



Secret Admirer

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Category: Erotic, Romance

Description: Her love could set me free from the shadows...

Seeing CoCo Becket for the first time, made my heart start beating again. It changed everything.

Before her I had no purpose, no reason to live.

She was the most beautiful woman I had ever met, I couldn't help but fantasize about kissing her plump lips or having those sky blue eyes staring back at mine, seeing beyond what I truly was. Broken and ashamed.

My desire for her ran deep, deeper than I expected it too. She was a Goddess and I was simply caught up in her glow, I couldn't say no. Not to her kindness, and not to my need to be near her.

CoCo was the good in life where I was the bad. She became the sun to my never ending darkness.

When a mysterious situation brings us together, I discover that I'll do anything to keep her safe. Even if it means risking my own life, to save hers.

Because before her, love was just a word I'd heard in passing...and now I'll destroy anyone that tries to take her, or that love away from me.

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1

Bodhi

I keep my head down and don't make eye contact as I walk down the sidewalk. I need to get out of the heat and find some shelter until the sun goes down. I've only been in town for a couple of days and have yet to get the lay of the land. I thought moving West for the winter would be a smart move. That was until I spent my first day sweating my balls off and then subsequently freezing them off all night.

The desert city is busy with shoppers getting ready for Halloween. I've never seen a town that loves the holiday as much as my newfound home. Every house and business seems to be trying to outdo the one next to them. Pumpkins litter the sidewalk by the shop doors with fake spider webs strewn across the windows and doors. The houses are elaborate scenes that could rival the best scary movie with graveyards, cauldrons, and serial killers peeking from the shadows.

I wonder if they celebrate like this for all holidays or if I'll be around for more.

Movement from my right catches my attention. Stopping in front of the window, my breath catches. The most beautiful woman in the world is stringing orange lights around the window with tears streaming down her face. She's petite with curves in all the right places. Her long blonde hair shines like the sun with blue eyes that remind me of the sky on a cloudless summer day. Even red rimmed and puffy, she glows like a goddess.

I'm drawn to her in a way I've never felt before. It confuses me and yet draws me

closer to the window.

It's not the first time I've seen a woman cry. Not by a long shot, but it is the first time my heart constricts in my chest as I watch her tears continue to flow down her cheeks. She doesn't even notice me standing out here gawking at her, she's crying so hard.

I have an unexplainable urge to go to her and wrap her in my arms, but I know I would only distress her more. Who wants a stranger taking pity on them? Especially when that person is a filthy stranger.

If I come up to her, I'm sure she'll be scared of me. I know what I look like. Who I am.

Growing up I was always the tallest person in my grade or school. To go along with my tall frame, I was so wiry everyone made fun of me calling me a beanstalk or skeleton along with the names they'd called me since we moved to town. I've been called a loner, creep, loser, and over the past few years a filthy beast. Once I got into high school, I started lifting weights hoping the snickers behind my back would end. Instead, their taunting only increased when I hit another growth spurt putting me at six foot, six. I've lost some of the muscle over the years, but my size is still intimidating.

My clothes are beyond dirty. In the desert sun, it's best to wear white, but out on the streets, white is unforgiving. If my hulking frame doesn't scare people away, my unkempt hair and filthy clothes and body will do the job.

Instead, I stare at her until one of her co-workers comes and envelopes her in a hug. When her pink haired friend catches me watching, she sneers, turning my Goddess around and ushers her further away into the building until I can no longer see them.

Blinking away the image of her crying form, I shake my head, trying to resist the urge to go inside, find her, and wipe away her tears.

For the first time in years, I feel I have a purpose.

I need to do something that will brighten her day the way she's brightened mine.

It's then I remember earlier in the day, I saw these bright pink flowers on a cactus a few miles away. Maybe I can find my way back and get her one before she leaves work for the day. Whenever that is.

Turning around I bump into a couple walking their dog and mumble my apology. They turn, scowling at me with their noses upturned and lips pursed. Quickening my steps, I head in the direction I think the flower is in. Sweat pours down my forehead and back. My clothes stick to every inch of my body. The sun is almost unbearable but not as unacceptable as not trying to cheer up her day.

My mouth is parched. I ran out of water about an hour ago and not knowing this town isn't doing me any favors. I don't want to start off on a bad foot and have people giving me dirty looks on day two or worse yet, call the cops on me. If I'm lucky, I'll find a drinking fountain where I can fill my water bottle.

My feet start to drag around mile two. I'm almost there, or at least I think I am. Everything looks the same in this damn town. Palm tree after palm tree. Cactus after cactus. The only thing I know is I haven't seen the blooming cactus flower yet. At this point, I'll take any flower I see.

Finally, I get into a residential neighborhood. It looks nice, but not the one I was in earlier. It's nicer than any place I've seen in the last few years. Out of desperation, I head down a street that ends in a cul-de-sac and take a look around. I pick a house in the middle and walk to the side of the house. Surely whoever lives here won't mind

me filling up a couple of water bottles out of their garden hose.

My eyes dart around for anyone who may see me sneaking along the yard. My feet crunch through the sand and rocks, and I try to lighten my steps to keep quiet. I know logically no one inside their house is going to hear me, but I can't help myself. I know what I'm doing is wrong and my brain is telling me that I must do everything possible not to get caught.

Finding a faucet, I pull out my two water bottles from my backpack and set them on the ground. With one final look around, I pray no one will see me as I slowly turn on the water. Cool water splashes against my overheated legs as I cup water in my hands and sip the lifesaving elixir. I can't remember the last time water tasted so good. Once my tongue no longer is stuck to the roof of my mouth, I fill up my water bottles, quickly turn off the water, and hightail my ass back onto the street in search of my Goddess' flower. I breathe a sigh of relief when no one comes running out of their house screaming at me for stealing their water.

After walking for at least another half hour the sun starts to dip behind the mountains. It's going to get dark soon and I've failed at finding her anything that might bring a smile to her beautiful face.

I don't want to give up my search, but I fear she'll be gone before I make it back. At least I was smart and wrote down directions to get back.

Do I head back to see if her day got any better or do I continue looking?

2

Coco

Heading to my car, I feel eyes on me. I turn around in circles scanning my

surroundings, but I see no one or anything in the shadows. Maybe I'm just imagining it. It's possible after the week I've had. My ex-boyfriend showed up at my apartment unannounced the day after I laid my parents to rest. Never mind that my parents and I didn't get along. We both had different ideas about what my future should hold. They died in a hit and run last week after attending a gala for the homeless in our town, Oasis, and surrounding cities.

With a final look around, I get inside my car and immediately hit the door lock. When the sound reverberates through the inside of my car, I breathe out a sigh of relief.

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I'm safe.

Turning on my car, I blast the air conditioner trying to cool off. Even with the sun dipped behind the mountains, it's still sweltering. I seem to be the only native in the area who isn't throwing on a jacket to stay warm as the temperature cools down. Just as I'm about to pull out of the parking lot, I swear I see someone move along the exterior of the building. Throwing my car into drive, my tires burn rubber as I hurry to get the hell out of there and take off to get some dinner. For the first time in days, I'm starved. I know just the thing to help revive my system. In-N-Out Burger.

I order a burger and fries with a chocolate shake at the drive-thru and then find a parking place to inhale my food since I'm too much of a mess to eat around others. I take my last sip of my milkshake ten minutes later feeling full and finally ready to get some much-needed sleep.

Having barely slept for the last week and a half has taken a toll on my mind. Today, I almost cut off six inches of someone's hair when she only wanted a trim. Thank God I caught myself before I lost a client. I need to get my head back in the game before I'm fired. There's only so much Trixie will put up with before I'm out on my ass. Not that I need my job, but I love it and Trixie.

Yawning, I get out of my car and make my way into my building. Only a couple more days here and I won't have to put up with my loud ass neighbors. That puts a smile on my face. The first one in a long time.

Pulling out my keys, I start to unlock my door when I see someone dart around the corner at the end of the hall. Since my parents' death, I've been on edge, feeling as if

someone is watching me. I've been told it's understandable, but this feels like more than grief and sleep deprivation.

"Hello?" I call out. I wince at how shaky my voice sounds as it echoes down the hall.

Maybe my mind is playing tricks on me.

Why would someone be at Tricks Salon and my apartment? Because there isn't. There's no one lurking in the shadows waiting to get me. This isn't a horror movie. I'm imagining things from lack of sleep. I just need a good night's rest and then I won't be hallucinating people who aren't there.

Still, I can't help how I feel. After Dwayne, my ex-boyfriend, showed up, there's been more than a few times I've felt as if I'm being watched. The moment my front door is closed, I flip the two deadbolts feeling marginally better. At this moment, I wish I had one of those bars that go across your door like you see in movies. Surely, they're real. Why else would they show them? Throwing my purse on the counter, I start stripping out of my work clothes as I make my way toward the bathroom for a nice hot shower.

Standing underneath the spray, I hang my head and let the water wash away all the stress from the last week. I don't move until the water cools and only then do I quickly wash my body. My hand pulls up short when I hear a thud from somewhere in my apartment. Quietly I slide the shower door open and peek out into the steamy bathroom. Grabbing a towel, I wrap it around my body as I tiptoe to the door. Placing my ear to the door, I hold my breath as I listen for any sounds, but I hear nothing but the clicking from my ceiling fan as it spins.

Letting out my breath, I open the door and slip through. My eyes scan my bedroom as I silently step out into the hall. With each step, my shoulders climb higher and higher until they're up by my ears.

So much for a nice relaxing shower.

Luckily or unluckily for me, my floor plan is open. I couldn't hide if I wanted to and neither can anyone else. I see no one. I hear no one.

Then I spot my purse.

I threw it on the counter when I walked in, but now it's sitting on the barstool. Maybe it slid off and landed there and I didn't notice. Only the bar stool is on the side facing the door and it would slide to the other side. Right?

I'm going crazy.

I must have spaced out and sat it down before I made my way to the bathroom.

Unease fills my stomach no matter how much I try to convince myself nothing is amiss.

Searching through my purse, I find my phone ready to call 911 if I need to. My fingers type out a quick text as I scan my living room and kitchen again.

Dad: I heard a noise in my apartment. I'm sure it's nothing.

I hit send and immediately tears well up in my eyes. My dad isn't going to respond. Neither is my mother.

To make myself feel better, I check my front door to make sure it's still locked. It is. Next, I make the rounds of checking every window to make sure they're locked as well. Not that anyone is going to scale the five stories to get in through one of my windows. Lastly, I check the sliding glass door leading out to my tiny balcony only to find it unlocked. I step out in only my towel, looking at the balconies of my

neighbors. No one is outside, and no one is lying in wait to attack me either. With one last look, I close the door and make sure to lock it. I can't remember the last time I used it and I'm not always the best at locking it, so I shrug it off as my overactive imagination.

A knock comes from down the hall causing me to jump.

"Delivery," a deep voice calls out.

A shiver runs through me, and I try to push away the disquieting feeling that's settled in the pit of my stomach.

I guess I'll have to have a drink if I want to relax and fall asleep before the sun comes up.

Pulling out the tequila I throw back a shot and let the burn settle my nerves. It doesn't work. There doesn't seem to be anything that works these last few days. Maybe it's my guilt for fighting with my parents for so many years. Now it all seems pointless. They're gone and I'm alone.

* * *

My alarm goes off only minutes after I fall asleep—or so it feels. I hit the snooze button repeatedly until I have no other choice but to get up and get ready for work.

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Last night was another restless night of sleep. Instead of dreaming of my parents dying in a fiery wreck, I dreamt of someone watching me from the shadows.

Trudging into the kitchen, I hit the Keurig button and close my eyes as I wait for my coffee. When I hear it's finally done, I grab the French vanilla creamer and turn my cup from a dark brown into what looks like a light chocolate milk. What can I say? I love the caffeine but not the taste of coffee.

After hitting the snooze button one or a few too many times earlier, I need to hurry up and get ready for work. My hair is a mess after going to bed with it wet, so I throw it up in a ponytail and hope I'll have time once I'm at work to fix it. Maybe I'll even let Trixie add some pink highlights like she's wanted to do since I set foot in her salon.

Grabbing breakfast, I quickly look around my apartment, taking stock of where everything is before I'm gone for the day. I know I'm being ridiculous, but I can't get the thought of my purse not being where I left it last night out of my head. If someone happens to come into my apartment while I'm gone and moves anything I'll know. I make sure to double check my front door is locked when I leave and jog down the stairs instead of taking the elevator.

Shoving the last bite of my bagel into my mouth, I start to unlock the front door of Tricks when I see a simple but beautiful hot pink flower.

Maybe this is the world's way of telling me I should get those pink highlights.

Looking down the sidewalk both ways, I don't spot anyone. It's surprisingly empty for being almost nine o'clock in the morning. Reaching down, I pick up the bright

pink flower and bring it to my nose. There's no smell, but I don't care because it's beautiful and I can't remember the last time someone sent me flowers. It's then I spot a note that was underneath. Slowly I peel the folded paper open to see beautiful script scrawled across the simple notebook paper.

I hope this flower brightens up your day. No more tears. Please.

B

3

Bodhi

I watch from across the way as my Goddess picks up the flower I left for her and brings it up to her nose. As her lips start to tip up at the corners, my chest swells with...pride. Something I haven't felt in far too long.

"Trixie, did you see anyone out front when you got here?" she calls out as she props the door open. Her voice is breathless and sexy as hell.

The sight of her and hearing the sound of her voice causes my body to stir to life. I duck further into the shadows behind a crop of trees so they don't see me.

"No." The pink haired woman from yesterday comes out of a room. "Why? Something up?"

"Someone left me a flower and a note in front of the door."

"How do you know it's not for me?" She snatches the note from her hands.

My Goddess places her hands on her hips and cocks her head to the side. "Because it

talks about me crying.”

“Oh, Coco’s got a secret admirer.” Trixie cackles.

My Goddess’ name is Coco. It’s fitting. It’s as beautiful and unique as she is.

“Or a stalker.”

My body flinches and I take another step back. Me, a stalker? I’d much rather she thinks the former rather than the latter. Stalker is so...harsh.

“What’s up with you girl? Normally you’re so easy breezy and...” Trixie cuts herself off. I move closer to where the trees end, my eyes trained on Coco. I find them hugging. “Hell, I’m sorry. Don’t cry.”

“No, I’m sorry.” Coco steps back, her delicate hands running underneath her eyes.

My heart constricts knowing she’s crying again. Maybe another flower would help. If I could I would bring her a coffee or some other small gift. If I want to stay here, I’m going to need to find a way to make money.

“I haven’t been sleeping well. At all. If I could only get a good night’s sleep. Maybe?” Even from across the road I can hear the exhaustion in her voice.

“Maybe, what?”

Coco moves to stand in front of the windows and looks out, her eyes unfocused, lost in thought. “You know how I told you Dwayne showed up?”

Trixie comes to stand next to her, hands on her hips. “Did that asshole stop by again?”

“Nothing like that.” She turns to her friend, shoulders slumped. “Ever since he showed up, I keep feeling like someone’s watching me.”

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Trixie steps outside and looks up and down the sidewalk as if she'll see whoever it is.

One thing I know is it isn't me. I only found my Goddess yesterday. Does she feel me watching her right now? I don't want to be a part of what's upsetting her. This overwhelming sense of protectiveness fills me, giving me purpose. My only problem is how can I protect her when I'm stuck walking around? I need to find out where she lives so I can keep an eye out in case there really is someone watching her.

It wouldn't surprise me for Coco to have multiple men watching her every move. The way her hips swish could hypnotize any man into following her to the ends of the Earth.

Walking back inside, she slings an arm around Coco's shoulders. "Do you want to stay at my place until you move this weekend?"

Strike finding out where she lives until she moves. Maybe by then, I can find my bike that went missing while I was sleeping my first night here. One of my only possessions stolen right out from under my nose.

"Maybe if I was packed, but I haven't even started. Remind me why I hired movers to come this weekend and got out of my lease?"

"Because you want out of that shitty apartment and you get to move into that awesome house your parents just finished building."

Coco wraps her arms around herself. She looks like she could fall apart at any moment and I want nothing more than to replace her arms with mine. "I texted my

dad last night when I was looking around my apartment for the boogiemán.” She laughs harshly.

“Oh babe. I’m sorry. You should have texted me.”

“I know.” She hangs her head. “I felt stupid.”

“If you heard something and feel like someone’s watching you, there’s no reason to feel foolish. Don’t downplay your instincts. A woman’s intuition is a powerful thing. I told you all along that Dwayne was a huge douchebag.”

Coco laughs and it reminds me of a fairy frolicking in the forest. “That you did. I should have listened to your instincts from the beginning.”

They’re quiet as they stand at the window both seemingly looking out at nothing.

“Maybe I should sell the house?” Coco twists her fingers together.

“Hell no! That place is amazing. If I could afford it, I would build one exactly like it. Plus, it will have a top of the line security system in it that will make you feel better once you’re in the house.”

Knowing she’ll have a security system makes me feel slightly better, but I’d feel much better if I could keep my eye on her.

“I guess.” Coco glances out the window one last time and then walks to where I can’t see her.

“You guess? I know!” Trixie stomps off after her.

I can’t hear anything now that they’ve moved farther away. I want to advance closer,

but I don't want to be spotted or for my Goddess to feel me watching her.

I head down the street until I'm far enough away no one at the salon will see me cross and come back. My steps slow as I get closer and hear murmuring.

"Maybe you should call your clients and reschedule. That way you can go home to pack and get some rest."

My steps falter. If Coco leaves, I won't see her for the rest of the day or be able to protect her. I check the area to see if I notice anyone skulking around. Oasis is starting to get busier but there's not much foot traffic and no one looks out of place.

Except me.

"I don't want to do that to my clients. Plus, I feel safe here."

"Okay," Trixie draws out the word. "Do you want me to come over tonight after work and help you pack?"

"That would be great, but I can't ask you to do that. You're already giving me time off for the move. Plus, everyone knows packing sucks balls."

Trixie cackles. "Truer words have never been spoken. I don't know why you didn't hire someone to pack up all your stuff."

I slide down the side of the building to sit on the sidewalk. Pulling my knees to my chest, I wrap my arms around them and rest my head on top as I listen.

"Ugh. I don't want some stranger going through my underwear drawer."

"You do know that you can pack up what you don't want them to see and have them

do the rest, right?”

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“Honestly,” Coco lets out a heavy sigh, “I haven’t really thought about it. It makes sense and would save me a lot of time and hassle.”

Sitting here off to the side isn’t enough, but I can’t go and stand in front of the shop just so I can see her while I listen to their conversation.

Why am I so drawn to her?

Everything about my Goddess kick starts what I thought was my cold dead heart. Unexplainably, she makes me happy in ways I haven’t been in a long time, if ever, and yet the longing to be by her side is crippling. Again, why Coco? I’ve seen plenty of beautiful women during my lifetime and yet her beauty breaks through the dark cloud that’s been hanging over my life for the last few years.

4

Coco

“Why don’t you at least go grab yourself a coffee?” Trixie strides over to her purse and pulls out a twenty. “Get me something while you’re at it.”

Narrowing my eyes at her, I shake my head. “You don’t need to give me money for coffee.”

She smirks at me as she twists one pink lock of hair. “Shoo. I’ll see you in a few minutes.”

Why hadn't I thought of stopping to get coffee on my way in? Probably because I was simply too tired to even think. I was on autopilot. Grabbing my purse, I flip her off while laughing as she glares at me. She knows I don't mean anything by it. From the moment we met, we clicked and became instant best friends. We're like long-lost sisters.

Taking a right, I almost trip over a guy sitting outside our shop. His long, tan, and incredibly muscular legs are bent up to his chest while his long scraggly dark blond head rests on top. Long lashes fan out against bearded cheeks as he sleeps. Full pink kissable lips peek out from all his facial hair.

What would it be like to kiss those lips?

Am I that desperate that I'm now thinking of kissing the homeless guy sitting outside the shop?

Perhaps.

From what I can see, he's hot. Even for a homeless guy.

I've never seen him around before. He looks young. Much too young to be living out on the streets. Although I know there's no such thing. Kids run away from home and live on the street as early as ten years old. Maybe even younger.

One eye slowly blinks open and then widens in alarm. Jumping up, he stumbles back into the wall.

"I'm so sorry if I disturbed you. I can...I'll go."

His deep voice is hypnotic. I don't register what he's said until he starts to walk away.

“Wait,” I call out, “you don’t have to go. It’s a free country and all. You can sit where you want to sit. I...” He turns, blue irises the color of the Caribbean stare wide-eyed back at me. His deeply tanned face makes the color of his eyes stand out even more. He’s tall too. At least a good half a foot taller than my five-foot-ten-inches.

Shaking myself out of my stupor, I extend my hand out, but he only stares at me as if I’m an alien. “I’m Coco. I work here at Tricks.” I gesture to the windows of the salon. “If you ever need water to fill up your water bottle come inside. We have a water cooler.” I gesture to the water bottle and backpack he left on the sidewalk.

When he only blinks back at me, I’m unsure what to do. Normally, I wouldn’t pay him any mind, but something compelled me to offer our water. It gets hot as hell here and I know there aren’t many places to fill up.

I take a few steps toward him and he shuffles away keeping his intense gaze on me. “Um...have a good day.” I wave and head off to Starbucks. The entire way I can’t get my encounter with the homeless man out of my head.

Could I have been any more stupid? Have a good day? He was sleeping out on the sidewalk while I’m going to spend twenty bucks on coffee. I feel like a spoiled brat. I am a spoiled brat. My parents gave me everything my heart desired and then some. I don’t know what it’s like to do without or to have to sleep outside.

With my shoulders slumped, I trudge to the counter and order myself a venti double shot on ice and Trixie a mocha Frappuccino. I scroll through social media while I wait for my order and only once my name is called do I realize I’ve paid no attention to my surroundings. If someone is watching me, I need to be more aware.

Internally I scold myself as I walk back to the salon. I don’t want to be one of those stupid people in horror movies who gets killed in the first few minutes because I ran upstairs and had nowhere to go.

I spot the homeless man leaning on the wall of the building that leads out to the parking lot. I bite my bottom lip as I make my way toward him, his eyes locked on me. My fingers twitch, wanting to pick at the hem of my shirt. I've ruined quite a few of my favorite shirts from my nervous habit. For some reason, this stranger exhilarates me while at the same time making me anxious.

Stopping only a few steps away from him, I hold out the bag to him. "I didn't mean to freak you out earlier, so I got you a sandwich."

"Why are you being so nice to me?" he grumbles, brows furrowed as he eyes the bag.

"Why wouldn't I?" I counter.

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He clears his throat, looking down. “Most people treat me as if I’m lower than the dirt beneath their shoes.”

“Well, I’m not most people. Most people I find to be assholes.”

His lips twitch and that’s all I can ask for.

For now.

“Are you going to take your sandwich? I got you a ham and Swiss Panini. It’s not much.” I shrug and immediately feel like an asshole. It’s not much to me, but for him, it could be his only meal for the day.

“Why don’t you eat it?” he asks, eyes transfixed on the bag. I bet he can smell the gooey goodness of the cheese melted all over the ham. It’s got my mouth watering and wishing I had ordered one for myself.

“I’m on a diet.” The lie falls from my lips so easily. I’ll say anything to get him to take it from me.

He looks me up and down and I feel the blush slowly rise from my chest up to the tips of my ears. I wouldn’t be surprised if I’m the color of a tomato.

“You don’t need to diet,” he growls.

Unsure what to say, I stand gaping at him. How can I convince him he needs this sandwich much more than I do without threatening his pride?

Thrusting the bag into his chest, I hightail it back into the salon without looking back. Okay, I could have handled that better, but I knew without a shadow of a doubt there was no way I was going to convince him to take the sandwich.

“Oh my God, have you seen the man outside?” I whisper-yell as I hand Trixie her drink.

* * *

I blink and I’m in my new house. The movers have already placed most of my things where they’re supposed to be thanks to Trixie. I was supposed to meet them bright and early this morning, but I had a flat tire. More like a couple of sabotaged tires. Someone slashed both tires on the driver’s side and scraped something up and down the side of my car. It looks like Freddy Krueger paid me a visit. I’m lucky it wasn’t all four of my tires, but why me? No one else in my apartment complex had their cars attacked. Since I was running late, Trixie jumped out of bed and came to my rescue directing the movers until I got here. I don’t have nearly enough to fill the house, but I don’t mind. Slowly I’ll start to add pieces and make what was supposed to be my parents’ house into my own.

It’s bittersweet being here. I love the house, but I’d much rather my parents be alive and me visiting them. Instead, I’ll have to settle for accepting the house as the gift it is and making a life for myself.

Now, as I look around, I don’t know where to start. There’s plenty to do, but all I want to do is plop myself down on my comfy couch and stare out at the desert and the city below. One entire side of the house is all windows and sliding doors looking out onto miles of beautiful sweeping views. Mountains line one side of the house helping shield it from when the wind picks up and can also be seen on the other side of town.

Trixie sashays up to me and plunks down on the couch, putting her arm around my

waist. She's been side eyeing me ever since I walked into the house but hasn't said a word to me. I mentally count down in my head.

3...2...1...

Frowning she pulls away. "How bad is the damage?"

"To my car?" When she nods, I shrug. "It isn't good. Two tires were ruined, and the driver's side is ruined. Maybe a werewolf was on the loose last night and attacked my car instead of some unsuspecting victim."

From the moment I saw my car, I've been wracking my brain trying to figure out who would want to do something like this to me. I keep to myself, and not once have I ever had a complaint from one of my clients or neighbors.

Trixie's tinkling laughter fills the house making me smile. "Yes, I'm sure that's what happened. Why on Earth would someone do that to your car?" Her eyes narrow as her lips purse. "Does anyone else in the complex have the same car as you? Maybe it was a case of mistaken identity."

Or maybe it's the person whose eyes I feel on me every time I leave my apartment.

"Have you seen or felt anyone around lately? You haven't mentioned it." It's as if she read my mind.

Leaning forward, I rest my chest to my legs and turn to look at her. "Every time I leave that damn apartment. I hear strange sounds too, but there's never anyone there. I'm so happy to be out of there."

"It's a good thing you've got that fancy alarm system here. When I leave, I make sure to set it. I know you'll probably space out listening to your music and forget all about

it.”

“I promise I’ll set it the second you walk out the door.” I can’t help but smile at her. Since I met Trixie, she’s taken me under her wing.

“Well, if you don’t need me, I’m going to head into the salon. I’ve got appointments for the rest of the afternoon.”

“Thank you, bestie. I don’t know what I’d do without you or how I’ll ever be able to repay you.” Wrapping my arms around her, I hug her tight, hiding the tears stinging the backs of my eyes.

Leaning back, she looks down at me with a mischievous smile on her lips, ignoring the tears in my eyes. Heaven knows she’s seen me cry enough these last couple of weeks and is used to it. “How about once you’re all settled here you have a party?”

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“Ugh.” My body almost convulses at the idea. Rolling my eyes, I set my glare on her. “You know how much I hate having parties. Plus, I have no friends to invite.”

“Oh, please!” She lets out an exasperated sigh. “You have friends. What about all those hoity-toity people who used to always swarm around you?”

“Used to is the key word in that sentence.”

“Whatever,” she rolls her eyes at me. “Rich people are crazy. If you don’t want to invite your old friends, you can invite all the people from the salon.”

“I’ll think about it.” Meaning it’s not happening. “It’s going to take me a good while before this place doesn’t look like someone broke in and robbed the place.”

“You’re having a party. What’s the use of having this awesome house if you’re going to be here alone all the time?” Trixie throws her pink hair over her shoulder with a knowing smile.

“Don’t you have to go?” I ask, changing the subject.

“I’m going.” Grabbing up her keys, she heads to the front door. Looking over her shoulder, Trixie calls out, “Do you want me to message you if your secret admirer left you another flower?”

I don’t want her to know how much I secretly like finding flowers every day when I get to work, although I don’t think I’ve been doing a very good job of hiding it. It’s nice to have something positive in my life while trying to get over the heartache of

losing both my parents.

“That’s what I thought,” she smirks. “I’ll see you in a few days.”

Hustling to the door, I lock it and engage the alarm system. Leaning against the door my lips tip up.

I’m safe.

Pushing off the door, I head to the living room already bringing up my playlist, and the giant stack of boxes that wait for me when out of the corner of my eye I catch movement outside.

5

Bodhi

Placing the purple flower on the mat in front of the salon, I slowly back away. I’ve still got at least another hour before anyone shows up. It’s been three days since Coco last worked and yet I still keep leaving her the best flower I’ve found for the day. Even not knowing if she will show up or not, I wait in the trees across the street. With nothing to do, I spend most of my days in the shade in the hopes she’ll show up—with no luck.

My heart drops into my feet when her boss shows up. Usually, she goes into the salon through the back when she’s alone, so the minute I see her, I know Coco won’t be showing up today. I continue to watch her after she flips on all the lights and then opens the front door and looks down for my flower meant for Coco.

I could stop until I know she’s back to work, but I can’t bear the thought of her face when she finds I haven’t left her a flower. The best part of my day is seeing her face

light up when she spots her flower and then as she looks around, wondering who could have left it for her.

Still, I watch as she carries the flower inside and takes a picture with her phone. Or at least I think that's what she's doing. If I had binoculars, I'd use them even if that brings me closer to stalker status.

Is she sending the picture to Coco?

With Coco moving, I've fallen into a routine, even though I don't know when she'll be back to work at Tricks. Bright and early I set out to find her a different flower than one I've previously given her. It's a challenge; I'm limited by how far I can walk and get to the salon in time to place it at the front door. I still haven't found my bike, and at this point, I doubt I'll ever find it.

When I had the idea of moving here, I thought it was a wise move. I couldn't stay in the Midwest another year and chance getting hypothermia when the temperatures had already started to drop. In my haste to move away from the cold, I forgot how the temperature drops in the desert at night. My body is still getting accustomed to the heat of the day. I sweat and lose far too much water to be healthy for the night to cool down so much; I'm a shivering mess.

Luckily, I've found that Oasis is a kind town. Not only was Coco far too generous, offering to let me fill up my water bottle, but I've encountered a few others in my journeys throughout the days who have taken pity on me. My pride is bruised and battered, but I've learned to push it out of the way for my greater good. If it weren't for Coco and the others who've been so nice, I would have moved on. To where, I don't know, but to somewhere with a different climate.

Instead, I've decided to stay. I've found a shelter to stay in at night which is a lifesaver. When an older gentleman stopped me as I walked down his street, I thought

he would tell me to stop stealing flowers from his neighbors, but his kind eyes locked on mine as he told me about the shelter only a couple of miles away from Coco's shop. He looked at the lone flower in my hand and his eyes glistened. Then he proceeded to tell me where some of the best houses with flowers were. I couldn't believe it. Not only had he told me a place where I could rest my head at night, but he was downright encouraging me to steal more flowers.

"Why are you helping me?" I croaked out.

"Because I see something in your eyes that reminds me of me when I was younger." He looked down at the yellow and white flower hanging from my fingertips. "I hope you land on your feet soon, young man."

Then he walked back up his street and into his house without looking back.

At night I lay on my cot and dream of what my life would have been like if I hadn't lost everything. I dream about one day walking up to Coco and handing her the flowers I've picked for her.

"Bodhi." A woman's voice calls from behind me. Looking over my shoulder, I see the night director of the shelter. "Can you hold up for a few moments so I can talk to you?"

Shit, are they going to kick me out?

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Her eyes crinkle at the corners as she smiles kindly at me. “Don’t worry, it’s nothing bad. I promise.”

My instincts tell me to run, but I turn around and try to smile. “What can I help you with...” I try to remember her name, but for the life of me, I can’t. “I’m sorry. What’s your name again?”

“No need to be sorry. You’ve got better things to worry about than remembering my name. I’m Lucille. I run Oasis Sanctuary.”

She’s a tiny little thing. Probably no more than five foot even. Her salt and pepper hair is short, yet the front always seems to flop down in her brown eyes that shine with kindness just as they are now. She’s like a grandmother to everyone here.

“It’s nice to meet you, Lucille.”

“The pleasure is all mine. I’m sure you’re wondering why I stopped you tonight.”

“A little bit. I’m kind of used to being invisible.”

“Honey,” her lips tip up, “you couldn’t be invisible if you tried. Now, the reason I stopped is you is that I’ve noticed you helping out some of the moms with their kids.”

Did I do something wrong?

“I’m sorry if I’ve done something I shouldn’t have. I didn’t know.” I swallow the lump that’s slowly forming in my throat.

“Nothing could be further from the truth. You took it upon yourself to help when you didn’t have to. The kids love you.”

“Art has always been my outlet in my times of need. I love it, but it’s been too long since I’ve been around any supplies to create anything. If I’ve overstepped any boundaries, I’m sorry. I’ll do whatever I can to pay you back.”

“Come, follow me.” Lucille turns to walk away, but when I don’t follow, she links her arm with mine. “Trust me. You’re not in trouble.”

Silently, I walk with Lucille as she takes us to the back of the shelter. We stand outside a large room filled with kids ranging from toddlers to teens. They’re all sitting around lunchroom tables with the stools built in. One boy sits at a table by himself reminding me of how I spent all my lunches until high school. No one wanted anything to do with me until puberty hit. I went from one of the smallest kids in school with no friends to one of the tallest boys in my school with the girls vying for my attention. I spent my afternoons in the school’s weight room bulking up and unintentionally gaining more attention from the female population. Attention my shy self didn’t know what to do with.

“There’s so many of them,” I murmur.

“Recently we’ve had an influx of women with children. Normally, we don’t have quite this many...” She trails off as she takes in a sleepy toddler who waddles over to a young girl and sits in her lap. I’m guessing it’s his sister. “I’m sure you’re wondering why I’ve brought you back here.” Lucille glances my way before turning back to the room. “Like I said, we’ve noticed you helping with the kids. Do you have kids of your own?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Were you previously a teacher?”

“No.” I chuckle. Couldn’t be further from the truth.

“Well, no matter, you’re a natural. I have a proposition for you. I don’t know your story and you don’t have to share, but you’re here for a reason and I’d like to help you out if I can.”

Instinctively I take a step back. I’ve had too many people offer help only to take advantage. Shaking my head, I try to head off the storm of memories that are sure to follow a trigger.

“Oh, Bodhi, I’m sorry. You’d think I’d be better at this.” Frowning, Lucille motions for me to follow her. “I promise, I have no ulterior motive. Well, actually that’s not true. I want your help, but in return, I’ll help you.”

“What do you want?” I ask a little too roughly and clear my throat.

“I’d like to offer you a job.”

“A job? I...I don’t have any training or knowledge in...”

She interrupts, placing her hand on my arm. “Not as a counselor, but as an art teacher. In the few days you’ve been here I’ve seen some of the things you’ve made, and I’m impressed. Last night, I heard some of the kids raving about you showing them how to draw some Jack Skellington fellow.”

A smile blooms on my face thinking about all the kids gathered around as I showed one of the boys how to draw the spindly body of the character.

Lucille makes a self-satisfied noise as she ushers me into her office. “You love art. I

can tell by the way your eyes light up.”

“I won’t deny it. It had been a long time since I’ve had my hand on a sketchpad. For me, and others, it can be quite therapeutic. When I was helping the kids their eyes lit up, and they each had smiles on their faces. You don’t see much of that around here.”

“No, you don’t. Does that mean you’ll take the job?” she asks hopeful, resting her chin on her clasped hands.

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“Can you tell me more about it? I know art, but I wasn’t lying when I said I’m not a teacher.”

“Of course. We’ve never really needed one before, but with all the children here and with your expertise, I thought we could help out everyone involved. We have a program here for mothers who are trying to get back on their feet. We try to get the kids enrolled in the local school system, so they don’t fall behind but we don’t have anything in place for them once school’s over.”

It saddens me to see so many kids here without homes. They don’t deserve that life and if I can do anything to make their lives better, I’ll try my best. At least they’re not out on the streets.

“Are you afraid they’ll start getting into trouble?”

“There’s a good possibility and their mothers don’t need any more stress. That’s where you come into play. I’d like you to head up an after-school art program. I can show you what supplies are already here. We don’t have unlimited resources, but if you make a list of what you think you’ll need; I’ll do my best to get you what you want.”

Tilting my head to the side, I hesitate. This all seems too good to be true, and I won’t be taken advantage of again. I’m a stranger who’s only been here a few days. Why would she ask this of me?

“Instead of only being able to come for dinner and a place to sleep at night, we’ll give you a room. It’s not much, but you’ll have a space to call your own.” She bites her

bottom lip. Now she's the one hesitating. "I know it's not much, but we'll pay you for the hours you're with the kids."

Not much? It's more than I've been offered the last four years since I lost everything.

"I have a feeling something is keeping you here in Oasis."

I hang my head. "Am I that obvious?"

"I'm a hopeless romantic and know a smitten man when I see one. Does she know?" Lucille smiles, her eyes twinkling.

"No," I shake my head. "I leave her a flower every day, but that's the extent of it. She doesn't know I exist."

"I bet she does," she counters. When I go to argue with her, Lucille holds her hand up. "That's beside the point. What I want to know is if you're interested in taking the job? You'd be helping us out."

I can't help but think there's an ulterior motive, but if there is, I have no idea what it could be. Standing, I extend my hand out and Lucille grins as she stands up clasping her hand with mine.

"Thank you for the opportunity." I shake her hand. "When do you want me to start?"

"Is tomorrow too soon?"

My feet shuffle. "I've got nothing better to do."

"You've got to get your girl a flower."

Clasping my hands behind my back, I look down as I feel heat rise from my neck to my cheeks.

“Don’t mind me. It’s a sweet thing, Bodhi. You keep doing what you’re doing. Why don’t you make a list of art supplies for me before lights out and come back tomorrow around two and we’ll go over everything? I’ll have that room I promised ready for you. If you have any questions, you can ask me then. How does that sound?”

I can’t help but chuckle. “It sounds perfect. Again, thank you. I’m so thankful for you letting me in here and now for the job.”

I’ll never be able to thank Lucille enough. At any moment, I’m afraid I’ll wake up from a dream and all the kindness I’ve experienced will be gone. Instead, I’ll be shivering in a box with newspapers covering me.

6

Coco

Trixie walksto the front of the salon and looks out. Her head pivoting back and forth as if she’s watching a tennis match.

“What are you doing?” I laugh over the sound of the blow dryer.

“Looking for your secret admirer. I was hoping now that you’re back, he’ll show up.” I roll my eyes at her and go back to straightening my client's hair. “Don’t give me that look. You know you want to see what he looks like just as much as I do.”

I do and I don’t. What if he’s a total dog? Then the magic will be gone. Yeah, I’m shallow like that. I can’t help it. I’ve built this amazingly extraordinary guy up in my

mind, who leaves me flowers at work each day and is drop dead gorgeous. Do I think it's a reality? Hell, no! But there's no harm in dreaming. There's a reason he hasn't shown his face.

"Has the homeless guy come in to fill up his water?" I ask, hopeful. The last few days have been hotter than normal for this time of year. Luckily, my parents had gone all out on the air conditioning system when they built their house. It was a necessity in the desert.

Trixie scrunches up her nose. "No." She shivers and shakes out her hands like she has a case of the heebie-jeebies. "You can't offer to let every homeless person come in here, Coco. We'll lose customers."

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Rolling my eyes at her, I walk over to the cash register to check out my client. “You know I don’t volunteer for every homeless person who’s wandering the streets to come in here.”

“I know. I’m just giving you shit. I missed you this week.”

“Aww,” I smile wide at her sweetness. Trixie doesn’t let it show often but she has a heart of gold underneath all that pink hair of hers. “If I had time to miss anyone, I would have missed you. Figuring out where I wanted everything to go took a lot of time. I guess I should have thought about it before I moved and had the movers put boxes in the correct rooms so I wouldn’t have had to lug everything back and forth.”

“Bitch, you know you could have called me and asked for me to help.” She waves at a passerby and then focuses on me. “I guess since I haven’t heard from you since the night you moved in that you didn’t have any problems or see anything else?”

My shoulders slump at the memory of my security lights going off every night. “I didn’t see anything, but the lights went off every night. Thank God for the state-of-the-art security system. I spent half of one day trying to figure it out.”

Trixie’s eyes go wide, and I instantly shrink back, afraid of how mad she’ll be that I didn’t call her when I freaked out every time the security lights turned on. To my surprise, she grabs my arm and starts to guide me to the back. “Oh shit! Don’t look now.”

So, what do I do? I turn around only to spot my ex-boyfriend strolling toward Tricks. He’s decked out in designer clothes that surprisingly look a little worse for wear. It

always drove me crazy how much importance he put on his appearance. He'd spend more time looking for what to wear than I ever did.

The bell over the door jingles and he strides in like he owns the place. "Hey, babe, can I talk to you in private?" His eyes narrow on Trixie. From day one they never got along and now that we're not together Trixie isn't going to hold back.

"She's not your babe so why don't you turn around and slither back to where you came from," she sneers.

Dwayne takes a menacing step toward us and Trixie's arm blocks him from me. It's sweet she's so protective, but she's a little thing and with the seething look on Dwayne's face I'm scared what he might do if she doesn't let him talk to me.

Placing my hand on her shoulder, I try to sound more confident than I am. "It's okay. Let him say what he has to say and then we won't ever have to see him again."

Dwayne's eyes narrow for only a moment. I'm sure he didn't want me to see he didn't like what I had to say, but I caught it.

"I'll be up front if you need anything. Anything." She gives Dwayne one last withering look before her eyes widen at me.

Crossing my arms over my chest, I glare at him.

Taking a step closer, he smiles an oily smile just like a used car salesman who's about to rip you off. "I went by your apartment and you weren't there."

And I'm not going to tell you why I wasn't there either. I like the thought that he wouldn't have my new address, and I want to keep it that way.

“What do you want? I thought we cleared up everything when you showed up at my apartment and I said I never wanted to see you again.” How could I have made that any clearer?

“Babe, I thought if I gave you a little time you’d reconsider. We were good together. Remember?” He smiles that same used car salesman smile thinking it will win me over.

“Remember? All the times you didn’t show up when we were supposed to go out or the lack of communication. Or how about all the times you put me down and told me I wasn’t good enough. Yes, good times.” I try to use every ounce of sarcasm in me, but his eyes soften. He’s delusional; that’s the only way he could not get the clue.

“I’ve changed. I promise. I...I know I wasn’t perfect, but if you’ll give me a chance to show you, I’ll treat you like the princess you are.”

I scoff. “Do you really think I want to be treated like a princess? That’s not who I am.”

Taking a step closer, he tries to grab one of my hands, but I shove them behind my back. I don’t want him to touch me. After my parents' deaths, I’m too vulnerable and afraid I’ll cave at the human contact even if I don’t want it to be from him.

“Oh please, who are you kidding, Coco? You were raised to think the world was yours. Your parents gave in to your every whim. I mean look at where you are.” His face contorts into a look of disgust as he scans the salon.

“Don’t you ever mention my parents again. Do you hear me?” I hiss. My hands fist at my sides. “You have no right. No right, at all. Now it’s time for you to leave.” He opens his mouth, I’m sure to try to convince me, but he’s only been his usual asshole self from the moment he walked in the door. He has no chance. “Don’t bother coming

back. I'm not going out on a date with you. If you couldn't bother for the last few months we were together, why bother now?" I step back and grip the sink behind me to ground me. "Not now or ever will there ever be a chance in hell that I'll ever take you back."

With each word, his eyes narrow until they're the barest of slits. I don't even know how he can see me, but that's his problem, not mine. He stands to his fullest height and puffs out his chest. Is he trying to intimidate me? We hear Trixie clear her throat all the way from the front and he slowly takes a step back.

"I understand that you're upset by your pa...their death, so I'll give you a little more time to grieve and we'll talk then."

"Dwayne," I sigh out his name in annoyance. I want to stomp my foot, but I know that won't get me anywhere with him. He'll probably just refer to me as a princess again. "It doesn't matter if you give me a week, a year, or a thousand years. I'm not going to change my mind. Once you step out that door, I'm putting you out of my mind. You won't exist in my world, so don't bother coming back. You're not welcome here."

Dwayne's face becomes a blotchy red mess as his cheek ticks in time with my words. For one moment, I think he might stomp his foot or explode. Instead, I watch as he slowly looks around the salon again. This time there's a glint in his eyes. A look that I've never seen before and one I don't like. Turning back to look at me, he grins the most wicked smile I've ever seen, and a shiver runs down my spine. My fingers clutch the sink behind me even harder.

"I'll talk to you soon," he says and turns to walk out as if our conversation never occurred.

I want to say something. Anything. But I'm too stunned and by the time my brain

starts functioning enough for me to come up with a comeback, he's gone. His retreating form weaves down the sidewalk like a drunk. Only, I know he isn't drunk; I would have smelled it.

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What the hell is going on?

I stand at the front, looking out the windows long after he's out of sight. It isn't until Trixie places her hand on my shoulder that I break out of my fog. "Has he gotten crazier since you guys stopped dating?" She pushes a strand of hair out of my face. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," I shake the confusion out of my head. "That was strange."

"He's a total psycho. Please tell me you see it now." Her eyes plead with me to see reason. What I couldn't or didn't want to see while we were together.

"I saw...something." Something I couldn't put my finger on. "Another good reason for me to have that awesome security system. If he finds out where I live—"

"He won't. How could he? I heard him mention your apartment." She shrugs, unapologetic for listening in. I don't care that she heard what we said. It's not as if I wanted to talk to him anyway. "If...you feel like he's following you then maybe drive by your apartment. Hell, walk inside if you feel like you need to. Whatever you need to do to be safe."

"If I feel like someone is following me I will. Although I'm not sure how I'd know."

"You," she points at me, "need to start reading more mysteries."

I can't help but laugh. I'm pretty sure they'd only make me paranoid and I don't need to be any jumpier than I already am. "I really don't think reading more is the way for

me to base my safety. I bet most of them aren't true to life. What happens when I try something in a dire situation, and it doesn't work? I'm fucked."

Trixie rolls her eyes at me. "Use common sense. I'm not saying to live your life based on a mystery novel." Moving closer to the window, her face is almost plastered against it. "Do you see your homeless guy over there?" Her eyes narrow while she bites on the inside of her cheek. "What's he doing in the trees?"

I squint from the sunlight, but I do eventually see someone in the trees across the street. It looks to be a man going off his height because whoever it is, is extremely tall. I can't help but remember how much taller he was than me the one time we met. "Maybe he lives in the trees."

"Oh, for Pete's sake, Coco. He's not Tarzan," she cackles, placing one hand on the window to hold herself up.

This time it's my turn to roll my eyes at her as I head back to my station to clean up. I've got one more client for the day and then I've got to hit the grocery store. My cabinets and refrigerator are bare and I'm tired of having to eat out every night. Since my place is a little outside the city limits, no one will deliver except for a couple of pizza places. Otherwise, I have to drive a half an hour one way for takeout.

* * *

With a smile on my face, I'm responding to a message from Trixie as I walk from the parking lot to the front of the store. Someone had trashed the pumpkins out in front of the store last night. Trixie had driven by earlier on her way to hot yoga and called me as she ranted about the youth today. It would have been funny if it were someone else, but Trixie takes pride in her store, and for someone to smash and smear the remains of the pumpkins all over the windows pissed her off.

I never understood who started the insane competition that went on in Oasis for the holidays. Everyone, and I mean everyone, decorates. It doesn't matter if you're rich or poor. You decorate the shit out of your house, cottage, or apartment. A few years ago, the businesses didn't like being left out and started decorating and hosting a competition. Luckily, it didn't apply to all of them, only the Fourth of July, Halloween, and Christmas—but there were still those who went all out for Easter, Thanksgiving and a few others.

Trixie is set on winning one or all in a year. No one has won all three, but if you do you get a parade or something. Since it's never happened, I've never known for sure. They can do whatever they want as long as they don't expect me to participate. I'm shocked she hasn't suggested I decorate my house yet. I know I won't get away with it for long though, and she'll require me to have my house all done up for Christmas.

I can't hold back my gasp when I stop in front of Tricks to see the mess is cleaned up. You'd never know anything was amiss except we have no pumpkins at the entry, and we had five of them painted and glittered to the extreme.

Maybe I misunderstood Trixie when she called, and she meant they were missing?

No. I shake my head as I inspect for any orange pulp. She had been pissed about having to clean up the mess on her day off, so I offered to come in early. My smile comes back when I see a bunch of little purple flowers made into a bouquet and tied together with a rope made from what looks to be grass. It's beautiful and makes tears well up in my eyes. Picking it up, I sniff the flowers and am met with a best smelling floral fragrance I think I've ever encountered.

Now that I don't have to clean up a nasty mess, I start to open up Tricks and get ready for when Trixie drops off the new pumpkins. I hope she remembers to bring something to decorate them with since we used up everything when we decorated the first time.

Standing behind the front desk, I'm on the computer putting in an appointment when the bell over the door jingles and in walks Trixie.

"Girl, you did a fabulous job cleaning up that mess. I was not looking forward to getting pumpkin bits underneath my nails." She wiggles her fingers in the air showing her bright purple coffin fingernails.

"As much as I'd love to take credit for the cleanup it wasn't me. It was like that when I got here." I notice the crazy tall and hairy homeless guy carrying two large pumpkins and putting them in front of the window. "Why is he carrying your pumpkins?"

"Our pumpkins," she turns to watch him walk away. "He wanted to help and who am I to deny him his charitable duty?"

My hands instantly land on my hips as I look at her. "You better pay him or offer him lunch. Something. You shouldn't take advantage."

"You need to get laid and stop giving me sass. If you're so worried about him why don't you go out there and help him."

"I will." I raise my chin high and walk out to see him with two more pumpkins bigger than the last in his arms. His biceps bulge from the effort and strain his white t-shirt.

He stops the moment he sees me and looks at the area on the sidewalk where he left the other pumpkins. Does he think I'm here to stop him? I take a few steps back and watch as his tanned muscles bulge in the most delicious way as he sets them down.

Without a word, he heads back to the parking lot, toward Trixie's car. Her back-passenger door is open, and I see the whole backseat is filled with orange and white pumpkins. Did she buy out the store?

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“Do you need any help?”

He clears his voice and wipes his hands on his clean white shorts. My eyes zero in on how clean his clothes are today. Maybe he found a place to stay. I hope so.

His blue-green eyes stare at me as if seeing down to my soul. I’ve never seen eyes as hypnotizing as his. They’re blue as the most beautiful Caribbean waters and so intense. I blink a couple of times to clear my head.

“Maybe the little ones.” His voice rumbles through my body.

“I don’t know if you remember but I’m Coco.” I hold my hand out for him to shake. His large tan hand lightly takes mine in his warm grip.

“I remember.” He smiles and white teeth flash back at me. He looks down, his long lashes fanning out on his pink cheeks as he speaks quietly. “I’m Bodhi.”

“Nice to finally know your name and what a name that is. I’ve never met a Bodhi and I’ve lived in California all my life.” His head tilts to the side in confusion. “For me, and I could be wrong—it wouldn’t be the first and it most certainly won’t be the last time—but when I think of the name Bodhi, I think it belongs to a surfer.”

Now his cheeks are a brighter shade of pink. It’s sweet how easily he blushes.

“I’ve never surfed before and I’ve never met another Bodhi. Only myself,” he answers just as quietly as he did before.

“Well, I like it. It’s unique, just like you.”

Bodhi looks down at me for a moment and then turns back to the car, hefting up two more large pumpkins and walks off. I guess we’re done conversing. I bite my bottom lip and pick up two of the little ones. I’m not sure how Trixie got all of them into her car. She probably flashed her smile, or her boobs, to someone to help her.

He passes me on my way back not meeting my eye. If I didn’t know any better, I’d think I’d done something to offend him. We continue back and forth in silence. I see Trixie standing inside, watching us with a strange look on her face. Her eyes are wide, yet her brows are pulled down.

Once he places the last pumpkin, Bodhi takes a step to walk away. “Where are you going?” He turns around but doesn’t answer me. He seems to be a man of few words. I have a feeling that when he speaks what he says matters. “Let me grab some money for your work.”

He shakes his head rapidly. A frown mars his bearded face. “They were much too heavy for the two of you and you needed help. I didn’t do it for money.”

“If you won’t take money, can I get you some water? Buy you lunch?” I scramble for something to do for him.

He looks over to the trees across the street. “I’m alright.”

So it is Bodhi who’s been camping out over there.

“Of course, you are, but I want to do something since you helped us.”

“Can I...carve the pumpkins?” he asks hesitantly, looking down at his dirty white tennis shoes.

“Of course. Do you need anything? A...knife?”

He stares at the sidewalk lined with pumpkins for a moment. “A trash bag or two and a knife would be great.”

“Done.”

I only hope he does a good job or Trixie is going to kill me.

7

Bodhi

Every few minutes I see Coco and Trixie at the window trying to see what I’m doing. My lips twitch each and every time. For now, I’m keeping my work to myself.

I know I should have been preparing for what I’m going to do with the kids this afternoon, but after seeing the mess in front of the store this morning and knowing I could be close to Coco and listen to their conversations, I couldn’t pass up the opportunity. The need to keep an eye on them, but mainly Coco, is coursing through my veins.

Some guy showed up earlier in the week and it killed me to watch their interaction from across the road. Even from over there I could see the tension was high. Since then I’ve been coming back at night to make sure they both make it to their cars safely. I can’t explain it, but there was something in the air that day that’s had me uneasy since and then after finding the destroyed gourds it’s only intensified.

My plan to listen to them talk while I work has been a bust. One or both of them have had a client while I’ve been out here so they haven’t had a chance to talk. Not that they’d necessarily talk about the mystery man or how they were feeling the other day

when he was there. No, if I had to guess what they'd talk about, it would be me and what I'm doing.

I sit facing the window while I scoop out the inner parts of the pumpkins and throw the remains in the trash bags. I'm not sure how long each of them takes me and there's no way I can do them all today. Trixie bought twelve pumpkins ranging in all different sizes. Once I've finished the bigger ones, I line them against the wall of the building so they can't see my work. I have a feeling they're worried I'm mutilating them, and they'll be a wreck, and that's why one of them leaves their customer to come check on me every once in a while.

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Standing up, I take a look at my work for the day. I wish I could do more, but I have to get back to the center and teach the kids. I take a moment to let that sink in because even after almost a week, I still can't believe I was offered a job. Not only a job but teaching art to kids who need the outlet to express their anger and sadness at their situations.

I'm not sure if Trixie will like what I've done, but I think the pumpkins turned out great. I went with the theme of the salon. I have a mummy cutting the hair of a witch, a vampire blow drying a mermaid's hair and a ghost washing Medusa's hair. Pretty brilliant if I do say so myself. Looking down at my watch I see I have just enough time to walk back to the shelter and wash up before my class.

Taking the end of my shirt, I wipe my brow as I start to head back to the Oasis Sanctuary. Oasis is cooling down, but it's still pretty hot in the prime of the day. In the next week or two, I was hoping I'd be able to afford to buy a used bike somewhere so I can get around faster. The thought of being able to find where Coco lives filters through my thoughts. More than once I've thought about how I can keep an eye on her if I just knew where she lived.

"Are you leaving?" Coco's sweet voice asks from behind me.

Spinning around, I open and close my mouth a few times, but nothing comes out. Whenever she's near I can't seem to find my voice and end up looking like the loser everyone's always called me. Instead of speaking, I nod my head and look in the direction I was headed before she came out.

She gasps loudly, "Oh my God, Bodhi." I quickly turn around to see her hand

covering her mouth that's hanging open. "I can't believe you did all this today, or that you did it to begin with. These are amazing. Truly astounding."

I hang my head and speak to my shoes. I don't want her to see what her words do to me. My cheeks are hot from her praise. "Thank you."

"No, thank you. What you did is...phenomenal. Tricks is sure to win the Halloween competition now. I...I just can't believe you did this while sitting here with only a few simple tools. You've got to let us pay you for all your hard work."

"That's not necessary. I had nothing better to do," I murmur. On the inside, I feel as if I'm about ready to explode with all her kind words and attention.

"If we win, and I bet we do, then you have to let us pay you something because it will be from all your hard effort. Did you..." Coco bites her bottom lip and my dick twitches.

Calm the fuck down.

"Did you clean up the mess this morning?" she finally asks.

"I..." I turn and start to walk away finishing as I am looking over my shoulder at her. "I really have to go, or I'll be late for my shift."

"Oh," her eyes go wide, "I wouldn't want to be the cause of you getting in trouble. Maybe I'll see you around?" To my ears, she almost sounds hopeful, but I know it's just wishful thinking on my part. Little does she know; I'll be back later to watch her as she makes her way to her car.

Even to my own ears, it sounds creepy. I've become what I've always been called, but in this case, I don't care. I'd hate myself if anything happened to Coco because I

wasn't there.

I give her the one, two finger wave and head off excited for another day teaching.

* * *

The sunset is beautiful as I make my way back to Tricks. As I do every time I walk, I try to find a new place and new flowers to pluck and leave for Coco. This is one reason I want to get a bike, so I'll be able to cover more ground.

"Stop!" a woman screams. Her voice is oddly familiar and at the same time not with the terror infused in her one word.

My pace picks up as I try to figure out where the scream came from. I don't see anyone out on the street but there are lots of shadows as the sun goes down. I hear a whimper up ahead and yet I still can't pinpoint where the sound came from.

Now at a jog, my head swings left and right as I try to keep my breathing calm and quiet. I'm almost to Tricks when I see a man pinning someone to the brick wall. Not just someone but a woman from the muffled whimpers.

"No!" The word is muffled and terrified.

My feet move me faster than I think I've ever moved before. I'm sprinting to save her. When I see long blonde hair and the shape of Coco's body, I lose my mind. Everything goes red as my vision tunnels in on this asshole's hands on her. He's ripping at her clothes with one hand as he pins her with the other.

"Help!" Coco calls out as she tries to claw him in the face to get away from her attacker. Her eyes widen the moment she sees me coming up behind him. Her attacker must notice before I can grab him and pull him off, he swings at me and

clocks me on the shoulder. I dodge the hit intended for my face, but not enough. The hit is hard, but not enough to stop me. I can't stop. I'm running on adrenaline as I try to save Coco. Nothing could stop me except losing a limb. I grab him by the hood of his sweatshirt and throw him to the ground.

He's fast. I'll give him that. Before my fist can connect with his covered face, he punches me in the stomach, and I double over gasping for air. He moves to try to get past me to get to Coco.

"Run, Coco! Run!" I roar as I grab him by the arm and swing him around to face me. I'm on him in a nanosecond. Punching him first in the stomach making him groan in agony and then in the face as hard as I can. I don't feel the pain as my knuckles crack open and bleed against his face and I don't feel the blow to the side of my head until I start to fall over to the side, my vision blurring.

I hear a scream in the distance, but it sounds as if I'm underwater. It makes no sense.

Blinking, I try to understand the bright colorful lights surrounding Coco as she hovers over me with tears in her eyes. Her delicate hand is against my cheek, and I want to reach up and wipe away her tears and the trickle of blood from her busted lip. I want to tell her not to worry about me, but no sound comes out as much as I try.

"Bodhi," she cries, "hang on the ambulance is almost here."

Again, I want to tell her I'll be fine even if I'm feeling far from okay at the moment. Black spots dot my vision, yet I still manage to cup her hand that's found purchase on my cheek.

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“Coco,” I manage to get out as barely more than a whisper before the black overtakes me.

All I know is black.

8

Coco

“I’m refusing medical treatment,” Bodhi growls out at the two EMT workers who have been trying to convince him for the last ten minutes that he needs to be checked out. He jerks back when they try to touch him, his eyes a little wild.

“Sir, you need stitches and you may have a concussion. Do you have anyone who can watch you for the next twenty-four hours?”

Bodhi’s Adam’s apple bobs and he looks down as he shakes his head. I want to cry for him. I’m not sure what it is about him that affects me as much as he does. Yes, I have compassion for all the homeless around the world but, Bodhi, he’s different.

Taking a step closer, I clear my raw throat. I wince but try not to let my pain show. The EMT’s have already looked me over and besides a few scrapes and bruises, I’m fine. At least physically. I’m sure later when I’m alone it will finally sink in that someone tried to rape me as I left work.

“I can watch over him.” I smile timidly. I can feel my lips tremble and try to strengthen my resolve.

“You don’t need to do that. I’m sure I’ll be fine after a little rest.” Bodhi speaks barely above a whisper.

“It’s the least I can do after you saved me.” He shakes his head and starts to retreat away from me and the EMT’s. “Please, let me do this for you. I promise I won’t make it awkward.” Like I just did. “And you’ve got to at least let them stitch you up.” I turn to look at the two EMT’s but keep an eye on Bodhi, making sure he doesn’t try to escape while I’m talking to them. “Can you do that here? It’s obvious he’s not going to go to the hospital.” I lower my voice so only they can hear. “I think he’s worried about paying. He’s homeless or was. I’m not sure anymore.”

One walks back to the ambulance and the other sidles up next to me. He’s short and stocky with brown hair cut in a military style and kind brown eyes. “Are you sure you’re up for this? How well do you know this guy?”

“He saved me. Maybe even my life. It’s the least I can do.”

“But—”

I interrupt him. “He...used to hang around here sometimes outside the salon. This morning someone trashed our pumpkins and I think he cleaned it up before we could and then he proceeded to decorate our pumpkins. You should see how amazing they are.” The stocky guy gives me a strange look. “Sorry, I’m rambling.”

“No, it’s fine. I wanted to make sure you were comfortable. If he agrees and you’re sure you want to take on the responsibility, I can give you instructions on how to treat a minor concussion at home and what to look for if it becomes serious, since there is no way to know without taking him to the hospital if he has one or not.” He proceeds to tell me as I watch the other EMT cut a few big chunks of Bodhi’s hair off so he can get to the area he’s bleeding from and stitch him up.

Bodhi remains stoic and doesn't even flinch when he gets a shot in the head. I, on the other hand, have to turn away. I hate needles and it's taking everything in me not to pass out.

"If he complains of a bad headache, or starts to throw up, you need to get him to the emergency room immediately. If he refuses, you can always call 911 and explain the situation. They'll send out guys who can handle him." He eyes Bodhi's large frame and I almost giggle. I have a feeling if Bodhi doesn't want to do something, no one can make him. "Don't let his stubbornness kill him. A concussion is serious business."

"I won't," I vow. I wouldn't let anything happen to Bodhi.

Ever again.

Why do I feel so strongly for him? I can understand after he saved me today, but even before I felt an inexplicable pull toward him that I'd never felt before.

"Are you sure you feel safe with him? You don't know him," he speaks out of the side of his mouth.

"I'm sure," I respond softly. Somehow, somehow I know that Bodhi would never hurt me.

"Now that the adrenaline has worn off, are you sure you're okay?"

It's sweet that he's asking, but I have a feeling that he's trying to separate Bodhi and me. Does he sense something I don't? Should I be worried?

"It's nothing a warm bath and a little ibuprofen can't fix," I assure him with an easy smile.

“The same goes for you, you know. If you start to experience any symptoms, head to the ER or call an ambulance. If you can sleep tonight, you’ll probably wake up pretty sore tomorrow.”

“Thanks. If I need to, I can always call in tomorrow. Once we’re finished here, I’ll call the owner and let her know what happened.” She’ll be furious with me if I don’t. “Actually, I think I’ll call her right now before I forget.”

“Sure,” he eyes me as if he knows I’m trying to get rid of him. I’m not sure why I am, but his constant questioning is starting to get on my already frayed nerves.

Moving off to the side, but still in the light, I hit Trixie’s number and wait for her to answer.

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“Miss me already?” She laughs. There’s a lot of background noise so she must still be at dinner. I’m not sure how much to say to her. I don’t want her to worry about me and I most definitely don’t want her to give me shit about taking Bodhi home with me, but I know she’ll kill me if I keep any of it from her.

“Coco?” Her voice sounds worried now. The once loud background noise starts to fade. “What’s going on? Did something happen?”

A bitter laugh tumbles from my lips. “You could say that. I...I was...I was attacked out in the parking lot. If...if it hadn’t been for Bodhi,” I choke on my words.

“Oh my God, Coco. Are you okay?” Her voice shakes with emotion. Hearing her concern makes tears well up, but I fight them away. I need to stay strong. At least until I get home and by myself. “Do I need—”

“No,” I interrupt her, “I’m as okay as I can be. When I get home, I’m going to take a nice hot bath and maybe drink a glass of wine. I just wanted to let you know what happened and I might be too sore to work tomorrow.”

“You do what you need to do. I can call your clients and reschedule them. Don’t worry about it. Do you want me to come by and check on you? Bring you anything?”

“For now I’m good, but if I need anything, I’ll let you know.” My chin quivers for the first time tonight. I grit my teeth and try to smile even though she can’t see me. “Thank you, Trixie. For everything.”

“You know I’d do anything for you.”

And I do. Trixie is the one person who accepted me when I broke out from under what my parents expected of me. She gave me a job when everyone else denied me because of my parents' influence.

"I know. I'd do the same." Straightening my shoulders and my resolve, I hold my head high. "Go back to your dinner and don't worry about me. Really, I'm fine," I say to assure not just her but myself as well.

"If you say so. Call me tomorrow when you wake up to let me know how you're feeling. Night."

"I will. Night."

I stand watching the EMT's talk to Bodhi. He's holding a sheet of paper and nodding along with them. At least he seems to be in better spirits. As if he knows I'm thinking about him, he looks up from under his impossibly long eyelashes. No, I can't see them from where I'm standing but I've memorized everything about his eyes and how his eyelashes fan out across his tanned cheeks the couple of times I've been in close proximity.

Putting on my best smile, I walk over and stand next to Bodhi. We're so close when I turn to talk to him, our arms brush and I feel a tingle travel up my arm. "Are you ready to go?"

"You really don't need to...I'm fine now." He points to the area with the stitches. The hair around the area is covered in blood and the stylist in me is itching to get my hands on his long mane.

Placing my hand on my hip, I thrust it out annoyed. "Just because you've stopped bleeding doesn't mean you don't have a concussion. You're coming with me. I promise to keep my hands to myself," I joke, but one look at his wide eyes I realize I

said the wrong thing.

“I...I never thought that about you,” he rushes out then looks away.

His reaction makes me want to cry for upsetting him. Who knew sweet Bodhi is a sensitive soul to boot?

“Oh Bodhi,” I place my hand on his bicep and feel the muscle jump underneath my touch, “I know you didn’t. I was only kidding. I’m sorry if I upset you, I guess I’m still a little frazzled. Please let me take care of you. You’ll be helping me as much as I’m helping you, if not more.”

His gaze traces over me like a caress. I can tell he’s still unsure, but why? Does he find me unappealing after the attack? From before?

He turns away from the EMTs and speaks loud enough for only me to hear. “I don’t want to be a bother.”

It takes everything within me to not reach out and hold his hand. “I promise you won’t be a bother.”

“And I promise, I’m not a serial killer or anything like that.” He clamps his mouth shut for a moment, his eyes assessing me. “Only a guy who’s down on his luck. Have been for a while now.”

“I don’t care about that. Only the man that you are.” I let him hear the conviction in my words. I mean every word. I don’t care if he’s the poorest or richest man in the world. I only want to make sure he’s okay.

“If you’re sure,” he mumbles.

“Do you need to call anyone?”

“There’s no one to call.” He pauses looking back at the salon. “Actually, I should probably call my work, only I don’t know the number.”

“We can look it up once we get back to my place unless you need to call them now.” With shaking hands, I try to pull my phone back out of my purse.

He eyes my movements before placing a timid hand on my arm but then quickly pulls it away. “My next shift isn’t until tomorrow afternoon.”

“Okay, you can call them in the morning. Are you ready to go?” I try to sound chipper, afraid that any wrong move will have Bodhi running for the hills.

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When we turn around, the EMTs are both getting into the ambulance. How did I not notice when they walked away? I know. Because Bodhi had my undivided attention.

“My car’s over there.” I motion toward my car and only in that moment with Bodhi by my side do I realize how excessive it is. God, what’s he going to think of me when he sees my house? Maybe this wasn’t the best idea. I don’t want him to think I’m some rich, spoiled brat treating him like a charity case. Only I’m not sure how to show Bodhi how I see the man underneath the exterior.

“I know,” he murmurs, walking straight to my car.

We’re silent as we head out of the parking lot. It’s uncomfortable, but I don’t know how to fix it. Bodhi is sitting ramrod straight as if he touches anything, I’ll yell at him or it will bite him. My stomach growls loudly. You’d think an alien is about to burst out of it from the loud noise. I feel my entire body heat from his gaze and my embarrassment.

“Um...I don’t have a lot of food at my house. Would you be opposed to stopping for some takeout and maybe the store to get some first aid stuff?”

Bodhi only shakes his head.

I know if I ask him what he wants he’ll say he’s fine, so I don’t ask. I head to my favorite Chinese takeout and order one of everything. Out of the corner of my eye, I see him shift uncomfortably, but he doesn’t say anything and neither do I.

After a quick stop at Target, I grab some bandages, antibiotic ointment, and a few

food staples. I'm going to have to get used to having food at my house since no one delivers.

"So...I...my parents died recently, and they were about to move into a new house." I bite my bottom lip. I don't want to think of my parents and start crying in front of Bodhi, but I need to explain. "Anyway, they left the house to me and I moved in a few days ago."

"Why are you telling me this?" he asks the window. The way he won't look at me makes me think he already knows. Either that or he's regretting his decision to come home with me. God this is a mess.

"My parents had a lot of money. I guess now I do too, but it doesn't feel like mine." He glances my way, his lips in a thin line. "I just don't want you to be uncomfortable or think I'm some spoiled brat."

"I don't think that."

"Not yet," I say softly, my eyes on the horizon.

Landscaping lights come into view and I glance over at Bodhi. He's watching with intense interest as my house comes into view. You can't see much in the dark, but you can briefly see the lights from the pool before we turn onto the driveway.

Once inside the garage we sit, neither of us ready to get out.

"I don't think I belong here," Bodhi strangles out in a rough whisper.

Oasis has a lot of rich people who live here and every day I see their houses. From the street and behind walls, but Coco's house is on another level. Now I understand why she mentioned it was supposed to be her parents' house.

I look down at my dirty clothes and feel inferior and unworthy of being in her presence. Why did she ask me here?

We're only in her garage but it's the nicest garage I've ever seen. It's immaculate with everything in its place. Where I come from, garages are filled to the brim with people's shit, but I guess when you have a house as large as this you have plenty of places to put all your belongings.

Coco faces me with a look of worry etched in her expression. I can't even imagine what I look like as I stare as the garage door goes down, trapping me inside.

Moving around to the front of her car, Coco starts taking out the bags of groceries and takeout food. Who knew cars had trunks in the front? I certainly didn't. It's more than obvious we are from two very different worlds. Everything about Coco's world makes me feel like an idiot and an alien at the same time.

"Let me take those. It's the least I can do," I murmur as I gather all the bags from her.

"Bodhi, you don't owe me anything." My name on her lips sounds like angels singing from heaven. Every time I hear it, my body flushes with the most delicious feeling of something I can't quite describe. Whatever it is, makes me crave to hear her say my name over and over again. The thought of her saying my name in ecstasy makes my heart race and my dick twitch. I know now more than ever that Coco will never see me like that. I'm not boyfriend material. Not for a woman like her. Not when she has all this.

I stop dead in my tracks when I step inside her home. The furnishing is sparse, as if

she didn't have enough to fill it up, but all the furniture is nice and expensive. The entire back wall of her house is made up of windows and looks out onto the city. It's beautiful and humbling.

“Come set those over here and I'll show you where a bathroom is so you can take a shower. I wish I had some clothes for you to change into, but I do have a robe for guests to use. I know I want to wash away the day after—” She stops abruptly and starts taking items out of the bags to put onto her white countertops. They look expensive as shit. Everything does. I'm afraid if I touch anything it might break, especially Coco.

...after being attacked and probably almost raped is what I'm sure she was about to say. Reality is finally starting to rear its ugly head and at any moment she might break down.

What do I do then?

Should I hug her?

Pull her into my arms?

No, she won't want me to touch her. I could offer to call Trixie. Maybe she's regretting asking me here.

"If you want, I can leave. I..." I don't know how I'd get back to the shelter besides walking for hours in the dark...or if I'd even get there if a coyote got me.

"No," Coco cries out and twirls in my direction. "No, please. I'm sorry. I'm being a poor hostess." In the bright light of her kitchen, I see bruises starting to form on her neck in the shape of a handprint and around her right eye. I grit my teeth as I fight my instinct to reach out and touch her. Comfort her. Maybe she's right, and she needs me here more than I need to be looked after. I have a pounding headache and feel a little nauseated but I'm sure that's more from the pain than a possible concussion.

Maybe Coco's scared to be alone tonight. I need to stop being an insecure bastard and be here for her. "I'll stay if you let me help you unpack." I quip trying to ease the tension.

Her blue eyes widen in what looks to be a happy surprise. When she smiles at me, my world fades away. For a moment, I forget how different we are from each other, about seeing some asshole attacking Coco, and the circumstances that brought me to where I am now.

When she blinks and steps away, the dream is over and I'm back to being uncomfortable. "Let me show you to the bathroom where you can shower if you want."

* * *

I almost feel like a new man after my shower. The hot water felt exquisite falling from her rain showerhead. I pull on the robe Coco left out for me and head downstairs to try to find her in the enormity of her house. On the landing, I spy her directly in front of me sitting on a big leather sectional with a blanket wrapped around her and the fireplace going. My bare feet pad on the cool floor, making no sound as I walk toward her. The closer I get, the more I see. The pain on her face she's been trying to hide as she tries to remain strong all while lost in thought as she stares out into the open night.

I'm unsure if I should give Coco her space or if I should let my presence be known. My choice is made up for me when she straightens and turns toward me. "Hey," she says brightly, "um...I didn't know what you'd want to drink with dinner. I'd offer beer or wine, but I didn't think that would be good if you have a concussion, so I got us both waters. I hope that's okay. I do have orange juice and..." She looks toward the kitchen; her cute nose scrunches up in concentration, "I think that's it. I really am a bad host, but I'm not used to having people over." She shrugs and then motions me to sit down. "Please sit and dig in. What we don't eat tonight we can have tomorrow."

Coco has to have ordered almost everything off the menu. The table in front of her is covered in Chinese food containers. There's no possible way we can eat all of it tonight or tomorrow unless she eats more than anyone I've ever met and has an insane metabolism.

"Oh shit. I'm sorry, Bodhi," she shakes her head, her big eyes sad. "I didn't mean to sound insensitive about the food, but I wanted to make sure we had enough, and that I got something you'd like. I may have gone overboard, but I promise it won't go to waste." Pulling the blanket around her even tighter, she scoots to the end of the couch. "I don't want anything else heavy tonight, but I'd like to know more about you and how you became..." Her cheeks turn pink, making her look more beautiful,

even with bruises marring her perfect face. Coco starts to open the boxes and sets forks inside each container.

I finish for her. I'm sure she doesn't know how to broach the subject. Neither do I, really. "Homeless. You can say it. I know what I am."

A loser and a creep who you've let inside your house.

Shame sweeps through me at the thought of her buying all this food in the hope she would find something I'd like to fill me up because she assumes I'm starving and don't know where my next meal will come from. I'm here out of pity and my stomach sinks at the knowledge.

Placing her hand on my arm, Coco's eyes plead with me. For what, I don't know, but I want to give it to her. "Bodhi, I didn't mean to make you feel bad."

I want to tell her she didn't to get her smiling back at me, but it would be a lie and we both know it. Instead, I go with the truth before looking away. "I know you didn't."

I hate how shy I am with Coco. I know that if we had met under different circumstances and I didn't resemble a yeti with my long hair and beard, if I didn't feel this inexplicable pull toward her, we could be out to dinner on a date, chatting it up.

"So, where are you from? Where did you grow up?" Coco starts piling different Chinese foods on her plate. Most of them I've never seen before and not sure what I like so I stick to what I do know and put some Broccoli Beef and Sweet and Sour Chicken on my plate.

"I'm from a small town in Nebraska with a population of less than a thousand. Where are you from originally?" I pop a piece of beef in my mouth and it takes everything in

me not to moan. It has to be the best tasting thing I've eaten in years.

She twirls her chopsticks. "Born and raised in Oasis. What's it like to grow up in such a small town?"

I finish chewing and take a sip of water. "Honestly, I couldn't wait to get out of there. Right after graduation, I was on a bus to New York City to pursue a career in art."

Her big blue eyes widen as her lips tip up. "What happened?"

"Life happened. New York happened." I stab a piece of chicken with my fork. "I was young and dumb." I chuckle bitterly.

"How old are you? I'd say you look young, but I can't see much under all that hair of yours." Coco leans forward as if my answer means something to her.

"I'm twenty-four. How old are you?"

Ducking her head, she glances up at me sheepishly making me all the more curious. "Twenty-one," she finally answers in little more than a whisper.

She's certainly living large for being so young. Not that I thought she was older, but her car and house are a lot for someone her age.

And yet she works in a hair salon.

She's an enigma.

* * *

“If you need anything, anything at all my bedroom is downstairs. If you start to feel nauseous or your headache gets worse, you can call for me and—”

“I know,” I chuckle. “You’ve already gone over it twice. I know what to do and I promise not to have anything bad happen on your watch. The ibuprofen you gave me earlier is already starting to work and my head’s feeling better.”

She stares at me from across the room, probably trying to assess if I’m telling her the truth or not. I haven’t lied to her yet and I don’t plan to start.

“Maybe tomorrow you’ll let me cut your hair.” She frowns as she appraises me. “They did a hack job on it before they gave you stitches, but I can fix it if you want me to.”

“Sure, I’d like that.” I nod as she stands in the doorway fidgeting with the sleeve of her sweatshirt. It would be nice to get rid of all this hair. In the last four years, it had grown past my shoulders and my beard is gross, even to me.

With her hand on the light switch, Coco hesitates halfway out the door. Pivoting around, she looks at me with tears in her eyes. “Thank you for saving me tonight, Bodhi. I’ll never be able to repay you for what you did.” Her lower lip trembles for only a moment before she composes herself. “Goodnight, Bodhi.”

“Goodnight, Coco.”

She flicks off the light and I'm left in darkness for a few moments until my eyes start to adjust to the shadows. After living on the streets for so many years, my eyes became accustomed to seeing at night.

The only sound is the beat of my heart matching the pounding in my head and the light whooshing of air from the ceiling fan. I turn on my side thinking it might help my head when I think I hear a faint a whimper. Closing my eyes, I try to will away the pain. The medicine has helped but only enough to take the edge off. I fly off the bed when I hear a gut-wrenching sob. I'm down the stairs and searching for Coco frantically. Earlier she gave me a brief tour of the house and showed me where her room was in case—I don't know what. If something truly bad happened to me then I wouldn't be able to get to her in the first place, but I listened and agreed to make her feel better. In the dark, I'm all turned around and run straight into a wall.

I find Coco in her bathtub with her chest to her bent up knees. Her arms are wrapped around herself as she sobs uncontrollably. She hasn't realized I'm here yet and I'm unsure what to do. Do I announce my presence and try to soothe her or silently back out of the room?

Her eyes slowly open and she takes me in. "Bodhi?" she cries.

Kneeling on the floor, I rub my hand up and down the smooth skin of her back. "I'm so-sorry," I stammer. "I heard a noise and went to investigate and then I...I'm sorry. I can leave if you want. I didn't mean to invade—"

"Please stay," Coco whimpers. "I thought I'd be fine, but I can't stop thinking about what would have happened if you hadn't shown up tonight. I kept trying to wash the dirt away from my knee, but after a few minutes, I realized it wasn't dirt but a bruise. This is going to sound terrible and vain, but I couldn't find the nerve to look at myself in the mirror. My lip and eye..."

I soothe my hand down her back. “There’s nothing wrong with being scared. I don’t blame you for not wanting to see the damage. It will only make tonight more of a reality, but I can assure you it’s not as bad as you think.”

She rests her cheek to her knees and closes her eyes. “You’re just saying that to make me feel better, but I appreciate it.”

I’m not lying. Yes, her creamy skin is now turning shades of purple and blue in places, but she’s still beautiful.

Glistening eyes open and I swear I see deep into her soul. Coco didn’t deserve this. Any of what she’d experienced in the last month with her parents’ deaths, her ex-boyfriend showing up out of nowhere, and feeling like someone is watching her—as guilty as it made me feel, I couldn’t stop watching or listening to her and Trixie.

“Can you...I don’t know,” she shrugs as best she can in her position without exposing herself, “talk to me.”

Keeping my eyes on her face is incredibly trying. My body wants to react to being in such close proximity to her naked form, but if she notices, then I really am the creep they’ve always said I am.

“What do you want to talk about?” I have nothing interesting to say and don’t want to talk about life on the streets.

“Anything. Just keep my mind off tonight.”

Leaning back against the wall, I stretch out and get comfortable. My long legs eat up the space between us. For a moment, I watch Coco run her sponge thingy down her legs, transfixed. What can I say to keep her from ruminating on the night?

“I found a job.” Her eyes pop open and a small smile graces her face, but I continue on. “It’s at a homeless shelter I stay at. I wasn’t looking for a job.” I guffaw. “They approached me after I’d been staying there a few days. I thought I was in trouble or they were going to tell me not to come back.” I straighten up and run my hands down my legs. “Not that I’d done anything wrong, but I couldn’t figure out why the director would want to talk to me.”

“That’s great. What do you do?” Her words are soft and somehow I know she means them.

“I guess you could say I run an after-school program for the kids who stay there. We do art projects. It’s a great outlet for them to express themselves. I’m going to see if the shelter has any money in the budget to buy some pumpkins the kids can decorate.”

“They’re very lucky to have you.” She splashes water on her arms as she watches me. “From seeing your work earlier today, you’re very talented. I can’t believe what you transformed those pumpkins into. To even think of what you did is astounding. Definitely beyond my creativity.”

“Thank you.” I can feel my cheeks heat from her praise, and I look down.

My gaze is instantly back on her as she takes a washcloth from the side of the tub, discreetly covers her breasts and leans back. “No, thank you. I really think we have a chance to win the Halloween competition.”

“There’s a competition?” I guess that makes sense as to why the town went a little crazy with the decorations. I vaguely remember her mentioning something about it when I carved the pumpkins.

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“Oh God, I guess I didn’t explain myself well enough earlier,” she laughs for a second. Her whole body relaxes, losing the tension I hadn’t noticed it was holding. “I can’t imagine what you must have thought.”

I shrug feeling stupid that I hadn’t realized the town did it for a reason. “I thought it was a little overboard, but in a good way. It’s...cheerful in a way. Makes the city as a whole seem homey. Welcoming. At least that’s the way it makes me feel.”

“Oh,” she smiles, “that’s the way it should be. Is that what made you stay?”

“Part of it.”

Coco’s gaze travels down my torso and stops. Looking down, I realize that the robe she provided me is laying open, and she’s stuck on my very tiny pair of underwear. I can’t remember where I found them, but they fit so I wear them. They’re men’s bikini briefs with polka dots on them. Not very manly, but beggars can’t be choosers. I pull the robe closed and once again lean back against the wall.

“You’re a beautiful man, Bodhi. You shouldn’t hide yourself.”

10

Coco

Holy fucking shit!Bodhi’s body is banging. Who knew he had such an amazing physique underneath his clothes? I knew he wasn’t in bad shape and on more than one occasion, I’d checked out his tanned muscular legs, but that was just a peek. Now

I'm seeing the whole enchilada. Well, almost everything. I desperately want to see what he's packing without the polka-dotted underwear hindering the view.

Holding his robe closed after he tied it tightly, I watch as his cheeks pink up—at least I think they do. It's hard to tell with all his hair, but with the way he keeps his eyes trained on the floor between us, it's a pretty good bet. It's cute. I can't remember the last time a guy blushed around me. Maybe middle school?

A shiver wracks my body and Bodhi immediately sits up straight. "You should probably get out and I should...go. You need your sleep." He stands as if ready to bolt out the door. I appreciate the way he hasn't ogled my body even when he had the chance, and in turn, I feel safer with him here.

When I start to stand, he turns around so quickly the robe flies out. "Bodhi," I call, wrapping a towel around myself. It's nice and warm from the warming rack giving a false sense of security.

"Yeah?" he asks, examining his toes.

"Do you think you could sit with me for a while? I could turn on a movie or something. The cable is hooked up. I'm...scared to be alone right now. Every time I close my eyes—"

"Say no more," he interrupts, his voice rougher than normal. His hand flexes on the door frame.

"Thanks. I'll be out in a few minutes," I say to give him a reprieve. I can't understand how a man that big is so shy, but he is, and I find it extremely endearing. As much as I want to know Bodhi's full story, I won't push him.

I quickly dry off and run a towel through my hair before slipping on another pair of

sweats. They're big and oh so comfortable as I drown in the soft fabric.

Padding down the hallway, I spot Bodhi on the couch looking down at the remote in his large hands with furrowed brows and his lips turned down.

Shit. I totally forgot that it took me almost two months to figure out how to work that damn remote.

"Do you want anything while I'm up?" I peek at him from over my shoulder as I make my way to the kitchen to get a bottle of water for myself.

"Uh..." He's wide-eyed as if I just asked him to save the Earth. He tightens the robe around him looking uncomfortable. I wish I had something else for him to wear so he'd be more comfortable, but I don't mind seeing so much of him and secretly hope the robe falls open again. "If it's not too much trouble I'll take a water."

"Of course, it's no trouble. Do you care if I turn on the fireplace? It makes me feel...safe in a way."

With sad eyes, he replies, "Like home."

Where's home for Bodhi?

After retrieving the water, I sit down on the couch as close to Bodhi as I can without making him uncomfortable, I can't help but trail my eyes up his toned and tanned legs. Hell, even his feet are sexy. What the hell is wrong with me? You'd think I'd never been this close to a man. Bodhi has an amazing body that on any other day, I'd have no problem licking every inch of, but the scraggly hair that reaches past his shoulders and the unkempt beard are too much. All I can see are his eyes, the tops of his cheeks and his scrumptious lips, and with a body like a Greek God, underneath all that hair he's gotta be ugly. Why else would he be covering up his face?

“I couldn’t figure out this thing.” He fiddles with the remote and I realize I’ve spent too long staring.

Trading his water for the remote, I sink back into the cushions and pull a blanket onto my lap. “What are you in the mood for?”

Bodhi’s so quiet that I finally look over at him to find him staring down at his water bottle. How insensitive can I be? Who knows how long it’s been since he’s watched TV?

“I haven’t been sleeping the best lately and I’ve been binge watching Friends. Have you ever watched it?” I don’t try to hide the hopeful tone in my voice.

Shaking his head at me, he wrinkles his nose. “I’ve caught it a time or two, but it seemed like a chick show.”

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What?! My mouth falls open. I'm flabbergasted. "Well, I'm here to change your mind."

He snickers at me. "I've never been one to watch too much TV, but I'm willing to watch it with you if it will make you feel better."

Instantly the night comes back to me. Leaving Tricks and being thrown up against the wall, feeling my skin scraping against the brick wall of the building, being hit and blinded by pain, and then Bodhi.

"Hey, I'll watch whatever you want. Don't cry." He speaks quietly from his corner of the couch with concerned eyes.

Pulling the blanket up to my chin, I attempt to smile at him, but I know it doesn't reach my eyes. "It's not about Friends. For a few minutes I forgot about tonight and then—"

"I reminded you. Shit. I'm so sorry, Coco." A muscle ticks in his jaw and he shifts uncomfortably in his spot.

"It was bound to happen sooner or later, but it was nice while it lasted." I hit the power on the remote and wait for it to come alive and then switch over to Netflix and queue up Friends. "Do you want a blanket or anything?" He doesn't look cold, but maybe he'd like to cover up. I know I can't sit around the house without a blanket draped across me.

Bodhi eyes my blanket and nods. In some ways, it's so easy to forget that he's been

homeless for who knows how long and probably hasn't even had the bare essentials.

A yawn escapes my mouth and all of a sudden, I feel the weight of the night on me. I'm dead tired, but afraid of what will happen when I fall asleep. "Want to share mine? I'm too tired to get up and find one." Scooting closer, I start to place the blanket over his legs when the light from outside turns on and I jump.

Bodhi's head swivels back and forth from looking outside and at my frightened face. "Coco? Are you okay?"

"This is part of why I haven't been sleeping well." My voice shakes along with my hands. I stuff them under my legs to try to control them. "Every night the security lights come on, but when I look there's nothing out there."

"You think it's someone?" He stands, making the blanket fall from his lap and straightens to his full height.

"I'm not sure. That's the thing. I've felt like someone's been watching me for weeks now. Following me, but I've never seen anyone. It's just a feeling."

Bodhi's face darkens and some untold emotion flickers across his face. "Do you have the alarm set?"

Looking up at him, I'm surprised to see the piercing gaze of his eyes as he scans the outside from where he stands. "I do. I turned it on the moment you went upstairs to take a shower."

"Can you turn it off so I can go outside and check around the property? You can turn it back on while I'm out there if it will make you feel safer." He says all of this with his back to me while he continues to scan my property.

In all truth, the only thing making me feel safe is the giant of a man standing in my living room. “Let me go grab my phone and I’ll disable the alarm. That way I can stand at the door and disarm it again. Actually,” I stop and motion to Bodhi, “follow me and you can go out that way.”

As we walk back to my bedroom, I turn off the lights. If someone is out there, I don’t want them to see what we’re doing. One of the downfalls of having a house and ninety percent of the wall made of glass is there’s no privacy. Except there should be because I live out in the middle of nowhere with no one around for miles.

Disabling the alarm with the panel by the bed, I grab my phone off the charger and slide open the glass enough for Bodhi to slip through. I grab his arm as he steps outside. Turning back to me, he looks down at me with fierce protection in his eyes. “Please be careful.”

He nods and takes another step out into the night. “I promise. Make sure to lock up.”

Watching Bodhi with my face plastered against the glass, I lock it and enable the alarm. I won’t feel truly safe until he’s back by my side. It doesn’t take long for him to get lost in the shadows, but every so often a different security light turns on outside.

What the hell had I been thinking letting him go out there in only a robe? If something or someone is out there, he has no way to protect himself. I should have at least given him a flashlight to search with if only I knew where one was.

A shadow starts toward the house and my heart rate picks up speed. I can’t tell if it’s Bodhi or not. He’s too far away for the security light to come on. Whoever it is, is moving slowly. Is he hurt? Disabling the alarm and unlocking the door, I slide the glass open and call out to him. “Bodhi?”

“Get inside the house,” he barks from the other direction.

Not the shadow!

I stand frozen as if my feet are encased in cement as I look out to the edge of my property where the shadow stops after hearing Bodhi’s voice.

“Bodhi!” I shout, panic filling every inch of my body. Who the hell is out there?

“I said to get inside,” Bodhi growls from only a few feet away. I’d been so paralyzed by fear I hadn’t been paying attention to my surroundings. It very well could have been someone else who came up on me and not Bodhi. Gently he grabs my arms and pulls me inside the house before closing the door and locking it. Looking down, his gaze is on my phone. “Enable the alarm, Coco.”

“Right. Right,” I shake my head and hit the button to enable the alarm. “Should I call the police?”

“I don’t think that’s necessary. All I found was a—”

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“A person!” I say at the same time Bodhi says, “A dead cat.”

I step back and look up at him. “A dead cat?” I ask confused.

His back stiffens and his brows narrow. “What do you mean a person? What did you see, Coco?”

“Just what I said. I was looking out and saw a shadow moving over there,” I point in the direction the shadow man had been. “That’s when I called out for you and you answered...from a different direction.”

“And you just stood there? You could have been hurt or worse.” He looks back outside but there’s nothing to see. It’s completely dark out except for the landscaping lights and the city lights below. He turns back to me so that he’s right in front of me as if blocking me from whoever could be out there. “Has this happened before?”

“The lights have come on, but I’ve never seen anything before. I’ve never gone out there.” My body starts to tremble at the thought of what could have happened if I’d gone out there.

Placing his large warm hand on my arm, Bodhi speaks soothingly. “Hey, it’s okay. Nothing’s going to happen to you while I’m here. I won’t let anyone harm you.” The conviction in his words calms my nerves a fraction, but I can’t stop thinking if it could have been the man who attacked me tonight. Or could it have been Dwayne? I don’t think he’s capable of stalking me. He never cared enough to go to these extremes. Why would anyone attack me or try to scare me?

“Maybe you should call the police if you saw someone...they can examine the dead cat on your doorstep.”

“Could it have been an animal that brought it up? A coyote?” I hope for a simpler solution than someone placing it there on purpose.

“It’s possible,” he answers sounding unconvinced. “Call the police.” He looks up and seems to be examining something, but I have no idea what. Walking over to my bed, I slump down on it, unable to hold myself up any longer. Tilting his head to the side, Bodhi asks. “Do all your windows have shades?”

“Yeah, they’re built in. Why?”

He doesn’t answer me but asks another question. “Can you control them from your phone?”

“Yes, why?” I don’t understand why’s he’s asking me these questions.

“Close them. Close all of them, Coco, and do it now.” He orders turning to look at me, his face locked down.

I do as he says as I watch him observe the blinds coming down in the bedroom. The moment we can no longer see outside, he leaves the room and I follow him as if we’re tethered together. We move from room to room until he’s scrutinized every last window and we’re back in the living room where we started.

“Turn off all the lights. You can leave the fireplace on if you’d like and then call the police.” Bodhi moves to stand by the fireplace and stares out as if he can magically see through the shades.

I shut down the house, even the fireplace and then promptly key in 911 on my phone.

The entire time I relay what happened, I stare at Bodhi and answer the dispatcher's questions before hanging up. In the distance I think I hear my phone ringing, I continue to stare at the man in front of me as we wait for the police to arrive.

“I know this is none of my business, but do you have the money to have a fence built?” He breaks the silence after long minutes of nothing but us breathing.

I jump from the sudden noise and being freaked out. Deep down I know a coyote didn't leave a cat at my doorstep. If I had been feeding a cat, and it brought a dead bird, maybe, but not this. No, someone purposefully left me a dead present. Is it a threat? Is Bodhi not telling me something?

“I...yes, but I don't want a fence. I want an unobstructed view.”

“And I want to keep you safe and alive.” He looks down at me, his eyes and mouth unyielding. “At least meet with someone and see what your options are. You're out here in the middle of nowhere and the closest person is miles away. At least have your security put up motion censored cameras all around your property and send you an alert when there's movement.”

“That's a good idea and it would make me feel...better. Safer.” What would make me feel better is for the lights to stop popping on at night and for Bodhi to never leave, but I'm not going to voice that out loud.

“Good. Now, what do you want to do while we wait for the cops to show up? Watch Friends?”

I let out a humorless laugh. “I don't think even Friends can keep my mind off all that's happened tonight.”

“What will?” he asks in all innocence. How can he be so sweet and shy, and dare I

say perfect?

“Honestly, I don’t know,” I wrap my arms around myself. “Normally the only thing that settles me is doing hair.” I chuckle to myself. “That’s one of the reasons I got into being a stylist.”

Bodhi steps toward me with his hands clasped behind his back. “You can do my hair.” He shrugs as if it’s not a big deal. “You were going to do it tomorrow anyway, so why not now?”

“Are you sure?” My fingers twitch as if grabbing for the scissors. I’m desperate to cut his hair and see the man underneath.

He laughs and it’s beautiful. It’s deep and rough as if he hasn’t laughed in years making me desperate to make him laugh again and again. “You’re dying to get your hands on this.” He flicks his long hair with his index finger.

He’s right, I am, but I don’t want to be rude. I’m sure he hasn’t had his hair cut because he hasn’t had the money to get it cut.

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“Come on. Maybe you can get it done before the cops arrive.” He gestures for me to follow him. I follow him, unsure where he’s going. His steps falter at the staircase, looking over his shoulder he asks. “Do you have something to cut it with here?”

Putting my hands on my hips, I deadpan because, really, what hairstylist doesn’t have shears at home? “Of course, I do. They’re in my bathroom. My best ones are at the salon but the ones I have here aren’t bad.”

“Good.” He nods and looks up the stairs. “I suggest we go upstairs to a bathroom if that works for you.”

Unsure why he wants to go upstairs, I shrug and agree. “Let me go grab my shears.” Bodhi starts to head up the stairs and I grab his arm.

“Thank you for letting me do this. It means a lot you being here and keeping my mind off everything.”

Bodhi looks down embarrassed and mumbles, “It’s no problem.”

I wouldn’t be surprised if he isn’t blushing underneath that beard of his, but the shadows hide his pink cheeks.

* * *

I stand staring at Bodhi. If I were to try to dream up the perfect-looking man, I wouldn’t even come close to the man sitting before me. He’s smooth skinned and gorgeous. His hair is short on the sides and longer on top and curls in the cutest way

when it dries. I didn't want it to be too extreme even though it is pretty extreme from how long it was before he let me get my hands on it. He even let me hack off his beard and holy hell I didn't know what was underneath all that hair. I let him shave the rest off and I can't help but want to caress every inch of his handsome face.

Now that all the hair is gone, his hypnotic blue-green eyes stand out even more. They call to me on a level I don't understand and when my gaze pulls away from his, I'm met with his soft full lips that beg to be kissed.

My trance is broken when the doorbell rings.

11

Coco

Bodhi shifts awkwardly in the chair. "That's probably the police."

Is he worried about the cops?

"You can stay up here while I talk to them if you want." Now it's my turn to be nervous. The thought that Bodhi might be running from the law and that's why he's homeless never crossed my mind until this moment. He's always seemed so harmless.

Bodhi stands up and tightens the robe around him, shaking his head. I wish I had something else for him to wear. "I'm not letting you go down there by yourself. It could be the police or whoever the fuck was out there earlier," he growls, striding past me.

Following behind him like a lost puppy, I can't help but ogle his ass as he takes confident strides to the front door. It's like a switch has been turned on and he's a completely new man. He's confident and in charge and I love it.

He steps aside when we reach the door. I quickly disable the alarm and open the front door to see two men in uniform staring down at the dead cat on my front porch.

“Hello ma’am, my name is Office Walker and this is my partner Officer Cajigas, we received a call about a disturbance. Are you...” A tall and brawny man with black hair and blue eyes pulls out a small notebook. He looks a lot like Superman, and I can’t help but think this is the perfect profession for him. “...Coco Beckett, the owner of this house?”

“I am.” I clear my throat and pick at the sleeve of my sweatshirt. “I’m not sure how to do this. Do I invite you in?”

“That’s up to you, ma’am.” He looks down at the dead cat, I’m trying to keep my eyes off of. “My partner and I would like to get some information from you about what happened and check the premises.”

“That would make me feel better. Thanks.” I pick at the sleeve of my sweatshirt as I take in the cat.

“Is that your cat ma’am?”

“No, I’ve never seen it before in my life, but I’ve only lived here for a week.”

“Was it here when you arrived home tonight?”

“No.”

He writes something down in his notepad. “Do you know how it got here?”

“No, idea. The security lights came on and that’s when Bodhi found it. I called 911 after that.”

“Has anyone broken into the house?” the other officer asks. He’s rail thin with mousy brown hair and kind tawny eyes.

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“No, not that I know of.”

“Okay,” Officer Superman speaks up. “On most occasions we wouldn’t need to come inside, but I don’t think any of us want to keep looking at a dead animal.”

He is most certainly right. From the moment, I saw it, I’ve tried to keep my eyes away from it so I don’t throw up. It’s been mutilated with its head barely attached to its body.

“Why don’t come in, so we don’t have to stare at the dead cat.” I step back and hit the front of Bodhi’s warm, hard body. I want to sink into him, but now is not the time and I’m not sure how receptive he’d be. I get so many mixed vibes from him; I don’t know where I stand.

“And you are?” Officer two asks Bodhi, eying him up and down.

“Bodhi Rivers.” He extends a hand out to the police officers. “I was here when everything happened. I’m not sure if it has anything to do with earlier when Coco was attacked—”

“You were attacked earlier?” Officer two asks with concerned eyes.

“Yes, let’s go into the kitchen and I can make some coffee and tell you all about my night.” The last thing I want to do is go over everything again, but they need to know to do their job. I look at his badge and it’s some long name I’ll never be able to pronounce so I decide to keep calling them Officer One or Superman and Officer Two in my head. Walking to the kitchen, I answer over my shoulder. “The police and

paramedics were called out. It was at Tricks Salon. Is it not in the system?" I ask alarmed.

"Ma'am, it is but it will still be helpful for you to tell me in your own words what happened. My partner can talk to your friend about what he saw too."

Startled they're separating us; I look to Bodhi for assurance.

"It's okay." He nods.

Officer Two escorts Bodhi into another room. I can't hear them and for some reason anxiety fills me. What if they're not really cops? "Can I see some form of identification?"

Superman laughs but pulls out his badge and I examine it. I have no idea if it's real or not.

"How would I know if your badge is real or fake?" I bite my bottom lip and scrutinize the ID picture with the man in front of me.

He smiles and then sobers. "I'm sure tonight has been difficult for you, but why don't you sit down and tell me what happened so my partner and I can investigate."

"Do you want a cup of coffee?" I place a K-cup in the Keurig and try to relax.

"No, thank you, ma'am"

Sitting down with my coffee in hand, I retell the events of the night starting with leaving Tricks, Bodhi saving me, the lights coming on every night since I've moved in, and the shadow that was outside.

“Have you had any other dead animals or objectionable objects left on the premises? Any messages of any sort?” He scribbles down his notes with a look of concentration on his face. At least he’s taking me seriously, but why wouldn’t he? There’s evidence right outside on my front doorstep.

“Nothing. The only thing that’s been off is the security lights and the feeling of someone watching me, but that started before I moved here.”

“And who all knows you moved to this residence?”

“Only my friend and boss, and the movers, who I’d never seen before. Why? Do you think it’s someone I know?” I pick at the hem of my shirt underneath the table.

“Have you had a disagreement with anyone recently? Maybe an ex-boyfriend or someone you’ve turned down for a date?”

“Oh, no one’s asked me out in...forever. My ex-boyfriend did start showing up recently asking me to take him back, but I don’t think it could be him.”

“You’d be surprised by the number of people who think that. Give me his name and we’ll check his alibi. Better safe than sorry.”

“True.” I give him Dwayne’s name, physical description, and address. Dwayne’s an asshole, but I don’t think it’s him. He always thought he was too good for me and that had been the downfall of our relationship.

Bodhi and Officer Two walk into the kitchen and instantly Superman stands up. “We’ve already checked outside before we came up, but we’d like to check inside before we leave.” Officer Two says with his fingers hooked in his vest.

“Thank you for everything.” I look back and forth between the officers. The one who

had been with Bodhi is giving the other a strange look. I find a hole in the hem of my sweatshirt and loop my finger through it. “What’s going on?”

“Miss Beckett, when I spoke to the gentleman,” he nods toward Bodhi. “And asked his address—”

I cut him off not wanting him to shame Bodhi for his living arrangement. “I know where he lives. Thank you for your concern, but none is needed. If it weren’t for Bodhi...” I tear up and just want this horrible day to end. I want to forget about everything except for the man standing in front of me with concern in his eyes.

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“I understand Ma’am. That’s not where I was going with my question. Mr. Rivers has lived out on the streets and some of the people he may have come into contact with aren’t the savoriest of characters. Is it possible someone might have followed you home?”

Turning to face the officers, Bodhi blocks me from their view—or so I can’t see them, I can’t tell. “I don’t think anyone could have followed us. Coco’s property is too far away for anyone without the means of transportation to follow. As you can see it’s been an emotional day for Coco. If you could please check the house to see if you can find anything it would be very much appreciated. I think it will go a long way in helping her sleep tonight.”

Officer Superman steps around until he can see me. “If that’s okay with you?”

Straightening to my full height, I square my shoulders. “I’m perfectly safe with Bodhi.”

“Yes, Ma’am, I’m sure you are.”

The moment they leave the room, I slide down to the floor and look up to Bodhi. “Is that typical for you?”

His brows furrow. “Is what typical?”

“The police treating you like they did.”

“Oh,” he tilts his head from side to side. “That was nothing.” He smiles down at me

and extends his hand out. “Why don’t we go back and sit where the fire is?”

Taking his hand, I stand, and we walk silently back to the couch where I wrap myself in a blanket. “Does it really not bother you that they treat you differently because you don’t have a permanent address?”

He shifts on the couch to look at me better. “Is it fair? No, but I appreciate them looking out for you. They only want to make sure you’re safe, and that’s all that matters.” The sincerity ringing from his words lessens a little bit of the tension from the day.

I pull my legs up underneath myself. “Funny because I feel the safest when I’m with you. You’d never hurt me, would you?”

“Not on my life,” he answers immediately. “I’d rather hurt myself than you.”

“Do you think they’ll find anything?”

“In all honesty, no, I don’t think they will. For one, it will be hard to find any evidence in the dark and second, if every time your lights have come on it was someone out there, I think they know what they’re doing.” He grimaces. “I’m sorry that wasn’t what you wanted to hear.”

“It wasn’t what I wanted to hear, but it was the truth so thank you. You could have easily lied to me.”

“I won’t lie to you, Coco. I’ll answer any question you have for me...or at least I’ll try to.” Again, I know he’s telling me the truth and butterflies take flight in my stomach.

Officer Two walks into the living room and stops in front of us. “Ma’am, we looked

around the house but didn't see anything. I'm sorry. We'll bag up the cat and it will be put into evidence. Do you have someplace else to stay tonight? A relative or friend's house, perhaps?"

"I could stay with my friend, Trixie, but I don't want whoever did this to run me out of my house." I know it's not the smartest decision, but for now, I want to stay in my home.

"I highly suggest you stay elsewhere, but I can't force you. If you have any problems whatsoever, please don't hesitate to contact us. Here's my card with your report number on it."

After taking his card, I lock up for what feels like the millionth time that night and enable the alarm. For now, I'm keeping the shades drawn and my house on lockdown. Back on the couch with another blanket in tow, I yawn. I'm dead tired and I've never been more afraid to fall asleep in my life. I don't know what I'll see once I close my eyes.

"Bodhi?" I call his name hesitantly.

He looks up from situating the blanket over him. "Yeah?"

"I know this might seem strange, but can you hold me? I'm scared of falling asleep and you make me feel as if you'd do anything to protect me."

"I would do anything to protect you, Coco, and if you need me to hold you, I will." He pats the spot beside him on the couch and I eagerly slide in next to him. Wrapping his arm around my shoulders, I lay my head on his chest and place my hand on his taut abs.

At first, his body is rigid, but as the seconds pass, Bodhi slowly starts to relax. I'm

actually surprised he agreed. He's warm and hard, and smells of the vanilla body wash from upstairs and something uniquely him. The rest of the tension from the night slowly drains away with each second I'm wrapped in his arms.

"Goodnight, Bodhi, and thank you for everything." I yawn and snuggle deeper into his hard chest.

Tightening his arm around me, he pulls me closer. "Goodnight, Coco."

12

Bodhi

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I wake up, my body feeling as if it's being scorched by the sun and disorientated with hot breath on my neck. Slowly opening my eyes, I lift my head to see blonde hair cascading across my chest and down Coco's back. Taking in my surroundings, we're still in the living room, the fireplace blazing with the TV on mute. My back is in the corner of the sectional with one leg on the couch and the other foot on the floor. Coco is practically lying on top of me with one arm wrapped around my waist and a leg thrown over mine.

My dick has definitely noticed. Luckily it hasn't woken Coco up yet. That would be awkward. Before she can wake up and see my reaction to her body, I start to slide out from under her, but her arm tightens around me.

"Don't go," she mumbles into the side of my neck, each word a jolt to my body. "I haven't slept that good in...forever. Give me a few more minutes, please," she whispers as she nuzzles my neck.

What the hell is she doing? Does she know who she's snuggling with?

I can't deny her, so instead, I lie there staring at the ceiling thinking about every disgusting thing I can think of to will my hard-on away. A toothless meth addict giving a blow job under the highway, old lady naked, but nothing does a better job than thinking of running up on Coco getting attacked last night.

Shifting to sit up, Coco stretches her arms above her head and yawns. Her sweatshirt rides up and I see a sliver of her toned and tanned stomach and I have to fight with my dick again not to embarrass myself.

“Good morning. How’d you sleep?” She sits back and crosses her legs with a smile on her face. Coco seems to be a morning person. I’m not sure what I am. My body is used to getting very little sleep from being out on the streets and needing to keep one eye open.

Surprisingly, I slept great. Better than great. I stretch and put my other foot on the ground. Coco’s eyes follow my every movement darkening with—am I reading her expression right? “Really good. How’d you sleep?”

“Like a baby. I’m surprised I didn’t have a nightmare or wake up, but you make for a great resting place.” She smiles sweetly at me.

“I don’t think it was me. Your couch is surprisingly comfortable.”

“I know, right?” she says excitedly with a smile. “When I was at the store and sat on it, I knew I had to have it. Plus, it fills up the space well, don’t you think?”

I look around the room taking it in. The sectional does work well with the space, so I shrug. What do I know?

“It’s going to take me forever to fill all the rooms. Before this, I lived in a tiny apartment.” My shock must show on my face since she continues. “I wanted out of my parents’ house and there weren’t a lot of options, so I took the first open apartment. It wasn’t the greatest, but I wasn’t living under my parents’ thumbs.” Pulling her knees up to her chest, she sighs. “It seems stupid now. I would listen to them disapprove of every decision for the rest of my life if only they were still alive.”

Placing my hand over hers, I give her a sad smile. “I’m sorry, Coco. I know what it’s like to lose your parents young.”

“Are your parents dead too?” she asks quietly with heartbreak in every word.

“I’m not sure about my father. I never knew him.” I pull one of the blankets up over me as if to shield myself from the truth. “He took off before I was born. He told my mom he’d take care of her, but the second she started to show...he took off and she never heard from him again. My mom worked her ass off to provide for us, sometimes working two or three jobs.”

Scooting closer Coco takes my hand in hers. “That very commendable. I can see how much you loved her. Your face brightens up.”

“I do love her. She died right before I turned eighteen. I managed to stay out of the system for the short time between then and high school graduation. After that, I ran away from her memory.” I shake my head at my stupid eighteen-year-old self. Maybe if I had stayed in Nebraska and attended community college, I could have made more out of myself than the failure I am now.

“I wanted to run, and I would have if it wasn’t for Trixie and her threatening to hunt me down. So, I understand the need more than you might think.”

It’s hard to believe she’d want to leave when she has all this, but I do know that just because you have money doesn’t make you happy or for the pain to be any less.

I squeeze her hand. “I can tell you from experience it does get better with time. You’ll always miss them, but it won’t always hurt so bad.”

“That’s what they say. It’s still so fresh for me that there doesn’t seem to be a light at the end of the tunnel, but I hope you’re right.” Coco squeezes my hand back before standing up. “I don’t know about you, but I could stand to use the ladies’ room and a cup of coffee. Would you like a cup?”

I shake my head and stand, stretching out my body.

“Do you remember where the laundry room is? Your clothes should be clean and dry by now.”

“Thanks for taking me in last night.”

“Yeah,” she frowns, her big blue eyes looking sad, “I definitely didn’t do a very good job of taking care of you, but I guess it’s safe to say you don’t have a concussion.”

Pretty safe to say, and it was all worth it for me to be here last night when Coco was scared.

“Go get dressed,” she orders with a smile.

After getting dressed, I decide to go outside in the light of day to see if I can spot anything that seems amiss. Coco’s in the kitchen making her coffee humming along to some song that seems vaguely familiar.

“Can you deactivate the alarm?” Looking up at me, Coco’s eyes widen. “I want to go outside now that I can see and look around.”

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“Oh...are you sure? We can...just stay inside.”

I hate that she's scared to go outside. That's no way to live your life. “Open the shades and you can watch me if it will make you feel better. I doubt anyone is out there right now.”

“But they might be back tonight.” Her chin trembles.

If she's right and there was someone there every time her security lights came on, she's right that whoever it is will probably be back. “Maybe with the police showing up last night, he won't come back.”

“You don't believe that,” Coco says barely above a whisper.

I can't lie to her. “It's what I hope. Now let me go check around outside and I'll be right back. I promise.”

“Fine,” she answers reluctantly. Taking her phone, she opens the shades and we stand silently watching as the light filters into the room. After a few moments of looking outside from her spot, Coco turns off the alarm. “Please be safe, Bodhi.”

Unlocking the door, I nod and step outside into the warm sunlight. I still haven't gotten used to the fact that it feels like summer in October here. At least I have a place to sleep at night. The extreme temperatures really did a number on me when I first moved here.

The outside of Coco's house is as beautiful as the inside. There's an outdoor kitchen,

a bar with a pool and hot tub, along with a fire pit. If she wasn't scared of someone being outside stalking her, I bet Coco would spend her evenings outside enjoying the beautiful scenery. I trail along the property line, looking for anything out of the ordinary but don't find anything. I'm not sure I'd know it if I saw anything. As I make my way back to the house, I stop by a planter full of little red flowers and break off one of the bunches. I'm showing my hand and I hope it doesn't freak Coco out when I give them to her.

Coming up to the sliding glass wall where I exited the house, I stand waiting for Coco to let me in. Beginning to worry when she doesn't immediately come to the door, my mind races with possibilities of what could have happened. Before I panic, I decide to walk along the side of the house. Keeping my eyes trained on the inside with each passing moment, a pit starts to form in my stomach. When I see her curled up in a chair on the phone, I let out a sigh of relief knowing that she's inside and safe.

Jumping up, Coco runs to the door and unlocks it before stepping back to let me in. "Trixie, uh...I'll call you back later." She pauses listening to her friend. "Yeah, everything is fine." Another pause. "I promise I'm going to take it easy and will call you if I need anything." Pause. "Bye, Trix."

Locking the door, she turns back to me. "Did you find anything?"

With my hands behind my back, I shake my head. "Nothing, but I'm not surprised. Is everything with your friend okay?"

"Oh, yeah, she's fine with me not coming in today. I'm a little sore..." I eye the bruising on her face. "Okay, I'm a lot sore, but it's more my state of mind. I would probably jump at every little noise and I don't think I could concentrate so I'm taking a mental health day. What about you? When do you work, or do you work today?" She fidgets with the end of her shirt sleeve, something she seems to do when she's nervous.

“I have to be at work by three-thirty. The class I run is from four to six.” Coco looks outside and back to me. “We have plenty of time, don’t worry.”

“Is it strange that I feel safe when I’m with you?” Her big blue eyes well up, and glisten with unshed tears.

To hear Coco say those words does something strange inside of me. It makes what I’ve been feeling since the moment I saw her feel validated. “I don’t think it’s strange for you to feel that way.” It’s now or never. Taking a deep breath, I let it out slowly through my nose. Bringing my hand from behind my back, I hold out the flowers to Coco. I do feel bad that I picked her flowers, but I didn’t have any other option if I wanted to give her a flower today.

Her eyes widen as she clamps her hand over her mouth. Looking back and forth from the flowers to my face, she takes the flowers with a shaky hand.

“You’re the one who’s been leaving me flowers every day?”

13

Coco

Walking backward, I stop when the back of my knees hit the chair I was previously sitting in. I’m gobsmacked. Lifting the flowers to my nose, I stare up at Bodhi. Yes, I know what the flowers smell like because they’re from right outside, but I can’t help myself.

Bodhi moves to stand behind the couch and clears his throat. His eyes can’t seem to meet mine. “Do you want me to leave?”

I don’t want him to leave. I want Bodhi to stay another night or three or more.

Turning back to the sliding wall, Bodhi unlocks it and slides it open. His eyes are downcast, and he wrings his hands in front of him. "I'm so...sorry, Coco. I promise I won't bother you again. Make sure to lock the door and turn on your alarm." He steps outside as my heart breaks for him. Why does he think I don't want anything to do with him? Because he leaves me flowers every morning and makes my day?

I blink and he's gone. I don't see him anywhere. Running outside, I look right and then left, but it's like he's vanished into thin air. I head around the corner of the house to see him halfway down the driveway at a fast pace.

Cupping my hands around my mouth, I yell as I keep walking. "Bodhi!" Either he doesn't hear me, or he doesn't want to stop. I take off in a run as I try to catch up with him. "Bodhi, please stop! Please!" I pant out. When he stops walking and turns around, I nearly fall to the ground in relief. "Bodhi, please don't go!"

Slowly we walk toward each other. My mind's going a mile a minute trying to think of what I'm going to say to him because underneath all that gorgeousness that is Bodhi Rivers is a sweet and sensitive man. I can't see the look on his face. His face is bowed with his hands hanging at his sides. The moment we're in proximity of each other, I grab his hand in mine and hold on for dear life. Fire zips up my arm and I hold him tighter, loving the way it feels each time we touch.

"I'm sorry." I blurt out as I pull him back to my house. "I was deep in my head and the next thing I knew you were gone." I know if Bodhi didn't want to come, he could easily stop me from manhandling him, but he lets me bring him back. Maybe it's just for a ride since it would be a long walk back.

Once we're close to the house, Bodhi stops in his tracks and looks around. "You didn't close the door."

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“I wasn’t thinking. I only wanted to get to you before you were too far gone.” I bite the inside of my cheek. “Probably not the smartest thing to do when someone was out here last night.”

Keeping his eyes on the house, he pulls me along. “You stay out here while I check inside.”

Now that I’m thinking clearly, I don’t want to stay outside. What if he comes back? What if he came back while the house was open and is inside waiting for Bodhi?

Stepping inside, I call out to him when I don’t see him. “Bodhi?”

“Still checking. Go back out until I know everything is fine in here,” he yells from what sounds like upstairs. He might be sweet and sensitive, but he can also be bossy it seems. I don’t mind though since it’s for my wellbeing.

Since I haven’t lived in the house long, I go sit at the pool. I have yet to use it, but I plan to rectify that starting now. Pulling my sweatpants up to my knees, I hang my feet in the water. The cool water feels great on my sticky skin after chasing Bodhi down. Leaning back, I tilt my head up to the sky wondering if Bodhi came back to the house with me because he wants a ride back or for another reason. I’d like to think it has something or everything to do with me.

“You were supposed to stay alert and outside,” he huffs, sitting down beside me.

Slipping his shoes and socks off, he sits down beside me and lets his long legs dangle in the water. “The house is safe in case you were wondering.”

Turning to look at him with my hand shielding my eyes from the sun, I see a smirk on his handsome face. Seems like he's forgiven me.

"I figured otherwise you'd be dragging me off and calling the cops."

Shaking his head, he smiles down at me. "I'd be in there fighting to the death if someone was in your house to hurt you."

I giggle. He's more like an angel with the sun around him, blinding me. "Are you my knight in shining armor?"

Wheeling back to face the pool, Bodhi hangs his head. "I'm no one's knight. Not even to myself. Don't put too much stock in me or you'll wind up disappointed." The dejected tone in his voice kills me and I know I need to figure out a way for him to believe in himself again.

"I beg to disagree. You saved me twice last night."

Bodhi opens his mouth, but I hold my hand up. I don't want to hear his disagreement and I want to talk about earlier.

"About earlier when you left...I'm sorry. I was thinking about how sweet and caring you are. It's not a trait you find in most men or, at least, none that I've known. I'm sorry I was so lost in my head that you felt the need to leave. I'm glad you came back with me." I smile shyly up at him. "And I'm happy to know it's been you leaving me flowers every day. It was you, right?"

I'd feel like an ass if it wasn't and I just assumed because he brought me flowers this morning. Maybe he was just trying to cheer me up after a less than spectacular day yesterday.

Shit!What if I had this all wrong?

“It was me. The first time I saw you, you were crying, and I wanted to do something to make you feel better.” Bodhi runs his hands down his shorts. “I had nothing, but I thought maybe a flower would cheer you up, and then I saw your smile when you found it. After that moment, I couldn’t stop bringing you a flower each morning.”

I’m near to bursting with happiness on the inside, but I keep it to myself. He seems almost embarrassed by his actions. “They brightened up each day, and I looked forward to getting one from my secret admirer. That’s what Trixie started calling you. I tried to envision who would bring me flowers...it was a very pleasant surprise to know it was you all along. Thank you.” I lean up and kiss him on the cheek.

Bodhi’s body tenses and I quickly draw away.

“So,” I draw out the word, “I was thinking while you were inside that I haven’t had a chance to enjoy the pool since I moved in and today’s the perfect day to lounge around and soak up the sun. What do you say?”

Kicking his feet in the water, he leans back on his forearms. “You want me to stay and swim with you?”

Leaning back like him, I tilt my head to him. “Why wouldn’t I? I think it will be nice and if you’re worried about making it work, don’t be. I promise to get you back in time.”

“If you don’t mind me hanging out in my underwear again?” He laughs looking down at himself.

If it was up to me, I’d have Bodhi in only his underwear all the time, but I’m not sure he’s ready for that.

I shrug and give him a smug smile. “I don’t mind if you don’t mind seeing me in my bikini.”

Bodhi’s Adam’s apple bobs and I want to cheer. He likes me, but something is holding him back. From my experience with men, I’m sure me living in this palatial house is intimidating, especially when he’s living at a homeless shelter. If I had brought him back to my old apartment, maybe he’d feel differently, but I’m unsure. The only thing I can do is try to make him feel welcome and show him I don’t care about how much money he has. I just hope he lets me.

* * *

A couple hours later and I’m nice and bronze. Bodhi now has a deep tan that makes his Caribbean blue eyes pop. I swear his hair has lightened in the short amount of time in the sun. He watches me from his raft, one long leg drifting in the water, eyes glued to my breasts like they have been for the last hour.

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“I hate to cut the party short, but I think we should go inside and get cleaned up before I take you...to work.” Going by my estimation it’s close to noon and even though Bodhi hasn’t said anything, I think he’s nervous about not making it to work on time. He’s looked up to the sky as if to tell the time like he has every ten minutes since we’ve been out here. “Are sandwiches okay for lunch?”

Closing his eyes, Bodhi looks away. “You don’t need to feed me. I can get something to eat at the shelter.”

I do, in fact, need to feed him and need to step up my game from sandwiches and takeout. Too bad I never learned to cook. Maybe while he’s working, I can watch some cooking shows. That is, if he accepts when I ask him to come back.

“It would be rude for me to eat in front of you, don’t you think? I’m going to make me a sandwich and thought you might like one too. Do you like cheesy egg sandwiches?”

Bodhi scrunches his nose. “An egg sandwich?”

“Yes,” I laugh, “do they not have eggs where you come from?”

“Of course, they have eggs where I come from.” He looks up and then at me as if I’m stupid or maybe that’s how I’m feeling. Who doesn’t have eggs in the US? “I’ve just never heard of having cheesy ones on bread.”

“I’ll make you one to see if you like it. I love them and could eat them every day. I’ll have them ready when you get out of the shower.”

He shifts uncomfortably. “Are you not going to shower?”

Is he picturing me naked in the shower?

I know I’m going to be picturing him in my head when I know he’s under the spray of water, all wet and soapy.

Maybe I’ll have to whip out my vibrator while he’s at work instead of learning to cook. Otherwise, I might jump him tonight.

If he says yes, Coco.

“No, I’m too hungry since we skipped breakfast. Plus, I think I’ll soak in the tub later.”

Bodhi chuckles, a deep rumbling little thing. “Haven’t you gotten your fill of the water?”

“Never.” I smile at him, remembering how my mother would have to beg me to come inside to eat and go to bed when I was little. I’d spent every waking minute in the pool. “My mom used to call me a little fish, I spent so much time in our pool when I was young.”

His eyes flit around to the house and around the property before coming back to me. They always come back to me and observe me as if I’m a mystery. “Did you grow up in a house like this?”

I don’t want to admit how I grew up, but I also don’t want to lie to him. “Like this, no,” I look around at the modern house. My mother went through so many phases of decor while I grew up, but the minimalist modern is my favorite by far. Scrunching my nose, I frown. “The house I grew up in was huge. You could probably put two of

this house in it easily, but it never felt like a home. My mom was constantly changing out the furniture to what was new and hip with her friends. It was like living in a museum. The house had to be kept immaculate in case anyone stopped by unannounced, making it feel more like a prison than a home.” I feel like the person I’ve strived to not be complaining about my upbringing to him. Selfish and entitled. “How did you grow up?”

“Nothing like this. Everything I had was a hand-me-down from someone who had it handed down to them. We lived in a tiny house that seemed to always be cold. Probably because my mom couldn’t afford to pay for heat.”

I wait for more, but it never comes. Bodhi seems lost in thought as he stares unfocused into his memories and then abruptly stands up. “I’m going to take that shower now if the offer still stands?”

“Of course, it does. I’ll make us some sandwiches.” We exit the pool and head inside. When he hits the stairs, I call to him. “Do you like mayo?”

“Um...yeah, why?”

“I put it on my cheesy egg sandwiches.”

His eyes grow wide and he shakes his head. “Yeah, I think I’ll skip the mayo on mine.”

“You’re missing out.” I laugh.

The eggs are almost done when Bodhi strides into the kitchen dressed in his clothes from yesterday and wet hair. How is it fair that men take so little time getting ready?

“It will be another few minutes before it's finished. Do you want yours on toast?”

Bodhi stops in his tracks and looks at me as if I've lost my mind. "Sometimes if I don't have mayo, I put mine on toast."

"Why not?" He laughs.

"Cool," I add the cheese and mix it in as Bodhi looks down at the pan, his mouth pulled to one side. "Can you put the bread in the toaster while I finish up?" I don't want to burn the eggs since they're one of the few things I can make. I pull out the toaster from a cabinet.

I watch him out of the side of my eye and almost ruin the eggs from my ogling. I've found men attractive before. I mean who hasn't? But after seeing him in only his underwear all day as we relaxed in the pool and what had been hidden underneath all that hair, I can't help myself, especially with the added benefit of finding out he's my secret admirer.

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I'm going to have to call Trixie and let her know, or maybe I'll wait since she'll want to know all about Bodhi and why he's been here. As much as I love her, I don't want her to ruin what's barely started and scare Bodhi away.

After scooping the eggs onto the bread, I sit down on one of the bar stools and wait for Bodhi to take his first bite. Knowing I'm watching, he overeagerly takes a big bite and chews with exaggeration. I'm about to ask him if he likes it when my phone rings in the living room. Running to answer my phone before whoever it is hangs up, I'm surprised when I see an unknown number on the caller ID.

Hesitantly I answer hoping it's not a telemarketer. "Hello?"

"Miss Beckett, it's Officer Walker. How are you today?" His deep voice rumbles.

"I'm fine. I stayed home and rested. How are you?" I ask wondering if they got a lead and that's why he's calling.

"I'm good. Thank you for asking. I wanted to let you know that we went by your ex-boyfriend, Dwayne's house this morning and he has an alibi. If you think of anyone else, who might want to see you harmed or has a grievance with you, please don't hesitate to call me or if you see anyone outside your property again."

"Do you think whoever it was will come back?" I ask as I walk back into the kitchen. Bodhi's head shoots up at my question.

"If you're right and someone has been setting off your security lights then, yes, I do believe they'll be back. I suggest you stay at a friend's house or have someone stay

with you. You know the saying better safe than sorry.”

“Thank you, Officer, for calling and updating me.” Now I’m definitely going to ask Bodhi if he’ll stay with me tonight.

“It’s no problem, ma’am. Have a great rest of your day.”

“I will. Thank you again, Officer.” I take a shaky breath at the thought that whoever it was will be back. I hate feeling unsafe in my own home and the thought of Bodhi not being here makes my heart rate pick up.

Shakily, I sit down beside Bodhi and stare down at my lunch. How has my life turned into this? Why did someone attack me? Why is someone coming to my house night after night? Is it a neighbor coming onto my property? It couldn’t be with how far the closest one lives. Maybe Bodhi was right and I should have cameras installed all around the property instead of only at the front door.

“Is everything okay?” Bodhi tilts his head to the side as he scrutinizes me with worried eyes.

“I don’t know. That was one of the officers from last night and he said my ex has an alibi for yesterday. I guess that’s good. I didn’t think it was him, but then again, I have no idea who it could be.” I shrug and lay my head on the counter. “I don’t have enemies. I pissed off some society people when I decided that I wasn’t going to spend all my life organizing charities, but this seems a little too far, don’t you agree?”

“I think so, but I’ve never lived that lifestyle. Maybe one of them is crazy and you’re their target. I’m sorry I’m no help.”

“Please,” I make an exasperated sound at him, “you’ve been a big help. I don’t know what I would have done without you here last night. Probably curled up in a corner

and cried.”

“I doubt that. You handled yourself pretty well given the circumstances. I mean what are the odds you’d be attacked and have someone leave a dead animal on your doorstep all in one night?”

“A million to one,” I answer bitterly. Who knows what the odds are, but it does seem crazy that two things I never thought would happen to me, happened on the same night. “I’ve wanted to ask you something all day, but I haven’t had the nerve to ask and I’m going to have to take you to work soon so...I was wondering...”

Sitting back, Bodhi gives me his full attention. His eyes on mine instead of my breasts. Another thing I like about Bodhi. “Wondering what?”

“After work will you come back and stay with me another night?”

14

Bodhi

“Your friend is outside waiting for you,” Lucille smiles at me with a glint in her eye.

She was all over me when I showed up earlier and saw Coco dropping me off. It didn’t matter how many times I told her that we’re only friends and I’m helping her out with a difficult situation. Lucille is convinced there’s more going on.

“I saw the way you looked at her and the way your face lit up when I told you she was waiting for you. You can’t fool me, boy.” She cackles.

“There’s no harm in looking but trust me she doesn’t feel the same way I do.” And she never will.

Putting her hands up in surrender, she backs away. “I don’t want to argue, but I think you’re wrong.” I go to deny her claim, but Lucille puts up her hand. “Since you don’t have eyes in the back of your head, you didn’t see the way she was looking at you when you walked away.”

I’m typically not arrogant but yeah, I know I look good. I’ve maintained my body, and I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror this afternoon when I showered. I almost forgot what I looked like it had been so long since I last shaved, but staring back at me was a baby-faced young man I hadn’t seen in the last four years. Now I look human instead of like a yeti with my new haircut.

“Like I said there’s no harm in looking, but she’ll never be interested in me that way.” Only in my fantasies.

Lucille’s brows pull together, and her head tilts to the side. “Why do you say that?”

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“Come on now, Lucille. You know my circumstances. I’d be out on the streets if it weren’t for you. There’s nothing for me to contribute. What kind of relationship can we have? She’s better off not knowing me. Did you see the car she dropped me off in? Well, that’s nothing compared to her house. She’s loaded and can have anyone she wants.”

“And you think that someone can’t be you?”

“Why would it be me?” I shake my head at her.

“Why wouldn’t it? I’ve seen this time and time again when people finally get off the streets. They no longer have any self-confidence, but trust me, you’re worth it to someone. I can’t say if it’s the girl outside in her expensive car or if it’s someone you’ll meet later down the line, but I’ve seen your kind heart and how well you work with the children here.” Her smile widens. “You’re most definitely a catch if I do say so myself.”

It’s sweet of her to say, and maybe she’s right about my self-confidence being gone after living so long on the streets, but Coco is simply out of my league. I’m just happy she’s let me be in her orbit.

“Are you going to be gone again tonight?” she asks waggling her all gray eyebrows comically.

“She asked me to stay another night, so I’m going to grab my things. I’ll be back tomorrow.”

“You don’t have to be back until Monday for your class. I won’t give away your bed until you tell me to, I promise. Now hurry and get your things before you leave your girl waiting too long.”

Realizing that it doesn’t matter what I say, I only smile at Lucille as I pass her on my way to my room. I grab my backpack with all my belongings in it. I haven’t unpacked even though Lucille encouraged me to do so. After protecting my things for years and almost giving up my life once, I can’t bring myself to unpack. It would be too easy for someone to steal something, and I barely have any possessions as it is.

Do I bring everything with me or do I risk it and only take a change of clothes for tomorrow? I don’t want to look like I’m moving in when she only asked me to stay for the night. As much as I want to trust the people here, I’m not there yet so I sling my backpack over my shoulder and head out to the parking lot.

I find Coco rocking out in her car, beating the steering wheel like a drum. Loud music thumps from inside. She looks like she doesn’t have a care in the world as her lips move with the song. She’s carefree and beautiful. A goddess here on Earth. Not wanting to scare her, I knock on the window. She screams, clutching her chest as she looks at me wide eyed.

When I go to open the passenger door, I find it locked. Probably a smart idea for the area we’re in. Fumbling, Coco unlocks the door, her hands shaking.

Bending down, I look at her from my side of the car. “I’m so sorry, Coco. I didn’t mean to scare you. I was trying to do the exact opposite.”

“It’s fine,” she replies shakily. Her cheeks are flushed, and her eyes are still big as she looks at me.

“I’m really sorry. If you want me to stay here, I can.” I set my bag on the ground and

squat so I can see her better.

“Don’t be silly, Bodhi. I’m not scared of you. You make me feel safe.” She laughs a high tinkling laugh that’s so unlike her real laugh.

Reaching across the car, I take her hand in mine. “Did something happen?”

Coco looks down at her hand in mine. Maybe I overstepped my boundaries with touching her. I try to pull my hand back, but she tightens her grip. “Nothing happened except I was alone for a few hours. I had all these plans, and they all went out the window the second I stepped foot into my house. God, Bodhi what if I can’t be alone without being scared for my life?”

I don’t know what to say. I don’t think she wants to hear me say that it’s normal to be scared, but what else is there to say? I can’t imagine being in her position. I’ve been scared plenty of times while I was out on the streets and my only solution was to stay up and tried to protect myself as best I could.

“I can promise you won’t be scared forever. Are you scared of being attacked, or of someone coming to your house?”

“Is it crazy I think someone is going to try to get me in my house?”

Moving to sit inside the car, I keep her hand in mine. “Not at all. No one expects you to be unfazed by what happened. Maybe you should stay in a hotel or with your friend until you aren’t overwhelmed and feel safe.”

“I felt safe with you there,” she says on a whisper. “I know we’ve only known each other for a short while and it’s probably crazy for me to ask you to stay with me, but it would mean a lot to me. I promise to entertain and feed you,” she cringes. Her hand becomes sweaty in mine. “I have a confession to make... eggs are about the only

thing I know how to cook. My plan for today was to watch cooking shows and hope to come up with something for dinner.”

Does Coco only associate me with the need for food?

“You don’t need to cook for me. I don’t want you to see me like that... I’m... I’ve got...” I look out the door unsure how to continue. I don’t want to be her charity case, but her hero.

“I don’t see you as anything but the beautiful man who saved me last night and indulged in my craziness to stay with me. We both have to eat, and I’ve got that amazing kitchen that I’m not using. You’re an excuse for me to step up my skills and not eat out every night.” She places her other hand on my bicep and softly asks. “Bodhi, will you please look at me?”

Why couldn’t I have met Coco when I was in New York and had a promising career? Not when I barely have a penny to my name. Reluctantly I look at her and instantly her lips tip up, brightening my previous dark thoughts.

“I have no preconceived notions about you. Show me who you are Bodhi, and that’s who I’ll believe you are. Can you do that?” Her hand rubs up and down my arm and, in that moment, I’d do anything for her even give my life if it came down to it.

The lump in my throat prevents me from speaking. All I can do is nod my head as I stare at the amazing women in front of me.

“Good. Now if you haven’t noticed I don’t live too close to town. Before I lived not far from the salon where I could easily stop and get something to eat on my way home or have it delivered. While I can still grab something on the way home, no one but pizza places deliver. I had pizza every night while I moved in so I’m over it for now. Having a guest though is pushing me to actually use that kitchen.” Her eyes

shine with sincerity. “Plus, it’s healthier.”

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“I know how to make spaghetti,” I blurt out making her laugh. “I can make dinner if you still want me to stay.”

“Oh, you’re not getting out of staying with me.” She points out the door. “Grab your bag so we can get home before it gets dark because while I was sitting here chilling out, I was daydreaming about ordering takeout from The Cheesecake Factory.”

I can’t help but laugh at her. “I thought you said you wanted to eat healthy and that’s not healthy.”

“What if I promise to eat healthy for the rest of the weekend?” She peers up at me, her big blue eyes filled with hope.

I play along because she can do whatever she wants. It’s her house and I won’t be there to hold her accountable if she slips up. “How can I deny you when you look at me like that?”

Somehow, she manages for her eyes to become bigger. Bigger. “Like what?”

Does she really not know? She has to.

“With cute puppy dog eyes filled with hope,” I answer.

“I wasn’t doing that, was I?” she asks, astounded.

She really doesn’t know. How has she made it this far in life and not know the power she holds with one single look?

Letting go of her hand, I close the car door and put my seatbelt on. “Don’t worry. It’s endearing. Let’s go get you your Cheesecake Factory and head to your house.”

Her smile turns cheesy and I can’t help but smile with her. “No better words have ever been spoken.”

15

Coco

“I can’t believe you’ve never had The Cheesecake Factory before. I love it, but it’s not exactly good for the waistline.” I fork a bite of my pumpkin pie cheesecake into my mouth. “Isn’t it divine?” I ask around my food.

Bodhi only shrugs, and if my mouth wasn’t filled with cheesecake goodness, it would be hanging open. “The pasta was good though and that bread, I could eat that bread all day.” He flushes and takes another bite of his red velvet cheesecake. Another of my favorites that I insisted he get since he couldn’t—more like wouldn’t—pick.

I’m not sure how to approach Bodhi on his issue about food. Heaven forbid we talk about money. For now, I’ll try to make him relax. No, I don’t understand what it’s like to be homeless and hungry, but I don’t care that he used to be or even if he still is. I can tell how good of a person he is. I only hope in my actions I’m showing him I don’t care. I only see Bodhi, the man who’s kind with a caring heart and a smoking hot body.

“Well, there are a couple of stores that sell it. Maybe the next time I go grocery shopping I’ll pick some up. It’s one of my favorites as well.”

“Coco,” he sighs my name out exasperatedly, “you don’t need to do that. I won’t even be here.”

Tilting my head to the side, I narrow my eyes at him. “Are you planning to not be in my life anymore?”

“No...but I won’t be here for meals. I only mean for you to get it if you want it. Don’t get it because of me. Thank you again for dinner and lunch.”

I burst out laughing and immediately fall to the side and onto the island. He blinks and smiles at me, flashing his bright white teeth that pop against his bronzed skin. Bodhi’s only being nice. I don’t think he’s a fan of egg sandwiches like I am.

“I promise I won’t make egg sandwiches for a good while.”

“What?” His eyes widen.

“You don’t have to pretend to like them. It’s fine, but tomorrow we’re watching The Food Network or YouTube or something and finding some good recipes.”

Bodhi looks around the kitchen with a critical eye. “It’s so white.”

“It is.” I shake my head. “I don’t know what my parents’ were thinking when they decided on an all-white kitchen like this. It matches the rest of the house, but it is a little sterile.”

Resting his head in his hands, he asks. “Did your mom cook?”

“Oh no! Once I was in high school, my parents were either out to dinner or brought home takeout. I can’t remember my mom cooking past elementary school. This house was for show. All that mattered to them was how they were perceived; for my dad to be the best lawyer in the state, if not the country, and to raise the most money at fundraisers. They lived a very superficial life, and that’s why I left when I did. I couldn’t be fake any longer.”

A long finger traces the lines in the marble, his eyes following the movement. “I can’t imagine you being fake. You seem so...genuine and real.” He blows out a breath. “You’re like sunshine. All bubbly and bright.”

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I swear I hear him say ‘my sunshine’ under his breath, but I don’t ask him to repeat it.

Swallowing my last bite, I set my fork down in my to-go container. “What do you want to do for the rest of the night?”

Bodhi shrugs, still looking down. “Whatever you want to do. I’m not picky.”

“What would you be doing right now if you were at the shelter?”

“I’d probably be in my room reading a book. I got a library card the other day when Lucille took a group to the library.”

“Really? What have you been reading?” I doubt it’s the steamy romance novels I like to read.

Cleaning up our takeout and putting it all into the bag, Bodhi answers. “I like fantasy. I started, but haven’t gotten very far into A Game of Thrones. Have you read it?”

“I haven’t read them, but I’ve watched the TV show. People are obsessed with it and that’s putting it lightly.”

“There’s a show on TV about it?” He hums to himself, a slight smile tipping his full lips. “It must be good then.”

“It is. We can watch some of it if you want.”

“If you want.” His voice is soft as he continues to trace the lines in the countertop.

I wish he would stop being afraid to be himself and say what he likes. I'm not a selfish person by nature; we don't have to do everything I want. If I wanted that I wouldn't ask him.

"How about we go outside and enjoy the night? I can turn on the firepit and maybe after some of our dinner has settled, we can get into the hot tub."

"Okay." He answers his typical one-word answer, and inside I want to scream just tell me what you want.

"If I got in now, I might throw up I'm so full." I place my hand on my stomach and groan. "I should have saved my cheesecake for later. I knew I couldn't eat only one bite and put it away." Bodhi stands and pulls out my stool. "Thank you, kind sir. I can't remember the last time someone had manners around me."

Bodhi makes a strange noise but doesn't comment.

"If you want, you can throw the trash away in the trash out in the garage while I put on a swimsuit underneath my clothes. Do you still have those underwear from earlier on?" I'm not sure where he found polka-dotted briefs, but I think only he could pull them off.

He pulls his bottom lip in his mouth and bites it. "No, I changed when I first got back to the shelter."

I won't lie and say I'm not disappointed, but I'm sure I'll be equally enthralled with whatever he's got on underneath those white shorts he has on.

"I can't wait to see." I smirk at him as I leave the room and head to change.

Maybe I should pull out a bottle of wine or some beers to get him to relax. If it was

daylight, I'd put on my sexiest bikini, but since it will all go to waste, I put on one of many I have filling a drawer.

Heading to the kitchen, I grab a couple of beers from the refrigerator and then open the sliders that look out onto the pool. Bodhi's already out there squatting by the firepit. It's not cold out, but there is a little nip in the air as the night cools down. Setting down our beers, I move to the wall and flick on the switch. Low flames shoot up from the blue glass and Bodhi jumps up and backs away.

Walking over I put my hand on his shoulder. "Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you. It took me almost an hour the first time I tried to turn it on to figure out where the switch is." He slipped on a dark colored sweatshirt while I was changing. I wonder if he has a swimsuit or if he'd let me buy him one. Probably not if he knew what I had in mind. Something small that doesn't cover much. "Do you want to sit here?" I indicate the outdoor sectional that makes a 'U' around the firepit. "Or do you want to get in the hot tub? I brought out beers for us to enjoy."

"Whatever you want," he quietly says and flips the top off one of the bottles of beer before taking a large swig.

Okay if he's going to play it that way then I want to see Bodhi wet and only in his underwear again. Instead of answering, I pull my t-shirt up over my head and skim my shorts down my thighs while keeping my eyes on his. He follows my every movement with dark, hungry eyes, but doesn't make a move.

Picking up one end of the sectional, I pull out two towels and shake them out. It wouldn't be fun to start to dry off with a scorpion on your towel. Grabbing the other beer, I walk the short distance between the firepit and the spa, all the while feeling Bodhi's eyes on me. Slipping in, I relax back against the wall and take a sip of my beer. "Come join me and tell me about what you did today at work."

Bodhi stands, looking unsure, with his beer hanging from his fingertips but gives in to my request. Slowly he takes off his clothes, starting with his sweatshirt and then the t-shirt underneath. The firelight dances on his skin as he slips his athletic shorts down his long, muscular legs. I want nothing more than to run my hands and tongue along each inch of his body. I feel bad ogling and objectifying him as he strips in front of me, but I can't look away from each dip and well-placed groove. He's got the body of a god and could easily be a model if only the right person saw him.

"Have you ever thought about being a model?" I ask as he steps one leg inside the spa and pauses. After only a moment, he sits down on the other side and looks out at the city lights.

"When I lived in New York, I had someone come up to me and offer me a modeling job, but I thought they were only saying it to mess with me. I was the one perusing models to paint and not used to being on the other side. I didn't..." He looks at me now, his eyes shadowed with an emotion I can't name.

"Would you now? You're still young and I don't know what you looked like then, but you really are a beautiful man, Bodhi. Plenty of people will be knocking on your door now that I've given you a haircut and your beard is gone."

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Did he purposely keep his hair long to avoid people?

“You can ask. I see it all over your face even in the dim light.” He shifts a little to look out more at the city than me.

“You don’t have to talk about anything that makes you uncomfortable. Ever. All you have to do is say the word. There’s something about you that makes me want to know every little thing about you, but I can also tell you don’t like talking about yourself much.”

“Growing up we didn’t have much money, and I was always growing too fast. My mother couldn’t keep up with my growth spurts, so my clothes were almost always too small for me.” He glances at me but goes back to looking at the lights. I don’t fault him. Sometimes it’s easier if you don’t have to look at the person you’re speaking to. “I’ve always been quiet. I guess too quiet because from the time I can remember kids were always making fun of me. Either for my clothes that weren’t quite long enough, not clean enough, or for not having any friends.”

I gasp and cover my mouth with my hand. Why are children so cruel?

“I got used to not having any friends and hearing all their comments behind my back. It got better for a little while in high school. I shot up again and started lifting weights which caught all the girls’ eyes. I know most boys don’t know how to talk to girls or women, but I wasn’t used to talking to anyone but my mom, and soon enough the girls who tried to talk to me or go out with me and use me started to whisper about me too.” Bodhi tips back his beer and finishes it. “I thought maybe when I left our small-town things would be different, but it was the same on a different scale. I didn’t

have the connections or money to make it in New York and, eventually, everything caught up with me. I lost my job and my shoebox sized apartment and ended up on the streets with nowhere to go.”

I slide around the spa to sit closer to him. Taking the beer from him, I grasp his hand in mine and hold it to my chest. “I’m sorry people were so cruel to you. Is that why you hid underneath all that hair?”

He looks down at me for a moment, his eyes glistening before looking out at the city again. “It was easier that way. It wasn’t like I could go get it cut. I didn’t have the money and no one messed with me or tried to interact with me. It was for the best.” He shrugs as if it’s not a big deal that he was essentially bullied and isolated himself because of it.

“Thank you for telling me. You didn’t have to.” I lay my head on his shoulder and feel him tense for only a second before he relaxes back against the wall. “What did the kids think about your new look?”

He barks out a laugh and looks down at me. His eyes dance with happiness. It’s obvious how much he loves working with them. “They didn’t know what to think at first. Didn’t even believe it was me. They had some fun with me, but they’re good kids.”

“What did you do with them today?”

“After doing the pumpkins at Tricks, I had the idea to do them with the kids. I asked Lucille the director if there was any money to get a few pumpkins for the kids to decorate and she delivered.” I could hear the smile in his voice. “She got two decent sized pumpkins, so I split the kids up into two groups and they decided what design they wanted to do. They had some good ideas and I think they came out pretty well.”

“You like working with them.”

“I do. I never thought of myself as a teacher, but I like helping them express themselves. It’s been so long since I had the outlet that it means all the more to me now. I hope they keep me on, but I know the budget is tight.”

I’m sure they take anonymous donations and it does seem like a good cause.

“I’m sure they will. Are you worried they won’t have a room for you?”

“I was, but Lucille said she’ll keep the one I have for me until I tell her I no longer need it.” I know if I look up at him right now, I’ll see doubt on his handsome face. I can hear it in his voice. After spending years on the street, it would be scary to have a place and know at any moment they might need the bed for someone else.

Bodhi stops talking and his body goes rigid. Lifting my head, I see the security light at the front of the house come on.

“Did you call the security company?” He stands looking toward the light.

Reaching up, I grab Bodhi’s hand and squeeze. “Yeah, but they couldn’t come out today. They promised they’d be here bright and early in the morning to install cameras and discuss other options.”

“Go inside, lock everything, and turn on the alarm.” He steps out of the spa and stalks off toward the light.

“Bodhi, please be careful,” I whisper-yell.

He disappears around the corner and I run into the house.

Bodhi

I don't know how long I toss and turn after leaving Coco to go to bed. Even though I saw nothing earlier, I can't stop thinking I might have missed something. Whoever has been coming onto her property knows what they're doing because they never leave a trace.

A soft knock at the door has me turning onto my back just in time to see Coco slip into the room. "Are you awake?" she whispers as she slowly walks toward the bed.

Sitting up against the headboard, I watch her move closer and clear my throat. "Yeah, I couldn't sleep. Are you okay? What are you doing in here?"

"Every time I close my eyes, I keep seeing someone outside, the lights turning on, or worse, something happening to you." She chokes out. "Can I stay in here with you?"

I'm not sure my body could handle another night with Coco next to it, but I'm here to help her feel safe and if sleeping by my side makes her feel safe, then I'll suffer. I wish I could assure her that earlier was a raccoon or a lizard or something, but I can't. I saw nothing. Be that human or animal it left no trace behind.

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Lifting the covers, I slide down to lay on my back once again. Coco rushes the rest of the way over and scoots in next to me, pulling the covers up to her chin.

“Thank you. I don’t know what I’d do if you weren’t here. I’ve never been so scared in my life and I don’t even understand why this is happening to me.”

Slipping my arm around her shoulders, I give her a squeeze. “I don’t know either, but I promise not to let anything happen to you.”

“Even if you have to stay here until the end of times,” she laughs out and snuggles into my side.

I don’t answer her because I know she’s joking. Someday, Coco will find a boyfriend and I’ll have to get over my obsession with her. For now, I’ll bask in her presence and try to figure out who could be getting on her property.

Wrapping her arm around my waist, Coco’s breaths start to slow. It’s amazing how comfortable she is with me. How is it that this amazing and beautiful woman doesn’t see me how everyone my entire life has?

“Relax and go to sleep,” she says softly into my neck.

“I can’t shut down my brain thinking about earlier. Maybe it was an animal because I don’t know how I would have missed a person running away. Either way, I’ll feel better when you have cameras up and we can see what’s going on.”

“Me too.” She yawns so loudly I want to laugh, but I stay quiet not wanting to break

the peace that surrounds us.

The hand wrapped around my side slowly moves up my body until it's worked its way into my hair. Coco starts to play with my hair somehow knowing it will put me to sleep. My eyes start to flutter shut immediately. I'm awake one minute and asleep the next.

* * *

When I wake up, Coco is gone and her place beside me is cold. Rolling out of bed, I hit the shower to take care of myself before I spend the day with Coco and her touching me. Being at war with my attraction to her and how I'm not good enough for her is exhausting.

Turning the water on as hot as I can stand, I tilt my head back and enjoy the lavish shower. The entire house is beyond anything I could have imagined, and I'm lucky enough to spend a couple of days in it with the most beautiful woman. The only bad thing is all her feminine smelling products, but in the scheme of things it doesn't matter what I smell like and Coco hasn't complained.

I massage shampoo into my now short hair. It feels strange to run my fingers through the short strands after having it long for so many years. Putting a big glob of vanilla smelling body wash in my hands, I run them along my arms and torso and along my stiff morning wood. With one hand braced on the cool shower wall, the other grips my aching cock and I slowly slick it up and down with the body wash. I squeeze and circle the tip, thinking about Coco's cherry red lips wrapped around my cock. One thought of her on her knees before me has me about ready to blow. Gripping the base hard, I let out a moan. Hanging my head, I watch myself pulse in my hand. With a few more strokes, I let loose a string of profanities as I paint the wall with my semen.

Now that I've cleared my head some, I quickly finish and get dressed. As I make my

way downstairs, I hear voices and quicken my steps. I find Coco sitting at her dining room table with two men and a table covered with papers.

The moment Coco sees me, she lights up. I haven't felt this good in...forever. "You're awake. Do you want coffee? I can make you a cup. I've got pancakes in the warming oven waiting. Syrup's on the counter."

I watch the two men who are eying me with...is that jealousy? It doesn't seem likely but maybe they think Coco and I are together. Either way, I'm not going to tell them otherwise. I smile at her as she makes her way to me and wraps one arm around my waist. Her hand skims across my now overheated skin. One touch and I ignite. Turning so they hopefully can't see or hear us, I bend down to speak in her ear. "Is everything okay?"

Coco is normally touchy-feely but not this much. She leans her head against my chest and rubs her hand over my abs. Is it because of being snuggled up together for the last two nights or because they're making her uncomfortable?

"Let me get your pancakes out." Her smile widens.

Okay, something is obviously going on.

"How about orange juice?" she asks a little too chipper.

"That would be great. Are you making any headway on the security cameras?" I ask with my eyes trained on the two men at the table.

"Not much, I was waiting for you to see what you think would be best."

I know nothing about what protection she needs except that she needs more and peace of mind. One or both of these guys had to have done something.

Wrapping my arms around her, I hug her to me. My head bows and I speak so only she can hear me. “Do I need to kick them out or something?”

Tilting her head up to me, Coco whispers in my ear. “Be my boyfriend. Act like you live here. The guy on the left is creeping me out.” Her body shivers and not in a good way. “He hasn’t done anything overt, but the way he looks at me makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.”

I kiss the side of her head before slowly stepping away and squeezing her hand. Like I said last night, I would do anything to keep her safe and if this guy is giving her the creeps, then I can be her boyfriend until he leaves.

“Thanks for making breakfast, babe,” I kiss her on the cheek and hope they can’t see me blushing now that I don’t have hair to hide behind. “I didn’t mean to sleep in. You should’ve woken me.” I pull out the orange juice and pour myself a cup.

“It was my turn to make breakfast. Mine’s not nearly as good as what you made yesterday morning before work.”

Pulling my lips into my mouth, I clamp down on them to keep from laughing. She’s really laying it on thick, but I play along.

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“But you made that yummy dinner last night.”

“So good.” Coco groans and my dick twitches. Hell, their dicks probably twitch too. The thought that they are probably turned on by her noise sends a possessive streak through me. I want to pull her to me and claim her lips. Her body.

Grabbing my glass, Coco walks back to the table swaying her hips. I swear she’s trying to kill me. I follow behind her like a lost puppy with my plate in one hand and the syrup in the other. Taking her previous seat, I pull the chair next to her closer so that I’m almost on top of her. Claiming her in front of these two men. I’m a tall guy and normally my stature is enough to put guys off, but both act as if I’m not there.

“We can always add a pole or two in places where there’s nothing to attach the cameras, but I think you should consider a gate at the front of the property with a call box and camera, and have a fence installed.” A short guy with muscles on muscles says. His shoulders are so close to his ears, he looks ridiculous.

“I don’t want anything impeding my view of the landscape and city,” Coco says crossly.

Putting my arm around her shoulders, I pull her closer until our sides are touching. “If you’re worried about the view, I’m sure they can put it further down the property at the end of the hill. I think it’s far enough away that it won’t be noticeable. Your safety is what’s most important.”

“Like Rick said, I agree with having a fence installed. You can do what your boyfriend suggested, and we can install cameras in a few places along the top so you

can see on both sides.” His eye twitches at the word boyfriend but otherwise, he seems fine. I understand Coco is a beautiful woman but as representatives of their company, they’re doing a poor job of showing their client respect.

“Babe, maybe you should get a few recommendations from other companies. Quotes too,” I interject. I’m not sure why she picked this company. Maybe they installed what she currently has, but if they make her uncomfortable, she shouldn’t have to stay with them.

Placing her hand on my knee, Coco smiles up at me, blinding me with her beauty. “That’s a good idea. Can you show me some options on the fence and upgrading with the cameras? The biggest concern I have is I want to have it done as soon as possible.”

The beefy guy with shoulders to his ears sits up taller and starts flipping through the papers on the table. “We can install the cameras today and, of course, add more later if you go with the fence. The point of the fence is to keep people out or at least make it extremely difficult for them to get in, so I suggest a fence and when I say fence, I mean a concrete wall at least six feet high. Since you want to keep the view, I would say six to eight feet. Ten could become a problem with your viewing.”

The other guy pulls a computer out of a bag. “Let me show you some of our other projects. I think when you see it this way, you’ll change your mind. A wall sounds intrusive, but with how large your property is it won’t be a problem.”

I wonder if they work on commission since they changed their tune once they learned they might not get the job.

I eat my pancakes while we’re shown multiple options for the wall and a room for monitoring the estate. Not wanting to hurt her feelings, I drown the pancakes in syrup to help with their horrid taste and how dry they are. A few times Coco smirks at me

as if she knows how bad they taste but doesn't say anything.

"What do you think would be the best option?" Coco rubs her hand up and down my leg. I swallow my bite of pancake a little too hard and almost choke. I sputter a few times before closing my eyes. Grabbing her hand, I lace our fingers together and will my dick under control. I really don't want to salute everyone at the table. Although I don't think the guys would blame me since their eyes have been falling out of their sockets looking at Coco.

"I think you should go with the eight-foot wall. It's so far down you won't notice it. As for the gate, I think you can do a wood one that matches your ceilings or go metal, but I prefer the wood. As for where you should centralize your security, I think you can do it in your office unless you want it isolated with multiple monitors on the wall. You're the one with the eye for design."

Coco blinks at me. I think I've rendered her speechless, so I guess that means I did my job. Turning to the two guys, I clear my throat. This is kind of fun messing with them. "Can we walk the property and you show me where you think you'd install the cameras and the wall? I want to be able to see it more clearly."

"Sure," Muscle guy says, pushing back his chair and standing.

We walk the property and it's even bigger than I realized. The size of the lot extends further than we walk because Coco owns acres of desert land. In the end, Coco decides to put up a wall and a fence. The fence will go around the entire property and the wall will protect the property if someone goes over the fence.

"It will take the rest of the day and most likely we'll have to do more work next week to install all the cameras and equipment. I'll also make sure work starts next week on the wall. Remember if you think someone's on the property you can hit the panic button or call the police. We all want you safe and our top priority is getting

everything you want installed as quickly as possible.”

I hope they’re telling the truth and not saying they can start right away only so Coco will hire them and not look elsewhere.

“Great! Thank you.” Coco jumps up from her seat, bouncing on the balls of her feet. “Do you need anything else from me?”

“That should do it, Miss Beckett. We’ll be in and out as we wire the wireless camera system and install the cameras to make sure they’re working, but we’ll try to give you your privacy.”

I doubt they’ll try too hard. It will probably be more along the lines of them constantly seeking Coco out. I let her escort them to the room where she wants them to set up the monitors and computer system.

Not sure what to do with myself, I take my plate and glass to the sink to wash them. With Coco’s walls being mostly glass, will she expect us to keep up the rouse we’re together or will she take me back to the shelter?

“Thank you for that,” Coco says from beside me. I drop the glass I’m holding, and it lands on the plate breaking both. I was so lost in thought about what would happen later, I forgot the here and now.

“Oh no! I’m so sorry, Coco. I didn’t mean to. You scared me,” I look down to the broken glass filling the sink. “Shit!” Her full, pink lips form an ‘O’. “I’m so sorry. I...I’ll buy you new ones someday. Somehow. Just tell me how much I owe you and I promise I’ll pay you back. I’m a man of my word. I’m so sorry, Coco. Were they special?”

“It’s okay, Bodhi, accidents happen.”

“No, I should have been more careful. I got too comfortable. I’ll do anything you want. I’m sorry.”

Taking my soapy hand in hers, she steps closer. “Stop apologizing. I promise I don’t care.”

I might not have known her for long, but I think she’d tell me it’s not a big deal about anything when it’s to spare my feelings.

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“I’m sorry, Coco. Really, I am.”

Her grip on my hand tightens before she pulls me into her soft body. Her other hand reaches up and wraps around my neck, pulling me down until our lips collide.

Instantly all is right with the world.

Stars burst behind my eyelids as her soft lips move against mine. When her tongue slips inside and caresses mine, I pull her closer until our bodies are melded together. My fingers tangle in her long hair and tilt her head to the side to give me better access.

She tastes of something sweet and coffee, and something pure Coco. I sweep my tongue against hers, and they dance together as if we are made for each other.

She tastes divine and I’m going to devour her.

17

Coco

Panting, Bodhi pulls away keeping his hands wrapped around my waist. “What was that for?”

“You wouldn’t shut up.” And because I’ve been dying to kiss him for days.

“Is that the only reason?” He stares down at me intently.

“Of course not. If I wasn’t attracted to you, I wouldn’t have kissed you. I would have kicked you in the shin or something.” I run my hand up his firm bicep and cup his now smooth cheek. “I don’t kiss just anyone. Would you like me to do it again?”

His large hands tighten their grip on the sides of my waist pulling me closer. “I’m not good enough for you, Coco, and I never will be.”

“Let me be the judge of that. You see yourself too harshly in this desert sun.”

“The sun hasn’t changed my perspective on myself. I know who I am, and after seeing you for the first time, I want to be a better man. Make my situation better, and I am, but it’s never going to be enough to ever afford to give you this life.” He gestures around the kitchen and outside.

“You don’t need to give me this life. I don’t care that you don’t have money. What I care about is finding a man who makes me happy. That’s the life I want. Trust me, the life I’ve lived is not all it’s cracked up to be, but I would give all of this away if it would make you see that it doesn’t matter to me.” And I would if it would prove to Bodhi how little I care about how much or how little money he has. “All I want is for you to see the man I see standing in front of me. You’re so good, Bodhi. I can see it and I’ve only known you for a short time. I mean look at where we are...you came here because I couldn’t stand the idea of being alone. Because you make me feel safer than I’ve ever felt before. You do that. Not anyone else. Do you not feel the connection we have?”

“I’ve felt it from the moment I saw you crying in the salon’s window. I can’t explain it.” He clasps his hands behind his head and shakes it. “From the moment I saw you, I wanted to make you happy. I set off to find a flower to brighten your day. I didn’t know why you were crying but I needed to make it better. This feeling of protection and possession I have for you has driven me to try and do better for myself.”

He breaks away and paces around the dining room table. “You’re gorgeous. The most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen, and boy do I want you. My body wants you, but more than that my heart wants you. But the demons in my head tell me I don’t deserve you.”

“What demons, Bodhi?” I ask softly, not wanting to break his streak of opening up to me.

“All my life I’ve had people tell me I’m not good enough, for as long as I can remember, and after a while, you start to believe all the things people say about you. After living on the streets for four years because I couldn’t make enough money to pay rent...I still feel dirty. Like the filth they called me. You don’t need that. You deserve someone whole. Someone better.”

Tears have been welled up in my eyes since he started to confess his inner demons and I can’t hold them back any longer. A sob breaks from me and I run to Bodhi wrapping my arms around him, crying into his chest. “You deserve for someone to treat you the way you should have always been treated. You’re the one that deserves better, but I’d be honored if you chose for me to be that person.”

Bodhi hugs me to him, resting his head on top of mine. His voice sounds choked as he speaks. “I’ve never had anyone talk to me like that. Like I mattered. Like I am someone.”

I pull back enough to be able to look up at him. “You are someone and a great one at that. Do you honestly believe they’d hire just anyone to work with kids at the shelter? No,” I put one hand on my hip. “They most certainly would not. They see in you what I see in you. I think you’ve just been listening to the wrong people.”

“I want to believe you,” he whispers brokenly, his eyes downcast. “I just don’t know if I can. Not after all these years.”

“I know you can. I have faith in you, and I’ll help you just like you’re helping me. You don’t have to do this alone. We can be partners. What do you say?” I smile up at him with what I’m sure is a broken smile. One only he can fix.

His thumb sweeps over my cheek to whisk away a fallen tear. “I think I’m dreaming. I have to be.” Dipping down, he presses his soft lips to mine. It’s not passionate, but it still floods my stomach with butterflies. He’s sealing our deal with a kiss. “I want you. I want an us. For us to be partners.”

“Yes,” I grin triumphantly and lift up on my tippy toes to kiss him.

A throat clears making us jump apart. Both our heads turn to see Josh, the less creepy of the two guys, standing in the kitchen. “Excuse me, Miss Beckett, I need your approval on one of the pieces of equipment.”

I scowl at him because I swear he interrupted us on purpose.

“I’ll be back in a few minutes,” I say to Bodhi and kiss him on the cheek.

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I follow Josh into the now dubbed security room. Who would have thought I'd need so much? I feel like a rockstar or something. I'm no one important and yet someone seems like they're out to get me or at least scare me for some reason. I'm not sure they actually needed my approval on which computer tower I want. I already said I wanted the best, what more do they want? I know I don't want them continually interrupting me with every little thing.

A few minutes later I'm back in the kitchen with no Bodhi in sight. Maybe he's feeling more comfortable after our talk. I don't want to set out to find him and make him feel as if he can't roam around.

Cranking up my music through the surround sound, I sing along to "I Need a Hero" from Footloose envisioning "Flash dance" moves as I clean up the glass in the sink and then the rest of the dishes. It's one of my favorite soundtracks and it seems fitting I'm singing it when I see Bodhi walking around outside. He might not believe it, but he is my hero, and I'm falling for him hard. Harder than anyone who's ever come into my life.

Opening the slider, he smiles shyly as he walks toward me. He looks around, probably to see if we'll be interrupted again, and stops directly in front of me. Picking up my left hand, he smooths out my fingers with one long digit and then places one of the yellow flowers from outside in my palm. "Sorry I'm late."

My smile stretches from ear to ear. I love that it's Bodhi giving me flowers and that's he's continuing to do so even now that I know it was him.

* * *

Hours later and I'm about ready to crawl out of my skin. The security guys are packing up for the day. They're not done, but they've installed quite a few cameras and interrupted us no less than ten times. After the last time, I gave up on trying to get any alone time with Bodhi. We are sitting side by side, watching a movie, and I have no idea what's happening because I can feel the heat from Bodhi with how close we're sitting. I want nothing more than to feel the long fingers I've been idly watching for the last forty minutes, caressing my body. I want to rip off the shirt he finally put on and lick each and every delicious ab of his. I want this man naked and under me more than I need air.

The second I hear the front door close, I grab up my phone to enable the alarm and close the shades. No. More. Interruptions. In one swift movement, I straddle Bodhi's lap and take my shirt off. Bodhi stares transfixed at my aching breasts that are heaving up and down in the anticipation of his touch.

Reaching down, I tear his shirt over his head and rake my fingernails down his smooth tanned skin. My fingertips dance along the edge of his shorts wanting to dip in and pull out the bulge I feel pressing against my core. I rock back and forth putting pressure on his growing shaft.

We both moan as our lips collide. He nips at my bottom lip and then soothes the hurt with his tongue. A tongue I want to feel somewhere else immediately.

Standing up, I pull my shorts and thong down my legs and kick them aside. Next, my bra comes off, and I'm standing naked before the most gorgeous man alive. I rake my gaze up from his parted thighs as thick as tree trunks to the erection wanting to break free from its confines. His abs tighten as if my gaze touches him. His chest rises up and down in a way that I know he likes what he sees. When I finally get to his eyes that have turned a deep stormy blue, and I can't wait a moment longer to feel every inch of him against me.

Bodhi must see the intent in my eyes as he quickly shimmies his shorts off and falls back on the couch. Bodhi's tall, like crazy tall, something I find extremely attractive, but I didn't think he'd be that big everywhere else even as I felt it underneath me only a minute ago.

Stepping closer, I run my hands up the thighs of a god. Any man would die to be as fit as he is, and I know for a fact he hasn't been hitting the gym. Even on the streets, he's taken extreme care of himself. There's barely an ounce of fat on his body. He's pure unadulterated muscle and I want to bite and lick every inch of him. Kneeling in front of him, I intend to do just that. I grip his cock, unable to wrap my whole hand even halfway around his girth and Bodhi nearly flies off the couch from my touch alone.

One of his hands lands on my shoulder. I'm unsure if he's going to push me away or pull me closer. The other cups one side of my face and he brushes his thumb across the apple of my cheek.

My thumb smooths over his tip, my eyes never leaving his awed face, and collects his pre-cum. Bringing it to my mouth, I suck his salty goodness off and moan.

"Coco." My name sounds like a prayer coming from his lips. He cups my shoulder harder. "Come up here," he pants. "I need to prepare you."

He's not wrong. Bodhi has the largest penis I've ever seen, and it looks like it could split me in two if I'm not careful.

Climbing up on the couch, I angle my ass toward him, but go back to his cock, wrapping my hands around him and stroking. He may need to prepare me, but I have to touch him. Taste him. Dipping down, I thrust my ass in the air and lick a new bead of moisture off his tip. His big hand glides down my spine and stops to squeeze my ass as his breathing picks up.

The moment my mouth encircles his massive erection, Bodhi drives two fingers into my core. Pumping in and out, he scissors his fingers stretching me like you would a virgin. In his arms, I almost feel like one. I've never felt this way about any man I've been with. It's not only lust that's driving me to make this connection with him, but something deep down is driving me. Making me need Bodhi more than my next breath.

Slipping his fingers out, he circles my clit with my juices and plunges back inside pumping faster. His rough thumb finds my nub and circles slowly. My tempo mimics his as I try to swallow as much of him as I can. When he hits the back of my throat, I take the rest of him in my hand. Pumping and sucking to match his tempo, my core starts to clench around his fingers, and I can't help but moan around him. Cupping his balls, I start to massage them and run my tongue around the rim of his now pulsing cock.

"Coco, I'm," he groans, "I'm going to cum," he warns.

Slipping him out of my mouth, I sit up and straddle him. Slowly licking up his neck, I nibble on his earlobe as I rock back and forth against his slick erection to get the friction I need. I pepper his face with kisses. Bodhi's hands knead my ass, his fingers flexing on the globes. Licking across his full bottom lip, he opens for me and I slip my tongue inside as I slowly seat myself on his waiting cock until I bottom out. We both moan into each other's mouth. It's so simple, but it's the single most erotic thing to ever happen to me.

Wrapping my arms around his neck, I slowly start to move up and down as my body tries to accommodate how massive he is. I'm full. Fuller than I've ever been before. The pain is delicious, and I know I'll never be the same after our time together. I'm already craving our next time.

His rough hands encircle my waist as he helps me ride and grind down on him faster

and harder. “Bodhi,” I moan, biting down on his bottom lip.

His hand snakes between our bodies and finds my clit and rubs furious circles. I grind against him as stars explode behind my eyelids. Bodhi pumps his hips up and stills, groaning as I milk his pulsing cock.

Resting my head on his shoulder, I can feel his heart beat wildly in time to mine and smile into his neck.

With me still wrapped around him, Bodhi stands and I clutch on to him harder. Loving how our bodies feel skin too skin. It seems everything about him is an aphrodisiac. He strides toward my bedroom and sets me down on the bed with my head on the pillow and I swoon at the gesture.

Climbing in next to me, he pulls me almost entirely on top of him. My head resting on his chest where I can hear as his heart rate starts to slow. Running my hand up and down his arm and into his hair, I start to drift off into sated bliss.

Bodhi’s hand stops tracing patterns on my back and his body tenses underneath me. I prop my chin up on his chest and look up at him. Everything had been so peaceful and perfect. “What’s wrong?”

“I didn’t use a condom. I...don’t even own them.” His chest rises with a deep breath. “I promise I’m clean. I haven’t had sex in...” He pauses and looks up to the ceiling as if he’s thinking back on how long it’s been, “at least four years.”

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Holy shit! Four years is a long ass time. I can't imagine not having sex for that long and it probably adds to why he's been so standoffish with me.

Smoothing my hand down his arm, I lace our fingers together. "I trust you, Bodhi, with my heart and my body. I'm on the pill and have been since I was seventeen. I haven't been with anyone since my ex and even though we always used condoms, I got checked after we broke up to make sure I was clean." Lifting up I kiss him on the chin. "I want you to know I'm not easy."

He probably thinks I'm crazy having him stay here when we don't know each other well, but everything in me says I can trust him. He hasn't let me down yet and I know he won't.

His arm slides across the cool skin of my back, hugging me to him and lifts his head until our eyes lock. "Never in a million years would I think you're easy." His voice has gone down an octave and is profoundly serious.

"Thank you." And I mean it. I can tell he's being one hundred percent honest with me.

His eyes scan my face questioning me, but for what I'm not sure. Is he looking to see if I'm sincere?

"What are we doing here, Coco?"

Coco

“What are we doing here, Coco?” I can see his cheeks flush even in the dim light coming from the clock on the bedside table.

“Falling asleep in each other's arms.” I rest my head back down and snuggle into him. Our hands are still laced together. I had been only minutes if not seconds away from drifting away in the comfort of his arms.

“That’s not what I mean,” he says softly and shifts to his side, keeping our bodies’ skin to skin with his arms wrapped around my shoulders and lower back. His eyes blaze with emotion as we share a pillow and stare at one another.

Furrowing my brows, I question him because I have no idea what he’s talking about. “Okay, then what did you mean?”

“Us. Me and you.” He indicates first him then me. “What are we doing? Is this...” Bodhi swallows harshly as if he has a bitter taste in his mouth. “Is this a one time thing or—”

I cut him off not liking where his mind is. “It’s most definitely not a one time thing for me. You want a label for what we’re doing?” I grasp his hand that now rests between us. “I want you to be my boyfriend. I want to see you as much as possible and get to know everything about you. The good. The bad and the ugly. Everything because I want to know how you became the amazing man that’s before me.”

Bodhi’s Adam’s apple bobs as he bites his bottom lip. “That’s a lot,” he says hoarsely.

“Do you not want the same thing?” I clench my free hand into a fist at my side.

“I do. More than you know, Coco, and I’ll fight like hell to prove it to you.”

“Good, now that that’s out of the way, why don’t we go to sleep?” I slip my arm around his waist as he slips his around mine. It’s perfect, as if we’ve been doing it for months and not for the first time. I’m relieved to find out Bodhi is a cuddler because Dwayne hated being touched while asleep or when falling asleep. It made for rather lonely sleepovers.

* * *

“Are you still my girlfriend?” Bodhi asks out of nowhere. I jump a mile in the air and hold my hand over my heart. “Oh my God, you scared the crap out of me,” I pant at him wide eyed.

When I woke up this morning, Bodhi was gone but one of the shades had been up, so I assumed he was outside somewhere. I’d thought nothing of it. Maybe he’d gone to check on the work of the security team or for a walk. I didn’t hear him enter the house, as I’m lost attempting to make French toast. I keep burning it and failing miserably.

Padding the rest of the way over on bare feet, he chews on the inside of his cheek. “I’m sorry. I didn’t think and I should have with everything going on. Next time, I’ll make sure to make more noise.”

Shaking my head, I wish I could break him of the habit of always apologizing for everything. It’s as if he thinks I’ll get mad at him and be done with him forever or something as equally ridiculous.

Flipping over a piece of bread, I’m happy to see it isn’t burnt. “No, I should have been more aware of my surroundings since the alarm isn’t on. I need to give you the code to the alarm and the front and garage doors. That way I can keep the alarm on

while you're outside or not here.”

“Coco,” he says raggedly, clasping his hands together, “that’s a lot of trust I’m not sure I’ve earned yet.”

“You saying that right there earned my trust.” Taking a step toward him, I wrap my arms around his neck and look up at him. “How can you think you haven’t earned my trust? You saved me from an attack and have been here every night to protect me from the boogiemán. You went charging after whoever or whatever’s been out there. I trust you with my life, Bodhi. I feel it deep down in my gut. You’re a good guy no matter what you think. You can’t argue with me; I know this from hanging out with you and getting to know you. I don’t care about your past. It’s not as if you were or are a criminal. I only care about who you are now. I really wish you’d see and accept yourself as I do.”

“Your trust in me means more than you know.” He struggles to say the words with all the emotion clogging his voice.

Moving back to the stove, I flip over a slightly too browned piece of French toast and place it on a plate. “Now let me get back to making breakfast. It might actually be good if I don’t burn anymore.”

Bodhi stands off to the side eying the charred pieces on another plate and I’m reminded of what he said when he came inside.

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I dredge another piece through the mix and place it in the pan. “What did you mean when you asked if I was still your girlfriend? Did something happen I don’t know about?”

He shuffles over to the island. “I thought maybe you changed your mind.”

“Have you ever had a girlfriend?” With one look at him, you’d think he would have had a girlfriend or ten at least during his lifetime, but from what he’s told me about his past and the way people treated him, I guess he hasn’t.

“No,” he says sadly from behind me. “One time I thought a girl was my girlfriend, but she used me to make fun of me to her friends.”

My heart sinks into my stomach. I’ll never understand how people could be so cruel to others and especially Bodhi.

I turn around to look at him. He’s standing looking down at the floor, twirling something in his hand. “I’m sorry she did that to you, Bodhi, and I can promise you that I very much like you for you. I have no hidden agenda for being with you and I’m not using you for sex, no matter how great the sex is.”

His cheeks pink up and I find it utterly adorable that a man as big as he is and with the looks of a male supermodel could blush at my comment.

“Thank you for that.” He clears his throat. “Like I said, it will take some time for me to get over what’s been ingrained into me.”

I turn back to the stove but look at him over my shoulder. I'm determined to make something that he likes. "What do you have in your hand?"

"Oh," he turns to me and holds out a white cactus flower, "I picked this for you when I was outside."

"Thank you." I take it and hold it to my nose. My whole body tingles with happiness. It's such a simple thing, but it's sweet and lets me know he's thinking about me and has been since the first day he saw me. "Maybe we should go to the nursery and get more flowers to plant that way you'll have more to choose from. Plus, this place needs more color." I place the flower with the one he gave me yesterday.

He lets out a husky laugh. "Don't do it for me, but for yourself."

I shrug. "I think we should. We can do that and once we're done, we can watch some cooking shows since we didn't do it yesterday. I'm determined to learn how to cook."

"Have you thought of taking lessons?"

I spin around, my mouth wide open. "Are you saying I need extra help?"

He smiles and I want to melt into a puddle on the floor. He's good looking at any moment, but when he smiles, he's devastatingly gorgeous. His brows pull together as he comes over and looks down at my attempt at French toast. "I think what they show on TV might be too much for you at first and you might not like the dishes."

My hip and foot immediately pop out at his words. My hands are on my hips, spatula forgotten. "I think what you're saying is my cooking is really atrocious."

"No," his eyes widen. "That's not what I'm saying at all. How often have you watched The Food Network? They have it on a lot at the shelter and rarely do I see food I would eat. Maybe it's because my palate is simple." He shrugs.

“You do make a valid point. Still,” I flip the bread, “it doesn’t hurt to watch and learn skills. If I take a class will you go with me?” I can’t hide how hopeful I am he’d go.

“If you really want me to and if I can.”

I know my face is one of confusion as I look up at him. “Why wouldn’t you be able to?”

He lets a deep breath out slowly and runs his hands down his shorts. “I can’t imagine cooking classes being very cheap.”

Shit! I want to smack myself in the forehead. Picking up his hands and holding them in mine, I pull him toward me until our bodies are plastered against each other. His arms slip around me bringing us even closer together. “I was thinking more of a couple’s class that we’d do together, and I’d pay for it.” Internally I cringe, waiting for him to freak out about me paying.

Bodhi trails his fingers up and down my back but says nothing for a moment. I’m not sure what to make of it until he pulls me closer with my head resting against his chest. “Don’t do it for me. If you find one you want to take and it’s not a couple’s class, take it.”

Is he so agreeable because my cooking is that atrocious?

“Do you smell something?” Bodhi sniffs and turns toward my now burning piece of French toast.

“You distracted me,” I poke my finger in his chest. “Otherwise, I’m sure it would be edible.”

Bodhi throws his head back and laughs with me still in his arms. I can’t help but smile and let out a few small laughs. His laughter is infectious. “Is that how you’ve

been living? By eating it unless it gave you food poisoning?”

Pushing away from him, I remove the now charred bread and turn off the stove. “I give up.” I hold my hands up in surrender. “Bread is hard.” I pout and Bodhi chuckles. “Maybe I’m not cut out for cooking, which really sucks since I don’t want to live on pizza every night.”

“There’s always picking something up after work.”