked the forest floor as a string of curse words slid out of pretty mouth. Words that ugly shouldn’t come from a mouth that pretty. Maybe I should spank him? Spanking his bubble ass would definitely be fun. For me.

“You drive me fucking crazy, Gabriel,” he muttered in exasperation. “Give me your finger,” he ordered.

I held my hand to him up without the first clue as to where he was going with this. He moved and wiggled until he was sitting astride my hips and braced over me, one on the ground holding him up and the other hand clasped with mine. He studied my hand, frowned slightly, mumbled something about even my fingers being fucking big, and then maneuvered me until all my fingers were down except for the one I pointed with. Then he turned his eyes back to meet mine.

“If you hadn’t ever watched gay porn before, you should have just told me, Gabriel. There’s no need to act like a total ass just for the hell of it.” He put the tip of my finger between his lips and suckled with just enough pressure to cause my dick to twitch beneath him. “I’ll bring my tablet tomorrow and we can watch some together. You’ll love it.”

Then those pretty lips went all the way down my finger and his tongue swirled around my digit, like he was giving my finger a blow job. His blue eyes crinkled with silent laughter as his head bobbed up and down on my finger until it was dripping with saliva. I didn't know where he was going with this, but he looked sexier than hell doing it. It didn't take my teenage mind much inspiration to go straight to him doing that to my dick.

After a few sexy minutes, his mouth slipped off my finger and he said, "Now...put your finger inside me."

Holy shit. Fuck. Fireworks went off inside of my head. I caught up in an instant.

He yelped in surprise when I lifted him off me and flipped him over onto his belly. I moved behind him, pushed his legs up and had his ass in the air faster than he could finish his cry of alarm. My knees pushed his legs wide apart as I settled behind him. Sure, we'd already tried this position once tonight...but not since he'd dropped that little hint to me seconds ago. I looked down and palmed his beautiful ass. Everything about him was nothing short of perfection. I felt confident and brazen. Thanks to his nudge, I knew exactly what he needed. My hands spread his cheeks apart and for the first time since we'd started meeting each other, since we'd fallen in love with each other, I looked at his most vulnerable spot. He tried to wiggle away and whined something about me embarrassing him, but my grip on his lean hips held him right where I intended for him to stay.

"Embarrassed, Kels? God, you are so fucking beautiful," I whispered in awe. "Oh, and thanks for the hint, I get it now. I've got a plan." While he was spread open, my tongue found the puckered spot and flickered across the soft wrinkles. Explosions shot through my brain and cock as his taste and scent invaded my senses.

"Shit, Gabriel," he squealed. "You can't do that."

His forehead was resting against the cold ground and his back was arched delicately. I frowned at the faded and fresh bruises. Once again, I was consumed with the need to demand that he stop playing a sport that hurt him...that marred his beautiful flesh. He was mine. I needed to protect him. I wanted to protect him.

His head twisted around to look at me and his blue eyes were dark with lust but still managed to pull off a playful twinkle at the same time. He said, "I didn't actually mean for you to stop. I thought I would say you shouldn't do it, but you would say something like how much you wanted to, and then you'd keep on—"

He yelped again when my tongue plunged straight inside of him. The yelp magically turned into a moan of pleasure within seconds—pure, blissful seconds of his sweet moans and throaty groans. When I moved my left hand in the position to keep him spread wide and then reached around with my right hand to stroke his cock, the moans and groans turned into every curse word in his vocabulary and then finally, to just gibberish.

I blinked and felt the tears that trickled down my face as the memory vanished away, like it always did, and left me feeling so fucking alone and empty. Gibberish—but it had been the sweetest sound I'd ever heard in my entire life. It had been in those few minutes that I'd finally realized what it meant to put someone else's pleasure in front of my own, because when I'd heard those noises he'd been making, I had instinctively known that I would do anything, noeverything, in my power to make sure I heard them again...and again...and again. I had wanted to be the only person in the world to ever hear them—they were mine. He was mine.

Without ever watching the first gay porn flick, I had tongued and fingered him with the skill of a porn star. He'd come with a hoarse shout, his trembling arms had finally given out, and he'd collapsed onto the forest floor. My hands had trembled with love, stronger than anything I'd ever experienced with another human being, as I'd caressed his sweat-coated back. Spasms had shaken his body for several long minutes

after he'd come all over my hand. All the while, he'd lain there, his head twisted so he could look at me through heavy-lidded eyes, and whispered over and over that he loved me.

My cock had been throbbing painfully, swollen far past any level of comfort and leaking precum with every beat of my heart. My balls were full and hard, drawn up against my body and begging for release. Every nerve in my body had been crying for release and aching for his touch. There wasn't a spot on my body that wasn't rebelling against the fact that I hadn't gotten to come.

And I had never felt more fucking content in my entire life. I'd given that look of pure exhausted bliss to Kelsey. Me. Because of me, the boy I loved had lain there, unable to do more than blink at me and whisper words of love.

The sounds of the forest tickled my ears. Winds gusted through the trees and leaves rustled pleasantly. The nearby stream trickled. The crickets chirped and somewhere nearby, a squirrel gnawed on something. Although it was silent to all the other living creatures that surrounded me, my heart broke, all over again, and I heard as it shattered into a million pieces. Ethan, Jeremiah, and Titus had worked so hard to piece it back together again and within twenty-four hours, Kelsey humpty-dumptyed it all over again.

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“Fuck!” I hissed to absolutely no one. When that didn’t get the job done, a string of ‘fucks’ followed behind it, each one louder than the last. What the hell was I doing? Why was I even here? What had I hoped to accomplish? Hurt him? Yeah, I was sure I’d done that, both with the company takeover and the sexual shit I’d pulled on him at every opportunity. So why did I feel like shit? I’d done what I came to do. Hooray.

I knew the answer to all those questions, but I didn’t like it.

I guessed the only question I didn’t have an answer for was the biggie—did I possess the cock and balls to admit what I’d really belly-crawled back to this town for? I still wanted him. I’d never stopped wanting him. I didn’t want to, but that didn’t take one fucking step in the right direction of changing the facts of the situation. Part of me still loved him...and when I said part of me, I meant every fucking fiber of my being.

I glanced at my watch. Yep, it hadn’t been more than four hours since I’d sat down with Ethan, Jeremiah, and Titus to develop a workable plan to give my soul some long-awaited comfort. At the time, it had seemed like a hell of a plan. With their help, we would turn Morganston Textiles around, transform it into a thriving business, and then unload it on another buyer. We’d planned to bring Kelsey back for a couple of reasons. First of all, the company needed him. When Titus dug even deeper into the computer files, he’d found that Kelsey was the only reason Morganston had managed to keep their heads above water in the financial department. Even Titus was impressed by the business maneuvers he’d been pulling out of his ass to keep the doors open, and when it came to business, Titus was hard to impress.

Secondly, I needed him. The plan was for me to spend some time with him, at work only, to help me find the closure I needed so fucking badly. Ethan was certain I could



get him completely out of my system if we were forced to spend time together. He swore I would see that Kelsey wasn't worth all the pain my mind was inflicting on my heart. Both Ethan and Jeremiah reminded me that we'd been nothing more than teenagers and hadn't really known what the fuck love meant. It had been nothing more than raging hormones. As an adult, I'd see that loving someone that hard when we were that young was simply nothing more than an illusion created in my mind. They didn't want me to hate him because hate was unhealthy and had made me make a shitty business decision. They just wanted me to finally find a way to move on with my life, to make my heart accessible again.

The plan seemed to be a good one...if I hadn't still been madly in love with Kelsey.

I dragged myself to my feet and, with one last look at the place beneath the oak tree that forever changed my life, I started the hike back to my rental. I needed to get back into the plant and face the trio of terror again. Oh, and Barb. Barb was going to kick my ass when she heard that I'd acted like a big enough ass that Kelsey would never come back to Morganston Textiles, or at least not while I was there. When I admitted to them what I'd done, Ethan would want to kick my ass. Jeremiah would want to pull me in for a cuddle and tell me everything would be all right. Titus would simply frown, shake his head, and start trying to develop another plan. Ethan handled emotions like I did, barrel through them with fists and cursing. Jeremiah was too emotional, always trying to find love where love didn't exist. Titus? Well, we'd already established he didn't understand the whole emotion thing.

Before I knew it, I'd played several scenarios over in my head, none of them pleasant for me, and I was back at the plant, ready to face the firing squad. Climbing out of the car, I told myself it was fair for them to be pissed with me and I needed to take it on the chin—whatever they wanted to dish out, I would just take it. Hell, I was pissed at myself. It was as if an alien invader took over my body whenever Kelsey was around. My heart wanted to do one thing, but my body, and fucking mouth, always seemed to dive head-over-ass straight into the opposite of what my heart was telling me to do.

I tugged open the front door, nodded at the security man Ethan already brought in to keep Wayne and his mini-Wayne brothers out of the plant, and walked straight past a smiling Barb and down the hall to the office designated as mine. I'd barely gotten within two steps of Barb when I saw her smile turn into a frown. It sure the fuck hadn't taken her long to catch on to my colossal fuck up.

"What did you...?"

I kept walking. I didn't have the time or stomach to deal with her ridicule and motherly frowns. I had a feeling she would hear it all from Kelsey before the day ended. No, I needed to save up the very last of my emotional energy to deal with Ethan, Jeremiah, and Titus. It had been a good plan. I'd fucked it up. Not only had I fucked it up, but I fucked it up in record time. Was there a book of world records for fuck-ups? If so, my face would be at the tip-top of the fuck-up scale. Fuck.

Okay, enough cursing. It wasn't helping a damned thing. Shit.

I opened the door to my office and wasn't at all surprised to find all three men, plus Courtney, invading my space. I was, however, surprised to see an old, ratty desk sitting straight across from the one I'd claimed earlier that morning. They were positioned like we were partners in a police precinct somewhere. What the hell? I didn't agree to any of them working with me in my personal space, aka hiding spot. I needed my own space. I needed a place to hide and lick my wounds. I did not need any of them watching me wallow in my own despair.

Other than working for Ethan's private investigation company, my dealings with the business or office atmosphere was nonexistent, but from what I'd seen on television and movies, there needed to be some comfy chairs or a leather sofa in my office somewhere. That way, there would be a place for me to collapse. Oh, and a liquor cabinet with expensive Scotch. I needed that, too. Since I didn't have any of that, I perched my ass on the end of the desk invading my office and looked at my friends.

Smiling like the lovesick fool he always was, Jeremiah said, “Hey, I had Kelsey’s desk brought up here so that you could keep an eye on...” he paused and his grin grew even wider before he finished, “his work.”

Ethan snorted. “Yeah, that’s exactly what he wants to keep an eye on. Kelsey’s work.”

“Uh...I think I should leave,” Courtney said quietly. “If you need anything else, Titus, just give me a yell. I’m going to go down on the floor and see if anybody has decided to start working yet.”

She ducked out quickly and quietly. I wasn’t sure if our talk made her uncomfortable, because as far as I knew, she might not know that Kelsey was gay. It could have been that or it could have been that, like everybody else I’d encountered in the plant, she held an undying loyalty to Kelsey. I had a particularly hard time believing that with Courtney since she’d been sleeping with Wayne.

“So? How did it go? Is he coming back?” Jeremiah asked, eyes still twinkling with fairy dust and glitter.

“Yeah, I hope you didn’t fuck this up, Gabe, because apparently, nobody wants to do any work unless Kelsey is here. His presence would definitely grease the wheels in helping us get this shitshow turned around so we can get out of this town. Sooooo...did you fuck it up?” Ethan asked.

He wasn’t mad, the bastard just instinctively knew.

“Uh...yeah, let’s work on a Plan B,” I answered nonchalantly. “Kelsey won’t be helping us out with the transition from drowning in a deep hole of company debt to making enough profit to be presentable for sale.” I turned to Titus. “You don’t really need him, do you, Titus? I mean, you’re brilliant, you can make money out of air.”

Titus looked up from where he'd been pecking away on his laptop. He was frowning at me. Shocker.

“Well, Gabriel, I don't actually need you three either, but it helps that you're here...just like it would have helped with Kelsey being here. The employees follow his lead and right now, the majority of them aren't doing a damned thing because he isn't here to lead. I don't understand their lack of motivation. Why in the world would it matter if the boy was here or not? They have a job to do, they need to just do it. How hard is that?”

Now it was Jeremiah that was frowning and he shook his head from side to side. “My God, Titus, did you totally miss the emotion gene altogether? Do you seriously not understand why they feel the way they do right now?”

The blank look on Titus' face confirmed that he, indeed, did not understand.

“Ethan, tell your boyfriend he's being an ass. I did not miss the emotion gene and to suggest so is simply ridiculous. For example, right now I'm mad at him because he's been fluttering around the office all morning, starring in a one-man show of matchmakers-r-us. I'm mad at you because you're not only allowing him to get away with it, but you've been sporting a hard-on all morning just from watching his ass.” He turned to look at me. “I'm mad at Gabriel because he obviously behaved like a testosterone-filled bully when he went to talk with Kelsey this morning, and, most of all, I'm mad at myself for missing something as astronomically huge as a rape charge when I started making plans for Gabe to get his happy ending.” His eyes swept over all of us. “Now, is that emotional enough for you, Jeremiah? I'm pissed. I'll probably remain pissed for the next six months. Pissiness is an emotion, right?”

During the whole of his argument, Titus never once raised his voice. Hell, his monotone hadn't changed one time. His face wasn't red. His blood pressure probably hadn't ticked one point past the I'm-alive-but-not-living number. Nah, he didn't have

a problem showing his emotions—nothing to see here, folks. Keep walking. What-the-fuck-ever.

Ethan rolled his eyes. “What did you do, Gabriel? Are we going to be slapped with an HR nightmare lawsuit?”

Uh...well, yeah, probably. I kept that thought to myself. “No, Ethan. He isn’t officially an employee of Morganston Textiles, so I couldn’t be charged with sexual harassment.”

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“Gabriel! Please tell me you didn’t do something stupid,” Jeremiah interrupted. “I know I don’t understand your entire situation with Kelsey, but it’s obvious that he’s still under your skin, even after all these years and how badly it ended between the two of you. The only way to resolve it is for you to work through the issues, and you need both of you present for that. If you don’t, this entire debacle is going to be a waste.” He waved around the room, indicating the entire Morganston Textile fuck-up I involved them in.

Right about now would probably be a good time to lie about my feelings, not show my hand to my three best friends. I could tell them that Kelsey meant nothing to me and maybe, just maybe, they would shut up about it and leave me alone to wallow in my anger and grief all by my lonesome. It would be safer that way. Lying would tuck away the vulnerability. Lying about Kelsey would be the safest path of operation for me.

“I’m still in love with him.”

Boom. There, I said it. Quietly, I stood and waited for my world to crash down around me. Funny thing, nothing happened. There weren’t any shocked looks. There weren’t any looks of disdain. Nothing.

After a few quiet seconds, Titus looked up from his computer, an utterly bored look on his face, and said, “Uh...yeah, we already knew that, dumbass. Way ahead of you. Question is—what are you going to do about it?” He sent a Titus smirk straight at me as he added, “I mean, I’m Mr. Cold-As-Ice with no emotions, but even I can figure out that you are fucking this whole ‘in love’ thing up. Should I draw you a diagram on how it is supposed to happen? A flow chart? A step-by-step computer program

that will, at the most, tell you exactly how to prove your love or, at the least, tell you whatnotto say...because you sure the hell don't have keeping your big mouth shut mastered as of yet."

"Titus! Stop being an ass," Ethan growled at his brother, but his eyes were still locked on mine.

"Just trying to fit in," Titus grumbled and then went straight back to whatever he was doing on the computer, like I hadn't just admitted the most monumental secret of my life.

"I think your brother just called all of us asses," Jeremiah said in a chipper voice.

Yeah, Mr. Matchmaker was as happy as a pig in slop with my revelation.

"Perhaps," Ethan agreed. "So, Gabriel? What do you intend to do about it?"

He crossed his arms over his chest and widened his stance. Uh oh. He was getting ready for an argument. Perfect. That was all I needed. Hell, maybe it was what I needed. Maybe I needed somebody to just talk me through the mess going on inside my head. Maybe, just maybe, Ethan, Jeremiah, and Titus could help me see that I was just talking bullshit. Karma wouldn't pull this shit on me. She owed it to Kelsey, not me.

I shrugged. "I don't have a clue. The only thing I do know is that whatever it is, I won't be doing it here. Uh...yeah...he won't come back. Hell, he might try to have me arrested again. Who knows?"

My eyes narrowed when Jeremiah abruptly walked out of the office but seconds later he was back, carrying an office chair. He plunked it down right behind me and then pressed down on my shoulders, pushing me to sit down. "There, babe. You looked

like you might be about to collapse at any moment and Heaven knows, Titus wasn't going to offer to get up and let you use the only chair in here." He frowned in Titus's direction but was totally ignored.

Ethan perched his ass on the edge of the desk, looked me square in the eye, and asked, "Did you do something that might get you arrested, Gabe?"

My blood pressure went from zero to stroke level in record time. How could he even suggest that? Did he honestly believe I raped Kelsey the first time? He must if he just asked me that question, right?

Grinding my teeth together, I hissed, "I did not rape him, if that's what you're asking."

Ethan frowned. "Of course that's not what I was asking, dumbass. I know you didn't rape him, this time or when you were fucking teenagers, Gabe. I know that. I know you. What I meant was did you do anything that would give him ammunition to use against you? Let's be honest, he's proven that he's capable of lying and not at all afraid to do so, even with the police. Did you fuck him? If you fucked him, he could always twist the facts like he did before."

I remembered the tear that stained Kelsey's face earlier. I remembered how he'd done exactly what I asked of him, even when it was painfully clear how hurt and humiliated it made him feel. I remembered the way those eyes looked at me—full of shame and hope. Why?

"Well? Did you? I need to know what we're up against," Ethan continued.

"No!" I took a deep breath and tried to soothe my soul. "No, Ethan," I answered more calmly. "I didn't fuck him. I wanted to. He acted like he wanted me to, but I didn't." Another deep breath. "I may have insulted him. Probably humiliated him. Tried my



damnedest to hurt his feelings.” Another breath—this one not as deep, because panic and shame were starting to set in. “Belittled him. Mocked him. Said things to make him feel small and worthless. Almost fucked him but then said I changed my mind because I didn’t really want him after all.”

“All right then. We’ve established you don’t know what the hell you’re doing in the love arena,” Ethan said. “I’ve heard what you’ve said, and I’m still standing firm on believing you just need to get him out of your system. You’re angry, we get that. You have every right to be angry. The mean things you are doing and saying stems from all the unsettled business between the two of you. On the one hand, you want him to be the boy you were in love with. On the other, you want to make him pay for hurting you so badly. I still feel confident that when you spend some time around him, both of those issues will resolve themselves and you will be able to move on...without Kelsey.”

“Why without Kelsey?” Jeremiah asked. “Why did you have to qualify it like that? You could have simply said that he needed to spend time with Kelsey in order to help him decide what his future looks like and whether or not Kelsey is in it.”

Jeremiah, ever the romantic, planted his hands on his hips and dared Ethan to argue with him. Titus snickered but never looked up. I contemplated throwing my body out the window and plunging to my death. Hell, maybe Ethan was right. Maybe my hate was keeping me from seeing things the way they really were. Maybe I didn’t really love Kelsey at all. I just needed a good old-fashioned purging to get him completely out of my system. Yeah, and maybe pigs would fly and Hell would freeze over, too.

I loved him and I knew it. How in the hell could that even be possible? After everything he’d done to me? Hating him should be easy. Getting my revenge should be a cake walk, but it simply wasn’t.

“What?” Ethan asked. “What are you thinking, Gabe?”

I shrugged, wanting the conversation to end. “I’m thinking it isn’t going to matter anyway. We won’t be seeing Kelsey down here at the plant, and I’m not sure he would ever let me back into his house again.” My head fell back and I stared at the ceiling, wondering how I let myself stoop so low that I would be here, doing what I’d done to Kelsey’s family. “I guess I could kidnap him, make him spend some time with me so we could finish up our old business and finally move on.”

“And he gets more and more brilliant with each word that comes out of his mouth,” Titus muttered.

“If a kidnapping is done properly, it can be very romantic,” Jeremiah said.

“You did not just say that,” Ethan gasped as he turned to look at his lover. “Please tell me you did not just say kidnapping was an acceptable form of courtship.”

“Oh, calm your ass down, I was just kidding,” Jeremiah countered. “Of course Gabe wasn’t really considering kidnapping. Jeez, Ethan, grow a sense of humor.”

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Sadly enough, I wasn't entirely sure I had been kidding. Kidnapping him and tying him to my bed wouldn't be at the bottom of my list of favorite things to do. Fuck, at this rate, he really would have me arrested before all this was finished and this time, I'd deserve it. I'd dodged a bullet ten years ago, only to walk straight back into the line of fire on my own accord.

A knock at the door interrupted anymore of our useless conversation. We were going around and around and regardless of what anybody said, I knew I was in love with Kelsey. I also knew it didn't make one damned bit of sense and would end badly for me, but I was in love. The ache in my heart had never really gone away.

One of the workers stuck his head in the door after Ethan barked out a rude "Enter!" Clearly, it hadn't bothered the guy standing outside my new office. He looked as bored as fuck and sounded even worse when he said, "Uh...yeah...two of the simplex machines are down and I don't have anybody to fix them. What do you want us to do?"

What in the hell was a simplex machine?

The guy kept looking in the other direction. I assumed he was looking down onto the production floor, but I guessed he could also be looking for a weapon to kill us all with. Neither idea would surprise me—not after what I'd done.

"Who can fix the machines? Don't you have a mechanic on the floor today?" Titus asked quickly. "Those simplex machines have to run. Our biggest orders are in simplex. The military contracts that Kelsey bid on are all for simplex. Call in a mechanic if you don't have one scheduled today."

The guy rolled his eyes. “Wayne laid them all off. We don’t have any knitting mechanics left and I seriously doubt you could convince any of them to come back. Should I just shut the rest of them off and send the crew home?”

“Uh...no? We can’t send the crew home. Orders are sparse; we can’t be poor performers on the few we have in-house.”

This time, the guy barked out a disgusted laugh. “Yeah, okay. Maybe you could take your suit jacket off, roll up your delicate, white sleeves, and look it over yourself? How does that sound?”

It sounded like the guy was being a total smartass. It also sounded like Titus felt it was highly important that the simplex, whatever the hell they were, needed to be in operation if I was ever going to dig myself out of this mess I’d jumped headlong into. Well, shit.

The guy glanced down at the production floor again and a smile spread across his face. “Oh, nevermind. Kelsey’s here. He can take care of it.” He waved a hand in our direction. “Go back to doing whatever you were doing. The machines will be up and running in no time at all.”

The door shut in our faces and I sat there, my head tilted to one side, telling myself there was absolutely no way humanly possible I heard him correctly. Kelsey wasn’t here...not after how I acted this morning. And yesterday. A strange, excited feeling caused my stomach to flip-flop when faced with the opportunity of getting to see Kelsey again.

“I thought you said....”

“Yeah, I did say he wouldn’t be back. I can’t believe he’s here.”

“Well, well,” Titus said quietly. “This should be fun to watch.”

I stood up and started toward the door.

“Here we go,” Ethan muttered. “Fire in the hole.”

### Chapter 8

#### Kelsey

It felt strange walking into the plant that I'd spent the last four years of my life working in—a plant that I hated. Sure, I loved the people working at the mill, excluding my immediate family, of course, but I hated the job. I hated it, because it forever tied me to the people I didn't respect or love. Yet, I'd done it, walked in the plant every fucking day and fought like hell to keep my head above water and the plant in the black. Apparently, I'd succeeded in neither of those things because the plant was bought right out from under us without anybody having the first clue and because my head was way below water. I was drowning.

My chest ached. My breathing was difficult. My head felt dizzy. My fucking heart? It soared, the stupid, dumb fuck.

Because of my heart, I had walked back into the plant I hated, with hope blooming in a spot that I thought to be dead. Gabriel Maverick. He was the reason I spent the last four years working in my family's mill and he was the reason I was back. Sadly enough, the last four years were due to the pathetic fact that I wanted to make sure he could find me if he ever took the notion to come looking. It was why I still lived in Trenton Falls. In my warped, fucked-up mind, I had to know that I'd made it as easy as possible for him find me if he ever decided to forgive me.

Well...he was here. He'd found me. He hadn't, however, forgiven me. With all the time that passed, I could only assume now that he couldn't forgive me. Gabriel, my Gabriel, was here to punish me. So, here I was, ready to take my punishment. What

he didn't know was that I punished myself every fucking day for the past ten years. I hated myself. I hated what I'd done—what I'd said. I deserved whatever he wanted to dish out. Hell, for all I knew, he'd returned to Trenton Falls to kill me, there was that much hate in his eyes when he looked at me, that was for certain. That was okay, too. Been there, tried to do that. He could bring it the fuck on. Maybe he could succeed where I'd failed.

I pushed open the plant doors and saw two new security guards planted a few feet away. For a split second, I thought they were going to toss me out, but they simply nodded in my direction. I took that as a green light to keep going. The second thing I noticed was there wasn't nearly as much machine noise as there should be. Machines were down. Just like they were every fucking morning when I punched in. Perfect.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Travis scampering across the catwalk, a skip in his step that made me want to groan out loud. He was headed in my direction at warp speed, which meant absolutely nothing good was coming my way. I could only imagine what he'd been saying to the new owners. The guy had absolutely zero filters on his mouth.

"Mornin', boss!" he bellowed about ten yards away. "You never come in late. Did you get laid last night? Please tell me you got laid. You need something to loosen your tight ass up a little."

I felt a blush creep up my neck and not stop until my entire face blazed. I didn't have to look up on the catwalk to know Gabriel was standing up there, overhearing every word Travis said...unless, of course, I was lucky and he'd mysteriously lost his hearing since he left my house that morning. Since I wasn't lucky, I felt entirely safe assuming my ex-lover heard each and every word and was probably dying laughing at me right about now.

Well, I'd known this wouldn't be easy. If it was easy, it sure the hell wouldn't be in

my life.

“Filters, Travis,” I reprimanded when he finally stood in front of me. “We’ve talked about it. You can’t just say whatever the fuck pops into your head.”

“Yes, I can. I just did and that cute little blush on your cheeks kind of made it all worthwhile, boss. What can I say? I like tormenting the helpless.”

I wanted to argue that I wasn’t helpless, and the blush wasn’t cute, but it would only begin a conversation I didn’t need or want to have with Travis. No, I needed to move on to the immediate problem at hand—my machines weren’t running. I paused. No, Gabriel’s machines weren’t running. Admitting that should bother me, but it didn’t.

He was home.Finally.

Sure, he might be back only to punish me and make my life a living hell, like it wasn’t already the classical definition of hell, but he washere. I would call that a victory on my playing field.

“What’s going on, Travis? Why are the simplex machines down? You know that’s our most important order right now.” Pretty much our only order, but no need to mention that, I supposed.

“Two machines broke down late last night. The fixer couldn’t do anything with them, so he left them sitting until you got here. Mackie said he tried to call you, but nobody answered.” He frowned and scratched his chin. “You always answer your cell, boss. Why not last night? At first, I thought the rumors about the new owners firing you might be true, but now, since you’re here, I’m back to the other possibility—you were getting laid.”

Oh, how times had changed. It might have been ten years ago, but it still felt like just



yesterday that I would have been terrified of anybody finding out I was gay. The only time I hadn't been afraid was when I'd been with Gabriel. Then, because of my own cowardice and stupidity, Gabriel had left me and I'd been forced to deal with my homosexuality by myself. If I had a dollar for every bruise I'd gotten over the years, nobody would have been able to come in and swipe the company out from under us. I'd be a rich man. As it was, nobody was paying for bruises, I was poor, and, oh yeah, someone had actually swiped the company right out from under us. And I couldn't find it in myself to give a fuck...at least not about the company.

I chose to ignore Travis' inappropriate comment and focus on the clusterfuck in simplex. "If two machines went down, why aren't the rest of them running? We have twelve machines. Last time I checked, that meant I still had ten machines that could be making us some money." I looked Travis in the eyes and asked, "Want to explain that one to me?"

He shrugged. "Simple mathematics, boss. We took a vote this morning and decided that we didn't like the new fuckers upstairs and if you weren't here any longer, we didn't want to be either. None of us wanted to put up with Wayne's bullshit and we don't want to put up with new guy's bullshit, either."

Travis was being an idiot—a loyal idiot, but an idiot. "We've had this discussion before, Travis. You've got a wife and two little babies to take care of. It doesn't matter if we like the guys upstairs or not, they sign the paychecks, so give them some respect." The headache that had grown substantially since my pathetic crying last night was getting worse with each passing second. "We don't have to like it, but we have to do our jobs. End of story. Now go start up the other machines while I work on the two that are down. I need you to be an example for the other employees, Travis." I frowned and then corrected what I'd said. "I need you to be a good example to the other employees."

Travis' eyes narrowed. He wasn't buying my feeble attempt to get him off the subject

of me getting laid. His persistence would have been nothing more than annoying if a spark of alarm hadn't exploded in my body when I caught a glimpse of Gabriel coming down the stairs.

I wasn't ready for this. I hadn't been ready yesterday. I hadn't been ready this morning. I wasn't fucking ready now.

Travis wrapped an arm around my neck and tugged me close to him. "Hey, is what they are saying about you and new owner true? Did y'all used to be lovers?"

How in the hell did that get out? When we'd been younger, we'd thought we were being so careful—that nobody had known about us. Suddenly, it felt like the entire world knew our secret. Which meant, of course, that everybody knew I'd gotten dumped when Gabriel skipped town. To everybody else, it probably looked like I'd been the one done wrong, but I knew the truth. Oh, and Wayne. Of course, that fucker knew the truth, and there wasn't much else in the world that he enjoyed more than throwing it back up in my face. He would laugh and laugh when he explained how quick Gabriel high-tailed it out of town when he'd heard what I'd said about him.

I didn't care what folks thought about me. It had taken years, but I finally managed to move past that piece of insecurity that once ruled my entire universe. What I didn't want were people like Travis not liking Gabriel because they believed he'd done something wrong. It was all on me and everybody needed to know that. It was the least I could do.

I tried to carefully choose my answer. I didn't even know if Gabriel wanted people to know he was gay. I sure as fuck didn't know if he wanted anybody to know he'd ever been involved with me. "That's none of your business, Travis. Keep thoughts like that to yourself, okay?" When he frowned at me, I added, "Let's just say that Gabriel is a good man. He'll be a good leader of this company. Whatever bad blood exists between him and me is there solely because of me. Got it?"

Travis' frowned deepened. "Are you telling me to back my shit down, boss? To treat the new boss man with kid gloves because I might hurt his feelings over whatever the hell history you two share? To maybe let him get away with talking shit about you because of some idiotic shit you did when you were around sixteen years old?" He stepped even closer to me. "Because if you are, you might as well get prepared to be pissed at me and the rest of the guys. We're all Team Kelsey."

Gabriel had reached the production floor and was only a few yards away from us. I knew this because I could see him out of the corner of my eye and because every nerve in my body suddenly went on high alert...with little alarms going off, warning me of an upcoming confrontation.

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“Travis, don’t be an asshole,” I warned. “You need this job. Your family needs your paycheck. This isn’t a game and you damned well don’t need to be picking teams. We’re all on the same team.”

I could tell I might as well have been talking to a wall. His shit-eating grin was in place. I was in trouble. Travis was going to be in trouble. Shit.

And now more trouble was two feet away from both of us.

“Travis said you would be able to get the machines up and running again, Kelsey. Titus says the simplex machines are the most important right now, so it’s pretty urgent.” Gabe took a deep breath and added, “I wanted to let both of you know that we have Barb calling all the mechanics back in, and they’ll hopefully be ready to start back to work no later than Wednesday of this week.” He paused. “Well, at least the ones we didn’t lose to other jobs.”

First of all, I found myself surprised that Gabriel knew Travis’s name because I was almost certain it wasn’t Travis who shared it with him since he was...uh, yeah, Team Kelsey. Secondly, I was pleasantly surprised that one of his first actions at the helm of Morganston Textiles was to try and get at least some of the employees on layoff back to work again. Of course, that was probably because he didn’t want to have me around any longer than absolutely necessary.

“Sure. It won’t be a problem,” I finally answered, hating myself for sounding so fucking breathless when answering a stupid manufacturing question. I knew it was something I would just have to get accustomed to because whenever Gabriel was around, I struggled to breathe. Then, in a moment of stupidity, I added, “Sorry I was

late this morning, sir. I got...distracted.”

For a few enjoyable moments, I literally floated on air as I watched a faint blush stain his cheeks. A quiet gasp escaped his lips, and I could see his heart trying to punch out of the cage of his chest cavity. I’d just convinced myself that I hadn’t been mistaken earlier that morning when I’d thought he was looking at me like he still wanted me. His next words slammed that fucking door shut.

“Well...I’m sure it won’t happen again. Mistakes aren’t worth repeating. Let’s get those machines running again. If Titus understands your production schedule, the simplex order is due to ship to the customer in two weeks, and we aren’t even halfway finished knitting it yet.”

“Yes. Of course,” I answered, feeling like the biggest fool of all.

“Oh, and Kelsey, your desk is in my office upstairs—Wayne’s old office. After you get the machines running again, you need to come up so we can review your new responsibilities.” He turned to walk away and then turned back to me. “Don’t keep me waiting.”

I opened my mouth to respond and then slammed it shut again. There was absolutely no reason whatsoever for me to keep allowing stupid shit to fall right out of my mouth. Pride and confidence were never my strong suit and both had just taken a blow straight to the balls. Going forward, I would just keep my mouth shut and my head down. Whatever Gabriel had planned for me, I would take it. I’d earned it. The stupid-ass fucker inside of me kept whispering, ‘maybe he’ll take you back then.’

“Asshole,” Travis grumbled, just loud enough to make sure Gabriel heard his comment.

“I heard that!” Gabriel called without looking back at us.

“I meant for you to,” Travis called out in a sing-song voice that proved my point that he didn’t have one filter in place and would eventually end up losing his job. I’d had some control over Wayne when it came to who he let go and who he kept. I clearly had no control over Gabriel. Nothing. Everything we’d once shared was nothing more than a memory in my heart that wouldn’t fucking go away.

Three hours later, my head was pounding and my arms and hands were coated in a thick layer of machine grease. My back ached from bending over the machine for entirely too long and my thighs were quivering from the strain. Oh, and I was starved since I’d missed breakfast and lunch didn’t look like it would happen anytime soon. I’d put off going upstairs and facing Gabriel for as long as I could without it looking too obvious. I stood up and arched my back, stretching the aching muscles.

“You got it from here, Travis?” I asked. He’d been hovering nearby the entire time, switching from watching me to watching the catwalk above us. I’d refused to even glimpse in that direction. If I had, I would probably have lost a finger or two in one of the machines I was working on.

I nearly yelped when I felt someone wrap their arms around me and squeeze tightly. Hot breath tickled the back of my ear and I heard a male voice whisper, “Don’t panic, boss. It’s just me. Listen, I don’t know a hell of a lot about how you boys get nasty in the bedroom, but I’ve got some ideas on how the mechanics work. I’m just gonna hold you tight and do a little bumping and grinding on your ass, okay? Don’t go getting the wrong idea or anything.”

What. The. Fuck.

“Yeah, I’m having a difficult time figuring out what the right idea might be, Travis. What the hell are you doing? Oh, and if you don’t take your hands off me in about two seconds, I’m going to kick your ass. That’s how I get nasty on the production floor when somebody pulls an HR nightmare on my ass.”

Travis laughed softly but didn't let go. "First of all, you couldn't kick my ass if your very life depended on it. Secondly, the right idea is to make the new owner jealous. He's been pacing that catwalk like a hungry lion caged right next to the tasty-looking gazelle. I'm not lying to you, man, his eyes have been locked on your ass the entire time."

The thought thrilled me, even though I knew it shouldn't. Travis was mistaken. Like he'd said, he didn't understand the nasty that went on in the bedroom for guys like me. The look in Gabriel's eyes was hate, not lust.

"Okay, let me clarify. If you don't take your hands off me, Jax will kick your ass."

Just as I suspected, he stepped away immediately, holding his hands up like I'd just pulled a gun on him.

"Don't be tossing around hostile threats like that, boss. I was only trying to help. Jealous fucking is awesome between men and women. It's got to be the same for guy-on-guy action, right?"

I turned around and said, "You couldn't sound more stupid right now if your very life depended on it, Travis. You touching me is not going to make Gabriel jealous, trust me. Not only can I not make Gabriel jealous, but there isn't going to be any guy-on-guy action with him either. Just drop it." I started to walk away and then added, "Please, Travis. Drop it."

Travis huffed out a curse word and answered, "I don't like how he looks at you, boss. I don't like what I heard about him. Hell, I don't like a damned thing about him, and I don't think there's anything you can do to change my mind. It's my job on the line, not yours. Stop worrying about me, okay? I can handle myself."

"I can too, Travis. I don't need a knight in shining armor to defend my honor here.

Let it go.”

“We’ll see.” His eyes looked toward the catwalk again. “Either way, I think you need to hurry up. His Royal Highness doesn’t look like he’s going to return to his throne until you join him.”

“Keep the machines in operation. They don’t shut down for anything, not even breaks. Stagger the schedule so somebody is available to keep them running around the clock. We’re behind schedule and this is the fabric we submitted for those military contracts we bid on. We can’t afford to fumble. Those military contracts are the only hope for this company’s survival.”

“Got it, boss.” His eyes strayed upward again and this time, he offered a mock salute to Gabriel. To me, he said, “If you need help, yell. He might be big, but Jax is bigger. I’ll put his number on speed dial.”

I laughed. “For a minute, I thought you were going to volunteer to race upstairs to my rescue. I should have known you would call in Jax for that shit.” I shook my head and started toward the bathroom to try and clean up. I’d already started the morning off like shit, facing Gabriel in nothing but my underwear. I didn’t want to be covered in machine grease for the second encounter.

Inside the bathroom, I squirted some Cherry Bomb onto my palms and started scrubbing with vigor. My hands, with years of experience, worked around the wide leather bracelets encircling each wrist. This morning, with Gabriel back in town, the bracelets stood out even more brazenly than normal. They were thick, starting at the base of my hand and going about four inches up my arm. They were locked on with a small lock...which I didn’t hold the key to. The tiny latch, made of platinum, was strong but not so strong that I couldn’t remove them if I ever took a notion. Their significance was more visual than anything.



As clean as I was going to get, I finally quit scrubbing and dried my hands and arms. One glance in the mirror told me I looked as horrible as I suspected I looked. Exhausted. Lost. Dark circles under my eyes. Bloodshot eyes. All in all, a shitty look. Not the way I'd looked in all my fantasies of when Gabriel returned home to me. Fuck it. How I looked didn't matter. To me or Gabriel.

I tossed the paper towel in the overflowing trash and made a mental note to clean the restrooms before I went home for the day. Yeah, Wayne dismissed the cleaning crew about six months ago too. I'd been cleaning them since then. I didn't feel comfortable asking the remaining employees to take on more responsibilities without more pay just because Wayne needed to add a fucking swimming pool. Anyway, Jax said staying busy was good for my mental strength, so I stayed busy. Cleaning the restrooms helped keep me focused on something other than how shitty my life was.

### Chapter 9

I knocked on the door and stepped inside the office that Wayne used to visit for a total of about eight full hours a week, spread out over seven days. Wayne wasn't much of a worker. He excelled at spending money, not earning it.

Several sets of eyes turned in my direction. Ethan, the man with Gabriel yesterday during the meeting, was there. Another man, about the same build as Ethan and Gabriel but with the warmest chocolate eyes I'd ever seen in my life, stood next to Ethan. A smaller man with delicate features sat behind Wayne's old desk, typing on a computer. He didn't bother looking up when I walked in. Gabriel was sitting in my rickety chair with his feet propped up on my desk, looking all arrogant and ready for a fight. Perfect.

"You wanted to see me, Mr. Maverick?" I asked politely, not at all sure how he wanted me to address him. How much did these guys know about our history? More importantly, what was Gabriel's relationship with each of them? I mean, I knew their names and they were all friends with Gabriel, but I didn't know how friendly they were with him.

The room remained deathly quiet. The only noise was the continuous pecking on the laptop keyboard. I was confident the delicate-featured guy was Titus. He was Ethan's brother, according to what I'd heard on the grapevine. My eyes flickered across the room, feeling like a total fool. I supposed that was Gabriel's intent, though.

Finally, Jeremiah, Ethan's lover, crossed the room with his hand extended. "Nice to meet you, Kelsey. I'm Jeremiah. Gabriel's friend."

I shook his hand, remembering how Ethan refused to shake my hand yesterday. From his permanent perch on Wayne's desk, it didn't look like he was going to offer his hand today either.

Not having a clue what to say, I simply smiled, nodded, and shook his hand. Following that pathetic burst of conversation, the room grew quiet again. Jeremiah laughed nervously.

"Your desk will remain in here, Kelsey. I need to be able to keep an eye on your performance. Do you have a problem with that?" Gabriel barked.

Oh yeah, he was sporting for a fight. He wouldn't get one from me.

"No problem at all, sir. I do have several responsibilities on the production floor, but a lot of my time is spent sorting paperwork, as well." I sounded like a complete idiot.

Another uncomfortable silence fell across the room as I waited for Gabriel to tell me what to do. When he didn't say anything, Titus spoke up and asked, "Do you know the major holders of debt against us and how long the debt's been outstanding? We need to get our payables taken care of so vendors will start shipping to us again. We also need to know the details of the immediate orders that require fulfillment and payments due us. Is any of that easily accessible, Kelsey?"

"I have the details of the open and pending orders on my computer, but the details of debt fell in Wayne's area of...expertise. Maybe Barb or Courtney has access to those files," I suggested as I tried to open my laptop while standing in the doorway. It wasn't an easy task, especially with my hands shaking. "We also bid on a military contract but haven't heard anything about the status of the bid yet. We've never been a prime supplier to the military, so I doubt our odds are good at being awarded the contract, but as far as I know, the contract still hasn't been awarded to another contractor yet."

That seemed to grab Gabe's attention. "Do you have the paperwork for that? I'd like to look it over."

"Sure. Let me go grab it," I answered. Before anybody could argue, I ran back down the stairs, realized my desk was up in Gabe's office, and then turned around to go back up the staircase. As I rounded the corner, I heard Ethan saying he didn't trust me. Of course, he didn't. Why would he? I made as much noise as possible before entering the office again. "Uh...yeah...it's in my desk. I forgot you'd brought it up." I crossed the room, opened the third drawer, and pulled out the folder holding all the military contract information in it. "Here it is." I handed the file to Gabe.

He jerked it up and started scanning the paperwork like he might actually know what he was looking at. I doubted it, military paperwork was ridiculous to try and understand. Just because he'd served in the military didn't mean he'd understand the ins-and-outs of their contracts for protective fabrics. It only took a few seconds to realize just how wrong I was. Gabe's face lit up like a Christmas tree.

"Look, Ethan," he said as he handed one of the sheets of the contract to his friend. "Any chance you recognize a name?" He grinned. "Because I do," he added as his smile grew even wider.

Ethan's face mimicked Gabe's. "As a matter of fact, I do. Let me go make a phone call," he said as he took the paper and started to leave the office.

From behind the desk, Titus said, "You realize that's against the law, right? Colluding with the contracting officer in order to get business," he explained, just in case everybody in the room hadn't understood exactly what he was referring to.

Gabe snorted. "Well, it sure as hell won't be the first law I've ever broken." His eyes cut around to glare at me.

Whatever the hell he meant by that, I'd never know. I most certainly didn't intend to ask.

"Let's go see what I can find out," Ethan said, completely unfazed by Titus's comment about collusion. "I'll be back...hopefully with good news. This guy owes us. Big time."

When Ethan left, the room grew silent again. Uncomfortably silent. I hated the quiet. It allowed me to hear the thoughts in my head and that was never a good thing. Ever.

Jeremiah broke the silence. "I love your bracelets, Kelsey. Are those handmade? They're exquisite."

Silence! Silence would be much better than the path Jeremiah just started down. I immediately felt my hands start to shake and then my right hand automatically started twisting the soft leather wrapped around my left wrist. Frozen in terror, I hadn't even realized Jeremiah had gotten up until he stood right in front of me and reached for my hand. All my instincts screamed that I jerk my hand back, but the tenderness of his touch and the softness in his brown eyes allowed me to remain perfectly still as he inspected Jax's handiwork.

"Absolutely beautiful," he murmured. I watched as a slight frown caused his eyes to squint. "They're locked on? You have a key, I hope," he commented as he looked away from the leather and into my eyes.

I tried to come up with something, anything, but my voice was lost. No, I didn't possess the key. Jax held the one and only key, but there was no way I was ready to explain my relationship with Jax. Loud voices coming from somewhere down the hall caused me to jerk my hand away from Jeremiah. Ethan's security detail demanded that someone stop, and then there was something that sounded a lot like a growl, followed by a heavy thump against the wall. Jeremiah and Gabe started toward the

door before I could do anything to acknowledge I recognized the voices. This was sonotwhat I fucking needed to add to my day.

Neither of them made it to door before it burst open, nearly coming loose from the hinges from the force of it slamming against the wall. Jax and Evie barreled inside the tight confines of the office, obviously locked and loaded for battle. Ethan was hot on their heels but instead of confronting the two intruders, he whipped past them and didn't stop until he'd positioned himself between them and Jeremiah. Gabe, I noticed, stood in the doorway, blocking anybody's exit. Fuck. Things just went from bad to worse.

This was just what I needed—Jax and Evie ready for combat in their efforts to protect me. Personally, I felt like I was doing damned fine on my own, even if I knew they wouldn't agree with that assessment. I'd been in the room with Gabe for nearly twenty minutes and I hadn't disintegrated into a pile of cowardly ashes. I knew being near Gabe was not only stupid but incredibly dangerous to my mental stability, but I didn't give a fuck. Jax and Evie, on the other hand, would definitely give a fuck. From the look on Jax's face, he was planning on giving more than a fuck. What was he even doing here? He was supposed to be hundreds of miles away and not scheduled to return for another couple of weeks.

Evie looked like a smug mother-bitch. She'd known Jax was coming back. Fuck, this was going to end very badly if I didn't do something to intervene.

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“Who the fuck are you?” Ethan growled, all in alpha mode and ready to protect those he loved.

“None of your goddamned concern, asshole,” Jax answered, his voice barely recognizable while in his snarling-mode.

His eyes were glittering with fury as he turned his head and locked eyes with Gabriel. Jax loved me in his own way. I knew he thought he was doing the right thing. Hell, kicking Gabriel’s ass might very well be the right thing, but it felt all wrong to me.

He made one step in Gabe’s direction, and I finally regained my ability to move, speak, and protect the man I used to love. Who the fuck was I kidding? I’d never stopped loving Gabriel Maverick. I guessed I never would, even when he clearly hated me.

“Jax, stop!” I ordered as I stepped right in front of Jax, blocking him from taking a step in Gabe’s direction. His giant body quivered in frustration...but he stopped.

With a tormented look on his face, he looked down at me and said, “What are you doing here, Smurf? Why are you doing this to yourself?” His eyes darted toward Gabe and he growled, “You shouldn’t let that piece of shit anywhere near you.”

Smurf? Was he serious right now? He did not just call me Smurf in front of Gabe. I wanted to die of humiliation, but knew I wouldn’t get that lucky. No, the good Lord would leave me standing right where I was, basking in a hell of my own making.

“Let’s step outside, Jax.” I grabbed Jax’s arm and tried to tug him from the room. I

would have had a better chance of tugging the Titanic than moving Jax's muscular body when it didn't want to be moved. I looked at Evie, silently begging for help, but she was too busy sending 'fuck-you' daggers at Gabe. I looked behind me and saw Gabriel looked more than ready to go head to head with Jax, which was stupid. Jax was not only a fucking brickhouse of sheer muscle, he was one of the top MMA fighters on the circuit. When Jax didn't budge, I said, "Please, Jax. For me."

"You fuck with what's mine, and you're a dead man! You understand me, Maverick?" Jax told Gabe before storming out of the office, dragging me along with him.

Once in the hallway, he pushed me against the wall and used his body to block any escape I might have considered. Jax did that, used his size to his advantage, whether it was to intimidate an opponent, annihilate someone in the ring, or calm me when I'd done stupid-ass shit in the past. He clearly thought any interactions with Gabe would be considered stupid-ass shit on my part, which would make me fair game for his protectiveness. He could be right, but a heart wanted what a heart wanted and mine wanted Gabe. I hoped it could settle for forgiveness from him.

Jax's hand wrapped around my neck as he rested his forehead up against mine and just leaned there against me, holding my neck in a way that always calmed my aching nerves. We'd done this so many times in the past, when I thought I couldn't handle my lonely world any longer and my ever-present darkness tried to creep past my defenses. Jax and Evie. Evie and Jax. They were always there for me, ready to catch me when I started to fall. Evie offered me her tenacious spirit and pure love. Jax offered me his strength, resolve, and unconditional love. Without them in my life, I would be in a grave somewhere, totally forgotten by everyone I'd left behind.

For the briefest of moments, I simply enjoyed the calming effect Jax's touch had on me. The warmth. The strength. The love. All those things, yes, but nothing more. My relationship with Jax and Evie was friendship, the deepest kind, but only friendship.



There was nothing sexual between the three of us, never had been and never would be. For so many years, they'd been the rocks I'd clung to when the storm raged. Hell, the leather bracelets around my wrists were reminders of the powerful influence they'd had on me.

I felt different now, though. I didn't feel weak...or lost...or like I was dangling on a ledge, wanting to let go more than I wanted to hang on. For the first time in years, I felt like I might be able to grow a fucking backbone, and I knew why. I knew where my newfound strength came from and it was Gabe. No, I couldn't explain it since Gabe had made it abundantly clear he hated me, but whatever I was feeling, it was true. While Evie and Jax offered me their strength to lean on, Gabe offered me something else. He always had. Even as teenagers, he'd been my aphrodisiac, and not just sexual. He'd heightened all my senses, empowering me enough to think I could stand on my own.

"What are you doing here, Jax?" I whispered. "You're supposed to be out of town." From the corner of my eye, I saw that Gabe and his crew had left the office and were standing only a few feet away from where Jax had me pinned to the wall. Gabe looked ready to do...something and Ethan was holding him back. Evie, God bless her, was pulling another Ethan and standing between us and them, more than ready to do battle. I didn't need an audience, but it looked like I had one anyway.

"No, Smurf," Jax answered. "What are you doing here? You know better." He backed away just a fraction so he could look me in the eyes. "Why would you do this to yourself? You owe him nothing!"

He was right, I owed Gabe nothing. He'd left me and apparently had done it without ever looking back...never giving me a chance to explain. I owed Jax and Evie everything. I owed them my very life. I knew all this, but none of it mattered where Gabe was involved. When he was near, my ability to make reasonable decisions obviously flew out the window.

“I know I don’t owe him anything,” I answered, unsure of what else I could possibly say that would explain why I allowed myself to be tortured just so I could be near Gabe again. “It’ll be okay, Jax. Trust me.”

The saddest expression crossed Jax’s face as he gazed down at me. After a few seconds, he dropped his hand and gently took my wrist. With the tip of his finger, he traced a path along the soft leather of one of my bracelets and said, “I can’t, Smurf. I can’t trust you.” He brought the leather up to his lips and kissed the spot that covered the inside of my wrist. “These bracelets make you mine, kid. Just as sure as if you had a collar around your neck, this leather on your wrist makes you my responsibility. I can’t let you stay here, Kels.”

“What he does is none of your fucking business!” Gabe growled from where he was standing. Then, as if he realized what he’d said and how it might be interpreted, he added, “The company needs him here.” He took a step in Jax’s direction and continued, “But we don’t need you here. Get out.”

Jax looked at me and I silently begged him to stand down. He knew how much Gabe meant to me. He also knew how badly Gabe had hurt me when he’d left...what his leaving led to. If I didn’t get Jax and Evie out of the vicinity of Gabriel Maverick, things were going to end badly, and I guess since I was obviously a masochist, I didn’t want things to end...good or bad.

Jax turned to Gabriel. “You gonna make me, little man? Oh, wait, you only pick on people smaller than you, right? I forgot.”

Jax was poised to fight. I could see how badly he wanted it. He’d wanted it for years. Glancing at Gabe, I saw he was just as motivated to tangle with Jax...which was stupid.

“Stop it, Jax! Birthday!” My voice echoed through the hall and Jax tensed in

frustration. My safe word—he wouldn't ignore it, even if we weren't involved in a scene. Evie turned and glared in my direction. Like her brother, she was sporting for a physical fight and knew her opportunity to enjoy one just dwindled into not-a-chance.

"I'm staying," I told them in a tone I hoped made them realize there was no changing my mind. "We'll talk about it when I get home tonight." Looking at Jax, I said, "Please pick me up at the regular time."

Relief washed over me when I saw Jax's body relax. I'd bought some time. Jax, no matter how disappointed he was with my decision, would leave me to it, and Evie would obey her brother. It didn't, however, surprise me when he gave Gabe one more parting shot before he left.

"It's gonna happen, Maverick. You and me. Kelsey won't always be around to protect you. I've waited a long time to make you pay for hurting him. Hopefully, I won't have to wait much longer." Following that promise, he spun around and barreled his large body down the hallway, toward the exit. He hadn't made it three steps before Titus, oblivious to everything that just happened, stepped through his office door...right into the path of a very mad Jax.

Titus's full attention was focused on whatever document he held in his hand, and he didn't know he was in the way until it was too late. Jax's muscle-bound body collided with Titus' slender frame with enough force to knock Titus into the next calendar week...or at least the hard floor. Instead of the floor, though, Titus ended up wrapped in Jax's arms, safe from any harm. "Easy, Fireball," Jax murmured quietly as he looked down at Titus. "Watch where you're going or you might end up somewhere...different than you're accustomed to." After those softly spoken words, Jax settled him back into a standing position and disappeared down the hall toward the exit.

Ethan growled. Literally growled in Jax's direction but, thankfully, made no move to

pursue my savior.

I recognized the huskier sound of Jax's voice and knew his encounter with Titus had been...enjoyable to him. Looking at the dazed expression on Titus's face, the feeling might very well have been mutual. Poor Titus. He had absolutely no idea of what he would get himself involved with if he traveled down the Jax-path.

"Where in the fuck is the security detail?" Ethan hissed in fury. "Malcolm! Get the fuck in here! Now!" He started pacing the length of the hall, his head looking in the direction Jax had disappeared down every few seconds. "I'll kill that son of a bitch for threatening my friend and brother. Kill him. Dead. And I'll fucking enjoy it."

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Ethan was mumbling almost incoherently, but I could make out most of the words. Jeremiah looked incredibly worried as he watched his lover try to control his fury. Gabe...myGabe had eyes only for me. There was nothing but disgust and hate swirling in those gray depths. Stormy. The color of his eyes reminded me of a nasty storm on the horizon and all the dangers accompanying that storm were directed straight at me. I lifted my chin and dared him to give me everything he felt, all the anger and hate. I deserved it. I'd waited on it for years, always hoping his anger would eventually drive him back to me.

A large man stumbled down the hall, holding the side of his head like he was afraid it might tumble off his shoulders at any given second. I recognized him as the security detail for the front door. Malcolm, I guessed. At the moment, I feared more for Malcolm than I did for myself. Not only had he gotten clocked by Jax, but he was about to get his ass handed to him by Ethan. As best I could tell, his was the only luck worse than mine.

"Sorry, sir," Malcolm muttered as he flexed his jaw, checking for breaks, no doubt. "That guy was...was...hell, boss, that guy had some moves I've never seen before."

Ethan crossed his arms over his chest in frustration. "Do I need to remind you that you were a Navy Seal less than two years ago, Mal? Moves you haven't seen? You have more ways of killing a man than Crayola has colors of crayons! What the fuck happened?"

Jeremiah stepped up. "Calm down, Ethan. Everyone is fine," he snapped irritably. Then, with a faint blush, he looked at Malcolm and said, "I mean...you are fine, aren't you, Mal? Nothing serious, right?"

“Nothing serious,” the security man answered with a blush of his own. “Except for my pride. It may never recover.”

“It shouldn’t!” Ethan thundered. “He touched my brother, Mal! My brother!”

“Shut the fuck up, Ethan,” Titus interrupted with an extra bite to his voice. “I enjoyed it. He’s hotter than hot.” Turning to me, he said, “No offense, of course.”

“None taken.” Let them all believe I belonged to Jax. What did I care? Gabe no longer wanted me.

“Let’s just move past this,” Gabe growled as he took one step in my direction. “Add extra security to the exits with automatic lock doors where we have to buzz people in.” Looking into my eyes, he added, “That will keep him out, won’t it, Kels? You wouldn’t want yourboyfriendfucked up, would you?”

I snorted. Like they could hurt Jax. “If Jax wants in, he’ll get in. I’ll do what I can to make him understand he isn’t welcome here, but he’s just worried about me.” When Gabe’s eyes darkened, I quickly added, “I’ll explain everything to him tonight. He’s not...he’s not my...”

“You won’t explain anything tonight. You’re working late. Date night will have to be cancelled. Sorry, kiddo,” Gabe countered with a deadly smirk, daring me to defy him.

“I can’t work tonight, Gabe. I have plans. Sorry.” I did have plans and they did involve Jax, but it was nothing like Gabe was imagining.

Gabe took a step closer. We were only inches apart. As I inhaled his scent...felt his body heat, my body responded like a drug addict to his favorite drug. It wasn’t until I felt my eyelids fluttering that I realized how horrible a job I was doing at trying to hide my reaction to him. My eyes snapped open and I retorted, “Not tonight, Gabriel.

I'm busy. Anyway, there's nothing to do. If the machines go down, they'll call me and I'll come in. Other than that, we're dead in the water until we hear about the military contract."

"You're working," Gabe growled.

"He isn't," Barbara hissed. She knew exactly what I did every single Thursday of my life and she wasn't about to allow anyone to interfere with it. "He said he has plans. Back off."

Titus cleared his throat and said, "Actually, there is a lot of planning that needs to be done." He looked at Gabe, then me, and said, "The military contract was awarded to Morganston Textiles a half hour ago. They'll be placing their first order by the end of the day and from what they are telling me, the contract is going to be front-loaded, so we're about to be head-over-ass busy."

"Front-loaded? What does that mean?" Gabe asked.

"Military contracts are normally issued for three-to-five years in length. They list a minimum and maximum the military plans to order. Front-loaded means they are going to probably order the maximum quantities during this first year and they're going to want delivery accelerated," I answered. Excitement bubbled through my veins. This was my dream for the factory. Military contracts were our only hope for survival and they'd just been awarded one of the biggest ones issued since the reduction of military spending. It was a fucking dream come true for the employees and we would potentially have to end up tripling our production capabilities, which meant hiring more people. Trenton Falls was a poor community, and every job we could offer helped tremendously.

I should be jumping for joy, but the thoughts that Morganston had been awarded the contract just because Ethan, Titus, Jeremiah, and Gabe knew the awarding officer left

a bad taste in my mouth. It was not only illegal, it was immoral. While I wanted to help the community, I didn't want to pull the 'it's all in who you know' card. My father and Wayne and pulled that shit at every opportunity and I'd promised myself to be better than them. They'd set the bar pretty damned low, but here I was, doing their same shit.

Titus clapped me on the back, interrupting my pity party. "Don't even think it, Kelsey. The contract was awarded before Ethan even had a chance to talk to his friend. When we called to inquire about the status, he told us straight out that Morganston Textiles had been awarded one hundred percent of the contract." He winked at me and said, "He said you did a damned fine job with your proposal, especially for a newbie. He's excited and ready to get busy. As spokesman for Morganston Textiles, I told him we'd do everything in our power to fulfill all their demands and as quickly as possible. We can do that, can't we, Kelsey? You aren't about to make me out to be a liar, are you?"

Wow. We'd gotten the contract without the help of pulling strings. A sense of pride washed over me, pride for my hard work, the dedication and loyalty of our employees, and all the extra shit Barb and Courtney did to help make it happen. I couldn't stop the smile that spread across my face, even if my answer to Titus was not going to make him happy.

"There may be some problems with the yarn supplier, but that's it. Our credit isn't worth shit and we're on a pay-before-delivery basis because of all the underhanded, dishonest shit Wayne pulled. Once we get past that, everything else will fall into place...with the hard work of the employees, of course."

"Excellent," Titus answered quickly. "We'll be good, then. It should just take a phone call and they'll be able to easily get credit insurance on us. If they balk, we'll pay cash before delivery."



He was obviously not at all worried about credit issues and from everything I'd found on Google, there was a solid reason for his confidence. Ethan and Titus had more money than the Roman Catholic Church. And, yet, they acted nothing like my family.

I cleared my throat and said, "Okay, that's great news for the company and employees. But, uh, the quoted yarn price for the first year of the military contract runs around thirty dollars per pound of yarn and if they max out the first-year contract, you'll be looking at needing around fifty thousand pounds of yarn for the first six months."

"Thirty dollars a pound for freakin' yarn?" Gabe bellowed in disbelief. He glared down at me and asked, "Did you get railroaded on pricing?"

I rolled my eyes but never got to answer his smart-ass, uneducated question. Barb cut in, using her don't-dare-mess-with-me mother tone. "None of this matters. Every one of us realizes how important this contract is to the success of this company, but Kelsey has plans tonight. He isn't available to work over, make plans, or celebrate success." Then she turned to Gabe and said, "No, we didn't get railroaded on yarn pricing. Kelsey and I are both friends with the supplier. We received the same quote that the rest of the companies did that bid on the contract. Clearly, this is a business you don't understand. Shocking."

Barb's insubordination was going to get her fired, and I didn't want to see that happen. Not because she was a mother hen where I was concerned—Barb was the mother I'd never really had—but she, like Jax and Evie, needed to stop trying to protect me. It had been over two years since I'd had...trouble. I was stronger.

I turned and gave her the sternest look I could muster. "Barb, I'm fine. If Gabriel needs me to work overtime to help with the production planning for the contract, then that's what I'll do, and I can make my own decisions about that. I can rework my calendar and reschedule my session. Like you said earlier, this contract is vitally

important to the success of Morganston Textiles. You and Courtney spent way too many hours helping me handle the paperwork and submitting wear trials to let my schedule impede success.”

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She crossed her arms over her ample chest and planted her feet wide apart. Her stance reminded me of Gabe in many ways. He was just usually angry and she was being protective.

“You haven’t missed a session in fifty-two weeks, Kels. It isn’t time to start now.”

Gabe snorted. “Is that what you kids call it these days? Sessions? Your boyfriend is...weird, Kels. Some of us call it a date.”

“How the hell would you know what to call it?” Titus quipped. “I thought you referred to them as booty calls.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake. This conversation is getting ridiculous,” Jeremiah growled. “Enough is enough.” His warm chocolate eyes landed on me. “Are you able to work late tonight or not, Kelsey? The decision is all yours. If you have plans you can’t break, we understand.” He glared in Gabe’s direction. “Allof us will understand.”

“No, I can work. I’ll call Jax and he’ll take care of everything. This contract is too important. There’s absolutely no room for error. With this being our first time as a prime supplier for the military, we’ll be under strict inspection, I’m certain.” Every word I spoke was nothing but the truth, but the main reason I would miss my session tonight was because I couldn’t pass up any extra time spent in Gabe’s presence. What could I say? I was clearly a glutton for punishment.

“Kelsey Morganston! This isn’t a smart move,” Barb reprimanded in a sharp voice that was softened by the love glowing in her eyes. “You know better.”

I frowned. Normally, I loved Barb's mothering, but not where Gabe was concerned. I knew all my decisions where he was involved were going to be bad...bad...bad. I'd accepted that. I was good with it. Okay, I wasn't good with it, but I knew I didn't intend to change anything.

"I'll make the session up, Barb. It'll be fine."

"Jax won't think it's fine," she snapped.

"Oh, for fuck's sake!" Gabriel growled. "Who really cares what his boyfriend thinks? This is business...important business. Kelsey's boyfriend and this session will just have to wait. If big boy Jax can't handle a bad case of blue balls, then he's not the man he pretends to be." Gabe literally glared in my direction as he spat out the words. It was clear he believed Jax was my boyfriend and he didn't appear to be in the mood to change his mind about it any time soon. Oh well, he'd find out soon enough.

Probably about the time Jax hit on Titus.

"I'll handle Jax," I answered quietly. Sending all sorts of pleading looks in Barb's direction, I silently pleaded for her to drop it. I turned to Titus and said, "Okay, what do we need to work on first? I can call the yarn supplier, but like I said earlier, I don't feel very confident about them shipping us product without payment upfront. I'll do my best to convince them otherwise, but I'm not making any promises."

Before Titus could answer, Gabe hissed, "No. You aren't at all good at making promises, are you? Wait," he quickly corrected. "You make plenty of promises, you just can't keep any of them, can you?"

I whirled around and countered with, "You don't do so well with keeping promises yourself, do you, Mr. High-and-Mighty, Do-no-Wrong?" He'd promised me, countless times, he would never leave without me. And then he left. Without me. He

never fucking looked back—never gave me a chance to explain or to apologize.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” he hissed in utter outrage. “What promise did I not keep? Tell me! I’m all ears, Kels. Let’s hear it. When did I break a promise to you?”

Nice. He didn’t even remember. “Forget it. Just forget it.” I dismissed him and turned back to Titus. “What do you need me to do, Titus? I’ll help every way I can.”

I felt Gabe grab my upper arm and shock waves of pure undiluted lust shot through my body, with every damned feeling settling in cock and balls. All the years vanished. His touch felt...familiar. Hope fluttered through me. Before I could lean into his touch and humiliate myself by begging for more, Ethan yanked his hand away and said, “Drop it for now, Gabe. We need to focus on work. This military contract is the opportunity that could solve a good deal of Morganston Textiles’ problems and help turn the business around. Let’s put our energy into making sure it does.”

Ethan didn’t like me, I could tell. I wasn’t sure why, but that fact really bothered me. It was weird because I’d learned a long time ago to not care what people thought about you. People tended to put you into the box wheretheythought you fit, instead of where you actually belonged. It used to bother me and I’d try to convince people to see me differently, but I’d eventually given up. There were very few people in the world I truly cared what they thought about me and Ethan shouldn’t be one of them. But he was. All of Gabe’s friends were. I knew why—they belonged to Gabe. I used to belong to Gabe too, and Iwantedto again.

Jeremiah stepped up and positioned his body between mine and the Gabe and Ethan tidal wave. “I was thinking...just in case Team Jax and his badass sidekick decided to come back and stir up trouble for Kelsey, maybe we should take the work home with us? Nobody knows where we are staying, so there wouldn’t be a possibility of interruptions.” He turned around and smiled softly at me...maybe to take the bite out

of his next words. “I’m certain Kelsey won’t mind turning his phone over to one of us, preferably me, to make sure our whereabouts remain unknown.” He grinned and patted Ethan’s ass. “We’ll get tons of work done.”

Panic started to flow through my veins. Jax...Evie...they were my foundation. They kept me focused on my health and wellbeing. They kept me from doing stupid shit when my mind, traitorous bastard it was, whispered I should do stupid shit.

They would be worried about me when I didn’t show up at the house for my ride to the AA meeting I attended every Thursday evening. Add the fact that Gabe was back in my life, and they would be terrified my stability would shatter.

Hell, I was terrified. Stability certainly wasn’t my strong suit.

Alcohol was on the long list of vices I’d leaned on over the years. Alcohol. Drugs. Cutting. Suicide. If it was ugly, I’d done it. Anything to escape the pain of losing Gabe.

Gabe’s held his hand, large and strong, out in front of him. “Give me your phone, Kels. There’s no way I trust you to do the right thing. I want the phone in my hand right now.”

I felt my teeth nibbling at my bottom lip, so I forced myself to put my teeth right back in my mouth, where they belonged. There’d been a time when that disgusting habit led to constant sores being on my lips. I wasn’t going back to being that person.

“I...uh...I need to at least let Jax know I’ll miss my session tonight,” I stuttered quietly. “Can I call him or send a text?”

“Nope.” Gabe’s eyes glittered with a challenge.

I pulled the cheap company phone out of my pocket and handed it to him. I turned to Barb and asked, “Can you please send a text to Jax and let him know I won’t make my meeting tonight, but I promise I’ll make it up. Tell him not to worry about me. If there was a problem, I’d let him know.”

“Would you, Kelsey? Would you let him know?” she asked.

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“Definitely. Thanks for taking care of that for me.” I turned to look at Jeremiah and said, “I’m ready, then. When do you want to leave?” I looked toward Ethan’s office, where my pathetic desk had been moved to and added, ‘I’ll need to grab my laptop so we’ll have all my contacts and their numbers. Is that okay?’”

“Not necessary,” Titus quipped. “I’ve loaded all the information onto my laptop. We should be good to go, as is.” He smiled at me and there was nothing malevolent about it, like he hadn’t just insulted me and invaded my privacy at the same time. His next words proved even clearer he didn’t respond or react like other people. “Your boyfriend’s really hot. Did I mention that already?”

I bit back a laugh at his audacity. Under other circumstances, Titus would be fun. “Did I mention he wasn’t my boyfriend?”

“That’s right, he isn’t,” Gabe snarled. “Oh, wait, maybe he doesn’t call himself your boyfriend. Is he your...Dom, perhaps?” Gabe’s lips formed an arrogant smirk with his last question.

“Not anymore,” I answered quietly. The silence in the room was deafening. Well, what could I say? Gabe had asked for that one.

After a few uncomfortable minutes, Jeremiah said, “Let’s leave on that note, shall we?” He turned and looked at me. “You can ride with Ethan and me. Titus will ride with Gabe. That sound okay with everybody?”

“No!” Gabe and Ethan answered in unison.



I wasn't sure if I should laugh out loud or be insulted. I settled for insulted.

"Kelsey will ride with me," Gabe said with a sneer he didn't even try to hide. "We have...years and years of missed time to chat about, don't we, Kels?"

Not really, I thought. I only had one question. Why did he leave without me? He'd promised. Yes, I'd lied. I'd said things that weren't true—things I knew would hurt him. I had my reasons, though. Reasons he never gave me a chance to explain. He'd just...left.

"No, not really," I answered. "I'll ride with Jeremiah." Turning to the only man in the room who didn't act like I was an airborne disease, I said, "I'm ready whenever you are, Jeremiah. I can't wait to see what Titus has planned for the fulfillment of the contract."

To be honest, Titus didn't treat me like Ethan and Gabe did. He didn't treat me like anything. He was just there, always working. The only time I'd seen any light flash in his eyes was when Jax had careened into him in the hallway.

"Coward," Gabe whispered in my ear.

"Bully," I answered without hesitation. In many ways, I was the same boy who had been madly in love with him, willing to do anything to please him, and spending every moment waiting until I got to see him again. In other ways, I was completely different. That boy...that Kelsey...was dead. The biggest part of my soul no longer existed and I'd learn to live with that. It didn't, however, mean I would stand by and be bulldozed over by Gabe and his hatred.

Hell, who was I fooling? Sure, I would.

Again, like before, I was in love with someone who couldn't care less about me. I'd

thought Gabe loved me as much as I loved him. In my youthful arrogance, I'd thought I was his world, because he'd been mine. Never in my life would I have thought him capable of walking away from me without a second thought. How had he done it, because I hadn't figured out a way. Had he ever lain in bed at night, wondering where I was or what I was doing? Had he pictured my face? Longed to touch it? Had he imagined hearing my voice in a busy crowd? Had he broken into my house just so he could smell my clothing, hoping and praying just a tiny bit of him had been left behind?

No...that was me. I'd done those things. Gabe, obviously, had never given me another thought...other than hate. It was apparent he had plenty of hate for me.

The pathetic thing was...

I'd take what I could get as long as it meant he was back in my life.

### Chapter 10

#### Gabriel

I sat behind the wheel of my rented vehicle, tapping the steering wheel with the tips of my fingers, and waited for Titus to gather up all his shit and finally walk through the doors of Morganston Textiles. As always, Titus was the last to be ready to leave and I felt my nerves tingling beneath my skin. I was furious. Hurt. Desperate.

Excited and aroused.

I needed Kelsey more than I needed the heart thumping inside my chest. I snorted in disgust, realizing that while I might need him...a part of me still hated him. It was a tiny part of me, so small it should be considered insignificant, but it still managed to override all my other emotions. When I wanted to tell him how beautiful he'd turned out to be, I'd say something mean instead. When I wanted to touch him, to see if he could still make my fingertips sizzle and my heart do cartwheels, I found myself insulting him sexually. Every damned time I opened my mouth, something anti-Kelsey would tumble straight out of it.

I couldn't stop it, no matter how hard I tried.

Fuck, was I trying? Did I plan on punishing him forever? Ethan was right: I only hurt myself when I allowed my hatred to overwhelm the real me.

I glanced across the parking lot and noticed a Ninja motorbike, instinctively knew it belonged to Kelsey, and the hatred bubbled up again. Hell, maybe I enjoyed hurting

myself.

Jax. More hatred sizzled in my blood. Jackson Solomon Jr. It had taken me several minutes to put a name to the face, especially when the body definitely didn't fit the boy I remembered, but when I had finally realized who Kelsey's...whateverwas, it had been a punch to my gut. Jax was the old Chief of Police's son, the very man who'd come to arrest me that night. The irony wasn't wasted on me. Evie...now that was yet another punch. I remembered Jax's sibling as Evan, a bit younger than the eldest Solomon, but back when I'd known them, Evie had been a boy.

A very pretty boy, who made an even prettier girl.

Normally, I would be proud to see someone brave enough to take life by the balls and make it your bitch, but since I had to hate Evie, I couldn't muster up much pride for her ball-grabbing of life. She was all Team Kelsey and that put her in my 'hate' category. Jax? He was at the top of the list. I hadn't missed the familiar way they'd touched or the reference to his leather bracelets being the same as a collar. I didn't know much about the BDSM world, but I damned well knew what a collar meant. Those bracelets meant Kelsey belonged to Jax—the same Kelsey that I still thought belonged to me.

The urge to kill Jax was too strong for me to ignore. Would I? No. If I hadn't been willing to go to prison for Kelsey ten years ago, I wouldn't be willing to go now. Would I kick his muscle-bound body into next month? I sure the fuck would give it my best shot. How dare he touch Kelsey like he had? Push him against the wall and hold him there with all those muscles?

That was my fucking job!

The car door opened and then slammed shut, nearly causing me to scream like a pre-school kid. I'd been so lost in my thoughts, I hadn't noticed Titus leave the building,

cross the parking lot, or open the door to climb inside. His laptop and satchel were crammed in the small area next to his feet and he was focused on a pile of papers sitting in his lap. When I didn't start the car right away, he finally glanced up and asked, "Why are we just sitting here? I thought we were meeting your boy-toy, my brother, and Jeremiah back at my house? Are we going to just magically transport ourselves there or are you planning on starting the ignition sometime in the near future?"

Asshole.

The engine roared to life and I pulled out of the parking lot, checking to make sure nobody followed us. I trusted Jax Solomon about as far as I could throw him...which was probably not a couple of inches, if that. "First of all, he isn't my boy-toy. Secondly, magic and transporting don't mingle, because one is magical and the other is science."

"Whatever," he mumbled. "Just get us there. We have lots of work to do. You're about to make some money, Gabriel! I told you it would work out!" He rubbed his hands together and did what I assumed was supposed to be his Dr. Evil laugh. "My brilliant plan is working out...just like I knew it would." His laugh grew even more sinister.

"You realize you sound like a total idiot, right?" I asked as I made a right turn at the red light and headed out of town, still checking to make certain no one was behind us. "Your plan is a total flop and I'm going to be lucky to survive it." Sending a playful glare in his direction, I scolded, "You're supposed to be my friend, Titus. Friends don't let friends waste millions...no matter how badly they want their revenge."

With a dull look on his face, Titus answered, "Revenge isn't what you're after, Gabe. I might not have known all the facts going into this clusterfuck, which is something I'm ashamed of, but I think I'm close to gathering all the pertinent information now.

You're still in love with Kelsey Morganston. He's in love with you. You're both knee-deep in a puddle of bullshit, comprised of lies, guilt, anger, young love, and betrayal. Whenever each of you," he turned and looked at me, arching a brow in the process, "mostly you, can pull your head out of your ass long enough to think straight, maybe you'll be able to forgive the past and work on a happy future." He shrugged. "That's about all I've got. Being emotionless and all."

Okay...so we might have pushed the emotionless point a little too hard, but the guy, as lovable as he was, was still weird. He was also way off base. Kelsey didn't still love me, and he had Jax to lean on. He had Jax to tie him up, collar him, and fuck him seven ways to Sunday. I'd never hated a person more in my entire life.

"It's obviously over between Kels and me," I muttered. "He's got Jax now. End of story. That's about all I've got. Having emotions and all."

"Now who's being the smartass?" he barked out with a laugh that sounded strange coming from Titus. "You...that's who. Jax isn't Kelsey's boyfriend. Kelsey said so himself." He wagged his eyebrows in a totally un-Titus way and added, "Jax may be my boyfriend before all this is said, done, and filed away for the history books."

"Yeah...right," I said slowly. "I wouldn't let Ethan hear you saying something like that. You might find yourself locked in your room or shipped back home."

"Ethan isn't my boss," Titus snapped. Then, in an act that shocked me, he turned around, winked, and added, "But I might want Jax to be. If you know what I mean. Wink. Wink. That's why I was so late coming out of the building. I did some quick research on BDSM—that's what I think they were involved in, by the way, Jax and your true love."

Everything in my stomach curdled into rot when Titus said the words out loud...the words I'd been tossing around in my heart and head. My eyes, every time I closed

them, saw Jax's hands on Kelsey. I saw Kelsey's pale flesh marred with red stains from where a whip or paddle had kissed his skin. I...I saw him look at Jax with that same look he used to bestow on me...the one that belonged only to me.Mine. Always mine.

"If Ethan isn't your boss, then I am. Stay away from Jax Solomon. I mean it, Titus. The man is nothing but trouble."

Titus smiled. "Thank you for giving me his last name. You've saved me countless minutes of research. I appreciate your effort, my man!"

"I'm telling Ethan," I snapped, sounding like a five year old.

"Tell Ethan all you want...but if Jax's mind is on me, then all his attention won't be focused on Kelsey." He batted his long lashes at me. "I'm just trying to...what is it you guys say? Oh, yeah, take one for the team."

Arguing with the idiot was useless. I'd talk to Ethan later. Titus was his problem, not mine.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:47 am*

I had a big enough problem of my own. His name was Kelsey Morganston and I was flat out in love...and in hate with him. No, that was a lie. There wasn't really any hate for Kelsey in my heart. I wasn't exactly sure when I'd thrown in the towel and admitted defeat, but it had happened. I was no longer in Trenton Falls to seek my revenge on Kelsey; I was there to make Kelsey mine again. I supposed the only question left was when I would have the balls to admit it to myself and everyone else...especially Kelsey.

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Nearly twelve hours later, my brain was fried. Dead. Shorted out. We'd gone over everything there was to go over...twenty times, probably. Titus, damn him, was the devil for the details. Without any of our help, Kelsey had convinced the yarn supplier to ship yarn based solely on Kelsey's word that they would receive payment. In my opinion, that was a dumb business decision but, then again, I wasn't known for my wise business decisions. On top of that, I was proud of him. When he'd hung up the phone, his face beaming with a huge smile, my heart had nearly burst at the seams. I wanted to grab him in a tight hug and dance around the room, telling him what a fantastic job he'd done.

Instead, I'd grunted like a caveman. Nice.

Kelsey's cell, tucked in my pocket, was going wild. I'd put it on vibrate and it was lighting-up every few minutes. Poor Jax. He was going insane not knowing where his Kelsey was. Good. He deserved it. In my humble opinion, he wasn't a damned bit better than his dear ole dad.



“Okay, let’s go over everything one more time,” Titus said as he shuffled his papers and tried to balance his laptop at the same time.

My head literally exploded...as in pieces of brain matter had to be staining the newly polished walls. I couldn’t do it again. I wouldn’t do it again. Jeremiah and Ethan were lounging on one of the leather sofas, kissing and giggling like school kids. Kelsey had dozed off about thirty minutes ago, after we’d finished ‘going over everything’ for the fourteenth time, and now he was curled into a small ball on a furry rug in front of the fireplace. His face was relaxed and every few moments, I heard cute little soft snores. I felt my breath hitch in my throat as memories flooded my body, sliding in each and every open space and even pushing against the spaces filled with my hate and need for revenge.

All those late nights we’d spent in the woods with nothing but flashlights or lanterns for light...nothing but each other to stay warm. I wasn’t sure, but I didn’t remember me ever sleeping when we lay cuddled together on whatever blanket or sleeping bag Kelsey had confiscated from Heaven only knew where. I’d spent every second watching him...touching him. The touches had been innocent, just me memorizing the feel of his skin beneath my fingertips. I’d marveled at how deeply he could sleep and the trust he’d put in my hands to watch over him. I would trace the many soccer bruises that marred the perfection of his pale flesh. I often noticed the dark smudges under his eyes...like he never slept, but I knew better. He could sleep at the drop of a dime. At least, he had with me.

Like he was now.

My heart softened and I could feel my memories still working their way through my body...still pushing hard against the parts of me that wanted to hate him.

“We aren’t going over it again, Titus,” Ethan growled between kisses. “Your plan is solid. Gabe will make money. Morganston Textiles will be successful. We will be

hiring at least an additional twenty employees within the next month. All's good." He kissed the tip of Jeremiah's nose and looked in my direction. "Anyway, we need to get Kelsey home. He's had about all of your planning that he can handle for one night." Ethan snorted when he looked at Kelsey's sleeping body. "Maybe we should make him walk home...or catch a cab. I've got more important things to do than act a chauffeur for the reigning town asshole." He grabbed Jeremiah's ass as he spoke, but Jeremiah, not liking his attitude, knocked Ethan's hand away.

"Why are you being such a jerk? He's a nice kid!" Jeremiah reprimanded.

Oddly enough, I was angry with Ethan...my best friend. I didn't like him talking about Kelsey the way he was. Kelsey deserved better. His pale blue eyes were so...sad. Why did he look so sad?

"He's a liar, Jeremiah. Don't defend him and don't dare forget what he did to Gabe." He wagged a finger in Kelsey's direction and said, "He might look like an angel, but we all know better. He lost his wings a hell of a long time ago."

"Shut the fuck up, Ethan," I growled, unable to listen to another negative word about Kelsey, especially from a person I cared about.

Ethan's face morphed from evil to triumphant in an instant. "That's what I thought." He winked in my direction. "I didn't think you'd let me get away with that. Just trying to wake you up to what you're feeling, big guy."

"Don't help me," I grumbled. I stood up and looked down at Kelsey's smaller frame and my damned fingers itched to touch him. "I know what I'm feeling, so fuck off...big guy."

"You taking him home or are you taking him upstairs...to your room?" Ethan asked quietly.

“He’s home,” I answered softly.

I was lying to them and to myself, but the words wouldn’t stop themselves from escaping my mouth. I believed it, with all my heart. Kelsey did belong to me, and he was home. Finally.

I knew he could accuse me of kidnapping as soon as he woke up, but I didn’t care. I wanted him with me and until he told me differently, I could convince myself he felt the same way.

“Does this mean we aren’t reviewing our plan for the military contract one more time?” Titus asked in an exaggerated whisper.

After taking a deep breath and giving myself a quick pep talk, I bent over and scooped Kelsey up and cradled him in my arms. I expected some kind of fight from him, at least a mumble or grumble against being manhandled, but his only response was to snuggle closer to my chest. Sure, he was fast asleep and could be cuddling up against Jax for as far as he knew, but I told myself he knew it was me. I needed to think it was me Kelsey’s body wanted to be closer to.

“Be safe, friend,” Ethan said as I carried Kelsey toward the staircase that led to the bedrooms. I knew he was referring to my heart...just as surely as I knew my heart was in jeopardy.

“Always,” I answered. I knew what I was doing was highly questionable and could easily be misinterpreted, especially by law officials if Kelsey decided to pull a repeat of our past. I also didn’t care. I was finally ready to admit the love I felt for man in my arms heavily outweighed the hate I’d felt, which meant I was willing to take another chance...to put my freedom on the line, if that’s what it took.

Kelsey never woke up as I maneuvered the spiral staircase, which was nearly an

impossible task. His eyes never did more than flutter as he flattened his body even tighter against mine. Once inside the room Titus had designated as mine, I locked the door and then gently laid Kelsey on the king-sized bed. Thankfully, the bedding had already been turned down by the cleaning service who magically appeared on our second day. Titus thought of every detail, down to knowing four grown men would have the giant refurbished church looking like a disgusting bachelor pad within a few days.

As soon as he hit the soft mattress, he curled himself into a small ball, knees tucked up to his chest and arms wrapped around his waist. It was strange but cute at the same time. Of course, I no doubt would have thought anything Kelsey did would be considered cute. Regardless of how badly I wanted to peel every stitch of clothing off his body, I knew that particular slice of heaven would be crossing the line. I settled for taking his shoes and socks off, pulled the blankets up over him, and went into the bathroom to get ready to finally share a bed with my first, and only, love. No, it wasn't happening the way I'd always dreamed, but at least it was happening. I brushed my teeth, splashed water on my face, and stripped down to my underwear. Would that be too much? Too aggressive?

With a frown, I dug around in a drawer, found a pair of sweatpants, and slid them over my legs and hips. Who was I trying to fool? Both Kelsey and I had woken up this morning hating each other. Why would I think it would be any different just because my heart was willing to finally admit I'd been confusing love with hate? Kelsey, no doubt, still hated me and probably had never even loved me in the first place.

He didn't act like he hated me, though. Every time I tried to goad him into an argument, he wouldn't be baited. I dished it out and he took it. His eyes, those beautiful azure blue eyes, still looked at me with the warm expression I'd used to refer to as love. They were flat and empty...unless they were looking in my direction.

Hope blossomed.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:48 am*

I could forgive him. Hell, I could forgive Kelsey any sin...including trying to send me to prison. The past was the past. I needed to focus on the future and turning that future into a life with Kelsey.

I slid into the bed next to him, tucked the bedding around my waist, and turned on my side to make it easier to look at him as he slept. What had changed about him, I wondered. In my youth, I'd memorized every plane and curve, every freckle, every...hell, everything. A smile curved my lips as I recalled how his incredibly long lashes used to drive me insane with their cuteness. Kelsey, on the other hand, had hated them. On most occasions, Kelsey would have himself a cute little temper tantrum when I'd point out it looked like he had angel wings over his eyes. On a few occasions, though, he'd be in a playful mood and he'd flutter those lashes against my cheek, the sensitive spot beneath my ear, or, the naughty nymph would torment my nipple. His lips, usually a dark shade of red, were plump and so damned kissable that it made it nearly impossible for me not to take him up on the silent offer.

I'd loved kissing him and could kiss him for hours. He'd squirm and moan, whimper and curse, plead and beg. I'd kiss and kiss and kiss.

I loved him so damned much back then.

I loved him even more now.

I scooted closer but was very careful to not let my body touch his. It wasn't that I feared he would accuse me of anything; it was more that I wouldn't want him to wake up and feel betrayed by me. I would never take advantage of him...even when I wanted to so fucking badly.

His back was turned to me and there wasn't much to see with his clothes still on and the bedding pulled up to his chest, but I kept staring. He was lean and wiry, perhaps skinnier than he needed to be, but if my dreams came true and he hung around with us, he'd put some weight on fast. I loved to cook.

With the bright moonlight floating through the large windows on the opposite wall, I could easily see the thick leather bracelets wrapped around his wrists. Those...they caused my heart to stutter and sputter. I'd heard what Jax said. I knew what a collar meant. The thing was, he didn't act like he belonged to Jax. Yes, they acted...close, but not together. So why was he still wearing the bracelets? What did Jax mean to him? There was no doubt of the importance of them, I just didn't know what the significance was. Unable to stop myself, I reached for one of his wrists but as soon as my fingertip touched the soft leather, he moved his hand away and mumbled something I couldn't understand. The wrist I'd just tried to touch tucked itself beneath his chin. His breathing changed, and I realized he was awake.

Slowly, I reached for the wrist again. For some reason, I was unable to stop torturing myself where Jax's "collar" was concerned. I didn't have the right to feel the way I felt, but I'd be damned if I sat back and allowed another man to collar what was mine.

He jerked the wrist away the second I touched smooth leather.

The room was eerily quiet as we both lay in the moonlit darkness, just waiting for one of us to make a move...say a word that could make the past disappear. We both knew that wasn't possible, though. Too much hurt. Too many lies. My craving for revenge had been so strong and it may have very well ended any chance I might ever have to hold him in my arms again.

"Anywhere but there, Gabe," he whispered, his back still turned to me. "You can touch me anywhere but there. I want you to touch me," he added in a huskier voice

that held a hint of shyness. “I’ve fantasized about you touching me again every damned day since you left me. Please, Gabe,” he pleaded softly. “You don’t have to love me, or care for me, or even like me. I just need your touch. You can hurt me if it makes you feel better. Just...just put your hands on me. Please.”

He’d fantasized about me touching him? His lies were the very reason I hadn’t been able to touch him. Touch him anywhere except on Jax’s collar? Hurt him if it made me feel better? There were so many damned things wrong with what he’d just said...but one thing had been soright.

He wantedmytouch.

“Why, Kels? Why did you say it?” The words, finally spoken in a tone not filled with hate, tumbled out of my mouth before I could stop them. “Why did you want to hurt me so bad? I thought...I thought we were in love with each other. Hearing what you’d said...it nearly killed me, Kels. Literally and figuratively.”

I waited for his denial. An excuse. Anything except admitting what he’d done.

“I thought I would have a chance to explain, Gabe,” he answered. I could hear the tears in his voice and it tore at my heart. “I...I never thought you would just disappear. I was afraid. Wayne scared me to death with his threats and I didn’t know what else to do.” He turned to his other side and looked into my eyes. “You’d promised you would never leave without me, so I thought for sure I’d get a chance to explain.”

Tears streamed down his face and a look of despair made his bright blue eyes look incredibly dim. His face was pale and there were dark smudges under his eyes. It was the same look he’d had as a boy...except I’d been able to make the hurt disappear, if only for a brief moment in time. When I’d see him again, the dark smudges would be back.What had he endured at the hands of his brother?



“I...I knew what I said would hurt you—that it might even cause you to never love me again, but I didn’t see another way out at the time. Honestly, Gabe,” he whimpered. “I would have never intentionally hurt you. I thought I had more...time. I thought I could make it right between us.” He took a deep breath and finished with, “I thought you wouldn’t leave without me.”

It didn’t matter. The lies he’d told—none of them mattered. Not anymore. The only thing that mattered was that we were together again. We both had another chance to right all our wrongs. I could...no, I already forgave him for lying about me. I should have known Wayne or some member of his family had threatened him. He’d loved me too much.

Maybe still loved me.

I sure the hell loved him.

“Shhhh, babe,” I whispered and pulled him tight against me. “The past is the past. I’m sorry, too. I’m so fucking sorry for leaving without you, and I’m sorry for the way I came back.” I placed kisses against his forehead and cheeks, sucking away the salty tears. We’d wasted too much damn time already. “I never stopped loving you, Kelsey. I tried. I tried so hard, but I never stopped.” My hand wiped away the remaining tears and I pleaded, “Let’s start over. I’m sorry for all the shit I’ve done since I got back. I wanted to hurt you the way I’d been hurt, and that makes me an asshole. Please give me another chance.”

He looked at me, blinked, his long lashes still heavy with tears, and asked, “Are you serious, Gabe? You’ll give me another chance? You...you don’t have to love me,” he whispered, “just let me back into your life. I know you were always more important to me than I was to you and I’m okay with that. I just want to see you...to touch you. I’ll take...anything you’ll let me have.”

“Oh no, angel. You’ve got all of me. You always did. Don’t ever think you weren’t the most important thing in my life. Hell, you still are! Even after all the shit we’ve put each other through, you are it for me.”

“If I’m dreaming, don’t wake me. Please touch me. Please make love to me. Do whatever you want to do to me.”

His hands, acting like they were starved for my flesh, rubbed my arms, down my back, caressed the side of my face—they were everywhere. His body was much smaller than mine, but his lean muscles, taut flesh over hardness, pulled me against him with a strength that made my cock even harder than it already was.

When my body touched his and I heard his sigh of contentment, the years and lies faded away. It was only Kelsey and me...the way it had been and the way it was meant to be. How could everything feel so familiar, yet so foreign at the same time? He’d changed, but he was the same.

Regardless of what the changes were, one thing remained solid. He was mine.

“Don’t turn me away, Gabe,” he begged.

I could never turn him away.

“You have on too many clothes, angel,” I whispered as I leaned in and nuzzled the tip of his shoulder and then nipped the sensitive flesh with my teeth. A soft moan escaped between his lips but after that, I couldn’t hear anything except him fumbling with the fastening of his belt as he struggled to rid himself of his clothes.

I chuckled and was amazed again at how perfect everything felt. I paused long enough to remember that when we’d been kids, messing around and learning what each other’s bodies liked, I’d laughed some then, too. After Kelsey left my life, there’d been no laughter or lightheartedness in sex. The only sounds I made might be grunts, groans, or issuing orders. Yeah, I made sure the other person got off, but other than that, they couldn’t expect much more from me.

It was different with Kelsey. It always had been. “Let me help you.” Pushing his trembling hands away, I opened the belt, unbuttoned and unzipped his jeans, and then slowly started pulling the denim and his underwear down his lean hips. His shirt had ridden up, and I was given a glorious peek of all things heavenly. His stomach was flat, with a hint of ab muscles, and his hip bones created the sexiest V I’d ever seen in my life. Unable to stop myself, I placed a whisper of a kiss on the flat plane of his stomach. He squirmed.

I kept tugging at the jeans until his cock finally popped free. He was already stiff and leaking precum. My hunger for him raged, and I wasn’t as gentle as I’d like to have been when I yanked his pants off the rest of the way and tossed them across the room. I pulled him into a sitting position and his shirt quickly followed his jeans. It felt as if my body was on fire, raging with a hunger that only Kelsey could quench. When I

pulled him close and our chests touched, skin to skin, I heard myself moan, almost a wail as if I was in pain.

“Missed you,” Kelsey said, his lips exploring my neck and earlobe. “Missed you damned much, Gabe.”

Using both hands, he maneuvered my face until we were looking at one another, mere inches apart. “I’ve done a lot of things, Gabe...things I’m not proud of. I have problems and lots of them.” His tongue darted out, and he nervously licked at his bottom lip, like he was gathering courage. Fear spiked in my heart.

“I’ve let other men...touch me...fuck me,” he whispered in shame, as if I would have expected him to remain celibate while we were apart. “I...I wanted to be hurt because I knew I didn’t deserve better and I let them do...things to me.” His eyes met mine and my heart started thumping even harder. “I wish I hadn’t. I wish I’d been strong enough to save myself just for you. I...didn’t know if you’d ever come back for me or if you could ever forgive me. Never, though, Gabe,” he vowed with a fierceness I didn’t know he was capable of, “never have I ever kissed another man. I always saved that part of me for you...only you.”

How could I have ever thought myself capable of hating Kelsey? Capable of living without Kelsey in my life? I’d survived the last ten years, but I hadn’t lived. I’d fucked others and I’d even kissed others as I’d tried to purge him from my soul. He, my Kelsey, was so much better than me and so much stronger.

I answered him with pure honesty when I said, “This, Kelsey.” I pointed to my heart. “I always saved that part of me for you...only you.” My heart had always belonged to Kelsey. It always would.

His bottom lip quivered and tears pooled in his beautiful eyes. “I can’t believe you’re giving me another chance. I won’t mess this one up, Gabe. I promise. I’ll be

everything you need me to be.”

“I only need you to be mine,” I answered and then my lips crashed against his. Gentle would have probably been the way to go, but at that moment, the word wasn’t in my vocabulary. I plundered. Claimed. Possessed. We kissed until we were both gasping for air. I had no idea how long we were like that, wrapped in each other’s arms, kissing like the moment our lips parted, our lives might end. It could have been five minutes or it could have been fifty. It wasn’t, nor ever would be, long enough.

“I need you to make love to me, Gabe,” he pleaded between kisses. “I need you inside me. Please.”

His words, spoken with uncontrolled desire, acted like strokes to my cock and balls. I was so hard I was afraid I might explode...or come like a fucking teenager before I got a chance to make him scream. I’d learned some new tricks and I couldn’t wait to teach them to Kelsey. Our one and only time together hadn’t been an Olympic triumph for me. Not bad for a kid, but nothing compared to what I could do to his body now.

A bolt of horror shot through me. “Fuck!” I practically roared, causing Kelsey to jerk back in surprise. “Fuck, fuck, fuck!” Starbursts of panic filtered through my entire being. No condoms. No lube. No...anything.

He deserved better.

“What’s wrong? Did I do something wrong?” he asked in alarm.

“No condoms, Kels. I...I didn’t really prepare for sex.” I grinned sheepishly at him. “I’m gonna be honest with you, angel. I didn’t think any of this whole revenge act through. My only focus was on being near you again.” I looked around the room, feeling like an idiot. “I don’t have any condoms or lube. Nothing.” I kissed him

quickly and jumped up, ready to storm into the bathroom, gather my clothes, and race for the nearest store. “I’ll be right back. Don’t you dare leave. It won’t take more than fifteen minutes!”

He giggled, reminding me of the old Kelsey I remembered. When his hand slowly reached down and wrapped around his own cock, my mouth fell wide open. I knew my pupils were completely blown when he stroked himself. Up and down. Down and back up. My own hand dropped to grip my cock, giving myself a hard pinch at the base. If I didn’t, I would come in my sweatpants, standing right in front of him.

“I’ll be right here waiting on you,” he teased as his hand worked his cock seductively.

“Put your clothes on. You’re going with me,” I snapped, knowing there wasn’t a team of Clydesdale horses strong enough to pull me out the door when Kelsey was lying on my bed, playing with himself. In a last-ditch, Hail Mary, I bent over and yanked open the nightstand drawer, hoping against all hope that Titus might have thought of that, too. Hell, he thought of everything else.

“Hallelujah. Praise Jeezus. I’m in fucking love with Titus right now,” I said as I reached into the drawer to pull out the prizes—condoms and lube. “That boy has absolutely no emotions or social skills, but he’s a fucking genius!”

“I’m in love with you right now,” Kelsey answered. “And Titus.”

“Hands and knees,” I barked as the excitement caused my testosterone to go wild. “Now.”

Kelsey didn’t hesitate. His grin never wavered. One second he was looking at me, lips and cock swollen from our play, and the next he was in the center of the bed, on his hands and knees.

His back arched and his ass...Lord, his ass. He was gorgeous, even more than I remembered, and in my dreams, he'd been fucking perfection. This? Fuck, the real Kelsey was almost too much. Too perfect.

In a perfect world, where Smurfs really lived under mushrooms and blue birds really fluttered over your head singing love songs, I would make love to him slowly. I'd torment him until he begged me to fuck every thought of any other man from his mind. Every inch of his body would be explored by my touch. That would be in the perfect world. Kelsey and I lived in the real world though. The world where I needed to be inside of him more than I needed oxygen for my lungs.

I popped open the bottle of lube, squirted a generous amount onto my fingers, and dove toward my prize like a kid picking a stuffed animal at the carnival. My heart felt light and heavy at the same time. The heaviness, instead of being something negative as usual, came from being so full of love. I forced myself to slow down. It felt like I'd waited my entire life for this moment, so I needed to not rush it.

"Uh...is something wrong?" Kelsey asked. He looked over his shoulder at me, a strange expression on his face. It was a mix between worry and frustration. Sexual frustration from Kelsey was familiar. The worry, however, wasn't...or maybe it was.

"Everything's perfect, angel," I whispered. "I'm just trying to slow things down a bit. You deserve better than being manhandled."

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:48 am*

He looked away, but I heard his whispered answer. “No, I don’t.”

I leaned over him, putting the weight of my body on his and said, “Yes, you do. These comments about hurting you if I want to and all that bullshit you do with Jax isn’t going to cut it with me, Kels. I like it rough every now and then just like everybody else, but when that happens, it will be to give you pleasure, not punishment. I don’t like you saying that shit and it needs to stop,” I growled.

His head dropped to the mattress for several seconds before he raised it again. “I told you there’s nothing between Jax and me—not like you’re thinking, at least. As for my negative thoughts and stuff, you almost make me believe it when you say it.” He looked over his shoulder at me again. “Keep saying it, Gabe. I’ll keep telling you how sorry I am and you keep telling me I’m worth forgiving.”

His words broke my heart. I’d done this to him. I’d turned him into someone who hated himself...and I hated myself for doing it. “You’re worth the world to me, Kels.”

His body relaxed immediately and I vowed to spend the rest of my life making up for leaving him behind, regardless of the reason. “Tell me you want this. I need to hear it.”

“I’ve always wanted you, Gabriel Maverick. Always have and always will.”

I leaned over and kissed the curve of his ass cheek and then let my finger toy with his puckered entrance. He sucked in a breath, but pushed against me at the same time. I peppered him with kisses and playful nips while my finger slowly worked inside of



him. He was so damned tight, so damned hot. My other hand stroked the curve of his back while my finger pushed in and out, searching for the spot that would make him fall to pieces. The second I found the small bundle of nerves and massaged it with the tip of my finger, he let out a yelp and slammed his head against the bedframe.

“Fuck! What the fuck was that?” he said, moaning as he pushed back against my finger and rubbing the top of his head at the same time. “Can you do that again? Damn, Gabe, that felt...”

He yelped again and suddenly rose into a position where he was only on his knees and his arms had reached over his head to grab my hair and tug hard enough to make me wince...and my cock weep. Surely to fuck he'd had his prostate played with before? He'd said he was experienced in the sex department. His fingers continued to frantically pull at my hair. I pushed my chest against his back and continued to toy with the nub of nerves. “You like that, angel?” I purred in his ear. “Surely you've been introduced to your prostate before?”

His brow crinkled into a frown. “Stop talking. I need to concentrate on how this feels. Holy fuck, that's good. Is this normal?” He gasped and then said, “Okay, stop. It's too much. Too good. I need you inside of me right now.” His voice was urgent, desperate almost.

“You need more prep. We've got all night.” I sucked the back of his shoulder hard enough to bring blood to the surface—my brand on him for everybody to see. “Relax and let me show your body how much I missed you.”

“Nu-uh. No. That won't work,” he muttered in frustration. “Let's do a quickie, knock the edge off, and then we can have a night of exploration. I think you've learned a lot of things I'm going to be most interested in you teaching me.” His hand reached around and wrapped around my cock, giving me a good squeeze. “But first things first. I need this inside of me. I need to be yours again.”

With a smile, I put my hand on the base of his neck and pushed him forward until he was head down/ass up in front of me. “Well, when you ask so nicely. Just don’t let me hurt you.”

I ripped the condom open with my teeth, worked it onto my cock, and then lathered myself with lube. He was so fucking tight. Of all the things we’d both done wrong to each other, this needed to be right. When I was suited up, I used one hand to spread his cheeks and the other to place the head of my cock against his entrance. All the work I’d done with my finger had closed right back up again, so when I started to push inside, I was as gentle as possible.

I heard his moan, but it sounded a hell of a lot like pleasure. When the head of my cock pushed past the tight ring of muscle, explosions went off inside of me. Through a haze of pleasure, I saw his fingers grip the sheets in a tight fist.

“Yessss!” he shouted, loud enough that even if my friends were still downstairs, they had to have heard him.

“I love you, Kels,” I whispered as I pushed forward. He pushed back against me and before I could draw another breath, my cock was buried completely inside of him. My balls, hard and begging for release, pushed against his taint and my hands gripped his hips so tightly that bruises would mar his flesh by morning. For some reason, the outline of my fingers imprinted on Kelsey’s skin was about the sexiest image imaginable.

“Always,” he answered between pants of breath. “Fuck me, Gabe.”

It was all I needed. I pulled out and then slowly pushed back inside of him, watching my cock disappear into the man I’d always loved. Slow and gentle...until he was squirming in frustration and my balls threatened to explode. Then, finally, fast and hard, my fingers holding tighter and my balls slapping against him with every thrust.

Words I couldn't understand and sounds that I loved tumbled from Kelsey's lips with each thrust. Our bodies were slickened with sweat and the entire room smelled of sex. I was in Heaven. Literally. Because I was inside Kelsey.

"Oh, fuck, Gabe. I'm gonna come," he hissed. "Harder. I need it harder."

I hadn't even touched his cock yet and he was on the edge of coming. I reached around our bodies, gripped his leaking cock, and pushed him right over the edge. I quickly followed, bellowing my release with a final deep thrust.

### Chapter 11

I knew I shouldn't. It was one of those things that needed to be left alone but I couldn't. Thoughts...images of Jax and Kelsey together danced around in my head and I couldn't get them out. We'd spent the entire night worshipping each other's bodies, whispering words of love and commitment. We were about to give love another try, and I didn't want there to be anything between us...especially not those damned bracelets. I knew how I was—how I would eventually only see the soft leather as a connection to another man. At some point, I'd stop seeing Kelsey and only see...whatever the hell they were.

I'd climbed out of bed earlier than should have been possible after what Kelsey and I shared last night, kissed his puffy lips, whispered that I loved him, and sneaked out of the room. I'd found Titus downstairs, already up and making pancakes, and explained to him that I was going to see Jax, to make certain the other man knew whatever he and Kelsey shared was officially over.

Titus, who would have normally shrugged and told me to be careful, turned and gave me a long, hard stare. It lasted long enough to make me want to squirm. Finally, he said, "I take it things went well with you and Kelsey last night?" Before giving me a chance to answer, he added, "Because here you are, up bright and early, ready to fuck it up. Are you trying to set world records at screwing relationships up, Gabe?"

I snorted, but his words bothered me. They hit way too close to home. "What would you know about relationships, little man?"

His eyes narrowed. "Not a damned thing. Still more than you."

“Just tell the guys where I am. I’ll be back before it’s time to head to the plant. Don’t let Kelsey leave without me.” I paused...the words haunting me. He’d said those words to me so many times and each time I’d promised I wouldn’t.

Titus stepped in front of me. “Do you think this is something Kelsey would want you to do, Gabriel? Think about it like that. Don’t start your new relationship with old deceit. It won’t accomplish anything. Let Kelsey tell you about his relationship, whatever it is, with Jax. That’s only fair.”

It was fair. I understood that. I just couldn’t wait. Kelsey was mine and I wanted everybody to know it, Jax included. No, especially Jax.

“Cover for me, kid. I’ll be back before anybody misses me.”

Without giving him a chance to continue his argument, I moved around him and headed for the door. Inside my rental, I punched in the address I’d gotten off the computer this morning and pointed my vehicle in Jax’s direction. I hadn’t driven long before I realized that apparently life had been good to him. He lived in the nicest part of Trenton Falls. With a huge effort on my part, I punched the jealousy down and kept driving.

Ten minutes later, I pulled into the driveway of a huge mansion. Yeah, things had definitely changed since we were all teenagers. Jax and Evan definitely hadn’t been poor like me, but sheriff’s pay hadn’t led to the family living anywhere above upper middle class. As I climbed out of the car, I wondered what being a successful MMA fighter paid. Was he more successful than me? He certainly lived in a bigger house.

The devil on my shoulder started whispering what a much better fit for Kelsey he was. He had money and wasn’t afraid to flaunt it. Was that what Kelsey wanted? Had he allowed Jax to collar him because of the money? Silently, I prayed it was money and not love...or sex. Fuck, I had it bad.

I couldn't have taken more than five steps toward the huge front door before it flung open with enough force to send it smashing against the sturdy rock that decorated the three-story Tuscan-style home. Cute. Tuscan style in Trenton Falls. I thought about the town I'd once lived in and the kiddie song of one thing doesn't belong started playing in my head. This house definitely didn't belong.

"Where the fuck is he, Maverick?" Jax demanded as he started down the steps toward me. His hands were balled into fists and his face was red with fury. "If you've hurt him...so help me Jeezus, I'll kill you with my bare hands!"

I didn't doubt it. Or, at least, I didn't doubt he would try. He might have turned into some famous MMA fighter, but the military had taught me countless ways to kill a man. On top of that, it looked like we were both driven by our love for Kelsey.

As bad as I hated to—because I would have really enjoyed kicking his ass—I raised my hand up to indicate he needed to slow his roll. "Calm your ass down, Jackson. I'm not here to fight."

Regardless of my words, he didn't calm his ass down or slow his steamroll until he was inches away from me. With both of us over six feet tall, we stood eye-to-eye and sized one another up. I hated to admit it, but it would be one hell of a fight if I tangled with Jax. I wouldn't mind the fight but hated that my adversary, AKA object of Kelsey's affection, was as masculine and testosterone-driven as I was. For a split second, I allowed a vision of Kelsey in Jax's arms to wave a red flag inside my head and it took every ounce of willpower I had inside me to not go straight for the other man's jugular.

"Tell me you know where he is," Jax hissed...but there was a definite sound of fear in his voice. "Just...just tell me he's safe."

Why wouldn't Kelsey be safe? Did he honestly think I would hurt him? Well...yeah,

I guess he did. In his mind, he thought I'd raped Kelsey when we were younger.

"He's safe," I answered quickly because I wouldn't want him to make me worry about Kelsey unnecessarily. Jax and I might be polar opposites on every damned thing on Earth, but not when it came to our concern for Kelsey. That fact griped the shit out of me. "Contrary to what this entire county thinks, I would never hurt Kelsey." Then, puffing out my chest just a tad further than necessary, I added, "He spent the night with me. We're together again. That's why I'm here, Jax. You need to back off. Kelsey belongs to me."

Shit, that sounded barbaric. If I heard anybody else say those words, in the tone I'd used, I'd toss them in the category of stalker.

Jax growled in fury. "Kelsey isn't an object and doesn't belong to anybody, you idiot!" His words tumbled out in a snarl. "See, Maverick? It's stupid-ass comments like that that tells me you are still a total dumbass with an ego the size of a mountain and a brain the size of a mole hill." He rubbed his hand over his face and I recognized the gesture as one to keep his hands busy so he wouldn't try to wrap them around my neck. He took a deep breath and asked, "Where is he? I need to talk to him...to make sure he's okay."

I snorted. "Sure...talk to him. Is that what you MMA fighters call it these days?" My own hands were balled into fists. There was no doubt about it, I itched to feel my fist connect with his face. "He doesn't need your drama right now, Jax. He's made up his mind. It's me. Don't be a sore loser."

"Oh. My. God. Are you serious right now?" Evie's high-pitched voice interrupted my caveman routine before it could even get off the ground.

I noticed Jax's body jerk in surprise and was delighted to know I wasn't the only one she'd snuck up on. My eyes turned in her direction, prepared for battle. The dark

rings of worry beneath her eyes stopped me short. Fuck, both brothers...or brother and sister now...were afraid I would hurt Kelsey. My anger for him, for all his lies, tried to simmer to the surface, but I forced it back down. I was finished being mad at Kelsey. I'd promised him last night and this time, I intended to keep my promises to him.

"Listen, Evie," I started, but she held up her hand before I could get another word out.

"Shut the fuck up, Maverick. I don't give a fuck how you feel, who you think you own, or if you honestly believe love birds are flying over your head right now. All I need to know is that Kelsey is safe and where he is. It's not that I don't trust you...but I don't trust you. I need to see him for myself."

"Fair enough," I answered. "When I get home, I'll tell Kelsey you'll be coming by the plant for a visit." I looked at Jax and added, "Just Evie, though. This Neanderthal needs to stay away." I looked Jax in the eye and said, "If you show up, security will turn you away."

He burst out laughing right in my fucking face. "What? You're going to turn security on me because you're afraid you can't hang onto your brand spanking new boyfriend? Is that how it works, Maverick? You know, when we were younger, before all the bullshit with Kelsey, I used to admire you. I thought you were not only a badass, but a smart guy that was going to dig his way out of the hell he'd been born in to. Guess you fooled me, didn't you, little man?" He took a step closer, putting us nose to nose. "As it turns out, you're nothing more than an insecure little nobody that runs away...or calls security when he doesn't get his way." He shook his head from side to side and added, "I have no idea what Kelsey sees in you—then or now. He deserves so much better."



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“And you think that’s you?” My chest bumped against his. Inside my head, I knew it was a dumb, egotistical thing to do. It was like I was looking down at myself, watching me make a total fool of myself but unable to do anything to stop it. Where Kelsey was concerned, it was as if when I opened my mouth, I said the wrong things. “And I’ll tell you another thing, little man, I want those damned bracelets off his wrists. You can either take them off or I’ll cut them off. You may think of them as a collar, but I see them as that whole possession bullshit you were bashing me about earlier. You preach that Kelsey isn’t an object, but you put a fucking collar on him like he’s your fucking pet?”

“I gave him what he needed!” Jax roared. “You don’t have a fucking clue what those bracelets mean...what they represent! Don’t you dare waltz in here years later, after I’ve cleaned up the fucking mess you made with Kelsey, and act like you have any rights to him! If you weren’t man enough to handle him when he was a teenager, then don’t come barreling in now, acting like you’ve finally grown a pair of balls. If you hadn’t been such a pussy...if you could have just been a man ten years ago, then he wouldn’t have those bracelets on his wrists and we wouldn’t be wasting each other’s time!” He shoved me against the rental car and in a calm, deadly voice said, “But you weren’t man enough, were you, Mav? You ran like a little school girl who got her ponytail pulled a little too hard. You don’t deserve him.”

So stunned by the stupidity rolling from his mouth, I never saw the left hook coming in my direction...didn’t know of its existence until Jax’s fist collided with my jaw. Fuck, but he had a left hook. In a split second, I whirled back around to answer his tit with my tat, but Evie was standing between us, daring me to hit a girl. She had one hand braced on Jax’s chest and one held out in front of me.

“Stop it! Just fucking stop it! It’s clear that everybody here is worried about Kelsey. Let’s just...stop your stupid macho stuff.”

“Oh, that’s right,” I said as I rubbed the ache out of my jaw. “Step in after your brother gets a cheap shot in. That sounds fair.” I continued to glare at both of them as I chomped on what Jax had just said. He was beyond stupid. “If you think me trying to dodge going to prison for something I didn’t do makes me less than a man, then so be it. Asshole.” Why had I bothered? There was no way Jax and I would ever see eye to eye, no matter how important Kelsey was to me...and obviously to Jax.

Jax snorted. “Prison? Trenton Falls was definitely a homophobic town back in the day, little man, I’ll give you that much. Even still, they didn’t send people to prison for being gay. Try again. You were a pathetic coward. End of story.”

What the fuck?

“What in the hell are you talking about? Kelsey said that I raped him, Jax. That’s why I ran. Your dear ole dad showed up with Kelsey’s dad, ready to arrest me first and ask questions later. Forgive me for not thinking I could get a fair shake when I was going up against the richest family in town. On top of that...on top of that, it killed me that Kelsey had said that about me. I thought—”

“What!” Evie practically shrieked. “Kelsey never said you raped him. Where in the world did you get that notion? Kelsey would never say that. He was in love with you!” She took a step back, like she’d been punched in the gut. “He’s always been in love with you, Gabriel.” Her voice softened. “Why would he say something like that?”

What had Kelsey told them?

It didn’t matter. The past was the past, I’d promised him that much. “Forget it. It

doesn't matter. Mistakes were made. I forgive Kelsey—that's all that matters."

Jax pushed Evie aside and was back up in my face in seconds. "You forgive Kelsey? You? There's nothing for you to forgive, asshole! You were the one in the wrong. If anything, you should be groveling for his forgiveness instead of taking away his family's company and worming your way back into his bed!"

His fist started to swing again, but I saw it coming and countered with a gut punch and uppercut before he could make contact. He shook it off like a trooper and tackled me, shoving both our bodies against the unforgiving metal of the car. We fought like animals, snarling and growling at each other as our fists, knees, and every other available limb made contact with anything we could. It was vicious. It was loud. It was messy. Neither of us, however, let up until Evie started screeching like a banshee again.

"Stop! Stop! Fucking stop!"

I shoved Jax off of me and staggered to my feet, ready to go another round, if necessary. He was up as quickly as I was. Ethan and Jeremiah would be impressed with the other man's agility, strength, and grace. It merely pissed me off even more.

"He started it," Jax muttered in Evie's direction.

"Shut up," she hissed in frustration. She looked at both of us, a worried frown on her face. Finally, she asked, "Gabriel, explain why you think Kelsey accused you of rape."

"I don't have to fucking—"

"Please," she added meekly. "For Kelsey. Just explain to me what happened to make you run away."

I didn't want to—they didn't deserve an explanation. Kelsey had admitted it. It was over. Anyway, if I started my story, I was terrified I would start crying...and neither of them should see me look so weak. I vowed to remain stoically silent, even as my mouth opened. "Kelsey and I had just...well, you know. We'd had sex, for the first time. I loved him. I loved him so damned much and tried to wait. I wanted to wait until he was old enough, but things got out of hand." I felt the tears threaten but once I'd started, I couldn't stop the words. "He never said no—never asked me to quit. In fact, he begged me to continue. I wanted to stop because I was afraid of hurting him, but...but...we couldn't. We loved each other too much. We wanted each other too much," I whispered. "When I got home that night, your dad and Kelsey's father showed up at the trailer. I was in my room and heard what they said to my dad when he opened the door. Your dad said that Kelsey had told his father and him that I'd raped him and they were there to arrest me. I ran." I took a deep breath, feeling cleansed that I'd let everything out but also feeling like I had betrayed Kelsey. He'd obviously not told them what he'd said about me. "I lived ten years of misery without Kelsey in my life. Spent a couple of years on the streets and came back for revenge. Figured out I was still in love with him. That's it. Don't interfere with what we have. I'll kill anybody that tries. I've lost too much time with him already."

Evie looked at Jax and Jax looked at Evie. I glared at them both. "That's it. Take the bracelets off of Kelsey, Jax. He doesn't need you anymore. Don't make me come back here and tell you again." I started to get into the rental when I felt Evie's hand on my shoulder.

"Don't leave, Gabriel. There's...somebody has lied. We need to figure out what happened. You lived ten years of misery without Kelsey. Trust me when I say that Kelsey lived ten years of misery without you. There's so much you don't know...that you don't understand. Can we go inside and talk?"

Nice. They were trying to lure me inside so they could kill me. "I'm not interested in hearing anything the two of you have to say," I answered shortly. "All this needs to

be discussed between Kelsey and I. I've already said too much." The thought of betraying Kelsey's trust left a bitter taste in my mouth and a hole in my heart. I should have never come to Jax's house to begin with. I'd known better. Even Titus had known it was a bad move.

"Don't be stubborn, Maverick. Come inside and let us explain some things. It will...help with understanding Kelsey," Jax said, most of the snarl out of his voice. "He isn't the boy you left behind all those years ago. Things...happened. Bad things."

"He and I will work them out," I bit out. It troubled me how badly I wanted to walk inside and hear every detail I could soak up about Kelsey—not because I feared any of it would be bad because I knew better. I just wanted to hear it all from him, not the people who loved him and took care of him after I'd fled.

"The bracelets, Maverick," Jax said quietly as he ran a hand through his hair, "they're to cover the cut marks on his wrists. He tried to kill himself...several times." Jax took a deep, troubled breath and when I looked at him, tears pooled in his eyes. "Things can't just go back to the way they used to be. Kelsey's...damaged. He'll need you to understand."

My hand gripped the side of the car to keep from falling down. Everything around me appeared to be spinning at a dangerous speed. Before I could stop myself, I leaned over and emptied the contents of my stomach. Kelsey tried to commit suicide? Several times? My Kelsey?

Please don't ever leave without me.

His words echoed in my head and I leaned over and purged my stomach again. It was the only thing he'd ever asked of me, not to leave without him, and I'd done it. I'd never given him an opportunity to explain or apologize. Nothing. I'd just...left without him.

When I could talk again, I straightened back up and said, “Let’s go inside.”

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About ten minutes later, Evie had given me some mouthwash and a cold rag to clean myself up with. Then Jax poured me a shot of Tequila and told me to chase it down with the Coke he handed me. I knew then, right at that moment, that the truth was going to be even uglier than what I was already imagining in my head. Tequila on an empty stomach was not smart. Tequila to help me handle what they were about to tell me, though, was necessary.

“Tell me,” I said quietly. I sat on the smaller sofa across from the larger one where both Jax and Evie were perched. My hands gripped my knees, mostly to prevent them from seeing how badly I trembled.

“First of all, Kelsey never told anybody you raped him,” Evie started out, but there was absolutely no venom in her voice...like all the times when we’d spoken. “I’ve called our dad and asked him to come over. He has some explaining to do, and I think it’s best that he face all of us when he’s doing it. It shouldn’t take him more than fifteen minutes to get here. But, Gabriel Maverick, know this and fuck whatever comes out of his mouth. Our father is a different man than he was back then and I don’t think he’ll lie, but if he says Kelsey accused you of raping him, then he’s lying. Kelsey never said that about you.”

Confusion swept over me. Kelsey had all but admitted to it. No, he’d never said the actual word rape, but there’d been plenty of times that he’d referred to what he’d done...what he’d said. I honestly couldn’t help but believe both Jax and Evie were mistaken. It didn’t change anything about how I felt about Kelsey, but they had gotten bad information. I hoped to hell it didn’t change how they felt about the man I loved. Kelsey loved Jax and Evie and if I’d done something to fuck that up, I’d never forgive myself.

“Here’s what we know,” Jax started. “The night, after you and Kelsey made love, Kelsey went home and Wayne caught him sneaking into the house. Wayne’s always been an ass...always hated Kelsey and went out of his way to try and hurt him. I have no clue why and really don’t give a fuck...it’s just the way it is.” Jax’s voice sounded ragged when he added, “Wayne used to always beat him. He’d have bruises all over him.” His eyes looked across the small distance separating us when he said, “I can’t believe you never saw them when you guys messed around. Kelsey told us you messed around, Maverick. How in the hell could you have missed that many damned bruises on his pale skin?” He started shaking his head, disgust for me more than evident. “I’ve never understood that. How? He wasn’t my fucking boyfriend and I noticed them during gym class. How is it that you should have been worshipping him with your eyes and never saw Wayne’s handiwork?”

The bruises...always there. Dark patches on his perfect skin. My fingers used to trace the outlines and I’d beg him to stop playing soccer. Fuck. I’d touched the very spots where Wayne had violated him. I’d even gotten mad at him a few times and demanded that if he truly loved me, he’d stop playing soccer. He would end up distracting me, cooling my anger with his soft laughter and even softer kisses. “He...he told me they came from playing soccer.” I felt my face turn red with humiliation. “I thought they were from getting kicked and hit on the soccer field.” My excuse sounded lame to me so I could imagine how it sounded to them.

“Kelsey didn’t play soccer in high school, Gabriel,” Jax answered angrily. “If you’d ever tried to learn anything about him, you’d have known that.” He stood up and paced over to the window, looked out, muttered a few more curse words, and then returned to sit down next to Evie. His eyes still shot daggers of hate and accusation in my direction.

“Gabe didn’t deserve that, Jax,” Evie whispered. “We both know how good Kelsey was...is...at lying. It’s an art he had to perfect in order to survive. Don’t blame Gabe for not seeing through it when he was nothing more than a child himself.” She



reached over and patted Jax's leg. "He fooled both of us for years and we were much older." She turned and looked at me. "Jax is just angry, Gabe. It's been so easy for both of us to hate you...to blame you for everything." She shook her head slowly. "And now, here you are, taking that away from us. I'm sure Kelsey did lie to you. He was ashamed."

I could still feel the anger radiating from Jax's body, but I didn't think it was all directed toward me, or not anymore, at least. "Why would he be ashamed? Wayne was the asshole," I hissed. I still couldn't believe his brother had been beating him, marring the perfection of his body, and I'd done nothing to protect him.

"Wayne was and still is an asshole. We all know that. He was also his daddy's favorite and was able to get away with practically anything, including using his baby brother as a punching bag." Her eyes looked sad when she looked at me. "Wayne used to keep Kelsey in line, to make him keep his mouth shut about the beatings. He'd threaten to tell their dad about you guys seeing each other. Kelsey knew that not only would his dad be angry over him being gay, but he was worried about what he would do to you and your family. Kelsey damned well knew what his family was capable of...how they would throw their money around to make people do what they wanted. He was afraid of them hurting you, so he kept his mouth shut and took his beatings." Her smile turned soft and sad. "He told me of how you and he would talk about running away. It was his fantasy. He told me he planned for it every goddamned day—kept a bag ready. He'd slowly started stealing money from...well, from everybody in his family. He had nearly three thousand dollars hidden in that bag, ready to go. He was just waiting on you." Tears streamed down her face. "He said that you'd promised to not leave without him. It...it nearly killed him when you did."

"You and he were...friends?" I asked, not knowing what else to say. Her words were wrapping around my heart and head, squeezing the life out of me. I couldn't stop the images of my sweet Kelsey tucking money away for us, just waiting for me to rescue

him from the hell he was living in...the hell I hadn't known existed.

She laughed bitterly. "No...not then. Kelsey..." She frowned and looked at Jax and then turned back to me. "Kelsey didn't really have any friends in school, at least not any I ever noticed him hanging out with. He mostly just kept his head down, did his own business, and got out of school as soon as the bell rang." Jax reached over and took Evie's hand, giving it a squeeze of support. "Kelsey and I met each other when we were both at the same psychiatric facility." Her eyes dropped and then raised back up again. "Kelsey was there for trying to commit suicide and I was there for mutilating my body." She shrugged and smiled sadly. "Needless to say, we were both in a very dark place at that time in our lives and we kinda learned to cling to each other. Our friendship stayed solid over the years, even allowing Jax into our group." She squeezed Jax's hand back.

A tiny part of me was jealous of what Jax, Evie, and Kelsey shared, but the biggest part of me was so damned thankful that he'd had somebody to lean on after I'd deserted him. I looked at Evie, saw the sadness in her eyes but also noted the pride lurking in the depths. She'd survived a lot, apparently. She and my Kelsey. As bad as I hated to admit it, they'd probably both had Jax's solid strength to help them when things had gotten too dark.

"Did...when Kelsey tried to kill himself, did that open his father's eyes at all? Please tell me things got better for him." Ashamed for appearing to only be worried about the man I loved, I quickly added, "It looks like things worked out for you. I admire your courage to not just accept what life tossed your way, especially when you knew it was wrong."

She smiled for just a second, but then the somber gaze returned. "Yes, it worked out for me. It was a wake-up call for my parents, and I'm one of the lucky ones with parents willing to accept the changes I needed to make. They helped me through the process of my sex change and have supported me from the moment I stepped out of

the hospital 'til now. Yes, it changed my father. A lot. I never thought he could or would accept me, but he did. He was forced to resign from his position as sheriff because most of the townspeople weren't nearly as supportive, but he did it...with a few politically incorrect words directed toward the naysayers. Kelsey, on the other hand, didn't fare as well with his family."

"Not at all surprising," Jax hissed. "I have no fucking idea how Kelsey came from that clan of idiots. There's absolutely no goodness in any of them, but Kelsey's made of nothing but good. I'll never understand it."

It was so hard for me to imagine the Kelsey I used to know, so confident and full of mischievousness, taking a blade to his wrists. Me...I'd done that to him. "What did they do to him?" I demanded.

"Nothing," Evie answered. "They didn't do anything—tried to sweep it under the rug and pretend nothing ever happened. They were embarrassed...and not for the right reasons. They thought it made him weak and the entire family already treated him like he was a cowardly wimp as it was. He needed to receive more treatment after leaving the facility, but they refused. Hell, he'd never been there in the first place if somebody outside the family hadn't been the one to find him. Knowing Wayne Sr. and Wayne Jr., they would have let him bleed to death before they would have allowed any negative gossip to be spread about the Morganston name. Some hikers found him, called 911, and they had no choice but to admit him into the facility because it was clearly a suicide attempt."

"Hikers?" I mumbled, and I knew. My heart knew where he'd been when he tried to end his life. He'd been at our spot in the woods. It had been his way to get as close to me as he could. God, how I hated myself.

"Yeah, hikers," Jax answered. "Don't dwell on it, Maverick. What's done is done."

The edge of his tone told me he wasn't really ready to let everything go, but he was trying...for Kelsey's sake.

I looked up at him. "So, you put the leather bracelets on him to...? I don't understand. To stop him from attempting it again?" That didn't seem very logical to me. There were plenty of other ways to kill oneself. There was more to the story and I was sure I probably didn't want to hear it.

"I made him the bracelets after his fourth attempt," Jax answered. "They aren't there to prevent him from slicing his veins again; they're there to remind him that he's loved. Every time he looked down, when his fingers and heart itched to do something to ease his suffering, I wanted him to know how badly it would hurt me and Evie if he went through with it. Kelsey was never worried about himself, but he hated the thoughts of hurting either of us."

"Thank you," I whispered, still so sickened by the facts, so sickened by what my running away had led to. What it had turned Kelsey into. "So...so you're not into the...lifestyle?" I asked, referring to BDSM and the collar remark Jax had made in the hallway—the one that made me green with jealousy.

"Yes, I am. So is Kelsey," Jax answered. There was, I couldn't help but notice, a big of smugness to his voice. Hell, maybe I imagined it because when I looked up at Jax, there was nothing but sadness on his face.

"Never together, though. I could never lay on hand on Kelsey like that," Jax finally eased my torment. "He has a Dom—one that I don't care for at all so I'm always there to ensure nothing gets out of hand during any of their scenes. His name is Daulton, and he's somebody Kelsey picked out. I know you won't understand it or see it the way I do, but I really do try my best to take care of Kelsey. I just...he just...Hell," he finally muttered, unsure of how to continue.

“Kelsey wants to be hurt, Gabriel,” Evie cut in, saving her brother. “He believes he deserves to be hurt. If he has sex, it has to be...abusive. He...he won’t allow himself anything else. When he saw what his suicide attempts were doing to us, he stopped. Next, he started cutting himself. Finally, he settled on BDSM.”

“But for all the wrong reasons,” Jax said between gritted teeth. “What Kelsey does with Daulton makes the lifestyle...ugly.” His eyes bore into mine. “Do you see what I mean now, Maverick? It isn’t going to be easy with Kelsey. The ugliness of his life has imprinted on his soul and I’m not sure he’ll ever be able to escape it. He tries, God knows he tries, but he hasn’t had the strength. Not yet, at least. Maybe...maybe you’ll be able to give him what he needs...what he deserves.” The doorbell rang, interrupting Jax. He stood up to answer it, but turned back to me at the last minute. “If you aren’t in it for life, Maverick, get out now. Loving him for a little while and then leaving again will kill him. There won’t be anything any of us can do to stop him. Walk the fuck out right now if you aren’t planning on staying.”

I wanted to hate him, but every word and emotion flowing from him was true. I also knew his worries, at least those concerning me ever leaving Kelsey again, were a waste. Kelsey had always been mine. “When I leave this town again, Kelsey will be with me.”

He stared another few seconds and then muttered, “Good.”

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“Don’t hate him,” Evie whispered softly. “His role of protecting Kelsey and me is a role he takes seriously. Jax is as fucked up as the rest of us; he just doesn’t have an opportunity to let it out, because he’s always watching over somebody.”

“I’m beginning to see that,” I answered. “And don’t you hate me,” I said, my own words barely above a whisper. “I made so many mistakes. I should have never believed the worst about Kelsey, but my own damned pride and poor opinion of myself was always a problem. I couldn’t believe somebody like Kelsey could honestly care about somebody like me, so when his dad and the sheriff showed up, I was quick to believe the worst. I loved Kels so much back then. Hell, I never stopped. Even when I claimed to hate him, I knew I was lying to myself and to everyone else. I wanted to hate him...I just couldn’t do it.”

Before Evie could answer, Jax led his father into the room. I stood up. Terror washed over me and I hated myself for that weakness. In that particular second, I was the same little boy hiding in his bedroom, listening to them talk about taking me away. The fear of what I might face and the shame of what I was felt exactly like it had that very night.

Their father hadn’t changed much—time had been more than gracious to him. I could barely note any significant physical changes, but there was a softness in his eyes that hadn’t been there before. I saw his eyes narrow after he’d stared at me for a few uncomfortable minutes. Finally, he said, “You’re that Maverick kid, aren’t you?”

I rubbed my hands down the front of my pants in a nervous gesture—a feeling I hadn’t felt in years upon years. No matter what Jax and Evie had just told me, I refused to allow the old man to make me feel like the trash I’d once been. I was better

than that and damn him to hell for thinking otherwise.

“Sheriff,” I muttered and then sat back down. He didn’t deserve my respect or handshake, not after the lies he’d been a part of.

“Not anymore,” he answered and turned his attention to Jax. “Why am I here? What questions did you need answering? I assume it has something to do with the rape allegations involving your friend and this man?”

Jax motioned for his dad to take a seat next to Evie. I was shocked to watch the older man lean in and give his daughter a giant hug. This man was definitely different than the asshole I remembered from my youth.

“How are you, baby?” he whispered.

“I’ve been better, Pops. There’s some problems with what Kelsey has told me and what Gabriel is saying about the night he left town. We’re hoping you can shed some light on what really happened. You’ll help, won’t you?”

“Of course.” His eyes cut around in my direction, crinkled with a frown, and then back to Evie. “What do you need to know?”

“Gabriel says that you and Kelsey’s dad came to his house and accused him of raping Kelsey. Is that true? Did Kelsey say Gabriel raped him?”

Without hesitation, he answered, “Yes, he did.”

I saw both Evie and Jax gasp in disbelief. I didn’t. Nothing the man said mattered to me. Kelsey was already forgiven. I understood now that anything Kelsey might have said was done in order to protect himself. If he’d needed to say I raped him to get Wayne Sr. and Jr. to stop hitting him, I was glad he did it.

“I remember that night vividly,” the older man continued. “It wasn’t every night the Morganston patriarch showed up on our doorstep. Wayne Sr. and Jr. were both there. The old man was having a coronary, screaming at me to get off my ass and arrest Gabriel Maverick. After they told me what had happened, I had to agree with them.”

His eyes cut in my direction again. “I realize you were young, son, but that doesn’t make what you did right. Kelsey Morganston was underage and you weren’t. Hell, not the ages would have even mattered. Rape is rape. No means no.”

“Kelsey wasn’t there, though?” Jax asked, still refusing to believe Kelsey had lied. “You didn’t hear Kelsey say it?”

“No, but I didn’t have to. Wayne Jr. had it filmed on his cell phone.” He paused, frowned, and then looked over at me again. “Are you claiming the two of you didn’t have sex? I saw it with my own eyes, son. I saw you wrestling with him, holding him down, and then...well, there was sex. The video on the cell wasn’t that good, but it was clear what was going on.”

Wayne had been there? Watching us? The sick motherfucking bastard!

Of course, if Wayne really had filmed it, they would have known it wasn’t rape. Kelsey had begged. I’d tried to talk him out of it. Suddenly, a thought occurred to me. “Was there any pauses or blips in the video?” We had wrestled like we always did. I had held him down. We’d played around before things had started getting out of hand.

His frown deepened. “Yeah...he said there was a problem with his phone, but he’d been there the entire time. He’d watched you...” He stopped talking and a look of horror washed over his face. “Fuck, surely he wouldn’t have just watched you rape his baby brother?”



It was as if it was the first time he'd actually stopped and considered the story the Morganston men had fed him. I felt sick to my stomach and ashamed for him at the same time. So much damned time lost because people were guilty of feeling the same way I had—like I wasn't worth anything.

Evie said me, "You said that Kelsey had all but admitted it to you that he was responsible for you running away. Kelsey never told them you raped him. That night, after he got home, Wayne cornered him and started threatening him about telling their dad about you. He said he was going to do everything in his power to get you into trouble. That's when Kelsey started running his mouth. He started telling Wayne that he wouldn't be caught dead with somebody like you and that he was too good for you. He said a bunch of shit...stuff he didn't mean, but he was desperate to get Wayne off his fixation with you. He made up a boy and told Wayne that's who he'd been with. He said he was in love with this other boy. He...he said lots of things. Bad things about you, Gabriel. After...after he'd finished, Wayne pulled his phone out and told him he'd recorded each and every word. Then he explained how he was going to go straight to your house and make you listen to it. Kelsey tried to take the phone away from him and Wayne punched him hard enough to knock him out. When he woke up, he was locked in his bedroom. The next morning, Wayne Jr. told him that he'd let you hear what Kelsey really thought about him and you'd left him. Left town without him. Kelsey told him he was full of shit, that you'd never leave without him."

Tears streamed down her face. Jax looked mad enough to kill somebody. Their dad looked like he was on the verge of a stroke. I couldn't imagine the look that was on my face. The betrayal Kelsey must have felt when he thought I left him over his comments. The guilt he must have felt...

"Instead of that, it looks like Wayne Jr. made up some bullshit, fed it to his dad, and then they fed it to me. I was stupid enough to believe it and I thought I had grounds to make an arrest." His eyes, suddenly weary and old, looked at me when he said, "I'd

like to think the truth would have come out eventually, son—that I would have made sure to see the right thing was done by you, but I can't say that. I...I wasn't a good man back then. Hell, I may not be one now," he muttered.

The room grew silent as we all wallowed in our own sort of misery. At the moment, I was sure of only one thing. I wanted to literally destroy Wayne Jr. The man would never receive the punishment he deserved for all the hurt he'd caused. Taking his company wouldn't scratch the surface. I knew that if I didn't leave Trenton Falls, and leave it quickly, I'd end up killing Wayne Jr. and then spend the rest of my life in jail...away from Kelsey.

I stood up, needing to hold him in my arms. I needed to get both of us out of this town. If I didn't, I'd do something that would destroy our future forever.

"I need to get out of here," I muttered as I started toward the door. My cell phone ringing caused me to frown. We all had a 911 ringtone and mine was sounding off. I yanked my phone out and answered, "What? What's happened?"

It was Titus. "Kelsey knows where you went, Mav. He went nuts. I...I couldn't stop him and Ethan and Jeremiah weren't up yet. By the time I was able to get them, he was already gone. Disappeared. I couldn't stop him, Mav. I tried. I honestly tried. There was...he's messed up. You've got to find him. I'm really scared."

"Shit!" I hung up and turned back around to look at Jax. "Kelsey knows I'm here and Titus said he...reacted badly. Why? What would upset him so much about me coming to see you? I need help here. Titus saw Kelsey's reaction and he was afraid of what he might do."

"Fuck, I was afraid this would happen," Jax said as he stood up and started moving. "Let's go, we've got to find him." He turned to Evie, "Stay here in case he shows up...even though we both know he won't. Call if you hear anything." He turned to

me. “Move, Maverick! We won’t have much time if Kelsey’s determined to hurt himself.”

I moved, but still didn’t understand. Once inside the car, I asked again, “Why would he get so upset? What’s he afraid of?”

“The truth,” Jax answered softly. “He’s afraid of you finding out the truth. We told you, Maverick. He’s ashamed of himself...for lots of reasons. He’ll think you’ll look differently at him if you know he tried to commit suicide. He’ll think you won’t want him when you hear what he’s let Daulton do to him. He’ll think lots of things and rest assured, none of them will be good. It’s how Kelsey’s mind works.”

### Chapter 12

Kelsey

I couldn't believe it. He'd betrayed me. Again. He damned well knew I wouldn't want him going to see Jax and there he was...seeing Jax. I knew what they were saying, what Jax would reveal to him. I knew it, and I was so damned mad that I couldn't see straight. My head pounded with fury. As usual, I let my emotions take control of my actions. I'd fought with Titus and maybe even hurt him. Then I'd run away, even when I knew I had nowhere to go.

One of the workers from the plant happened to be driving down the road where I was walking toward town, and he'd picked me up. I was lucky. Even in my fury, I hadn't wanted to face Ethan or Jeremiah. Titus was a lightweight, like me. Those guys...not so much.

"Just drop me off at my house if you don't care, Mitch. I need to shower before coming into work."

"It's the weekend, Kelsey," Mitch answered. "No work today. What were you doing way out here anyway? Walking? Barefoot? In the cold?"

Wow. I guess there really wasn't any way to pretend like everything was perfectly normal. I started laughing and then quickly stopped, alarmed by the foreign sound. Fuck, it had been a long time since I'd laughed. Well, I'd laughed, but nothing real. It had been so fucking long since I'd actually felt anything, that it honestly felt strange. I liked it.

“Just take me home, Mitch. I’m in a mess.” I turned and looked at him, smiled, and said, “I guess that much is pretty obvious, huh?” I laughed again and decided I liked the sound.

“Yeah, no hiding that...with the hickeys on your neck.”

“Shit.” I flipped the visor down and did a quick look at what was visible. There were red patches on my face where Gabe’s stubble had rubbed my cheeks. There were hickeys, just as Mitch had teased, on both sides of my neck. My hair stood out in every direction, like somebody’s hands had played with it all night long. I looked...well-fucked. It was a look I wasn’t familiar with, but that wasn’t what captured my attention. There was a light in my eyes that hadn’t been there in years. Just like that...

One night of sex—one night of being in Gabe’s arms and the fire was back. Normally, under circumstances as critical as the emotional mess I currently felt, I would have been fantasizing about ending my life, slicing my skin until the pain of the cut made me forget the pain in my heart, or calling Daulton and begging him to whip and fuck me until my body felt nothing else except pure physical and sexual exhaustion. None of those things, however, had crossed my mind when I’d overheard Titus talking to himself, fussing about how stupid Gabriel was for going to talk to Jax without my permission. I’d been furious and it had felt fucking good. I wanted to punch Gabe and Jax. I might even punch Evie, pretending she was still Evan and give her a good solid punch to the jaw. No, I couldn’t do that. I’d have to stick with punching Jax and Gabe.

I smiled and laughed again. “Let’s not tell anybody about this morning, okay?”

Mitch laughed, even louder than me. “Sure, you can trust me, boss.” He turned his head and winked at me. “I’m really sorry, Kelsey, but I can’t sit on gossip like this. It’s just too good. Please don’t fire me.”

He looked so goddamned sincere that I couldn't stop laughing. I felt amazing. I didn't even care if Mitch told the entire town. Gabe had told me he loved me. We'd work our way through whatever he'd heard this morning. With Gabe by my side again, I felt like I could conquer the world. This. This was what I'd needed. No, I wasn't miraculously healed of my depression, but being near Gabriel was a step in the right direction. It wasn't a band-aid like it always was with Jax or Evie. I carried on through the really hard times because I didn't want to hurt them. Hurting me? That was normally a habit of mine. But everything felt different now.

He'd said he loved me last night, that he'd forgiven me for what I'd done, but I wasn't foolish enough to let myself believe all our troubles were behind us. If I'd learned anything over the years, it was that people lied to you. All. The. Time. Hell, I lied to people. I'd lied to Jax when I told him I wasn't thinking of suicide as an option any longer, because suicide was always an option in my head. I'd lied to Evie when I said Gabriel didn't possess the power to hurt me any longer. Shit, that had been a really big one. The Mack-Daddy of lies.

Gabriel Maverick. My Gabe.

It had always been him. It always would be him.

He either held me together or I fell apart without him. Yes, I knew that wasn't healthy, and my therapist had told me that over and over again. Actually, she made sure to mention it every time I visited. She explained how unhealthy my obsession with Gabe was. Words. They were all words. There was no way she could have understood my feelings for the man.

No, everything wasn't perfect in my world, but for the first time in a long time, I had hope. Even if last night had been nothing but a bed of lies and revenge sex to Gabe, it had been more to me. On top of that, when he'd looked at me last night, I'd caught glimpses of the old Gabe, the one I'd been in love with for years. He was the only

man to hold my heart in his hands. This time, hopefully, we'd both be more careful with each other's hearts.

"I can't fire you, Mitch. I don't own the place anymore." Shit, we were almost to my house. That meant there'd been several minutes of silence while I'd been lost in my daydreaming.

Mitch grinned. "I know. I would have at least lied and pretended I wouldn't tell if you'd still owned the place." He pulled into my driveway. "I hope the night was at least worth the morning, boss."

I grinned back. "It was worth every damned minute of it, Mitch. Every. Damned. Minute." I opened the door and stepped out, wincing when my bare foot hit the cold ground. I'd been so mad earlier that I hadn't really noticed. "See ya Monday."

"Hey! My daughter uses a curling iron and puts fake little burns on her neck to try and hide her hickeys. Maybe you could go in that direction?"

"Ha-ha, Mitch. Very funny."

After a quick wave, I sprinted for the front door. I was grinning like a fool the entire time. I was alive again. Alive. Yes, I was still kicking their asses, but I was fucking alive.

I stepped inside my small home, shut the door, and froze in horror. Wayne was standing in the hallway, holding Snowball. His hands stroked her slowly and I knew she was either dead or unconscious. The only people she allowed to touch her was me or Evie. Or Gabriel at one time. "What are you doing here, Wayne? Put my cat down. Now."

"Now, now. Is that any way to talk to your favorite brother?" he asked as he tossed

Snowball across the room. She landed with a heavy thud, but at least it was on a pile of blankets.

Her blue eyes blinked at me and a small sense of relief washed over me. Gabe would take care of Snowball and her kittens...if I couldn't.

"I don't have a favorite brother, Wayne. I hate you all. Why are you here?" My hand reached behind me, searching for the doorknob, but he pounced on me before I'd barely moved an inch. I fought him, punched him hard enough in the nose that I heard a loud cracking noise and blood spurted in my face. I shoved him away, grabbed the doorknob, and yanked the door open. I knew if I ran, Wayne would follow me. At least my pets would be safe, even if I knew I wouldn't. I had a good chance, though. Wayne hadn't run or even walked fast for at least ten years.

Blocking my path, though, was Daulton. I frowned, confused by the strange expression on his face. Daulton was my Dom, the man I'd selected to hurt me when I felt the urge to be hurt. I'd felt the urge often. When Jax had refused to abuse my body the way I craved, I'd found another man who would. Daulton loved hurting me. We didn't, however, have a scheduled appointment and as far as I knew, Daulton didn't have a clue where I lived.



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Behind me, Wayne was spewing curse words and threatening to kill me in numerous different ways. Wayne was a fat, lazy idiot. The true threat stood in front of me. “Why are you here, Daulton?”

He grinned. “Shouldn’t you say, sir?” he suggested.

No, we weren’t in a scene. I didn’t need to call him anything. “Why are you here, sir?” I asked anyway, hoping to appease him until I could figure a way out of the mess I was in. Daulton wasn’t at my house on a social call.

He shrugged. “Well, since you asked so nicely, pet, I’m here to help Wayne kill you.”

I wasn’t surprised by the words; not really. I should have known. Wayne kept a close eye on every move I made. Of course, he would have known about Daulton. Of course, Daulton would have been easily bought. Of course. Of course. Of course.

I felt something sharp prick the side of my neck and in an instant, the room started spinning. The fucking cowards had drugged me. They were both twice my size and they’d still felt the need to drug me. Cowards.

My last thought before the darkness took me was of Gabriel—of all we had missed...of all we would miss in the future. My time had run out.

Gabriel

Jax and I had gone straight to Kelsey’s house, but he wasn’t there, nor did it look like he’d been there at all that morning. The shower was dry and the clothes he’d been

wearing the night before were nowhere to be found. Other than Snowball acting terrified of us, nothing seemed amiss. After that, we'd gone back to the renovated church where I was staying to see if maybe he'd cooled his heels and returned to confront me.

No sign of Kelsey there, either.

"We're wasting time that we don't have," Jax snarled. "Either you come with me to the hiking trail now or I go without you. I'm telling you, Maverick, that's where Kelsey is." He was angrily pacing the length of the living room. "I told you he wasn't the same boy you left behind. If Kelsey feels like you betrayed him, he won't be able to handle it. He...he cares too much for you. His mind will twist every detail of last night into something ugly, regardless of what it really was. Come with me, Gabe. Kelsey will need your help."

The unspoken words were 'if it's not too late,' but I chose to ignore them. Something wasn't right. There was no mistaking that Jax probably knew Kelsey better than I did at least now, after we'd been separated for ten years, but my heart still knew Kelsey's soul. He wouldn't do that to me...to us. He wouldn't.

I turned to Titus. "Tell me again how he acted when he overheard you this morning."

Titus was sporting a black eye and his pride was severely bruised, but his main concern was Kelsey's safety.

"He was angry. Furious. He called both you and Jax every name in the book...and I'm not talking about the good book, either. He snarled around the kitchen, knocking chairs over, muttering about how he was going to kick your ass and when he was finished with yours, he was moving on to Jax. Evie's ass may have been mentioned. After he slung the coffee pot across the fridge and punched me in the face, I thought maybe I needed to call for backup. By the time Ethan and I got back down the stairs,

he was gone. We drove up and down the streets, but it was like he'd just vanished into thin air." His eyes cut around to look at Jax. "He didn't act suicidal...more like homicidal."

Jax frowned and continued his pacing.

"Is that normal, Jax? Is that behavior the depressed, suicidal Kelsey that you're describing?" I asked. I was so fucking torn and unsure of what I needed to do. Should I listen to Jax or follow my own heart?

"No," Jax muttered. "It's nothing like the usual Kelsey downslide. He gets quiet and doesn't say anything to anybody. He's withdrawn." His frown deepened. "It isn't like he goes off and has a pity party or something but he's...empty. It's like there's no emotion to him at all."

"That was not the Kelsey I was faced with this morning. That boy had enough emotion swimming in his veins that he won't get rid of the adrenalin for weeks," Titus said.

I was following my heart. "Kelsey isn't going to kill himself. He wouldn't do that, not after last night."

Jax laughed bitterly. "Perfect. You think one good fuck is going to turn him around? That's insane, Maverick! The kid needs help. He hates himself. His idea of a hot date is letting Daulton beat his ass and then fuck him so brutally that he can't leave his bed for a couple of days. One doesn't move from thatto lovey-dovey."

"Bring up Daulton's name just one more time, Jax, and so help me Jeezus, I'll kill you and bury you in fifty different places!"

Ethan quickly stood up and put his body between me and Jax. "This isn't helping

anything, men. Let's try to think. What would Kelsey do? Where would he go?"

"To the tree," Jax answered quickly. "He'd go to the tree where he and Maverick used to meet. Every time he's tried to kill himself, it's been there. That's where we need to be...like fifteen minutes ago!"

Jeremiah, who'd been over in the corner talking on his cell phone, shouted for us to shut up. He shoved his cell in his pocket and said, "Okay, I've called every employee at Morganston Textiles to see if anybody's seen or talked to Kelsey this morning. I just got a call back. Somebody named Mitch saw him walking, picked him up, and took him home. This guy says he watched Kelsey go into his house."

"Who is this Mitch guy and can we trust him?" Ethan asked quickly. Since Jax was the only local, he turned his full attention to him when he asked the question.

"Mitch works at the plant. He's a good guy. If he says he took Kelsey home, then he took Kelsey home." His frown deepened with each word that passed his lips. He looked over at me and asked, "Did we miss something?"

Jax's cell started ringing and he yanked it out of his pocket, nearly ripping his jeans in the process. "Give me some good news, Evie," he demanded.

I was standing next to him in a second, trying my best to hear whatever Evie was saying. When he noticed, I half-expected him to shove me away, but he put the phone on speaker instead.

"You're on speaker, Evie," Jax said. "Tell everybody what you just told me."

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“Sitting there and doing nothing was driving me crazy, so I asked dad to stay at your place in case Kelsey showed up there. I ran over to his place, just to check things out. It’s weird here, Jax. Something isn’t right. Snowball didn’t want me to touch her and when I finally cornered her, it was easy to see why. She’s been injured. Badly. I think at least one of her legs is broken. I also found the pop cap to a needle in the entry hallway. Last time I checked, Kelsey doesn’t take any medication which requires needles. It just feels...off.”

“Any sign of a struggle?” I asked. Who would want to hurt Kelsey? I sure the fuck knew Kelsey hadn’t injured his own cat, even if he was intent on hurting himself?

“No, nothing like that,” she answered.

I could tell from the tone of her voice there was something she wasn’t sharing with us.

“What time did you get there, Evie?” Jax asked. “Maverick and I were there at around 8:45 this morning.”

“We missed each other by minutes, then,” she said. “I got here around 8:50.” She paused and then asked, “Did you notice any strange...smells?”

Smells? What the hell was she getting at? “Just spit it out, Evie. What are you getting at?” I demanded, ignoring the glare Jax pointed in my direction.

I watched as that glare turned into something else...something that terrified me. Realization caused his face to morph into something ugly.

“Daulton,” he muttered. “His cologne. It didn’t register with me until you said something. What would that fucker be doing at Kelsey’s house? I specifically made sure Kelsey never gave him any personal information. I’ve never trusted Daulton with Kelsey.”

“You...you said Kelsey called on this Daulton guy when he needed to, uh, feel pain. Do you think Kelsey reached out to him when he heard me say Gabe was going to see you?”

“Kelsey never has a scene with Daulton unless I’m there to supervise. Never. He wouldn’t.”

“So, you thought he would betray me by killing himself but wouldn’t dare betray you by having a BDSM scene without you there to babysit him?” I practically roared. The thoughts of another man’s hands on Kelsey was making my ability to think straight fly out the window.

“Yeah, pretty much,” Jax answered. “Kelsey trusts me. He knows I only want what’s best for him. The jury’s still out on you and what you want.”

Blind rage swept over me and I lunged for Jax. Ethan was there to jerk me back before we made contact. “Not now, kids. Hell, I’ll sell tickets so we can all watch the two of you rip each other apart after we get Kelsey back.” He jerked the back of my collar and made sure I wasn’t about to try to sneak around him and get to Jax again.

“Does Wayne know Daulton?” I asked Jax. A horrible thought crept into my mind. Wayne was the one person that had always been there to hurt Kelsey.

“Not that I know of,” Jax answered. “Why? What are you thinking?”

Terror washed over me. I knew exactly who had Kelsey. I also knew what Wayne

was capable of and that my return...my takeover of Morganston Textiles had pushed him to his limit. He would hurt Kelsey just so he could hurt me. “Wayne. He’ll try to make it look like a suicide—that way nobody would point a finger at him. He’ll tell everybody about Kelsey’s other suicide attempts and thinks he’ll walk away without ever looking back.”

“If you honestly believe that, then Wayne wouldn’t be stupid enough to take him to the tree. He’d know that’s the first place I’d look. Knowing Wayne, he’d want to make Kelsey suffer as long as possible.”

I looked at Jax and memories of that night, our last night together, raced through my mind. I knew exactly where Wayne would take Kelsey. “Let’s go.” I started toward the door, my heart racing with the fear that I might be too late.

“Where are we going?” Jax asked, matching my steps as we both raced toward the car. I heard Ethan, Jeremiah, and Titus climbing into their own vehicle. I also knew their vehicle would be equipped with anything we might need to handle whatever situation Kelsey was in, whether it be a sniper rifle or medical emergency bag. They were always prepared...always there for me.

“Where does Wayne Jr. always go when he needs to borrow a pair of balls?”

Jax sat quietly for a second and then answered, “He runs to his daddy.”

“Exactly.”

Kelsey

The cold marble of Wayne Sr.’s tombstone ate its way through the thin fabric of my T-shirt. They’d propped me against the headstone of the only man I’d ever hated more than Wayne Jr. Whatever they’d dosed me with, it was doing the job. I couldn’t

move. It was taking every ounce of my strength to get oxygen into my lungs. I had no idea how long I'd been unconscious. When I'd finally managed to pry my eyes open, I'd found myself on the grave, Jax's bracelets cut off, and my blood already flowing freely from the brutal cuts on both my wrists. Fuck, but Daulton and Wayne had done a much better job of butchering my skin than I'd ever done.

Finally...something Wayne was good at.

My eyes rolled to the back of my head and I reprimanded myself for the sarcasm. Now wasn't the time for dry humor, or any humor, for that matter. Wayne was about to succeed at what I'd failed at, ending my own life. There was a time when I would have been happy to see the end so near. Hell, I'd even prayed for it time and time again.

Not now, though. Not when Gabriel was finally back in my life. For the first time in ten years, I wanted to live and Wayne was taking it away from me. I really fucking hated my brother. It was him that had run Gabe off the first time, and after what I'm sure Jax told Gabe earlier that morning, Gabe wouldn't have a hard time believing I'd killed myself. I loved Jax and Evie, but had no doubts they would describe me as the walking, talking poster child of self-hatred.

When he told me he loved me last night, had he meant it? I told myself he did.

"You made sure his fingerprints are on the knife, right?" Wayne asked Daulton as he paced around the gravesite.



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Daulton leaned down and looked at me. “Sure did. His cute little fingerprints are all over it.” He laughed. “Anyway, who’d question this little fairy offing himself? Everybody knows he’s not the sharpest knife in the drawer.” He leaned in closer and said, “That’s a little knife humor, pet. You got it, didn’t you?” He tilted his head as he watched me. “Wait, you can’t move, can you? I’ll just assume you got my joke.”

“How much longer is this going to take?” Wayne snarled.

Even with my vision growing fuzzy, I noted how his belly jiggled as he walked. Maybe I’d get lucky and he’d die of a heart attack while watching me bleed out. Wouldn’t that be some poetic justice?

“Why? You worried somebody’s gonna catch us?” Daulton asked.

He acted arrogant, but I noticed how he glanced around the graveyard, a worried expression on his face. Yep, he knew what Jax would do to him if he ever learned of his involvement with hurting me. It gave me some consolation to know the coward would probably have nightmares about it for years. Jax was a mean son of a bitch when crossed.

Wayne huffed out a breath. “Nah, ain’t no angels gonna rush to his rescue. They’re all at the tree looking for him. Kelsey was always so...unimaginative. He went to the same damned place every time he took the knife to his wrists.” Wayne straightened and tucked the front of his shirt back into his pants. Every time he moved, it came untucked and exposed his ample gut. “Hell, he’ll probably rot out here before anybody finds his body. I’m the only one that comes to visit Daddy, so as long as I stay away, the worms and maggots can have their way with him.”

“Don’t forget the coyotes,” Daulton murmured. “I’ve heard about them ripping bodies apart and spreading the pieces far and wide.” He scratched his chin thoughtfully and said, “They may never find your body, kid.”

“Don’t say that shit,” Wayne countered. “I’m counting on the proceeds from his life insurance policy to put me back on track. I’ll have to make sure somebody finds him before he completely disappears into the belly of some wild animal.”

I tried to tune out their cruelty. I hoped Snowball was okay. Evie would take care of her and the kittens. I also knew she’d give Gabe my journals. Although it wouldn’t help either of us, I still felt comforted by the fact that he would read them and know I never stopped loving him.

Wayne squatted down in front of me. “Hey, kiddo. Did I ever tell you about the time I ran Gabriel Maverick out of Trenton Falls? Yeah, I think I did. At least I gave you one version of why he ran away, leaving his faggot lover behind. You wanna know the real story, baby brother? You know...as a parting gift?”

He laughed at himself but my ears perked up...even if the rest of my body was as lifeless as a corpse. What had they given me?

“I know what you’re thinking,” he said, “but there’s so much more to the story. That little recording I made of you ranting and raving about how much better you were than Gabriel Maverick—the one where you swore you’d never let that trailer-trash lay a finger on your body? I didn’t let Gabriel listen to that, I didn’t need to. No, instead of letting Maverick listen to your lies, I told Daddy about that little fuckfest you and your lover shared in the woods that night.” He tried to lean in closer, lost his balance, and ended up landing on his ass. “I was there that night, the night Maverick turned you into a man,” he hissed in disgust. “You were both disgusting. Grunting and humping like animals. Your daddy raised you better than that, Kelsey Morganston. I made a video of it. Daddy helped me alter it a bit and then we took it

to the sheriff.” His eyes glittered with hatred. “Maverick didn’t run from you because he thought you denied your love for him, he ran because Daddy said you accused him of raping you. Regardless of how tight that ass of yours was, he wasn’t willing to go to jail for it.” He burst out laughing. “My plan couldn’t have worked better if the good Lord Himself had intervened. Daddy and I got everything we wanted. Maverick gone and you back in line, where you belonged.”

I couldn’t believe it. Wayne had lied the entire time. Gabe thought I accused him of rape? The breaths I was already having a hard time pulling into my lungs became more difficult. He thought I’d told everybody he raped me...and he was still willing to forgive me? No wonder he’d been hell-bent on revenge. What had happened to him? Where had he gone?

That was why he’d left without me.

Wayne smiled when he saw my heartbreak. “Hey! Help me up, Daulton,” he yelled. “My knees ain’t what they used to be.”

Daulton reached his hand down to grasp Wayne’s elbow but said, “No, it’s that your belly is more than it used to be.”

Their words seemed far, far away and their movements were in slow motion. I knew this feeling; I’d been here before.

This was it. I was close. I would never get to touch Gabriel again. My entire life had been spent with somebody taking him away from me. He was all I’d ever wanted but the one thing I’d never get.

“Come on, Wayne,” Daulton said as he moaned and heaved Wayne’s body to a standing position. “Let’s get out of here. I’m cold and the kid’s minutes away from bleeding out. I want my money so I can get out of this town. I don’t want to be

anywhere near this shithole when Jax or Maverick learns Kelsey's dead, and I'd suggest you live by the same rule. I have a feeling they'd both kill for him."

They'd kill for me, but all I could do was die for them. There was so much left to say...so much left to do. I didn't want to leave without Gabriel, Jax, and Evie knowing how much I loved them. Inside my head, my mind was screaming that I needed to move...to dosomething. I couldn't, though. Death was so fucking anticlimactic.

"I have a feeling you're right. I hope you're both willing to die," a deep masculine voice answered Daulton's comment to Wayne.

Even in my sluggish condition, I recognized Gabriel's husky voice...and the sound of a bullet chambering into a gun. So damned much left to say, but I felt my eyes grow too heavy to keep them open. I was there one second, screaming to Gabe that I loved him and that I hadn't betrayed him, and gone the next.

Heaven...or Hell, whichever I'd made it to, was incredibly annoying. People were always talking, always touching me, and I couldn't make myself move. I was thirsty. Surely somebody in Heaven could spare an ice cube? Shit, I must be in Hell—no ice cubes anywhere. My mouth was so parched. I tried to move my tongue, hoping for just a bit of saliva, but something was smashed against it, keeping it from wetting my lips.

I might have known dentists were in Hell.

I tried to reach for the offending object, but every time I tried to move my hands, somebody pushed them back down. I'd hear them chuckle softly and then tickle my eyelashes or pull my hair. I could hear them talking to me...butcouldn't. It was frustrating. I'd been frustrated on Earth and now it looked like I'd be frustrated throughout eternity.

Time drifted...or maybe it didn't, I didn't really have the first clue. After a while, though, the noises I heard started making more sense and, thank all things holy in the world, I recognized voices. Gabriel was there...talking to me in soft, hushed tones, telling me how much he loved me and that I needed to come back to him. Jax was there, usually growling or snarling at Gabe about something, but even in my semi-conscious state, I noticed how his tone would change when he said something to Titus. With my eyes closed, something stuffed down my throat, and my hands tied to a bed railing, I was still very aware that Jax was smitten with Titus, and I seriously doubted anybody else in the room even noticed. Evie was there...always there, even when Gabe tried to get her to leave. She's stubborn like that. She loved me but I suspected she was hanging around just to spite Gabe.

I wonder if she knew none of them had a reason to dislike Gabe any longer? He hadn't deserted me, he'd run for his very life because of my sorry-ass family. I wanted to kill Wayne Jr. and then dig my father up and...well, I wasn't sure what to do with a corpse that would cause them any pain. I could only hope he was rotting in Hell.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity to me, I found the strength to open my eyes. I felt them flutter at first, but then it turned into a good, solid blink. The lights around me seemed way too bright and the noises, suddenly, way too loud. I tried to open my mouth to call for Gabe, but the tube was still lodged in my throat and it prevented any words. The choking or gurgling sounds were enough, though. Gabe's beautiful face was right in front of me within seconds.

"Hey, angel," he whispered. "You're safe. Everything's okay. I'm with you. I love you, Kelsey. Stay with me, okay? Try to fight the weakness that keeps dragging you down."

His words were spoken with such concern and love that I felt my heart start to melt. Oops. It didn't melt, it must have started beating like I was running a marathon

because beeping noises started going crazy. Gabe turned to somebody and said, “Tell them to get the doctor. He wants this tube out of his throat.”

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His hands caressed my face, played with my hair, and if I tried to close my eyes again, just for a quick rest, he would flutter my eyelashes. So, he was the bastard that had been teasing me earlier. I might have known. He'd always had an unhealthy fixation on my eyelashes. My journals had notes after notes of how Gabe would want me to tease his cheeks (and other things) with my lashes.

I hoped I had the rest of my life to fulfill all his fantasies, regardless of how weird I thought they might be.

Minutes later, or it could have been hours, I didn't really have a clue, the tube was out of my throat and the first words I tried to strangle out were, "I didn't tell them you raped me, Gabe. Never. I loved you. I begged you to love me that night." Okay, I wasn't sure I got all those words out or if they were translatable if I did, but I gave it my best shot.

Gabe smiled softly. "I know, angel. I know that now. It wouldn't have mattered if you did, though. I loved you even when I thought you had. I loved you always."

"Me too," I answered, but I felt the tears pooling in my eyes.

Worried, Gabe asked, "What's wrong? Are you in pain?"

I shook my head from side to side...lying. I was in pain, but not the physical pain he was talking about. I held so much baggage inside of me, and Gabe deserved better. What if he couldn't handle my mental struggles? I feared that once the option of suicide was put on your plate, would it always be there? Could I ever overcome my desire to hurt myself when my world turned ugly? Did I want to put Gabe through all

my shit? Was I truly that selfish?

“Talk to me, Kels,” he urged. “Tell me what’s bothering you. I’ll get you whatever you need.”

I tilted my head and saw Jax and Evie on the other side of the bed, looking down at me and knowing exactly all the bullshit running on loop inside my troubled mind. Evie looked sad. Jax looked mad. Business as usual.

“He’s worried that he’s too much of a handful for you, Maverick,” Jax finally answered. Eyeing Gabe, he added, “He must not think you’re the man I am, ‘cause heknewI could handle him. Is that it?”

“No!” I shouted hoarsely. “You know better than that! You...you know how much I love Gabriel. Stop causing trouble just to be causing it,” I demanded. Jax’s naughty smile told me he felt very confident handing me over to Gabriel Maverick, a step I never thought I’d see Jax take.

“That’s ridiculous, Jackson, because I’m clearly twice the man you are,” Gabe answered. Looking down at me, his eyes soft and full of the love that had been there when we were younger, he said, “If you’re silly enough to worry about whether I can handle your struggles, then I’ll just have to continue worrying about whether I’m worthy of you or not.”

I frowned. “Worthy of me? What do you mean? I’m a mess, Gabe. You have no idea. I’ve got...issues.”

“We all have issues, angel. My issues caused me to run away from you, spend ten years hating you for being so much damned better than me, and then, biggest of all, caused me to come back here and try to hurt you. I’m ashamed of that, Kels—so ashamed of every mean action and word that I tossed in your direction. I did it



because I never have thought I was good enough for you.” His eyes cut upward to Jax and he clarified, “Man enough, yes. Good enough, no.”

“How could you ever think that? You’re so much more than me! You were my strength when we were kids. You gave me the strength to climb out of bed every morning and hope for a better future. Even now, after all we’ve weathered, I was stronger after the night we spent together. I...I didn’t want to hurt myself, I wanted to hurt you!” I paused, thinking of how I’d acted when I’d overheard Titus talking into the phone. “Oh, I think I owe Titus a huge apology.”

Gabe smiled. “Titus is fine. He’s one of your family now. You’ll quickly learn that my men are quick to forgive and forget. You’re going to love them, Kels.” His palm cupped the side of my face. “I’ve had good times with them and they’ve been my strength but, even then, I wanted you to be there. Whenever we’d be celebrating a holiday or just watching a football game, I wanted you there beside me. So many times I wanted to tell them about you, but I didn’t have the courage. Since we were separated, I viewed you as my weakness—the only way someone could truly hurt me. I was so fucking wrong, though, Kels. You’re my strength. You make me whole.”

“And this is making me sick,” Jax muttered, but he had a huge smile on his face. “Can you two just kiss and make up already? All the lovey-dovey stuff is making me lose respect for both of you.”

Evie punched him in the arm. “Come on, brother dearest,” she urged as she grabbed his upper arm and forcibly turned him toward the door. “Let’s give them some privacy. You’ll have plenty of time to torment Gabe while he’s here, getting Morganston Textiles strong enough to stand by itself.” She looked in Gabe’s direction and asked, “You aren’t taking him away from us immediately, are you?”

“We’ll stay as long as Kelsey wants to stay, and we’ll go when Kelsey wants to go.” He winked at her. “There’s no reason whatsoever why you couldn’t come with us,

Evie. You'd love where we live. Sure, you'd have to leave the Neanderthal behind, but you're more than welcome to become a part of our little family."

I punched Gabe. Sure, it was a weak punch, but a punch, nonetheless. He'd have to learn to love Jax. He was part of my package deal. "Don't talk about Jax like that. I love him like a brother."

"Noted."

I guessed that was the best I was going to get at the moment. I'd take it. I had a huge feeling things were only going to get worse between Jax, Gabe, Ethan, and Jeremiah. As soon as they closed the door behind them, I said, "You know Jax wants Titus, right? I can see it in his eyes...hear it in his voice."

Gabe's smile lit up his face. "Yeah, I kinda suspected that. I can't wait to sit back and watch Ethan tear him apart." He rubbed his hands together in glee. "Cannot. Wait."

"You know Jax is a badass Dom, right?"

"Noted. I'll be sure and mention that to Ethan." He leaned in and placed a soft kiss on my dry lips. "You know Ethan knows how to kill a man and dispose of his body more ways than there's letters in the alphabet, right?"

I liked playful Gabe. "Kiss me again and I'll tell you some of his weak spots."

He kissed me, this time playing with my bottom lip long enough that I heard a soft whimper escape my lips when he finally eased away.

"Give me a weakness...other than you and Evie, of course."

"Uh oh. That's all I had."

Gabe nodded. “Yep, that’s what I suspected. Cannot. Wait.” He carefully climbed into bed with me and pushed our hands together, looping our fingers. “I meant it, Kels. We go if you want to go or we stay if you want to stay. I’m with you. Forever.” He nibbled the lobe of my ear. “As in...you’ll never get rid of me.”

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“As if I’d ever try. You’re all I’ve ever wanted, Gabriel Maverick.”

“Good, because I’m all you’re ever going to get.” His voice and eyes softened. “I love you, Kelsey Morganston. You’re all I’ve ever wanted too. There’s just one thing...”

I thought a wave of terror would cause my heart to stop, but nothing happened.

“What’s that?”

“I can’t fucking wait to change your name to Maverick. How about we go ahead and start working on the wedding plans?”

“Nope.” I felt him stiffen for an instant, but then he melted against me again. “I still have the original plans we made. It’s written in my journals. There’s practically no planning to do.” I smiled up at him. “Was that really a proposal?”

“Yes and no. Yes, it was a proposal but just a preliminary. I’ll come up with something much more romantic as soon as you’re feeling better.”

“The answer’s yes...no matter how you ask it, romantic or Gabe-style. Hell, yes. Yes, yes, yes!”

I dozed for a while after that, wallowing in pure contentment with Gabe’s strong arms wrapped tightly around me. For the first time in years, I didn’t dream. I didn’t drift off, lonely and sad, and I didn’t wake back up, wishing I could sleep forever. When my eyes did open again, I caught him staring down at me, his fingers playing with my hair. The look on his face nearly took my breath. I’d probably always struggle with

believing someone like Gabe could love someone like me, but I was willing to bear that particular cross for the rest of my life if it meant keeping him beside me.

“What happened with Wayne?” I finally asked. I didn’t particularly care what the answer was. My brother no longer held any power over me. Gabe was home. I was safe.

“Wayne’s in jail,” Gabe answered. “I wanted to kill him on the spot, but was outvoted.” When I gouged him in the ribs, he said, “Trust me, angel, it was a tight vote. Ethan assured me his lawyers would make certain Wayne Jr. never saw the light of day outside of a prison again for trying to kill you.”

“Daulton?” Again, I didn’t really give a fuck. If Gabe and his friends had killed both men, I wouldn’t lose a night’s sleep over it.

“Unfortunately, he got away. With our focus on Wayne Jr. and getting you medical attention, we made a mistake. We’ll find him, though. He’ll pay for his part.”

“I’m not worried,” I answered. “I’m surprised the ambulance was able to get there in time. I honestly thought I was dying. Actually, I thought I’d died. I felt my life slipping away.”

“We couldn’t wait for an ambulance—no time. Titus worked on you right there. He had an emergency kit with him, and I knew your blood type, so we started a transfusion immediately. We have the same blood type, by the way.”

“Shit,” I murmured.

“It’s okay. Titus knew exactly what to do. You’re completely safe now. Nothing to worry about.”

“No, it’s not that. If Titus saved my life, then I’m going to have to side with him and

Jax over you and Ethan when that whole shitshow starts.” I tilted my head and kissed his jawline. “You understand, don’t you? Hedid save my life.”

He snorted. “You were just looking for an excuse to side with them! Quit playing matchmaker. Ethan’s very protective of his baby brother and Titus is...special.”

I grinned and winked. “May the best team win.”

“We already did, angel. We already did.”

“Forever, right, Gabriel? You won’t leave without me, will you?”

I smiled down at him, because I loved him so damned much. “Forever, Kelsey Morganston. You’ll be mine forever. And I’ll be yours.”

The End