







# Never Say Yes To Your Fake Husband

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**Category:** Romance, Billionaire Romance, Adult

**Description:** Married? Yes.

Happily? Not even close.

Because guess what...

I've never actually met my husband!

That was the term when I accepted the contract marriage.

Except I'm so over being "married" but single.

After a threatening phone call to my husband's lawyer,

One reckless night out,

A ridiculously hot stranger,

And a very unfortunate case of holy-crap-I-just-hit-on-my-husband later...

I'm screwed.

Because now? He's interested.

Like, let's-make-this-real kind of interested.

He says I can't break the contract.

He says I belong to him.

And he now wants to play husband.

Like excuse me?!

But no, thank you.

Not falling for the billionaire stranger I married.

Not when he's still hiding secrets from me.

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:37 am*

## Chapter one

### Weland

“I’m about to make a terrible decision, Smitty McSmittington.” Based on the fact that this man is my husband’s lawyer and, out of the two of them, the only one I’ve ever met before, I figure I should give him the best possible chance to talk me down and maybe even stop me. I owe him that, at least. He’s nice. Most of the time. Plus, I think his name is kick-ass. Even though he does boring things all day, like law, he’s all right when it comes down to it.

And my god, it's definitely coming down to it.

“Miss Bull, please don’t give me that.”

“Give you what? No bull?”

Smitty’s sigh is one of the longest, long-suffering ones I’ve ever heard through a phone. “For the love of turkey drums, what’s going on?”

Oh, maybe the fact that I’ve been married—technically married—for four years, and I’ve never met my husband. Maybe that’s what’s wrong. Or maybe the fact that I used to be fun, but due to the gag clause in the contract I signed, I mean married documents, I have to zip it. It means no telling my family and friends why I can’t go out, why I’m not interested in guys, and why my life is on pause while theirs goes on, and they get to do things, live, meet people, fall in love, get married, and have babies.

You know, all the regular, amazing, normal life things to do.

They get to share it with someone else.

I just have a piece of paper that bought my silence. Oh, and two hundred grand up front, with the other three hundred grand promised to me at the end of five years.

Don't get me wrong, I'd do it all over again if I had to. I saved my brother's life with that money. It was a no-brainer at the time. I just didn't realize how hard it would be to be thislonely.

"I'm going out tomorrow night. My sort of best friend is getting married, and I'm going to her stagette." I can only imagine Smitty's face. Given that he's pretty patient, I'd say he's not pulling one at the moment. He has a good, resting, straight-laced face. A good lawyer face.

"There's nothing wrong with that. The contract was never meant to make it so you couldn't go out and have fun with friends."

"Yes, but it's at a bar. A bar with guys. Guys who are no doubt attractive. Guys who will buy us drinks. Not that we can't buy our own because we can, and we will." One day, I'm sure I'll look back on this moment as the deciding moment of something or other, but right now, I'm going for it. And by going for it, I mean going off the rails. "I will no doubt be inebriated, and I haven't been drunk in a very, very long time. I can't promise I'll behave. I also can't promise I won't find a handsome stranger and take him home. Of course, it would all be very discreet, so that should at least be within the parameters of the piece of paper that rules my life."

I know I'm not being fair. I know the piece of paper kind of rules his life too. I know if I mess up, he's going to get in shite. But honestly. Four years. It's beenfourfreakingyears,and I am just sofreakingdone.

Will I actually get drunk this weekend? Probably. But too far gone drunk? Not a chance. I actually don't even like drinking. I prefer more like nicely buzzed, still kind of sober, easy to get sober with a glass of water so I can still look after my friends kind of drunk. And that friend who's getting married? She's my sort of bestie, just as I said. The bestie I've grown a little apart from in the past four years, and no, it's not just because of life. It's the gag clause. She has no idea I'm married. As far as she or anyone else knows, my family's health insurance paid for my brother's surgeries.

Will I hit on a handsome stranger and take him home? Not a chance. I would never do that. But can I threaten and be petulant and wish for just a moment that I had someone to hold me at night and share my feelings and my heart and life with? It's not as though I'd find that with a one-night stand, but yeah. It doesn't stop me from wishing. Or from hurting.

"Miss Bull, please, let's just talk about this." This is where the calm lawyer stuff comes in. The rational tone and the I've got this because I can handle anything lawyer voice.

"I'm not technically even a Miss Bull. Did you know that, Smitty? Of course you know that. You know what my last name is. I don't. I don't even know that. Because on the contract I signed where I gave up five years of my life, the real name of my husband was blacked out. In war times, I think they would call that redacted. Or not in war. In government documents. Which I feel like this crazy contract was."

There's a different kind of sigh this time. Heavier. Like he knows he's going to have to get his hands dirty kind of a sigh that comes from the bottom of his chest. I can imagine Smitty, all six feet and seven inches of him in a designer suit, heaving and shuddering. He's not fit. I mean, he's not unfit either. He's just a mountain. A mountain crammed into a suit with a huge red beard and a bald head. He's one of those teddy bear guys who looks like a juggernaut. Like legit, he might be one. I'm not sure how or why he ever became a lawyer. I know he's a business lawyer, but this

seems more personal than business.

I do know that my husband, whatever his real name is, married me because of some family dispute that involved greedy Gretchen cousins—Smitty’s words, not mine. They wanted to take what was his, and there was something about a will and an aunt with a sick sense of humor who put a marriage clause in her will that said something about my unknown-named husband needing to have a wife for a minimum of five years. Since Smitty is a business lawyer, I imagine it has something to do with some business dealings or some company. Or likely shares because that’s the only thing that makes sense to me, but of course, I’m actually not sure. I only gathered this from seeing Smitty on and off over the years. I know just enough info from the beginning when I had to be talked into signing that darned contract in the first place.

So now I’m living a romance trope in a fake, contracted marriage, and my nameless husband is living it too, but he’s probably a gazumba bumba billionaire. If he’s not, then I’m not sure how he can afford to pay me what he’s paying me to live this trope.

Yeah, I know. Things like this only happen in movies and books.

Or to me, because I posted a video that I hoped would go viral so I could save my brother.

I got my wish.

Be careful about making wishes and all that. It really is good advice.

“I think I should come over, Miss Bull.”

I’ve zoned out, and it’s no doubt worrying Smitty on the other end of the line. Ominous silences are not my deal. “No, Smitty. There’s nothing you can do. I want someone to share my bed at night. I want someone there. I want...I want a family. All

my friends are in love, married, or have kids. I'm twenty-nine years old."

"It's only another year, Miss Bull."



## Page 2

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“And that’s no bull. Ha. Okay, stopping that. But seriously. My name, Smitty, is Weland. I’ve told you a hundred and one million times to just please call me that.”

“Okay, Miss Bull. Okay.”

My phone is on the older side of things and doesn’t need to be clenched this hard. “Grr.” No, that’s not me practicing being a bear. That’s me being totally frustrated by all of this. “I know I got two hundred grand. I know that. But if I break the contract now, you do realize if he sued me to pay it back, which yes, I know is one of the clauses I signed off on, I could just declare bankruptcy?”

“You wouldn’t do that, Miss Bull. You’re too good for that. Too kind.” Oh, well, it’s a good thing Smitty believes in me. “Your brother got what he needed because of my client, and I know you’ll hold up your end of the deal.”

My eyes start to sting. “What if I don’t? What if I’m so hopeless that I don’t want to? What if I go to the clinic and get in vitro tomorrow and get pregnant and cause a huge fuss and stir? There are no rules against that. I also have the money.” Kind of. I kind of have the money. Not that there was much left over after Bryan’s medical bills were paid.

“Would you do that?”

“I don’t know. Would I not do it?”

“I really hope not. You’re a good girl. I really like you, Miss Bull. I don’t want to have to sue you, but I’m my client’s lawyer before I’m your friend.”

“I think we have different definitions of friends.”

I know that’s doubly not fair. Smitty has always been so good to me. So nice. None of this is his fault. I suppose he could have said no to taking this job, but then someone else would have done it. Maybe he donates money that he feels is dirty money to charity. He seems like he’d be the type. He probably donates money anyway. Probably for homeless cats or sweaters for hairless dogs so they don’t have to shiver in winter. Believe me, Michigan can get really cold. Sweaters are a great thing. We need more sweaters in this world. And more dogs. And people with hearts like dogs have.

“If you’re lonely, I’m sorry, but why don’t you get yourself a dog?”

I almost laugh because, really? Are we that in tune that we’re on the same wavelength about dogs here? “Um, I don’t think I’m looking for that kind of relationship.”

“I know you’re not the kind of woman who does one-night stands.” Smitty’s voice goes from deep to deeper. “But more importantly, you’re not the kind that goes back on her word.”

“I want to be that woman, Smitty, but I don’t know. I can’t make any promises.”

Actually, I can. Because this phone call is actually bull. I know I won’t find someone and take them home. I could never do that. But it doesn’t hurt to vent. And who am I supposed to vent to? Only a few people in this world know the truth. And that’s me, Smitty, and his client—as he terms him. My family thinks I got the money from my song going viral, then selling the rights to it, and some of my other work to some big record exec who discovered me and didn’t like me but liked my music. That’s the convoluted story I gave them, but it worked. It explained where I got a large chunk of money from, why I took the video down, and why I haven’t put anything else up.

My mom didn't even know the whole story, and she still begged me not to give up the rights to my songs, even knowing that as she was telling me not to give up something that should have been mine, she was resigning her son to a life of never being able to walk properly again. My brother shattered his knee in a stupid dirt bike accident. On a friend's bike. Driving it when he didn't really know how.

It was pretty easy to convince my mom in the end that songs didn't matter. My brother did. When I put it like that, she understood, even if she sensed there was more, and I wasn't telling her all of it.

"I'm going to get you a dog. I'll have him or her delivered within the hour. Personally. I will personally pick him or her out for you."

I know he won't do it. Smitty has more important things to do. These are empty threats. Just like I'm calling him to threaten and vent because he's the only one I can call at this point. It's not like I know my husband's number. It's not like I know anything about him. He could be called Buttfink Finkle Finkleton the Eighth and makes his oodles of money by selling photos of his hairy big toe, for all I know.

Fine, so I know he's not named Buttfink, and I know he doesn't sell photos of his toes, although they might be hairy. Do I know he doesn't sell photos of his toes? No. No, I don't. But I would bet he doesn't.

"Okay, Smitty. I'm hanging up now."

"Okay, Miss Bull. Take care. I'll see you soon."

I hang up, confident he's bluffing and that he's called my bluff. That we're both bluffers, and all this amounted to nothing, though I do feel just a little bit better. Smitty has that effect for some reason.

Two hours later, I realized one of us wasn't bluffing.

I open the door to a red-bearded, big-hearted, big juggernaut lawyer dude in one of those customhuge and extra huge and then somesuits, holding what can only be described as an old and slightly moldy ancient-looking dog in his arms.

It only has one eye and one ear on opposite sides, half a tail, and very, very strange fur. And its tongue lolls out. Permanently, I think. There is also a decrepit odor that has to be the dog because Smitty doesn't smell like old armpits.

"His name is Beans, but you can change it if you want. He's had a hard run of things, but his luck changed today because you're going to love him. He's your new best friend."

He holds out his arms, and the dog rips a massive fart. It absolutely rips it. Like, loudly. And eye wateringly too. What were they feeding this guy? The dog probably also weighs at least sixty pounds. It's not a small breed. I'm not sure what breed it is. It's some terrifyingly cute mix of every single breed on Earth. Honesty, he looks more like a scraggly potato than a Beans.

The poor thing's tongue is lolling out, and it makes me think he can taste the fart. Dear god, I hope he can't taste the fart. It's potent. So, so potent. I can feel myself tearing up because it's that bad.

"Can you set him down on the couch?" I shouldn't be asking this. I should be telling Smitty absolutely not and to take that dog back to wherever he got it, but it was probably a shelter, and who knows? Maybe this poor guy won't find another home. He's old. He's a scraggly potato with mold, and he looks very, very sad.

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But he wags his half-a-tail when Smitty sets him down, and I don't have the heart to tell him no. I don't have the heart to say that if I were a dog person, I would have had one by now. Or a cat. Or a plant. Something I can keep alive. Something other than just me here in this condo I rent for a normal amount of money because people need to believe I can afford it on a guitar teacher's salary. Because that's what I do. I teach guitar lessons. I used to do it at a school, but then they downsized, and I was out of a job, so now I do it from home.

Which is another reason I don't have pets. What if some of my students are allergic?

"They'll love him," Smitty assures me, even though he has no idea what I'm thinking.

Or does he? Gah! Does he?

"We're all good then? You'll be okay? This was just you letting me know you're frustrated? You'll make Beans here feel at home, and we won't have a problem with the contract?"

"Yeah, sure." But I shake my head and shrug. "Beans is good." I don't answer about the rest.

Smitty gives me a very lawyerly look, which makes me feel like I'm melting on the spot. "Alright, Miss Bull. Have a good rest of your day."

"Yeah," I gulp out. This bluff was a bad idea. And now I have a dog. Beans wags that stump of his even harder. "You too."

## Chapter two

### Sterling

What is it that all the young people say? This club is pumping?

If anyone heard me say that...well, they wouldn't. Because I would deny it. I would never, ever say such a thing. But I suppose it is. The music—some heavy bass stuff—is hitting pretty hard. But it's not my taste. My taste is country. Pure voices. Angelic voices.

Voices like Weland Bull. A voice like all the angels singing in unison, like a fresh spring day, like an uncomplicated life and a pure heart. That voice has lived rent-free in my head for the past four years and eighteen days since I first heard it.

The video she posted was just her and her light wheat-hued hair, bright blue eyes, and flushed cheeks singing in rapture and bliss with the purest and rawest talent I've ever heard. It was just her and her guitar and that frilly floral dress that people would also call boho, and no, I will never say that word out loud either.

There are a few stagettes here tonight, but I only have eyes for one. The one mywifeis attending. I have never met her in person. She doesn't know what I look like, what I do, or even my name. It's all very cloak and dagger, but Smitty thought that was for the best, and since Smitty is the best of the best, I trust him with the business side of my business. I've trusted him with more than that. She has no idea he moved his entire practice up to Detroit just because I asked him to. Because I wanted someone close to her, someone to watch out for her. Security would have been better, but when I mentioned that to Smitty, he didn't like it. He said she would hate it, so he moved close by to keep an eye on her himself and be a friend to her because he figured she would need it.

It's why I'm here.

Because he called and told me that she was lonely—lonely enough to do something drastic and done enough to be really done with all this. He thought she was joking, but he wanted me to know, just in case she was serious about getting drunk, finding someone, and wrecking this whole thing when it was almost over. And the baby? She couldn't be serious about that, could she?

A blonde who is probably smoking hot by definition of anyone in this place except me bumps me hard in the back. I'm a few feet away from the bar and being as casual as I can, which in this place means getting in line to get a drink.

"Sorry," she drawls, grinning at me and batting her fake eyelashes. They're very heavily...gooped. I know that's not a good word, but it's the only word I can use right now for all that mascara and eyeliner. Her teeth are very, very white, and her boobs are also...umm...fully on display, pushed up in a barely there hot pink dress. Her hair? Not a real blonde. She's one step away from freeing the nipple with that dress. I back up a step, but it makes her smile even harder. "Don't be shy. You can buy me a drink. That's fine with me."

"Sorry, I'm just having water tonight. I'm a designated make-sure-no-one-here-gets-into-trouble person." No one here named Weland, at any rate.

"Aww, you came with someone then?"

"Taken, I'm afraid," I reply.

"Probably married." She pouts, but then she laughs, and I swear it's loud enough to cut over the pounding music. The lights are strobing, too, or at least I think they are. I don't think that's my eyes and brain. God, when did thirty-two start to feel this old? "But that's okay! The married ones are more fun."

“Ohhhhhh, no. Not me. I’m very—very—married. Very married.”

“Not happily, though, or you would have said so. Although, that’s usually just a lie people tell when they’re not. You can still buy me a drink, you know.”

While she pouts at me and I shake my head, I realize Weland and her group have moved to some other part of this club, which is entirely too massive. Panic claws at my throat. Panic because I can’t let all this be for nothing. Not this crazy amount of work, the past four years, Weland’s sacrifice, or the fight of my life that I’ve had to do to keep my company. A company that I built myself from the ground up. From nothing. I had to borrow money at the start to buy shares. Shares that were worth nothing one day and then worth everything the next. Shares that my aunt, who backed me, left to me only on the most clichéd conditions. No doubt she’s laughing from beyond the grave at all this.

But no doubt I’m not.

“I’m sorry. I really am.” I’m only sorry that a line like that actually works on some people. I back out of the line, and the blonde just shrugs and turns around to find a more receptive audience in the guy behind me.

Alright, I’m sorry I had to drag someone like Weland into this too.

I’m sorry she’s been having a hard time. I’m sorry she’s sad and lonely and—holy shit.



## Page 4

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Right freaking here.

She's right around the corner. In fact, I nearly plowed right into her. I bring myself up short, and my sharp athletic reflexes save me.

But they don't save her. I guess I'm a little bit too close because even though I come up short, she must sense the air shifting or something, so she spins around. Her drink goes flying out of her hand and lands right on the front of my suit.

Because yes, I'm one of those guys who wore a suit to a club. To be clear, it's not a formal, suit-wearing kind of place.

"Oh my holy smokies and onions! I'm so sorry! I don't know what's wrong with me. Oh my goodness, you scared the life out of me, and it just went flying. I'm...jeez, well, you did sneak up on me. You shouldn't do that in a club. People get the wrong idea. Something about darkness and weird lights and too much music and too much booze, and ahhh, look at me. Talking too much. Hold that thought." She holds up a hand. "I'm going to run to the bathroom and get some paper towels to wipe you down. Again, I'm so, so sorry about the suit. It looks expensive. Gah, look at me. I'm still talking too much when I should be moving. Okay, moving now. Right now. Right nownow."

She's nervous, but she's over her scare. With those wide blue eyes, the adorable way she's biting down on her bottom lip, and the way she won't look me in the face after that first initial shocked glance, it all tells me that she likes what she sees, and she's flustered from more than just her projectile drink, which honestly, appears to just be water.

I brush at the wetness and raise my fingers to my nose. I don't care that I give them an undignified sniff. Yup, it's just water, which is funny because when I look over at the other women—there are at least fifteen or so in the stagette group, and they are all packed into one big booth—they all already look beyond slightly inebriated.

“It's not a problem. Don't worry about it.” I don't think club bathrooms are a safe place for a woman to go alone. Is any bathroom safe? God, I want her to be safe.

Catching a plane from London, I literally got here just in time. Smitty did the rest, finding out which club the stagette was going to take place at, and if there were more than one, he would have found out the specific times. I have no idea how he did it, but he gave me the time, address, and name of the place, and he had it for me within twenty minutes of the phone call with Weland.

It sounds a lot like he tattles and spies, but in reality, he doesn't do either. Not much. But maybe kind of. I have to keep tabs on my wife, okay? The marriage thing was a rocky idea at best and fucking straight-up awful multiplied by infinity and spiders at worst.

“No, I need to worry about it. I'm sorry again.”

“It's alright. It'll dry,” I tell her.

Weland sighs. She has one of those open, honest faces, so I'm not surprised by what she says. “I'm not even drunk. That's the sad thing. We took a bus here. This is my first night out in forever. The woman getting married? That's Kate, my bestie. I should be really, really drunk, but I don't know. I thought this would be super fun, and it's alright. I just feel...” She pauses, her eyes fluttering upward. The lights flash over her face. She's dressed quite conservatively for a club, with a vintage white lace blouse and a high-waisted skirt that looks handmade, also trimmed in lace. She's rocking red vintage cowboy boots. I had no idea she liked vintage fashion. But maybe

she doesn't. Maybe she just put on that outfit because she really thought a stagette at a club meant polka night with a hint of line dancing at some hall where no one would be under the age of a hundred and eight.

Whatever her likes or dislikes, the strange outfit is adorable on her. She's totally cute from head to toe. I knew what she looked like from her videos online and the few photos I have, but she's a knockout in real life. She has sunshine eyes and is beautiful in an old-fashioned and new-fashioned way mixed together and stirred with a hint of sea breeze that clings to her. She reminds me of someone who would look good wearing flowers, and seriously, isn't that out of style already? But no, not on her. On her, they would never go out of style. She's got that petite, sweet little frame that would look good in anything, new or old, in or out of style.

She's not the kind of person who fits in here. Or maybe even anywhere. She's all around too sweet and honest for the world.

"Can I interest you in a walk then?"

"A walk?" Her light blue eyes flash as they dart over to her group. They're mostly sitting around one of the huge booths, all of them crammed into one, though I don't know how they've managed even with a few of the women sitting on each other's laps and one of them perched half on the table, and two standing at the ends. "I was just going to take a walk to order a round of water, actually. I told them I was getting drinks, but I think water is what's needed. We've only been here for an hour, and it's already getting out of hand. No one needs to get alcohol poisoning tonight, and ending up on the floor or holding back someone else's hair while they upchuck for hours isn't how I want this night to go."

"Alright, a walk to get water then."

She gives me a once over, and it looks like she's trying to assess my level of stranger

danger. Her cheeks turn pink, which makes me think that maybe there was a little bit of truth to what she said to Smitty about finding some dude and getting laid tonight, though I didn't think it was possible. From what I know of her, it didn't seem like more than an empty threat. Even Smitty didn't think she was going to do it, and he usually has a pretty good read on people.

But here I am, ready to prevent anything from happening. I take all threats seriously, especially when it's a threat to my personal privacy and the stupid will that still hasn't gone to bed yet because five years aren't up, and I have a pack of ravenous cousins waiting in the wings who could put any salivating, aggressive, and snappy wolves to shame.

"Don't worry. I won't try and seduce you," I add, with just a hint of velvet burr in my voice. I don't know why I do that. The last thing I'm going to do is seduce my wife, and that sounds like I mean the opposite. Total creep zone, but Weland throws her head back and laughs.

"Don't worry. I'm not so easily seduced. Certainly it would take more than a walk across this club. Although it is packed, so it will take us a while to get over to the bar. We'll also have to wait because there's a long line, and we'll no doubt get shoved together by all those people waiting rather impatiently. And if we didn't, we'd still have to lean intimately close in order to not yell at each other with all this music blaring."

"Do you like it? The music..." I ask. Her smile falters, and she gives me another long, searching look. She's trying to figure me out. She senses that I know something about her that I shouldn't know. I try and give her an innocent smile but probably come off a little bit dopey. I haven't done this in a very long time. Bars, smiling at women, thinking about anything other than business, talking to my wife. "I'm just trying to make conversation. Ignore me," I add.

“No.” She’s trying to be polite, I can tell. “No, I don’t have to ignore you. The music is...interesting, I guess. It’s not my favorite. My jam is more singer-songwriter and country.”

Does she even want to be standing here having this conversation, or would she rather be crammed into that booth, laughing and screeching uproariously with her friends? It doesn’t look like she wants to be doing that. Maybe she thought she did, and then she got here and found she craved the quiet she was used to.

I’ve asked Smitty about her so many times. What she’s like, what she likes. He’s always told me that she’s kind and quiet and that she loves her family above anything and will always put them first.

“That’s quite a far cry from this,” I comment.

“Yeah, but this is okay too. Everything is okay. Some music is better than none. I like to give anything a chance.”

She’s so open-minded. Smitty was right about the kindness. She radiates it like chocolate chip cookies radiate deliciousness.

I motion to the bar with a nod of my head. “Shall we then?”

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“I guess we shall unless you’re completely awful and insufferable. In which case, tell me now and save me the ten minutes I’m going to have to spend in your company.”

I think she’s serious for a second, but then she cracks a smile and laughs. I can’t hear it above the bass, but as I watch her shoulders shake, my stomach flip-flops at the way her eyes crinkle and her nostrils flare because she means it when she laughs.

Watching someone laugh shouldn’t make a guy hard in strange places, or like normal places in strange ways, but garlic on garlic toast, Weland is just so intriguingly beautiful.

“I’ll do my best not to be an insufferable prick.”

“Okay then. Off we go.” She turns and waves at her friends, and they give a cheer, thinking she’s going to get them another round of drinks.

Halfway across the club, even though Weland is close beside me, someone slams into her. Not just bumps but slams. She goes off balance, rocking on her red cowboy boots, and I catch her before she can fall. I steady her and put out a hand to ward the asshole off, but he’s already lurching away.

“Are you okay?” I want to keep holding onto her shoulders and letting her body heat burn through her blouse and into my palms. I want to keep drinking in her fresh, breezy ocean scent. She reminds me of white sand beaches and palm fronds, coconuts, drinks with little straws in them, crashing waves on a beach, and monkeys flinging poo at each other from the trees.

Trust me, no beach vacation would be complete without the monkeys, and somehow, they just about always end up in a poo-flinging fight. Who can blame them, really? It would be awfully fun to engage in something like that and give zero fucks about it. Tell me with a straight face you've never wanted to fling poo at someone before. I'm sure certain circumstances definitely call for it.

"I'm fine." She shrugs out of my hands. I want to be a gentleman and offer her my arm and jacket to keep her warm even though it's so damn hot in here from all these bodies packing the place. But I suppose I've offered her enough already—half a million dollars and my last name. Actually, minus my last name because she doesn't know it, but err, metaphorically and all that.

She raises her chin and I let her go now that she's perfectly fine on her own two feet. She marches forward. "It's not going to stop me from getting water. My friends all need it, and I'm a good, responsible person."

"I can flag down one of those servers and ask for a round if you like." I pull out my wallet.

There's no need to impress Weland with money. I know it's impossible when it comes to her. Somehow, I knew it from the start. A woman who gives up five years of her life for her younger brother to get surgeries to repair his knee and other bones in his leg so he can walk normally and even run and do sports again isn't the kind of woman who gives two flying monkey turds about things.

Her right brow arches up a little. "You're going to pay for water?"

"I'm going to tip. Because that's a lot of water. You have a lot of people at that table."

"Right, yeah. That's a good point. It will probably be more than one tray and more

than one trip. How much should a person tip for that?” She reaches for the little clutch attached to her wrist. It’s sparkly and has cat ears. I didn’t notice it before.

“Funny. I pegged you for a dog person.”

She freezes, and I realize I messed up. “Why—why would you say that?”

“Oh, just, uh...I don’t know. I really don’t know why I said that.” Actually, yes, I do. Because Smitty told me all about that poor decrepit dog that he found at the shelter. The dog was initially found on the street, so someone must have dumped him at some point. He clearly didn’t have an easy time surviving either. Of all the dogs Smitty could have picked, he thought Weland would love that one best.

He knows her. I don’t. And it makes me feel like I’m thrashing around in my own skin.

“Well, I got this dog,” she says. “I actually just got him. He’s probably not that old, but he looks old. He looks like a hairy potato and an ancient dry sausage had a baby. He’s the sweetest. Most people would say he’s so ugly, but I think he’s beautiful. He makes me want to speak dog so I can ask him to tell me about what happened to him, about how he lost an eye and an ear and half his tail.”

“Jesus Christ.” Smitty didn’t go that far in his description. He just said sad. Very sad. And heartbreaking. The obvious choice for tons of love from someone who has love to give.

“Yeah, I know. It’s really sad. He’s so sweet, though. He’s a good boy despite all that. To me, he’s lovely. I just wish he could talk to me when I talk back. He’s a great listener, but I want him to tell me if he’s hurting. In his soul or in his body. He’s old, so I can’t imagine that’s very comfortable.”



This. Woman.

Of all the women in the world I could have picked to be fake married to, I knew she was the one the second I heard her angelic voice and took in the plea for people to share her videos so she could maybe get one viral in order to support the people she loved. Yes, fake marriages require one as well, and it requires two people who know they can make it work. I didn't want someone who was just in it for the money. Even if it would only ever be platonic and I had no plans to ever meet the woman who signed her name next to mine on the paper, even if she knew nothing about me, it was still important to me that she had a good heart and a good head on her shoulders.

"I don't imagine it is. I'd like to hear more about him. What's his name?"

"Beans. But I don't know if I'll keep it. The only accurate thing about that name is that he smells like farts."

"Oh geez. Like bad farts?"

"I don't know. Like real farts. He's gassy. It's not a lingering body smell, and it's not coming from anywhere but the rear. It's legit farts, and I think a better diet will help."

"Beans. I like that. Beans are tough. They're a staple. Versatile. Delicious."

Her face lights up. "Seriously? You like Beans?"

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I shouldn't find this so thrilling—this conversation about old dogs and Beans—but I do because Weland smells good, and she's gorgeous and funny and sweet, and she's so close to me that it's doing things to my pulse, blood pressure, and man parts.

“I seriously do.”

### Chapter three

#### Weland

As far as turn-ons go, the phrase you like Beans shouldn't be one of them, but who am I kidding? It certainly is. It takes a brave individual to admit to liking such a thing and an even braver one to talk about farts. It tells me this guy is comfortable with himself, his body, and the grossness that sometimes happens. He doesn't expect perfection, even though his suit screams he has enough money to be perfect. He's clean cut, which I normally find a little bit abhorrent, but maybe the Beans talks take the edge off the neatly trimmed dark hair, the too-square jawline, the handsome features, the soft dark eyes, and the tall broadness that is nothing short of drool-worthy. I'm a big grown-up girl, and I know guys like this can have the pick of the litter, and it's not me.

Obviously. I'm platonically married, and despite talking a big game yesterday, I'm not going to cheat on that fake marriage. I'm not going to break the contract. I shouldn't even be talking to this guy right now.

Or shouldn't I? It doesn't hurt to just talk. He's nice even though I spilled my water all over him. Anyway, it doesn't hurt to just give him a bit of conversation. Plus, I'm

enjoying it.

I've looked forward to this night for so long. I thought I could go out and pretend everything was normal and that I was the same person I was four years ago before any of this happened and my life changed and all the secrets started, but I can't pretend, even to myself. I don't feel like I fit here. And honestly? My friends are just fine without me. Kate would still have a great time even if I left early. I call her my bestie because she is, or at least she was, but they've all moved on with their lives while I've been frozen in place, and as I said before, drifting apart is a real thing.

It feels extra real tonight.

And extra lonely.

Until he showed up. Mr. Stranger Not So Danger with the soft, deluxe hot chocolate eyes and the big smile that softens the sharp, chiseled angles of his face into something that is bone-meltingly attractive without being intimidatingly a turn-off. Too-hot men are actually not a turn-on. Trust me on that. It makes sense. Science can only go so far before reason kicks in, and no one likes an overconfident jerk. Hot guys who know they are hot aren't very much fun for anyone. The same goes for hot girls who know they're hot and want to weaponize it. Not cool. Not cool at all.

We're just about nearing the area where they have servers who will bring us drinks. I'm letting him lead, which is something I don't do. Also, clubs, bars, and flirting. Those are things I don't do. I don't act like someone under the age of eighty. Also, I haven't done those things in a while. And now I'm talking to a guy who has no name because I didn't ask for it, and he didn't volunteer.

I'm so busy looking at this handsome, tall, built, dark-haired stranger that I pay less attention to everything else than I should.

Splloosh!

Oomph.

Holy farging bacon. Now I'm the one wearing a drink. I let out a gasp. I don't even know where it came from, but it's cold and milky and smells like sticky, sweet whisky, which immediately turns my stomach, especially when it's dripping down my hair, my forehead, and all over my blouse. There's probably some on my skirt too. Darn it. A milky, boozy mess is probably really hard to wash out, and I love these clothes.

Mr. Tall, Handsome, and Dangerous grabs the guy who just spilled his drink all over me. Not hard, but he closes his hand over the guy's arm, which looks to be the only thing keeping the guy upright. The guy's eyes are bouncing around in his skull, and it looks like he could use some water more than the whisky drink he just spilled all over me. But maybe it's not whisky. Maybe it's something else that's hard. I don't go for that stuff, so I don't really know. But yeah, it's definitely milk. I mean, I think. Please let it be milk. I'm scared to try and let my mind get to naming what else that creamy sludge could be.

"Hey, I know that was an accident, but you need to be more careful. Apologize to the lady, please."

Gah. Even when he's kind of pissed on my behalf, this guy has manners, and manners are hot.

More eyeball bouncing from Super Drunk Guy. "Smorry," he slurs.

"It's okay." I swipe my hand over the goop dripping into my eyes. I'm sure it's not a good look. "Can you get him some water? I'm going to go to the bathroom to try and clean this off."

“Are you sure? I can come with you. Or I’ll get one of your friends to go with—”

I wave him off. “I’m okay. If you could also order them some water, I would be eternally grateful.” I know asking a stranger for this is probably more than he owes me. Okay, it’s definitely more than he owes me, based on the fact that I owe him for spilling my water on him. Maybe this drink is spillage karma.

“Of course. If you’re sure.”

I swipe another glob of milky crap away from my eyebrows. It seems to be replenishing itself at an astonishing rate, which means it hasn’t saturated my hair yet and is just sitting on top and dribbling down. Or it has saturated everything to max capacity, and this is the extra. Either way, it’s so nasty that my stomach rolls again.

I race off to the bathrooms, which have to be at the back of the club because aren’t they always there? Some big, burly bouncer dude in a suit back there spots me. He rushes up and doesn’t even need me to ask. Instead, he points me in the direction of the bathrooms and sees me back there.

The women’s washrooms might be huge with a ton of stalls, but the fact that this place employs bouncers back here just to watch over them is what no doubt keeps them clean and safe. There is nothing dubious going on in here. In fact, I’m the only one in here at the moment. Before someone comes barging in and asks me for help peeing because they’re super duper drunk and can’t figure it out by themselves, I head over to the row of free-standing pedestal sinks. I stick my hand under the soap dispenser and pump the little metal pump a few times until pink pools of soap line my palm. I’m not going to do a hair wash job over the sink in here, but I am going to wash my face.

I bend, and yeah, I know this is weird, but what other option is there? Once the soap is rinsed off my face and neck, I run clear water into my palms and do the best I can

with my scalp. I spent so much time curling my hair for tonight, but I am certainly not going to cry over that. My eyes definitely aren't burning or watering. Nope. That's the booze. And the soap.

Thankfully, this place has paper towels and not just hand dryers. I grab a handful, wet them, and dab at my blouse. The goop has already sunk in, and it's probably toast. My skirt has a few spatters, but maybe they'll come out in the wash. My boots were spared, which is a good thing because they're vintage, and vintage red cowboy boots aren't cheap. At least these ones weren't.

My hair is a wreck, but it's a good thing I always have an emergency hair tie with me. I unzip my clutch, extract it, whip my hair over, and then twist it into a bun—a tight one at the scalp because it's all soaked. Then, I make it messy enough on top that it kind of covers up the damage as the strands fall all over.

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I give myself a quick once-over in the mirror.

My stomach sinks.

This was supposed to be a fun night, but now my favorite blouse is wrecked. The hot stranger has probably gone on to greener, less disastrous pastures, and even if that's probably for the best, it still sucks. There was just something about him. I don't know what it was. Maybe he's an old soul. Or maybe we've had a past life together. It feels a little bit like recognizing something in someone that there's no way you should recognize because you don't know each other, though it feels like you do.

I just want to go home and go to bed. Even if the dog is probably on said bed, and it now smells like dog farts. He's warm and cuddly. Every single time I do something nice for him, which is basically anything in his mind, he looks at me with his one big, happy brown eye and wags his tail like he's so grateful, and it just melts me.

I head out of the bathroom because I can't just stay in here feeling sorry for myself. I expect the stranger will be long gone by now, but when I approach the side of the club where my group is supposed to be, they aren't there.

But he is.

He raises a brow when he sees me, but he smiles. It's the best smile. Warm. Genuine. It's as sweet as his maple syrup eyes.

I twist around and look in the direction of the dance floor. It's on the far right, and it's huge. My party could easily get swallowed up in it, even though there are a few of

them.

“They’re gone.” There are, however, two trays of water on the table. “I came back, and they weren’t here. I’ve looked all over.”

My jaw drops open. “They left without me?”

“Did they?” He looks as confused as I feel.

“I don’t know. They...they were going to go to another club. The bus. Right. The freaking bus! How could I have forgotten? I didn’t think they were going to do another one for at least an hour, but they must have decided to go. They were all pretty drunk, hence the water, but I can’t believe they forgot about me.”

“I’m sure they didn’t forget.” He sounds very unconvinced, and now his features are showing some sympathy or other that guts me and makes my cheeks flame up red. I don’t want to be someone that needs that. “I think it was just an accident. Inebriation tends to scramble the brain.”

“Yeah.” I toe the faux wood floor with the tip of my boot as tears sting the backs of my eyes. I don’t want to let them fall. I don’t want to look up and meet his I’m so sorry your life is a disaster gaze.

But wait. Why is he still here?

Out of sympathy?

“So now you don’t have a ride home,” he says.

I snap my head up so fast that I see bright spots. Nope, that’s just the strobing lights in the place. The bass is starting to scramble my brain. Maybe that’s what happened



to Kate and everyone else. Combined with the booze, it's probably easy to see why they just left without me. It's not like I don't matter. It's not like she forgot about her own best friend on purpose. I'm sure it's not.

"I—I'll just take a cab."

"Isn't that unsafe?"

I make a noise in my throat, but the music drowns it out. "Hardly. I'm sure it'll be fine."

He blinks at me. I blink back. Then, there's the world's longest and most awkward pause. "I could give you a ride if you want," he tells me.

A laugh comes from the tips of my toes and nearly explodes out. I trap it by biting down on my tongue just a little too hard, which makes me wince, and he probably thinks I'm wincing at his suggestion because he frowns. "I think that's more dangerous than a cab ride because I don't know you either. And who drives to the bar?"

"Someone who didn't plan on drinking."

"Ahh, but you came by yourself, and you said you wouldn't try and seduce me. You promised. But if you came here alone, not to drink, then you obviously didn't come to leave alone."

"Oh no. I definitely did. But now I find that I want to do something else." He says that like he's puzzled by it. There's something about him. Something more than that old soul vibe. He truly does seem harmless, and I know that's probably what one or two poor girls thought before something not harmless happened to them.

My better judgment finally wins out over whatever burning and lighting up is going on in my very dusty, unused lady bits. “I think I’ll take the cab.”

“Then please let me ride with you. I don’t have to come in,” he rushes to clarify before I can object. “I just want to make sure you get home safe. I’ll get the driver to bring me back here for my car.”

“But then you’ll know where I live.”

“I can close my eyes. Or you can blindfold me.”

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“I have to tell the driver,” I point out.

“Right. Well...I can promise I’m not a creepy stalker. Plus, you have a dog.”

“He’s not that kind of dog.”

“He could...dog fart me to death.”

I nod. “He could do that.” Did he really just say dog fart me to death? I can feel myself starting to smile even though this night has not been exactly what I expected so far. Really, what’s the harm in letting a nice guy who also just happens to be super freaking handsome as a bonus ride along with me in the cab? It would be safer. And yeah, okay, I don’t think he’ll stalk me. Sometimes, people are just really nice. He didn’t have to wait for me to make sure I was okay. He didn’t have to offer to see me home. Unless he actually is a stalker.

In reality, I knew I wouldn’t be taking anyone home tonight. That wasn’t my plan at all. But maybe the universe has other ideas.

Mr. Tall, Dark, Ride-In-Your-Cab-With-You, I’m-Not-A-Stalker-I-Promise stands up and holds his hand out. “Sterling,” he says, his voice just a shade deeper, like it’s an admission he doesn’t usually make, which doesn’t make any sense because it’s his name. It’s not some dark secret.

I don’t shake his hand. Instead, I nod, grab a glass of water from the table, and slide it into his waiting palm without touching his fingers. For some reason, I think touching his skin would be dangerous. “Weland,” I say, and not as carefully or as reluctantly as

I should either.

It's just my name. I've only given him my name and agreed to share a cab for safety's sake, but for some reason, I feel like I'm in all sorts of deep trouble that I never truly expected to find myself in.

## Chapter four

### Sterling

I used my real name. I gave it away like it was nothing. I don't know why I did that. Because I don't do things like that. Ever. Fake names work just as well. Weland wouldn't have known the difference. The night is almost over, and she's almost home safe. But now she knows who I am.

She knows without really knowing who I am because Sterling means nothing to her.

The cab ride is pretty quiet. I ruminate on why I said Sterling, and she ruminates on, well...I'm not quite sure. But I do know that I want to find her asshole friends and do to them what my parents always threatened to do to me when I misbehaved as a kid—hang them upside down and whip them. Which, back in the day, was nothing to get sued over, but now? It's clear I can't do that. But I can sit here and fume about them being less than considerate. Didn't Weland say it was her best friend getting married? My god, with friends like that, sign me up for enemies.

I know exactly what kind of condo Weland has, and I know her address already. Right now, I feel like an ass for pretending I don't. The longer this goes on, the worse I feel about lying to her. But it's only a few more minutes. I'll make sure she's safe, and then I can take off back to Florida and, from there, move on to London for business next week. I can finally stop thinking about her.

Because I'll be able to stop thinking about her.

I'll be able to focus and forget all about the way her huge blue eyes filled with tears she bravely blinked back when she found out she'd been left behind. And when her eyes glowed with pride and love already when she talked about her farty dog. I'll be able to forget all about how she's clearly one of those people who wears her heart where it counts and gives it to the whole world, even though she knows it's going to get beat up, disappointed, and hurt. I already know that too. I know what she's giving up for this. I also know she is good straight down to that heart-of-gold soul that so few people have.

I pay the cab driver, even though Weland fights me on it. I don't let her win. I give the guy an extra forty bucks, and she raises a brow.

"Don't you usually pay after the ride?"

Right. Yes, I guess a person does generally do that. I still have to go back to the club and get my car.

There's a beat of silence in the backseat of the cab. She looks at me, and I look at her. There isn't any expectation. Not on my part. Not on hers. It's not this heavy, weighted silence. That's why what she says next is so weird.

"Do you...uh...want to see my place?"

"See it?"

"Inside," she replies.

"Oh." Fuck. I need to say no. I need to politely decline and tell her to have a good night. I need to get back in my rental car, get back on a plane, and get far away from

here now that I know my contract is in no danger of being broken and my company is safe. “Sure.”

Her eyes widen. “Sure?”

No, not sure. The opposite. I mean the opposite. I need to tell the cab driver to wait for me while I walk her to her door and come back and... “If you’re sure.”

“I think I’m sure. For like tea. And talk about dogs. And a change of clothes that don’t smell like old milk and nasty booze.”

I think she smells fine, still like the sea breeze. And I like that her hair is just a little bit frizzy at the roots, where it got a good soaking. I hate that it happened, but it didn’t change the fact that this woman is gorgeous and adorable.

My heart does a strange blip that feels like my pulse is going all wrong. Probably because it is. I swear thud-a-bump shouldn’t be a thing. It should be ba-bump. Ba-bump. But it’s not. I can hear my heartbeat racing in my ears, and it sounds an awful lot like bad decision making.

## Page 9

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“Alright then.”

We bail out of the taxi and the driver peels out of the parking lot, shaking his head. It's not even the last call, and he's already had one silent ride with a strange ending. I'm sure he's seen worse. At least this ride didn't end in him having to hose the back seat down at a car wash because someone yakked. I wouldn't be able to handle it. Ugh.

I follow Weland to her front door. Her condo complex is kind of, for lack of a better word, dumpy. It's not the nice kind of place money can buy, but I guess most of the money went to her brother's surgeries and aftercare. Plus, this agreement was to remain secret, and there was no way she could explain a sudden influx of money. People watched her video, but just one video that went viral wasn't enough to buy or rent a real place, as she termed it. She gives guitar lessons for a living, so she had to get a place that matched her income, or people would ask what was going on.

I mean, probably.

She rattles her key in the lock. The condos are connected together barracks-style, with gray vinyl on the outside. They're tall and thin, with little front porches and one parking spot each. I'm assuming the little red sedan in front of the place belongs to Weland. It doesn't look safe, which makes my blood boil. I should have bought her a brand-new one. I still could. Except people will ask questions, and I don't want to do anything that leads back to me, that leads back to my cousins getting leverage against me to prove the marriage is fake. They know I have a wife, but they don't know who she is or where she is, and as long as they don't know that, they can't prove it's not legit. They've no doubt tried. Many, many times. They haven't found anything

concrete, and I just have one more year to get through. Then, the shares will be irrevocably mine, and the company I can't bear to lose because it's my everything will be safe.

I should not be here right now. If I were followed, this would lead whoever was looking straight to Weland's door.

I duck inside, my heart racing wildly.

It starts racing for another reason a few seconds later. Because when I enter the small living room that the place opens up to, it smells like freshly baked cookies, ocean breeze, and sickly sweet dog farts.

"Beans!" Weland rushes across the room to hug her dog.

I think it's a dog. Kidding. I know it's a dog. She was right about it looking more like a hairy potato, the fur looking like old scraggly beard trimmings glued onto a grey, dumpy sort of old potato with toothpick legs stuck at the bottom. If you are thinking of a five year old's monstrosity of a drawing that is supposed to be a dog, then think this one.

Okay, that's unkind. I love kids. I just don't plan on having any of my own. But I do like them. A lot. Other people's kids are great. I've always felt more at home with kids than with any other humans. Kids say what they mean, and they're guileless. It's refreshing to cut through the crap sometimes. Plus, they have great imaginations. I support tons of charities and most of them are all for kids because that's where I'm passionate about making a difference. I've seen firsthand what giving someone a chance can do.

Anyway, it's also mean to think gnarly negative thoughts about someone else's dog. It can't help its genetics or the life it had.



“I’m just going to take him for a quick walk.” Weland clips a leash onto the dog’s red leather collar. He wags his tail as she takes him to the door and then lets out little chuffing woofs, impatient to get going. “I’ll be right back.”

“You’re just going to leave me here?” I can’t believe it. She has zero stranger danger. This is not okay. My protective instincts roar to life, even if they’re misplaced in this situation. She’s not really mine to protect. She just needs to be hers to protect. To keep herself safe. I see no security here. The locks on the door look easy to get through. Yeah, the neighborhood is okay. Nothing scary going on there, at least. But that’s not the point. The point is, I’m a stranger in her house, and she’s just going to walk out.

“Sure, yeah. What are you going to do when I’m gone? Go through my underwear drawer and keep a pair of my panties like a weird and creepy panty snatcher?”

My face gets hot, and I don’t usually get hot faces. It’s not me. “Absolutely not.”

“Okay. Well, even if you don’t keep them, don’t go through them and sniff them or anything. I promise they all just smell like laundry detergent.”

“Holy Christ.”

Her cheeks go red to match mine. “Okay, that was too much.” She motions to the kitchen, which is just down from the living room. The whole area is open, with a staircase heading way up that looks far too steep and narrow right at the entrance. “I baked cookies this afternoon. They’re in a container on the counter. Feel free to help yourself.”

“I could be in here sprinkling drugs on your cookies. Getting up to no good. Committing nefarious murder. Are you sure about this?”

Her eyes narrow and rake up and down over me. My heart starts to pound all wonky again. “You did promise you aren’t a stalker or a creep, and you also said no seduction. So I think I’m safe.”

I quirk a brow. “I could say anything.”

“Sure.” She shrugs. “But you meant it. I can tell.”

I don’t get to respond because her dog leaps up and scratches at the door, wagging that stumpy tail like a maniac. Weland laughs, opens it, charges through, and then she’s gone, and I’m alone.

I need to fix this.

My first instinct is to call Smitty, but that would be giving up the game in the worst way. So that leaves...me. I can’t call my security people. Nothing to give me away. Not yet. But I will. I will make calls and put a team on Weland to make sure she’s safe. Someone to watch this condo since it’s not like I can drop by later and install security and better locks.

How can her father let her live like this?

How can her assholehusbanddo this? Why didn’tlinsist on safety?

She’s been living on her own for years now, and she’s been fine. It’s not your business. You have no right to make it your business.

Except I’m here now, I’ve seen this place, I know I have to do something, and that’s all there is to it.

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I might be four years late, but I'm going to help in any way I can. Even if it leaves just the slightest trail, it's a risk I'm going to have to take. We only have one more year to get through. Just one more, and then Weland will be free. I'll even give her a bonus. Buy her a house, a new car, whatever she wants. She won't want it, but I'll insist. She'll never know it's coming from me—the man she invited in and gave cookies to that probably tastes just like childhood and invokes the happiest of memories and sunny smiles because she's sunshine and light, but that's something I can live with.

There isn't any other choice.

And I need to leave. As in, five minutes ago. As in, I never should have been here. I never should have gotten out of that cab. I never should have come here myself. It was impulsive. I can't even explain what was going through my head besides sheer panic. And a little bit of humanity, I suppose. Hearing that the person who bailed your ass out is miserable doing it isn't a good feeling. People think having money means being heartless, but I didn't come from anything at all, and that's why it's so important for me to stay where I am and hold on to what I've built. Because I'll always remember where I came from. And I do have a heart.

The smart version of me walks out the door. The smart version finds Weland and tells her that I have an emergency and to have a good night. The regular version of me that I am twenty-four fucking seven gets up and leaves right now.

But this version, this imposter I don't know and don't have a clue about, walks over to the kitchen, finds those cookies, pops the lid, and takes one out.

This imposter takes a bite and, yup, gets thrown straight back to his childhood because it tastes just like “mom” cookies.

They’re a trap—“mom” cookies. From what I remember anyway, and I barely remember, but the memory is a potent one. I can’t leave now. I’m in too deep. I’ve lost my chance.

I need another cookie.

All I’ve wanted my whole life was just one more “mom” cookie.

I need another Weland smile. Unlike the cookies, seeing another smile is possible.

I need to know that, beyond a doubt, she’s going to be okay.

And that’s the real reason I can’t just walk out the door.

Chapter five

Weland

While I walk Beans, I realize something.

I’ve never had someone. Sure, I dated in high school and on and off in college, but it was more of a light version of that. Did I ever think to myself that the boyfriend I had at the time was my someone? Someone I could depend on and rely on? No. Never.

I have a husband, but he doesn’t know me. He doesn’t care about me. He’s not my person, a safe person, the person I turn to when everything goes wrong. He’s never seen me cry. He’ll never see me cry, and he’ll never hear me laugh. He’s never had the good moments or the bad moments, the pretty or the ugly. He’s had nothing and

none of it, and he never will, and darn it if that doesn't make me feel even more alone than I've been feeling.

No, I'm not trying to rationalize anything. I know asking Sterling to come in was a mistake. As in, I shouldn't have done it because of the contract. Because I made a commitment to a piece of paper and a person at the other end of it, and just because I don't know his real name or anything about him doesn't mean I can just do whatever I want.

When I get to my doorstep, I decide I'm going to have to tell him to leave.

But when I walk in the front door and let Beans off his leash, he goes bounding right for the super hot stranger in my kitchen who bends down and scratches his head while stuffing a cookie into his mouth with his other hand and making a grunty, sexy sound low in his throat that gets all sorts of raw interest stirring inside me, and I can't help it.

I change my mind. Truth is, I don't want him to leave.

We can just talk. We can talk and be friendly, and I won't be alone, just for a few hours. Tonight was supposed to be about that. About me having fun with friends, having fun with someone who I used to have so much in common with that I called her my bestie. Instead, it ended with me being forgotten and left behind and not even knowing what club they'd gone on to next. As far as signs go, that's a big one. And maybe this stranger is another.

Signs might be up for debate, but here are the facts. I was alone. And now I'm not alone anymore.

"How was your walk?" he asks as he finishes the cookies and licks his fingers. The sight of his tongue coming out and licking melted chocolate off his digits shouldn't

do anything to me, but it makes me feel primitive and wild inmydigit. That's right. Single digit. And no, it's not my finger or my big toe.

"I—errrr..." Great, now I'm not capable of speaking. "Good," I murmur. I decided to tell you that you have to leave. But now I can't, so that's not good. Yet it feels good to not say the words.

I make myself move toward the kitchen. I should retreat, but this place is small. It's easy to do something because Beans has a container of food on the counter, one of those plastic ones I bought and filled with dog food. It's easy to pour some food into his bowl. It's a good distraction. Except when I stand up, Sterling's deep brown eyes run smack dab into mine, and my heart goes racing at a thousand miles an hour.

Something that isn't panic shoots through my brain, chest, and who-ha, in that order. My brain shuts off, my chest clamps down, and the rest of me... That's the part I keep feeling. That burn. That burn of awareness. Of being in close proximity to a man who smells like forest, open skies, wild mountains, and all the beasts contained within. Well, maybe not the beasts, as per how beasts go, but he smells and looks rugged, and all that ruggedness is doing something to me even though I've never been a thrill seeker.

I'm probably standing here looking constipated. Idea constipated. Like I need to say something, but I can't get it out.

I shove the food container back onto the counter. Beans walks over and starts hoovering up those crunchies. He's a messy eater, and bits and pieces fall all over the floor.

One minute, Sterling is just standing there in my kitchen. And the next, he's moving. He's coming closer to me, and I should back up, but I don't. The only thought going through my brain is straight up: He just ate my cookies, but I'd really like him to

eatmycookie.He closes the distance between us way too fast. After a couple of mouthfuls, Beans loses interest in the food and saunters off toward the couch. Sterling is now way too close.

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I press up against the counter until it pokes into my back. I want this. I want it to happen. My belly is cramping, my chest is about to explode from me holding my breath, and my lady bits are clenching in on themselves because, yeah, four years of celibacy, and alright, at least a year before that, do things to a person.

Apparently, all it takes is a look now to get my mojomomoing.

Maybe it's just been so long, or maybe it's because Sterling is so drop-dead gorgeous, or maybe it's that our body chemicals work well together, but I don't feel the least bit threatened or regretful about what is going to happen. He's going to enter my personal space. He's going to touch me gently on the shoulder, on the waist. I'm going to lean into him and tilt my face up, and he's going to kiss me. I'm going to kiss him back, and it's going to kick off the best sex marathon of my life. Even if it's over in five minutes, it would still be the best sex I've ever had. It would be me riding his face. His tongue would be inside me, and then his fingers, and then his—

"I—I'm super tired, actually. I should probably go to bed." The words wheeze out of me like I've just used my tongue to clean up all the dust bunnies under the couch, and believe me, that old beast collects a ton of debris.

He blinks. I blink back. He steps back, and I lean further into the counter. I expect him to get mad at me for leading him on, to ask me what's wrong with me, and to tell me that I'm a tad pathetic and strange and then storm out of here.

Instead, he nods. "You're right. It's late. I'll call for a cab and get it to take me back to the club for my car."



“Yeah.” Yeah, he could do that. But deep down, it’s yeah, as in, please don’t. Yeah, as in, change my mind. Yeah, as in, there’s this stupid contract I absolutely can’t break hanging over my head. “Or you could just uh...sleep on the couch. I could make it up for you.”

We both glance over at it. It’s not really a couch. It’s more of a loveseat. A big old plaid one that I scored because the person who lived here before me left it when they moved out. It’s not comfortable, but I didn’t want to pay someone to come and take it away, and I didn’t have the heart to throw it out because, structurally, it’s still quite sound.

“Sure.”

I think we’re both shocked. Suddenly, he looks tired. He rubs the back of his neck like he caught a red-eye flight from somewhere this morning and has been worried and on his feet ever since. Maybe it’s the white button-down shirt and jacket he’s wearing that puts the image in my head. Suits always scream office, which screams businessman. I realize I don’t know a darn thing about this guy. Yet I was going to...to what? Right now, I don’t remember what I was going to do, but I was going there in my mind. I don’t know where he comes from, what he does, or what his last name even is.

“Okay. I’ll just go get blankets and pillows. Hold on.”

It does my burning face and wild, shaken, and stirred-up insides good to race up the stairs and raid my linen closet, which is basically just the tiniest cupboard in the hallway. It’s full of crap that doesn’t fit anywhere else. I don’t have a spare bedroom, and no one ever sleeps over, so I have to grab two pillows off my bed, but it’s a queen-sized bed, and there are four pillows, so it works out well. I do have an extra quilt and a set of sheets.

Downstairs, I don't look at Sterling. I can't believe I asked him to stay. I don't know why I can't just let him go when I know I can't move forward with him. It's crazy. I should never have even talked to him beyond apologizing for spilling my drink on him at the bar. I don't know what it is about him. Something just makes me feel drawn to him.

I need to spend some time thinking about what I can tell him. Technically, I can't say a thing. What with the gag order and all that. Can I somehow find a way to tell him that, right now, I'm not free to make my own decisions, but in a year, things will be different? Can I give him my number and tell him if he's still single and wants to do this at this time next year, then I'm down for it?

He'll think I'm crazy. He probably already does.

I finish spreading out the quilt and then take a step back, my face on fire. My brain feels sludgy, and my body feels heavy with regret. "If you need anything, just let me know. Coffee's always on in the morning. I get up early, even when I go to bed late. And I hope you don't mind sharing with Beans. The couch is kind of his thing. I bought him a dog bed, but he refuses to use it."

Beans is standing right next to the couch. He gives me one of those raised doggy eyebrows and looks at me like he can't believe I'm serious.

I can't believe I'm serious either.

I can't believe any of this even happened.

"I'll be fine. Thank you," Sterling says.

"No, thank you. Thank you for making sure I got home okay. And for not murdering me as soon as we got here."

“There’s still time.” But he laughs, kind of nervous and warm at the same time.

I know it’s crazy because anyone would tell me how unsafe I’m being, but I just don’t feel like there’s anything to worry about. “Please don’t,” I joke back.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to leave?” His eyes track toward the door, but there’s the same strange reluctance burning in them that I feel. Not because he wants to pressure me into anything. It’s just...I don’t really know what it is. It’s not something I’ve ever felt or can put into words.

If it’s just pheromones, I’d be seriously surprised.

“Are you sure you don’t mind smelling dog farts all night?” He probably has a five-star hotel booked. As it is, he has a rental car back at the club. He can go anywhere. I don’t know why I get the vibe that he’s not from here, but I do. Something about the image of the red-eye flight I just had. Maybe I’m wrong and he actually lives here. It could be that he just likes to dress up to go out. “Because I’m alright. I got home safe. I’m all good now.” Please stay. Please let me tell you whatever I figure out I’m going to say in the morning. Please let me be crazy enough to ask you to find me in a year. Please let a year not be too long.

You know the really strange, shivery sensation you get when your forever is staring you right in the face? Neither do I. I’ve never had it. Until now. Right now, my knees feel like they’re going to knock together, and that chilled-out feeling becomes so strong. It’s like suddenly having your eyes opened to the supernatural.

“I tend not to breathe very deeply when I sleep. It’s a condition. So I shouldn’t even smell anything.”

We both look at how tiny the couch is. There’s no way it’s going to be comfortable. And having to share it with another body? No, unfortunately, not my body. There

isn't any extra room.

“Okay, if you're sure.”

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“I’m sure if you’re sure,” he replies.

I don’t know why I’m sure, but I am. I feel like morning will bring something monumental, if only I can find the right words and the right way to say them. One small action right now can change the future in a myriad of ways. I know that’s true because I’ve read enough fantasy and adventure and time travel books to believe in it. I just have to make that one small action become a reality.

I nod, my heart still banging against my ribs while the rest of me buzzes and flutters. “Sweet dreams, Sterling. And Beans. I’ll make sure the coffee is extra strong tomorrow morning to make up for the terrible sleep you’re going to have on the couch.”

### Chapter six

#### Sterling

This morning smells like the very dark coffee I think I might have gone overboard with, lingering dog farts, and the potent odor of regret that off-gasses from bad decisions.

I don’t know what I was thinking last night. But I know that this morning, I have to make it right, so I started by taking Beans out early. And when I say early, I mean early. We stayed in sight of the front door since I didn’t have keys, and I wasn’t about to go out and leave it unlocked. Not so surprisingly, the dog didn’t have a poop, which he desperately needed, judging by the smells. No matter how many times I walked up and down the parking lot, he wasn’t about to poop where he lived. I think

that's a thing with dogs. He did mark a few parking poles and a streetlight at the end of the lot, though, so that was a win.

To say I was wracked by guilt all through the hours of the night is an extreme understatement to the tune of how weather people never accurately prepare you for how bad that cold snap or snowstorm is going to be. They're never right about that kind of thing. And I wasn't right about this.

Beans is now back on the couch, all curled up and giving me the Beans stink eye with his only eye. It's a look that says he knows I have a game, and it's up. It's so up, and his mistress is not going to be pleased, and since he likes her a heck of a lot more than me—the mystery dude he had to spoon all night when the couch is usually his—he's definitely going to be on her side.

“You could go a little easier on me,” I whisper in his direction. “Considering that you tooted in my general direction all night and at least once right in my face, we should be on a friendly level.”

He huffs at me, rolls his one eye, and puts his head back down on the blankets, which I tried to make up as neatly as I could.

“Don't worry. I'm going to come clean. It's all going to be okay.” It's all not going to be okay.

“What are you going to come clean about?” a voice suddenly asks.

Nope, it's not the dog suddenly proving the impossible and learning the human language. It's Weland coming down the stairs. She looks about as well rested as I am, which is not at all, but even with dark smudges under her eyes, a messy bun that looks a little sticky from the drink that didn't get fully washed out of there yet, and no makeup, she's fabulous. No sleep looks good on her. And so does the tunic sweater

dress with owls all over it and the pair of super soft and sleek black leggings she has on. Her bare feet pad down the stairs without a sound, and she does a wagging thing with her eyebrows like they're asking me a question themselves.

Now I'm trapped between a guilty conscience and a dog that sprawls out and sighs hard. Yeah, he knows it's coming, and he's not going to like it.

"I made coffee and I think I might have put in too many grounds. It's coming out black as tar."

"Oh, good. That's my favorite kind." Weland brushes past me like I'm supposed to be in her kitchen at six in the morning and not two shades past an utter stranger. She grabs two mugs from the cupboard and puts them on the counter.

The kitchen isn't state-of-the-art. It's small. The cabinets are white, and so are the appliances. The countertops are some kind of beige plastic, dinged and scarred. The mugs, though, give the place life. They're the pottery, bright, handmade kind.

"I have a thing for dishes," Weland explains. "Especially the handmade kind. I love thrifting. Always have and always will. That includes flea markets, garage sales, fundraisers, antique stores, and art markets because supporting local people and artists is important. I got these ones at a thrift store when I went with my mom, but I do have some that I bought at an art show earlier this year if you want one of those instead. If you're particular about your mugs."

"I'm not particular," I tell her.

She hairy eyeballs me. "That suit of yours cost, like, I don't know. A lot. Probably. Unless you're a good thrifter too."

"I...it wasn't thrifted." I really don't want to get into my childhood. It's not a

particularly pretty story. I don't think I ever bought anything new until I was old enough to work, and then I worked my ass off to have anything. Add that to the list of reasons why I'll do whatever it takes to keep my company and keep it as mine, not have it all pieced out and torn apart.

"So your confession is that you're here on business. And after today, I'll never see you again because you don't live here?" She pours the liquid tar into the two mugs. "Holy biscuits with butter and jam. You weren't kidding about the grounds. I should have warned you. They're from a local shop here, and they don't mess around. I grind them myself, so I think that makes them extra potent, too, in comparison to the regular grocery store stuff."

"That would explain why they're in a canister and not a token coffee tin."

"Yeah, it would. Anyway, this probably just needs some cream. Are you a cream guy? I think coffee is a bit gut rot first thing in the morning if you don't put some cow juice in it."

"Cow juice?" I quirk a brow.

"Ha. I probably shouldn't call it that. One day, someone is going to clue me in on what cow juice actually is. Moo milk then? Because lots of kinds of milk aren't moo milk."

"I would love some moo milk."

Beans sighs again. He's all about calling me out on my bullshit. The guilt nearly chokes me long before I take a sip of the coffee. It's strong enough to put hairs on the chest, alright, ladies and gents. Or like on the toes or something. Somewhere hair wouldn't normally spring up. Never mind. I think my toes are hairy. I haven't checked in a while, but probably. Maybe the soles of the feet? That would be weird. I



can just imagine them sprouting after this liquid rocket ship in a mug. My heart isn't just beating fast because of the adrenaline that comes with guilt and confessions. The caffeine is a hard punch to the nervous system.

“So...I have a confession to make too,” Weland says, leaning against the counter. She's holding her mug with both hands. She looks petite and beautiful and absolutely adorable. Just looking at her is a punch to the nervous system.

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Curiosity is a killer, and I know it's not right that she goes first. Not when I have a secret so huge. But I want to know. It's not about being a coward and delaying. I try to say something, but speaking is suddenly hard. A low sigh comes out that sounds an awful lot like Beans.

"I'm uh...I'm not actually free to do this," Weland blurts. "To do whatever we might have thought we were going to do last night, which was nothing. But there's a reason, and I can't go into detail about it other than to say my life is complicated right now, though I very much want to be the kind of person who doesn't come with complications."

Her baby blue eyes sweep up to my face, and bam, there's the knockout punch. All the rest were nothing in comparison to this one. There's so much emotion in there. So much soulfulness. And it makes me want to be like butter and melt all over her kitchen floor.

"My life is going to be complicated for a year. But that's it. After that, and I know it's a long time and a lot to ask—you're probably going to laugh about this later, and I'll die a little inside from the crazy amount of humiliation—but if you're interested and in a year you think about me and remember this night, and you wonder to yourself whatever happened to the girl who had a drink spilled on her head and was forgotten by her friends, the weirdo girl with the farty dog and the baggage that's going to take a long arse time to unpack and you think, I'd like to get to know that girl, and I have space in my life for a little bit of awesome craziness, then please, look me up. You know where I live, and I won't move anytime soon, so...uh, that's it."

Wow, that's a heck of a lot and not at all what I expected.

Some things about Weland are, but overall, she's been one heck of a surprise, and am I sorry I'm here? No. No, I'm not. That's not what the regret is about.

"I...holy farge on all the barges." I rake a hand over my face and through my hair. This is it. I have to come clean. "I know."

"I'm sorry?" Weland gives me the most direct stare, but only because she's trying to figure me out. "What do you mean?"

"I know your life is going to be complicated for a year."

"How?" She looks up and studies me, and I know the exact second she reads what's in my brain and on my face. There aren't any more secrets of that kind between us. "Oh my god! You're a stalker. You're a freaking creep, though you promised you weren't! The rest of those homicidal jokes better have been just jokes, or you're going down!" She rips open the kitchen drawer nearest to her and pulls out a carrot peeler. It's carrot-shaped. Like an actual carrot with the peeler coming out of it. "Back off! I know how to use this!" She waves it madly, slashing it in the air with enough force to do some real damage.

I hold up both hands as she advances at me and swings wildly, her face flaming red. She means business, and I don't want to be on the business end of that business. I backpedal big time, literally and metaphorically. So maybe she didn't exactly read the right information in my expression the way I thought she did. "Wait! I'm your husband! Weland, I'm your actual wedded husband, and that's how I know!"

She freezes, and her jaw drops open. Then comes more of the red. The red in her cheeks, the red creeping up her neck, the gritted teeth, the throbbing vein in her forehead, and the twitch in her left eye. She slams the peeler down on the counter. "You...you...you horrible, terrible man! I should have known Smitty would tell you, but this? Are you freaking kidding me right now? Why? Why would you do that?"

You what? Seduced me as a test? Came to that bar to keep an eye on me? Kind of really did stalk me? Why?

“You could have just, you know, been normal, shown up here, and been like, I’m your husband, Weland, and we need to talk things out because you said some seriously crazy things, and I’m just checking in to make sure everything is okay. And if you didn’t want me to know who you were, there’s this thing called a phone. You could have called from a private number or sent an email. There are a hundred ways you could have contacted me, yet you chose the extremely weird way you did? What in the actualarnation was running through your brain?”

My brain is doing this thing where it shuts down, and I feel like I’m being boiled alive. I knew it was a bad idea and all sorts of wrong. It went way too far. She has every right to be mad. “You just threatened me with a carrot peeler!” It’s official. I am the world’s worst imbecile.

“It was called for!” she shrieks.

“You asked me to spend the night here. That means you had intentions.” I have no right to say that or get huffy, but it comes out hecking huffy. The dog chuffs from the couch like he’s telling me to get real.

“Are you kidding me? You spent the night on the couch. We didn’t even get close enough to make any intentions a thing. And you know what my intentions are. I just asked you if, in a year, you would think about picking this up because I couldn’t right now. I kept silent. I kept my part of the bargain, no matter how weird it was or how hard,” Weland hisses. Her eyes are getting big, welling up, and getting shiny.

Seeing that does something to my knees and stomach that I don’t like, but the not-liking is all me not liking what I’ve said and what I’ve done. Apparently, I still can’t stop being a turd. “But you invited me in.”

“I did. And then I let you sleep on the couch,” she grits.

“You told Smitty you were going to sleep with someone.”

Weland throws her hands up in the air, which is still better than reaching for the peeler to take a real strip off me. “I was just venting. I should never have said that. I was lonely. I was in pain. It was stupid. I have Beans now. You can’t just lay this on me. I haven’t done anything wrong. I took a lot of pains to make sure nothing happened after...yes, okay, after I invited you to stay over. But having you sleep on my couch isn’t the same as sleeping with someone.”

“Are you sure? Because if anyone found out that a man stayed the night here, anyone who could matter or bring something against me...”

“But you’re not just any man. You’re you. You’re my husband, and you didn’t even tell me, which makes you a dirty liar and the worst sort of trickster. A...a monumental poo pants! And I hate to be all semantics right now, but you walking out of here and someone seeing you if you weren’t you and you were someone else isn’t the same as having sex with someone. Even if we’d spent the night in the same bed, it wouldn’t be the same thing. Which we didn’t. You can have a sleepover with your best friend and it’s not the same thing. It’s the intention that matters. You slept with Beans all night on the couch. I rest my case.”

“Too far,” I say, my voice low.

“It’s not too far. You’re too far. This whole thing that you did? That’s too far! Lying to me, pretending to be someone else—”

“You’re the only person I have never pretended to be someone else with!” That’s too far. I didn’t mean to say that. Fuck. Fuck, shit. Fuck shit and a carrot peeler.

That knocks the socks right out of the room. By socks, I mean air, and by the room, I mean my lungs. I need to reach for the counter to keep myself upright. The kitchen was small before, but now it seems like a black hole ready to suck me up.

“I don’t know how to respond to that.” Weland reads the room, and her posture changes, softening out. She’s not on the attack anymore, and she’s not defensive. She sighs instead of saying anything else, but then, after a brief moment, she does, adding, “I don’t know where to go from here. I want things you can’t give me. Meaning a partner, a marriage, a child, a family, and a life. I’m tired of being in limbo. I get that I signed a contract, and whatever you might think, I’m not reneging on it, and I’m sorry for the worry I caused. Maybe I brought this all on myself by saying what I said, and for that, I apologize.

“I’m still offended by you tricking me when you could have just been honest, and it’s going to take me a hot minute to get over it. So, yup, that’s where we’re at. I’m not sure how to go from here to everlasting happiness, but I know it’s not together, and honestly, that feels like a shame because, in a year, I was really hoping you’d remember my dog and me and do the impossible. However, now I’m finding out I might not have to wait a year, yet it’s actually a hard no and a never because you’re not who I thought you were.”

“Maybe I’m not who you think I am in that regard either.”

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“Obviously. I want to see what they think about all this,” I say.

“I don’t know if I can do that,” Sterling replies, shaking his head.

“If you want to date me for real, you’ll have to meet them first. And there’s nothing saying I want to date you for real. Or be your real wife. It seems like there would be a lot of complications to iron out. Aren’t you busy? You have a life somewhere else. Probably a huge company you’re some hotshot CEO of. And a vast fortune to defend from your cousins. You were wary about men and trails and stuff leading back to me and back to you, so maybe you shouldn’t even be here. You can’t just say fuck what everyone thinks and call it a day. Why do you now, all of a sudden, want to do this anyway? Why after four years?”

I don’t taste anything in my mouth after all that long-windedness, so maybe it’s safe to lower my sweater a fraction. I do, but then quickly tug it back up. Nope. My sweater was filtering out more than I thought.

“Meet your family?” he gag-gasps. “That’s...insane.”

“And this whole thing isn’t?” Something stirs low in my belly. Something that feels a lot like want. And not just physical want. It’s not just my hormones or nipples acting out again. Although, thank goodness for this sweater because my nipples are totally free right now under this tank I have on underneath, and they’ve definitely perked up a good inch since descending the stairs and finding that Sterling was still in my house and in my kitchen and that he’d made coffee.

Never underestimate the allure of a man who makes strong java first thing in the

morning. I haven't had anyone do something like that for me since I lived at home, and it's been years.

That's what has the want stirring. That flickering, shining, lonely asshole that lives inside me raises her head and gives me two hard fist bumps to the center of my chest. What Sterling is proposing might be crazy, but so was seeing someone's video of them singing a song online and then contacting them to ask if they want to be a fake wife...so was entering into this marriage in the first place. He did that, though, and now we're both used to the idea. We've been living like this for four years.

I've been lonely for four years.

Has he?

Has it been longer than that?

I shouldn't care. I should be able to stay mad. But the beast inside me has been beasting for some time...and this man. I know there's something about him that I won't be able to expunge from my life ever again. Even if he were still Sterling from the night before, I wouldn't have been able to forget last night. And now I couldn't even if I wanted to because this morning just happened.

"I'm not...I'm not in danger from your cousins, am I?" The thought suddenly connects with me, slamming into my brain. "You said something about them tracking your trail."

"I was just..." He waves his hand in front of his face and slowly lowers the towel. Then, he tests the air before putting the towel down on the counter. I drop my sweater too. I guess the danger has passed for now. "I was...I don't know. I don't want to scare you. They would never hurt you in any way. They just like to make trouble for me."



“Care to expand on that?”

“Not at the moment. But maybe I should stay here with you, just in case one of them shows up. They essentially want to prove the marriage is fake. If I were here, then it would be much harder for them to prove that than if I were staying in a hotel.”

“Oh no. No way. My parents will...they will...” I don’t know what they will do. Once they meet Sterling and assure themselves he is an okay dude as far as most people go—and I really don’t know if that’s the case, but the naïve and hopeful version of myself thought so last night when I let him sleep on my couch, and I have no lock on my bedroom door, and even if I did, it would have done very little to protect me if I needed it—once they satisfy themselves that this man is alright, and they will because he oozes charm out the wazoo, they’ll be fully on board with him staying with me.

They’ll be shocked at the whole paper marriage becoming a real thing and also shocked beyond belief because they didn’t even know my paper marriage to Sterling existed. But when they know everything? They’ll be on board with me giving this a legit shot, won’t they?

“We meet my family first and tell them everything. They won’t say anything, I promise. If you want to keep going on with this, then those are my terms. They are my only terms. Otherwise, there’s no deal.”

“Hmm.” He runs a hand over his chin and contemplates that for all of a few seconds, then gives me the most charming, quick-thinking grin I’ve ever seen. Despite everything, my ovaries light up. He’s still absurdly hot, even if he did trick me. Even if he’s my nameless, faceless husband who isn’t so nameless or faceless anymore.

“Is Sterling even your real name?” I shouldn’t even be considering this. This seems like a whole lot more trouble than any paper marriage would have been, loneliness be

damned.

Except it is damned. I feel damned along with it, and I'm so tired of feeling that way. Like I have no one at all in the world, and I'm just stuck, stuck, stuck while life keeps going on without me.

He frowns. It looks extra good on him, right along with the fine shadow of stubble on his square jawline. "I could have given you a fake one. I should have. But I didn't. So, yes, it's my real name." Those frown lines get frownier, and his hotness getshotter. "Alright. We'll go and meet your family. But I have one stipulation of my own."

I prepare for the worst and most absurd suggestion. "What's that?"

"We stop for dog probiotics along the way to your parents' house. Some really good, the best money can buy, proven to fix any kind of intestinal problems, miracle-working dog probiotics."

## Chapter eight

### Sterling

Six sets of eyes are staring me down.

Wait, I mean six eyes. Jesus, not six sets and certainly not six sets of six. There are no aliens here. Just a very concerned mother, father, and little brother who also looks like he's debating the merits of kicking my arse from here to Sunday. The little brother is the worst of them. He's practically breathing murderous, ass-kicking—if you hurt my sister, you're going down, you mother fucker—intent.

Does the dog count? I guess it would be four sets if he counts because he's giving me

a dirty look too. With his one eye. Jesus. And this after I stopped at three different vets on the way in order to find the miracle probiotic I was suggesting, paid for a cab, and also used my rental, which I'm pretty sure is a pet-free car, but whatever. I can afford whatever the slap on my credit card is for the cleaning fee.

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Yeah, I get it. Dogs are actually a woman's BFF, even if this dog has only known said woman for a few days. He's still on her side. Sharing a couch with me last night didn't endear me to him.

"Let me get this straight," the little brother says. He looks like his sister. They have the same flaxen hair and blue eyes, but his bone structure is much less delicate than hers. He's also about a foot or so taller. He's even taller than me, and most people don't get to boast that because six-three is a tough benchmark to beat. He has scrubby scruff, which indicates he's much younger than she is because I know she's twenty-nine, and since the dad is rocking a full beard that tells me family genetics doesn't trend toward scrub-brush facial hair but more like get turned around and lost in the bush because it's so thick kind of facial hair, I don't think he's old enough for bearding yet.

But what do I know?

That's the kind of look Weland's mom is giving me. It's a look that says what the heck do I know about anything? And how could I have done this to their daughter? How could I have kind of ruined her life and then made her lie about it, even to them? What kind of person does that?

"Bry..." Weland says, a warning note in her voice. "We didn't come here to beat anyone down or rehash things we can't change. We came because...because I guess it's time. We wanted to tell all of you everything. A full confession."

"You told us everything," Bryan argues. His death glare becomes extra homicidal, and of course, he doesn't train it on his sister. Just on me. "He sat there and let you do

it. And you clearly couldn't come to us until he gave you permission. That's weird and creepy. Gag orders? Seriously? Fake marriages? It all sounds just a tad like acontrolling assholeto me. This is the guy you want us to give our blessing to?"

"Forgiveness doesn't happen overnight." Weland is so gentle. I think she's always like this. Hard to make angry, quick to laugh, and easygoing. Somehow, she keeps putting her heart out there over and over again, even when it gets ripped up and tattered and hurt. "But yes, that's why we're here. Because we want to know what you think. Ultimately though, we will make our own decisions, so be gentle. People make mistakes, and this situation is still more complicated than a fifteen-minute sit down can even begin to explain."

"You told us that you sold the rights to your songs. That's why you had to take down the ones you had online, and that's why you couldn't make any more videos. Because all your work was sold." Weland's mom, Monique, complains. She's an older version of Weland. Petite, lovely, and dignified with kind eyes. Except they're not blue. "You lied to us becausehemade you lie to us?"

I did. I did that. I also gave Smitty a written sheet of what she could say to explain the money and why she was taking down her videos. I came up with that explanation because it was valid. And because I'm a bastard, I did use her songs. To my credit, once she read the sheet over with Smitty, she fired back that if I was paying that kind of money, I might as well have her song and all the songs she'd planned on putting online at that point. She wasn't going to be turned into a liar.

So I had them, and I gave them away. I made exponentially more money from them than what I'm paying Weland, which makes me feel like a douchebag multiplied by a thousand.

Allof this makes me feel like a total douchebag multiplied by a thousand. When laid all out on the table, it really does sound bad. It makes me sound like an unfeeling

villain. Like a greedy, money-grubbing grubber of a grub, even though that's not who I am.

"That's not how it happened, and that's not who he is." Weland defends me, keeping her tone gentle but firm. It's like my eyes are projecting words onto the wall, and she's reading my brain like a teleprompter.

It kind of creeps me out, but the shiver that runs up my back isn't all bad. It's more like amazement. Being married to someone for four years doesn't make you close to them. Being contractually married for four years definitely doesn't make you close, yet it still feels like I know Weland, and she knows me, and now she's reading my thoughts.

Bryan gives his sister a wounded look. Yeah, it would suck to find out that you're kind of the reason your sister messed up her whole life. Not that it was on purpose, but the kid has to be feeling guilty. And I say kid, but I think he's probably twenty-one or twenty-two since I already know he's a lot younger than Weland. I should know this. All the details. Smitty would know it. He'd tell me if I asked him, but I don't want to ask him.

Beans shifts under the table, curling up into a ball. He huffs, closes his one eye, and immediately starts snoring. As soon as we got to Weland's parents, she let them feed Beans a packet of the probiotics we found, along with a bit of plain yogurt. Then, we all sat down at the kitchen table and she explained why she called an emergency family meeting and brought some rando with her.

Rando. Christ. I hate that word, term, implication. All of the above.

"He still made you lie to us," Bryan insists. "And that's just wrong. Who makes someone fake marry them anyway? That's seriously desperate, dude."

I glance away since I don't want to look an angry wolf in the eyes. I glance toward Fred instead, but looking at Weland's dad isn't really any better. I see where both kids got their bright blue eyes from though. He subtly scowls at me like he'd enjoy nothing more than shoving a boot straight up the parts of me where the sun doesn't shine.

He's pushing hard to get the dirt despite what his sister just said. "I can't explain the whole situation, but it was dire. Sometimes it happens. It wasn't his fault." Weland is defending me again, though she can't explain the whole thing because I haven't even explained it to her. It's not fair of me, and I know it. I need to man up here.

Clearly, this whole family thinks I'm a piece of work.

I think I'm a piece of work.

There's no way they're going to give their blessing.

It was a crazy idea anyway, thinking we could make it work. Wanting to make it work out of the blue wasn't something I saw myself needing to check off a life list when I was on my way here. And then I saw Weland at that club in person, and it was...it was...I don't know. It feels a lot like game fucking over. RIP to my single life.

And you know what? It might be crazy, but I'm not sorry. Everyone called me crazy back in the day. They said starting a record label would never work. That I'd never sign anyone and that tiny little indie studios never went anywhere. Well, spoiler alert, they were wrong. Whatever this idea of mine is now might be crazy and terrible. It might even end up being torture, but call me a masochist, I guess, because I'm signing up for it.

I'm suddenly jumping off the cold and unfeeling bastard businessman married to the

life of work, work, work boat, and leaping into waters that involve tricky things like emotions, hormones, and other unknown elements that terrify me.

“I did.” This is me manning up. “I did, and I’m sorry. I went about all of this the wrong way. I did pay your sister a huge sum of money in exchange for a fake marriage because I needed it to save my company. I’m not sorry about that. If you met my cousins, you’d understand. It’s not an excuse, and I’m not saying it was right. Just necessary, but necessary isn’t always moral, and it’s very seldom the high road. Yes, there was a gag clause because the marriage needed to appear legit, and I couldn’t risk it getting out that it wasn’t. No, there was nothing saying we needed to be in the same room or that the public needed to know my wife. And my cousins not being able to get their hands on her or even their opinions anywhere near her was important to me. I was trying to protect her as much as I was trying to protect myself. That sounds like a cop-out, but I mean it. The rest, you can blame me. I took advantage. I needed someone who was desperate because I was desperate myself. I went about it all wrong. I freely admit that.”

“So why now?” Weland’s dad interrupts. “And is it genuine?”

“You just seem like a creep who wants to get in my sister’s pants,” Bryan growls.

“Bryan!” Monique yelps. “We don’t say things like that.”

“But we do make life hell for assholes and creepy dudes who want to mess with Weland. At least, I do. She’s my sister and she clearly needs protecting, maybe even saving from her own self. I messed all this up for her. It was my surgery she had to pay for. It was me she sacrificed herself for, and I’m not going to let her do it again. I’m not entirely sure why you’re even here, Sterling, but you don’t get my stamp of approval on anything but us putting you on a plane to whatever hole you came out of and making sure you stay there for the next year until my sister is free of you, and then it’s good riddance time.”



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“Bryan.” Weland’s hand shoots out and covers her brother’s.

She’s sitting the closest to him while their parents are on the other side. We’re kind of together, clustered around the other half of the circle, where the three of them could watch us as they listened to whatever we said. I’m closest to Weland’s mom, but she also looks like she’d enjoy tenderizing me with some kind of kitchen implement at the moment, despite her admonishing her son earlier for whatever he said.

“It’s true, Welly. We’re not letting him hurt you. This guy is straight up the worst kind of news.”

“I’m twenty-nine. I don’t need defending,” she whispers. “But thank you. This is my decision. I just wanted to come and tell you about it. I was skeptical, and I guess I did say I needed to hear what you thought, and above all, I needed to tell you all the truth. It was past time. But now that I’ve talked it all out, this is what I want. For better or for worse, we are legitimately married, and part of me wants to see if it will work.”

“And the other part is terrified because you know this guy is a jerk and a monster?”

“Oh lord.” Weland withdraws her hand, scowls at her brother—not really a real scowl—and turns to her dad. “I think it’s time for ice cream. Or coffee. Or coffee and ice cream together.”

“Caffeine and sugar won’t make him less of a total douche,” Bryan gripes.

“We don’t say douche in this house,” his mom reprimands him.

“Apparently, we do,” Bryan shoots back. “We do when it’s necessary!” He scowls at me like he’s four and just got soap in the mouth, while I did much worse and didn’t get punished at all. “It’s so necessary. This guy thinks he can just waltz into Welly’s life and suddenly make a forced fake marriage real? He’s a stranger. He doesn’t know one thing about her. He just shows up after lying to all of us for years and forcing her to do the same and then expects the world to drop at his feet as if that’s what is traditionally done because when you’re rich, you can afford to be a...fine. A total D-bag hole. Is that better?”

It’s not really a question, and his tirade keeps on tirading. “I don’t know if it’s an emotional breakdown or what’s even going on, but we’re here for you, Weland. We are. We’ll chase this rich pr...bast...entitled person right out of town if that’s what you want. He doesn’t belong here. He doesn’t fit in here. He has no right to get anywhere near you, seeing as he’s already taken more than enough from you.”

I’m not exactly stunned by this. I pretty much saw all this coming. Weland, though, appears surprised. Her lips are slightly parted, there is a soft rose petal blush on her cheeks, and she looks absolutely lovely. She brushes her hair back and swallows nervously. “Umm, first of all, I’m not having an emotional breakdown.”

“We know you aren’t, sweetheart.” Her mom gets up and walks around the table. Then, she fills the kettle in the small kitchen and slides it onto a stove that looks like it’s at least thirty years old but immaculately cared for. The house is a small bungalow, but everything looks that way. The pride of ownership is obvious. The flowers growing in the beds are beautiful and neatly tended, while the white fence around the side yard is straight and true and doesn’t have a flake of paint peeling. The inside is just as nice. Homey, if not very modern. The furnishings are all dated, but they look just like the day they were made.

“You think I am.” Weland’s eyes nearly pop right out, and her hands curl into a bunch on the tabletop. She grasps her knuckles until they turn white. “You’re making

tea. You make hot chocolate when everyone is in a happy mood, or it's freezing outside. Coffee goes with dessert, or early in the morning, or for anything social. Juice is also a happy drink, whether it's the crystals kind or the real fruit stuff. Milk is either a late-night comforting beverage or strictly reserved for cereal or cooking. Water is always on offer, but tea? Tea is one of those things you only bust out when something or someone needs real comfort. Or serious fixing."

"Good lord, what is that smell? Is there a gas leak in the house?" Fred jumps up and turns his head from side to side so wildly that it's a wonder his neck doesn't snap clean off.

It feels weird to think about Weland's parents using their first names. I don't feel like I've earned a first-name basis, even in my head. She might have introduced them when we got here, but it doesn't give me permission to use their names.

"It's the dog," Weland groans. "That's why mom gave him that probiotic first thing when we got here. It's no joke."

Bryan wrenches his T-shirt with a stickman doing a handstand on the back of a purple unicorn up onto his nose. "Oh my sweet lord, that is horrific! No joke, you weren't joking. It smells worse than something dying. This is blue cheese mixed with onions mixed with liver mixed with something dying."

"I'm sorry." Weland pushes back her chair. "I'll take him outside."

I stand up as well. This seems like a good time to take a five-minute break. Maybe it's natural. Maybe the dog did me a huge solid, or maybe he needs to take a huge solid. It sure smells that way.

Weland gives me a stricken, worried look. I'm so freaking sorry about all this. I want to put my hand on her back, her shoulder. I want to wrap my arms around her, pull her

close, and hold her. I seriously don't know what's going on because I don't get urges like this. My life has been vastly less complicated due to the fact that I haven't been close to anyone. Okay, so I was once a teenager, and then once I went to college...I kind of...alright...once upon a time, I did date, but not after I became serious about my business, and by then, I was far too busy to worry about any of that. Maybe I grew up. Maybe the urges just died off or something.

All the urges are doing all sorts of things to me now, and that's not a good thing, especially not when I'm standing in a kitchen with a bunch of people who don't like me and would rather roast my balls on a platter than have them anywhere near their daughter. At a minimum, they think I'm a huge ass, and they're not that wrong about how I've treated Weland. Even if they knew me, they would probably be pretty darn skeptical about me turning over a fresh, bright, and shiny new token leaf.

"Let me take him." I bend down and urge Beans out from under the table. The odor is worse under here. It's eyewatering. Some of it gets in my mouth when I try and do the shallow breathing thing through it, and I nearly gag. Upchucking all over the floor on top of just showing up here and being myself isn't something I want to ever contemplate happening.

It's just lucky Beans comes out, does a downward doggy stretch, grunts, and then wags his half tail when he looks at me.

And you know what? I don't like dogs all that much, especially not the decrepit, smelly variety, but the ice blocks I've walled my heart up with melt just a little.

"You don't have to do that," Weland protests. She looks at her dad and her brother, who is still mostly hiding in his T-shirt, and then at her mom. "Please stop making tea. The world isn't in crisis mode. We'll talk right now. Please just sit down, and while Sterling takes Beans out for a ten-minute walk, we'll work things out. Because this is happening. Me and him, we're happening. We're going to do this, and I need

you all to be okay with it, at least on a very basic level, because I'm me, and I love you, and I can't do this without you. I need your love and your support, and I need you not to have this kind of hate for someone who doesn't deserve it. So, please. Just...let's all sit down and keep talking."

"There isn't anything I will say while he's gone that I won't say in front of him," Bryan insists. He has his nose plugged under his shirt, so it comes out garbled and nasally sounding.

Oh, I'm very sure about that. He didn't hold back when I was right here.

Weland's mom moves away from the kettle, which has boiled and turned off anyway, and comes back to hover near the table. Her dad reluctantly sits down. He looks confused and helpless, while her mom looks so worried and horrified. Her brother, on the other hand, is going to be in kick-ass mode for a long time.

I'm the wrench in a family that was doing okay.

Except Weland clearly wasn't, and I'm solely to blame for that.

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I might not be able to fix anything else, but I'm going to work my ass off to fix that.

Even I'm shocked straight down to my socks, which are still on my feet—fancy dress style socks that are more than due for a change, and can anyone say shower and a fresh set of clothes before I start to stink like Beans here—that she defended me. She said she wanted this, which was more than she said back at her place.

I don't know why she's changed her mind.

And I don't know why I put it out there in the first place.

But I do know that when I do something, I don't do it halfway, and now that we're doing this, we're full-on doing it. It doesn't matter if I haven't dated anyone in ten years. I'll figure it out.

Chapter nine

Weland

I have a boyfriend.

I have a husband who is also kind of a boyfriend.

I have a husband who is also kind of a boyfriend but who is also kind of neither.

A few days ago, I thought my life was complicated. But I had no idea what that word even truly meant.

I still haven't figured it out. Part of me can't even believe this is real. There's this huge part of my brain that keeps giving me the same foul thought pattern over and over again, which is that Sterling is just going to disappear. That he's going to just leave and go back to his life. I don't even know his last name yet. Then again, I didn't ask. He asked me if it was okay if he checked into his hotel after my parents' house in order to give me time to process everything, and it truly felt like a dismissal.

I mean, what was I supposed to say? That no, it wasn't actually okay because I went to freaking bat for him with my family, and him leaving felt like a rejection, and no, I didn't want to go home to my tiny little condo and resume my pathetic, boring, lonely, boyfriendless, and childless life? Was I supposed to tell him I had my doubts and that I thought he'd be on the first plane out of here, leaving me in his rearview mirror, never to think of me again except when he should ever need me because you know...evil cousins?

But of course I didn't say any of that. Of course I didn't ask for his last name so I could internet stalk him all night and then maybe stalk him some more if he should happen to ghost me. There are things I don't do, and they're mostly to tell people what I need. I just don't do that. I don't have a long list of things I need, but even if I did, I wouldn't put it out there. I'm the one who fixes problems. I'm the strong one. I'm the one who has it all together and needs to have it all together so I can repair what's broken.

When I look at the past few days, it's pretty obvious to me that I don't have it together. That I haven't been so good at fixing what's broken for myself. And that I do have a list of things I need. The venting I did to Smitty might not have just been a product of my frustration. There might have been a lot of truth and need in it too.

After an evening with Beans where I tried to shut down my overactive brain and then had a night of restless sleep, I opened the door the next morning to a fresh, sparkling, sunny-eyed, bushy-tailed, real-life, real-in-person, didn't-skip-town husband holding

a bouquet of sunflowers and a huge bag of chocolates—the ball kind that are all different flavors wrapped in brightly colored foil—and by a huge bag of chocolates, I mean a white sleeve thing so big that it looks like it weighs at least twenty pounds.

“I sent a care package to your parents’ house too.”

I block the doorway with my body, which is hard because I don’t want to advertise that my nipples are suddenly going into full-on piercing mode, and there’s a wild heat flooding through me in the most disturbing and consuming manner.

“I’m sorry, I don’t think they can be bought with chocolates and flowers.”

“It’s probably a good thing I also included three new tablets, a seventy-two-inch TV, one adorable snail purse, and eighty-seven greeting cards because I sponsored eighty-seven rescue cats. When you donate, the site automatically generates e-cards. I donated in your parents and brother’s names.”

My jaw slowly moves toward unhinging, but I have things under control. I’m not going to let it go flapping all over. The same goes for my nipples and ovaries. It doesn’t matter that my husband is real and here, and he didn’t leave, or that he brought me chocolates and flowers because he thought of me. Or that he looks so deliciously hot that he might as well be a twice-baked potato with hot dogs on top, all smothered in cheese and homemade salsa with a side of sour cream and barbeque sauce because, yes, that is my favorite food and, yes, my mouth is watering right now.

It doesn’t matter that he’s tall or that his Henley clearly shows off his masculine shoulder goodness and his muscly arms. It doesn’t matter that jeans do something for him that is definitely unnatural because it’s so smoking hot. He’s like a god wrapped up in a baked potato, in hot dogs, and then smothered in cheese with a side of extra smoking eye candy, ovary-busting goodness.



It also doesn't matter that he thinks the way to my family's hearts is through helping homeless cats.

Nope. Not one bit. That burn in the back of my throat and that sting at the back of my eyeballs? Not happening. I'm sure it's not happening for my parents either. And I'm sure my brother doesn't really like the new tablet or the new TV. Sterling was probably kidding about those things anyway.

"How did you get their emails?" I ask.

"I printed off every single one it generated, folded them up—they each come with a photo of the specific cat you helped save—and put them with the pile of stuff that got couriered over."

"Gah. And snails? How do you know my mom has a thing for snails?"

"They were everywhere in the house," he replies nonchalantly.

That makes it sound like my parents' house has some kind of problem, but by everywhere, he means the décor. My mom has been collecting snails for a long time. Little knick-knacks and ornaments, stuffies, paintings, whatever we can find for her that is snails...we usually pick it up if the price isn't crazy. A lot of her collection came from thrift stores and garage sales.

I don't want to show him how touched I am or how hopeful I am that my parents and my brother will come around to this because I most certainly should not be hopeful, and whatthisis hasn't even been defined yet. I want to put on my best ambivalent face, but I swear I fail.

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“How’s Beans doing? Any change in his digestion yet?” he asks.

Ugh, damn it. He has to hit me right where it hurts. Right in the soft, feeling spots with all his masculine, nice guy, food-smothered, god-like body charm.

How is it possible to look that good at nine in the morning? I’m over here in an oversized sweater and leggings because it’s human and comfortable, and he’s all freaking red-carpet worthy. I mean, no one wears jeans to the red carpet, but I think they’ll all make an exception in his case, and jeans will suddenly become the new tuxedo the way forty is supposed to be the new twenty. I’ve been twenty. It wasn’t all that great. I hope forty is better.

That just makes me think of what life could look like ten years from now, which makes me feel all hot and bothered, fantastical and hopeful, and slightly depressed because I still don’t feel like any of this is real.

“Would it be okay if I came in? Or would you rather go out? We could have breakfast. Or take Beans for a walk and discuss the merits of probiotics that are hopefully working. We could talk about—”

“About what your real name is, where you live, what you do, your past, your life, your family, your history, and everything that led you to this point?” I can feel my right eye start to twitch.

I put myself out there yesterday with my family. I know if this doesn’t work out—and this is still pretty undetermined—they won’t rub anything in for me, but I’ll rub it in for myself. They now know I lied to them. Yes, they think this man drove me

to do it, but they're going to be confused and hurting for a good while yet, and they're not going to trust me the way they used to. They're not going to see me the way they used to, and okay, maybe that's not entirely me being fair to myself because I know they'll think about the sacrifice I made, but still. Maybe I'm being hard on myself. They won't be hard on me. They love me. If this doesn't work, they'll be there for me. Now they know the truth, and it's such a relief.

"Weland?"

I'm brought back to reality by the sound of my name said with perfect cadence, like a song.

"We can uh...take Beans for a walk." I don't know if I'm ready to share such a tiny space with this much hotness again. It's kind of like crawling up into Satan's arsehole itself, at least as far as the fiery, burning-from-the-inside-out factor goes.

"Alright. Do you want this?" He holds out the flowers and the chocolate.

Darn it, I do. I love flowers. And who doesn't love chocolate? Somehow, he knew they were my favorite kind, and no, I don't recall ever mentioning it to Smitty. It's like the snails thing. Sterling notices things the way other people just don't.

I grab the chocolate and flowers from his hands. Then, I give him the universal wavering eyebrow sign that means stay right there, please and leave the door open because shutting it in his face just feels rude.

My face is probably hotter than the inside of any arsehole as I get a big juice pitcher down for the flowers, fill it up, and then stick the flowers into it. I stash the chocolate in the pantry, slip Beans' leash on, and get into my dog-walking runners, which have just been designated as such in the past few days of having a dog. They're comfy, and they're always going to be my go-to for walks, so I think it fits.

Sterling falls into step beside me as soon as I step out and lock the door. When he starts whistling a perfectly in-tune happy tune, it's more than I can take.

"Beans is good," I finally answer. "Really good. His farts smell like uh...more like Beans and less like rotting Armageddon to the exponent of death, multiplied by sixty-four."

His smile is so genuine that it melts the icy bits inside me that are still lingering over the past four years and the fresh ice that frosted over from worrying that maybe he was just going to up and abandon me. Although it wouldn't make any sense for him to do that given that if he wanted to, he could have just done it already and not gone to all that trouble with my family.

"I'm glad."

Beans marks a signpost and then turns to me, his tongue lolling out, his stumpy tail wagging. He looks like he's feeling better this morning too.

"And I'm glad that if you're truly serious about us trying to make this work, you're going to open up and start making the past four years make some kind of sense. You seem to know everything about me. Now I want to know about you. It might be rude and painful, and I'm sorry about that, but it's also necessary. I need a crash course in all things Sterling so my husband isn't a total stranger. Even if we take the time to date and get to know each other like regular people, which probably isn't in the cards for us because that's normal, and nothing about us or this or anything has been the way anyone else on this earth would do it, then I still know nothing, and I'm at a huge disadvantage."

I half expect some brush-off or non-committal answer, but Sterling surprises me. He lets out a sigh that makes him sound like he's been constipated for eight thousand years—might I recommend dog probiotics, but the people variety—and nods.

“Alright,” he says tightly. “Let’s walk, and I’ll tell you everything.”

## Chapter ten

### Sterling

I’ve spent a lifetime not talking about this. No, I’m not avoiding it. I’ll never forget where I came from, but I’ve never intentionally gone there either. I don’t want to talk about it now, but Weland deserves the truth, not just because she stood up for me with her family, but because I’ve chosen this. I’ve chosen to be here with her. Maybe I spent a lifetime consciously not choosing that either—a family, a wife, and a life like everyone else has—but perhaps there was a part of me that always wanted that.

Obviously, there is. I wouldn’t be here right now if there weren’t. Everyone always told me, and not exactly in a nice way either, that there would come a day when work wouldn’t be enough. The company wouldn’t be enough. Being married to my job wouldn’t be satisfying.

I didn’t know it was here until it blindsided me. As it is, I still don’t feel like that’s true. I don’t feel like it’s not enough. But I’m here. I’m here, and I’m finding that I want something in addition to it. I don’t feel like I have to carve a part of myself out to have the other. Maybe I’m just scrambled up, jet-lagged, and having emotional whiplash. That would explain a lot of the stuff I can’t properly explain to myself.

“Everything sounds a lot like crickets,” Weland says, her tone light and breezy. She’s holding Beans’ leash while he marks yet another pole. A dog’s pee reserve is astounding. Their bladder must be the size of a water tanker, but somehow, it magically fits inside them.

“Sorry. I’m just trying to think how to start.”

“I know. It’s all good. I was trying to make a joke because I thought that might make it easier, but it’s probably not. Take your time. We can walk all morning if you like.”

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:37 am*

The street is endless, with rows of condo complexes, apartment buildings, and houses. Cars are parked all down both sides of the street. It might be early enough in the morning, but it's still busy enough. We're the only ones out walking so far. I guess we're not that early, and all the morning dog walkers are probably already at work.

"You teach guitar?" I ask.

Weland blinks. "That's right."

"When do you give lessons? I don't want to mess that up for you."

"Monday to Friday in the evenings and then in the afternoons on weekends. I just took last weekend off because of the stagette. I moved the lessons. I thought I'd be more...uh...well, busier."

"Did your friends contact you?"

She tries really hard not to let her face fall, but I can see the disappointment in her eyes. "No, none of them did. I texted Kate because I didn't want her to think I just left and bailed on them, but I haven't even heard back from her yet, and it's been days. She's busy, though. Planning a wedding and all that."

I scoff. "Ignoring someone who is supposed to be her best friend and all that."

Weland winces, and even though I'm trying to defend her, I feel like the bottom end of a jackass, and I think that's all ass to begin with.

Waving a hand, I quickly add, “Sorry. Ignore me. I don’t know anything about it. I’ll tell you about me instead.”

“How bad is it?” She wraps the leash around her hand one more time like she’s preparing for Beans to tug her off her feet, but really, I think she’s trying to ground herself so she doesn’t get knocked off her feet by what I’m about to say.

“Oh, just regular bad. You’ll be okay.”

Her brows shoot up, and she gives me a wild look. “It’s not me I’m worried about.”

No, she wouldn’t be. I don’t think she ever worries about herself. She’s the least selfish person I’ve ever met. But self-sacrifice can be too far and too much as well. “My mom was a single mom. She was close to her family. She never did tell a soul who my dad was, which became a real issue later, but in the earlier years, they helped her out. She was young. She had me when she was nineteen. When I was three, she started dating again. I don’t remember, but that’s what my grandma always told me when I asked.

“Everyone always described her as being like the sun. Bright, beautiful, but a little bit unreachable and untamable. Granted, that was always coming from her own mother with a hell of a lot of hindsight behind it, so I’m not sure I can count that as accurate. I think there might have been a lot of jealousy involved too, even for my grandma. I think my mom lived life to the fullest every day and in every way. I’m not sure anyone really understood her. She dated a series of guys, as my grandma liked to put it, and one of them kind of stuck. They’d been dating for a few months, but she never brought him home. My grandma would see his bike pull into the driveway to pick my mom up and then back again at the end of the night. She didn’t know much more about him than that. Later, she knew his name because it was in the papers. She knew it from his obituary. He was a few years older than my mom but still way, way too young. Driving a bike late at night in the rain, they were hit by a truck. Neither of



them survived.”

Weland makes a gargling noise in the back of her throat, and when I glance over, I see unshed tears glistening, and they turn her eyes a dark shade of blue, somewhere near cobalt or sapphire. As much as I try to feel anything about my past, all I feel is regret about what could have been and what wasn’t. I don’t feel grief. I was three, so I don’t remember any of it. But I do feel longing. Longing to know the woman who gave me life, who loved me, and who was taken from me before I could even properly recall anything about her. All my life, I wished that night never happened. I wished I had a real mother instead of a grandma and an aunt and cousins.

“I lived with my grandma for a few years after that. She was heartbroken, though, and losing my mom was hard on her. I didn’t understand it as a little kid, but as an adult, it was clear. When I was eight, she passed away. She wasn’t overly old, but I don’t think heart attacks pick and choose.”

“Good god, Sterling,” Weland gasps. “You said it wasn’t that bad.”

“That’s all the grief and losing people in my story. It’s done there. My mom’s dad died super young, when she was a teenager. Maybe that had something to do with her wild streak or why she tried to live life and love life to the fullest. I’m not sure. I’ll never be able to ask her. There was no one other than my aunt. She was five years older than my mom, and by the time I came into her family, she already had three kids. Two older and one a year younger than me. She didn’t want another, but she made room for me anyway, and she loved me in her own way.

“From what I could gather, she was so different from my mom. Her husband was a banker, and later, when she went back to work, she worked at the same bank. They were both so...proper and upright. Stodgy, I guess. I don’t know what it was, but she also encouraged the worst kind of sibling rivalry, except it was between her kids and me. The three of them against me. That’s the way it always was. Three boys. She

called them her Gaggle of Greedy Gretchens. So, full disclosure: I didn't come up with that myself. They hated that. They hated that she compared me to a saint or an angel all the time because I was quiet and never asked for anything. I never wanted to draw attention to myself, but it never worked out in my favor.

“All our lives, it was me against those three. I knew my aunt and uncle would never be a mother or father to me, and I'd never be one of their kids. They didn't treat me like that, but it felt like it anyway. I never wanted to ask for anything, and I never wanted to need them for anything. I didn't want to do a single thing that'll ever give them a reason to get rid of me, which I understand now is super fucked up logic, but when I was a kid, that was how I thought.”

“Were they mean? Or just like kind of obtuse? I can't imagine being in a family where you didn't know you were loved beyond anything. We're all so close, my mom and dad and brother, even though he's so much younger.”

Beans stops and lifts his leg against a bush like he's pissing all over my aunt and uncle's idea of raising me.

“I think more obtuse. They had four boys to raise. That's a lot for anyone. Maybe it was too much for them because when I was thirteen, my uncle literally ran off with this young girl from the bank. He left my aunt the house, half their savings, the car, and four boys when he moved to Switzerland to start his life over. And my aunt, to her credit, held us all together. I got a job when I was fourteen, just washing dishes at a restaurant close to the house. I held the job until I was eighteen. I worked my ass off in high school to make sure I could get a scholarship, and I did. I studied business, but music was always my passion. None of us had music lessons. My cousins were more bruisers than they were anything else, and they loved sports above all, but I had a good ear.”

Weland pulls a face. She's already reading between the lines here. “More like one of

those people who can just play anything after hearing something, am I right?”

“Kind of. I don’t know where it comes from. My aunt says my mom wasn’t musical. That she never played anything. But with genetics, it’s impossible to know. Maybe my biological father was the same way.”

“Do you sing?”

I lift a shoulder in a shrug. “Not really.”

“That would be a yes.”

“I have this kind of freaky talent for finding the perfect voice, and by perfect, I mean a voice people are going to love. I also have a really good talent for business, so I turned both of those things into a company and then into a career. I couldn’t have done it without investors, though, and my aunt saw potential in me, I guess. Because she bought most of the shares I was offering when I started my company. I needed an investor, and she had some savings. She was the financial backing, and I was the...well, everything else. My company started off with one person, me. I saw a need and I wanted to fill it. A lot of artists don’t want to work with big labels. They don’t want to lose control of their work. I never wanted to take someone else’s music from them, but I did want to help get them out there, help the world to see what I saw and hear what I heard.”

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:37 am*

“Who do you work with, or who have you signed?” Weland pauses right there on the sidewalk. “Never mind. I don’t need you to name-drop. Your company obviously did well and is doing well because you have lots of money now.”

“Even after it took off and I tried to pay my aunt back, she never wanted to sell her shares. She was proud she invested in me when no one else wanted to. She and my uncle had put away money for their kids’ college since they were born, so she didn’t have to spend money on that. Then, she got the house from my uncle, and it was mostly paid off. As such, she wanted to keep the money invested.”

“Except her shares were worth almost nothing, and then suddenly they were worth a lot when the company blew up,” Weland says.

“That’s right. She wasn’t my mother, but she was always telling me that I should find someone to be happy with. That special someone.”

“Was she a hardcore romantic?” Weland asks.

I wrinkle my nose, but this time, there isn’t any bad smell. We might be in the middle of the city, but this particular neighborhood smells as fresh and clean as any other summer morning, and there are trees here and there lining the street. We might not be in a park or the country, but it doesn’t feel closed in or too busy here.

“You know, she wasn’t. At least, not that I ever knew. She was practical. She had ideas about how things should be done. All my cousins are married now. She liked all their wives, even if they were unlikable. She wanted them to be happy, and in her mind, that meant finding that special person. Maybe she was sad it never worked out

with my uncle, or maybe she never got over that. It could be that it all stemmed from there. She never remarried or dated, so either he was it for her, and she mourned their broken relationship for the rest of her life, or she nevertruly loved him and regretted never finding theonefor herself, and she didn't want to see her kids make the same mistake. She was a hard lady to read."

"How did she pass?" Weland asks quietly.

"My aunt used to say my mom was reckless and irresponsible, which she did sometimes say. Well, she lived her life the opposite. She wanted to be around for her boys, and probably me too, I guess. But when it's your time, it's your time, though. She never told any of us she had cancer. Pancreatic cancer. She said goodbye in her own way, but none of us knew that was what she was doing. She shocked us all. She downsized the house and sold everything off. She said she wanted to retire and didn't need a big place, and then she went on a vacation down to Mexico.

"She was getting treatment there, but she didn't tell a soul. She ended up passing away down there, and my cousins...god, the oldest one is a real asshole, but he dealt with all of it. All the legal stuff and getting her body back here to bury. It was a nightmare. It was the one time in my life I actually felt sorry for Joseph. Lucas and Tony were wrecks too. My aunt left them all her savings divided between them and everything she hadn't sold. But to me, she left her shares in the company, though she did put stipulations on it. If I didn't get married within a year and stay married for at least five years to prove it was real and not just something to meet the parameters of her will, then her shares would be divided up amongst my cousins, also equally. At the end of five years, if I were still married, then they would be mine."

Weland stops dead. Beans sits down and looks up at her, even though she did not give him a command. He waits patiently for her signal, but she looks at me with a gathering storm of fury building in her eyes. I don't want her to release it here on the sidewalk, so I put up a hand.

“I know what that sounds like, and for someone who lived her life quite conservatively and unromantically, it’s wild and nonsensical, but it was what it was. I couldn’t let my cousins have it. Not what I had built from nothing. I was shocked when I read the will, so I did what I’d been doing for years. I went out to a few little bars in the middle of nowhere that had live music and then lost myself in it. It was the strangest thing. At four in the morning, I was driving around aimlessly, wondering how I was going to save my company and having the crisis to end all the meltdowns in the world.

“Then, I pulled over by this park. I got out and sat on a bench just to think. It was so quiet, and I had to wreck it. I pulled out my phone, and after a little bit of browsing, there you were. You. Singing. Your songs. An angel in a sea of despair. Smitty had been my lawyer for a while at this point, but he was also a friend. I skipped over everyone else—my assistants and the rest of the office—and called him. I wanted to know two things. If you were single and if you were willing to save me. For the former, I suppose anyone could have helped me find that out, but for the latter, I needed it to be entirely secret. Naturally, each of my cousins got a copy of the will, and they’re pretty eager to get their hands on those shares. Considering they’re worth a few million dollars a piece for them, it would probably have brought the greed out in anyone.”

“But for you to just announce you were getting married out of the blue, they must have known it was fake.”

We start walking again, passing a string of houses that all look the same. Literally, they’re just different colors, but at least a row of a hundred have the same design. Two stories with porches on the front and alternating red and yellow and dark blue.

“Not at all. I’d been so quiet and private for such a long time. I’d get tired of my aunt telling me to find someone, so one time, I told her I had someone, but it was my own business. Therewasn’t actually anyone, and I hadn’t really ever dated seriously

because I was so busy with work, college, and then building a company after that, but she didn't have to know that. I was just so sick of her harping on it, so the lie slipped out. Maybe that's why she made the stipulation in her will. Hoping I'd take my happiness seriously. Or maybe she knew I was lying. My cousins believed I was seeing someone, though, and it was only natural for me to get serious about it and accelerate things to meet the terms of the will. As long as I was married and stayed married, and it appeared real, they couldn't do anything."

"So that's why you were so worried about finding me and proving it was real."

"Yes. They would have had a hard time proving it was fake. It would have been my word against theirs unless they got a hold of the contract, but Smitty would never give it up. I know I can trust him." Two angry squirrels in a large tree across the street fill up the fairly quiet morning with a rapid burst of sudden chatter. "I'm not one of those people who live in the spotlight. I'm more behind the scenes, and even if some artists I've discovered, signed, and helped along the way are famous now, no one cares about the head of their label. I always wanted to remain unseen, and so I am, for the most part. I do meetings all over the world, and I have enough money now, so privacy isn't an issue. My cousins know that. For a guy who was always half in the shadows and half living secrets before my aunt passed, it wasn't much of a stretch to figure I did have a girlfriend and would never usher her into the fame I myself didn't want. I guess my desire to go unnoticed was a stroke of massive luck."

Weland stops again. She drops the leash, steps on it even though Beans stops too—the most alert dog to his owner's commands I've ever met, and he barely even knows her—and thrusts her hands onto her hips. It pulls her sweater a little bit tighter over her chest, revealing curves and the swells of her breasts, and I have to pull my eyes away. My dick jumps to life, yet another reminder that all parts of me have spent years and years working and cherishing my privacy.

"Why now? Why did you just suddenly decide that now, of all times, you want to

make it real?”

I’m at a loss here. I still haven’t answered that for myself. It’s not going to be adequate, but I give her the only answer I have. “Because no one who met you in person and saw your smile and heard your laugh and basked in your light could ever turn around and go back to the shadows and pretend like it never happened.”

## Chapter eleven

### Weland

I guess I’m riding on the hot mess express right now. It’s something to do with the inner cavewoman coming out and distracting the hell out of my normally rational brain because there’s a delicious man in my kitchen, and his presence is giving me all the tingles in all the spots.

After our walk, we came back to my condo, and I attempted to make breakfast for us—attempted being the keyword here. But after the eggs nearly caught on fire and the bacon sizzled down to little burnt crisps, I decided I was too distracted to cook and instead went with what I knew.

I could literally make these marshmallow peanut butter squares blindfolded. Not that I want to try. It’s hot and scary in the kitchen, and I wouldn’t actually like to do it without being able to see. You’d think this would involve a higher degree of don’t fuck up than bacon and eggs, but apparently not.

I’m just melting the peanut butter and butterscotch chips into a big pot when Sterling walks into the kitchen, pulls out a chair, and sits at the table.

There goes my ovaries.



There goes my nipples.

There goes my cooking skills.

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I nearly fling the butterscotch mix out of the pot and onto the wall when he rakes a hand through his hair. He looks uncertain, kind of stressed, a little bit sad, and slightly lost. I don't even know if he realizes his face is showing all the stuff he's not used to letting anyone see.

Now that I know a little bit about how he grew up, given his life story crash course, I get why he's been guarded. Granted, it's all self-proclaimed, and I have to take his word for it, but I believe him. He could lie to me, but why would he at this point? I feel like the second we literally bumped into each other at the club, our lives took a different course. I've been going over everything in my head, and it's so overwhelming.

"If you could be anything in life, would you be what you are right now?" I have to ask something to break up the silence that's descended over the kitchen. Listening to myself cook and stir and Beans' soft snores from the couch are just too quiet.

"I think so. I love what I do. It's not just about the money. It's always been about the fact that I'm good at it and I enjoy it. The music. Making people's dreams come alive. It's a good feeling." Sterling raises his head, and I find myself melting like the butterscotch chips in my pot when under his butterscotch gaze. "What about you?"

"You know that saying, in a life where you can be anything, be kind? Well, I'd rather be fucking awesome. All those things people just won't do because they're afraid or they're worried about failure or embarrassment? I want to do them. I want to be brave enough. I want to see beauty in the not-so-beautiful. And the fucks? I want to give all the fucks when it counts and not give them when it doesn't." I realize I shouldn't be talking to my husband about fucks, but it's not the same. It's not that kind of fucks.

Dear lord, my face is probably on fire. I whip back around to the pot and stir, stir, stir. In my defense, if I don't, burning will happen, and I've burnt enough crap this morning already.

The beginning of a smile makes my heart flop over when I glance over at Serling out of the side of my eyes. "That sounds like a good way to live." A beat of silence follows, and then, "How did your parents pick out your name?"

If I had a dollar for every time someone's asked me that, I wouldn't have had to get contractually married to get my brother those surgeries, but for some reason, the way Sterling asks gives me pleasant goosebumps. I don't mind it at all, making conversation with him.

"Apparently, it's just another form of Waylon, but could my parents take the easy route? No, they could not. They had to go with something wild. I know it's not a common female name, but whatever. Unisex is in fashion."

"So are strange names," Sterling says.

"Is it strange?"

He taps the tabletop with his fingertips, and his smile gets a little bit shy, which makes him look absolutely adorable. "Maybe a little, but I like it."

"It sounds like wetland. That's what most people associate it with."

"That's funny. Because I associate it with you, and you sound like an angel even when you're just talking." At those words, his cheeks turn pink, and he ducks his head. I don't think he meant to say that, or at least not all of that, and it makes me stir the pot even harder and faster because my heart is racing, and I have to do something to keep from blurting out something silly.

We both fall silent, but sometimes having nothing to say is a huge improvement over giant embarrassing things, saying sad things, or being hecking awkward as all heck.

“I can’t sleep without white noise at night. I used to have a noise machine.” I don’t know why I’m saying this. Maybe because he’s given me so much, and it doesn’t matter that he told it to me like facts and without emotion. I know it hurt—his past. “But then my parents found this new age stuff. It’s just music. Tones and just kind of crazy stuff. I listen to it every single night.”

“I would have pegged you for more soft country.”

“Nah. Nothing with words. If I listen to the words, then I can’t fall asleep. If I know the songs, then I’m going through all the words. If I don’t know them, then I’m focusing on them, and it has the opposite effect of making me tired.”

The mix is finally ready, and I whip it off the burner so it can cool for a few minutes before I add the marshmallows. I don’t want anything to melt down to nothing. I lean against the counter and face Sterling because having a conversation with my back turned to him doesn’t seem very brave. “Are you one of those disagreeable label execs who kind of intimidates the hell out of people?”

“Never. That’s not my vibe at all.”

“Do you still meet with people, or is someone else doing the meeting?”

“I still discover every single artist we sign, and I absolutely meet with every one of them. By discover, I mean every single suggestion goes through me, so I might not make the original discovery. That’s probably taking too much credit or using the wrong word. But I do care. I care about my company, every single person there, and every single artist. That’s another reason why I’ll do anything to hold it together. If my cousins get those shares, they’ll be able to break it up or do anything they want to

them, and just because they're mine, they'll cash them out in any way they can. And if they can't find a buyer, they'll do what they can to make my life miserable, which means everyone who depends on me will suffer."

"So they wouldn't sell them to you if anything happened, and they got them?" I ask.

"Oh, hell no. No way in hell, cold day in hell, all the hell, just no."

"Why do they act that way? Is it because of what you said about your aunt encouraging competition?"

"I don't know. It's complicated." He sighs. "I don't know how to explain it. It just ended up being me against them, and maybe there was always a little bit of misplaced jealousy involved. People also don't like seeing someone become more successful than them."

Now I'm the one who sighs. "I don't know why life has to be a competition. I'm so glad my family has always been so loving and supportive of each other. Even my extended family. But people can be really cutthroat sometimes, and you're right. Jealousy is rough."

"The worst."

"Well, if all things fail, you can always sell foot photos."

He gapes at me. "Fa—what?"

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“Yeah. Foot photos. You haven’t heard of that? If I hadn’t found you when I did, I probably would have resorted to it, although I don’t think it was as popular then as it is now.”

“Are you serious?” Sterling gasps.

I don’t think I’ve ever seen eyes so wide. “Yeah. I wish. I think it can be a legit career. If you don’t want to dive in with both feet, you can just dip your toes in.” I giggle at my own terrible joke and reach for the bag of mini-colored marshmallows. Rainbow galore, here we come. “That might sound extra dirty.” I dump the whole bag into the pot. “Anyway, I’m kidding about that, I really am. But it would be a good backup plan. I’ve always had it in my head if all else fails. Once you start freelancing online, you hear about the extras, and then the extras, and it probably spirals from there, like picking a loose thread and having the whole darn sweater come undone.

“But is it that bad? I think it’s pretty innocent. It’s just feet. There are obviously way worse things to put out there. Or way better things. If you were a hand model, you wouldn’t get the same kind of grief. Why are hands so much classier than feet? There’s probably a good chance I’m overthinking this.” There’s a hundred percent chance I’m rambling. And over-stirring this. “All the power to people who do the feet thing. I think they must have unchained souls. They seem wild and free and unbound by the norms and conventions of society. To all the feet photo posting individuals, I give you two big toes up.”

It takes a second, but the first low rumblings of a laugh start. It gets louder and more rowdy, and then it’s a full-on belly laugh, and I have to turn to look.

Turning to look is a mistake.

Sterling is a gorgeous, sexy, beautiful beast of a man, and when he's belly laughing? Dear god, I'm finished. Slain. Done like this marshmallow dessert that I'm dumping into the pan I've set out on the counter for it to solidify and cool in.

"Is this too much?" Sterling asks.

"What?" I whip around and nearly fling half of the pot's contents across the room. I have to control my body and keep my hands centered over the baking pan. "Is what too much?"

There's a very fine line between intelligence and brawn. Or no, I suppose not. It's more like there's a recipe for how much brains and how much brawn is sexy. That ratio isn't set in stone. It varies from person to person. I suppose that's what people term attraction and personality. Why one person works for you while another doesn't. Alright, there's a good chance I have no flipping idea what I'm talking about. I love intelligence. Maybe I should just say that. Muscly goodness is just a bonus. But emotional stuff? Where does that factor in? Sterling is obviously smart, and he's even more obviously good-looking. Muscly, brawn, and brains. But the emotional intelligence aspect? It seems totally new to him. He's so used to being shut down, and now we've done this outpouring with each other. I think that's what he's talking about.

"What you told me?" I prod gently because his jaw is working, but no sound is coming out. He's clearly having trouble with the words.

"I mean this. Us. Me. You. I have no idea how this is supposed to work."

I'm half pouring out marshmallow goo and the other half with my neck cranked around like an owl, though not quite because I'm not that talented. "Just hold that for

a second. That thought.” I finish what I’m doing, set the pot aside, pat down the dessert, pop the pan in the fridge, and turn back around.

“I don’t think either of us knows how marriage is supposed to be because we haven’t been married before. And dating? It’s been a long time since I did that.”

I let my eyes do a slow perusal over the rugged features of Sterling’s face. He shaved this morning, so the shadow is gone, but his face is angular enough that he has all the mountain man vibes. Those jeans are really doing it for me, and so is his shirt. I can imagine how I’d like a few things to go.

Are we going to have steamy closet sex one day? I think that might be even better than any bathroom sex, the backseat of a car sex, or on top of some public monument sneaky sex I’ve ever dreamed of. Not that I’ve really ever dreamed of that or think it’s a thing. You just hear about it happening, and I couldn’t not admire the bravery and guts it must take. Or just like regularsteamy sex? I’d take that right now. Wait, umm, no, not right now. Jesus. The hormones are clearly out of control.

I feel like I’m a million degrees, so even though I just put the dessert in the fridge, I rush toward it and take the dessert back out. I slip a knife from the utensil drawer and cut a few quick slabs, which are still more like hot, sticky messes than pieces, but whatever. It’s something to do with my hands. Maybe if I concentrate hard enough on this, I can force air back into my lungs.

The air is all butterscotch, peanut butter, and marshmallows, but all of a sudden, there’s pine and fresh air andman.

I freeze. I can sense Sterling behind me before he reaches past me for the pan. His hands look huge, capable, and a little bit veiny. His skin tone is naturally darker, more of an olive undertone, so they look the slightest bit tanned. And that’s it for air and my lungs and me. We’re all finished.



“I’ve never had this before,” he comments.

“N—no?” I choke out. “It’s in—incredible.”

“What do you call it?”

“M—marsh—marsh...” I know what’s wrong with me. He’s what’s wrong with me. He’s why I can’t get the words out or why I’m going to pass out from ovary overload and lack of air. “Marshmallow peanut butter squares. Or peanut butter butterscotch squares.”

Sterling chuckles. “That’s a long name for something that smells so delicious.”

“They are delicious. They’re worth the effort and the long name. I promise.”

There’s the slightest pause. I know this is a weird breakfast. Maybe he doesn’t eat sugar or carbs. Maybe I should have asked before I—

“Will you feed them to me?” he murmurs, his voice low.

My stomach bottoms out, and my heart goes into so high an overdrive mode that it’s probably dangerous. I can feel it banging around in my chest. I can also feel every single part of me that is distinctly female heating up, tightening, throbbing, and causing all sorts of general chaos.

“Sure. Let me just...let me just get the knife and a plate and—”

“No. Will you feed them to me?”

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:37 am*

Of all the places I would have picked, hypothetically, to be having dinner with my wife—who, by the way, is smoking hot—this place wasn't one of them.

I picked her up after her guitar lessons were over for the day. I'd found a nice five-star restaurant that had private rooms because privacy was key for us. I'm still very aware that my cousins are out there like three nebulous balls of ass waiting to make an ass destruction.

"This is lovely." Weland's eyes trace the private room that I booked. "But does it have to be just us? It feels a little bit...I don't know. I guess I like it, but it feels a little bit like we have money."

"We do have money," I point out.

"You have money." She smiles faintly. "I'm sorry. You want this to be a nice evening. I'll shut up and let it be nice, even if it feels strange to do something so...ritzy."

"I wanted to spoil you," I tell her.

"I also know it's because you want this to be as low-key as possible. It's a nice place. I like the wood on the walls and the fireplace over there. It reminds me of some cottage in the middle of the woods, out of the way. Something no one would ever find. Our private retreat."

It's the way she says that word. Our. It gets me longing. It's the kind of longing I've always felt deep in my gut. A longing that says I don't have a mom or a dad, though I

did once, at least a mom, and my whole life, I've wanted to just know her. To have her back. I'm shocked that just a few words from this woman are enough to take me there and make me feel that way.

"Sterling?" Also, the way she says my name. Soft. Intimate. As if it's just us here, even though there are servers hovering around, people on the other side of the door doing their jobs, bustling around, making food, serving food, and also people eating food out there.

I didn't go all out and book the whole place. I just booked this private function room. It's just us and some other tables and chairs in here, with the setting sun outside the windows, woodsy walls, old antique art in heavy frames, red drapes, and a roaring fire in the corner like it's not the middle of summer out there. Somehow, the room isn't hot at all. It's perfectly temperature-controlled, which gives me an idea.

I realize Weland's place is only a rental, but she needs air conditioning. I want to get one installed for her, but I know if I tell her, she'll protest. She'll probably talk about landlords and how she doesn't really need it and on and on. I want it to be a surprise for her, and I plan on making a few phone calls to Smitty later to get the permission I need from whomever it takes to get one installed. "No" is not something I'm willing to settle for.

"Sorry. I'm here," I say, breaking out of my thoughts.

Weland searches my face, and then her smile grows. "You are. That's the crazy thing. You could be anywhere, but you're here with me. In Detroit. You could be all over the world, making good music, doing meetings, or...or...staying in your vacation houses or in Nashville at the center of everything, but you're not."

"No. None of that is important right now." Weland's important, and I want her to know that. I want her to know that now that we're trying this, I'm all in. I didn't

know that was a thing, but it is, and I'm diving into it. I've always been so cautious. This doesn't feel cautious. But maybe it's okay because it's like I've been looking at the lake for four years before I ever dipped my toes in, and I know swimming is what I want to do.

"I—I'm honored. Really."

"Me too." I want to take her hands. I want to slide over with my chair, pull her into my lap, and kiss her until we're breathless. I want her in my arms. I want her to lose all inhibitions in this private room and—

"What do you think is good?" She frowns at the menu, which is lying flat on the table in front of her. I don't think she has even really looked at it since we got here.

I know I haven't looked at mine. I'm too busy looking at her. She's in a long maxi dress that has a black skirt and flowers up top, and I'm pretty sure it is right out of the seventies. It has three-quarter-length sleeves, and it fits Weland like it was made for her. She's piled her hair up half messy, half styled, and the softest pink lipstick sets off a set of perfect lips that I'd very much like to be tasting right now.

Fuck dinner. I'd much rather have Weland.

I almost choke out you, but I pick up my own menu and give it a quick scan. "We could ask."

"Right, sorry. You've never even been here. How would you know what's good?"

I know what's good. The best thing is sitting right in front of me. "Fish, maybe? Tuna steaks?"

"Oh. I've never had a tuna steak."

“Really? They’re usually pretty good. They’re known as the chicken of the sea, you know.”

She hides her laugh behind her hand. I love that her fingers have callouses built up from playing the guitar. It gives them character and life. It’s just another thing that makes Weland entirely unique. Not that other people don’t play the guitar. It’s just that when she does it...

“Or steak. Can’t go wrong with steak,” I add.

“I don’t know how I like it cooked. I’m not really a steak eater. It’s never been in the budget.”

I gape at her. “But I...”

“Almost all of it went to Bryan’s surgeries and his physio after.”

I’m an idiot. That’s the real reason she’s renting a dumpy condo that doesn’t have proper locks or security. It’s not just that she’s flying under the radar or that it’s a good cover. It’s that I haven’t given one thought to the fact that she would have used all the money for her brother, and there isn’t any more until the end of our agreement.

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That's another thing I'm fixing right now. "I'll make sure you have a buffer. I'm sorry I didn't think about it before."

She looks horrified. "No!" Her eyes well up and I know I've said something wrong by trying to be nice. "No, please. Don't do that. I'm fine. I make enough money to live by giving guitar lessons. It's not a big deal."

"It is a big deal. Your comfort and your safety is a big deal to me."

She doesn't throw back at me that I didn't care enough before. She just bites her bottom lip. "I'm happy where I am, and the area is fine. The condo might be old, but I'm comfortable, and it's home enough for me. I'm not that far from my parents either, so that's nice, and I'm in a central location for the lessons I give. If I moved, my students would have to travel further, and I can't ask them to do that. I'll get new students of course, but it's not fair to the existing ones I have who have been with me, some of them for years."

She'd think of others first. Yes, of course she would because that's Weland. Beautiful in all ways. I was captivated by her song at first, but now I'm captivated by her.

"You're looking at me funny," she states after a moment.

I quickly shift my eyes back down to the menu, but I can't help but ask, "How so?"

"I don't know. You have that look like you're gazing at the stars. I'm no star, Sterling. I'm just me. Flawed and imperfect like everyone else. I hope you know that. When people first get together, it can be...it can be hard to see those flaws, and

then the disappointment comes later. I want you to see me as I am, with all my flaws and imperfections included. That way, I feel like you would never be disappointed.”

“Disappointed?” I leap up from my chair and shove it back. It only takes a second for me to get to Weland. I take her hands and pull her up. Then, I hug her close. “I could never be disappointed.” She smells like the restaurant, like cheese bread and garlic, and her own sweet floral scent. I’m enchanted. “Some things might wear off with time, that’s true, but I’ll never be disappointed.”

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep. I don’t like when people do that. I try to never do that myself.”

I kiss her forehead. I want more, but we’re still in a public place, even in this private room. “I mean it.” I’d like to do something cheesy, like dance her over to the fire and sway without music. I’d like to wrap her in my arms and hold her for the rest of the night. For the rest of my life.

For the rest of my life.

What the heck is going on? She’s right. We basically just met. The sensations rushing through us are hormonal, physical, and new. They’ll wear off or wear down. One day, they won’t shine as bright. She’s worried I’m not thinking clearly. I know my brain isn’t muddled, but she’s right. Slow is the best way to go. Slow and seeing clearly, thinking clearly, making clear decisions, and being real.

I kiss her on the forehead one more time. “Not going to happen.” That’s a promise I can keep. She could never, ever be a disappointment.

When she’s seated again, blushing so prettily and slightly unsettled, it really makes me want to take her up in my arms and do everything I was thinking about. Dancing. Kissing. Hugging. Holding. Leaving right now and taking her back to her place.

But no, I want to have a nice dinner. I want this night to be about her, for her.

“Chicken,” she says so softly that I almost miss it, even in this quiet room with only the mood music and the vague sounds of other people behind the closed door to compete. “It looks good. Not the chicken of the sea. The chicken of the land.”

“We can get both and try some of each other’s. Chicken of the sea and the land.”

Her smile shouldn’t be so dazzling, but it is, and it goes straight to my chest. There’s been a decided absence of warmth in my life. It started when I was young. I learned to shut out the goodness along with the bad. I learned how to shut myself off, so I didn’t get hurt. I should be using those same skills now. Walling myself up to prevent those daggers from slipping in—the ones that life is so fond of using to destroy me from the inside out. But I can’t. It’s impossible with this woman. I haven’t even considered it, not since the first time I saw her in person in that club.

“Chicken of the sea and the land it is then.”

## Chapter thirteen

### Weland

Isaw myself coming home with my super hot husband and maybe getting a goodnight kiss. Or maybe being brave enough to give one. My brain was telling me to take it slow while the rest of me was screaming full tilt, high blast, pedal to the freaking metal that I dive in with both feet and get wet fast. Really wet. And not the kind of wet that involved water. Unless it was hot shower sex. Or hot do the dishes together and then have sex on the kitchen counter sex. Or maybe hot soapy water to clean the house and have astoundingly hot sex on various surfaces that will then need to be cleaned again sex.



I didn't see myself coming home to the Greedy Gretchen Trio of Terribleness, but one look at them and then at Sterling's jaw locked up so granite tight that it could nutcracker a heck of a lot more than nuts and at the haunted look in his eyes and I know. I know this is our worst nightmare coming to life.

"Stay here. I'll try and talk them down." He opens the car door and I scramble out the passenger side. There's no way I'm leaving him to face this on his own. I try to shoot him a look of support when his eyes bug out at me getting out. I hope he understands it because I'm not sure I'm so good at telepathy or telegraphing or whatever it is I'm trying to do.

At least Sterling's hands don't ball into fists. He doesn't go on the defensive like I expect him to. Apparently, my front doorstep isn't a warzone. He must be really good at meeting with people who are grouchy and need to be talked down because he smiles. Yes. Smiles. Anyone would think he's actually happy to see his cousins.

Meanwhile, I'm over here freaking the heck out on the inside, and just a little part of me is mourning the fact that I'm not going to have any type of sex at all now, which is probably good because it's way, way too fast no matter what my body tells me I might want. Wants are not needs. I don't need to have kinky, blissful, hot, amazing, blow-my-mind sex with the hottest man on earth. I'll survive another day without it. I've survived an entire lifetime so far.

Regardless, my ovaries still want to go completely homicidal on these three for messing up my night.

Just saying.

"Joseph. Lucas. Toe-Toe."

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:37 am*

The cousins have arranged themselves from tallest to shortest. Oddly enough, they're each just a few inches shorter than the other, like a set of stairs. They all have dark hair, dark eyes, and dark scowls. They're also all wearing jeans and plain black T-shirts as though they agreed ahead of time that it's the official uniform of assholes. With their arms crossed over their chests, they could be triplets.

"Don't call me Toe-Toe!" the shortest one huffs. I don't know if he's the youngest. He could also be the middle child. It's nearly impossible to tell. It's crazy how different they look from Sterling. Not a single one of them is anywhere near as tall as he is.

Honestly, I get the sibling rivalry thing just looking at them. They're not as tall, not as muscly, and certainly not as good-looking. They probably aren't anywhere near as smart, naturally charming, good-hearted, controlled, or successful either. Sterling set the bar high in all he did. I can just see it.

"I'm sorry. Tony," Sterling corrects. "It's so nice of you to come all this way for...for what? Tea? Conversation? To meet my wife?"

"We found you, and we know you're lying," Tony pretty much shouts. He's got a great, big, booming voice, and I can see what kind of effort he's putting into it. All three brothers have blocky faces—hooded brows and square jaws. They would be handsome if they weren't so foul and broody.

Toe-Toe. That makes me think about selling foot photos, and I have to try like heck not to let the bubbly laughter out. Must keep it trapped inside. Must keep it trapped. Keep it freaking trapped.

“We know your marriage is fake, and we’re going to prove it and get those shares that are rightfully ours.”

“Goodness,” I interject before Sterling can say something he might regret. Not that he will, but I’m scared if he does, it will be four years down the drain for both of us. I take his hand in mine and squeeze. My heart does a somersault just from that little touch, even though I instigated it. “I think we should all sit down. I’m not sure where you get the idea that we’re not really married, but I can assure you, it’s false.”

At least that much is true. Technically, we are legitimately married.

The second tallest one, maybe Lucas, lets out quite an evil-sounding laugh. It’s pretty maniacal. “We know you’re married for real, but the marriage itself is fake.”

I clench Sterling’s hand harder. “This isn’t a conversation for the doorstep, and we’ve never even met.” I don’t offer my other hand to any of them. “I think you all should come in if we’re going to hash this out.”

“You’re faking it,” the other one, maybe Joseph, growls. “I bet you don’t even know his middle name.”

Fuck, he’s right. I don’t. I didn’t even know Sterling’s first or last name until a few days ago. “He changed it a few months ago.” I try to sound confident. “To...uh, Blossom.” Yes. Yes, that is really what slips out. Blossom. Of all the names, it just had to be that.

Three sets of eyes pop out at pretty much the same distance. The three of them could be triplets. It’s kind of eerie and unnatural how much they mirror each other. “Blossom?” Tony scoffs. “That’s not real. That’s not a thing. If you think you can have one on us, guess again. We’re not going anywhere until we get answers.”

I raise my chin in the air a few notches. It's probably remarkable that Sterling didn't groan and wither on the spot. "Blossom. It has a special meaning to both of us, which we don't have to explain to you. Ask me anything, and I'll give you an answer. Anything at all. Then you'll know we truly are married."

That gets me a warning pressure as Sterling's hand curls a little more tightly around mine. Right, so I'm getting a little bit ahead of myself here. I pretty much just promised the impossible, and the cousins are going to gleefully take me up on it. Challenge accepted multiplied by three.

The one I think is Joseph puffs out his chest. I probably only think that because I know he's the oldest from Sterling's story, and he's the tallest. Tony is probably the youngest because he's the shortest. That's also likely the most ridiculous assumption anyone's ever made. I'm pretty sure nature doesn't work like that.

"Joseph, come on."

No, it does make sense. Because that leaves Lucas as the middle one—middle height.

My god, this would almost be funny if it wasn't so not funny.

"What's his favorite sports team?" Joseph asks, giving me a look that says he's got me now.

And shit on all the sticks, does he ever. I know nothing about sports. I would be hard-pressed to even name a single team as is, let alone pick Sterling's favorite. I don't look at him because that would make it seem like he was giving me cues, and I don't want to give these three any reason to accuse us of cheating in their warped little twenty-questions game.

"That's easy." I pretend that I'm all confident. "Guitar. Piano. Drums. Or just

acoustic guitar. Any combination of any instruments that make up any band is always going to win over sports any day. Sterling might be athletic, but music is always his first love.”

I want to cross my fingers right now. I want to cross my toes. I either said the right thing, or Joseph is wondering how I beat him at his own game because he positively looks like he’s going to have a stroke on the spot.

“Favorite animal,” Lucas grunts from between his brother.

“Also easy. My farty dog. Although, we just put him on probiotics, so now it smells less like he needs an exorcism every time he farts than before, so he might not be known as the farty dog for long. Maybe just a regular gassy dog. He’s super cute. If you come in, you can meet him.”

Tony literally starts pacing in the smallest square, then whips back around to us. “What’s his favorite food?”

“That’s always changing, but right now, it’s marshmallow peanut butter squares. I made a mean batch just this morning. There are some leftovers if you’re so inclined. I think your visit calls for a bit of sugar and sweetness. This family gathering is quite...quite a lot.”

I get three creased brows in response. Three darker-than-ever scowls. “Our mom would have enjoyed this,” Joseph snaps. “She liked a good rivalry.”

“She wanted to make those shares a competition,” Tony adds. “It had nothing to do with real romance.”

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“She wanted the best man to win,” Lucas says, agreeing with his brothers and also working them up just a little bit more. The three of them seem to feed off each other.

“I’m sure Sterling has offered to buy out those shares at the maximum value,” I say sweetly. “You can all get millions of dollars for them, put aside whatever rivalry and bad feelings this has caused, and just be happy. Maybe try welcoming me to the family now that you’ve finally found me. This is exactly why Sterling never told anyone who I was. We wanted to keep our romance private since it would make things complicated and vicious. They were already complicated and vicious enough for you all before then, I think, although I’m not sure why. I’d really like to see you all be friends. You’re cousins, but you were raised as brothers. Brothers are supposed to love each other. They’re supposed to give up anything, even their own freedom, to save each other if that’s what’s needed. Above all, they’re supposed to be kind.”

One after the other, each of those dark frowns turns into a look of incredulity as if the concept of love and kindness is so foreign, and I’ve just spoken some kind of alien language.

Tony shakes his finger at us. “This isn’t over, and we’re not leaving town until we prove this is all a farce.”

“Great!” I try to appear genuinely thrilled on the outside, while inside, I’d like to give each of these doofuses a good punt in the bum so they smartened up. Mostly, I’m just really sad for Sterling. He must feel so alone if this is what his remaining family is like. Also, Greedy Gretchens is an astoundingly accurate term. “Hopefully, you’ll come over for dinner one night then. Are you sure you don’t want to come in now for tea? I have mint.”

“No, we would not like mint,” Joseph grumbles.

“Wait, I might like—”

Joseph cuts Lucas off with a sharp look. “We don’t like mint, and we don’t like you. We’ll be back. Come on, Lucas. Come on, Toe-Toe.”

They walk off, shaking their heads and mumbling. I distinctly hear Tony tell his brother to stop calling him Toe-Toe because it makes him look like an idiot.

Sterling doesn’t say anything until we’re inside and the door is shut. I almost half wonder if those three bugged the place. I wouldn’t put it past them, so I lean in very close to his ear and whisper in my lowest, softest possible tone. “Are we fucked now, do you think?”

There’s a long pause. It’s longer than I would like, but Sterling doesn’t disappoint. He responds exactly the way I hoped he would because I’m not ready to go down like this. I’m not ready to throw away the past four years, and I’m not ready for him to lose everything he’s spent his whole life working for. Mostly because I think it would kill him, and I can’t let that happen. Sterling might only really have been my husband for the past few days, at least in my mind, or however it goes, but that makes him family, and in my family, we fight for each other and protect each other. And as I said outside, we sacrifice for each other, and we stand together, even when the odds are stacked so high against us that it seems impossible.

“There’s not a chance in hell I’m going down without a fight. If they want a performance, they’ll get one. They’ll get the performance of a lifetime. If you’re in, I’m in.”

It takes me a minute to realize I’m still holding his hand. I don’t let go. “I’m in.”

## Chapter fourteen

### Weland

After the confrontation on the front doorstep, we stand on the inside of the front door for a long time. I'm not sure how many minutes pass before I get out my phone and do the most logical thing. I call my family and let them know about the three buttholes bearing bad news. The trifecta of buttholes. The arseholios to the power of three. They don't like it, but at least they've been warned, down to a detailed description and the names of all the cousins, including Toe-Toe. You know, just in case he tries to go incognito but decides to use the name he hates the most because, why not?

"Oh no." I sag against the door after. This is all getting so out of hand. So freaking complicated. I don't like complicated. I thought my life had enough of that before. I can't even imagine it now. Sterling's brows dip down above his nose like a flock of flying geese following the lead geese, except they ate a bunch of fermented something or other and got drunk and aren't flying in a proper formation.

"I'm scared to ask what you just thought of," Sterling mutters.

"My friends. None of them know I'm married. We just told my parents, remember?"

"Yes, well, it makes sense. I wanted to keep the marriage a secret to keep you out of the spotlight and keep any and all attention away from us and also to keep my cousins away from you, so you didn't tell your friends. You only told your family, and you swore them to secrecy. That's the story we're going with."

My sigh could bring down the house. "And what about my students? What if your cousins go sniffing around them and their parents? Would they think I gave their names out? That's a breach of privacy. People would be angry. Then they'd be



doubly angry that I lied to them about being married to someone like you. Or at all. It just makes me look completely dishonest.” I hate that my nose is burning. I’m not going to let those three big hairy toes of cousins make me cry. I’m seriously not. I’m freaking not, and I mean it.

Beans has wandered off and is eating dog food in the kitchen. I can’t see him, but I can hear him crunching. He makes the strangest sounds when he eats, and by strange, I mean entirely adorable. It’s a mrph crunch, mrph crunch noise and then smack, smack, smack, like he’s really enjoying himself. He probably is. The poor thing. I spent a wad on that food, wanting to get something good for him. I focus on those sounds—happy sounds—to ground me instead.

“My cousins won’t mess with your students,” Sterling says.

“How do you know? What if they’re skulking around here and creeping people out? What if they make it so I don’t have any students because people can’t trust me anymore, and my neighborhood is full of buttholes?”

Sterling’s right eye twitches like he just got a fly up his nose and needs to sneeze. I understand the sentiment. I really do.

“I’ll make sure Smitty takes care of them. He’ll hire someone to keep this place secure and chase off the riffraff so they can’t scare your students or creep out their parents.”

“What if they hire someone to clear them out?”

“I’ll hire two people then. Or as many as it takes.” He raises his hand, brings it almost to my shoulder, and pauses when I make a noise in my throat. Then, he tucks it back at his side and doesn’t end up touching me, which is a tragedy. I could use a hug right now.

I'm shocked at how much I'd like a hug right now. A Sterling hug. It makes my heart jump two beats past its regular pattern, which could also be the stress. It's probably that. My stomach has just about lost the tickly feeling it got when it came to standing next to Sterling or being alone with him. I'm not so focused on that anymore. Now I'm trying to figure out how to get the fuckedupness of this whole thing unfucked.

"Well?" I'm just giving up on trying to make it through this on my own. I have to look to Sterling for my cues now. "What do we do now?" As in, what are our next steps? We talked about a performance, but I'm not sure how to do it. I'm not good at faking anything. Then again, I've been selling this for years, even to my family.

“Like right now?”

“Maybe we should go find them and just sell them some kind of story they’d believe. We could rehearse it and get it straight. Tell them there’s no need to doubt us.”

“Like right now?” Sterling repeats.

“They’re probably just lingering around. I doubt they’ve gone far.”

“We’ve been standing here for so long that all the blood has disappeared from my feet. If we ran after them, my toes would probably snap off.”

“Dear god, is that actually a thing?” I want to laugh. Despite everything, I actually want to laugh. Even Sterling’s eye twitch isn’t so bad right now.

“I’m not sure. I hope not. I don’t want to have to shake the bloody stumps out of my shoes.”

“Seriously, that’s a mental picture if I’ve ever seen one, and I don’t know about you, but I’ve heard about a lot of really crazy things. The internet is a blessing and a curse. Blessing and a curse.” I pause. The crunching noises from the kitchen have stopped. “We could always fake a pregnancy.” At that, Sterling’s jaw drops. “I’m kidding. That was seriously just a joke. I would never do that. And speeding up the wholelet’s see if we can make this a real marriagething by actually getting pregnant for real isn’t...that’s just...I can’t do that. Not to us, not to my family, not to me, and not to the poor child.”

“No, of course not. We’ll come up with something. Just give me...give me a few minutes to think. Or a few hours.”

“Well, for one, we shouldn’t be staying in separate places. That doesn’t really make sense. You need to get rid of that hotel room.”

To his credit, he doesn’t wince even though he must not relish the prospect of sharing the couch with a farty dog. Beans is less farty now that the probiotics are kicking in, so I guess there’s that.

“Also, I think I need to keep a regular routine. Talk to Smitty about getting someone to watch the place. I like that idea. But discreetly, of course. Even if your cousins found out about the guy, it makes sense. You have lots of money. You wouldn’t go just anywhere without some kind of protection or something. And you wouldn’t leave me unprotected.”

“I could just straight up tell them that they’re not welcome to harass you or interfere in your life with their crazy ideas and that there will be security around the place.”

I blink at him. “You know, that kind of truth is probably best. Whatever small truths we can tell, we should go for it.”

A dark shadow passes behind Sterling’s eyes. “I’m sorry I dragged you into this.” He looks even sorrier that those words just fell out, but there’s no taking them back.

“It was a necessity. For both of us. I got what I wanted, and I’m going to make sure you don’t lose the company. So many people depend on you. I’m going to play this game if I have to play it, just for them. Because they have lives and families that don’t deserve to be destroyed over your cousins’ petty jealousies, which I don’t even understand. If you’ve offered to buy them out and give them tons of money, I really don’t know what this is about other than the most ridiculous jealousy and them one-

upping you any way they can.”

“I think even just a little bit of jealousy is often enough for people to do incredibly irrational things.”

I barely resist giving Sterling the hug he so desperately needs—that we both probably desperately need—and apologizing to him again that he had to grow up with those people. I know his aunt probably did the best for him that she could, and things could have been much worse if he didn’t have any family to go to, but still. I want to tell him that I’m sorry he didn’t have parents like my mom and dad. That he didn’t have a brother like mine. That he didn’t have those bonds and love and kindness and goodness. But I don’t say it because it’s not going to help. Right now, I need tough Weland to make an appearance. I need my game face on.

“Okay, so get rid of the hotel, spend the night here, and we’ll brainstorm?”

“I’ll get rid of it right now. I’ll send Smitty to send someone there to collect my things. I just have to make a few calls. It’s probably best if I don’t leave here. He can hold my stuff and drop it off with the security detail when they come and meet with us.”

“Okay. Well, I’ll make cookies. We can give them to your cousins as a peace offering,” I say.

“Are cookies code for turd brownies?”

I frown. “Gah! What are turd brownies?”

“Never mind. You don’t have a cat. But we can collect Bean’s biscuits and bag them up and...”

“I’m pretty sure that’s actually a federal offense,” I say with a laugh.

“I never said we’d put it on their doorstep or light them on fire.”

“You did kind of mean you wanted those biscuits baked into cookies. I’m sure fecal cookies are strictly prohibited by more than one law, not to mention the idea is completely and utterly revolting.”

“Okay, bad joke. I’m sorry.”

“I have a strong stomach. I just hoped you were kidding.”

“I was kidding,” Sterling says. “I’m not about stooping to their level. One can only wish.”

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“No, one cannot wish. We are going to do so much better. We are not doing any stooping. None whatsoever. We’re going to figure this out.” I wish we had a secret handshake. One of those best friends finger dingle, palm smacking, up high and down low, spin around and touch the ground deals. We don’t, though, so all I can do is give a watery smile that is nowhere near reassuring, and all Sterling can do is take out his phone and start to make calls.

The rest...we have to figure out.

Together.

And then we have to actually put it into action.

Together.

Chapter fifteen

Sterling

Two days and two sleepless nights later, I think we’re both going out of our minds. We’re no closer to a solution than we were when we stood in front of the door outside and then inside the house and plotted to make things happen.

Yes, plotted. That’s what I’ve been reduced to. A plotter. I don’t want to be a plotter. I never wanted to be a plotter. I feel like plotting reduces me to a level I don’t want to be at. It reduces me to the cousin level. Okay, so I went there, but to be fair, I also hadn’t had any sleep for two nights, and before that, sleep was sketchy at best. It’s

starting to wear on me, and yes, all of this is because of my three cousins, so also, yes, I feel a tad bit surly about the whole thing.

“Maybe we’re going about this all wrong.” Weland pours us both a cup of coffee that smells like she literally dumped in a whole bag of coffee beans and used a thimble of water to make it.

I sip at my steaming mug across the table from her. It’s strong enough to put hairs on the old chest. Just the way we both need it, what with our red-rimmed, bloodshot, bagged-out eyes.

Beans happily munches on his crumbles. He’s been having good sleep. I know because I’ve been sharing the couch with him. He’s been having wild dreams that seem pretty happy. His favorite thing to do is grunt and cry in his sleep, twitch like he’s dying, and then boot me a good one right in the face, belly, or crotch. He teabagged me approximately three point six times last night. The point six was just the last one that he only got halfway to my groin before I managed to block it. At this rate, I’m not going to have any nuts left to make this marriage real if that’s the direction we decide to keep going with.

“Oh?” That’s about all I can muster up this early in the morning. We haven’t even walked the dog yet. It’s so early that if we were catching a redeye flight, we’d still have time to spare.

Weland points to the window behind her. She’s shut all the blinds tightly, drawn all the curtains closed, and pulled down every shade there is to pull. The condo doesn’t have a ton of windows, but she’s made sure no one can see in. Smitty found someone to do security right away—the kind of guy who is burly enough to scream ex-military and rough enough around the edges that my cousins won’t mess with him when they discover he’s real and he’s watching the place.



“Yeah, I mean, we want to put on a show for your cousins, but that’s exactly what they expect. I think the last thing they’d ever see coming is if we just went about being us the way we were being us before. That means hiding and not being discovered. It means valuing our privacy. It means me keeping up with my students and my teaching and you going about...well, how you would normally be, which is minding your own business because you like to fly under the radar.”

She’s been keeping up with her teaching. I went down to the basement when she had students over the past two days. It’s unfinished down there and slightly creepy, but I did love listening to the guitar and Weland’s soft voice giving gentle and patient instructions.

Honestly, Weland amazes me. She’s tough. She’s ready to fight for me even though we’re not even a real couple. At this point, I have way more to lose than she does, but she cares. She cares about all those people who work for me and all those artists who could lose their jobs and their contracts if my cousins get their hands on the company and break it up. We’ve been existing in the same space for two days now, and it’s been pretty awkward but not as difficult as I thought it would be, mostly given that we’ve been too tired to even interact with each other. Still, Weland gives those guitar lessons like the world is ending, and it’s the last thing she’s ever going to do, and she wants to go down doing it well. In the sleepless hours of the night, it’s made me wonder what it would be like to have this woman in my life all the time. Someone who has my back. Someone loyal, smart, fierce, strong, and lovely.

What would it be like to have someone like that love me?

I can’t say I’ve ever really known a love like that. Not from friends or family either.

“Hmm.” I’m slow at catching up this morning. “What do you propose?”

She slurps her coffee and gets a devious smile that makes my teabagged bags throb in

an entirely not-so-bad way. “We crack the curtains and the blinds like it’s an oopsie afterthought or like we’ve gotten cocky and overconfident in being in here and having security working outside. And then we tell Mr. Muscles to go and take a break every now and then. Long enough to let the Greedy Gretchens get video footage or peeks of us in here being all...loving.”

“Loving?” Dear god, I think I might actually be having a cardiac arrest. Either that or this strong-ass caffeine is finally hitting hard.

“Being mushy.”

Okay, that does it. It makes me tingly in the groin. Weland’s cheeks go a little pink, which makes my chest feel hot and tight.

“Like...” I mumble.

“Kissing. Hugging. Snuggling on the couch. Making breakfast or lunch together and doing things that regular couples who live apart and have missed each other and are making up for lost time would do.”

“Do regular couples get distracted by their dog watching?”

“What?” She whips around and finds Beans studying her from the other side of the kitchen. Her hand flies up to her mouth. “Dear god. I don’t know.” She tries to block a giggle, and it comes out as a snort. “We’ll wait until he’s sleeping. He does that a lot.”

“I’ve noticed.”

“Oh goodness. Is your sleep on the couch that bad?” She frowns. “Well, the cousins definitely shouldn’t see you doing that. You need to come and sleep in my bed.

They'll no doubt have binoculars or something sneaky like that. We need to, uh, keep the blinds up there open just the smallest amount so they look closed, but also so they can see shadows when we have a lamp lit, and we need to...um, make it look real."

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:37 am*

“Oh.” Oh. My dick is straight-up aching right now. And I mean straight-up. It’s going to punch through my zipper and blow this pair of jeans apart if I keep going at this rate. Hearing Weland describe these things, even if they’re just fake, makes the rest of me feel like I might explode.

“We were going to try those things for real anyway,” she whispers, studying her coffee intently. “We’ll just be speeding it up a little bit.”

“What if they see us not doing it right?”

“We’ll just have to fake it until we make it. If we find it’s just not right, and we have zero chemistry, then we’ll close the blinds back up and just do awkward fumbling and fake kissing, but they won’t be able to tell the difference because shadows are tricky.”

My insides are flipping out, and my outsides are flipping, uh, in...and everything feels like it’s been turned upside down. I find myself smiling like a moron. I shouldn’t be smiling right now. Not this big. And certainly not this enthusiastically. I shouldn’t really be on board with this plan. Not like this. It’s too much. I need to dial it back. I need to get a grip on myself, but it’s hard when Weland is so...electric. She’s electrifying too. I can easily see why her students love her so much. She’s not just a great teacher. She makes everything look and sound fun.

“And when should we...uh...commence this plan?” I ask.

“You need to call Smitty and explain what we’re doing, or if you’re not comfortable with that, then you need to tell him to give this guy coffee and bathroom breaks. It’s

horrifying to think where he's going right now."

"He probably doesn't eat or drink, so he doesn't have to. I doubt guys like him are into wearing an adult diaper so that they don't have to leave their post or pee into a bottle."

"Oh lord. Okay, none of that is healthy. This guy definitely needs breaks, even if we aren't in here plotting. A second security person to relieve him is in order going forward."

I nod. "I'll let Smitty know."

"So we're going to do this? This plan?"

I didn't know nipples getting hard were a thing for guys, but mine are starting to poke through my T-shirt. "I think you're right. It's the last thing they'd expect."

"And I guess we'll find out if we're...uh...um..." Watching her blush even brighter pink is the most adorable, hottest thing I have ever seen. Every time she does it, which is a lot, it makes my junkage feel like it's going to turn into grapefruits and goblammo. I shift uncomfortably, making room in the no-room space in my jeans. I also look away because nut explodage is not cool.

"Compatible?" I finish for her while trying to find the answers in my nearly empty cup of coffee.

"Yes, compatible. That's a good word. A very good word." She pauses for a minute. "I have a few lessons this afternoon, but we can start figuring it out after that. Like when we're making dinner or something. Or after. And we can plan on you not sleeping on the couch starting tonight. Either you sleep in my bed, or I stuff a bunch of pillows in there, pull up the covers, and secretly make a bed for you in the

basement.” I shudder at the thought of the basement. It’s enough of a punishment to be down there while she’s giving lessons so that I don’t interrupt or confuse her students. “Never mind. The basement is horrible.” She says it. Not me. “You’re sleeping in my bed with me tonight.” She swallows bravely before she slays me even harder. “We’ll find a way to make it work.”

She doesn’t mean it literally, but now I can’t stop thinking about naked Weland, warm and snuggly and soft, lovingly pressed up against me, or me draped around her as we hold each other all night.

I think about more than that too, but it’s not gentlemanly to elaborate on it.

And I know that whichever way this pans out, I’m very likely screwed.

## Chapter sixteen

### Weland

I wanted to make something that would take a while for us to do together. Something that felt a little bit romantic. What would my long-lost secret husband, whom I hardly ever get to see, like to eat if he came over to my house and spent a hypothetical week with me?

Probably not anything with garlic and onions.

And absolutely not liver. Shudder.

Steak is likely because doesn’t everyone like steak? But I don’t have a barbeque, and throwing it in a hot frying pan for a couple of minutes doesn’t seem all that romantic. Part of the show is to leave those cracks in the vertical blinds at the patio door that leads out to the world’s smallest yard with the shakiest fence, and you know...get it

on.

I thought all day about what I could make. I didn't want to have to run out for groceries and chance getting followed by the trio from hell. The last thing I wanted was another round of twenty fucking questions with them.

After a quick search of the fridge and pantry, I eventually decided on a stir fry. It'll be missing some of the key ingredients, but I do have rice, chicken, peppers, carrots, corn, a can of water chestnuts, and a bottle of amazing teriyaki sauce.

My knife nearly slips off the carrot and goes through my finger when a loud clang comes from outside. "Gah! What the heck was that?" I didn't think the cousins would try and break into the house. The hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

Sterling instantly has this guilty-as-all-heck look on his face, but he grins at me. And since he's not panicking, I slowly set the knife down and turn to him. Crossing my arms, I wait for him to explain why it sounds like half the house is going to be torn away.

"It's hot out," he states.

"Yeah, I did get that. Unbearably so."

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:37 am*

“Other than the obvious, I think maybe that’s why we’re having trouble sleeping at night. It’s uncomfortable to be sweaty all the time.”

“I’m sorry the fans aren’t cutting it,” I say. I am sorry. AC costs money. I didn’t feel it was safe to install one of those window units on the main floor because someone could just push it through and come right in. And upstairs, none of the windows would work. I didn’t have the kind of money it would take to spring for central air.

“Not a problem. It’s especially not a problem when you have tons of money. People can make things happen for you. They can come at the dinner hour and get an entire central air system installed in a few hours.”

“Oh.” So much for getting romantic at dinner.

“I was thinking maybe we could order something in and then go for a long walk with Beans while the guys come in and work on your place. And then we could, uh...maybe watch a movie. In the nicely air-conditioned house. Together. Side by side. On the couch. And tonight, when we’re sleeping up there in your bed, under the same covers, I thought it might help that we weren’t both burning up.”

He has to be kidding. There is zero chance that if we’re sharing the same bed, I’m not going to be burning up. I’m going to be an inferno. A bottle of molten lava, if any bottle could even hold that. Back when we were kids, my parents used to give me and my brother sparklers. I was so much older than him, but it didn’t stop me from loving it and loving how much he loved it. We’d race around the yard together, doing tricks and pretending they were magic wands, those sparks burning hot and bright and wild in the dark night.



I feel like my nipples are the equivalent of those sparklers, and I don't even want to comment on what my lady bits are doing.

Anticipating.

Seriously, anticipating.

I've been trying to tone it down since breakfast, but it hasn't helped. Not even doing my guitar lessons with my students helped. I was strung as tight as those strings I was plucking, thinking about all the metaphors that could relate to my body being plucked and played and made music with.

It's a nice gesture. It's something Sterling saw I needed, and he arranged all of it as a surprise for me. I mean, it's not like I was actually looking forward to making dinner together or anything.

We can still do that tomorrow night.

I'm going to be amazed at this and not the least bit put out. I'm not going to let my nipples dictate my feelings.

"Sure, we can order something. But you didn't have to do all this. It's...it's a lot. And on short notice, it has to be expensive."

"Don't worry about the money. I want to do this for you," Sterling replies.

I start putting things back in the fridge. "Thank you," I say to the fridge, and then I feel bad, so I turn around to face him. "Thank you, Sterling. That's very kind."

He hesitates like he's done something wrong. I force a smile. I'm being silly. That's what this man does to me. He makes me ridiculous. I get my phone instead and bring

up a Mexican restaurant's menu. I'm totally making that stir-fry tomorrow. I ignore my tight nipples, the burning in my belly, and the buzzing going on lower down. In a perfectly normal voice, I order tacos, then think about the whole Beans thing and how it's probably up there with garlic and onions. Who wants to Dutch oven it out together when we spend our first night sharing covers? But it's too late.

Couples who fart together stay together? Not sure if that's a thing, but if Sterling can't handle a fart, then he's not the one. There are so many worse things we'd see from each other if we made this work and continued making it work.

After dinner, which is the world's most delicious tacos, we take Beans out for a walk. It's a good thing because I'm stuffed. Sterling ate at least seven tacos, and then I lost count, so he must need the walk as well.

Throughout the whole walk, I don't feel eyes burning into my back, and I don't ask if there's security tailing us. I don't really want to know.

We loop through the streets, twisting and winding through the blocks, saying nothing, but it's an easy silence. After a while, we start making small talk. Sterling likes squirrels, and he thinks raccoons are hilarious. He also likes the particular shade of blue the recycling bins are. Then, he compliments a group of kids on their street hockey skills and finds a quarter that he says must be lucky. He slips it into my back pocket. We keep walking until the evening gets that dusky feeling I enjoy so much. Summer duskiness really is the best. I like that sunset, nighttime summernglow where the heat doesn't fade, and the dark doesn't feel long or oppressive like it does in winter.

We've been gone for a few hours, and I'm amazed that as soon as we walk back into the house, there are no crews, though I do see dust and some mess here and there. There are new registers and a new thermostat on the wall. When I glance outside, I can see the box unit set up out there, humming away. I'm shocked beyond

everything. How many people had to come out to make this happen in just a few hours? They worked all through dinner, and it took a while to come, but it couldn't have been more than four hours. Yes, they would have started around five, and it's now after nine.

I duck back inside and find Sterling sweeping up the dust on the floor.

I help him clean up the mess after I feed Beans. When Beans is done eating, he takes up his favorite spot on the couch and waits for us to join him for movie night.

It's already cold in here.

Really cold.

Cold enough that my bare arms have goosebumps on them, and if I were wearing shorts and not jeans, my legs would be goose-pimpling too. It's cold enough that I'm slightly freezing my beaver off. Yes, I went there, like nineteen seventies style. I'm privately amused, and I smile to myself as I clean up. I've heard of free-the-nipple, but now I'm thinking of freeze-the-nipple. At least I can blame how hard they are on the cold.

It takes a good hour to sweep up and wipe everything down. When we're done, it's already after ten, and I glance at Sterling, all the heat rushing to my face to combat the cold air circulating through the house. "Is it too late for a movie? Should we maybe just go to bed?"

"It is pretty late, I guess."

"Are you tired?" I ask.

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I wish I had words for that. I don't. But I can kiss her. With the wonder of kissing her, I can show her how it makes me feel. Honestly, I didn't think anything in the world would ever approach that feeling, and then I met the woman I've technically been married to for the past four years. I finally met my wife, and kissing her makes me feel that way. Kissing my way back down her breasts, over her belly, and lower. That makes me feel the heart-speeding breathless wonder.

Her hands come down on mine when I kiss nearly to her panties. I think she's going to stop me, but she helps me peel them off instead. "Teamwork makes the dream work," she whispers.

I think it would be undignified to let out a bellow of laughter at this moment, so I do what she did earlier when she was trying not to laugh. I snort-laugh.

Except, when I realize Weland is completely naked from the waist down, I can't make any noise. I settle myself between her legs and then position them over my shoulders. I think this is what gives my life meaning. Being here with a woman I could treasure if I let myself. She'd let me. I already know she would. If we were a fit, that is. Not just physically but in other ways. I'm not kidding myself that just because we've been able to make the past few days work, it means we could make the next however many years of a future together work, but small steps. I'm not saying they won't work either. How would I know what it takes? I've never had someone there to rely on. I've never let myself trust, not even when it comes to family. I've never had someone in my corner other than Smitty and the people at the label who have my back, but I pay Smitty, and the other relationships are also working ones.

Weland opens her legs for me, and she's totally naked. It's pitch black in here except for a few small glints of light coming in through the blinds, but it's enough to outline her in a faint glow. Perfection. She's an angel crash-landed from the heavens, and here I am, overthinking things.

It doesn't take much for me to turn my brain off, at least right now. That's actually a talent I haven't been able to master—turning things off when I want to. My brain is usually always going, going, going. But not right now. Right now, there's just Weland in front of me, glistening wet and ready. She smells absolutely divine. I know it's incredibly cheesy to say that my mouth waters in anticipation of tasting her, but that's exactly what happens. I'm kneeling on the bed, which keeps my cock from drilling a hole through both my jeans and the mattress. I don't need to take Weland's bed out too. Sacrificing my pants is more than enough.

I inch closer, pressing a kiss to the crease of her silky thighs. Her legs tremble and open just a little bit wider, and I inhale the wondrous scent that is all her.

I don't know why I freeze up, but I just do. Maybe because I'm having a hard time believing this is happening, and it's happening to me. It's a good thing, and good things in my life are generally very short-lived. I don't want this to go the same way. I want this to last. Oh, look, my brain just turned itself back on again, and it's whirring so darn fast that the rest of me can't keep up, which is probably why I feel paralyzed here.

There's a momentary pause, but Weland doesn't get offended that I've stopped. She doesn't ask me what's wrong with her pussy or if there's an issue with my tongue being broken.

Instead, she inhales.

And then she sings.

She sings, and it's sweeter than angels, sweeter than tacos or the deliciously guilty late night deep fried chicken run I treat myself to every once in a...well, not often enough. She's sweeter than anything I've ever heard. I'm sure it's her song she's treating me to, one that she wrote. It takes me right back to the first time I ever heard her sing. Right back to that video on the internet that had me so amazed, I would have asked her to marry me right then and there even if I didn't need a wife.

I'm kidding. I think.

As I wait for her to finish, I stroke my hands up and down her thighs. It might be the weirdest thing anyone else has ever done, and seriously, I really hope my cousins don't have night vision goggles and a wiretap going on, but I think the beefy security dude Smitty hired will take care of that right quick and clear them out if they did.

Soon, Weland finishes, her voice tapering off. Silence filters through the room for just the briefest heartbeat before I lean in and press a kiss straight to her clit.

Her hips instantly follow my mouth up and then press back down when I kiss her again. I follow it up with a lick, and her hips go wild. Her belly trembles, and she thrashes her head on the pillow, moaning. "Don't stop. For the love of cheesy meatballs, don't stop."

I want to obey, so I don't. I kiss her, lick her, and tease her with my fingers. She loves it. She lets me know exactly where she's most sensitive, where she wants my tongue, and where she wants pressure or not so much pressure, more teasing or less. She doesn't have to tell me with words because her body does it all for me. She's soaking wet, her hips riding my touch. She's so sensitive that it blows my mind. I don't want her to come yet because I don't want this to be over. I don't want to stop giving her pleasure. I don't want to stop discovering what she likes and giving it to her exactly the way she wants it.

I've been missing out on this for a lifetime.

I've been missing out on this for the past four years, and I didn't even realize it.

I lick over her folds, teasing her entrance with my tongue. She gasps when I plunge it inside, and I probably gasp too. Because she's delicious. I know I shouldn't, but I go back up and tease her clit into my mouth, suckling at it while she pants and arches off the bed, her hips bucking a little more frantically and wildly. I bring two fingers to her entrance and tease her there. I won't plunge them in. I don't want to take her all the way yet.

She lets go of my hair and grasps the sheets, curling claw-like fingers into them.

I can't help it. I have to do it. I have to let her come because I want to experience it with her. I want to be the one taking her there. I want to see her body racked with pleasure. I want to hear her come apart. I want to feel it happening around me. I'm the one who can't wait.

I slip two fingers inside her and suckle her clit hard. It takes a few seconds, but then her climax hits. She wheezes breathlessly and bites down on the sound as her walls clench around my fingers. I can feel her feet digging into the bed as her legs clench around my shoulders.

I lick at her gently, hyperaware of every single noise and movement she makes. She's incredible. More than incredible. She's the entire world right now. I don't have words for what that feeling was like hearing a song that is going to change everything for that very first time, and I don't have words for this either. I want to show her, but I'm ending up in the same wordless spot of amazement. Maybe this is where I was always meant to be.

She goes limp around me all of a sudden once the pleasure has passed. I kiss my way

back up her belly, going in reverse mode until I meet her mouth. Then, I take my time there. The fact that she's not shy about tasting herself makes my dick roar like an untamed beast but tamed he's going to be, at least for tonight.

I can see how sleepy Weland is. She's pulling me down and twisting me to the side. She wants to be held, and darn it, I'm going to give her everything she wants. If only because I darn well should after not being here for the past four years.

"That was the best non-show I've ever had the pleasure of being a part of," she whispers.

Her eyes flutter shut, and her breathing evens out. She's asleep before I can even pull the sheet over her.

I nestle down next to her. I'm only half holding her as she's on my one arm. No doubt it will go numb in short order, but I refuse to mind. I close my eyes, but my body is still buzzing. There's no couch tonight and no dog, but there is the warmest, loveliest woman in my arms. I can already sense tonight will be another one of those mostly sleepless nights.

Chapter eighteen



*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:37 am*

Mom goes back to whipping up the batter with a little bit extra whipping, which tells me this was actually all her idea. Dad must have done the research, and Bryan is here for moral support. We stick together in this family. Good or bad ideas, we talk about them and do them together.

I grasp those eggs a little bit tighter without even realizing I'm doing it. Cracking is imminent whether I want it to be or not, so it's a good thing I have the bowl ready.

"It was your mother's idea," Dad says, confirming my suspicions. The waffle mix gets a little bit mixier. "From what Weland has told us—" He's referencing the quick conversation I had with my family after meeting the trio of cousins to the power of awful the other day. "We understand your cousins want your company, and you want to protect it and everyone there. I know this is going to be an oversimplification, but we both took the day off work because we know it's important, and we think this could be something that could actually have a chance at succeeding."

Right, work. I'm losing track of the days. My parents don't just take time off work. I feel beyond honored that they're here right now. They don't just have my back anymore. They have Sterling's too. As I said earlier, it makes me feel like we're a team.

"Alright," I say cautiously. "Tell us."

"Just make a different company," Bryan blurts, clearly ruining the surprise and careful planning my dad has put into explaining this. "As in keep it the same company, but just move everyone over. All your artists, all your employees. Make the old one with those shares not worth anything. That way, your cousins can have it, and

you'll have something brand new that they can't touch."

I have never gaped so hard in my life, and my jaw has never creaked up so creakily. This is beyond the pale. It's beyond all the colors. It's beyond anything I've ever known. It's all the colors. All the pales. All the things that should and shouldn't be.

I whip my gaze back and forth between my mom and dad, then to my brother and Sterling. Everyone has a different expression on their face, ranging from hope to skepticism. I can tell Sterling doesn't know what to think. He's not used to family meetings, and it's still early in the morning. His cousins showed up out of nowhere, and we just did things last night. There's a lot going on, and now this. But he looks cautiously optimistic. The lights are working their way on in his dark eyes, which are back to being that lovely dark roast coffee with just the right amount of cream hue.

I crack the eggs in my hands and go for two more before anyone can notice how my body is lighting up just looking at this man. I don't know if I'm large enough to contain emotions like this. I might be one of those containers that say, "Do Not Tip Over" and "Handle with Care." Do not shake, stir, and for the love of all things holy, do not get close to fire. And he's fire. We're not supposed to mix, but here we are. Flirting with the most dangerous of dangers.

We're also thinking about flirting with disaster because that's what this plan feels like. It feels like fucking over three people who very much aren't going to stand for tricks like this.

"Make a different company," Sterling muses thoughtfully. I crack two more eggs and reach for another two. I'm all about the double cracking. Two eggs. Smack together. Then, into the bowl. That's how I've always done it. "Gosh darn it, I think it could work."

"Oh, it could work," Bryan says with all the confidence of youth. "I've never been a

glass half full type of person, but even I think it could work. It beats them at their own game because they're definitely playing it. Plus, it untangles my sister from all this."

At those words, my world wrenches to a grinding halt. I drop one egg onto the counter, and it splats there noisily. Everyone is looking at me now. "Is...this what this is really about? You all getting me away from Sterling?" I suddenly feel betrayed by my family. And it's not a feeling I'm used to. I don't like this pain. It's like a hot knife slicing through my body, which is suddenly made of butter. As in whip me up and spread me onto bread, make toast of me, and dip garlic sticks in me kind of butter.

I guess there only is that kind of butter.

No, wait, there's body butter, but I think it's a similar concept.

"That's not it." Mom is quick with the paper towel, wiping up the broken egg mess. "I mean, it's part of it. We just want you to be free to make your own decisions. We'll support whatever it is, but no one should be forced to get married." She looks to Sterling right after me. "That goes for you too. Neither of you should have had to enter into an agreement like that. This will free you both. If you want to pursue something together after that, then we're not going to stop you. You're an adult, and you know your own feelings."

That's legit. My mom doesn't lie to me. I'm the one who kept this from my family, but they're not mad at me. They're not mad at Sterling. They're not trying to separate us. I let out a breath I didn't even realize I was holding. I don't usually do that—not realize I'm not breathing.

This offer isn't conditional. My family's love isn't conditional. Their idea to help us isn't conditional on me never seeing Sterling again. There are always conditions on

everything, but not on the hand that my mom puts on my shoulder. Not on the way she squeezes, assuring me with a single look that she loves me and always will love me, even if I've hidden a marriage for the past four years.

"I'd prefer if you left and never saw my sister again," Bryan says. He yelps a second later and jumps up, and no, it's not because Sterling has booted him under the table. Sterling's not even sitting at the table. He hasn't even moved. He also doesn't have bionic eye skills. "Your dog just rubbed his anus on me!"

Bryan is wearing shorts and a T-shirt. I crouch down, and Beans wags his tail. He's under the table, just standing there.

"He backed up and leaned his hot anus on me!" Bryan grumbles.

"Hmm, sounds like he was trying to give you a hug." My mom is trying very hard not to laugh.

But my dad does it for her. He bellows his signature dad laugh that sounds a little bit like a donkey's mating call. Heee-hawwwwww. Heeeeeeeee-haw. He-he-heeeeeee.

"Dad!" Bryan huffs, his face turning red. "I fail to see how that's a hug. And it's not funny." He's embarrassed. My little brother, who hardly ever gets embarrassed about anything, is totally turning red. This coming from a guy who can let one rip in a totally silent room, and everyone knows it's him, and he won't even deny it, or he'll just straight up confess to it.

"He could have been giving you a dog CPR. We were getting awfully excited in here," Mom goes on. She's getting on a roll now. She gets like this when we play those board games with words. You will never, ever beat my mom at one of those. Peeing your pants is also a high risk when undergoing those kinds of activities with her. "Anyway, these waffles are ready to be made." She reaches for the waffle maker

and, within a minute, has it plugged in and greased with the cooking spray from the cupboard. “Sit back down, Bryan. The dog just loves you, that’s all. Give him some nice pets and we’ll talk about how to outsmart these cousins from you know where.”

“The moon?” Dad suggests, genuinely confused.

I bite back my own laughter. I may have inherited a little bit of that braying call from him, and I don’t dare let it loose.

“I think she was talking about hell,” Bryan states dryly. He reluctantly starts scratching Beans’ head. I can see the movement from above the table.

I finish cracking eggs, and once I have the whole pack in the bowl, I get a whisk, add some milk, and start scrambling. Everyone thinks it’s for the pan, and it is, but it’s also for the bowl. That’s the secret to good scrambled eggs. Well, that, along with cheese and tons of hot sauce.

“I did some research,” Dad goes back to saying while I heat up the frying pan and Mom gets her waffle-making game face on. “It would take a lot of work and probably some good lawyers and some time. I’m not saying it would be cheap, but I think you can pull the rug right out from under them, clichéically speaking.”

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“Clichéically isn’t a word,” Bryan interjects.

Beans woofs from under the table. My brother reluctantly goes back to petting him with a sigh. “Your dog’s butt hole is way too warm. I think he should see a doctor for that.”

“How warm?” I can’t help myself. I’m rising to it. “I think they’re supposed to be pretty hot. That’s where they take their temperature, you know.”

“Ears,” my brother throws back at me with a shudder. “They take it in the ears.”

I pour the mixed-up eggs into the hot pan and listen to them sizzling. Speaking of hot things, I think I got the perfect temperature. “I think they do sometimes stick it...uh...where the sun doesn’t shine.”

“Well, I think it’s hot. You should get it checked,” Bryan says stubbornly.

“Fair enough. But tell me more about this plot. I mean plan.”

At last, my brother perks back up. “It’s a plan to save you from the evil butt crack butt hole-faced cousins.”

“You’ve never seen them,” I protest, just to be fair. “You don’t know what they look like.”

“Well, they act like butt holes.”

“Fair enough.” Dad’s using his serious tone, and he’s getting his game face on. His business game face. His no one messes with my family and survives to tell the tale, especially not butt-hole cousins game face on. Suddenly, I’m blinking back tears. I’ve never been prouder of my family or felt more loved. They’re here because we need them. They’re here without even being asked. Heck, they don’t even like Sterling, yet they still showed up in the biggest way. “This is how I think we could do it...”

## Chapter nineteen

### Weland

“How did your dad get so smart?” Sterling asks.

I toss a whole handful of spaghetti into the pot of boiling water. The frying pan is sizzling again, this time because we’re making dinner, so I dump a quarter of a bag of frozen meatballs. Don’t judge. We can’t all be masters of the kitchen, and besides, they’re good.

My parents and my brother left for the day right after breakfast. I could barely focus on anything while thinking about the plans Sterling was going to have to make. He spent most of the day in the basement with his laptop and phone, making calls. I had students come and go in the afternoon, and he needed the time and space to make a bunch of calls to lawyers and other people. I know the first one he placed was to Smitty, which makes sense because Smitty isn’t just his lawyer. I’m pretty sure he’s a wizard from another dimension.

“He reads books.” Sterling pulls a face at me like I’m trying to give him a token answer. I’m actually not trying to be funny for once. “No, really. He reads tons. But he’s also reading all these books on how to succeed in this or that,” I say.

“Self-help?”

“I guess that would be it, but he reads everything in that genre. Not just how to help yourself mentally or emotionally but how to help in business and every other venture. His social media feeds are full of bullet point lists that other people have highlighted from books.”

“So he gives you lots of that bullet-pointed wisdom?” Sterling quirks a brow.

“He does. That and tons that don’t sound like they’re from bullet points.”

“Like respect all life forms, even the kinds you’re scared of because they all have a job to do, so don’t you dare squash a spider or step on an ant?”

“He’s never told me that in those words, but it makes sense. Every lifeform has value. Although, when it comes to mosquitoes and yellowjacket wasps, it’s hard to see the value in those,” I say with a light chuckle.

Sterling nods. “I agree.”

I wait a few minutes and then fork the spaghetti apart to keep it from fusing into one huge mass. We were supposed to be putting on a show at dinner for the triptych of camping out evil, but now they don’t seem so powerful, menacing, or nebulous. I’m dying to ask Sterling how it’s going, and I have been ever since he emerged from the basement looking like he’s been living in a cave without seeing the sunlight for months, blinking and raking his hands through his hair wildly, but I haven’t asked since I don’t think it’s what he needs.

“Did he ever tell you not to eat yellow snow?” Sterling wonders.

“All the time. This is Detroit. Winters are long, and there’s lots of snow.”

I get out a separate smaller pan for the sauce. It also comes from a jar, and yes, it’s



also excellent.

“I think his wisdom is more translatable, like today. It’s rubbed off on all of us over the years. He doesn’t just walk around spewing quotes or making lists. There aren’t quotes up on the wall, and there sure aren’t posters anywhere. He’s just very patient and easy to talk to. If we’re ever stuck, he’ll tell us things like, ‘Silence is a lovely thing because there’s space in silence to create loveliness.’ He’d say, ‘We don’t have to be worried about working to achieve all the things in life all the time because the best part of life is not being worried about working to achieve things. It’s just letting them come.’ Stuff like that.”

Sterling thinks about that. He tucks his bottom lip between his teeth, which sends a rocket of heat rushing through me. We got derailed this morning, so we haven’t talked about last night. Or repeated it. I’d rather be eating him than this dinner I’m preparing. Just saying.

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“You’re going to tell me that I deserve someone better, aren’t you?” she mumbles.

“It’s not about deserving someone better.” I sigh, and it feels good to force that air out. “It’s about the fact that we’re married because I needed you to marry me, and you needed money. It was an arrangement that was kind of forced on us both. We didn’t come together naturally, and that’s always going to be hanging over us.”

“So you’re leaving because of how we met four years ago, not what’s happened now? Doesn’t it mean anything?”

I have to let her hand go. I don’t have any right to hold it. But then I take it back up again because I can’t help myself. I need to touch her. She grounds me, and I know that’s the opposite of what I’m trying to do here because what I need to do is set her free to live her own life uninterrupted by me and then leave to make sure my new company runs as smoothly as possible and stays out of danger of any and all nefarious cousins.

As I try to find the words, though, Weland’s eyes start to get shiny. She blinks furiously, but her eyes stay a little bit wet. Jesus, it’s enough to make me get hot in the eyes. I haven’t ever bawled in my entire life, and I’m not going to start now. I’ve spent the entirety of my years basically flying solo, even when I kind of had a family, and I know I can’t let my guard down now. This was a nice break. It could have been something wonderful. Maybe in another lifetime, Weland and I could even have been a family together. Her parents could have loved me, her brother would have been a brother-in-law, and I would have had the family I always craved for. Okay, that last bit is a stretch. A big stretch. However, I’m not entirely shocked at the pulsing in my chest. I know I want that. Who doesn’t want to feel loved and accepted?

Shit. Shit on a stick. I'd really like to know what it's like to have a mom. And a dad. And siblings.

But Weland deserves the chance to meet someone who doesn't con her into getting married. She deserves a chance to find her better half. The half that really completes her. She wants to stay here, and she loves her family. She doesn't want to go hopping all over the globe for business and stuff, and I'm not ready to quit. I don't want to live in Detroit. My business is in Nashville. Even if we could make this work, it would involve so much time apart, and that's really not fair to her.

Maybe I'm grasping at straws here. Maybe it's just because I know I'm not good enough for her. I'm never going to be good enough for her. She's great, and above all, she needs someone who knows what it takes to be a family. I have no idea when it comes to that. I'm not the piece in her puzzle that's missing. That person, whoever he is, is still out there.

Is it wrong that I want to find him and make him eat hot peppers until he cries?

Yeah, that's messed up. I don't really want to make anyone cry. I don't. Not even this nebulous, out there, still imaginary at this moment person.

"It does," I utter. My thumb traces a circle over the back of her hand. Her skin is so soft and silky. "It did. It's always going to mean something. I think we're just not...there's too much...there's a hundred reasons...I'm not...I just can't stay, Weland. Not now. Not ever. Not with work. Not with my business. I have to leave now, and I'll always have to keep leaving. You deserve someone who wants to make a life with you. Right here. I know you'd never want to leave your family. I'm on the road an awful lot, and my business and life are in Nashville."

Her eyebrows cross, and she looks at me like she'd enjoy tearing off my balls, dipping them in chocolate, and feeding them to me.

She jerks her hand back. “That’s the biggest cop-out I’ve ever heard. If you have to go and take care of things, that makes sense. If you’re scared, that makes sense. If you just don’t like me, that makes sense too. But what you just said...it sounds like a load of bull.”

“Weland...” I sigh.

“Straight up bull.”

“It’s not. Think about it. Do you want someone who is in your life for only a few days a month? A few weeks a year in total? Would you leave here, leave your family, and only be in their lives for a few days a month or a few weeks a year?”

Her frown darkens. If it was an evening frown, it’s not a full-on night frown, and the not-so-friendly night bugs are coming out.

“So why were we even trying to make this work then if that was a concern? If it did work, were you going to give it up? What was going to happen? You knew I loved my family.”

“I didn’t realize how much. I don’t...I wasn’t thinking that far ahead. I was just trying to see if we were even compatible. I didn’t come here trying to seduce you. That wasn’t even the plan. I thought about it so hard last night. I’m sorry if it seems like I just wanted to play with your body or your feelings. That wasn’t my intention.”

“What if we could meet halfway? What if we traveled a little and stayed here a little? I could write songs for you. Or for whoever wants to sing them. Because I don’t. I don’t ever want to be famous. Those videos I made are the last ones I ever want to make. I don’t need the world to see me. I just want you to see me, Sterling. I think we could make it work if you’re willing.”

I hesitate. She's tearing me apart and tearing me down, bit by bit. My will to leave starts to waver. "Don't you want to get on with your life? You've been suspended in this marriage for four years."

"So have you," she argues. "We don't have to stay married anymore. We don't have anything to worry about when it comes to that. I'm not saying we should. I'm telling you that you're freaking out, and you don't have to. We could work if we wanted to. I know it."

"What happened to the you have to set things free in order for them to come back to you idea?"

"Don't throw dad wisdom back at me," she says with a grunt. Her arms fold across her chest, and I can see the way her breasts swell under her monster shirt. The happy blue fuzzy monster looks like it's doing a happy blue fuzzy monster dance. If I were sitting on top of Weland's breasts, dwelling right by her beating heart and a part of her warm skin, the fabric of me gracing her body, I'd be doing a happy dance as well.

"I think I need to leave. We need to get a divorce, and I need to go. There are things with the new company that I need to make sure are airtight and made right."

"Well, you're not under any obligation to stay. That's not how I want you, and I know it's not how you want me. You're trying to do the nice thing and set me free, but what if that's not what I want? Do I want to stay married the way we've been? Absolutely not. Do I want to keep seeing if this could work because it felt good, and I actually like you? Yes. Yes, okay, I do. If you feel the same way, then you can leave. You can go and do the things you need to do, but you can come back. Technically, that's setting each other free. Technically, it's you leaving. If that's what it takes and if the dad advice has to be followed, then on all the technicalities, we'll be doing what we need to do. Traveling? I want to see the world. Nashville? Sounds like an incredible place. The thing is, I write songs. I make music. And you're in the business

of putting songs out into the world. I think it could be a great thing—us partnering together. For us personally and on the business side of things.”

Damn it, she’s making it pretty darn hard to see the benefits of just taking off out of here. I thought I could spare her if I left now. I thought I’d be doing the right thing. Setting her free to live her life feels like the generous, non-asshole thing to do. I’d talked myself into getting a divorce and letting her live her own life and moving on while I live mine. I’d already decided it was the best thing to do on a scale of how to not fuck with her life anymore.

Was I wrong? Am I wrong? It only takes two point seven nine seconds of soul-searching to admit her argument has some validity. It makes a lot of sense. Do I really feel like leaving? No. Do I have to leave? Yes. Do I want to come back here, not for this city but for Weland? Yes. Yes, I absolutely do.

I’ve traveled, I’ve searched, and I’ve gone all over the world. I’ve lived a good portion of my life already. I’ve built a music empire, and I have more money than I know what to do with.

But do I know what family is? Do I know what love is? Not really. And no. No, I don’t. But what if I had the chance? What if I had the chance right now, and I let it go?

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Sounds like what every good song is based on.

It also sounds like the exact opposite of what I want my life to be. I don't want to live one of those regret songs. One of those I had the perfect woman, and I let her go, so I'll spend the rest of my life aching for her songs. I want to live every cheesy country song instead, minus the pickup truck and the tractor. Or with the pickup truck and the tractor, if that's what Weland wants.

"Sterling." She takes my hands, and her eyes fly to mine. "You can go, but for the love of all things cheese, and very few things in life are better than cheese, please come back. I spent four years of my life trying to make sense of this, and now it does. I don't want it to stop making sense. If you're not in my life, it's going to be incredibly senseless. I'm not saying this because I want perks of your cash or because I want you to make my songs famous. I'm saying it because I want you. I want you to kiss me up against the wall while the dog eats our meatballs. I want you to take trips to the vet with me to find the perfect probiotic because the dog's farts are hot death without it. I want you to take all those death glares from my dad and brother and turn them into something to laugh about one day. I don't want you to ever sleep on my couch again, and not because we're putting on a show for your evil cousins. Maybe one day they'll change. Maybe they'll come around and not be so evil, although I seriously doubt it, but we can keep the door open and keep hoping.

"Honestly, I want more orgasms because the ones you give are really good. They're the best kind of good. I want more of you. I want more of your kisses. I want to fall asleep and wake up next to you. Even if it's not possible every single day, that's okay. You're my husband, and even if we get a divorce, and you're no longer my

husband, that's okay too. I don't need you to be married to me in order for me to want to spend time with you. I want to keep seeing if this will work because I've never in my life met anyone that I felt like it could work with until I met you. I've written songs all my life, but you make me want to write songs about you. And that's a thing because I've never, ever written songs about a real guy. Just pretend guys. And I knew nothing about love. I want to do it for real. I want to sing them to you. I want to sing them for you." Her eyes flood with tears again, and then those big, crystal droplets spill over. "I guess if you don't see it working, then fair enough. But if you do, then give it a shot. Give every cheesy song lyric a chance to become true for us and then some."

This time, when her hand lands on my arm, it causes a volley of goosebumps to form. The hairs there prick to attention and stand up when I shiver. She's the first person who has ever really looked at me and seen more than the money, more than my job, and more than what I can offer materially. She's the only person who has looked at me like I'm more than a job, more than a burden, more than a chore, and more than something to compete with.

If I left, I didn't think I could come back, but she's amazed me again. She's given me an option that I didn't think would be there.

"I have to get back to Nashville. There's only so much I can do from here. Smitty has sent me everything to sign electronically, but I want to make sure I have all of it taken care of without an inch of leeway before my cousins catch on. Also, I know if I leave and make it public, they'll follow me back. Of course, Smitty will be here with you, and I'll have security watching your place. They won't get to you, I promise."

"If you leave, the only thing I care about is that you come back. Eventually. When you can."

"You'll wait?" I ask.



Her eyes sparkle, and she squeezes my arm. “Of course I’ll wait. But Sterling?”

“Hmm?” I’m not thinking about the company. I know I should be, but it’s hard to focus when I want to think about Weland and all the things I could do to her instead. How she’d smell aroused, how her eyes would darken, and her pupils would get huge, and how I’d be able to make her moan and then lose all the breath it takes to even do that because I’d kiss her until she was breathless. Senseless. Until there was just me for her.

“You owe me a song,” she says.

“A song?” Of all the things in the world, that’s what she’s going to ask for? But it makes sense, given how she’s nothing like anyone I’ve ever met.

“Yes. One that we’re going to write ourselves, day in and day out. We’re not going to stop until we’re corny, classic, and cheesy. Isn’t that right?”

“It is.” God, I want to get back here. I don’t even want to leave in the first place. Leaving is going to be the hardest thing I’ve ever done, and this is coming from a man who found a fake wife, spent the past four years keeping her a secret from the world, and just started a company overnight. Or rather, moved the old one over overnight. “That’s definitely right.”

Chapter twenty-one

Weland

Idid talk about technically, and technically, Sterling has been gone for three weeks. Actually, it’s been twenty-three days, but who’s counting?

Me. Obviously.

I've been counting.

Counting down the days, the hours, and the minutes.

My family has been amazing. They've kept me from going out of my mind. They've been there for me like they always have. They haven't once tried to talk me out of this. They've just been there with their jokes and their humor. We've played all the board games we love as well as cards. We've watched movies, cooked together, and talked.

I've also been busy with my students. Thank goodness for my work.

Beans has kept me entertained. He's been a great bud. He's taken to sleeping beside me on my bed, and I don't mind his snoring and night-kicking one bit, even if it is disturbing. Dogcuddles are so good that they more than make up for it. I don't know how Smitty knew what I needed, but he did. He kind of works miracles like that. Not just for me but for Sterling too.

He hasn't called. And he's not a texter.

But he has sent me a few emails, keeping me updated about what's going on with the company.

When his cousins found out about the company, they threw a hissy fit to end all hissy fits to the power of hissy fits, and now they're pouting. Sterling isn't really sure what their next move is going to be, but as for his new company, it's safe. All of it. There isn't anything they can do.

I haven't received an email from him in two days. I've been checking my phone neurotically, refreshing my email whenever I pick it up just to make sure it's updated.

It's a very Sterling thing to just show up on my doorstep, which he does right after dinner. One minute, I'm getting ready to take Beans out, and the next, he's there, ringing my doorbell and thrusting a guitar case into my hands when I open the door.

“For you. I'll tell you all about it tonight, I promise. It's one of those rare, historical, expensive, played by a certain rockstar guitars, and I know you'll never want to play it because you'll be scared that if you do, it will lose some of its magic. But I can't think of a single other person I would want to play it and infuse it with even more magic, which you would, of course, because you have the purest form of magical everything I've ever known.”

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I know I said I wanted to live our own corny song lyrics, but this is above and beyond. I let out a squeal and launch myself into his arms. He sets the guitar case down and hugs me so hard that I'm lifted clean off the ground. "You have some magic too." That's the best I can do because I'm starting to snifle and get hot in the eyeballs.

It feels like forever since he left. I can't believe there was a time when I didn't know his name, how wonderful he was, or how much I'd miss him when he wasn't right here with me.

I usher him inside. "Will you sit and wait for us?"

He grins. "I'll do one better. How about I come for a walk with you?"

My heart is galloping at a thunderous pace, and it's all I can do to nod.

We're pretty quiet on the walk. There's the weight of catching up and everything that happened while Sterling was gone. The weight of three weeks and my great, overarching joy that, above all, he's back. He's back, and this time, it's not for business, for his cousins, for the will, or for anything else. It's just for me.

Okay, maybe for Beans too.

When we get back to the house, Sterling grabs the guitar case. He cracks it open and takes out the most gorgeous, worn-in, ancient, and antique-looking guitar I've ever seen. Think fifties here. I know he's going to tell me who owned it, and my heart races for a different reason. Any musician, however amateur, gets excited about

gorgeous instruments, but when you combine a gorgeous instrument with some history and provenance, you get bubbles. Jittery, wonderful, happy, insanely good bubbles of sheer wonderment.

“I’ll tell you all about it soon, but I want to do something for you with it first,” Sterling says.

He strums his fingers down the strings, which are perfectly in tune. I freeze. The way he’s holding it, the look on his face...I didn’t know he could play. He slips the strap—a worn, plain red band—over his shoulder, and then he starts to sing. And my god, his voice. I didn’t know he could do that either. Sing, I mean. Holy god, can he ever sing. It has all the crazy goosebumps goosebumping on my body.

It’s clear from the first line that this isn’t one of those serious love songs that get played at your wedding, but it’s going to be one I remember every note and every word of for the rest of my life.

Not only is this song not very country, it’s also not very good.

But that’s okay because I wrote it just to make you laugh.

I really hope that after this you might want to take a bath.

Not because you stink or anything. You’re like sunshine, and you smell like flowers.

My favorite time is all the hours

That we get to spend together.

Pretty sure it’s always going to be the best time, now until forever.

But if not, I want that too. The good and the bad and the in-between.

I want it with you, and I want it with Beans.

I know I'm missing a chorus and a bridge and better lines,

I know that so far, all I've come up with is a bunch of rhymes,

But I hope we can start again.

Will you do me the honor of not being my wife?

When the guitar goes silent, he removes it and leans it against the case and the wall. Then, he digs in the bag he had slung over his shoulder when he walked in. I know what the stack of papers is before he hands them to me.

Divorce papers.

Ha, this shouldn't be romantic either, but the way Sterling looks at me with those wonderful brown eyes makes me all soft and gooey. He doesn't look like most people who are getting a divorce. I mean, some people might be happy about the fact, but he's not looking at me like he's happy. He's looking at me like this is the first step on our road to getting our shit together. Orforever, but using words like that is kind of big and scary and soon.

"This is how I'd like to start our real romance. By being free. No strings attached, no obligations, and no contracts. Nothing hanging over us," Sterling says.

The papers don't feel like a lead weight when I take them. I carry them to the kitchen table, grab a pen from the junk drawer in the kitchen that has about fifty million mismatched pens, and sit down. I know I should read through them, and I will, but

right now, it feels important to put my signature on them.

“I actually think we need a witness,” Sterling says, cutting me off. “But we’ll get one. I can call Smitty to come over.”

### Chapter twenty-two

#### Sterling

I kiss the heck out of Weland. It's more than the fact that I've missed her. It's more than me being happy to see her. It's more like I've found the missing piece she was talking about. Not just out of my life but out of my soul. I didn't exactly pour my heart out in that song because it really was just designed to make Weland laugh, but I'm pouring my soul out tonight. In the living room, up the stairs, and toward the bathroom.

"Should we go in?" I pant, tearing off my T-shirt.

"Nah, too messy. Too much water. Too much shower. Although...maybe after."

"After?"

"After this." She tackles my jeans, and I let her. She's good at buttons. It pops right out, and she unzips them and then starts tearing them down. I do the same for her pants, tugging, pulling, ripping, tearing, shrugging, struggling, and shucking.

Before long, we're both naked, our hands roving wildly all over each other. We kiss like we need to kiss in order to save the planet from imminent destruction, and if we don't get to kiss level ten, then we're doomed. I thought I was doomed once, but Weland proved to me how wrong I was. I wasn't asleep, and my heart wasn't dead. It was just waiting for her.



She shuts the door after us. “So we don’t scandalize the children.”

My mouth cracks open, but then I realize she’s just talking about Beans. There aren’t any kids in here. “Scandalize. I like that word. I’d very much like it if you would scandalize me.”

She blinks at me, slow and flirty and with plenty of intent behind it. “And how would I do that, good sir?”

“You could sit on my face, for starters.”

“Gah! That’s scandalous, alright,” she rasps.

“Scandalous and hot.”

“What if I smother you?”

“Then I’d more than die a happy man,” I say to her.

“Good lord. I’m not really going to do that.”

“Smother me or sit on my face?”

She blushes. I love seeing that delicate pink light up her cheeks. She’s so cute when she’s embarrassed and flustered. I step close and set my hand on her hip. She’s wearing a bra and panties, and that’s it. I still have my boxers on. I glance at the blinds, but they’re all shut tight, and the lights are out. It’s just us in here doing our thing. Doing us.

I let my hand travel over her hip, and she gasps. Then, I let it travel down further, down the soaked silky panties, down to her clit. I tap lightly against the wet fabric,

and her hips jerk against my hand. Her knees creak forward, wobbling into me.

“Oh god,” she sighs. “That’s nice.”

“Did you touch yourself when I was gone?” I whisper.

“What? Good lord.”

“If you did, I’d think it was hot. Three weeks is a long time to wait. I wasn’t sure how long I’d be in Nashville, dealing with business. You weren’t sure. So yes, I’d be happy to hear you touched yourself. It’s healthy. It’s a great way to escape stress and make up for what we can’t control. Tell me that you did. And that you thought about me.”

“I did,” she finally confesses. Her eyes squeeze shut, and her cheeks flame up even brighter. “Just once, though.”

“Tsk, ts. We’ll have to talk about that control. In this case, a lack thereof is most decidedly sexy. In the future, we’ll have to have really good phone sex.”

“Oh my god! Who does that? Are you serious?”

“Absolutely. If it’s with each other, I think it’s hot. But if not, it’s okay. If we try and don’t like it, it’s not something we have to keep doing. I just think we’d really like it. Because we won’t always be able to be with each other. Hopefully, this is the longest stretch we’re ever apart, but I do still have to travel for business, and sometimes I even go to Europe. It’s not just across this country. I hope you’ll come with me, but I understand there are times when you won’t be able to. So...phones.”

“Maybe.” She leans into my touch, though, and that perhaps sounds more promising. More than a maybe and more of a cautious yes, but only because it’s with you, and trying new things with you might be fun.

“Maybe is good,” I say.

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“Trying new things is good,” she adds.

“Dirty talking with you would be good.”

“Everything with you would be good.”

She laughs and kisses me as I get her steered toward the bed. Then, I spot a section of open wall and take a detour. Trying new things is good, she said, and I want to try this with her. I want to try everything with her. As I said, everything with her would be good.

My hard cock bumps into her center as I back her into the smooth wall. She grasps my shoulders and tries to climb me, footing me with her foot on my calf and then my upper thigh. Her head falls back as I bump into her again, not so accidentally this time. I grasp her hips and lift her up, rocking her hard against me and the wall. She has nowhere to go but into me, which is a great place to be.

My fingers slip over the lace at the sides of her panties. It's fragile. Delicate. “These just happen to be in the way, my darling.”

“Oh? Just let me...” she mumbles.

I give a tug, and they rip at the side before she has a chance to shimmy away from me and pull them off herself. She gasps and looks up at me with fire in her eyes but laughter on her lips.

“That was undignified. You could have waited a hot minute.”

“When it comes to you, I can’t.” I tug at the other side, and the lace is so fragile and delicate that it gives way under that tug too. I’m now holding a scrap of fabric, and it gets tossed over my shoulder in favor of Weland. I can’t keep my hands off of her. I don’t ever want to have to stop touching her.

“They were expensive,” she pants as I stroke my finger through her folds. She’s so wet that we might as well have gone into the bathroom and started up the shower. The water would have washed this away, though. Or mixed in with it, and I just want Weland. Every single bit of her. Natural, soaking wet, hot for me, swollen, and ready. I want to taste her skin and have it be just her. No water, and nothing slicking away the womanly scent of her.

“I’ll buy you a thousand more pairs.”

“Goodness. Wherever shall I put a thousand pairs of underwear?”

I let out a small laugh. “Alright, I’ll buy you ten.”

“Hmm, I think I could find homes for ten pairs. And maybe one super hot and sexy bodysuit?”

“Your wish is my command.” Even if thinking about her in sexy lingerie nearly kills me on the spot.

I run my hand over her hip as my eyes flutter closed at the gorgeous feel of her skin under my fingers. I dreamed about this. Literally. Every single night. And most days when I was awake, too. I longed for her. I missed her. Not just this, but all of her. Her laughter, her determination, her strength, her intelligence. I felt the hole in my life so keenly that it scared me a little. It’s rather frightening not to realize you have a big gaping hole there at all and then suddenly become so aware of it.

The frightening part is that I'm scared of losing her. But it's not going to happen. I won't let it ever happen. I won't let life ever happen. Because there will be no life for me without Weland in it. I know that already.

I stroke lower, letting my fingers explore her smoothness until I reach her folds again. I continue teasing her like that, bringing them to her entrance but then dancing back up to her clit. She moans.

"You have a lovely pussy, my darling," I purr.

She groans. "That lovely pussy wants your hard cock in it."

Said cock throbs in utter agreement. "Oh, are you getting into the dirty-talking game? Please tell me this is going to be a thing. I find it rather delightful."

"I find you to need to get inside me. Right. Freaking. Now."

"Are you on the pill?" I check, just to be sure.

She doesn't open her eyes and look at me, and her head doesn't pull away from the wall. "It's been three weeks. I got on it as soon as you left. So yes, I'm good. I'm good for you to go in there and stay in there and make us both feel good until we can't stand up anymore."

Holy. God. Okay, yes. All the yeses. All the okays.

When I look back down at her, her eyes have finally opened, and she's looking at me. Her smile is the best thing in the entirety of the world. "What's funny?" I ask.

"You." She cups my face. "You. This. I just want to smile because I'm so happy."

I bump against her center with my hardness again, and her pupils get even bigger. Her lips part, so of course I have to taste them. They're delicious. Soft and ripe. Her hand is even better when it cups my dick, wrapping around the bulge through my boxers.

"Get these off," Weland commands. "I won't attempt to tear them. Underwear road rash rug burns wouldn't be pretty."

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Right here, right now, in this bed, and every day going forward in the future. If this is an experiment in making it work, then every single day, I'm down to find out what it takes to do exactly that.

Chapter twenty-three

Weland

Epilogue

“Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you, happy birthday dear Beaaaaannnnssssss—”

“Happy we picked this day out of the blue to make it your birthday, happy approximately ten years old, or so the vet says. At any rate, happy birthday to you.”

I do my best glary glare at my brother, but he just laughs. My dad lets out a big guffaw, and my mom joins in with her much softer laughter. Sterling slips his arm around my waist and kisses my cheek. No one bats an eye. They're used to our PDA. We've been unabashedly mushy for two years now, so I think the shock factor wore off long ago. If there ever was a shock factor. My family might have doubted Sterling just the slightest bit at first, but they lost that pretty quickly too. They realized he was in it for the long haul, and he'd never do anything to hurt me. I'm also an adult, and he's my choice. I chose him, and I chose this relationship, and because of that alone, they were supportive, even through their doubts during those first few months.

Really, after that visit, where we ate waffles and scrambled eggs and hatched the plot



to switch companies, my whole family has been team Sterling, even my brother.

Right now, they're team Beans, and rightfully so. "It's not just any day," I protest. We're all sitting around the table in our new house, Beans included. It's a big table. Round solid wood with big solid chairs. Beans fits perfectly on his chair, and the arms keep him from sliding out or jumping off. We tried sticking a party hat on him for a picture, but he wouldn't accept it, even for a few seconds. Right now, he is looking longingly at the dog cake my mom assembled. "This is the day I got him."

It's a horrible mishmash of crunchies, gravy, gelatin, and tuna, all mashed up into a ring-like mold. Think nineteen-sixties cookbook gelatin meatloaf overnight in the fridge horror stories here.

"The day you were given him by the world's best lawyer," Sterling clarifies.

Smitty turns a right shade of red. "Goodness. It was just what Weland needed. And what Beans needed. They needed each other."

"I love that Beans' gotcha day is right before the day we met," I say, staring up at Sterling with a regular amount of hearts and mush in my eyes.

No one groans, not even when Sterling turns me in his arms and kisses me full-on. Mom just cuts the dog cake and serves Beans a slice. We have regular cake for the rest of us. I'm so happy Smitty took time out of his crazy schedule to come down here for Beans' birthday. He wasn't able to make it last year, but this year, we booked him in advance.

Sterling and I bought a house together not so far away from my parents, but then, we bought them a house too. And my brother, as well, just down the block. It makes it easy to be together this way but still have our privacy. We're busy now—now that Bryan has finished college, and we made it so my parents could retire. Now that

we're busy traveling and seeing the world. Beans too, of course. He doesn't get left behind. He's on his way to becoming one of the world's best-traveled dogs, I'm sure. My parents have been busy seeing the world as well. Sometimes, they come with us, but other times, they do their own thing.

Sterling's company is doing amazing. Best of all, it's safe. It's given us an amazing life full of opportunities I wouldn't have and things I would never have seen. It's made it possible for my mom and dad to stop working and live their dreams. It's also made it so my brother doesn't have to worry about student loan debt hanging over his head or a mortgage that he'd have to work way too hard to pay off. It's given us all a beautiful life, but it's given us more time with each other, and that's always going to be the best part.

His company has also made it possible for so many of my songs to make their way out into the world. Other people have sung them and made them famous. It still stops me in my tracks when I hear one of them on the radio. I love that they're sung by other people. I never needed to give them my own voice. I just wanted them to find their way into other people's hearts and lives to make a difference, and they have.

Another thing Sterling's company has done is make it possible for healing within his own family. Last year, we went to Switzerland to be with his uncle for two weeks. A few months after that, he went down to Texas and celebrated the birth of his first nephew, or at least kind of given that his cousins were more like brothers, in a way, with said cousins. Yes, the terrible trio are now uncles and a father, and it's changed them. Babies often bring so much happy change. I think they'd mellowed out, and it was just time. Sterling couldn't have been more shocked to have gotten an invite to the christening. We went, a little edgy about the whole thing and wondering what kind of traps and tricks might be set and prepared, but there were none. No traps. No tricks. Just a good BBQ, and even a few half-embarrassed handshakes as a way of apology at the end of it.

Toe-Toe didn't even get mad when his brothers called him Toe-Toe the entire time. So yeah, things have changed. In really great and awesome ways.

I have one other change to tell Sterling about, but I wait until after the party, until it's just us and Beans. After a long walk, he's passed out on the couch—his favorite spot in the whole world, throughout the whole world. We kept this couch just for him when we moved. It's his, and we will never rehome it or throw it out.

Sterling likes to print out travel plans for the upcoming months ahead of time. Then, we sort through and pick out and make itineraries. We match our travel plans with his business obligations, and we make it work. We haven't done our scheduling for the next few months yet. We just got back from London last week, and my parents just got back from a month of cruising the Caribbean. We wanted to be home for Beans' birthday, but really, it's so we could all celebrate together. I think that's why he was waiting before booking anything. He wanted to talk to my parents first and be here in Detroit if they were going to be here at the same time. We're all busy, but we always make time for each other. Family is always going to be our priority, first and foremost.

"Goodness." I pick up a few pages where he has our dream trip planned, with stops in Ireland and Scotland and then over to Spain, France, and Italy. We did Sweden, Switzerland, Finland, and Denmark last year. "That's the trip of a lifetime."

"I was thinking we could spend the next couple months here the way we talked about because it's so nice here in the summer, and your parents said today that they're going to be hanging around too. Plus, your brother is here, of course. We could go in the fall. Maybe your parents would join us."

"And be gone for a few months?" I clarify.

"I think so. We could take our time and do however many months we want in each

place and see whatever we want to see. Castles, art galleries, vineyards, the whole lot.”

“Ooh, castles!” I love castles. We’ve seen a few already. “What about those hairy cows? I really want to see hairy cows!”

Sterling takes my hands in his. “Whatever you want to see, my love, we’ll make it happen. I will get you all the hairy cows in the world if that’s what your heart desires.”

“I think I’d just like to see them. Maybe take some photos!” I say excitedly.

“Then hairy cows we shall see and photograph!”

“We might have to make sure we’re back by January at the very latest, though.”

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“Back? January? In Detroit?” Sterling looks at me like I’ve lost my mind.

I’m still holding his hands, and I guide them to my belly. “Yeah, because traveling later in a pregnancy is sometimes not the best. I really want to be here to have the baby, too. I know if we talk to my parents, they’ll change their plans and make sure they’re here for us, although the baby won’t be born until spring, early April or mid-April, I think.”

I get a confused blink back at me. Sterling has gone completely blank. It hasn’t sunk in yet. I knew it would take a few minutes. We didn’t plan this. It was a surprise. We’ve always talked about having kids, and we both want them. We were just busy traveling and writing songs and, honestly, just getting to know each other. Yes, we’ve been getting to know each other for two years, but even when someone is perfectly open and lovely, it still takes a while, and we don’t want to rush anything. I know I made threats about babies when we first met, but I was content to wait until we were both ready and the time felt right.

However, sometimes life just makes you get ready, and you have to do your best to make it the right time.

“You’re...I’m sorry, we’re...we’re having a baby? In April?”

“That’s right,” I say softly.

He takes me with him when he plops down on the bed. “Oh! Oh, wow. That is a surprise, isn’t it?”

“It is, yes. I was surprised too. Very. I haven’t taken a test yet, but I’m three weeks late, my boobs are sore, and I’m tired. I didn’t even think about it until last night, and then I was really thinking about it, and I just know. I can take a test, but I’m pretty sure. I’m never late.”

“Oh! Oh, wow. Weland... I...I’m so excited right now that I don’t even know what to do.”

“You look shocked and scared. Not excited,” I point out.

That starts the grin that was just waiting to break out. “I am excited. This is my excited face. You know that. You know me. You know me inside and out. You know me in ways no one else knows me. You’ve made me a part of your family, and now we’re going to be our own little family. I think that’s why I’m so stunned. This is...this is my dream. I know my cousins have come around lately, but I wasn’t...I never felt like I...I never had a mom or a dad.”

I wrap my arms around his neck and sit on his lap. “I know.” I kiss him gently. “I know what this means. You absolutely don’t have to have grown up with a dad to be a great dad. We are going to raise our son or daughter together, and they will be so loved. We have great people in our lives to love on them lots as well. Not just my mom and dad or my brother, but your cousins too. They will adore our kids. I feel like it’s going to be true because we’ll make it true. We already know babies heal the past and soothe wounds. Look at little Michael. He’s a miracle, and that’s when your cousins really made the effort to have us in their lives.”

“I’m...I’m so am...amazed. I really am,” he stutters.

I love that he still can’t get the words out. Sterling isn’t someone who really talks a lot, but he’s never speechless either. This is a good moment for us. I’m going to remember the sheen of tears in his eyes and the awe-inspired smile on his lips forever.

“I’m so happy you’re happy,” I murmur.

“Oh, yes. I’m so happy! Every single day with you is a happy day, but this day...wow,” he says breathily.

“I shouldn’t have stolen Beans’ thunder. Do you think he’ll ever forgive me?”

“Yes.” Sterling laughs, his shoulders shaking. “Yes, of course he will. Beans is the most gentle old soul who ever lived. He’s going to make a great big brother.”

“I think so too. He’s so patient and kind. One of the best souls I’ve ever known. This won’t stop us from traveling or living. Our baby will see the world. He or she will love music. They will love the world, and they will love life. They will be a part of something bigger than they are. I want them to have the kindest soul too. As a mother, that’s what I want to give our child or our future children if we have more than one baby.”

“Oh, Weland.” That’s all Sterling says as he hugs me tight. I don’t need him to say anything else. Just having him close in my life as the love of my life is more than enough. But then he goes and makes it impossibly better. “I love you. I’m always going to love you. Let’s get married again.”

“Okay.” By some miracle, I am somehow dry-eyed, though it won’t last. I feel the burn coming on, but at least I can squeal and kiss him and laugh with him and smile with him before we start crying. Together. “Of course I’ll marry you again. I’ll be yourwife, and I’ll be your partner. I’ll be a parent with you, and I’ll do anything with you that you want to do.”

Sterling smirks. “Anything?”

I smack his shoulder. “Of course you would go there. Maybe one day. Just hold that thought.”

“Believe me, I’ll never forget.” He takes my hand in his. My left hand. “I need a ring! I don’t have a ring!”

“That’s okay because I’d really like for us to pick one out together. I like making decisions with you. I like exploring with you. I love you, and I love doing life with you,” I say earnestly.

“I love doing life with you too. It’s the best way to do absolutely everything.”

There were a whole lot of years and a whole lot of time that neither of us saw this marriage working or even thought about making it real, but I’m so glad we did. I’ll always be thankful Smitty got me Beans and phoned Sterling with that SOS call just because I had a bit of a meltdown that I didn’t even mean. Sometimes, people leave our lives, but the best people can also come into it.

There’s never too much music in the world, and there’s never too much love.

Ever.