



Tangled Desires

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Description: I always said I wouldn't be the settling-down type—wild at heart, always chasing the next thrill. Everything changed the day Lyric came storming back into my life like a hurricane—sudden, intense, and impossible to ignore.

We were kids when she left, her parents packing up their house to moved for her father's job. We promised we'd stay in touch, and for a while, we did.

Then, without warning, the calls and letters stopped.

I told myself to move on, to bury the past, and never look back, making a promise of my own. To never let anyone in like that again.

Now, she's here, living in the same house, and suddenly, everything I thought I wanted doesn't feel the same anymore.

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PROLOGUE

LYRIC

One Month Earlier

Please take care of your father, Lyric. He'll need you when I'm gone, and don't forget I'll carry you with me always. I love you, sweet girl.

Those were my mom's last words before she left this side of the earth twelve years ago. The same thoughts I've kept at the forefront of my brain and have never let go, not even when things got worse. I stayed true to her words, promising to take care of my dad, her husband, until his final breath.

I never thought in a million years that at the age of twenty-one, I'd be called home from college to hear the news of my mom having cancer. My parents told me I could go back, visit more throughout the semester, and then change universities when the school year ended. I squashed that idea like a bug beneath my shoe, transferring in the middle of spring semester and never looking back. My thenboyfriend said we could make it work, insisting that a long-distance relationship didn't mean we'd lose touch. I remained cautiously optimistic.

Then, like the saying goes, life happened, or rather shit happened. A domino effect as disappointment sank in, when a random phone number sent me a text message with an image of him in bed with another girl. I knew everything he said was in the heat of the moment. We were young, and I had more responsibility than most peers my age. I didn't blame him.

He'd call me in the beginning, I'd call him back when I got a minute, and the conversations would last a minute or two here and there. I'd undoubtedly be needed by my mom or dad, and, well, he'd be heading to class, football practice, or a party, so we drifted apart. I never dated again once my mom passed away after her long and drawn-out battle, trying her hardest to keep going. She was a fighter, trying every chemotherapy and radiation therapy she could, even going as far to be a part of any research trial she'd qualify as a candidate for, but nothing helped. Two years later, we reluctantly said our goodbyes, and I've kept my promise that I would take care of my father, the love of her life, ever since.

Of course, I had no idea what that would entail until I started really noticing things about my dad. He'd forget a few things here and there. Mainly his keys when walking out the door to work on the base, or I'd notice a couple of other things here and there. His uniform would be messed up when he'd never once allowed himself or anyone else under his command look slightly disheveled. Then his doctor's office called to confirm an appointment, and when I mentioned it to my father, he said he had forgotten. I understood the sentiment entirely. We'd been through a lot at the end with Mom, hospice coming and going at all hours of the day during her final days.

We both stayed by her side until I heard Mom say something to Dad. That's when realization hit that they needed alone time together. I excused myself, swallowing back the lump in the back of my throat and blinking the tears away, only allowing myself to fall to pieces once I cleared the room. I ran to the bathroom and closed the door as quietly as possible, then my back slid down the wall, and my hand covered my mouth. I found a hand towel to muffle the sobbing and allowed the emotions to take over.

We buried her three days later, my dad in his dress blues sitting beside me, holding my hand, and while he maintained a brave face, I couldn't help the tears sliding down my cheeks, unable to keep up with them. There weren't enough tissues to combat the tears from losing my mother. My mind went into overdrive, thinking about all the

moments that had been stolen from her and, selfishly, myself.

Now, here I am, standing next to my mother's grave, where my father is in his final resting place beside her. The doctor's appointment after Mom's funeral hit me in the gut yet again. His general physician brought up my mother's concerns, which had me at a loss for words.

My father was showing signs of early-onset dementia. My big, strong father, Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps, would need to see a neurologist, which resulted in doctor after doctor. Test after test would be run, and we'd eventually receive the diagnosis Mom had been trying to find before she became so sick that she couldn't keep up. The downfall of everything was being kept in the dark. I know they were trying to overcome obstacles and thinking that everything would be okay. You know, like Mom going into remission and Dad not being diagnosed with frontotemporal dementia.

Any thought of me returning to school went out the window. Instead, I doubled down and became a caretaker again because while Dad did what he could with Mom, he still had a job at the end of the day, but he'd have to let the Marine Corps know. Another hit yet again.

I did what I did best and read through every public forum available about how things could and would potentially go. He was honorably discharged with full medical benefits. As if the blows weren't enough from losing Mom, I had to watch my dad slowly decline, too. He was confused at first, wondering why he no longer had to be out the door after drinking his coffee at four o'clock in the morning, and I'd remind him. He'd look lost for a moment, become quiet, blink a few times, then sit down in his chair.

For years, I watched this disease ravage my father, and before that, I watched my mom do the same. Over a decade, I was there for them, and I'd do it for ten more

decades if it meant getting to spend as much time as I could with them.

The only problem I have now is how to go on. How do I live for myself after living and breathing for them? I'm thirty-five years old and have to learn to live for myself. The only problem with that is, how does one do that? The minimal work experience and a college degree that luckily, I was able to finish online, leave me with little options as far as work goes, let alone getting out there again to make friendships.

A memory appears out of nowhere, pulling me in. It's one I've tried to forget, but it calls me like the tide calls to the moon. A time and place where I could get lost in the feel of his arms, the lure of his kisses, and tell him about everything.

Jagger Steele.

My one and only love from a time long ago. Except I lost him, just like I've lost my parents.

I'm numb inside, the rain falling like sheets of ice around us during the burial service. It doesn't matter that there are tents set up on the lawn for us to sit under; the cold has settled deep in my bones, and the pain is splintering my heart in two. Unlike Mom's service, where the sun shone, the trees swayed, and a bird chirped here and there, Dad's is cold and desolate, exactly how I'm feeling.

"I'm sorry for your loss, Miss Skye." I'm standing off to the side, receiving condolence after condolence. In true Marine Corps style, he had the military sendoff of all sendoffs.

"Thank you." I take the offered hand or place mine on top of theirs as they pat the side of my arm or whatever.

"Call if you need anything." A broken promise here, another one there. I heard the

same song and dance at my mother's funeral. They'll be here for the first week, maybe two, before they fade away into the background.

"I will," I tell Marge, my parents' neighbor. My parents finally quit moving around when Dad received a higher rank. Mom found a cute three-bedroom, two-bathroomhouse in a quiet neighborhood, remodeled what needed updating, mainly the kitchen and bathroom, and they were both content to live their life for the rest of their years there. Nobody knew they'd succumb to cancer and dementia.

I stand, waiting for the line to die down, attempting not to snort at my use of the worddie. A morbid sense of humor probably isn't the best to have at this point in time. I look around, seeing the soldiers standing at attention; they'll stay here until I'm done hearing their condolences and will stay until I say my goodbyes. As much as I want to stay and stare at their headstones and the pile of dirt when they lay my dad to rest, I won't. No, I can't. I'm broken inside. A piece of me is missing and will always be gone. I'm the last living relative on the Skye side as well as my mom's side. Both my mom and dad were only children. Their parents have been long gone, and as much as my parents tried for a second child, it never happened. Now, I'm here alone and feeling like an orphan while in my thirties.

"Naomi." I breathe a sigh of relief. I'm able to let my guard down when she pulls me into her arms. Truth be told, this woman right here helped me through all of the travesties we've been through. She was mother's best friend and traveled around the globe to be here with me.

"Lyric, my girl. I'm sorry I couldn't come until now," she says with a Parisian accent. My mother and Naomi grew up together, and they kept in touch when my parents met. My parents fell in love, got married, had a child, and moved more than most people ever have. Still, she and Naomi managed to talk once a week at least, if not more. When Mom got worse, she flew in and stayed with us until shepassed, or really until after the funeral. Naomi made me promise to keep in touch, and we have. Our

phone calls helped keep me sane, and she insisted I take the help provided by my father's insurance. I'd gone to work part-time; finding a flexible job as a receptionist at a dentist's office really helped my mental health. I told them about the happenings in my home life knowing it would be a lot. The office manager told me in no uncertain circumstances that I was not to come in when Dad had a rough day.

True to their word, the first time I called them two months into my new employment, needing a day off, they understood and said my job would be there the next day. I finally turned in my notice when I wouldn't be there for days on end when things got worse. I could have put Dad in an assisted living facility. Naomi even encouraged it, and it wasn't until I spilled the beans about Mom's last request that she finally understood why I wouldn't.

"Stop, there would have been nothing for you to do," I tell her. Much like what we went through with Mom, similar happened with Dad. They both passed peacefully with hospice sitting outside the room at home.

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“Still, I am sorry.” I swallow the clogging of emotion trying to pull me under. A couple more hours, then I can be done holding it all in.

“Don’t be, please. Tell me something good?” I ask her, playing the game we’ve been playing for years now. Whenever one of us is having a rough day, the other will ask this question.

“Well, there’s a hot man coming your way, ma chérie,” Naomi says, stepping away and moving toward my mother’s headstone. I watch from my peripheral vision as she squats down, being careful with her heels and skirt. She places a kiss from the tips of her fingers to my mother’s name before doing similar to my father’s. Then Naomi stands up, nods my way, and moves to a seat near the back of the tent the cemetery has set up.

“Hello, Miss Skye.” He extends his hand to take mine. I’m unsure who he is, but then again, I didn’t know most of the others.

“Hi, I’m sorry. I don’t know your name.” He’s an older gentleman, judging by his salt-and-pepper hair, the crinkles around his eyes, and the way he carries himself. I’d peg him somewhere around his late fifties or early sixties.

“That’s because we’ve never met. I’m your parents’ estate attorney, Scott Bennet. I would usually wait until a day or two later, except your mom made me keep a promise.” I let out a light laugh. That is so classically Melody Skye.

“I’d like to say I’m surprised, but I’m not.” I look around and notice mostly everyone is gone, minus the Marines, and now I’m feeling guilty for keeping them here as long

as I have.

“Then it’ll come as no surprise to you that she wants you to restart your life. She’s asked that you donate the contents you don’t want, keep what you’d like, and I believe her words were, ‘be at peace and live as much of your life as you can.’” That sounds exactly like something she’d say. I’m sure Mom wouldn’t know the timing of how things would go. I start to tune the attorney out until he says, “There’s a home in Whispering Oaks. They’ve rented it to a long-term tenant for a while, but it’s currently sitting empty. Mrs. Skye mentioned you loved that place more than anything, and your father wouldn’t sell it when you moved away because of her.” I close my eyes, remembering the years we spent in the small town, living next door to my then best friend and boyfriend and love of my life, and making that pact of ours.

Jagger Steele assaults my memories one after the other again.

God, back then, life was so much simpler.

“Ma chérie, we must leave. Mr. Bennet said he’d follow up with you in a few days, but we really must let these fine men go.” It isn’t until I feel Naomi’s hand on the back of my elbow that I realize I’ve completely zoned out.

“Oh, right. Thank you.” I offer my hand to him again. He shakes it and then takes off.

The home we stayed in the longest growing up, one where I made friends, where life seemed to be going amazing. Then Dad came home with a look on his face I knew all too well. He shook his head, telling me everything without any words, and I did the one thing I probably shouldn’t have. I ran to Jagger, telling him the news and crying in his arms. I sometimes wonder where he is now, especially because we lost communication all those years ago.

Maybe he thought I was some silly girl, and when I brought it up to my mom, she

mentioned boys get busy. Now, looking back, I'm pretty sure she'd been trying to make me feel better. Back then, I felt like my teenage heart was being torn in two. Jagger was my first real heartbreak, and those are the ones you never forget.

1

JAGGER

Present Day

Work, sleep, repeat, and in between those three things, I've been doing what I do best: looking for the only high that calms my nervous system, the next adrenaline-thumping, death-defying activity you can find. I've done a lot and seen a lot—swimming with sharks, bungee jumping, mountain climbing, and sky diving to name a few. All of those were tame compared to what I did last weekend, going silent, telling the guys I needed a weekend away and making sure no one knew what I was doing. It's my usual way of operating, only this time, I was running from my past and a certain person: Lyric.

Fucking Jude mentioning her being back pissed me right the hell off. She left and never looked back, and now she's in Whispering Oaks.

The times I go dark means no phone, no watch, no laptop, no tablet, and half the time, no one knows where I'm going, and there isn't much service as it is. In fact, I make sure it's that way, if at all possible. This last weekend, though, had me puckering my buttocks and hoping my feet landed safely on the ground. I've been trained, gone through every protocol there needs to be, and still, this one rattled my cage.

Base jumping in New River Gorge Bridge. I trained, went through every possibility of what could happen, and had to sign a release waiver of all waivers. It's a good thing I have my affairs in order, because there was a real possibility I wouldn't make

it back in one piece. The company I went with is legal; the safety factor is what they couldn't guarantee. I'd looked into other areas, choosing not to go out of the country since we're currently slammed at Jagged Edge Construction with no end in sight.

The thing I haven't done yet is admit to my friends and family what I did. They know I've got an addiction that doesn't consist of drugs or alcohol. They've been around long enough to realize this is who I've become. I hit puberty and became wild and reckless, speeding around town, racking up tickets, and being a menace to society. It didn't matter that I was in sports; nothing could hold me back. There weren't enough hours in the day to monopolize my time or wear me out.

Fucking hell, I gave them gray hair long before they should have had any. Mom made jokes that the reason she was at the hair salon every four weeks like clockwork was because of me. Luckily, before I did anything stupid like wrap my car around a tree or do harm to someone with my bullshit, Dad funneled my energy elsewhere.

He took me to a drag strip, got me hooked, and we started working on a project vehicle, leaving me with little time to be young and dumb. This way, it was legal, safer, and gave me the rush I needed without giving my parents a heart attack or putting myself in an early grave.

It helped for a while, until it wasn't enough anymore, and once I turned twenty-one years old, I moved on to other shit. They weren't too impressed at first, then Dad made a comment about me being so much like his own dad, that he understood. I still have the hot rod we worked on and I still occasionally race; it's currently sitting in my garage, covered with a sheet, with not so much of a scratch on the pristine paint job. Every now and then, when I can't get away from the job for more than two days, you'll find me on the track pushing myself to the next limit, fine tuning my car, and seeing what I can add or take away to make it faster.

I did the responsible and adult thing and sent a message to tell the guys I made it back

last night before calling my parents to do the same. I'd have much rather sent a text than to have a conversation with my mom, who repeated everything I said to my dad, except neither of them likes to respond. They also don't have their read receipts turned on, which makes it difficult to know if they even looked at their phones. They're not technology driven in the least; they still put tape across the camera on their computers and have a landline. Which is what I called them on hoping they'd both pick up to make it easier to relay the message. The beeping of the other line did me a solid, and I hung up faster than the speed of light, because Mom started in on questioning where I'd gone and what I'd done.

The only people who knew where I went were my group of friends; it'd be hard to hide since I used Tysen's private jet to drop me off and pick me up. Then there's Jude. He tracks every last one of us with the fancy app he developed. There's nowhere to hide when it comes to our friend group. Even when my devices are turned off, Jude can still track my location. I learned this a few months ago and quit bothering with trying to keep things quiet. The one thing I did learn was to stay at a hotel away from where I'd be to keep him none the wiser.

I thought after talking to my parents, I'd be in the clear, except my luck didn't run that far. The group chat went off way more than normal, and while I'm usually the one shooting the shit or, how my friends like to say, starting shit, I did something I've never done before. For years, I'd have my phone on me, minus the time I'm out on an adventure. Last night, it became too much. I could feel the walls closing in on me. The house I built from the ground up seemed like a cage. The outdoors didn't relax me. Nothing seemed to be working. The dinging and vibrating of my phone only amplified the mayhem spinning in my head, and for the first time in I don't even know how many years, I tossed my phone in a drawer and walked away.

It's now Monday night back in Whispering Oaks, and my day started at six o'clock this morning with going over contracts, plans, and bids. By noon, I was over it. The coffee I had earlier in the day long since lost its effect. My eyes were done with

looking at paperwork of any kind. I grabbed my phone, which I continued to leave on silent, though now it was turned on, but I'd yet to go through all the notifications that have piled up.

Instead, I went around to the job sites, looked at what needed to be done, and got to work. The need to get my hands dirty, to get my mind in the right frame to be any kind of company, was exactly what I needed and what I was after. A new job we'd picked up needed heavy demolition. The crew started earlier in the day, and when I showed up, I went to work right beside them.

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We worked until the sun went down. I was tempted to set up a few lights and keep at it. Except I'd be useless tomorrow, muscles sore, joints aching, and too tired to get out of bed. The closer I get to forty, the longer it takes to recover. So, the crew and I packed our tools into our respective work trucks. I learned a long time ago that while having a storage shed on site to keep everything handy, it comes at a price, one I'm not paying again. We'd locked everything up using heavy duty locks and all, yet still, the thieves used a grinder and cut through the metal on the backside where no one could see if they drove by. That shit was a nightmare, one I'll never repeat. I also never recovered the tools that were stolen or the money it took to replace them all.

"Figured I'd find you here." I'm sitting in a booth at Twisted Oak, a bar in Whispering Oaks, with a bottle of beer in front of me, realizing the things I used to do aren't fulfilling me anymore. I've already quit playing footloose and fancy free, as my grandmother would call it. In other terms, quit being an idiot, find a woman to settle down with, and stop looking good for right nows, and stumble upon a forever kind of good. The dissatisfaction caught up with me. The next morning, I'd wake up with nothing but regrets and a feeling of emptiness.

No one knows that while I joke about being the playboy of the group and never wanting to settle down, those times have come and gone. It's been me and Rosy Palmer for so long I can't even remember.

What's fucking next?

The adrenaline rush I need to quit making my heart pound. After this past weekend, that very well might come true.

“The cavalry send you?” I ask Luke as he slides into the seat in front of me.

“Nah, figured I’d find you here when you didn’t respond to my text outside of the group chat. You good?” The doctor isn’t in his usual scrubs and white coat, which means he did the same thing I did. After work, I went home, stripped out of my work clothes, tossed them in the laundry room, and headed straight for the shower. Twenty minutes later, I’d washed the dirt and sweat off my body, walked out of the bathroom and through the house. I didn’t bother with wrapping a towel around my waist or putting on clothes. There wasn’t any point when I’m the only one who lives there, and Jude’s fancy alarm system he installed alerts me when someone pulls down the drive. I moved through the house, heading for the back patio, needing the outside noise to help drown out the too quiet house.

It took me two minutes to realize staying in for the night would be out of the question, and now here I am.

“Yeah, I’m good, brother. You?” Luke quirks an eyebrow in question to my response.

“Never better. You want to talk about anything in particular?” I nod my head to the waitress when she signals to ask if I need another. I respond with two fingers, knowing Luke has the same taste as I do in beer.

“Not necessarily.” It’s the cold fucking truth, too.

“Alright. You at least have a good trip?” Luke brings up another subject that has me ready to call it a night. Except I won’t. I’m not that much of an asshole to leave him when he only got here and it’s clear he only stopped after seeing my truck in the front parking lot.

“Wasn’t bad. Went by too fast, like most weekends do. You know how that goes.” Five days of work and two days of downtime is never enough, not for anyone, if you

ask me. I'd prefer to work Monday through Thursday, from sunup to sundown, but nobody else does in the business world.

"Yeah, well, I've been on call the past two weekends and don't see an end in sight." The waitress sets down our drinks, we both take a healthy sip, and he continues on, "Two more weekends, and then I'll be back to the normal schedule. Remind me next time not to trade favors with my partner. It always fuckin' backfires."

"Sucks, man. Wish I could help you, but I'm thinking what I know about a woman's body and what you know about a woman's body are two different things," I grunt.

Luke laughs before taking a long pull of his drink. I do the same, and we sit in comfortable silence. He's got his eyes on another area in the bar, probably doing similar to what I am, getting lost in a mindless game and zoning out.

"You eating here or at home?" he asks a few minutes later.

"Here. Definitely here." I haven't opened my refrigerator since well before I left to head to West Virginia, and truth be told, I'm not looking forward to cleaning out the fridge or the grocery shop I'll need to do tomorrow.

"Same. I'm at the clinic or the hospital more than I am home. Once this shit is over, I'm going in hibernation, staying away from restaurants, fast food joints, and hospital food," he states.

"I need to do the same, but not tonight."

"I can drink to that." He looks for the waitress to place our order, and my mind drifts off again, thinking about a woman, and not just any woman. A woman who's been out of my life longer than she's ever been in it. Fucking hell, maybe I should have stayed out of town a hell of a lot longer than a couple of days. At least then, my mind

wouldn't be on my past.

2

LYRIC

It took me forever and a day to deal with everything Mom and Dad related. A last will and testament is well and fine until you have to file so many different documents and request extra copies of everything under the sun while simultaneously boxing up your life. A task I tried to deal with after Mom's death and Dad's diagnosis, only it confused him more than anything, making it come to a screeching halt. You'd have thought with as many times as my parents and I moved throughout the years, they'd have pared down a lot of furniture, décor items, and clothing. That couldn't be further from the case. I would characterize their style as maximalist. Every wall had so much artwork, every cabinet was filled to the brim with pieces from traveling, and their closets were so full there's no way either one of them could fit another article of clothing.

I'd slowly donated a few things here or there, mostly when Dad had a good day, and I wouldn't remove anything he'd notice. It still didn't put a dent in what I'd call the aftermath.

Naomi, who didn't have to stay as long as she is, has truly helped out the most.

She's a saint amongst us mere mortals.

She also said the first thing I should do is pick and choose what I'd want to keep for myself, then go through all of the personal items I wouldn't want anyone to have. Then shred or burn documents before calling a company to hold an estate sale. As much as I'd have liked to stay while they held the event, Naomi advised against it, instead, we went and enjoyed a spa day, her treat. Where she opened up about the

dates she's been going on with Scott Bennett, my parents' attorney. I crossed my fingers in hopes she'd fall madly in love with him, uproot her life, and move to the States.

Selfish, I know, but I'd love to have a piece of my mom here even though I'm now moving states away. Still, she's well past due to find a happily ever after. Naomi has been single forever, well, besides having a few long-term boyfriends. She's never had a husband, and she doesn't have children. I remember once I hit the age of seventeen, she and my mom brought me into the fold, which meant there wasn't a subject they held back on.

It's where I learned Naomi had been put through the wringer in her childhood, with a mom who never protected her from her predator of a father. I had to hold back my gasp and blink the tears away before she noticed. Where my childhood and my mother's were normal, minus us moving around every so often, Naomi didn't have the loving home every child deserves. Which is why my mom always said her best friend is worthy of all the happiness in the world, and now it's me repeating those words to her.

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“Ma chérie, did you make it?” Naomi asks through the speakers of my car. The trip from North Carolina to Florida could have taken me one day. Except I split it up in two days, mainly for the person on the other end of the line. She was worried I would overdo it, get too tired, and after all the loss we’ve suffered, an extra day didn’t bother me too much. Plus, it’s not like I’m on a time crunch or anything. There’s not a job I need to get to, only a house that has been sitting vacant for what Mr. Bennett says has been a year.

“Not yet. I’m at the edge of town. How did things go with your date last night?” I put the emphasis on date. She’s been on quite a few with Scott.

“It was wonderful, but don’t get your hopes up too much. I’m not.” She sounds a bit leery, as if she’s waiting for the other shoe to drop. I mean, I understand given what she has been through, but I also did a thorough search, similar to the one a police officer could probably do, only the free version. Scott Bennett has one divorce on the record, has no children, and is a partner at the law firm he works at. He also only has one social media account, not several, and not across the many platforms available, either.

“Fine, I won’t. I still think you should see where things go before you leave.” I shrug my shoulders, not that Naomi can see. I make a turn onto a street leading toward my new home. The sun glares through the windshield, and I take one hand off the wheel to dig around the center console in order to grab a pair of sunglasses.

“That is what dating is all about, my beautiful girl. One should do similar, don’t you think?” Naomi spins the conversation around on me. I’ve been a bundle of nerves since waking up this morning. When I hit the Florida state line this morning, it only

made them worse.

“You’re right. Maybe I’ll meet a man and fall madly in love,” I say with a wistful tone to my voice.

“Didn’t you say your childhood boyfriend lived next door to you? Who knows what could happen. Maybe he still lives there or at least nearby?” she states, except it’s more like a question, and while I’ve done all the looking into Scott Bennett, I absolutely refused to do the same for myself.

“Maybe or maybe not. He could be married with two kids with a white picket fence by now, too.” Which I’m sure is the case. Jagger Steele as a seventeen-year-old on the cusp of manhood was devastatingly handsome to my young fifteen-year-old heart. I’d also made a complete fool of myself, crying, except more like sobbing, begging him to make a promise with me I had no business asking for. My younger self called it love. My older self now realizes that wasn’t fair to him.

“You won’t know until you find out. Isn’t that what you told me only last week?” Oof, Naomi is throwing down the gauntlet today.

“Yes, except we’re talking about someone from long ago. You have a man standing right in front of you, who just so happens to be wooing you.” I turn my blinker on and turn into the subdivision leading to the house that seemed like the only home I’d ever had before.

“It seems I do. Call me later and tell me everything, okay?”

“I will. Love you,” I reply.

“Je t’aime, ma chérie.” With that, we hang up, and I continue on my journey. A few more turns, a curve around the cul-de-sac, and I pull into a home that I haven’t seen

in over twenty years. I'm still unsure how Dad was able to keep this from me for all these years, let alone Mom, even in those final hours. Then again, she had a lot on her mind. Dad started forgetting things, and I'm sure this is one of those subjects that was so small on his radar even on his good days, it didn't trigger a memory.

I pull into the driveway, put my car in Park, and stare at the home in front of me. The mature tree in the front of the yard is still there, bigger than before when I used to climb up the branches as high as I could. It has me opening the door and stepping out. The once white paint could use a new coat; there are spots that are chipping and peeling. The navy shutters and door are in the same shape, and I can see I'm going to need to do a lot of weeding in order to showcase the flagstone pavers I see peeking through the overgrown grass. The bushes in front of the windows could use a good trim as well, but other than that, everything looks okay. The grass is cut, and because of the coverage from the trees, the yard is lush and green. I toss the keys in my hands and take a few hesitant steps, watching where I'm walking in case the ground isn't level, kicking myself in the ass for wearing flip flops instead of a sturdy pair of sneakers.

I make it up the path, remembering a time when double red knock-out roses were in place of the bushes that are there now. I think I'll replace them once I get my hands in the dirt. The small front stoop is enough to cover you from the elements while you're rushing into the house to get out of a Florida downpour, the one problem Mom had with the house. That and the detached garage. Dad loved it, something about the car fumes never being able to make it inside the house. Therefore, Mom delegated him to be home when we'd do a big grocery shop to help lug everything inside.

"What in the heck?" I fumble with the lock, placing the key in the deadbolt, hearing it unclick, and I do the same with the doorknob. When it doesn't open with a slight push, I try again, but it still doesn't budge. The only option left is to power through it and use my shoulder to finally get the door open. It's not even like it's wood. There doesn't seem to be any swelling, and now I'm wondering if there's something on the

other side that could be keeping it closed on me.

I push at the damn thing one more time, and it finally gives. I'm so busy worrying about getting inside the house that I don't hear anything at first.

"Excuse me, ma'am. Yoohoo! I wouldn't go in there if I were you." I look over my shoulder. A woman around what would be my mom's age appears, shoulder-length honey-golden hair cut into a bob style and eyes the exact same color of his. Glacier blue, so vividly clear you could get lost in them and never leave.

"Mrs. Steele?" I question. She's in a white linen button-down shirt, a pair of blue capri pants, and leather woven-style flats. She looks exactly the same, minus a few wrinkles here and there. I remember everything so vividly it's like a kaleidoscope of memories hitting me all at once. Her and my mom talking in the yard for hours on end while waiting for the bus to drop me off during my middle school years. They did the same on the rare occasion Jagger didn't have some kind of practice after school. He'd give me a ride home, and we'd find the two of them chatting it up with no end in sight. It gave us time to sneak away into the Steele's house, where Jagger kissed me senseless. Which inevitably led to a lot more when we weren't anywhere near our houses or parents.

"Oh, my goodness, as I live and breathe, you are the spitting image of your mother, Lyric." The inside of the house is empty, and I move closer to a woman who has me ready to cry in her arms. I've yet to really let my emotions run free. The few tears I've spared here and there are nothing like the cathartic release I know will come once I finally allow myself to sit and think. It's also why Naomi shoved a pink spiral notebook into my hand and told me to journal; I guess she's noticed I haven't been doing that lately like I normally do. When I opened it last night in the hotel room, it even had writing prompts. Some were way too much when you needed sleep, so I slammed the notebook closed and put it back in my bag.

“Yeah,” I say with a lump lodged in the back of my throat. Her arms lift up, and then I’m giving her a hug, but really, she’s the one giving me the embrace. I had no idea what I’d find when I landed back in Whispering Oaks because, you know, that whole refusing to snoop like I’d usually do.

“It’s so good to see you. I’m so sorry about your mom, honey.” Mrs. Steele pulls back. She sent a card in the mail shortly after we’d buried my mom. I remember seeing it and thinking I should give her a call, and then, well, the Ferris wheel kept spinning, and there was no stopping to get off the ride.

“Thank you. I’m sorry I didn’t call you after. I promise it was on my list of things to do, but then Dad was diagnosed with early-onset dementia. I didn’t even know they kept this house until the reading of the will when he passed away.” I get the gist of the story out of the way. There’s way more involved, and I’ll probably spill the beans, except I don’t think she needs or wants to know every dang detail. I spin around, trying to give myself a moment to clear the crying jag that’s attempting to take root, and look at the carnage of the inside of my childhood home.

“Oh, dear,” I hear Mrs. Steele say from behind me. There are holes in the drywall, there’s flooring ripped up in random areas, and when I walk through the house, I see so much more. A ceiling fan that’s only being held up by its electrical wires, and the kitchen is a disaster, filthy in a sense that it doesn’t look like anyone has ever cleaned up after themselves, missing cabinet doors, drawers pulled out. And when I walk out of the main living area, heading toward the back of the house, where there are two bedrooms, two bathrooms, and what my parents used as a study, the damage is much the same. Damn it, the house is inhabitable.

“Why don’t we go over to my place? We can talk. You can catch me up on what’s been going on, and I can do the same. We tried to do what we could. I can promise you that, Lyric.” I nod my head, still not turning around to face her. My shoulders slump. I’m going to have to add finding a place to live while the house is gutted to

the studs.

“Yeah, okay. We can do that.” I take a deep breath, realizing I’m fortunate in the way that I’m set up financially to fix my house and live somewhere else for the time being. I’ll also need to find a job. Idle hands and all will only make me really lose my mind.

Mrs. Steele’s hand goes to my back when I make my way into the front of the house. Neither of us should have walked in here, not without a hazmat suit and steel-toed boots at least. I’d beat myself up for allowing this to happen, only I had no idea, and with the round-the-clock care my dad needed, it’d have been impossible to work on the home here in Whispering Oaks while residing in North Carolina.

“Do you still enjoy sweet tea? I just brewed a pitcher, and Mr. Steele has yet to discover it,” she teases, helping ease the boulder sitting on my shoulders.

“I do, thank you. I wasn’t sure what to expect. Definitely not a house with more holes than walls,” I say before mentally telling myself I can do this.

“Well, it’s a good thing I have a lot of contacts, if you want them.” I’m going need them in spades, but until then, I’ll put one foot in front of the other, make a list, and go from there.

JAGGER

“Excuse me, what did you say?” I pull the phone away from my ear, thinking I must be hearing shit. After Luke and I had another beer, ate some dinner, and talked for a bit longer, we went our separate ways. Luke going to his condo near the hospital and me heading back home to my quiet place in the woods. That was three nights ago.

“I said Lyric was at your parents’ house today,” Jude tells me when I bring the phone back to my ear and gives me the exact same words a second time.

“What in the actual fuck is going on?” I grumble, not expecting an answer from my friend, more or less making a statement.

“Well, about that. You wanna meet the guys and me at Undercover Lovers? There’s a lot to fill you in on, and I’m just now getting the information after tapping into my resources.” I’d rather go to my parents’ house and figure things out directly from the source, but my mom would run interference on any questions I’d toss Lyric’s way.

“Yeah, I’m done for the day anyways.” I put my phone on speaker. Nobody’s in the office at this time of day to hear what’s going on in my office. The laydown yard, where we keep supplies, house trucks, and have a trailer set up, is empty. There’s a small reception area where my administrative assistant sits, a small seating area, a bathroom, and my office is located in the back. The door I usually have closed is open. Joss tends to leave it that way after she says her goodbyes for the day. I was so absorbed and in my own bubble, I didn’t bother to tell her to shut it when she left.

There are days I'll have employees stagger in after completing a project to drop off paperwork on Joss' desk, and if they see my door open, well, that usually means they get chatty, my work takes longer, and while I try to keep a somewhat open-door policy, the last thing I want is to be here till midnight.

"Good, don't bother with food. Lennie made enough to feed an army, and everyone will be there. Apparently, the girls have news they want to deliver, too." I already know what one the girls' update will be, Winnie's to be exact; she sent me a text yesterday with a attachment of a sonogram picture and a promise for me to keep quiet. While I give Johnny hell and aggravate the piss out of him, Winnie is like my baby sister, plus I'd never cross a line like that even though I pull enough shit to have him questioning me at times.

"Alright, I'll be there in fifteen." I grab my keys off the desk.

"Later." Jude hangs up. I do the same with a press of a button before scooping my phone up, depositing it in my pocket, then walk through the office. I turn out the lights and lock the door on my way out before heading to my truck. Since I knew I wouldn't be on any job sites today, I didn't bring my work truck, preferring a vehicle where the air conditioning works all the time instead of some of the time. I've worked on the near twenty-year-old truck so much, I gave up on dealing with certain things. As long as it's still running and gets from one job site to the other, I'll deal with the rest. On the days I don't need the old beater, I drive the new truck. The Chevy Silverado High Country is a bit over the top, and it was a damn a splurge, but it's also extremely comfortable.

The moment I hit the key fob, the headlights illuminate the dark sky and the doors unlock. My mind goes back to the news of Lyric being not only back in town but also at my parents' house. That shit is messing with me. Jude told me she was back a month or so ago, except she really wasn't at that time. Only that the house next door to my parents is now hers and apparently has been in their family's name the whole

damn time. I had no idea until Jude broke that down for me. I might see my parents on a weekly basis, but talking about the house next door doesn't happen.

"Christ." I climb inside, start the truck, and reverse out of the yard. We've added a third project manager and a second general contractor, plus summer is here, so we've got a slew of summer interns between the local high school and community college. The pay isn't the best, and the job also doesn't come with benefits, but the experience they're receiving will help beef up their resumes when the time comes for them to head into the real world.

I pull out of the parking lot of Jagged Edge Construction and head to Undercover Lovers.

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"You're gonna want a beer for this conversation." Jude hands me one the minute I walk into Johnny's office. True to his word, the place is crowded with our crew. The only ones missing are the kids: Briar, Kennedy and Trent's daughter, who is from a previous relationship Kenny had, and Sebastian, Johnny and Winnie's son, who's been formally adopted by the two when Winnie's sister passed away.

"Christ." I grab the bottle and take a deep pull from it before making my way into the inner circle. The rate our group is growing, it won't be too much longer until we've outgrown Johnny's office.

"At least there's food. We'll let the girls feed us and wait for them to move off to the side before I give you the information on what I found out." I nod my response and head toward our friends.

"How are you ladies doing?" I ask. My target just so happens to have two out of the four women. My arms wrap around Winnie and Maci's shoulders, and I kiss each of

them on the cheek.

“Never better,” Winn says. “What about you? Working hard or hardly working?” She pats my chest.

“You know me. A bit of both.” I give her a smirk.

“That sounds like a bullshit answer,” Maci replies, calling me on my lies. “I’m doing good. Finally done with the sickness that sneaks up at any given time or in the weirdest of places, and now we’re on to the planning part of the nursery.”

“Oh, and Kennedy has news. You may want to grab a bite to eat before everything commences,” Winnie says, grabbing a plate and piling it high with salad and bread. She’s been off meat the past few weeks. From what Johnny says, he can’t keep up with what she likes and doesn’t like.

“I think we can all guess what that is, too,” Maci says with a wink, then she heads to Tysen. I tip my head toward him, giving him a silent hello and a shit-eating grin. He saw where I beelined it, too, and there are two other ladies I still need to greet before heading to my brothers. Tysen shakes his head. He knows my game; they all do. Anything to get a rise out of them and to keep the focus off what I’ve got going on.

Lennie and Kenny are chatting away in the corner. I give them a few minutes to finish their conversation, and in the meantime, I finish my beer. I’ll be grabbing another one, then call it a night when it comes to drinking since I’ll be driving home. I could very well tie one on and one of the guys would drive me home, except four out of our group have a woman and their own family to get home to. The last singles in our group besides myself are Jude, the app developer in our group, Luke, the obstetrician and gynecologist, Matthew, the lawyer who came in handy when Kennedy’s ex tried to act like he wanted to be an active part of Briar’s life, popping in and out whenever he chose to, and Crew, our engineer, who also helps a lot at

Jagged Edge.

Jesus, I need to get ahold of my damn self, figure out what Jude has to say about Lyric.

“Excuse me, can I have your attention, please,” Trent says, stopping me in my tracks. So much for Winnie spilling the beans about the gender of their baby. I’d bet anything Kennedy told the girls in their group chat, and Winnie decided to keep her news for another time.

“Trent and I have some exciting news we want to share with you,” Kennedy takes over. My eyes glance around the room, noticing everyone is aptly waiting to hear the news, but I’m pretty sure we can all figure it out. “I’m pregnant!” All the girls crowd in on Kenny, and while they did this to tell everyone, I’m pretty sure this is more for the girls than the rest of us. The guys make their escape after giving Kennedy a hug and a kiss, and I’ll wade in once things settle down.

“Alright, now that the girls are busy, Jude, go ahead. Take the floor and make it quick,” Asher says with sarcasm in his tone. Once the girls get to talking, nothing will stand in their way.

“As I told Jagger today, Lyric was at the house today and then stopped at your parents’. I’m not sure if she went there or your mom saw her and went over. You could always ask your parents, but that’s up to you. The other news I have sucks.” He pauses for a moment before he continues with his eyes on me. “Her mom passed away twelve or so years ago, battled with cancer. As much as she tried to fight it, nothing helped. Her dad’s health declined as well. Lyric was and has been his primary caregiver up until he passed away this year from dementia.” I rock back on my heels. Fuck, that’s damn brutal. “I’m still waiting on more details about the house situation and what’s going down in that area. It might take a few more days. I do know Lyric isn’t sleeping there. She’s currently at Oak Haven Bed and Breakfast.”

“Well, damn,” Asher breathes. He must have gotten off work, grabbed Lennie, and came right over. He’s still wearing his blue firefighter uniform that he wears when he’s not on a call.

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“Poor girl has been through it,” Johnny says, taking a sip of his whisky.

“Explains why she’s back, though, taking care of business since everything has been left on her shoulders.” Tysen looks like he’s lost in thought. Now that he’s gotten a third pilot on rotation for Vaughn Air Elite, his private charter company, he’s able to be around more.

“Shit, she’s what, thirty-three?” Trent responds. I could very well have him do a complete background search with his job as a police officer. Except Jude has taken over keeping tabs on everyone and every facet of our lives.

“Thirty-five,” I grunt, because no fucking way I’d have had any type of relationship with her when I was seventeen and she was thirteen. I’m the youngest in the group. While the rest of them are hitting thirty-nine and forty, I’ll be hitting thirty-eight later this year.

“Someone’s memory is sharp as a tack,” Matthew mutters. I give him a sharp look.

“Incoming,” Crew states, letting us know the girls are about to converge on our group. A fucking welcome relief. I finish my beer, more than ready to call it a night. The other day had me questioning why everything seemed too quiet, and now I’m over here ready to leave my friends to have nothing except silence.

“Congrats, Kennedy, happy for you.” I side swipe her before she moves toward Trent. In the past year, we’ve had weddings, pregnancies, and engagements, and I don’t see an end in sight. Matthew will more than likely be the next given the way he’s talked about his housekeeper lately.

“Thanks, are you doing okay?” she asks.

“Never better. I’m gonna head home. I’ve got an early start in the morning.” Kenny nods, and I make my rounds, being sure to make a plate to take home. I’ve already seen the worry written on Winnie’s face. That’s the last thing I want. She’s got enough going on, and Johnny would kick my ass if something upset her. That man is wrapped around her finger, much like Tysen is Maci’s, Asher is Lennie’s, and Trent is Kennedy’s. Yeah, I don’t see me settling down anytime soon, especially because Lyric is back. She fucked that up a long time ago, and it’s best left where it belongs—in the past.

4

LYRIC

“Here goes nothing,” I say to my empty room at the bed and breakfast the next day. After I spoke with Mrs. Steele, who told me to call her by her first name, Eleanor, I also learned Mr. Steele’s given name is Troy. We spoke about the house, how it all happened, and given the background, I was shocked but also felt sorry about the tenant.

The single mom who had lived there for the past five years with three children all under the age of ten tried to make ends meet. Apparently, she did a really good job, too, until her abusive ex made a sudden appearance. Things went from bad to worse, and he took his anger out on her, the kids, and my house. The tenant, Vivian, called the police numerous times, but the husband would take off and couldn’t be found. She put a restraining order on him, and child protective services were involved, too.

They thought they’d be in the clear, since he didn’t comeback for months this time. Then one day, he re-appeared, hurt Vivian and the girls, wreaked havoc on the house, until finally, Troy called the cops one night after hearing screaming. The abusive

piece of shit was taken away in handcuffs, and all Eleanor knew is that Vivian and the girls up and disappeared in the middle of the night. Eleanor tends to believe she received help from the women's shelter and is in the wind, especially since the man who beat on her and the children didn't stay behind bars long.

I felt terrible after hearing the story. No longer was I upset about the house but at the way Vivian and her children were treated. I make a mental note to include a sizable donation to the local women's shelter when life settles down. What reason is there to have all this money that's been left behind with nothing to do with it? I'd rather see it be spent on the greater good. We then proceeded to write a list of what would need to be done to make the house livable. I'm okay with living there once the basics are done, you know, like a livable bedroom, kitchen, and bathroom.

When I first planned to come down to Florida, I initially thought I'd throw a blow-up air mattress in the car and figure things out when I got here. Naomi clucked her tongue, telling me in not so many words that my idea wouldn't be the greatest, especially because there was no running water and power. Furthermore, turning it on while no one is at the house could make for another sticky situation in case there was a leak or an electrical fire. Here I am, thirty-five-years old, and didn't even think about that. Clearly, I've never owned a home on my own before. Even while being Dad's caretaker, nothing really happened at the house apart from needing a new hot water heater.

Needless to say, I saw the error in my ways and quickly found a place to stay. There were hotels to choose from, except they were further away from my house, not to mention they were a bit pricier than I wanted to pay. My goal was to come down here, get the house ready, working night and day to do so, and only need a place to lay my head at night. I guess that's out of the question, but the good news is the bed and breakfast I booked isn't near as steep as a hotel, plus it comes with breakfast. The older couple who owns and operates the establishment is an added bonus; they're warm and welcoming. They also let me book my room until I no longer needed it and

gave me a sweet deal for it, too.

“Hello, this is Joss with Jagged Edge Construction, how may I help you?” I finally grew a pair of lady balls and dialed the number on the sheet of paper Eleanor wrote on along with my list of to-dos. There’s a construction company, a yard maintenance company, and also the water and electric companies she had on hand. I’m forgoing the yard one for the time being. I can use my own elbow grease and dive right in. The math started mathing when I calculated the price of yard tools versus hiring the work out. Yes, it would be a whack at first, but I’d have it until they bit the dust or I got tired of dealing with the yard. I can’t honestly say that will happen. In North Carolina, when the nurses would sit with Dad, I’d take a full two hours to mow, weed eat, hedge the bushes, and pick the weeds out of the flower beds.

“Hi, I’m calling to see if I can schedule an estimate. You were referred to me by Eleanor Steele,” I name-drop exactly like she suggested. I’m desperate here, and it’s not like there are a whole lot of options in this small town. Eleanor even warned me that should I need to go outside of this area, to let her know the company name first, and she’d run it by Troy to be on the safe side.

“Let me see what we have available. In the meantime, can you tell me your address?”

“Umm, hold on just a minute. I know the street name but can’t remember the exact house number.” I get flustered for a second, feeling caught off guard when I for sure thought my ducks were in row.

“Take your time. There’s no rush,” Joss says on the other end of the line, calming me down a little bit. “The scheduling system likes to lag, so it all works out.”

I quickly turn the page in my notebook. “There it is. Fifty-nine thirty-five Fawn Ridge Road in Whispering Oaks.” Good grief, I could have looked that up in maps app had I put my speakerphone on.

“Perfect timing. My scheduling program decided to wake up and realize it is not in fact a Monday and shouldn’t be acting crazy at all,” Joss jokes.

“Well, it is Friday. Maybe it’s thinking about quitting time.”

“Ha, it’s too early in the day for that, plus this is an ongoing issue.” Maybe their system needs an overhaul. These types of things always happened at the dentist’s office I once worked at, and because the facility was on the smaller side, upgrades didn’t happen as fast as they should have.

“Well, that stinks.” I sympathize with her.

“Alright, here we go. I have Monday at eight o’clock in the morning. The general contractor will be Randy. Is the number you’re calling from a good point of contact?” Wow. I breathe a sigh of relief. This is happening a lot faster than I expected it to.

“That’s perfect, and yes, this number is a good point of contact,” I reply.

“I guess I should jot down your name to attach the house to the person Randy is meeting.” We both let out a laugh of our own. I don’t think it’s only her computer program needing a break; we all do.

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“Lyric Skye,” I tell her.

“Perfect. I appreciate your patience. Randy will see you Monday morning. Thank you for calling Jagged Edge.”

“Thank you as well. Have a great rest of your day.” I hit the end button, drop my phone to the table, then raise my arms and feet while remaining sitting on the chair to do a dance of sorts.

Now that I have the ball rolling, I need to send Naomi a text to let her know what’s going on. When I left North Carolina, she stayed back and is in the process of rifling through stacks of paperwork that I didn’t have the time or energy to deal with. She rented an Airbnb for the time being, and we brought the boxes to her place, where she’ll go through them and decide what’s important and what’s not. I’m hoping it won’t be too much, then Naomi can just ship one package and be done with it.

Me: Good morning, I have a contractor coming out Monday. I’m going to get the ball rolling on the landscaping even though I’m sure it’ll be a mess once a construction crew gets started.

When I called her last night after getting settled, she had plans with Mr. Bennett, so we kept our conversation short. I gave her the details of the house, told her to have a great night, and we’d chat today. I don’t see a response right away or a notification under the thread saying read.

Interesting. Very interesting.

Naomi always has her phone near her. Even when she's in Paris and our time differences clash, it's always within reaching distance. I have my fingers crossed that maybe she had a late night and is sleeping in, or maybe she's with a certain handsome lawyer and never made it back to her place.

I abandon my phone on the table, stand up, and stretch. I raise my arms over my head, move my body side to side, place my legs shoulder-length apart, and bend forward until my hands touch the carpeted floor. I do this a few times, trying to loosen the stiff muscles in my aching body.

Between the drive down here, the stress that's been my life for too many years to count, and then sleeping in a bed that isn't mine, it has made me entirely too tense. I should probably add a yoga mat to my list while I'm out shopping today. I'm sure there are going to be more days ahead when my muscles are absolutely going to protest.

My phone goes off on the table, an alert for a text message, and after walking my hands out to further stretch my lower back, I do the reverse and stand up. The blood rushes to my brain, causing a slight dizziness to take hold. I take a deep breath and wait until it disappears. I really need to get a move on. The light dinner I had last night has long since worn off, and I'm going to need nourishment to fuel the calories I'm likely to burn.

I grab my phone and look at the notification while walking to the ensuite bathroom, an added bonus when a lot of bed and breakfasts don't have this advantage.

Naomi: Ma chérie, that is wonderful news!

Me: I'm excited and nervous. How'd your date go?

Naomi: I'll have to get back to you. I'm still on it.

Me: FINALLY! Love you! Chat later!

I toss my phone on the counter and get to work. I have my teeth to brush, clothes to change, breakfast to eat, a store to shop at, and a yard to tackle. I look at myself in the mirror. Even though the losses I've been dealt, I'm still standing, I'm still breathing, and I'm still smiling.

5

JAGGER

"The schedule is updated on the computer for next week. Also, you need to look over a set of contracts to see if any changes need to be made. Those can wait till Monday, though," Joss tells me as she places a few folders on my desk. We're slowly converging everything digitally. Our schedule has already been done, though we're finding glitches in it, and I need to get Jude out here to take a look. The next phase we're slowly integrating is contracts—less paper, less filing, and hopefully less hassle, and not only for Joss, for everyone. Our general contractors, project managers, and foremen will then be able to pull everything up on their tablet before too long.

The one downfall we've come across is plans. Reading them on a ten-inch screen is damn near impossible, especially if you need to add a certain detail. It's a hell of a lot of scrolling and zooming in. Another task for Jude. He's been on me forever to make it into this century. Telling him it wasn't that simple didn't help until he spent a day with Joss. Then his mind worked, and he came up with a program of his own to work at Jagged Edge.

"Thanks, I'll look over them today or tomorrow. I'm still playing catch-up from last week, and no, you're not on call this weekend. Don't answer your phone, don't come in, and don't think about work. This place will be fine." Joss pulled her weight big time last weekend while I was away. The guys pitched in, but had it not been for her,

I'm pretty sure we'd be behind on most of our projects.

"I hear you. I'll silence it, but seriously, if you need me, don't hesitate. The only plans I have are to float around in my apartment pool, read gossip magazines, and eat my weight in chips and salsa." She doesn't mince words at all, she doesn't take my shit, and she sure as hell doesn't take anyone else's. A few of the guys have tried to give her the run-around, but Joss put her foot down, stood tall, kept her shoulders back, and looked a man twice her size dead in the eye while telling him he better get his ass on the job site, or else. I was in my office, ready to intervene, but she handled herself. The employee stormed off, and when no one was around, I had a word with him myself. He didn't like what I had to say, therefore I gave him his marching orders. Still, word got around, and ever since that day, no one has dared to piss Joss off.

"Sounds like you have a solid weekend." I look up from taking a quick glance at the contracts, noting their names and which one is a priority.

"I do. Oh, that reminds me. We have an estimate on Monday morning. She dropped your mom's name." That gets my attention. I move my mouse around to wake up the computer. "Eleanor doesn't give the company name out lightly or even suggests using her name, so I moved the client in right away. Randy is the only one with availability."

"It's all good. Get out of here, or you'll never leave. Enjoy your weekend, and don't answer the phone," I remind her.

"Okay, okay. Don't work too hard. I'll see you bright and early Monday morning." Joss waves as she walks out of my office, through the small room, and out the door. I wait until the door slams closed before looking at the schedule. I'm about to pull up the program to check who the mysterious person is my mom referred.

"Lucky me," I mutter. My cell phone starts dancing around on my desk. The screen

lights up, and I know there's no ignoring this call.

I hit the accept button before pressing the speaker option. "Hey, Mom."

"Hey, Jagger, you'll never guess who I saw today." I'd hazard a guess, except then she'd know my friends have been checking up on things and I'd have to answer questions I'm not ready to reply to yet.

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“You got me there. Who?” My computer decides to finally pull the program up, and I’m once again reminded that I’ll need Jude over here soon.

“Lyric. You remember her, right? She lived next door. Her mom and I were good friends. Though, we lost touch. Life got busy and whatnot. Her father was a big to-do Marine. Anyways, the house next door is hers. She inherited it, and, honey, it needs a lot of work. I hope you don’t mind I gave her your number for an estimate.” I puff out a breath of air. Of course, I remember Lyric Skye. Kind of hard to forget the first girl you ever loved.

Motherfucking fuck.

I knew Lyric was here in Whispering Oaks. I also knew she’d been at my folks’ house. What I didn’t know was that Mom would throw us back together like this.

“Yeah, Mom.” I’m sure she can hear the tension in my voice.

“Well, honey, what was I supposed to do? Give her some two-blow joe’s number so he can screw her out of the money her parents left her?” I’ve gone and truly pissed her off, and all I said were two damn words.

“Give me the phone, Ellie,” I hear Dad mumble in the background. Well, my night just went from shit to shittier.

“He’s not being an asshole, just a grump,” Mom retorts. I muffle my chuckle.

“Jag, you there?” Dad is swift with his words.

“Yeah, I’m here. I already told Mom it was fine. Joss gave me the heads-up she referred someone. I was looking at the schedule when she sprung the news on me.”

“Alright, we’re all aware there’s a past but, bud, I saw the girl myself. Boy, that girl has had the weight of the world on her shoulders. The way your mom tells it, she came home from college to help and never went back, been taking care of one parent after the other.” I already knew as soon as I saw Lyric’s name with Randy attached to the estimate order, I’d be taking over. The last thing I want is to admit to myself why I’ve been ready to delete his name and input mine.

“I’ll take care of it. Mom didn’t let me get a word in before you came on. I’ll call her tomorrow, see if I can’t meether over there before Monday.” A clawing takes ahold of my chest, rattling my cage, making me think all kinds of shit I don’t need to be reflecting on. Thoughts that make me second-guess keeping my distance, putting the past where it belongs, in the past, and laying my eyes on her in the flesh. The picture Jude showed me happened to be her driver’s license. I don’t know one single person who has a decent picture attached to their identification, yet some-fucking-how, Lyric does.

“I knew you would. We’ll be around. Make sure you stop on by and bring Lyric around.” I don’t respond, mostly because there’s a clanking going on, and I hear Mom say something to my father before he’s gone. This call is going to take a lot longer than I expected, meaning getting out of here early is shot to shit. I’m tempted to grab my laptop, the contracts, plans, and head home. There’s one slight problem with my plan—I won’t stop until I’m falling asleep, and I’m talking head nodding only to smack myself in the head when I inherently conk out.

“Thank you, sweetheart. I appreciate you helping Lyric,” my mother says calmly into the phone. Apparently, she booted Dad out of the situation once she got her way. Classic Eleanor Steele moves right there.

“You’re welcome. I’ll let you know when I’m over your way. Am I good to get back to work now?” I ask.

“No, you’re not. Let me tell you what Lyric did today, which, by the way, she wouldn’t allow me to so much as lift a finger. I had to watch as she went to town trimming the bushes, which she said was pointless because roses will be replacing them soon enough. Then she trimmed backbranches, grabbed a weed eater, and went to town in order to see to those massive pavers. I feel bad we didn’t keep up with it more than we did. Anyways, we fed her dinner, and now she’s back at the bed and breakfast.” She barely takes a breath before she’s back at it, “Your father told her she’d be doing a lot of this stuff for no good reason, especially once the work on the house starts. Lyric shrugged her shoulders and said at least it wouldn’t be even more overgrown, and it gives her something to do besides sitting down. That girl, well, I can’t wait for you to see her again.” The giddiness in her tone means she’s up to something and what that is will be no good.

“Mom.” She continues carrying on about Lyric. Talking about her features, the way she looks exactly like her mom, eye color, hair color, physical build, and what she wore today. “Mom, stop.” I try to get her attention again. She still doesn’t stop. My eyes close, and I pinch the bridge of my nose, placing my elbows on my desk. I’m tempted to hit the end button, except I’d find myself in a world of trouble. She already sicced Dad on me after I barely said two words. I can only imagine what will happen next.

“Mom!” I bark louder than necessary.

“Goodness, Jagger, who pissed in your Cheerios this morning?” Gee, I can’t fucking imagine. This whole week has been one thing after another, whether it’s with myself or with a childhood girlfriend who had no problem leaving me in the dust. The damn kicker of it all is, after seeing her picture, my cock can’t get with the program. I’ve ignored it. Not once have I allowed my hand to get near it when it perks up at the

thought of her. It's made for a long-as-fuck few weeks.

"Nobody did. Yet. I've got to finish up a few things at the office. Then I'll make a call to Lyric tomorrow." I already knew I would. Randy's name sitting there like a beacon, flashing on the screen, is doing nothing to calm the storm brewing inside me, inherently eating me up. The anger I hold over Lyric makes me second-guess calling her tomorrow, but there's my mom, hounding me, Dad getting in on it, and my own fucking conscience.

"Well, shoot, I'm sorry. I'll let you go. If you think about it, text me when you make it home. I worry, you know."

"It's okay, and I'm well aware you worry. I'll send you a message. Even though you or Dad never respond," I appease her. When I'm out and she's none the wiser, Mom doesn't ask me to do this. Occurrences like these, well, they seem to hit differently.

"One day, we might, though. I love you, Jagger." She gives me false hope over her use of technology. Hence her calling me from her landline this evening.

"I love you, too. Talk soon." We hang up after that. I don't waste any time ending the call. I stand up, grab the files, my laptop, the keys to my truck, and the phone I was using seconds ago. There's no use staying in the office to work. The quiet room does nothing to help me focus. It didn't before the call, and it still doesn't now. At least at home, there's beer to drink and food to eat with a television that will no doubt have a game playing. Anything sounds better than sitting at the office on a Friday night, alone.

“Five more minutes,” I mumble into my pillow, slapping my hand around on the mattress until I find the blaring annoyance of my phone going off. Finally, my palm meets the device, and the noise quits making a racket. I roll over, tuck myself beneath the covers, and hide away from the sun shining into my room. The last thing I want to do is wake up when I only fell asleep what seems like hours ago.

I’d been packing all of the yard tools into the detached garage when Eleanor came traipsing over. I stopped what I was doing immediately and headed in her direction. My outfit that consisted of a long-sleeve shirt, a pair of old ratty jeans with rips in the knees and stained with paint or bleach in a few areas, and sneakers that have seen better days was something to look at, that’s for sure. I finally finished what I could, and luckily for me, the tenants didn’t leave any belongings in the detached garage and it’s in a heck of a lot better shape than the interior of the house.

I still have a lot of work left to do in the backyard, but the small dent in the progress out front made me feel proud. Until I did a quick survey while Eleanor invited me over to their house for a hot meal and air conditioning. I was tempted to say no, until she mentioned what they cooked. My stomach let out a loud growl at the thought of a Greek salad, fettuccine Alfredo, chicken cutlets, garlic knots, and tiramisu. All catered from the pizzeria the next town over. They said they always order too much, that after all these years, they’re still unable to order or cook for only the two of them.

After a couple of more minutes, she thoroughly convinced me to join their party of two even though I knew I’d feel more like a third wheel. Which I actually didn’t, by the way. We chatted, ate our fill, and then we said good night. They even tried to lure me into spending the night, but I told them my room was paid for, and there was no use letting money go to waste. I think Eleanor might have been a little worried that I would be too tired to drive; little did she know that wasn’t the case.

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“Ugh, what’s the point?” I groan groggily as my phone goes off again. Surely, it hasn’t been enough time yet. The sleepiness finally fades, and I realize it’s my phone ringing. I never turned on my alarm. I haven’t since the day Dad died. There wasn’t a point; my schedule hasn’t been the same ever since. I’d like to fix that, but until I get my whole housing situation under control, I’m looking at this as a turning of a leaf and letting things roll off my back for the time being.

My hand slides from under the covers, the cold air sneaking its way in and causing me to shiver. I hurriedly snatch my phone before sinking deeper into the abyss of warmth. My eyes are still blurry and out of focus after the little sleep I got. I assumed after leaving the Steeles, I’d be exhausted. The sun, the heat, working in the yard, and a full stomach would usually have me promptly passing out. Sadly, it didn’t. The hot shower, washing my hair and shaving my legs, didn’t tire me out, either. I didn’t understand it because every muscle I had in my body was protesting any movement. Yet, I couldn’t get my mind to shut down. I wrapped myself in a towel, tossed my hair in one as well to help the long locks absorb the water, and pulled out my journal.

A few hours later, after more scribbling than I’ve ever done before, with tears rolling down my cheeks, exhaustion finally took over. I unwrapped my hair and body from the thick cotton, tossed it at the foot of the bed, and got under the covers. Sleep took over, but it feels like I’ve been put through the wringer between the physical and emotional turmoil.

“Hello.” I don’t recognize the number, and when I squint at the time, I realize it’s later than I first expected. Who knew I could snooze until nearly ten o’clock in the morning? Sleeping the day away is the last thing I want, especially if I want to work on the backyard today.

“Hello, is this Lyric Skye?” the voice on the other end of the line answers. I sit up straight, holding the phone with one hand and pushing my hair away from my face with the other. I’m very much awake now. The male voice is smoky, deep, and slightly raspy. The cool brooding intensity gets to me, and he’s only said a few words.

“This is she.” I look down at my naked body. One could blame the cool air for my flesh to raise with goose bumps and my nipples to harden into tight tips, except I know the truth. The stranger on the other end of the line has me all fired up.

“I’m with Jagged Edge Construction. Joss gave me your name and phone number. We’ve had a cancelation in our schedule, and I can fit your estimate in this morning, if you have time.” Yep, most definitely the voice. My thighs clench together, and I’m going to have to take a cold shower before I even remotely think about meeting the stranger.

“Uh, um. Yes, that will work. What time were you thinking?” I survey my room. My luggage lies open in the corner, clothes pouring out, some on the chair, some on the floor, and then there’s a sundress I had the forethought to hang up. So much for wearing another set of grimy clothes to work in the yard today.

“I’m free in about thirty minutes.” A couple of quick calculations in my head tell me I’m going to need at least ten minutes to do my bathroom business, minus touching my hair, five minutes to get dressed, maybe another five to grab a cup of coffee and muffin downstairs, leaving me with ten minutes to spare to meet him. I can totally do that. I’ll just have to get my ass out of bed, a problem considering I’m still sitting in said bed.

“That works,” I reply. My own voice sounds different from normal. Jesus, I can’t be lusting over a man simply because of his voice, can I? I shake my head, making a mental note to grab another bag from my car that has a certain toy. Maybe I just

need a good orgasm. Yeah, that's what I need.

"Sounds good. See you then." He hangs up the phone. I throw my body back on the mattress, dropping my phone and stretching. My arms lift over my head, my toes go into a point, and some of the tension I've been feeling slowly floats away. Too bad I can't stay like this for much longer. I've got to get ready, and fast.

I jump out of bed, going wobbly at the sudden and swift movements, but that doesn't stop me. I pull the covers up and slightly straighten them; I will do better next time when I'm not in a rush. I move through the room, closing my notebook and moving it to be closer with my purse in order to take it with me. It's a good thing it's big, too, because carrying around two notebooks isn't for the faint of heart. I go about tossing my clean clothes back in my suitcase and putting the dirty ones off to the side and then move into the bathroom. The last thing I want is for housekeeping to come in my room, it being way more untidy than necessary, and then think I'm a slob. That's the last thing I want spread around town. Here's Lyric Skye, overstaying her welcome at the bed and breakfast, and she's a beyond messy to boot.

"Shit," I mutter. Time is dwindling down, and I still have a lot to do. I head into the bathroom, still naked from last night, which I guess makes it easier, because when my eyes land on the mirror, my hair is a hot fucking mess.

"You'll never learn." I grab my toothbrush, put some toothpaste on it, and turn the water on. There's more than a slight chance I'm going to be late, but it's either that, or I'm going to have to bypass coffee and a snack. I don't even wait for the water to heat up. I'm on a mission, one that won't make me late. I shove the toothbrush in my mouth and scrub my teeth while tipping my head backwards. It's going to take a miracle to tame the wild mess of my hair. Letting it dry naturally in the Florida humidity is asking me to look like I put my fingers in an electrical socket, but what other choice do I have?

I go about my business, working at lightning speed, and step out of the shower sopping wet. A quick look around, and I spot a clean towel. The fabric abrades my skin with how fast I'm going, but time is of the essence. I flip my head over once I'm done and wrap the towel around my head. I'll get dressed, and by then, my hair will have dried enough to run a brush through it, put it up in some kind of twist, and pop a clip in it.

"What now?" I hear my phone ringing. Part of me is tempted to grab it. Except I can't make the estimator wait. If he leaves before I get there, who knows how long it'll take to get him back out there or to find another one? I gulp at the last option, fear taking hold as I rip my sundress off the hanger and shove my head through it. All I need to find is a pair of panties to slip on. The type of dresses I love have built-in shelf bras, and considering life didn't go according to plan when it comes to children, my breasts still sit high and tight. I snatch a pair of panties, moving from one foot to the other, taking half the fabric of my dress with me as I pull them up. Now it's time for hair. I move my head to the side, allowing the towel to fall off my head and land in a heap on the floor. I'll pick it up on my way out. Hair first, makeup last. Oh, who am I kidding? There's no time for mascara, let alone blush; a bare face will have to do.

My mother, God bless her soul, would tell me to at least put on moisturizer, except I haven't looked at the clock, and I'm scared to. Instead, I brush my hair, yanking and pulling, ripping more out with how I'm handling it, and promise myself when I get back today, to do a better job.

"Yep, this is as good as it's going to get," I tell myself in the mirror. In a perfect world, I'd have taken a lot more time. You know, considering I felt more than I have from the stranger's voice than I have in years. "Shut up." I bend to pick up the towel, pulling my dress down while doing so, and hang it on the hook. I flip the switch, walk back into my bedroom, grab my purse, deposit my things in it, shove my feet in a cute pair of woven leather sandals, and move my ass.

I look down at my watch briefly as I shut the door to my room behind me, breathing a sigh of relief that I've somehow managed my time enough to grab a to-go cup of coffee and muffin. I hustle down the stairs staying laser-focused, my eyes on the prize in the form of carbs and caffeine.

"Good morning, Miss Skye," the innkeeper greets me as I land on the bottom floor.

"Good morning. I'm going to grab something quickly and head out the door." I point to the room where they keep snacks and drinks during the day but breakfast in the morning. "My appointment suddenly moved up and, well, I slept later than normal." I feel like I need to explain myself. He nods in understanding; a sense of relief rushes through me. I've lived in enough small towns with the way we traveled around for Dad's jobs that I know people talk, the perks of being a military brat. When Dad became an even bigger deal, I'd really had to home in on being polite, never wanting my behavior to fall back on my father's shoulders. My parents never made me feel like I had to, except I watched other children when we had to attend certain events, and I learned from them.

I'm able to grab a blueberry muffin and stuff it in my purse, and a few steps later, I have my coffee cup secured with a lid. The doctored version I'd have in the luxury of my home is different when there's only half and half and sugar or an artificial sweetener available. I opted for the cream and sugar, making do with what's available. I'll find the time to pick up a few things at the grocery store later today.

"Bye, Mr. Gus." I wave as I head for the door.

"See you soon, Miss. Skye." Gus and his wife, Nora, have been the greatest. She's not around this morning, but she was last night when I came in for the night. I'd wondered how they make it work, having a marriage, owning a business, and working opposite hours, yet somehow, they have. I don't have time to do much more thinking. I've got a house to get to, and turning it into a home is my top priority. With

that thought in mind, I unlock my car door, climb inside, and start the engine. I'll drink my coffee and munch on my muffin along the way, though now that I've had time to go over the phone call, a phone call that's absolutely harmless yet has me wondering things I haven't let myself think about, I'm reconsidering if I should touch my coffee or food.

7

JAGGER

I'm leaning against the bed of my truck when Lyric pulls into the driveway. The quick glimpse of her face doesn't give me enough time to really look at her. A damn shame, too, but since I'm willing to bet I woke her up with my phone call, there's a reason she comes in hot to fucking trot. She whips the top-heavy gun-metal gray Chevy Tahoe SUV into the driveway, throws it in Park, and opens the door. Lyric drives her vehicle like she stole the damn thing. I straighten, ready to make my way toward her, when I'm greeted with one killer leg, kissed by the sun, long and lean, and when she slides out of the driver's seat, I get even more of her body in the form of a shapely thigh.

Jesus Fuck.

"Sorry, I'm so sorry. Am I late?" She looks at her watch on her wrist and back at me. Her mouth forms into the shape of an O. It appears Lyric has now realized who's meeting her for an estimate. I remain silent, unable to answer her question, mainly because I'm taking her in. When Lyric and her family left that day all those years ago with tears streaming down her cheeks, she was pretty then, but now that she's an adult, the woman version of Lyric Skye is a goddamn vision. Her dark brown hair is pulled back, but when her hand moves to the back of her head to undo the clip, her long hair tumbles down. The sun catches the subtle gold and chestnut strands, making it look rich and earthy. I'm drawn to her green eyes like the grass after an afternoon

thunderstorm, striking and vivid. Lyric's high cheekbones flush a light pink, and her lips appear soft and full, reminiscent of the color of ripe berries.

I'm tempted to bite my fist when my eyes travel down the length of her body. She's small, tinier than my six-foot-six frame by more than a foot. That doesn't make her any less appealing, though. My cock decides to perk up at the thought of seeing her without a stitch of clothing on her curvy-as-fuck body. She takes a hesitant step away from the Tahoe. I bite at my lower lip and take a step toward the woman who had not one single fucking problem leaving me in the dust.

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“You aren’t late,” I finally breathe out. I’m still locked in on her, focused on how the dress she’s wearing does nothing to hide the shape of her body or how with each movement, I can see the bounce in her tits and the sway of her ass.

“Um, well, I guess that’s the good news. Should we go take a look?” I would have thought she didn’t recognize me, except I saw in full color how she became well aware. I’ll let her make this play. Figure she can bring it up, or we’ll address it at a later time.

“Lead the way.” I hold my arm out, allowing her to precede me. I’ve already got my tablet in the opposite hand, having grabbed it when I moved away from my truck. I’ll take pictures of the space, work out the specs, make notes, ask questions about what she’s envisioning, and depending on what Lyric wants, I may need to call in Crew.

“I don’t know how much you’ve seen or heard about what happened, but it’s really bad,” she tosses over her shoulder, hair flinging with the wind and lips tipped upward in a half smile. I move my eyes off her ass and give her my full attention. Getting caught staring at the bombshell is the last thing she needs. Shit, it’s the last thing I need, too. I’m still pissed as hell with her, and while I’m fully fucking aware we were both teenagers when things went down, it still ticks me off.

“Yeah, I know about it.” I don’t tell her that Trent was the lead investigator or that Matthew helped get her divorce pushed through as well as getting full custody of the kids. Then we all rallied, kept our mouths tightly shut, and moved the family states away. Matthew hears from her now and then, an email here or call there. Mainly to make sure that she and her kids are still safe from the ex.

“I kind of figured as much.” She bends down to place the cup of coffee on the ground, and with me only being a step behind her, I’m taking a quick step back, so she doesn’t press into my hard-as-fuck cock. Still, I’m gritting my teeth when I get a better view of her heart-shaped ass. I watch as she struggles a minute to get the door to unlatch while turning the key. Clearly, that will be the first thing fixed on the list.

“Small town. People talk,” I say a bit more abrasively than necessary. I clear my throat, realization hitting that I’m coming off like an arrogant little prick. “I didn’t get a chance to see what shape it’s in. I know the neighbors did what they could with the resources they had. I’m sure they’ll be happy to see it’s getting worked on.”

“It’s in some kind of shape, alright.” Lyric overlooks me being an asshole, and I know it. I clear my throat, trying to calm the need to ask more questions than I need answered.

“That’s true. Okay, here it is. Welcome to my humble abode.” The door opens, and she steps inside. I watch as she loses her footing on a piece of ripped-up carpet, and my arm reaches around her waist to steady her.

“Easy now,” I mutter. Her body meets my front, and I can smell her. The same scent she wore when we were teenagers. Honeysuckle with a touch of raspberry.

“Thank you.” She starts wiggling, and I release her from my hold.

“Not a problem.” My cock is none too happy with me, but what’s new? Shit has run dry for weeks on end, and I refuse to get myself off thinking about Lyric. After this morning, I might not have a choice. There’s only so much a man can take until he’s about to break. It’s either I use my hand or Lyric. I shake my head, clearing the thoughts of having her naked and spread out on my bed. This isn’t the time or the place.

“Well, still.” She turns around, head tipping up, looking at me while her hands slide into her pockets.

“Don’t mention it. How about you tell me what all you’d like done.” She goes back out the front door, does a squat this time, holding the skirt of her dress down, and while I should have started looking through the house, I don’t, too busy getting my fill of her.

“Okay, I don’t want anything fancy. No ripping walls out and making it an open concept. I’d like to restore it to mimic how it looked when I used to live here. I’m sure you’ve heard from your mom about what happened to my folks, and I understand if you don’t want to take this project on. With, well, our past. I just want a sense of home, and this place has always felt that way.” She’s no longer looking at me. She’s giving me her back and hugging herself. Fuck me. I hang back for a minute, allowing her to collect herself before wading in, but when I see that’s not happening, I move, cussing myself up and down. There’s a reason shit hit me so hard as a seventeen-year-old young man. I’d had her beneath me in every sense of the way. When she ghosted me, the pact she made me promise her, and the future we planned, well, it all went up in smoke.

“Come ‘ere, Lyric.” I drop my tablet on a leftover side table. Damn thing is missing two legs, and I’m lucky it’s still standing instead of sitting in a pile of rubble. It, along with a lot of other shit in Lyric’s house, will end up in the roll-off dumpster when everything is said and done. I’ve seen the aftermath from what happened. How the Mott family survived with that abusive piece of shit, I have no idea, and how Lyric had no idea what happened makes me scratch my head further.

“I’m sorry. I thought my tears were all dried up. Apparently, they aren’t.” I cup the back of her head, turn her into my chest, and hold on while she cries or does whatever it is she needs. Her arms wrap around my waist, forehead pressed against my sternum, and the cup of coffee she has in her hand is more than likely dangling from the tips of

her fingers. I wish I'd had the forethought to grab it and set it on the table with my tablet. "God, I'm so sorry about everything. Maybe coming back here was a mistake. When your mom gave me the company name, never in my life did I think you'd be the owner. When I talked to Joss, she mentioned Randy would be meeting me, and when you called this morning, I didn't even remember to ask your name because I'd finally fallen asleep at four this morning, and I've been an absolute mess. Jesus, I need to go. I'm sorry for wasting your time." She tries to pull out of my arms, still not showing me her face, and judging by the wetness seeping through my white cotton shirt, she's got a lot to work through.

"Hey, hey, hey," I say in a soothing tone that I'd use for Briar or Sebastian when they're having a moment, whether it's because they didn't get their way or one of them skinned their knee while riding their bikes. "Mom called me last night and told me she gave you my company's name. Figured we'd get this squared away so you don't have to live in a bed and breakfast for months on end. We might be able to swing it to where we get the bedroom and bathroom done first, so you can at least stay here while we finish the rest. As for the tears, you take what you need. I've got time." I'm tempted to ship her off to my parents' house, let her sleep for the rest of the day, and wait on her to wake up before we finish the tour of the house. Except Mom would badger me to death on why Lyric's crying, and she'd no doubt blame me.

"No, no. I'm good, promise." I feel one hand sneak away from my side. She slithers it between us, and I'm assuming she's wiping away her tears. Christ, the last time she's been in my arms with tears streaming down her cheeks was the day she left Whispering Oaks. I'd had to reluctantly push her away from me and help her in the car. It'd broken a piece of me, knowing that the kind of love and friendship we had is what others dream about. Call me a pussy, call me an idiot, you can call me any damn thing in the book, but as long as I'd had Lyric, I didn't give one single fuck. "I guess we need to talk, too."

“We’ll deal with that another time. Let’s work on the house and go from there.” That whole once-bitten-twice-shy deal is ringing in my ears.

“Right, then can we start with the bedroom and bathroom? On second thought, let me go grab my notebook. Your mom and I made notes on what all would need to be done, plus I have pictures to kind of keep the same appeal it once had. Minus the exterior. I don’t think anything needs to be done besides the yard work, a good pressure washing, and a new coat of paint. All of that I can manage on my own,” Lyric says. At least now she’s not hiding her eyes from me. While they may be bloodshot and red-tinged, at least the tears have stopped.

“Go grab your notebook. I’ll take pictures and measurements to get everything specced out. And since you’re not talking about opening up any rooms, you won’t need an engineer, at least as long as nothing structural is going on.” The dropping of her shoulders makes me realize that I could have kept that out of the equation.

“Is that a big possibility?” She steps away from me and looks from my face to the wide-open door.

“I’ll take a look around, but I’m not seeing any cracks in the walls or ceilings.” I keep my mouth shut about foundation issues this time.

“Oh, right. Okay, I’ll be right back.” My lips tip in a smile as I watch her scurry out of the house, being careful not trip on the bunched-up carpet again. It’s not until she’s out of my line of sight that I get started on work. Lyric hinted at bringing up the past, and while I’d love a lot of my questions answered, it’s clear now isn’t the time. It damn sure isn’t the place, either. I give my mom another thirty minutes tops until she’ll be over here getting in the thick of what Lyric wants her home to be.

LYRIC

I made a mad dash to my vehicle, placed my cup in the holder, and scarfed down the last bite of my muffin. I needed sustenance after seeing Jagger in the flesh after all these years. The fact that we played it off only made my anxiety heighten. I'd have much rather hashed it all out and got to the root of the cause, except I chickened out because I'm a big ole ninny.

When I came back inside, I watched Jagger work, measuring rooms, taking pictures, checking every nook and cranny. He'd make comments here or there, scribble on his tablet with a pen. It was all very methodical, and it had me wondering about what else he can do with his strong capable hands.

I look at Jagger, really look at him. Somewhere along the way, he's managed to become taller than I remember and packed on a shit ton of muscle. He's solid, rock solid. When he brought me into the comfort of his arms and chest, I felt every damn inch of his toned body. My emotions getting the better of me didn't help any. I seemed to be leaking like a faucet. I only hope the tears have finally calmed down because I'm tired of them.

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Jagger's dirty blond hair is longer than before, grazing the top of his collar, tousled in a way that makes you think he's run his fingers through it multiple times when I've yet to see him do so. The loose waves, the style, it seems unkempt, giving him the free spirit vibe, like he's someone who doesn't follow the rules; that's who he was years ago. I've got a feeling the adult version of Jagger is more along the lines of a bend-the-rules-until-they-break kind of guy.

When our eyes meet across the room, mine drown in his, blue like the sky just before dusk, the quiet intensity sucking me into their vortex. I'd be the willing victim to drown in them. I've had to tell myself relentlessly to quit staring at the man who at one time meant everything to me in the form of a best friend slash secret boyfriend. We'd kept things quiet, didn't tell our parents, hiding our true feelings, though my mom knew. How couldn't she? And how could I not fall for the man who reminds me so much of the boy that was my childhood best friend and once boyfriend?

I continue my perusal, taking in the strong structure of his face, the chiseled jawline, sculpted with pure masculinity in mind, and you know there are women who look twice. A lot of who are probably breaking their necks to get his attention. His lips are lush and inviting, with a natural softness that makes you want to press yours against them. Jagger's upper lip is fuller, and when his teeth press down on the lower lip like they do now, I'm tempted to throw caution to the wind and launch myself into his arms.

His build is strong and muscular, the white cotton tee only showcasing his broad shoulders, wide chest, and massive-as-hell arms. His powerful torso tapers down to a narrow waist, flaring out to thick thighs encased in worn jeans, stained in various places, a rip in the back pocket, highlighting an ass I'd like to sink my nails into.

Jagger Steele is like a Viking god. Tall, strong, built, and you know without a shadow of a doubt he'd protect you by any means possible. What I don't understand is how the connection we so clearly had at one time was severed without so much as a backward glance from him. I've tried to start a conversation about what happened in the past; then again, I broke down. Maybe another time, we can sit down and figure out what transpired.

"Is everything okay?" I ask once he stops moving around. Following him around felt intrusive, though he'd question me about what I wanted here or there. I wish I had grabbed the box of pictures and whatnot as he closes the case to his tablet.

"Yep, why don't we take this outside?" Jagger must have realized the house started getting to me in the form of fanning myself and wrinkling my nose. "With there being no power, there's no circulation, and there's no air conditioning. The water being turned off for who knows how long makes for an unpleasant smell. The fresh air will do us some good."

"I agree." As we walk back through the house, Jagger's hand slides to my lower back, hand wrapping around my hip. I almost freeze on the spot, and it's only sheer will and determination that make me keep up with him while he guides me. We skirt around the tripping hazards, sharp corners from drywall being ripped apart, and the small table that's seen better days. When I came back from my car, I left the door open on purpose, a forethought I'm entirely happy about now. The one downfall is losing Jagger's hand the minute we make it outside.

The breeze from the oak trees calms my heated flesh, and as much as I'd like to say it's from being inside the too humid house, a lot has to do with the man standing beside me. I look around, trying to keep my gaze from locking with Jagger's, thinking about where I can place a couple of Adirondack chairs; boy, would I really like them right about now. My body is still protesting after all the work I did yesterday. I'm also beginning to think taking today off from attacking the backyard is

a great idea.

“Is it possible to salvage any of the tile in the bathrooms?” I ask, breaking the ice while opening my notebook and looking where I made notes on what I’d like to restore. The mint green and black tile in the front bath is one of them. The light pink and darker hues in the bathroom off the master bedroom is another. When I looked at it with Eleanor, I only spotted a few cracks in some of the pieces. “I’m not looking for perfection,” I tack on in case Jagger thinks I’ve somehow formed two heads.

“Yeah, I’ll make sure the crew knows not to demo those rooms. Are you good with the bathtubs staying the same? Getting the old cast iron tubs out in one piece will be hard to do, and setting a new one up could potentially lead to us needing to remove tile,” Jagger answers right away.

“The tubs are good. I mean, they’ll need a really good scrubbing, but you’re not going to find another well-made tub like that.” I’m not a bath type girlie. I prefer a shower, the hotter the better and stinging like needles because the pressure is that amazing.

“Then you’ll be good. We’ll patch, paint, and fix the walls along with whatever else needs to be done. The next order of business is doing a thorough inspection of the house. Structural, foundation, plumbing, electrical, and roofing.” He looks at me. This is the crappy part of being an adult, and my face must say it all. “I get it. No one likes this part.” You can say that again. I’d much rather see what money is being spent on visually instead of it being out of sight and out of mind.

“Well, that’s life.” I close my notebook. Everything else will be ironed out once Jagger gets the ball rolling and the estimate sent over. I’m sure he heard me when I said I’d like to have real wood kitchen cabinets, preferably painted a sage green or light blue. I’d also mentioned butcher block countertops instead of the preferred granite or quartz most homeowners gravitate toward. I’m looking for homie and

comfortable. I've dealt with cold and sterile enough while having nurses and doctors in and out of my life.

"Yeah, I'll do a thorough walkthrough of all of that in a few minutes. The only hiccup we'll have is checking the plumbing and electrical today. If you can work on getting those turned on in the next couple of days?" I look up, way up, and realize he's crowded my space more than I realized.

"I can do that." Tomorrow is my day to tackle the backyard. Monday will mean I'll have a breather from physical labor. I'll deal with those two items and maybe hunt for a job while I'm at it.

"Next thing, do you have a spare key?" Jagger asks. My back is facing the oak tree; I'm unsure of what to do next. Am I allowed to touch him? Is he allowed to touch me? I'm in uncharted territory, which really sucks since there's so much I want to do. My breathing becomes shallow, my knees weaken, and I'm more than aware that my panties are saturated. Maybe I should add 'use my toy' to my list of things to do today.

"I do," I stammer out, pulling my keys out of my pocket, where I have two on one ring holder. The lawyer, who, bless his heart, did way more than anyone else ever would. I figured since I'd been Dad's sole caregiver, I'd have been privy to a lot more than what I was. Apparently, Mom's last wish came directly from her. They put money away to deal with anything that could come our way. She knew, God, did she know how heartbreaking and time-consuming it would be watching Dad go through the process of losing the ability to do what he used to and not adding more to my plate.

"Alright, I'll take it. Also noticed the lock gave you some trouble. We won't change that out until a new door is installed." I go about taking the spare key off the keyring and depositing it into the palm of Jagger's hand.

“Did I miss the fun part?” Eleanor breaks the spell, and Jagger takes a big step back. A low whimper escapes me before I can suppress it. Damn it, Lyric, you are showing your hand, and to a man who is giving you mixed signals.

“Not at all,” I say, reviving myself from looking like a little girl who lost her prized possession in the form of a stuffed animal. The need to fidget takes ahold, so I swiftly put my unoccupied hand in my pocket.

“We’re all done here. I’m going to finish checking out the house, put the estimate together, and then head out,” Jagger states, giving his mom more information than he’s given me. That kind of stings. I turn my head, allowing myself a moment away to clear the sting I’m sure shows with my facial expression. I never could play poker for that reason alone; I wear my heart on my chest entirely too much.

“That’s good. No price gauging my favorite girl, Jagger Steele,” I hear Eleanor say as Jagger lets out a snort. I’m able to regain my composure and watch the two of them joke with each other.

“And never hear the end of it? Not me.” He puts his hand over his heart and smiles at his mom. Well, shit, I’m wholly underprepared for Jagger. Truth be told, I have been all along. The smirk, I could get past without my body turning into an inferno of need and desire. A full-blown smile, I’m done for. The world goes sideways, my nipples tighten, my pussy weeps, and there’s no way I can control them, either. Had I not realized my early slip-up, I’m pretty sure I’d let out a moan to rival all moans.

“A discount, then?” Eleanor teases.

“No, no, no. Please don’t. That’s completely unnecessary,” I interject, reeling from the thought and becoming mortified over the notion she’d even bring that up.

“Ellie.” I’m saved by Troy, Jagger’s father.

“Thanks, Dad. Saving the day per usual.” Jagger looks over my shoulder, giving his dad a subtle nod.

“Jagger, really, don’t do that, please,” I reiterate, making sure he knows I’m not looking for handouts.

“You’re good, Lili.” He realizes the error of his ways and clenches his jaw after using the name only Jagger used for me so long ago, and I haven’t heard it in just as long.

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“Alright, well, I’ll head back in. Joss took down all of my information, unless you need anything else?” While I’d love nothing more than to stay in his presence, Eleanor and Troy being here makes it hard to talk, not like the big guy would anyways.

“Nah, we should be good. I’ll call you if not. Good seeing you.” I’m rewarded with a slow tug at his lips as he gives me a lazy smirk. Yeah, I’m going to need my neck examined with the whiplash Jagger is giving me.

“Oh no, please stay,” Eleanor says.

“Don’t leave on our account. We were heading out anyways. Ellie wants to walk around the downtown area. They’re closing the streets for their monthly deal. Shops stay open, vendors are out, and there’s live music.” Troy wraps his arm around his wife’s shoulder.

“You two could join us,” Eleanor chimes in.

“Mom, you’re as bad as Lennie’s mom, Catherine. I can’t either way. I need to get this finished and do some work. Maybe another time.” Jagger has no problem denying his mom. Meanwhile, I’m trying to come up with a plausible explanation to not third wheel.

“Sorry, I can’t either. I’ve got a few errands to run, plus Naomi is shipping a few things, and I need to go through them.” A lightbulb moment appeared momentarily; the downfall of this fib is that it’s not entirely accurate, because the boxes aren’t coming in until sometime later in the week.

“Next time, then,” Eleanor agrees.

“Come on, we’ll miss out on parking, and you’ll have to walk further.” Troy looks down at her shoes.

“Okay, fine. We’ll see you two later.” They head back toward their house, and we watch as they go.

“I guess I’ll be going now. Thanks again.” I give Jagger a finger wave and head toward my Tahoe.

“Lyric.” Jagger stops me in my tracks.

“Yeah?”

“Never mind. I’ll have this sent right over. Good seeing you.” He doesn’t wait for my response. Instead, he shakes his head and walks toward my house. Goodness, this is turning into one wild ride of a day.

9

JAGGER

“To what do I owe this pleasure?” Jude answers on the first ring. I’ve wrapped up my time at Lyric’s, doing everything I could to maintain a semblance of control. A damn hard thing to do when trying to conceal the way my cock kept perking up, no matter how many times I tried to keep the dumb piece of flesh from doing so. Every time she walked in front of me, the soft and subtle sway of her hips each time she took a step made the dress of her skirt cling to her ass. It made it damn impossible not to take things a step further. I’d shake off the thought, remembering how much unfinished business we had to discuss, none of which I wanted to bring up at that moment.

“Fuck, I have no goddamn clue,” I reply, standing at the railing of my back deck. I finished the estimate for Lyric an hour ago, made a sandwich, grabbed a beer, and walked out back to enjoy the fresh air.

“You’ve got it bad, my man. She as pretty as her picture?” Jude is doing nothing to help my case.

“Prettier. You find anything else out that I need to know? Husband or man in the picture?” We didn’t get into the nitty gritty of her background. Kind of hard to ask questions when she fell to pieces in my arms.

“Nobody in the picture except a woman named Naomi. One of her mom’s friends who kept in touch when she passed away. Naomi is from Paris and hopped on a plane the day everything went down. I checked her flight plans. She’s been back and forth to see your girl every summer like clockwork, staying the longest during Lyric’s mom’s final days and for weeks after. I took a look at her recent trip. It seems Naomi will be staying even longer with the way her paperwork reads. Other than that, Lyric’s been alone, friend and man wise.” Motherfucking fuck, she’s been doing it on her own for all these years. Who the hell knows what happened during her teen years? Jude said the battle with her mom really started once Lyric went to college, but what if there’s more? What if this shit started when we lost touch? And what if I’ve been an asshole for no damn reason?

“Shit, man. Thanks for looking into this.” I rethink every last moment I spent with her today.

“Not a problem, you know that. Did you get the estimate done?”

“As if you’re not monitoring everything that comes through the network even on a Saturday.” Jude keeps tabs on everyone. It’s his schtick, and while sometimes, it can be intrusive, there are times like now when it comes in handy.

“Yep, saw it. Also, that’s quite a steal. You sure you want to do that?” I may as well get it all out. He’ll more than likely take it back to the group; it’s one less thing I’ll have to bring up the next time we meet up.

“Yeah, she deserves a break. Lyric also doesn’t want anything drastic. It needs new drywall, paint, and flooring. The roof is still in good shape. The electrical and plumbing, I’ll take a look at once she gets it hooked up. She doesn’t even want to take the tile down in the bathroom. I figure we’ll work on the master bedroom and bath, close off the hallway as much as we can to keep the dust down,” I relay to him what I told Lyric. The thought of her spending money on staying in the bed and breakfast didn’t sit right with me. Especially since she’ll be paying utilities at the house and a whack when it comes to the estimate I emailed her a few minutes ago.

“Doesn’t hurt that you want her,” Jude states a fact that I can’t deny.

I’m about to make a crude joke about how I want her beneath me, on top of me, against me, and any other way I can have her when I realize this is Lyric I’m thinking about. She’s the one who got away, the one I’ve been trying to do anything to get over, to ease the ache in my chest and the burn in my gut. No amount of people in the past accomplished that; neither did the adrenaline rush I’ve become accustomed to. I should have gotten off my ass, talked to my friends who are more like brothers, and while they all knew Lyric meant something to me, I also made them swear to not do anything involving finding her. Apparently, I can hold a grudge for a long-as-fuck time.

“No, it doesn’t. Hey, gotta let you go,” I tell Jude when I look down to see a black cat slithering in between my legs. The cute thing doesn’t have a collar on, and the ear isn’t clipped noting it’s a feral animal, which means he or she is probably lost, or the poor thing has been dumped. I’m thinking it’s more along the lines of being left out on the dirt road before it leads to my property.

“Alright. Later, Jagger,” Jude responds.

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“Later.” I hit the end button, drop my phone to the railing, and bend down to pet the midnight-black cat.

“What are you doing out here? You’re a tiny thing.” The cat keeps weaving in and out, rubbing its face along my jean-covered leg while I resume stroking the length of its back. I pick her up and bring her to my chest, figuring a sweet thing like herself must mean she’s a girl. “Come on. I should have some canned tuna inside. Hopefully, you’re weaned, because going into town will take some time, let alone finding replacement milk in our area.” I talk to the cat as if she can respond to me. It looks like on my list of things to do tomorrow is stop at a pet store and load up on everything I’ll need for the kitten. For now, I’ll make do with canned food, a container of water, a box I’m sure I have in the garage, and whatever shavings I can sweep up from the floor until tomorrow. I planned on getting started on Lyric’s house first thing in the morning, but I guess it’ll have to wait until the afternoon. It’s probably for the better. There’s still a lot to do, like ripping the carpet out, pulling down the kitchen cabinets, and starting on the drywall. The downside is, I don’t have a roll-off dumpster, which will mean making a mess in Lyric’s front yard after she worked her ass off on it yesterday.

I walk inside, keeping the cat close to my chest. Her softpurring vibrates against me, and when I place her on the ground, she doesn’t so much as move away. It seems I’m not the only one who’s starving for affection. I move through the kitchen, pulling down a paper plate and a glass bowl before fixing the little thing up some dinner and water. She’s black with specks of brown mixed in, has a long tail and bright yellow eyes.

The minute I pop open the can, her ears perk right up, the meowing goes up a notch,

and I move fast in case she hasn't eaten in a while. I place the food on the ground, the glass bowl filled with water beside it, more than ready to take a shower, have another beer, and relax for the night. Once I've got the cat settled, I move through the house, hitting the door for the garage and going about finding what I need for her to use the bathroom. I'm playing it by ear, hoping that I don't wake up to a mess in the morning and figuring I might need to do some studying on what a cat needs. I grew up with a golden retriever, and losing him was hard. My parents never brought another pet in, and with my schedule, I knew it wouldn't be fair on a dog to be stuck inside all day.

Now, it seems I'll have a cat, and there's no way I'll be sticking her outside unless she really makes it known that's what she wants. It only takes me a few minutes to locate a box and find what can be used instead of litter. A combination of wood shavings, some paper scraps from discarded plans we've had to re-do that were in the recycling bin, and I call it good. By the time I'm back inside the kitchen, the unnamed cat is done eating the small amount of tuna I left out and drinking a lot of the water. I place the box down, making sure I rip an entrance, so to speak, and place her inside it. She does her thing, learning the way of the land pretty damn fast, then walks out.

"You and I will get along just fine." I give her another scratch to her chin and then head toward the bathroom. My home being on all one floor means I won't have to worry about where she goes. I'll just close the doors to the two bedrooms and bathroom, leave my door open, and clean up whatever mess she happens to make.

She follows me for a little while until a blanket that's tossed on the ground catches her attention. I leave her be, needing the hot water beating down my body and my cock to finally find some relief. There's no holding back. After weeks on end without letting myself get off, tonight, I'm taking care of business.

I shuck off my clothes, pulling my shirt off by the back of the collar and dropping it to the ground. My jeans join the pile as well as my boxer briefs once I'm in my

bedroom. I keep an ear out for the cat, realizing I need to come up with a name and call the veterinarian's office to make an appointment. Maybe I'll call the Johnson family. Dean's wife, Tully, has her own practice. A perk of Lennie being part of the family is having help when you need it. I keep that thought in mind and continue on to my shower.

I'm in the bathroom, turning on the hot water, ignoring the switch for the light. There's enough coming from the two windows in the room. My gaze catches on the reflection in the mirror, my cock lying thick and heavy against my stomach. When I fist my length, pre-cum saturates the tip, and I know the minute I let myself go, it's going to be over before I'm ready. The way I've kept myself from fucking my hand, it might be a two-session kind of night. I move away from the mirror, more than ready to bring up any and every fantasy I can conjure of Lyric. I'm going to start off with what I wanted to do today, her bent over, hands on the oak tree, as I lift her dress over her ass and see what she's unknowingly teased me with.

I let go of my dick, reluctantly at that, open the glass door, and step into the tiled shower, making sure to close it behind me. The steam envelopes me, and the hot water sluices across my taut muscles. I rest a palm on the wall, my hand returns to my cock, and close my eyes. In a different world, Lyric would be here in front of me, completely stripped bare, hair slicked back, eyes riddled with desire, and moaning my name. I'd have her plastered against the wall, legs wrapped around my hips, hands digging into my scalp, and her pussy pulsing along the length of my dick.

"Fuck," I mutter. My hips roll with each downward stroke, a slow twist of my wrist. My thumb gliding over the head of my cock comes away with more wetness than ever before. I'm already on the damn brink of coming in my hand, and I've barely gotten started. Lyric and I may have some differences to work out, but it won't be long until I succumb to needing her any way I can have her. I keep working myself, my grip tightening, my balls drawing up, and my spine starting to tingle. The velvet clench of her cunt spurs me on as I take my fantasy to the next level, mourning the

loss of her pussy as I pull out. Her eyes plead with me, begging me not to leave her, and I keep her steady until her feet are planted on the ground. My hands mold to her hips, spinning her around, taking her hands and pressing them on the cold tile, pushing her tits against them and watching her body shiver with desire. Lyric hisses out my name, arches her ass in such a way that she's gagging for my cock to be buried back inside her slick, wet heat.

"Lyric." My voice goes hoarse as I picture me behind her, my fingers pressing into her fleshy hips, watching as she pushes her ass out even more, and the only thing I can do is fist my cock. I rub the head along the lips of her cunt, feeling her saturate me, and it damn sure isn't water from the shower.

My fist pounds on the tile, wishing like fuck Lyric were right here in front of me. I look down. The head of my dick is red and angry, tired of holding back, and when I picture sinking into her with a force so solid there's no holding myself back, my head tips back and I come on a solid roar with one woman in mind. I'm done playing it safe. There's no more holding a grudge. Lyric Skye will be mine one way or another.

Any and all energy I had is zapped. My thoughts of going a second round have long since left. Clearly, I've been holding back entirely too long, going weeks, maybe even closer to months, without giving in to my basic need. I finish my shower, washing away the evidence of today and the cum I've painted the wall and floor with, then turn the water off. If I stay in much longer, I'll turn into a damn prune. I open the door, step out onto the rug in order not to bust my ass on the tile floor, and grab a towel. A few swipes across my face, head, and chest, and I call it good before wrapping it around my waist.

I walk out of the bathroom, hearing a soft trill in my bedroom. My eyes lock on the little bundle of black fur, bright eyes staring back at me, and it's clear she's looking for attention.

“Find yourself a makeshift bed, huh?” I move toward her, bending down to stroke her belly because she’s lying on her side, using my shirt to burrow into. “I’m going to have to name you, and then we’re going to have to somehow convince Lyric that I’m not an asshole. You think you can help me with that?” She doesn’t respond. Instead, I’m given a meow, a clear sign she wants more rubs. I do her bidding, coming up with a plan while I’m at it, one that involves Lyric.

10

LYRIC

It’s been three days since I’ve seen Jagger, or his parents for that matter. I received the estimate the same day he came to look at my house, and I signed the contract after my eyes nearly bulged out of their sockets. It seems Eleanor talking about giving me a discount well and truly succeeded. At first, I felt terrible, then I called Naomi. She assured me from what I told her about Jagger that he wouldn’t do anything he didn’t want to. She also told me to sign on the dotted line, write the check, or in this case pay the first half through the attached invoice, and to stop worrying over nothing. Naturally, I did what she suggested, then, because I worried myself sick, I went for a walk with my trusty notebook in hand.

I went to the coffee shop, Oak & Brew, and grabbed their signature drink of the week, a hazelnut and chocolate iced coffee. I also grabbed a cheese Danish, asking them to warm it up before I headed to a park bench beneath a mature tree along the red-bricked road. When I was finished with my pastry, I let my feet do the walking, navigating through the streets while I looked at shops and kept my eyes peeled for a ‘Help Wanted’ sign. There were two, one at a thrift shop looking for a cashier and the other at an accounting firm looking for a receptionist. I jotted down their numbers and made a mental note to check in on them when they were open.

When I was finished perusing, I wrote in my journal, and this time, there were no

tears. Thank goodness. Plus, there haven't been any since I sobbed on Jagger like the loser I am. Yay me.

Sunday, I put on my glad rags, went back to my house, and tackled the backyard. Another day of working in the heat, using muscles that haven't been worked in a very long time, and a headache the size of Texas formed. A clear sign of dehydration that had me ready to throw in the towel.

Nevertheless, I persevered, much like I always do.

The yard is completely mowed, the hedges are trimmed back, the weed eating is done, and I even pulled the overgrown vines off the detached garage. By the time I finished, hunger had set in. Running off coffee and a breakfast from the Inn had long since vanished. My clothes were too dirty, and I was too sweaty to go inside. A quick drive to a fast food joint on the edge of town only to scarf it down on the drive helped me in not delaying my shower. I conked out, phone uncharged, lamp illuminating the room, and the television playing softly in the background. I woke up disoriented, needing another shower because my hair looked similar to a cockatoo's, and I had to run errands, like to the local watercompany, calling the power company, and having another conversation with Naomi. The boxes she shipped should be here tomorrow, and I'm wondering where I'll be storing them since my house will still be a construction zone.

"Hello," I answer the phone, not looking at the screen. It's Tuesday, and I'm online inputting my credentials for job applications. The receptionist position is right up my alley, and I have plenty of experience in that field. The cashier job doesn't have an online system, so I'll have to go in person to apply. I've also found a few other positions I'll be applying for as well.

"Hey, Lyric, is this a bad time?" I sit back in my seat, pushing away from my laptop, and try to control the way my core pulses at hearing the deep rugged tone of Jagger's

voice on the other end of the line.

“No, not at all.” Goose bumps pebble along my skin, raging a war because I’m not cold at all. I’m hot, so damn hot I may combust. I’m in another sundress since I brought in another bag from my Tahoe when realization really hit that my house would be under construction for a minimum of six weeks.

“That’s good. I finished up checking the plumbing, air conditioning, and electrical. I’ve got some not-so-great news to give you.” The way he delivers the message with a grunt, my eyes close, my head tilts back, and I run my fingers up the top of my thigh, pulling the fabric along with it. I can visualize him here in the room with me, his big body caging me in, protecting me yet doing all kinds of dirty things to me.

“You there?” His voice breaks through my trance. I don’t open my eyes, and I damn sure don’t stop what I’m doing. The tips of my fingers edge dangerously close to the lace of my panties.

“Hmm, yeah. I am.” I wonder what he’d look like on top of me, hair messy from my hands digging into the soft waves, his lips swollen from our kissing and me nipping at the soft pillowy flesh, sweat coating his arms and chest, droplets clinging to his hair, slowly dropping on my chest as he works his thick length deeper than I’ve ever experienced before.

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“Lyric.” Jagger’s voice takes on an edge. One that does nothing to stop my fingers from wandering deeper, and my thighs have no problem opening in order to give me more room to work with.

“Jagger,” I reply, hoping and praying he can’t tell what I’m doing over the phone. While he may have been a grump on Saturday, it doesn’t deter me from using him for spank bank material.

“Woman.” His raw, guttural, and barely contained groan-like growl causes my spine to tingle. I really need to get this conversation done and out of the way; it won’t be much longer until my hands are doing what I really want him to do.

“I’m here, promise.” I open my eyes, taking myself out of the scene I set up in my head. The faster this call is over, the faster I can get back to business. Which is why I pause my ministrations. I shouldn’t be doing this while he’s on the phone, especially with how Saturday turned out to be. Plus, he went ghost mode. I haven’t heard a peep from him or his office since Jagger sent the invoice. If I didn’t know where his parents live, I’d have thought they took my money and ran. Though, I did receive a receipt yesterday, which helped calm my nerves some.

“For now.” Jagger sounds exasperated. Well, same, my guy, same. I want a man I shouldn’t want. I mean, after all, he’s the one who quit answering my calls and returning my letters.

“You were saying?” I spur him back on the subject at hand. If he’s going to interrupt my time, the least he could do is hurry up the conversation. I still have things to do, and my orgasm is top priority.

“Lyric, you’re testing my patience. I’m ready to quit what I’m doing and drive to where you are and see exactly what you’re doing that has you breathless.” I’m tempted to invite him over, except I think Jagger needs to sweat a little.

“By the time you get here, I’ll be through, and you won’t know where I’ll be.” I’m not sure where those words come from or how I’m being this bold. My fingers have a mind of their own, continuing to slide into my panties, then one slips lower, strumming my clit and causing me to bite my lower lip.

“I wouldn’t bet against that, gorgeous,” he says with a teasing tone. I feel wetness coat the tip of my finger. I add another, making a V on either side of my pussy. I’m not wet. I’m soaked, saturating my panties in a way I’ll have to change them once I’m done. I’m refusing to touch on the little pet name he let slip through his lips. At least he didn’t use Lili. I’d really be screwed then, and there would be no stopping me from sinking two fingers inside my center, getting off, and moaning his name.

“Maybe we’ll have to test that theory. You were saying?”

“Fuck, Lyric, we definitely will. Back to shop talk, the last damn thing I wanna talk about now, but if I don’t, something tells me you’ll tease me to no end.” He has no idea.

“You’re not wrong there.” My muscles tense when I edge my finger inside and swirl it around, slowly building myself back up.

“Bad news first, you need new air conditioning, inside and outside units with new duct work. The good news is, I built that into the estimate I sent over. A contingency without you having to come up with more every time you turn around.” I hold still, calculating how long that will take to install and what it’ll do to the timeline of the project.

“Okay.” I’ll do just about anything to keep him talking. Though, not in the way he reminds me of what I’m doing; there’s no need for all of that. It also makes me want to rip all my clothes off, tell him to come over, and greet him naked at the door.

“That will be done tomorrow. The demo part of the project is nearly complete. All that’s left is the kitchen. That being said, we’ll have drywall and mudding going on tomorrow, and as long as everything goes to plan, paint on Thursday. You should be good to come in on Friday at the earliest, the latest on Saturday. That is if you want to stay at your house through the construction. The option is open to you. Just let me know so we can section the hallway off.” Now I’m imagining him ripping things out of the house. The drywall, the cabinets, the flooring, and while he’s doing that, well, he’d be shirtless, and I’d be greeted by his muscles bulging with every movement.

“Hmm.” I clear my throat when I realize what I’ve done. “I think I might wait until the weekend, if that’s okay. I’m already booked here at the Inn. There’s also the fact that I don’t have a bed, bedding, or washer and dryer.” Jagger groans at the mention of the bed. I kick my sandals off my feet, prop my legs on the edge of the table, and sink lower into the chair. I’m sure I look like an erotic mess, but ask me if I care.

“That’s fine. Oh, and, Lili.” Fuck me, he had to use that name, the one that gets me every single time. The one he absolutely knows what it does to my insides. The one he only used sparingly at a different time in life, and it was usually when we were naked. I spin out of control, my back arches, my calves flex, toes gripping the edge of the wood, and I sink two fingers all the way inside my core.

“Yeah,” I pant as the palm of my hand grinds down on my clit.

“Think of me while you’re fucking your fingers. It’ll give me plenty to think about tonight when I’m in the shower with my hand wrapped around my cock. Soon, we’ll both have the real deal, but for the time being, those sweet sounds and wondering what you’re doing to your pussy when I’m not there to watch will hold me over.” His

voice, the way he talks about what he does to himself, and how he'll be doing it tonight... Now I want him to watch. Oh shit. The two of us getting ourselves off while watching, that'd be even hotter.

“Jagger.” My skin is flush, perspiration is pebbling my skin, and each time I slide my fingers in and out, it only makes me want to go harder and faster. “You do that while thinking of me?” I question in between pumps, keeping my palm on my clit, either pressing down or swiveling it, anything to keep me on edge.

“You’ve got no idea, but you will soon.” He hangs up without saying another word. I drop my phone to the ground and continue my indulgences. Usually, this wouldn’t be enough. It’d be my fingers on my clit while a toy vibrates inside me. That’s not the case today. I also didn’t recharge the flesh-like dildo, a task I need to remedy because talk about a lady boner killer.

My mouth opens on a silent cry when the orgasm takes ahold of my body, and I’m a shivering and shaky mess. “Jagger.” I’m out of breath, and as it slowly subsides, hearing the wetness between my legs makes me feel a different kind of ache, this one deep in my bones. I place my feet on the carpet, pull my fingers out of my still quivering center, and realize my panties aren’t the only things that are ruined, because so is my dress.

A shower is definitely in order, and a nap, in that exact order. Which is weird because I can’t recall the last time I’ve ever felt the need to crawl into bed in the middle of the day. I didn’t do it when Mom passed away, and I didn’t do it when Dad passed away, either. I kept chugging along. Maybe now that my life has become my own again, this is my body’s way of telling me to relax. The only problem with this way of thinking is now more than ever, I wish Jagger were in bed beside me.

JAGGER

It's been a week since my eyes have landed on the woman who has my cock in a constant state of hardness, and I'm surprised new callouses haven't formed. I wake up every morning with my hand wrapped around my length, unable to even get out of bed to start my day until I get off. Lyric is at the forefront of my mind each and every day. So much so that I found myself shooting her a text and calling her when I'd leave the office to head to a project. She'd answer, sometimes with a happy tilt to her voice, sometimes she'd be sad, trying to brush it off and telling me it's because she'd written in her journal. I've learned that she's struggling with her newfound freedom from taking care of everyone else except herself. That socked me in the gut and had me making a call to my mother. If anyone can help someone wade through the storm, it's her.

I also got to hear her breathless yet again, though it was nothing like the time she was getting herself off while on the phone with me. I'm still unsure of how Lyric started it, but I know it was me who helped her finish it. I've never gotten off the phone so fast before. Had I been home, my jeans would have been undone, cock out, and I would have been coming right along with her. As it is, I've had to reserve that for the comfort of my home. Which I've done, every damn time I take a shower.

At least today, I'll get to see the woman who has my dick in knots in the flesh. My schedule has been a shit show between working in the office and going around to projects we've been trying to wrap up. Some are so far behind it's making my head spin, and Joss is ready to spit nails, bust elbows, and more than likely walk out. I've had to do some fast thinking, promise her a paid vacation and lunch on me a few times a month. Needless to say, the permits we were waiting on with the commercial side of Jagged Edge Construction, whatever Joss did lit a fire under their asses, and now we've got all hands on deck. That also meant not being able to see Lyric like I wanted. I'd work at the office, go around to all the sites, and then finish my day at Lyric's house. The crew would be long gone when I'd get there; I'd go over what

they did for the day and then worked on what I could. A lot has been taken care of, including the two rooms I'd promised Lyric, the air conditioning is installed, and the drywall is taken care of throughout the entire house, taped and mudded. The sanding wrapped up yesterday, and come Monday, they'll start on painting the walls and ceilings. The hold-up will be the kitchen cabinets; ordering and installing them is the six-week lead time. There's still plenty left to do, like flooring, trim work, and putting up light fixtures.

I pull up to Lyric's house, noting her Tahoe is already in the driveway, and she's got the front door open as well as the hatch to her SUV. She'd asked me earlier this week if someone would be at the house to help her with a few things she ordered. Apparently, the furniture company gave her a drop-off window of all day. She also had a few boxes delivered this week, and while my crew placed them inside, I already knew how heavy they were when my project manager called me to talk about what they finished yesterday. He said that shit was heavier than hell and no way he'd let his wife even attempt to push it to a different area in the house. I've got a distinct feeling Lyric has a penchant for heavy shit, which means the probability of the boxes she'll be unloading today will be too damn much for her to carry.

I climb out of my truck after going through the motions of putting it in Park, unbuckling my seatbelt, and turning off the engine.

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“Hey,” Lyric says with a finger wave. I watch as she walks out of the house in another summer dress, this one light blue with white flowers, tank top style, tight in the chest and waist before flaring out. The last thing I thought I’d be doing today is contending with my cock being so hard it’s trying to burst the zipper open. Sure, a semi is still noticeable, but nothing like I am right now. My eyes will be glued to her ass and tits. The thought of her bending over and giving me a view from behind or the front is going to have me ready to come unglued.

“Hey, Lili.” I meet her halfway. My hands move to her shapely hips, my head dips, and I skate my lips across hers. She doesn’t reply. Instead, I feel her fingers graze along the dips of my stomach, slowly inching upwards until her palms are flat against my chest. A soft sigh escapes her, and I can either pull her into my arms or step back. I’ve got half a mind to pick her up, walk us inside, slam the door, and take her against the nearest wall.

“Wow.” She takes the decision out of my hands.

“Yeah, that about sums it up. You want to show me what all we need to move inside?” I ask, clearing my throat.

“All of the boxes in the truck. The big box in the living room needs to be put together, but I can do that.” Her hands drop to her dress, clasping the fabric in her fists. I can see the nervousness setting in. It makes me smirk to know I get to her as much as she gets to me.

“I’ll put it together, though it’ll cost you.” I made the call to Dean Johnson the day after I found Shadow. He handed the phone to Tully immediately when I said a cat

wandered up to my house. Of course, he made it clear that their funny farm was closed and they would not be driving down to Florida to cart an animal home when his wife does that enough. I knew the man was lying through his teeth. He can't say no to Tully, and I did mention if his wife really wanted my cat, they could always bring it home when they come down for the birth of Lennie and Asher's baby. He grunted his response and left it at that.

Tully told me what all I should get faster than I could write it down. Then she said never mind, that she would text me the list, especially the brand of cat food I should feed her. She then proceeded to say the vet appointment could wait a bit but to at least deworm her, adding the best place to get it to the list that became more like a paragraph. I've since gotten the cute furball food, treats, toys, catnip, a scratching post, a litter box, cat litter, and she's been dewormed. The cat bed I bought for her has sat vacant from what I could tell. I always find her curled in a ball on top my clothes or, like the other night when I scooped her up to lie with me on the couch, she ended up sleeping on the pillow I'd been resting my head on.

"Is it worse than putting furniture together? Because if so, no thanks. I'll take my chances." Yeah, I can tell she won't be putting shit together.

"It's not nearly as bad," I reply.

"Okay, fine, I'll do it." She smiles, and I'm lost for a moment in time. Jesus, I'm worse than Johnny. I could have found her a fuck of a long time ago. Maybe not right out of high school, but by the time Jude started his business, it would have been easy. Hell, even Trent could have looked her up in his database if she had a record of some kind. I'd been hardheaded, too damn stubborn for my own good. That shit stops right fucking now.

"You're not going to ask what it is first?" I tease. It seems a lot of things never change. She's still easy to pull one over on, and now I'm wondering if she's still easy

to rile up.

“Fine, what is said barter?” She relaxes, leaning her shoulder against the porch post, propping herself up, and my eyes zero in on when she crosses her arms over her chest. Except it’s more beneath, pushing her tits up and showing even more cleavage. My tongue slides along my upper lip. Lyric’s eyes zero in on the movement, and my own locks on hers. She’s breathing heavier, tits rising and falling, nipples puckered into tight tips. I’d love nothing more than to wrap my lips around them, sucking on each one until she’s writhing in pleasure, trying to use my body to ease the ache between her pretty thighs. I’d have one heck of a time keeping my hands to myself.

The dress she’s wearing would make it mighty easy to be pulled up, and now I’m wondering what she’s got going on beneath. Is she bare, slick with desire, or is she wearing panties, and if so, what kind? Cotton, lace, thong, bikini? Not like it matters, but damn, it’s making my thoughts run rampant and my dick harder than it’s ever been before.

My nostrils flare, my breathing takes on a life of its own, and now I’m thinking about what she’d do if I dropped to my knees right in this very spot. The need to bury my head beneath her dress, to breathe in her scent, to taste her, whether she’s naked or it’s through the fabric of her underwear; I give not one single fuck, and I’d demand her to play with her pretty tits while I’m at it.

“Jagger.” Lyric’s voice breaks me out of my daydream, making me realize what I want can’t happen now, especially not here. My parents are within seeing and hearing distance. Then there are the other neighbors who live close. A place like this would be impossible to get her out of her head and make her come on my tongue. At my place, though, it’d be a different story entirely. There’s not a single house or person for acres, and when things go my way, I’ll be doing exactly what we both want.

“You say my name like that again, nothing will get done today.” I take a step closer.

She doesn't back up. In fact, Lyric seems to like that idea. Too bad a horn honking interrupts her craving until it slowly fades away. I could curse whatever person drove by.

"What were you saying?" I watch as she blinks once, twice, and a third time. Yep, she is out of the same haze I was in.

"The barter," I say. Maybe she's still thinking about me, too. Her eyes trail the length of my body, which is answer enough.

"Oh, that's right. Are you going to tell me what it is or keep me guessing?" I shake my head with a chuckle.

"I put your furniture together, you take my cat to the vet for me." The appointment I made for next week is slap in the middle of the day. It's hard as hell to get away from work once I'm at a project, to head home, grab the furball, go to the appointment, go back home, drop her off, and then get back on the road. I may as well take a full day off.

"You have a cat?" She looks surprised about that.

"She's newly acquired. Someone dumped her, and there's no way I'll drop her off at a shelter. You know what happens there if they don't get adopted." Her shoulders drop, teeth worrying her bottom lip, because she's well aware of what I'm talking about. The animals either stay there forever, or they'll be what they call humanely euthanized, and I'd rather not even think about that prospect.

"I'll take her. Just send me the details. I'm not working right now, and the applications I've put in, I haven't heard a peep from." Jude told me her parents set her up financially, and I figured she'd wait till the house was completed before getting out there. Apparently, I was wrong to assume so.

“You’ve got yourself a deal.” Shaking hands is out of the question. I do something a whole lot better, moving into the soft curves of her body. My hand cups her cheek, the other grabs her hip, and I graze my lips across hers. At her sharp inhale and her nails digging into my sides, I finally allow myself a small taste. I glide my tongue along the seam of her lips, feeling hers slide against mine with a teasing touch, and goddamn, drawing back is near impossible. Yet I do it. The next time I have my mouth on hers, neither of us will have any fucking doubts that this is happening.

12

LYRIC

“Oh my god, what the hell? How?” I look from the opened box to Jagger. We’re sitting on the floor of my new bedroom, a rug beneath us, which sits on top of gleaming honey-golden wood floors. The walls are a gentle creamy beige that I’ve picked out for the whole house. It was a part of the estimate, and if I wanted extra colors, it would be an added expense. I figured I could do that on my own later on, you know, once I figured out my own style. For the time being, I’ll use rich colors in the way of furniture, bedding, and décor.

The brass headboard and footboard were easy to put together. The mattress, on the other hand, came in one of those vacuum-sealed bags, and when we let the air out, well, it almost took both of us out. We laughed, we talked about our week, we didn’t touch the past, and it felt like old times.

It also confirmed the fact that this man was always meant to be mine. The few times I’d go out and about, meet a guy, and find the relief without worrying about one of my parents is nothing like what I had with Jagger. One day soon, we’re going to have to talk about the past, and it seems right now is the time, whether we like it or not.

“What?” He’s taking my plethora of notebooks I’ve accumulated through the years

out of a different box. What he doesn't know is in between the oldest notebook I have are pressed lilies, the one's Jagger gave to me; it's also partly where he got the name only he uses for me. The heavy package Jagger lifted with ease held a wooden hope chest I'll be storing what he's taking out in until the rest of the house is finished. That was also the second piece of furniture we had to put together, and the last. The dresser and nightstands came already assembled. There was no way I'd trust myself with that task. I'd have gladly paid all the money in the world. As for the hope chest, well, winging it would have been the name of the game. It would have probably come out wrong, and I'd have to put a blanket or something on top to hide the imperfections I'd no doubt create on my own.

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“These.” I pull out a stack of envelopes that are tied together with twine. Jagger rips them out of my hand, pulls the string, and lets them fall out.

“They’re sealed. You mean you never opened them?” Jagger’s big body crowds me, scooting until his legs are on either side of mine, thumbing through them one by one.

“No, I never got any of them. I sent yours, but when I didn’t receive a response, well, I figured you moved on.” He continues shuffling through the envelopes, reaching the bottom of the stack. “Wait a damn minute.” I started to lounge against Jagger’s chest when I spot my handwriting in the stack.

“Fuck.” Jagger’s composure remains stoic, minus the tightening of every muscle in his body. He’s tense, and I’m sure if I took the time to look over my shoulder or spin around, his jaw would be locked tight.

“That’s about the size of it. I wish one of my parents were around so I could get to the bottom of this.” I highly doubt my mother would do anything to persuade Jagger and me not to communicate. We were thousands of miles apart; it’s not like we could have run off together into the sunset and get married without them noticing. That leaves me to believe my dad could be the person behind this, and God, do I hate to think badly of him. Especially with his disease, unless maybe this could have been part of it?

“Me too. That only leaves me with one other question. What about the phone calls?” This time, I do move, resituating myself with my legs going over his, my dress lifting up, showing a whole lot of thigh. When I got dressed this morning, it was for the reason of staying cool. Jean shorts are miserable on the best of days, and with most of

my clothes being packed away, my sundress seemed like the best idea. Jagger's low grumble proves me right, that and the fact he's been unable to stop touching or staring at me. I think I'll make a mental note to add another ten or so dresses to my wardrobe.

"What phone calls? I never got a call from you," I say, one hand cupping his cheek. I place the other over his heart, feeling it beat and wishing it were my head lying on his chest.

"And yours said the line was disconnected. At that point, I didn't even tell my mom. I knew they were friends and talked; she'd already known about the lack of mail." Jagger is real, raw, and honest. I can see the toll this has taken on him, the worry lines that are currently marring his face, and now I know the reason he was like a light switch flicking on and off last weekend.

"God, we've lost all this time." I leave my sentence open, unsure if I should apologize, hug him, or cry. Maybe I should do all three. It wasn't his mom or dad who kept him away; it was mine. Shit, this hits me deep in the chest. I put my life on hold for them, and while I don't regret a second of it, I'm still left wondering why they would do something like this. I take a moment, realization hitting that I need to be the one to start the conversation. While it might not be my fault, I could have and should have done a lot of things differently once having the Internet at my fingertips became easier. Except I was scared and let my insecurities get the best of me.

"Jagger." His eyes close for a minute, and it hurts like hell to watch what I think is him closing down. When he opens his blue eyes, they aren't like his usual crystal clear; they're dark and stormy. The only hope he gives me is his arms wrapping around my back, the letters scattered on the ground between us, and he pulls me into the comfort of his body.

"Don't you dare apologize, Lili. This isn't your fault, and it's not my fault. I'm not

accusing you, and I'm not blaming your parents. It burns like hell, but they're gone, and there's nothing we can do to change the past. There's a slew of things we could have done to change the turn of events, and maybe, the way this went down, it's what was meant to be until now." My ankles hook around his lower back, barely. Comparing his size to mine is hard; the only way to describe is I'm small enough to curl into him, and he's big enough to wrap me up.

"You have to blame someone. Letting this go as easily as you seem to..." My fingers tangle in the loose ends of his hair. The soft strands aren't knotted; they're silky smooth, and it makes me wonder why guys have it all. I bet he uses one of those all-in-one deals that has body wash, shampoo, and face wash mixed together. Meanwhile, I have shampoo, conditioner, a hair mask, a leave-in conditioner, and then heat protector. Still, my hair isn't as soft as Jagger's. I'm also insanely jealous of his long eyelashes, curled naturally, thick instead of sparse, and seriously, his eye color, it's what a girl with dark hair can only dream to have. Yes, there is science behind it, but since neither of my parents had blue eyes, I'm destined for green. I guess that whole saying you always want what you can't have is true.

"Can and will. Shit happens. What good is it to blame people who aren't on this earth anymore? It's clear as fuckin' day you didn't know." Jagger's hand slides around my lower back and moves upward, and in doing so, he pulls me closer. His voice, a deep cadence, does nothing to cool down my overheated body. Plus, there is the fact that I can quite literally feel him pressing against my core. I squirm, the verbal foreplay and semi kind of phone sex we, I mean I, had has done nothing to calm my desire. If anything, it's only awakened it even more. I'm like a dog in heat, ready to be mounted, to surrender to Jagger's control and let him have me any way he wants. "We could go round and round over all this shit, but nothing's going to change. While you couldn't control where the letters went or our numbers being blocked, that didn't mean the resources weren't there for me to do my own due diligence."

His words sound amazing, they really do, and if it weren't for him helping me roll my

hips with the pressing of his palm on my back and the other glued to my side, I'd form a coherent sentence. As it is, words are hard. The only thing I'm able to do is nod and attempt to contain my moans, all while holding his gaze.

"Jag." My body takes control. No longer am I thinking about rights or wrongs. The man beneath me with a body built like a Viking, a face that no doubt turns female heads, and when he talks, it's what miracles are made from.

"Settle down, or we'll be breaking in your bed right here and now." His jaw tightens, and he's no doubt grinding his teeth while he's at it. Jagger's at war with himself, unwilling to make the decision he literally laid out a moment ago. I search in the deepest crevice of my existence, doing something I've never dared before. Especially because besides Jagger, I've basically didn't have as many experiences as most women have; it left me feeling cold and alone. I closed myself off, deciding to just take care of myself on my own terms. Then life went to shit, and I was busy surviving. Being put on the back burner causes you to lose a certain aspect of your life.

"Says the man who's cocking his hips, arching into my center, and giving me more without asking." My back arches, and my hands leave his hair, trailing down his chest. Every muscle of his ripples with each inch I travel. He licks his lips, holding his tongue between them, watching what I'm doing, and he probably thinks I'm going to attack his cock when the tips of my fingers slide from his shirt to his jeans.

"Motherfucking fuck," Jagger's groan echoes through the quiet room. The only other noises are the ceiling fan whirling and the quiet hum of the air conditioning. I grab the hem of my dress and slowly pull it up. My thighs shiver when I sit up to pull the fabric away from my ass. I cross my arms in front of me and do what I've been building up the courage to do. All at once, I whisk the offending clothing over my head and off my body. I'm on my knees in nothing but a nude-colored thong.

“You mentioned something about breaking in a bed?” The woman I am right now is bold, confident, and going after the man who’s made her feel more alive than she ever has before. I only hope I’m not making the biggest fool out of myself to date.

“Yeah, and we’re going to be using it. I hope you’re prepared for me, Lili, because once I get started, I’m not going to stop,” Jagger says as he dips his head. Silly me thinks he’s going for my lips. His mouth wraps around my nipple, sucking it deeply into his mouth. The sensations shoot right to my center, and I’m instantly trying to get closer to him in order to relieve the ache between my legs.

“Jag, I want this. I want us,” I say on a long sigh. He scrapes his teeth on my wet nipple, lifting his head for a moment to look into my eyes.

“You’re sure? One hundred percent positive?”

“Jagger Steele, should I get on my knees and beg in order to show you how fiercely I want you?” My words are spoken with conviction. Jagger lifts us both up, his massively strong arms wrapping around my waist. My thighs open for him to settle between them, allowing me to feel his thick dick yet again.

“Now, you’re going to get it.” His chest rumbles when he speaks as he walks us toward the bed; it doesn’t take long. These older houses weren’t big on huge bedrooms, preferring to use the space in the living areas, and while I grieve the thought of losing Jagger like this, I know it’ll be worth it.

“I’m more than ready to get it.” He places me on the bed, and the mattress bounces when he comes down between my legs.

“Taking those off,” he murmurs, looking down the length of my body. “Next time, I’ll rip them to shreds, or maybe I’ll use my teeth. The possibilities are fucking endless.” I’m not sure if he’s talking to me or himself. What I do know is that I like it

all the same.

“Yes, please.” I writhe, hoping it spurs him on.

“Impatient thing today, aren’t we. Kind of like when you were fingering this sweet pussy while I was on the phone. Hmm.” Jagger’s mouth meets mine, tender with just a brush of his lips, teasing me slowly. I’m ready for more, as in flip him over until he’s on his back and I’m the one exerting all this pent-up energy that’s burning inside of me. Finally, the hunger takes ahold of him, judging by the unapologetic way he takes my mouth, his tongue exploring mine, giving chase with every stroke we take. I’m breathless, he’s groaning and rocking his hips, and I’m lifting my body to meet his. The only way to describe the kiss of all kisses is raw and urgent. Full of heat, our movements laced with tension for our mutual want for one another.

“Jag.” The ache lingering in my voice is apparent when he pulls back.

“Yeah, panties, clothes, and my mouth all over you, in that exact order.” He moves like a panther, with stealth, patience, and precision, planting kisses along my heated flesh along the way. He stops near my center, tongue sliding along the edge of my panties, and I’m wondering if he’s going to use his teeth like he threatened. Sadly, I’m wrong. He sits back on his haunches, hands going to my hips, his calloused fingers dragging along my skin as he takes the last piece of clothing off my body. “Jesus, fuck, nothing could have prepared me for this, not a single damn thing.” Jagger says, looking from between my legs to my eyes before bringing the fabric to his nose, inhaling deeply as if my scent is his dying breath. My pussy spasms, wanting him more now than ever.

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“Jagger, please. You’re killing me.”

“Not as much as me, gorgeous.” He lifts himself off the bed, keeping his gaze on me the entire time. I only hope he hurries up before I have to take matters into my own hands.

13

JAGGER

Lyric’s body, naked and waiting for me to get with the program and do the same, is the least of what I expected to come from today. It’s damn hard when the only woman you’ve ever loved rips her clothes off and isn’t shy about what she wants.

“No touching. I think we’ve done enough of taking care of ourselves this past week. Don’t you?” She’s been sliding her hand down the middle of her chest, leading right to where her wet pussy is calling to me. I’ve got so much I want to do to her, and it’s a damn good thing I’m not working today. I’ll be taking my time with her. The first goddamn thing I’ll be doing is kissing her, not the short and sweet ones we shared earlier today. I’m going to dominate her mouth, her tits, and her pussy. I feel her coating my abdomen with every lift of her hips while I’ve got my mouth wrapped around one taut nipple, testing the limits to how soft or hard she likes it, going to the other then repeating the process.

“Please, Jagger.” Lyric plants her feet on the mattress, spreading her thighs and showing me her sweet pussy. I rip my shirt over my head. My boots are already off in order not to track drywall dust into her bedroom. I back off the bed, annoyed that I

didn't have the forethought to get naked with her earlier. I bend down to take off my socks, watching her as she watches me.

A soft gasp, a catch in her breath, has me hurrying up. My hands take care of the button and zipper, then the jeans fall to the floor, I step out of them, and I let Lyric look her fill. The clear outline of my cock is easy to notice in the black boxer briefs I'm wearing.

"You want me, Lyric, but how do you want me?" There's no wrong answer, and as I wrap my hand around the bulge in my shorts, I see what it does to her. A tremor consumes her body as her flesh pebbles. Her hands are in the freshly made bedding, washed and folded after she unpacked it. I'm noticing that she likes to be kept busy, no matter what's going on around her.

"On top of me, preferably." She's a handful, but I'd never want less. I pull my boxers down and step out of them. "Holy shit, did that, I don't know, get bigger?" My cock bobs against my abdomen. I wrap my hand around my length, holding it. The need to paint her body with my cum, marking her as mine, sits heavy on my mind.

"I don't measure my dick, Lili." I step forward, ready to be between her pretty thighs.

"Well, I'm not sure it's going to fit. How about that?" There's a nervousness to her tone, and I can't have that, not after all this time without her. The need for a rush of adrenaline isn't there like it usually is. I've been settled ever since coming home and reconnecting with her. Maybe she's the cure for my need to do something careless or reckless. The drug that didn't use to fail me now is, and the one I want and need is lying in bed waiting for me.

"I'll fit. We'll go as slow as you need. But, Lili," I get her attention as I climb back onto the bed.

“Yes?” My hand wraps around her ankle, sliding upwards while keeping a firm grip on my dick, worried it’ll have a mind of its own and rut into her like I’m some kind of wild animal.

“I’m going to use my mouth first, followed by my fingers, and when you’re nice and ready, you’ll get my cock.” My plans of working from the top to the bottom fall to the wayside. I drop to my forearms, hands going beneath the backs of her thighs, lifting them up and over my shoulders, and finally get a taste of Lyric.

“Holy fuck.” The tip of my tongue draws a circle around her clit, feeling her body shudder. I keep going. Her feet dig into my back, spurring me on and telling me she likes what I’m doing. It’s too bad for her that I’m not going to only pay attention to one particular area. I trace a path along one lip, sucking it into my mouth before repeating the process on the other. My cock is impatient as fuck with me, wanting to get inside her after getting a small taste. I open my mouth, then my tongue is sinking inside her. Feeling Lyric’s tightness, as much as I want to prolong eating her sweet cunt, now is the time to stretch her.

“Jagger, oh god.” My eyes lift, sweeping up the length of her body, seeing what I’m doing to her. Perspiration coats her skin, her breathing is labored, tits moving up and down, more than a damn handful, and if I weren’t going to need my hands, I’d be playing with her nipples. They’re a ripe berry color, the same as her lips, and soon, I’m going to feast on them like I am her pussy. I use one hand to cup the cheek of her ass, tilting her hips upward, and drag my tongue around her tight bud. When she’s lost in the moment, I press one finger inside. She’s so fucking tight. Too goddamn tight to take my cock without me stretching her first.

The walls of her center pulse around me as I slide in and out, wetness coating me with every pass, and when she gets used to me, I add another. Lyric’s eyes close, one hand is fisted in her hair, the other is trailing down the center of her torso, moving to her abdomen and sinking into my hair.

It's clear she likes what I'm doing. At the hiss of pain when I scissor my fingers after a few thrusts, I keep my mouth sealed around her clit. My cheeks, mouth, and chin are drenched with her juices. My fingers dig into the flesh of her ass, sinking closer, and I'm tempted to graze the tip over her back entrance, except she takes that moment to bear down on my fingers and fly apart on my fingers and tongue.

Thank fucking God.

I continue licking her through her orgasm, pulling my fingers out of her drenched center nice and slow. When Lyric's body calms down, back landing on the mattress, I lift away. My gaze drops to her pussy as I sit up, going to my knees, more than ready to take her with my cock. She's got a small landing strip the color of her hair, and it's hot as fuck to see her spread open after I've had my mouth buried between her thighs.

"I'm still not sure how that's going to fit inside me." I use my hand to clean her wetness from my face, her eyes watching the entire time.

"It will. That being said, I didn't plan on having sex, gorgeous. I don't have a condom with me. We can stop here and finish this another time. It's up to you." I'm pissed as fuck at myself. I should have known this is where we'd land. Every time before, it'd been just the same. Neither of us could keep our hands off one another.

"I'm on the pill and clean. Are you?" she asks, wrecking any pretense of control I once had.

"Yeah, Lyric, I'm clean. Are you sure?" I can hold off, use my hand, or maybe she'll use hers on me. Then there's always her tits. I could crawl up her chest, her hands pressing her tits together, and I'd glide my cock between them. Fuck me, I'd bet she'd lift her head up, tongue sliding out and lapping at the head of my dick until I came all over her chest.

“Then, please, get inside me. It’s been too long.” I’m not reading into anything. Don’t wanna know who she’s been with, and I’m damn sure not giving up any information about myself. That shit can stay away, far fucking away.

I move until I’m lying beside her, my mouth going to hers, kissing her as deeply as possible, feeling her hands on my pecs, nails digging in, and moving us so we’re face to face. Lyric’s eyes are closed, but mine are open, watching herevery step of the way as I move my arm beneath her neck, my other slipping down the length of her body, and she shivers.

She pulls back, eyes opening, glossing over in the haze of desire. Her cheeks are red, and her lips, fuck me, they’re wet and swollen, making me want to kiss her until we’re both out of breath.

“Going to take this nice and slow, Lili.” I grasp the back her thigh and lift it over my hip, causing her to open up, and I dip my hips. The head of my cock grazes her slit, wetness coating it, but my hands are damn full right now. “Need you to guide me. Can you do that for me?”

“Holy shit, Jagger.” When she wraps her hand around my dick, it’s my eyes closing and head tipping back. I’m breathing through the need to be inside her with one deep stroke.

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“You’re telling me.” She moves her hand out of the way once my cock is seated inside her.

“I’m going to need you to not stay still.” Lyric’s inner thigh muscle squeezes me.

“Gorgeous, if I do what you and I both want, you won’t be walking today, let alone tomorrow.” I slide in another few inches, holding myself there as she flexes her velvet walls along my dick.

“Why walk when you can carry me around?” she teases, a low moan leaving her lips when I sink deeper. This position will get me as deep as possible while also stimulating her G-spot. Thank you, fucking Luke, for all the shit he leaves lying around his office. Plus, this way, I can focus on her face and take her mouth, which I plan on doing as soon as she takes me completely.

“There is that, but the last thing I want is you hurt. I plan on being buried inside you as much as possible,” I pant, slowly sliding in and out in short thrusts. It’s damn hard to keep control. Lyric’s soft mewls, her hand on my shoulder, digging into my muscles, our bodies moving with one another, and I push deeper.

“I want that, too. Oh my god, I feel so full,” she whimpers once I’m planted all the way inside her.

“That’s because you are, gorgeous. I can feel your tight pussy pulsating on my dick. You’re not going to be able to hold back, are you.” She shakes her head, and I keep moving back and forth. Lyric saturates my dick, coating me as well as her. My mouth touches hers, my hand not on her ass goes to her back, pulling her closer, and sweat

coats our bodies. I kiss her through every undulation of her body, every ripple of her vice-like grip on my cock, and when she starts to come, pulling me with her, I don't stop. I'll never fucking stop.

"Jagger, you feel so good. Oh god." I've barely gotten a taste of her mouth before she pulls back to cry out.

"Fuck yeah." I surge all the way inside in one deep and hard thrust, taking her a bit harder than I probably should, but I can't help it. A tingle slides up my spine, and I'm coming deep inside her while her hungry cunt keeps sucking me dry.

"There's no way we're only doing that once." I've hardly recovered, and Lyric is asking for more.

"That'll depend on how red and swollen you are," I reply. Our arms are wrapped around one another, both of us keeping the other close.

"Damn. Well, with any luck, I'm not."

"Hopefully not." Her lips press against mine, and this kiss is slow and sweet. The built-up passion is still there, but there's something to be said for taking her mouth softly. A task I'll be taking upon myself a heck of a lot more.

14

LYRIC

I'm an idiot. That's what I keep saying in my head over and over again. Jagger stayed until he couldn't anymore with having a new-to-him fur baby at his house, so he offered for me to come with him. I could either stay the night, or he'd drive me back to my house. I thought the idea was absurd. For one, I'd have followed him in my

own car, then come back. He did enough yesterday. It sucked for me to turn down going to his house as it was, especially after the three orgasms he delivered. My legs were so weak they shook when I stood up to clean myself. Another task Jagger offered to do, but there are other things a woman needs to tend to, and I gave him a little bit of entertainment as I shuffled into the attached bathroom. Our combined fluid definitely slid down the insides of my thighs, but I guess that's the price you pay for not using condoms. Jagger didn't have any on him, we both discussed the whole being clean deal, and I'm on a new birth control to try and help with my stupid heavy periods. This month and next will be the real test to see if it helps the cramps and flow or if I'll have to call my doctor to ask for something else yet again.

I came back to bed after taking care of business, and when I saw Jagger there, leaning against the headboard, still naked, I knew what I'd be doing. He patted his thigh, but instead of sitting on his lap, I crawled between his legs, my hand wrapping around his hard length. I lowered my head, and he guided me until he couldn't take it anymore. We made another mess, but this time, Jagger pulled out at the last minute, replaced his cock with his fingers, and finished all over my body.

We were both exhausted after that. It also meant our time came to an end. Did I mention how much of an idiot I am? He left for his house, and I stayed at mine, where I got absolutely zero sleep, regretting not taking him up on his offer. A few days ago, I had finally gotten used to the noises around the bed and breakfast, then last night came. I tossed and turned, sat up in bed more times than staying horizontal, and when the sun finally rose, I decided enough was enough.

The box in the corner taunted me, sitting opened, a couple of stacks on the ground, and abandoned. Jagger didn't want to read my letters, and I didn't either at that point. He's right about letting things go, yet I still wanted to read what he wrote me.

I made it two letters in before I had to stop. The wound was ripped open, and the tears kept coming, one after the other. I tucked the back of my legs to my thighs, wrapped

my arms around them, and buried my head to hide myself away from the outside world, my hair helping do the majority of the work, and let myself sob. We've missed out on so much time together, the hurt knowing my parents, one or the other or maybe both, kept us apart, and I didn't know how to process it.

A few minutes later, my phone rang, and thankfully, the person on the other end of the line talked me through it. Naomi, my second mom and built-in best friend. Sadly, she had no answers. Mom never spoke about it to her, only talked about how I walked about looking like a lost soul for nearly a year. No truer words have ever been spoken. My heart and my head were a mess. I'd wandered around in a daze wondering what I did to make Jagger go ghost mode. When Naomi and I hung up, I packed everything back into the box, took a long hot shower, and then made my bed, got myself together, and called Jagger.

I had a moment of apprehension thinking it'd be too early, but he picked up on the first ring, and before I could ask what he was doing, Jagger told me to either get to his house, or he'd be at my house in twenty minutes. I had no food or a place to cook said food or prepare it, the price I knew I'd have to pay during the renovation process, and one I knew would be worth it. I offered to pick up groceries to make breakfast or to run to the diner, yet once again, Jagger had it covered.

That leads me to now, walking up to Jagger's home. My eyes go every which way, a lot like they did when I turned onto his dirt road. I should have known he'd have a home off the beaten path, away from the busier side of town, with more grass, trees, and lush landscape as far as the eye can see.

"Hey, you find the place alright?" Jagger opens the front door and walks out wearing a pair of black shorts sitting low on his hips and nothing else.

"I did. It'd be hard to miss. A turn here, a turn there, and then travel down the dirt road till I see your mailbox." He gave me his address plus directions in case my cell

phone service went in and out. He takes the steps off his front porch, never taking his eyes off mine, making me move my own feet. When we meet halfway, Jagger's head dips, his lips go to mine, and my eyes close. This feeling of rightness, the way his arm wraps around my back, pulling me into his warmth as he deepens the kiss, it's like no time has passed. While his tongue chases mine, the tips of my fingers dig into his lower abdomen, and just like every time we kiss, my brain turns off. There's no thinking, there's no worry, and time is at a standstill. It's only the man in front of me and no one else.

"Fuck, would have loved to have you in my bed this morning, waking you up like this, but I get it," Jagger relays the message, similar to what he told me last night when I walked him to my door to say good night.

"I hate to admit when I'm wrong, but I fear in this instance, you might have been right. I didn't sleep a wink last night." I attempt to pull back from him. Jagger being Jagger isn't having any of it.

"Should have called, texted, emailed. I'd have loaded up in my truck to come and get you. No more of that, yeah?" I'm about to respond when I hear a certain noise come from between us. Jagger Steele, the big muscular Viking-like god, is holding his kitten in the crook of his arm. "See, even she agrees with me," he says with a wink.

"We'll see, though I'll warn you. Sleeping with me won't be a lot of fun. I tend to move non-stop, so you can forget about getting any rest." I look from him to the black kitten. One paw is lifting up to explore Jagger's chest, and I don't blame her one bit. "Want to introduce me to your friend?"

"This is Shadow. She's a goofy thing. Bought her more cat beds than an animal should have, yet she chooses to sleep on dirty piles of clothes." I extend a finger at her nose, waiting to see what she'll do before I pet her. When Shadow nudges me for more, I take her word for it and slide two fingers back and forth on her head. She

makes a buzzing noise, soft and continuous. “I think she likes me.”

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“What’s not to like, Lili?” Jagger is biased, but that’s okay because so am I when it comes to him. “By the way, I don’t want to know how you know you move non-stop or who told you that, but I’ll be fine. You pack a bag, or are we driving back to your place later today to do so?” He cocks an eyebrow, and his upper lip lifts, giving me a playful smirk.

“Nobody told me. The proof is in my bed sheets every morning as well as my pillows being tossed on the ground. It’s good to know you don’t like hearing about my past, though, and I don’t need to know yours, either.” I wrinkle my nose, causing Jagger to laugh, low and throaty. It makes my pulse quicken. He must see what he’s doing to me with the way his look turns dark and seductive.

“Didn’t answer my question about clothes. You can wear mine or none at all. As for a toothbrush, I’ve got a spare from the dentist in the drawer.” I haven’t said yes, no, or maybe, and he’s making plans for tonight. It looks like I’m staying with him, since I’m unable to put up a fight, because a peaceful night of sleep, with Jagger wrapped around me and Shadow snuggled at our feet, sounds perfect. The last part he’s unaware of yet, it might take some persuading, and I’m not afraid to use any method imaginary to make it happen.

“I can see how this is going to work. You’re barely dressed, therefore I’ll be barely dressed, and we’ll be one happy barely dressed household?” I joke, not caring in the least about what Jagger wears. As for me, I’ll be pilfering a T-shirt, one I’ll more than likely hide in my purse in order to wear at home. You know, when I grow a pair of lady balls and don’t blurt out how badly my insomnia gets to me in new places. Naomi mentioned earlier today to buy a radio to play music, or a sound machine. I heard Scott in the background mention a fan. That’s not a bad idea, either. While

tonight should be fine at Jagger's house, there's always tomorrow night. Which means I'll be making a stop at the big box store in town, and I'll probably purchase all three, because who knows what will work best for me?

"Now she's getting it." Jagger's hand slides to my lower back, and he guides me up the front porch steps and into his house. The front porch beckons me to make a cup of coffee and sit in one of the rocking chairs he has to one side. There are two with an end table in the middle. On the other side is a hanging porch swing, another chair, plus a smaller table to put your drink on. This has Eleanor written all over it, pure comfort to complete Jagger's style. The taupe and cream rock façade on the bottom half the house, siding that's darker in color on top, and the wooden gables scream no white and pristine is allowed in his domain. The best part is, it's sheer perfection. "Did you build your home?" I ask, more than ready for the answer to be yes.

"Yeah, about ten years ago. I got tired of staying in a camper at the laydown yard. Took me quite a while since I didn't want to cut corners. Also knew this would be my place forever. The backyard is the only thing I took care of when I moved in; made for a heck of a mess. Not the best thinking on my part."

"It's beautiful. Would you be opposed to eating breakfast out here?" I cross my fingers behind my back. I can imagine having a plate on my lap, my feet propped up on the railing while listening to the sounds of nature.

"Fuck yeah. Let's go on inside. I'll let Shadow do her thing. We'll plate our food and post up out front." When Jagger opens the door, I'm in awe once again. Walnut-colored wood floors greet me, and the stone from outside is carried through on one wall in the living room, the same one that has a fireplace built in, a massive television hanging above it, and a big, oversized couch with two chairs on either side. "I'll give you the tour later. Food's ready, and I'm sure you're starving." I turn around after he drops Shadow on the small bed in the corner near the wood burning fireplace. She kneads the fluffy fabric as if she's making biscuits, does a small circle, spinning

around, and curls into herself like a croissant.

Jagger has done an amazing job for himself. He's always had big dreams, had a penchant for the fast life in the form of racing cars, and I find myself wanting to wander through the entire house instead of eating. My stomach growling tells me otherwise, so I follow Jagger into the kitchen, where I'm yet again surprised. There's a smorgasbord of food, way more than two people need. There's a bowl of fruit, a platter of biscuits, a pot of sausage gravy, another bowl filled with scrambled eggs, and, last but not least, bacon.

"Umm, Jagger, I think you made enough for three families," I say as he's filling up two mugs of coffee.

"There's a reason for that, one I'm hoping like hell doesn't happen. The guys, they've been known to bounce around from place to place, bring their wives and children. It's usually one or two of them, plus it's not every day I get a chance to have breakfast in the company of my woman. How do you want your coffee?" We've been so wrapped up in our stuff, I haven't asked how the guys are doing. As teenagers, we'd all been around one another, though not nearly as much as I was with Jagger. The guys would say hi, give me a hug, ask how I was doing or if I needed a ride, but it was more in a neighborly kind of way.

"Cream and sugar, heavy on the cream or milk. Whatever you have is fine. Will you catch me up on the guys while we eat?"

"I'll tell you anything you want to know." Jagger's blue eyes lift to mine, and he shoots a heated look my way, causing a warm tingle to rush to my core.

He looks at me like I'm the only person in the world who matters.

LYRIC

“Asher is married to Lennie. She’s got family from Wyoming that semi adopted her and her sister, Minnie, without the papers since they’re older via her husband, Clay. The Johnsons will be down here soon because Lennie is pregnant, and her aunt’s house is next door to them for anyone to use.” We never got to talk on the porch. I gorged my food, eating more and faster than I ever have before. The pizza, salad, and breadsticks we had delivered to my house last night had long since left me. The sun started shining through the trees, beating down into my eyes, and Jagger started sweating, causing us to come back inside. We tag teamed the kitchen, putting away what was left yet making it easy enough to pull out in case anyone stopped by, and then loaded the dishwasher. Jagger is truly Eleanor Steele’s son. She taught him from a young age to take care of what needs to be taken care of. He’d already cleaned the majority of the workload before I got here.

“Wow,” I say with a soft sigh. I’m lying on top of his body, my hands crossed over one on top of the other on his chest, my chin on them, listening as he gives me the updates.

“He’s also a firefighter, pulls his weight at Jagged Edge when he can, and Lennie works for Luke at his obstetrician and gynecologist office.” He takes a breath, then lifts his head up for a minute to prop another pillow behind his neck.

“I can move,” I offer.

“Not on your life. I like you exactly where you are, feeling every inch of your body.” He gives me a wink, then continues on, “Alright, Trent is a police officer but on the detective side, doesn’t go undercover anymore since he’s with Asher’s sister, Kennedy. They have Briar, who’s a spitfire and will be over here any given time to use me for my pool or eat my snacks. She’s also from Kennedy’s previous relationship, but Trent formally adopted her, and Kenny is pregnant, too.”

“Holy shit, how did Asher take the news that his best friend and sister got together?” Asher and the guys were very protective of her, more so than I’ve ever seen before. We weren’t in the same age group or friend group back when we were kids, and of course, we moved when I was fifteen.

“Asher didn’t give two fucks. After Briar’s dad, anyone would be a step up. Trent, though, he’s the real deal, took care of Kenny when she was stranded, helped her get out of trouble when shit went down at her job, and loves her and Briar more than anything on this earth,” he says with conviction.

“I have no doubt. You all might have been a bunch of teenagers at one point, but you’ve always loved deeply.” I lick my lips, and Jagger tracks the movement.

“You’re not tempting me yet. Still have blue balls from my mother calling earlier, asking where you were when she didn’t see your Tahoe at the house.” His muscles flex as he puts his hands behind his head and laces his fingers together.

“Yeah, yeah. I’ll keep my hands to myself.” It’s a lie, and we’re both well aware of the fact. I probably should have told Eleanor my plans, except in the excitement to get to Jagger, I kind of forgot.

“Sure. Where was I?” He pauses for a moment. “There’s Johnny. He owns the night club Undercover Lovers. That also has a bottom floor that’s called Night Moves. It appeals to a certain lifestyle, exclusive, and no way am I taking you there. Anyways, Johnny married Winnie. Shit went down with her sister, and she left for a few years. The sister passed away but held her own kid over Winnie’s head to keep her from leaving until drugs ultimately took her. Winnie came home, Johnny found out, and now they have custody of Sebastian, her nephew. She’s also pregnant. That’s the short story of a much longer, much more detailed saga.”

“Damn, that had to be a lot for all three of them. I couldn’t even imagine watching a

family member go down that road, plus to have a child involved.” My heart hurts for the three of them.

“They made it out on top and are tighter than ever, which is saying something because before shit went down, they were rock solid.” I’d imagine they had to be, kind of like Jagger and me, and while neither of us has said the samewords that were repeatedly said in our teen years, it’s in every look, every touch, and every breath. “Tysen is a pilot, went commercial and hated every minute of it. Finally went private. Maci entered the picture, they had a one-night stand, lost touch for all of a minute, it seemed. She showed up on his plane at Vaughn Elite, Tysen figured out she was pregnant, both of them fell for one another, and now they’re well on their way to getting married.” Damn, these men have done very well for themselves, as I’m sure their ladies have, too.

“Is everyone a business owner or super successful?” I ask the question that’s been on my mind.

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“Yeah, I guess so, now that you mention it. We all started Jagged Edge together. It transcended into their own thing, whether it’s because one had the capital or they needed the money to get their own venture started. We all put in the effort, and luckily, it paid off.” I’m not sure it’s got anything to do with luck; it’s clear these guys work, and they work hard. I may have left college when Mom got sick, but I still kept at it, transferring to a local college, and enrolled in classes that wouldn’t interfere with doctor’s appointments and spending time with her. It meant it took me longer, and I’d been well on my way to starting on my next leg of the journey when Dad’s diagnosis came through. I’d had dreams and aspirations; my next stop was to get my bachelor’s degree, then master’s, and from there, I’d do my clinical fellowship to finally become a speech therapist. Things changed, life happened, and while I could still go back to school now, the thought no longer appeals to me. I’ve been around enough doctors, patients, medical staff, and hospitals to last a life time.

“You okay?” Jagger asks when I remain silent.

“Yeah. Thinking about my own life and how things change so quickly.” I shrug my shoulders. “Please continue. I want to hear about everyone else. There’s Matthew, Jude, Crew, and Luke, right?”

“We’ll come back to that. Matthew is an estate lawyer but has no problem dabbling in other areas, family law to be exact. He’s stepped up for Kenny and Winnie without blinking an eye. He’s still single. There’s been chatter about his cleaning lady, but nothing’s confirmed yet. Which leads me to Jude. The man is like a dog with a bone. He let me know the minute the house was transferred into your name and when you came back. He hacks everyone’s shit, phone included. The only way to get away from him is to turn off every single device, put it in a different location, and he’ll be

none the wiser.”

“Wow, I meanwow. You probably knew about the house before I did. I found out through the reading of the will. Mom really dotted all her i’s and crossed all her t’s. Her best friend, Naomi, didn’t even know. Apparently, the money Dad made was put into an account to pay the bills down here, and I controlled the ones in North Carolina as his power of attorney. She made it nice and easy probably because when she was sick, Dad was already in the early stages of being diagnosed. Mom knew I would take care of him, so she tried to relieve me from dealing with everything else.” I absolutely hate that she did all of this instead of focusing on herself, except that’s who my mom was, and I’ve got a lot of her in me.

“That’s what she wanted, though, Lili. You know that, right?” Jagger’s hand circles the nape of my neck, where he flexes his fingers, then he shifts his hips, and I get the hint. He wants me closer. His lips touch mine, soft and sweet, and my eyes close. Jagger reads me like a book, always two steps ahead of what I need.

“Yeah,” I whisper against his lips.

“Good. I get you’re still handling stuff and working on yourself. What you may not realize yet is, you’re not doing it alone.” This man, his words, he’s better than anything in this world. Not even the most expensive chocolate could make me trade him, and that’s saying something because my love for chocolate runs deep.

“Thank you.” He pulled back a moment ago, still making good on his threat for us to wait till our conversation is through.

“Don’t gotta thank me. I’m right where I wanna be. Should I continue?” I nod. “Crew is an engineer, has his own firm, and I don’t have much to report on anything love life wise or what he does besides work and hang out with us. I’ll have to pester the shit out of him next time we’re all around each other.”

“Well, I’ll leave that part to you,” I reply teasingly before getting serious. “Jagger, I have to tell you something, and this may change things between us. In fact, I really think it will, and I hate that I’ve only gotten you back, and this could very well end us.” I need to tell him. His friends have children, he’s surrounded by them, and damn it, he would be the bestfather to anyone he fathered, and I hate that I could take this away from him.

“There’s nothing that bad, Lili.” His hand sifts through my hair. He pulled the hair tie out earlier during our hot and heavy make-out session in the kitchen. His hands were on my waist, ready to lift me up on the counter, when his phone rang. I scurried out from under him, kicked my shoes off by the door, and meandered around the house until he finished his call.

“I don’t want children.” I close my eyes, unable to see the look he’ll no doubt give me. If this is the last time I have Jagger Steele in my life, I want to remember all the good and none of the bad.

“You motherfucker! I can’t believe you did that. Do you know how stupid and incredibly dangerous it is to base jump? You had no service, and none of us fucking knew. We’re damn tired of you going off grid, getting your rocks off for some kind of messed-up thrill where you could wind up dead.” Jagger lifts his body up, taking me with him. I end up straddling his waist. My head turns over my shoulder, and the color drains from my face when I put all the pieces together. Luke is standing in the open doorway, seething with rage and worry. Rightfully so, too.

“We’ll talk about this later, promise. That’s Luke, and he’s going to need a doctor himself when I’m through with him.” Jagger drops a kiss to my lips, picks me up, places me on the couch, and storms over to Luke. I see Shadow start slithering toward the door that’s standing open while the two men have a glaring match. They probably don’t even realize we could have an escape artist on our hands. I scoop her up, bring her close to my chest, and sink onto the floor, my back meeting the couch,

where I think about the news I just delivered and the news I had slung back via Luke.

Jagger Steele is trying to kill himself. Well, that won't be happening on my watch. I stand up, spin on my heels, and march toward my man, clearing my throat along the way.

"Please close the door while you two have a stare-off competition. I have something to say." That breaks them out of their whatever-you-call-it haze.

"Holy fuck, Lyric," Luke says. Apparently, he didn't see me on the couch with his friend. Interesting. He was so upset his sole focus was on Jagger. These guys. Not a lot has changed in the years I've been gone.

"Hi, it's good to see you. What is this?" I place Shadow on the ground, clearly upset with all the noise seeing as how her claws have come out to play.

"It's Luke pissing me off." Jagger looks toward the ceiling, shaking his head.

"What's that? Did you get a woman and a cat without telling any of us?" It comes off as a question, but there's no denying Luke's voice has a teasing tone now; the frustration has seemed to vanish.

"Back to me. We'll answer that in a minute. Jagger Steele, I swear to God, if you're trying to take yourself out of this world on purpose, I'll murder you myself. How could you be so negligent? Do you not realize what a gift you are? I've lost everyone. I'm not losing you, too!" I scream-shout. Jagger tries to stop me when I scurry around his big-bodied self, but I dodge him and run toward the hall, pumping my arms and looking for a way out, for a way to ease this achebuilding inside my chest. He never gave me an official tour of house. When I wandered around earlier, I stayed in the living areas. Right now, I've got tunnel vision, looking for the darkest place there is, where I can cry or scream into a pillow, cry my heart out, and hide all at once. I

happen upon what I'm assuming is his bedroom. There's a massive bed, his scent surrounds me, and I close the door before diving headfirst into the mattress. I crawl upward, pushing the comforter and sheets down along the way. My eyes close, and the tears come, one after the other. I let them, all while burrowing into Jagger's pillow, loving him and disliking him all at once.

16

JAGGER

"Fuck, I gotta go. Stay if you want. There's food. Or you can leave. it's up to you. But don't let my damn cat out." Luke and my buddies deserve an explanation, but the woman in my bedroom needs one more urgently.

"I'm out of here. Think Lyric did what we all wanted to do. I hope you're done with this dumbass bullshit. We need you and want you here. Clearly, she does, too. You want a rush of adrenaline, go fuck your woman. Check your phone when you come up for air."

"Later." I slap Luke on the back. None of us stay mad at each other for long, and it's not like I have a right to be. I did something dangerous. This shit is on me. Luke does the same to my shoulder, and I wait until he walks out the door. I turn the lock, not wanting another fucking interruption. Lyric and I have a lot to talk about. My eyes look for Shadow. She's curled up on her bed, ignorant to the shit going on around her, too busy sleeping. I'm not sure which animal has it better, a dog or a cat. They both seem to live the good life and have not a single care in the world except to eat, sleep, and demand attention when they want it.

I kept my eye on Lyric's back the entire time she was running away from me, the thought burning in my gut that she's leaving me. The only bright side to this shit storm is her running into my bedroom instead of for her keys, hopping in her truck,

and driving away. I would have really lost my mind, and the only thing I'd have left to do is chase after her.

I'm more than ready to talk this shit out with her, especially with the bomb she dropped before Luke did me more than dirty. He saw a vehicle in my driveway and knew I wasn't alone. I'll put this away for now, but there will come a time and a place when he'll get what he deserves.

"Lyric." I open the bedroom door. The room is pitch black. I never opened the curtains or made the bed this morning. A certain woman called me, and I had shit to do, breakfast to make, so cleaning in here didn't take priority. She sits straight up and flings the covers off her face, then throws a pillow my way, aiming for my face. It pisses her off even more when I catch it. She has never been more beautiful even pissed off, tears streaming down her cheeks, eyes red, and hair tousled every which way.

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“Jagger Steele, how could you do something so stupid? I’ve buried every single person I’ve loved, minus you and Naomi. It hurt, it still hurts, years and months later. My parents will never see me walk down the aisle, they will never grow old together, and not because they went and lived their life to the fullest but because of a disease. One that there isn’t cure for. And you’re out there being reckless and careless. Well, I refuse to lose you, too!” Her voice rises with each sentence. She’s up on her knees now, shuffling closer, throwing her arms around in the air, and all I can do is watch. “And another thing.”

“You love me,” I interrupt, done watching my woman get riled up when I can settle her down if she lets me get a word in edgewise.

“Yes, you big Viking god, though you’re acting like a dummy right about now. I’ve always loved you. It might have been put on the back burner because somewhere in this epic stupid universe where I’m sure it was my dad trying to protect what he thought was my young naïve heart, or who knows, maybe it was part of his early-onset dementia,” she rambles without so much as taking a breath. Pretty sure the only way I’m going to shut her up is by taking her mouth.

“Come here, gorgeous.” If I get on the bed with her, we’ll be doing a whole lot more than kissing, and we still have too much shit to talk about.

“I think I’m fine right where I’m at. Why don’t you come to me?” She crosses her arms over her chest and blows out an exasperated breath. Annoyance is getting to her because she’s not getting her way.

“Fine, I’ll stay here, and you can stay there. I’ll say what needs to be said, then we’re

stripping out of our clothes, and I'm going to show you how much I love you." Her chest rises and falls. My cock twitches at the notion of us getting naked and burying myself inside of her.

"Jagger." She's breaking down. Too bad she laid out the rules, because this time, I'll follow them.

"Nope, you could have come to me or at least met me in the middle. I've listened to you. Now I need you to hear what I've got to say. Came back from my last trip unsettled. I'd already made a few changes, ones that we don't need to discuss because it's my past and that's where it belongs. I scared myself with that last one, told myself I'd be done. It didn't fulfil me like it used to, realized there was a reason. You. Jude had news about you, and instead of doing the smart thing and going after you, I ran the fuck away." I'm not explaining to her that terror twisted in my gut and made my hands shake. Lyric would probably take the lamp off the nightstand, aim it at my head, and either hit me upside my stubborn head or throw it at a wall when I undoubtedly ducked to miss being hit with it.

"Oh, well, okay." Her arms uncross and come down, no longer carrying the anger she once did. I maneuvered her bra off while we were on the couch, when she complained the wire was digging into her side. A quick flip of the clasp from my hands, and her doing that thing women do, pulling it through her shirt sleeve, and she flung it onto the floor. An action that's coming in handy now as I watch her nipples harden to tight peaks. Lyric's eyes drift down the length of my chest and land on my thickening cock. "Luke is right. I can take the hot rod out to the drag strip and have fun there, in a safe environment." I hate like hell I have to bring another man's name into this conversation, especially in the bedroom and while she's in bed.

"You still have the same one?" She'd been around me enough times to see me working on the car my father and I built. Back then, I'd told her what the plans were. Fucking life pulled us apart, and she never got to see the finished project.

“Yeah, it’s in the garage. I’ll show it to you. After.” I’ll also be taking her on the hood of the car. She can either be bent over the hood or spread out on top, or both.

“After what?” There’s no more sadness. She’s not distraught. Lyric never could hold a grudge, not like I can. Though, the way she keeps bringing up her dad and the letters, I may need to keep a pulse on how she’s feeling.

“Children.”

“Jagger, I’m sorry. I can’t, and I’ve thought about this for a long time. Years, really, so if this is the end, please just let me know, and I’ll head back to my place.” She worries her bottom lip with her teeth.

“Get that right out of your head. A child doesn’t make a family. It doesn’t make a happily ever after. I’m with you, and I’m staying with you because I love you. Time goes by and you change your mind, that’s cool, but if not, that’s fine, too. You haven’t met everyone yet, but once you do, they’ll be your family, too. Plus, Mom and Dad are yours as well. I’m pretty sure they like you more than me anyways.” She lets out a soft laugh at my statement, probably because she knows I’m right.

I’m damn tired of holding back, so I shuck my shorts off, climb into bed, and cradle her face with my hands. I should have stripped her down, too, then her shirt and shorts wouldn’t be in my way. Then again, taking off her panties is half the fun.

“I won’t change my mind.” When her hands cover mine, I figure she’ll try and pull them away. She doesn’t. They grip mine, clinging to me. “I’ve taken care of everyone. There’ve been no vacations, no traveling, no being worry free to go about my day, and I need that as much as I need you.”

“Then it’s a good thing I like to travel and can take as many vacation days as needed.” I lower my head, and her eyes close, giving in to me.

“I don’t, not yet at least.” That makes me pause.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I still need to find a job. The house needs to be finished, and I’d like to pad my savings account without touching my inheritance.” I’m not even the least bit surprised she’s got goals. This woman has been through hell and back, yet she comes up swinging.

“Alright, whenever you’re ready, we’ll go. Now, since we’re done arguing, it’s time for me to show you just how sorry I am for upsetting you.” I press my lips to hers, tongue sliding along the seam. When she moans, that’s all it takes. My hands slide from her cheeks, roaming down her back and gripping her ass. Lyric’s flat on her back, helping me rip off her shirt. Once I see she has it over her head, I move down the length of her body. She arches her back, helping me take her shorts off. “Motherfucking fuck, these should be illegal,” I say, burying my head between her legs and sucking the white lace into my mouth right over her cunt.

“Jagger,” she cries out my name, hands going to the back of my head, pushing me deep, lifting her legs and placing her thighs over my shoulders. I wrench her panties to the side and suck her clit into my mouth with deep and heavypulls while I slide two fingers into her slick heat. She’s already wet, more than willing, except she’s anything but ready. I’ll have to be careful with her, but there’s no way I’m not going to sink my dick inside her. She needs this, and fuck me, I need it, too.

“Jagger, please get inside me. You can use your mouth next time, but please, I want you. Your eyes on mine, please.” She begs twice in one sentence, and as much as I want to finish what I’m doing between her hot-as-fuck thighs, what Lyric wants, Lyric will get.

I sit up, wrench her panties off, lock my arms beneath her legs, wedge my hips, and

lift her up until I'm where I need to be.

"You want me, you know what to do, gorgeous." Her hand engulfs my length. I look down at what she's doing. She's smearing her wetness on the head, priming us both, and when she wiggles her hips down, I let her legs go. My forearms are planted in the mattress as I move in and out of her heat.

"I don't think I'll ever get used to how big you are." She loops her arms around my neck, fingers clenching my hair, encouraging me to lower my head to hers.

"The way you tighten around me, I doubt you will, either. Swear it doesn't matter what I do to get you ready or how wet you are, you're still snug as fuck." I kiss the tip of her nose before moving lower. Our lips meet, gentle, without a hurry in the world, nothing but quiet longing for one another. The soft breath she lets out has my tongue meeting hers, savoring the woman beneath me. I roll my hips in deep, deliberate movements, each thrust grazing her clit, a slow slide of our bodies sensually dancing with one another.

It doesn't take long for her to go off. Priming her with my tongue and fingers did wonders, and I've already realized she's addicted to my mouth any way she can have it.

"Jagger." Her voice shatters through the empty room, and her head tips back, fingers pulling at the strands of my hair. I thrust in and out of her a few more times before staying locked inside her as I come.

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“Lyric.” I drop my head, she wraps her arms around my back, and I flip us so I’m on my back and she’s on her side in order not to crush her with my weight. Her leg hitches over my hip, and I can feel our combined wetness coating my skin. It’s hot as fuck, making me want to take her again.

“Do you remember that pact we made before I left that day?” she asks a few minutes later. We’re still trying to catch our breath. Lyric’s lying on my chest, fingers moving up and down my skin, and I’m slowly drifting in and out of a snoozing state.

“I remember it.” Her mom had to rip her out of my arms. She’d been crying and begging not to leave Whispering Oaks. That she hated her dad’s job and how it always tore their family apart.

“The pact?” She lifts her head up, eyes on mine and looking sexy as fuck with her lips swollen, cheeks red, and eyes soft. It makes my cock hard all over again.

“Yeah, gorgeous. I remember it.” My hand comes away from the back of my head, and I lift my pinky finger up. She takes mine with hers, locking them together. Lyric had been distraught. No, that doesn’t even touch the surface. She’d been hysterical and devastated. The worry on her face, anxious as fuck that I’d forget her. Looking back at everything that happened, I guess she had reason to.

“We don’t have to keep it.” She licks her lips, wetting them. Her nose scrunches up in that way when she’s either troubled or doesn’t want to discuss a topic. In one swift movement, I flip us until she’s on her back, and I’m hovering over her.

“We’re keeping it. I planned on marrying you anyways,” I tell her. In one last ditch

effort, she asked me to pinky promise that if neither of us were married by the time we were forty, we'd marry each other.

"Jagger." Her hand goes to her mouth, and there's a quiver in her tone. While I have no problem holding her through the tears, I think she's done enough of that for today.

"You won't have to wait till you're forty, either, but I can promise you one thing, you'll be surprised. I'll pick out your ring, and when I do propose, only the two of us will be there."

"Kiss me, please," she pleads.

"You don't ever have to beg for that, Lili." Our mouths meet, and we both get what we want. The only thing I won't give her is my cock again. She was tight earlier, and even though she tried to hide the wince when I first slid inside, her fingers kept at her clit, and I took her nice and slow, exactly like she needed.

17

LYRIC

"Hmm," I murmur into Jagger's neck. I'm not sure what time it is, and I'm not sure I care. After yesterday and us spilling our guts to one another, this time him more than me, everything felt right, almost perfect. I didn't vocalize my realization, too worried I'd jinx our luck and things would fall to pieces.

"Morning, gorgeous," Jagger says. His voice is raspy with the weight of sleep. He presses a kiss to the top of my head, and I snuggle deeper into his body. The slight tinge of pain between my legs causes me to stop rubbing my legs together. I'm out of commission in the sex department. Jagger's length and width combined with my unused muscles being put to work the past two days means I'm tender.

“Good morning. Did you sleep well?” I ask, wondering if he’s going to roll out of bed with bruises from my incessant moving.

“Yeah, only woke up once.” Well, shit. Looks like I did, in fact, perform a circus act in my sleep.

“I’m sorry. I’ll go home at the end of the night, promise.” I lift my body away from his in order to prop myself up on an elbow, and I’m about to slide the covers off Jagger’s body to survey how badly I’ve beaten him up.

“Lili, you didn’t move, and when you did, it’s because we resituated with how I wanted to hold you.” I raise the sheet and comforter, looking down the length of his naked body, unbelieving what I’m hearing.

“Are you sure?” I ask, peeking beneath but not seeing any red marks or black and blue bruises. The only thing that’s holding my attention is his thick, firm body. Even in a relaxed state, Jagger’s muscles are stacked. There’s also his cock, lying against his abdomen, hard and more than ready.

“Positive, gorgeous. The only thing that hurts on me right now is my cock.” My hand drifts below the sheets, tracing each line in his abdomen, every dip and crevice of his abs. I can hear the deep inhale of his breath and see how it moves his body with my eyes. “Lyric.” His grunt hits me between my legs as I slip lower down his abdomen. The light patch of hair meets the tips of my fingers, and I creep further, wrapping my hand around his dick. A hiss of breath leaves Jagger’s lips, and just as I’m about to get on my knees and slither down to take the head of his cock in my mouth, his phone interrupts us.

“You should get that,” I say after it keeps ringing.

“Fuck. I’ll be silencing the damn thing from now on.” My hand slides lower, meeting

the root of his shaft, and while I want to keep this up, the moment Jagger answers the phone, I start to pull back.

“This better be fucking good, Trent.” I smirk. Jagger places his hand on top of mine, holding me there. A soft meow captures my attention. I look from the man whose attention is on the phone call to the side of Jagger’s bed. This time when I abandon his length, he allows it. Last night, I mentioned wanting Shadow to sleep with us. Jagger shook his head, as if he was going to tell me no. Which he did, by the way, but only because his bed is sky high and I have to use my knee or have a running start to get in it myself. He didn’t want Shadow to jump down and hurt herself or for her to try and jump and end up doing similar. She’s yet to make it on the couch, though she’s been trying, and while Jagger was right, I didn’t like it.

“Yeah, give me a minute. I’ve got to get my laptop to see what’s going on schedule wise.” Jagger lifts up, and I grab the sheets to cover myself from the cold air. Meanwhile, it doesn’t deter him in the least. I watch as he bends down, scooping up Shadow in one hand and bringing her to his chest. She rubs her nose against his skin. The girl knows what she’s doing. He holds her there for a minute while listening to Trent on the other end of the line, making noises in agreement or disagreement; I’m not really sure, and I don’t really care. I’m too busy watching the man I love be affectionate with a cat he rescued.

“You good, Lyric?” I’m asked, breaking my gaze from where Shadow is snuggled into his chest and move to Jagger’s face.

“Never better. Give me the kitten and go do your thing.” I hold my hands out for Shadow. I’m greeted with a smirk and my request is answered without hesitation. Shadow purrs, nuzzling into the shirt I’m wearing. The sheet fell from my hands when I accepted her, and she takes comfort in securing a place on me. I settle back into the pillows, propping them so I can sit up and realizing I should have asked Jagger for a toy for her to play with.

“Be right back,” he tosses over his shoulder, then walks down the hall naked like the day he was born. I trace my finger along her snout, and she moves her head into it, silently asking for more. Shadow and I hang out for a while. She bats at my hair with her paw, and I move it off my neck, fixing the collar of my shirt and my necklace when Jagger walks back in.

“When did you put that on?” He nods at the chain around my neck. He’d given me the necklace when we were teenagers. I wore it since the day he gave it to me on our last Christmas we spent together. I didn’t take it off until six months after he went silent, or what I thought was him going quiet. I never got rid of it. Instead, I put it in my jewelry box and kept it in there until yesterday, when I transferred it into my purse. After we showered last night, Jagger washing me and me returning the favor, I pilfered his shirt. Then moved through the house and into the foyer, where I hung my bag earlier in the day to find what I was looking for. A minute or so later, it was back where it belonged. Around my neck. Either Jagger didn’t notice it last night, or it ended up tucked beneath the fabric.

“Last night,” I reply.

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“I like my present from years ago wrapped around you.” He gets lost in thought. I continue playing with Shadow, allowing him to have a moment to himself. It’s not until he climbs in beside me, wrapping his arm behind my back, and pulling me into the comfort of his body, that I reply.

“I like it, too. Is everything okay?”

“Yeah. Briar has a dance recital this week. We’re invited. Trent wanted to make sure I didn’t have anything going on since they always start at five o’clock. I told him we’d be there. Afterwards, they’re having dinner at their place. Our group has gotten too big to even think about having a dinner out unless we reserve a room, and doing it this way, the kids can play until they fall asleep, and the adults can talk.” Jagger’s finger drags along my neck where the chain sits.

“Okay, is there anything we can bring?” I ask, unsure how we’ll be able to keep it cold or hot while we’re watching Briar’s performance. I’d have much rather reacquainted myself with the guys and formally met everyone before attending a function where others will be around, but there’s no way I’ll tell Jagger no. Especially when he already told Trent I’d be there.

“Nah, they’re catering everything. Usually, we’d all pitch in, but with this happening in the middle of the week, it’s easier to order from Briar’s favorite place. I hope you like pasta, breadsticks, and salad. And I’m sure there will be sweets. Briar has a sweet tooth that can’t be denied. Cake, ice cream, candy, it doesn’t matter as long as it’s full of sugar.” I make a mental note to pick something up along those lines for after her dance. I’m certain an almost eight-year-old might like flowers, but if she has a sweet tooth, she’ll appreciate that more.

“I think I can hold my own with that type of food. I’m not a picky eater, Jagger.” We ate pizza in bed the night before and breakfast yesterday. Both of us skipped lunch since we gorged on our food earlier, and last night, Jagger cooked for me yet again. This time, he fired up the grill before he made us drinks, him a bottle of beer and me having the same. I’d have preferred a crisp white wine, but it’s not like he would have known that or been prepared. While he took care of the meat and veggies, zucchini and squash, I went through his pantry and found the last of our meal: rice. A quick and easy side which made it nice I didn’t have to spend all my time inside and could instead enjoy the back patio. Jagger’s pool and deck are massive, and the stone from the front façade is carried throughout.

I made a mental note to bring my bathing suit the next time I came over in order to enjoy the water. Although I’m more than sure Jagger would be alright if I stripped out of my clothes and dove in naked, and he would more than likely join me.

“I’m only warning you because the place she loves is hit or miss. Hopefully, it’s decent. I’ve got one more bit of news I’d like to hit you with.” I arch my neck to look up at him.

“Alright, give it to me.” Shadow moves from my chest to Jagger’s, curling up on him, doing that cute thing with her paws where she stretches them in and out before settling into him.

“You’re not going to like this, especially after you just got everything set up. So, here goes. I think you should stay here with me until the rest of the house is finished.” I wrinkle my nose. Jagger chuckles; he already knows I’m going to give him a run for his money. “Yes, I’m asking because I selfishly want you here, and while I’d love nothing else than to stay with you at your place, I’ve got Shadow, and you have to admit, you slept last night.”

Why does he have to make perfectly good sense? Plus, I had to hit the laundromat

before I moved into my bedroom, and while I'm not above it, it's a pain in the ass. There's also no kitchen, which means eating out or pre-packaged food at the very least, a very unappealing thought. Eleanor and Troy would probably help me out, but I don't want to be a burden to them, either.

"I can't believe I'm giving in this easily. You promise once the house is finished, we can go back and forth?" I'll never get rid of my house, and while the thought of not living inside the walls of my own home sucks, living without Jagger will suck worse. In a different world, we'd have children, maybe hand it down to them one day, except I told Jagger I didn't want them. A decision I've found myself waffling on in the last twenty-four hours and can only assume will get worse when I see him around Briar and Sebastian this week.

"I promise." He sticks his pinky finger out, I place mine alongside his, Jagger wraps it up entirely, and then holds mine with it.

"I love you, Jagger."

"I love you, too, Lyric. Now, what do you say we make some breakfast, then head to your place, grab some clothes, and come back here?" I don't respond. Instead, I tilt my head up, and he meets me more than halfway, sealing our plans with a kiss. One that's deep, tongues sweeping against each other, eyes closing, and him growling into my mouth as he cups the back of my head.

18

LYRIC

"Yes, that's what he thought." I'm on the phone with Naomi the next day after taking Shadow to the vet. Jagger's cat has been cleared with a clean bill of health, received vaccinations, and will be getting fixed at the next appointment. I also found out that

she does not like a cat carrier and squalled the entire way to and from the veterinarian's appointment.

"Ma cherié, I wish I were a fly on the wall when you tell your Jagger the news." We're on the phone for our daily check-in. Sometimes we text, but most times, it's a phone call.

"Me too. Oh, Jagger's home. Have fun tonight with your Mr. Bennet. Don't do anything I wouldn't do." I wiggle my eyebrows, which she obviously can't see, except she knows me well enough to know what I'm doing. The giggling on the other end of the line says plenty.

"Have a good night, and I'll try to refrain from all of these things you try to get me to do. Je'taime, ma fille." I love it when Naomi uses the term my daughter.

"Je'taime. Salut, on se reparle bientôt!" I reply that I love her, and we'll talk soon.

"Oui, oui." She clicks off, and I do the same just as Jagger walks through the door. I've been in the middle of whipping up something for dinner while chatting on the phone. I turn the burner down and move away from the stove to walk toward him.

"Hey, gorgeous. Something smells good." He is already out of his boots and dropping his tablet and a set of plans on the dining room table that's off the living room.

"Hey, it's only Cajun chicken orzo. Did you have a good day at work?" I meet him halfway. His hands wrap around my waist, and he lifts me off my feet. My legs wrap around his waist, and he presses his forehead to mine.

"It's not only. You took Shadow to the vet, then came home and cooked dinner. Lyric, that's a lot you didn't have to do. Appreciate you a hell of a lot, and I'm showing you my gratitude when you deserve it," Jagger says, melting more than my heart. My

panties are completely saturated. I may as well not be wearing any when he's around anyways. At least today, I was smart and put on a pair of biker shorts and an oversized shirt. I did one of those front tuck deals in order for it to not look like I am pantless in public.

“Well, I think the appreciation can go both ways. Now, kiss me, please.” He slides his nose along mine, teeth nipping at my upper lip. My tongue slides out, and he captures my mouth with his. I woke up with him this morning, completely wrapped up in his warmth. At the feel of his arms holding me in his grasp while his cock nudged my opening, I opened my thighs without hesitation. There's no better feeling than waking up with Jagger, and since our round of lovemaking caused him to rush out the door for work, I made sure to keep off my phone anytime I thought about sending him a text. Thankfully, he opened the line of communication, and I sent him random messages, mostly of Shadow pouting like I'm her sworn enemy.

“I have a question to ask you.” We pull back from our kiss, and I have to ask him what the vet verified today.

“Shoot.” He walks through the house with me wrapped around his body, heading into the kitchen, where I know he'll grab a bottle of beer. When we stopped by my house yesterday to grab clothes, toiletries, and a few other things, we also stopped at the grocery store. He needed a few things, and I wanted certain things as well, including the couple of bottles of white wine that are now besides his preferred beer.

“Why did you think Shadow is a girl?” My ass meets the counter, and Jagger does exactly what I expect.

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“Want one?” He opens the fridge door and grabs a beer to offer.

I shake my head no on the offered beer. “Wine, please.” The pasta dish and a Cesar salad I prepared called for wine. Beer is more my speed when it comes to having pizza, burgers, and wings.

“I’ve gotta buy wine glasses,” Jagger murmurs while he pours my glass, then hands it to me and twists the metal cap back on. I watch as he bends the metal between his thumb and forefinger, doing it with such ease that his muscles barely contract. I close my legs, finding the action insanely hot.

“I don’t mind these.” They’re short juice-style glasses and get the job done. I’m still awaiting my answer about Shadow, giving him time to wind down. He told me this morning he had to stop at my house to end the day, like he always does. He also said they had a new project to start, he had meetings with the crews, and there was office work, his least favorite. Jagger brings the bottle to his lips, winking before giving me a slow grin, before he proceeds to guzzle half of his bottle. Clearly, the office work got the better of him today.

“All the same, the women in our group would beat my ass. I saw you eyeing a bottle of red, and even I know juice glasses won’t cut it.” He props himself across from me, his ass to the counter, leaning on it. I’m tempted to hop down and slide myself between his legs. This newfound territory has me second-guessing myself, so I stay where I’m at. “As for Shadow, look at her. She’s the sweetest damn thing, minus you, of course. Where is she, by the way?”

I start laughing, taking a sip of my drink to keep from busting out to make fun of the

reason he thought Shadow's a girl.

"Shadow, who is a he by the way, is curled up in the cat bed in your bedroom. He currently hates me after being poked and prodded." The look on Jagger's face is priceless.

"Say what?" he asks.

"Shadow is a boy. Did you ever check his down-there parts?" I point to his groin.

"Why the fuck would I do that? I'm not a damn weirdo." I'm done holding it in. I toss my back and laugh. It's loud and throaty. This is golden and nothing like what I would expect. It takes me a minute to compose myself, the main reason being Jagger's hands touching the tops of my thighs, and only then do I regain my composure, barely. I'm still giggling, remembering he looked absolutely appalled about checking Shadow's private parts. "I'm glad you think this is funny. Shadow's a boy, huh? Guess I was wrong."

"You were. It's cute you think looking at an animal's sex would make you a weirdo. I do have some good news I'd love to share with you, if you're over the shock that your cat is a boy. I wasn't going to say anything, but you know, the doctor and vet tech said they'd be neutering Shadow instead of being spayed." His hands move upwards, his thumbs sliding to the inside of my thighs, pulling them open, then he steps inside my now spread legs. Except he doesn't move his fingers, and they're dangerously close to grazing my pussy.

"The guys are never gonna let me live that down." He shakes his head while saying it out loud. He's totally going to get it from the girls, too. I know because I'll be right there with them. Surely, with the number of children he's been around, he's changed their diapers. What did he do, close his eyes while managing the task?

“Can you turn the stove off and slide that to the back burner?” I meant to transfer it into the oven, but Jagger came home earlier than I thought he would. My dad being in the military taught me a lot when it came to living with someone who has a job where you’d think his hours would be one thing but turn into something else entirely. I figured I’d make it, keep it warm until I was hungry or he was home; either or would work. I didn’t expect him to be home well before the sun went down.

“Sure thing. What’s your news, gorgeous?” I’ve applied to numerous other jobs, followed up on them with either a phone call or a quick stop last week, and nothing. I knew I couldn’t not work. I’d have too much time on my hands and would feel useless.

“Well, I noticed while checking in Shadow today that the vet’s office had a ‘Now Hiring’ sign for a receptionist. I’ve done similar work at a dentist office back in North Carolina. Well, you’re now looking at the woman who was hired on the spot and starts next Monday at Whispering Oaks Animal Hospital.” I’m excited, wiggling on the kitchen counter, moving my arms back and forth, probably smiling like a crazy person.

“So fucking happy for you.” Jagger cups my cheeks, then presses his lips to mine. I close my eyes, relishing every moment when he’s somehow connected to my body. His kisses, though, they’re made of a woman’s dream, foreplay in a sense. Soft and sensual, raw and rugged. All of Jagger’s attention is completely and utterly devoted to me, the same exact way I am for him. His tongue slides inside my mouth, chasing mine, taking me in a dominant way, focused solely on the two of us, and I’m lost in the moment.

“Thank you. It’s only part-time, but it’s a job.” I cover his hands with mine, wanting to keep them where they are.

“It could be for five hours a week, or ten hours a week. It’s still an accomplishment.

One you went after without hesitation. You didn't wait for it to fall in your lap. It's all you, gorgeous. You took the initiative and went after it. I'm damn proud of you," Jagger says with conviction.

"You're amazing, Jagger Steele. So freaking amazing. I love you." I'll never take for granted telling the people in my life how much I love them, especially since I've lost my parents at a too young age.

"Right back at cha. I love you, gorgeous. Now, I'd have taken you out to dinner to celebrate the new job, but you cooked. What do you say we eat dinner and then commemorate today a different way?" My body is still adjusting to his length and girth. This morning was much easier to take him, probably because when I woke up, I was more than ready.

"Jag," I moan his name, ready to forget about food and go right to the bedroom, or he could always take me here on the kitchen counter. I'm not opposed at this point.

"Food first. You're going to need your energy, Lili." His finger tracing the Lon my necklace doesn't help to calm the desire thrumming through my blood.

"Fine, I guess. I'll finish getting the Cajun chicken pasta plated and pull the salad out of the fridge. In the meantime, you might want to check on your boy. Between the shots and hearing they're taking his balls away, I think he needs some guy time." I pat Jagger's chest as we both laugh at Shadow. Me because he'll be losing a set of balls, and Jag probably more along the lines of not believing his girl is a boy.

JAGGER

I step out of the shower, more than ready to climb into bed with my woman and

celebrate her success in a different way. Except my phone has been non-stop vibrating on the bathroom vanity since I got in to join Lyric. She cooked, therefore I cleaned. I also needed to look over a few plans before calling it a night. Lyric didn't mind, settling on the couch to write in her journal for a little bit before heading to where I am now. It fucking sucked she was basically done with her shower, and I missed my opportunity of soaping her up. Still, I didn't let my woman leave without my fingers plunging in and out of her slick heat, feeling her ripple around me until she shattered with my body pressed to hers, and once she regained her composure, I was harder than ever. She slithered away from me, touched my chest, and told me she'd meet me in bed.

I've never finished cleaning up in my life this fast. The only thing holding me back from meeting my woman is the phone, which is lit up and going off. I get out of the shower, towel off in order not to slip on my ass with slick feet, and grab the damn device, unlock it, and see the group chat is on a roll. I never should have told them about Shadow. My cat, who by the way didn't want a lot to do with me, either, came out of his bed to eat, use the litter box, and get a few scratches before sauntering back to his nook, where I noticed a blanket is tucked in the rounded corner, an addition Lyric must have placed there. At least it's something, and he's out of the bedroom. I've been worried at first thinking he'd had a reaction to the vaccines, but Lyric assured me the vet and vet tech mentioned after riding in the car, going through a thorough examination, and then driving back, he could be tired and might stay to himself. He sure the fuck is. This pet of mine has me wrapped around his paw and damn well knows it.

Asher: What the fuck? Who are you, and where the hell is Jagger?

Tysen: Do we need to go back to fifth grade and go through the anatomy class again?

Crew: Am I seeing this right? You didn't know your pussy cat was a dude?

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Jude: How did you not look? Surely, you know the difference.

Trent: Wait till the girls get ahold of this information. You're fucked, my guy.

Johnny: You can't tell the difference between a dick and a pussy?

Luke: I have pamphlets at the office to help you with this kind of thing.

Matthew: I can't believe what I'm seeing.

I shake my head. The range of being roasted goes from bad to worse. I type out a quick response.

Me: Fuck you all. I'm not a Peeping Tom. You all are a pain in my ass.

Jude: Payback's a bitch. You had this coming.

Asher: The almighty Jagger has a lot of explaining to do after Briar's recital. Good luck.

"I never should have told the guys about Shadow. The amount of shit I'm getting and will get for years to come, it's gonna be a shit show." I walk out of the bathroom buck naked, ready to have Lyric beneath me. I'm still looking at my phone and not looking up. When I do, motherfucking fuck, I'm not prepared.

"Lyric." My phone drops to the ground, making a thud on the floor. I don't give a shit if it shatters into pieces. The vision in front of me is all I care about.

“I saw this in a magazine I was reading. Do you think can we try it?” She’s lying across the bed, head near the bottom edge, completely bare, feet planted apart, thighs open, and pinching her nipples. My cock instantly hardens. My hand grabs ahold of it, slowly stroking my shaft as I approach the bed, more than ready.

“We’ll do anything you want, gorgeous. Slide down further. Keep working your pretty nipples. Open your mouth, and I’ll feed you my cock.” Lyric’s eyes close, lips pursing together. A flush coats her cheeks to her neck and to her chest.

“Jag,” she purrs, licking her lips once she’s in position. I’m right there with her, my hand going beneath her neck, holding her steady as I drag my dick along the seam of her lips. Her tongue slides out to lick her lips, causing my balls to draw tight.

I watch as she traces my head. Wetness coats it, and she leaves no part untouched while I allow her to have her way. Lyric’s mouth engulfs my tip, sucking me so hard I have to lock my knees to stay standing. Her hands slide up the back of my thighs, softly at first, until I feed her more of my length, then the tips of her nails depress into my skin. I ease out a bit. “You need a breather, tap my leg, okay?”

She hums around my dick in acknowledgement, making me lose myself a bit more. My gaze lingers on her body. The curves of her breasts lift with each breath, berry-ripened nipples pebbled into tight buds. If I thought I could keep my cock in her mouth while sucking on them, I would. The thought of losing her sucking me makes me pause. Her hips flare out, giving me something to grip as I’m sinking inside her.

“Giving you more, Lili.” She swallows around me. My eyes close, and I breathe through my nose and clench my jaw. Christ, she may lack in experience, but she makes up for it with effort. Her scent surrounds us, warm, deep, raw. I can smell her hunger coming off her in waves. My focus bounces from watching Lyric’s lips surrounding my dick to her tits that bounce with every flex of my hips. I’m unable to keep my hands to myself, I cup them, thumbs sliding over her nipples as I watch what

it does to her. Her legs rub together, trying to find relief. The lips of her pussy are so slick, her juices are coating the insides of her thighs.

“Spread your legs, Lyric. I’m going to eat you while you suck my cock.” I drop down, my body lying along hers, being careful not to press down too much. She’s already in a precarious position. Restricting her air flow is the last thing I want to do.

“Hmm.” Fuck me. I pull in and out for another moment, making sure she’s good with what we’re doing. Not once has she so much as tapped me to tell me to give her a reprieve.

I lick my lips, ready to have the sweetest taste on my lips, to bury my head between her thighs, have her pressing into me all while she’s engulfing my dick. She gets more into it, lifting her head up to take more of my length, but there’s no way I’ll be coming before my woman. My tongue drags around her clit, focusing on what she likes, circling it clockwise and counterclockwise. A shiver takes hold of her. I move down, getting a taste directly from the source, the deeper the fucking richer. She drenches me with each forward and backward stroke of my tongue sinking into her pussy. I bring my fingers into the mix, one then two, knowing Lyric likes it when I’m stretching her. My mouth wraps around her clit, taking deep pulls and feeling her suckharder on my dick. I flutter my fingers back and forth, opening them and closing them, working her inner muscles. It’s only when her body locks up that I back my mouth off her clit. I use the palm of my hand instead, keeping the momentum going. Our combined sounds of wetness, skin against skin and our labored breathing have me ready to blow.

“Christ, look how pretty you are. Soaked, taking my fingers while doing the same to my cock. You need to get there, gorgeous, and fast.” I grind the palm of my hand down, rubbing it around and around. Lyric’s muscles grow taut, toes pointing, and she stops sucking me for me for a moment while her orgasm takes hold. I don’t stop my movements, not until she’s completely wrung dry from coming.

She only lies still for a moment. I'm more than ready to pull out and wrap my hand around my dick to finish the job when I feel light lapping of her tongue. Not once does she back off. She gets back into it, moaning, slurping, and getting me ready to fucking blow.

"Suck me down, Lyric, swallow it all." I stand up, barely able to find my footing I'm so goddamn close. One of her hands moves away from my thigh. I'm ready to move quickly if she taps out. But she doesn't. Instead, she cups my balls, rolling them around in the palm of her hand. "Fuck, I'm coming, Lili, right the hell now." I keep my focus locked the hell down, watching her lick me clean, not letting a drop go to waste. The minute she pulls back, I'm helping her up, step back, hands going under her back, sit down beside her on the bed, and pull her into my lap.

"Wow, that was really hot," she says, shocking the hell out of me.

"You good? Light headed? Anything like that?" I ask, worried she'll have some kind of lingering effects.

"No, I'm good. Are you?" She moves until she's straddling my lap. Her hot pussy comes in contact with the underside of my cock. The damn thing just had the best head of his life and still won't go down.

"Never fucking better," I reply. She lifts up on her knees. I assume she's going to drop down on my cock, but she does the complete opposite, pressing her lips against mine, tasting herself on me, and when I deepen the kiss, I've got no problem doing the same. We go hot and heavy for a few minutes. Lyric's nipples skate over the hair on my chest, buzzing with vibrations. I'm about to stand up, let her back meet the mattress, and have her again, when she pulls back.

"I think we need another shower." She hops off my lap and runs to the bathroom, and I get another great fucking view of her ass jiggling with each movement. My cock

bobs against my abdomen, and there's no way I won't be taking her in there, too.

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LYRIC

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“Wow,” I breathe out a few days later. It’s Briar’s dance recital, and between their friend group and the grandparents, she has two full rows fifteen people deep to watch her. No wonder they’re hosting at their house after the performance.

“This isn’t even all of them. We’re missing my folks, Tysen’s, Johnny’s, Crew’s, Matthew’s, and Luke’s. They usually try to make an appearance, but this one was kind of last minute,” Jagger says, holding my hand as we take the aisle toward our seats.

“I bet. I love that everyone shows up for each other.” I don’t say that with a chip on my shoulder, either. I’m genuinely happy that this group is such a close-knit family.

“You’re part of it, too, gorgeous.” He squeezes my hand. “Now, I’m sorry to drop you in a pool where you don’t know everyone, but I’ve gotta give my friends shit, and in doing so, mess with their women.” Jagger shoots me a wink, and I roll my eyes. He’s always been this way when it comes to his friends. The jokester comes out to play, and I’ve been more than aware of this side of his personality.

“Go do your thing. I’ll be fine.” He doesn’t let my hand go. Instead, he drags me through an aisle where Johnny is standing to allow us room to move in. His wife, Winnie, must be beside him and is holding a toddler in her arms.

“Johnny, I swear every time I see you and Winnie together, I assume she’s with you as a public service.” Jagger wraps his arms around Winnie, giving her a hug, tousling Sebastian’s hair, and pressing a kiss to the side of Winnie’s head.

“You’re an ass. I’m not sure what Lyric sees in you,” Johnny replies.

“Me either. Got any other eligible bachelors lurking around?” I tease while shrugging my shoulders.

“Good to see you back, Lyric, and glad you can put this guy in his place,” Johnny says.

“I’m Winnie. It’s nice to formally meet you. This is Sebastian.” The little boy holds his arms out for me. At first, I think it’s for him to shake my hand, which would be strange considering he’s a toddler.

“You too,” I respond as Sebastian launches himself into my arms. I hold on as he hugs my neck and starts whispering into my ear, “I sit with you.” I look at Winnie and Johnny. They both give non-committal answers.

“I’d apologize, but Sebastian is a great judge of character, plus he saw you coming in with Jagger. Who, by the way, has never brought anyone around our group.” Winnie is a girls’ girl, giving details even though I didn’t ask for them. “Please sit by us. Jagger is probably on his way to piss off Asher next, then there’s Trent.”

“Okay, thank you. Is he good to sit with me?” I ask, making sure that this is okay.

“Oh yes. He might move around from person to person after a little while.” I smooth out the back of my dress as I take my seat beside her. There’s an empty one to my left, which I’m sure is for Jagger, and from there is Luke.

“Hey, Lyric, thanks for helping me out the other day.”

“Hi, Luke, no problem. I guess my thanks are in order, too, because I’m pretty sure he’d have never told me.” Jagger still hasn’t gone into detail about all the things he’s done, dangerous or otherwise. There’s a part of me that wants to know every detail. Then there’s the other that would much rather be none the wiser. I’m pretty sure I’d

develop an ulcer.

“Well, I don’t think he’ll be doing anything like that again. Not with you around, and if he does, you let us know. We’ll take care of him,” Luke promises.

“Alright, quit talking to my girl and get one of your own. She’s mine.” Jagger plops down in the seat beside me after squeezing himself between the row in front of us and Luke. He stuck his ass out, pushing it in Luke’s face.

“You’re a dick,” Luke mutters under his breath, using his hands to get him away. Sebastian giggles at their antics. I cover his ears since there are more words thrown around that I’m sure he doesn’t need to hear.

“He’s fine. Johnny is way worse than those two put together. Not to mention the rock songs he has Seb jamming out to on a daily basis,” Winnie whispers in my ear.

“They silly,” Sebastian says when I put my hands down. His little hand goes to the necklace I’m wearing. The shiny silver captures his attention a lot like it does Jagger’s.

“They are,” I reply.

“Hi, Lyric, I promise we’ll talk after, and I’ll introduce you to everyone, unlike this big oaf, who left you to your own devices.” Kennedy turns around, waving at me.

“Except me. I already reacquainted myself with her,” Luke pipes in.

“Okay, fine, not you or Winnie or Johnny, and clearly not Sebastian, but everyone else,” Kenny says.

“Thank you, and thank you for including me in Briar’s recital.” I came back into

town and have since been swept up in a whirlwind romance. I should have gotten out more. Except I've been kind of in my own little world, journaling my grief, working on figuring out who I am while not being a caretaker, and then being wrapped up in Jagger.

"Anytime." Kennedy turns around as the lights dim.

"I see you've met Sebastian." Jagger holds his fist out to bump Sebastian's, and he returns it with a big smile.

"I have indeed. He's a cutie." The music comes on, the emcee announces tonight's lineup, and Sebastian turns around. He claps his hands, and I bounce my legs up and down. He gets into it, and I notice the group around us does as well, either singing or dancing, the guys bobbing their heads, but not Jagger. Nope, he's singing like his life depends on it and is jamming out. I don't know where to look, the stage, Sebastian, or Jagger.

"Here comes Briar," Winnie tells me, or Sebastian, I'm not sure which. The little guy squeals, claps his hands in excitement, and once Briar is on stage, he points in her direction. We get lost in the performance, everyone does, and it isn't till all of them are done, and we're giving all of the classes a standing ovation, that I realize Sebastian didn't move from my lap once. In fact, he's now in my arms, situated on my hip. I'm really going to admit to Jagger that I'm having mixed feelings about my statement. Maybe kids could be in our future, like, in a few years or so.

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“We’re going to meet Briar backstage. We’ll meet you all at the house,” Trent tells the group.

“I go with you,” Sebastian says. I must have a deer in the headlights look because what do I say to that?

“We’ll see you at Aunt Kenny and Uncle Trent’s. I don’t have your seat in my truck, little dude,” Jagger helps me.

“Promise?” Oh, man, this little boy has attached himself to me, and it’s making my heart melt.

“I promise.” I give him my pinky finger, the same way Jagger and I do when we make a pact.

“Otay.” Johnny comes up beside me, and Sebastian goes with him willingly. I give him a finger wave when he looks at me over his father’s shoulder.

“Well, gorgeous, you might not want to have children, but they sure as fuck want you. Plus, they look good on you.” Jagger bends down to whisper in my ear so no one else can hear, thankfully.

“They are cute, and how could you not love me?” I spin around to be face to face. I wrap my arms around his neck, forgetting everyone around us, in our own little world when our attention is on one another.

“That’s for damn sure.” He bites his lower lip, causing my core to contract, wishing

we were at home.

“You know when I said absolutely no children?”

“Yeah. Are you worried I’ll be upset, gorgeous?” Jagger is more understanding than most would be.

“Well, no, I didn’t even think about that, honestly.” I wiggle my nose and furrow my eyebrows, worry hitting me in the gut that he will be. It’s time to suck it up and tell him what I’ve been thinking of as of late. “I might change my mind. I don’t want them anytime soon, but maybe a few years from now. After we live our life and travel a bit?”

“Whatever you want, whenever you want.” He drops a kiss to my lips, keeping it short and sweet. “Now, you ready for the fun to really begin? If you think Seb was attached to you, wait until Briar gets ahold of you. I may as well kiss you goodbye,” Jagger says in a teasing voice, except I know him well enough that he’ll be right there with me even if two kids drag me around to play with them.

“I love you, but I’d never let you say goodbye to me. Not ever again.” I wrap my arms around his waist, settle my head on his chest, and hold on to him with both hands.

“I love you, too. Let’s get going. The faster we get there, the sooner we can leave.” He presses a kiss on the crown of my head, squeezing my lower back before we head out of the building and meet everyone at Trent and Kennedy’s.

“I’m so glad you’re back,” Winnie tells me. We’re all off to one side, the guys are on the other, and I can hear the laughter getting louder with each passing moment. Trent

and Kennedy had everything set up and ready by the time we made it back here; well, the caterers did, really. I offered to help when we arrived, but there was nothing to be done. Instead, I helped clean up when plates and cups were set down, essentially being abandoned. The food was good, the desserts were better, Briar saddled up to me, telling me which ones were the sweetest, and we became instant friends.

“I’m glad to be back,” I tell her, taking a sip of wine.

“I knew you meant something big to him when he stormed off when Jude told him about you. It sucks that you were apart for so long, but as I’ve learned, sometimes life falls apart to be put back together again.” Winnie’s words are wise, and from what Jagger said about their time apart, it makes perfect sense.

“I didn’t feel like my heart really beat until I came back and saw him, even though he was a horse’s ass with his light switch being flipped on and off.” I don’t fault him. Neither of us really knew what had happened, and once we finally talked, I understood.

“That, I also understand. They have these big emotions, and instead of talking about them, they bottle it up, which, I mean, I may have done similar, but the best part about all of them is that they don’t hold grudges. They’ll also fight for what they want. There’s no walking away from their women.” Winnie tells me some of what I already know. The other, I’ll have to talk to her in a smaller group setting. Oneday, I’ll have to ask her about what happened between her and Johnny.

“What’s this I hear about Jagger not knowing the difference between a male and female cat?” Lennie enters the conversation. “The guys are giving him hell about it as we speak.” She’s got a plate of her own, stacked high with what looks like fudge, cookies, mini-cupcakes, and a piece of cheesecake.

“Well, I can answer that. He refused to look at Shadow’s privates to decipher the sex.

Only assumed because the cat is so sweet, it had to be a girl, which then made me question how he helped with the kids around here. Did he cover his eyes when he changed diapers or took them to the bathroom? You should have seen his face when I asked if he looked. He was utterly appalled.” The girls laugh.

“You know, I can see that about Jagger. He’s this big thrill-seeking jokester on the surface, but deep down, there’s a lot more,” Maci says, describing the man I love so perfectly.

“Well, I hope he’s up for diaper duty. Between the four of us, we’re going to need all hands on deck.” Kennedy massages her lower back.

“I’m sure all the aunties and uncles will help, plus Briar will be in the thick of it. Then there’s Sebastian. I bet he’ll do the same,” I tell the group of girls.

“Enough about babies and sex. Well, not the real sex, because Kennedy will absolutely lose her shit on me. Let’s talk about your house. How’s it going? When will it be done? And are you ready to shop?” Lennie rapid fires the questions my way.

“The sex is great. Sorry, Kennedy,” I tease. Since Jagger isn’t her brother, I’m able to get away with a smidge more. “The house is still in the early remodeling stages, but Jagger and his crew were able to get the master bedroom and bathroom done. I’m not sure when it will be finished, so as for shopping, it might be a few weeks from now, once more rooms are done and I can store things properly.”

“Well, I’m down, and I know the rest of the girls will be, too,” Kennedy states.

“Um, I hate to ask, but have you figured out what you’ll be doing with the house once it’s finished?” Lennie asks the question that’s been plaguing me for a while now. It seems every time I’m adamant about doing something or sticking to my guns, I

change my mind.

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“Well, for the time being, we decided to go back and forth. I know that won’t last forever, but I’d like to at least live there before making any big decisions.”

“You could always do what Lennie does.” Winnie nods her way.

“What’s that?” I really hope it’s not turning it into one of those vacation-style homes. My neighbors would probably kill me. I’d no doubt be a bundle of nerves, and the logistics of keeping it clean non-stop would kill me.

“I keep the house next door reserved for friends and family. One day, I’ll figure out what to do with it, but for now, it gets used quite frequently.” Lennie takes a bite of her cheesecake.

“The only problem with that is I’m not sure mine would be used all that much. I’ve got Naomi, my mom’s best friend, but she spends most of her time in Paris, and unless her new beau changes her mind, I don’t think she’ll be in the States much longer.” I’ve chewed on this idea, too, plus the possibility of renting it out again, and while I know the damage wasn’t the last tenant’s fault, the thought still makes my gut sink.

“Oh, well, I might be able to help with that. If you want, my house isn’t big enough for the whole Johnson clan. Especially if my sister comes into town. They literally make this group look small. Maybe we can work something out, and if not, please feel free to tell me no,” Lennie suggests.

“You know, I like that idea a lot better. Can I get back with you once everything is settled?” There’s still a lot left to do, and Jagger mentioned the kitchen being the

biggest setback with the lead time for kitchen cabinets.

“Of course. Excuse me, I see my niece found a different dessert. She must have been holding it back because I didn’t see that on the table to begin with.” Lennie dashes away, well, tries to as much as she can with her pregnancy belly.

“Hey, Lili, you ready to head home?” Jagger comes up behind me, hands wrapping around my chest and pulling me close to him.

“I am.” I look around. Everyone has dispersed, hanging with their men. A few of the girls are yawning, and I’m suddenly feeling the same.

“Let’s get outta here. Ready to have you in my arms, the game on, and you writing in your journal while Shadow begs for some ear scratches.” The scene he sets is the perfect end to our evening.

“Take me home, Jag, please.”

“My fucking pleasure.” He pulls back, captures my hand, laces our fingers, and then we’re off to say our goodbyes.

21

JAGGER

“Lyric, are you okay?” I come barreling through the door. Her text came through in the middle of the meeting, letting me know she wasn’t feeling well and would be taking a nap. I responded when I got out, an hour fucking later. The commercial building we’ve been trying to break ground on keeps hitting red tape after red tape. Joss is now working on another problem with it, and I’m done for the day. Lyric never responded to my message, and she didn’t answer when I called. It sent me

spiraling, and I made a quick call to Joss telling her to clear my schedule, and I hightailed it home.

Shadow isn't in the living area, and neither is Lyric. I kick my boots off where I stand; a task I forgot to do it in the garage, my mind so focused on my woman that thinking straight isn't happening. I walk through the house, noticing the kitchen is clean, nothing is out of place, but the house is darker than usual. The curtains are pulled closed, and only one lamp in the living room is illuminated.

"Jagger?" She sits up in bed, hair pulled up on top of her head in a bun, one of my shirts covering her, except it's hanging off her shoulder because it swallows her body whole.

"What's wrong? You didn't answer your phone." I pull my shirt over my head, undo the buttons on my jeans, push them down, and walk toward her.

"My period. This is the first month I've been on this prescription. I wanted to try a different form of contraception, and so far, it's so bad. The cramps are unbearable, and so is the headache." Her voice is quiet, hoarse, and I can see her wincing with each word.

"Trust me?" I ask, lifting the sheets up and sliding in beside her. Shadow lets out a meow, annoyed that I didn't stop to give him attention. He'll have to wait his turn, the needy thing. Right now, Lyric needs me more.

"Always," she replies. I'm careful not to jostle her too much. I prop the pillows behind my back to lean up against and then help maneuver her until she's settled between my legs.

"I'm going to relieve the pressure, get you in the shower, feed you, and then if you're still not feeling better, I'll call Luke." I lift her shirt so my warm hands can cup her

lower abdomen, slowly rubbing her up and down, side to side, and feeling her body slowly relax.

“Jagger, that feels so good.” Her head tips up, her eyes flutter closed, and I can feel goose bumps pebbling her flesh. I keep my hand above the band of lace confection she’s wearing. Thongs. It doesn’t matter the day of the week or the time of the month, it seems. Which means this will make it even easier for me and hopefully will relieve some of the pain she’s feeling.

Lyric relaxes into me, giving me more of her body weight. The soft sighs tumbling from her lips tell me to keep going. The tips of my fingers lightly graze beneath her panties. “Still okay?” I ask her. I’m trying to comfort her, not freak her out.

“Yes.” Green eyes meet mine. The pain I see behind them cuts me to the quick. I’m half tempted to call Luke to make an emergency appointment. Fuck, I definitely will if this doesn’t work.

“I’m going to use my fingers on you.” Lyric shows a sign of hesitation, causing me to pause from proceeding further.

“But I’m on my period, and I have a tampon in,” she states with confusion.

“I’m not going inside. I’ll make you feel good. It’ll alleviate the pain. If I’m wrong, we’ll never try this again,” I explain. She opens her thighs, trusting me, and my fingers come in contact with the light landing strip of hair. It’s manicured, trimmed, and hot as fuck. I keep one hand on her lower abdomen, rubbing the ache, plus the heat radiating off my body gives her some added relief. While my other continues the journey, teasing her while making my cock hard as steel. This is for Lyric, not for me, and the damn thing will have to wait, even if my dick is pressing into her lower back.

“We’re not calling Luke,” she grouches, not liking the idea of having him check her

out. The feeling is entirely mutual when it comes to any part of my woman being naked, except he wouldn't do any type of exam on her. What he'd do is give her something for the pain and suggest a better alternative to the bullshit she's on now.

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“We will if we need to. You can also quit taking birth control entirely, and I’ll use condoms.” I’d hate like hell to lose taking her bare, but having her miserable like this? Fuck that.

“If I go without, it’s ten times worse, and usually, it’s the first day or two, then I’m fine.” The tip of my finger grazes her clit. She’s already wet. Goddamn.

“Then we’ll find something else for you. The last thing you need is to be miserable for a few days a month when there’s shit out there to help you.” Lyric doesn’t respond; no answer is more than alright for me. I’m going to get to work on making her feel better. I start moving my finger in a circle around her pebbled tip, getting her going, and when I feel her hands dig into the tops of my thighs, I change directions, side to side, then circle, and side to side. She spreads her legs wider, moving until she has her feet planted on either side of the outside of mine.

“Jagger, oh god, more. Please, please, please.” It’s clear as day this is exactly what she needs. I don’t stop working her clit, repeating the process time and time again. Her back arches off my chest, and her breathing becomes more erratic, labored, and already getting close to an orgasm. The moans get deeper, her head thrashes, and that’s when I add more. Three of my fingers run over her clit, using the same motions as before.

“Get ready, gorgeous. It’s coming.” My cock leaks pre-cum. The tip will more than likely saturate the borrowed tee she’s wearing. We’ll both be soaked, because her wetness coats my hand, but when I look down, I can’t see what my fingers are doing to her. I gather the fabric on her hip with my other hand and tear the delicate fabric with one loud rip. Finally, I can see the lips of her cunt. They’re drenched; the same

goes for the insides of her thighs.

“So ready,” she moans.

I double down. The way she’s going wild, it won’t be too much longer. My fingers go high and low, left to right, over and over again. The next time she needs a release because of some fucked-up birth control, we’ll be doing this in the shower, and it’ll be my cock doing all the work. Though, I don’t even want to think about her being miserable again. Whatever doctor she has in North Carolina clearly isn’t helping, and I’ve got not one single fucking problem stepping in to make sure my woman never has to go through this again.

“Jag,” Lyric says my name with a low hitch in her throat, sultry and deep, dripping with emotion, rich and intimate.

“Fucking fuck, Lyric. You’re a goddamn vision in front of me,” I murmur against the crown of her head, placing a kiss there while slowing down my motions to bring her down gently from her orgasm. She lies still, body zapped of energy, eyelashes fanning across her cheeks, nails no longer digging into my flesh, but we’ve got one last step before I’m letting her fall asleep.

“Come on. Shower for you, Lili.” I slide out from beneath her, extending my hand for her to take. She’s still coming down from her orgasm, and while I’d have suggested a hotbath, she’s stated passionately in the past that those aren’t for her.

“I’m good right here. Walking is overrated.” Looks like I’m carrying her today. I bend down, slide my hands beneath her neck and the fold of her knees, then lift her up and out of the bed. Her arms wrap around my neck, and her nose slides along my neck, cuddling as deeply as she can get.

“I see you like my idea now.” I walk with her in my arms, making it through the

doorway, and am about to hit the light switch to turn the lights on when I think better of it. The house is dark and cool throughout; may as well keep the bathroom as similar as I can.

“I can admit that it’s in the top five of best ideas. Don’t ask me what the other ones are right now,” she says, still fuck drunk from her orgasm. I chuckle at her explanation while trying to decipher if she’s ever brought a list up before. She’s probably got it in her notebook somewhere.

“Shirt off, gorgeous.” I settle her against the vanity, making sure she’s steady on her feet while I turn on the hot water. I’m already naked and will definitely be joining my woman.

“Okay,” she utters. I hear the fabric drop to the ground after I do what I need to and close the shower door to allow the steam to fill it.

I move around her toward the cabinet, set a new tampon on the counter, and then work my way back to Lyric. I close the toilet lid. “Leg up, Lili. You don’t have to worry. I promise you’re safe with me.” I’m done in a flash. The tampon slides out, I dump it in the trash, and Lyric remains quiet the entire time. I might have pushed my luck with that, but it’s too fucking bad.

“Thank you. I’d forgotten all about it.” Apparently, she’s not upset, and good fortune is on my side.

“I love you, Lyric. I’d do anything for you.”

“I love you, too. Shower with me?” She looks up at me.

“Fuck yeah, with goddamn pleasure.” I lift her up again, liking the feel of her in my arms. She locks her ankles behind my back, my cock still hard and more than willing

to get inside her.

“Do you think we could, um, you know, in the shower?” she asks in a similar way to the last time she wanted to try something new.

“Hell yes.” I fuse my lips to hers, sealing her idea with a kiss of all fucking kisses.

EPILOGUE

Lyric

Two Months Later

“Oh my god, this is incredible.” We’ve been ziplining through our entire vacation. I picked the activity, and Jagger chose the location of our first vacation together. We kept our destination area within the United States, using Tysen’s private jet to drop us off and pick us up. Washington state is incredible—the trees, the views, the clean air, and not a care in the world.

We both did the same thing with our phones and devices, turning them completely off before dumping them in a drawer at the Airbnb we rented, and while I almost crashed out worrying about Shadow being by himself, Jagger reassured me that Luke is staying at our house to cat sit, drinking all his beer and probably swimming naked in the pool. I wrinkled my nose at that then proceeded to tell Jagger he better super shock it when we get back.

The downfall of our getaway, well, it’s not lasting long enough. We got here Friday, and tomorrow is our last day. We leave early in the morning. Tysen could only book this window of time for Monday at stupid o’clock, as in up-before-a-rooster-crows early. That’s why we’re on one last zipline before we head back, clean up, and go out for an early dinner.

“You like this, we’ll do a hot air ballon or helicopter tour next time.” I greet Jagger at the other end of the line, standing on a rocky cliff with an employee who manages the zipline.

“Yes, please.” Jagger helps me unhook, having already done so himself. He did all the ground work for this, choosing the safest company, and one where we would take the trails to enjoy the scenery. All of our gear is given to the guy standing off to the side.

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“You got it.” He holds his hand out, mine slides inside, and we head down a trail. Jagger took it to the extreme when I had to wear a helmet, double-checking it was secure. The same could be said for the other gear. The harness, though, he triple-checked, just in case. The man undertook a lot of wild thrill-seeking adventures, yet when it comes to my safety, he goes to the highest degree. I expected him to go after me when it came to our turn, but he muttered under his breath that he’s going first in case something happens.

Luckily, he made it to the other side each and every time, my stomach in knots and holding my breath until I saw his feet meet the landing spot. Then he watched me the entire time, too. I’m thinking all of our vacations are going to end up being similar if I try to marry his penchant for fun and mine to see more of the world. Even with Dad’s job and us being stationed in all kinds of areas of the world, it’s different when you’re a child. You don’t appreciate what you have right in front of you, until you look back.

“Okay, so, since you’re picking the next adventure, do I get to pick the place?” I ask when we get further away from anyone else.

“Sure, name your place, Lili.” The name he uses for me comes across his lips in a husky tone.

“Paris. Two birds, one stone. We can have time for ourselves but also see Naomi and Scott.” They split their time between North Carolina and the 1st Arrondissement in Paris, an area that’s rich with history while being close to everything.

“We’ll have to make sure we have more than four days for a trip like that, plus book

Tysen's jet in advance. You might lose hours at the clinic." Jagger pulls me toward an overlook area.

"It'll be worth it. The house being done helps, and while I've yet to figure out what to do with it, I'm leaning toward renting it out to Lennie's family since they'll be here on and off over the next few months. A little added income to put away." I've been seriously contemplating renting it out, and maybe I still will, one of these days.

"Fuck yeah, I'll take any time I can get without workblowing my phone up. Only thing I worry about is how you'll handle being away from Shadow." Jagger comes up behind me, caging me in. His warmth surrounds me, settling my soul like a deep balm.

"I think if we set up a cat camera and allow ourselves a few minutes a day to check on him, I'll be okay." I turn around, wanting to see his laugh lines at my crazy suggestion.

"I love you and your wild ideas. We'll get one for the house. I figure we'll need our phones to get around everywhere when we're not with the newlyweds." Yep, Naomi and Scott eloped. Didn't tell a single soul, just went and did the damn thing and sent me pictures the next day.

"I love you, Jagger."

"I know you do, which is why I'm not asking you to marry me. I'm telling you. Though it's safe to assume you'll say yes." I watch as the man I love slides a ring off his pinky finger. It doesn't even fit over his first knuckle. It's absolutely stunning, an oval cut diamond in a silver setting, and he slips it on my finger. The ring fits perfectly.

"I'll marry you, any day, any hour, anywhere." I jump into his arms as tears stream

down my cheeks. His mouth lands on mine, and he kisses me with fierceness, so much passion, and when his tongues snakes inside and they tangle together, it's everything.

"Christ," he mutters against my lips in between kisses. I feel what I'm doing to him when his thick, hard ridge slides along my core. The leggings do nothing to hide my own desire. I'm dripping wet. The need to have Jagger feels like it never ends, and it probably never will.

"Take me back. We have reason to celebrate." When I nip at his lower lip, a low grumble gives me all the answer I need. There won't be any going out to dinner tonight. We'll be too busy with one another to care about food, not until it's late at night, and we'll end up ordering a pizza.

"Might have to climb down, unless you want me to carry you." I unhook my legs and slowly slide down the length of his body.

"You can carry me to bed. Right now, we need to hurry." Jagger takes my hand again, leading me down the path to where the rental truck waits. Excitement is thrumming through my veins. Any day that begins and ends with Jagger is my favorite kind of day.

I hope you enjoyed Jagger and Lyric's story and will consider leaving a review.

Coming next is Secret Seduction, Luke and Shae's story and releases August 2025

Amazon

Prologue

Shae

Two Weeks Earlier

“Hey Shae, how’s your day going?” Lyric walks in through the studio doors, a smile on her face and a pep in her step. She’s here three times a week and part of the reason I’ve seen an influx of new clients. Between her and the girls, Lennie, Kenny, Winnie, and Maci word of mouth has gotten around Oak County. The neighboring towns around Oak View where my place is situated.

When I opened up LITHE a year ago, I barely had two nickels to rub together especially after installing the mirrors, floors, and speakers throughout the at one time art gallery. It truly helped when I looked at the space with the realtor that the plan was completely open. My parents being the most supportive helped in the way of elbow grease. They couldn’t help me financially, yet they pulled their weight in what I needed most. Dad built the walls for two separate rooms for different classes to be held. He also did similar for the reception area where I’m standing behind now.

“Hi Lyric, not too bad. What about yours?” I don’t tell her that I’m waffling between closing the studio down for the afternoon and having to refund or credit the next class for the day. One of my instructors turned in her notice this morning and didn’t feel the need to give me her two weeks either. Needless to say, I truly hope she won’t be using my name as a reference or that her next place of employment chooses not to call me.

“Oh, you know, same old, same old.” She shrugs her shoulders, I notice the iced coffee with the Oak & Brew emblazoned with in a clear plastic cup, olive green print with their signature logo in the form of a coffee cup on the side.

“Anything new on the menu this week?” I ask, Oak & Brew is known for more than just coffee, they have baked goods, breakfast sandwiches, and teas.

“Yes, it’s all things cinnamon this week. Cinnamon swirl latte, cinnamon coffee cake,

cinnamon tea, and endless others. The girls and I have stopped by almost every day so far. I swear they put crack in their drinks because I am officially addicted.” Lyric takes the last sip of her drink, the slurping telling me more than she ever needed to.

“Crack in the form of caffeine and you are not wrong.” Tomorrow morning, I’ll be waking up earlier than usual to get a fix of my own.

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“Nope, where are the others?” Lyric asks.

“Well, my sister is on vacation with her girlfriends. They do an annual trip once a year and this is their week.” They’re younger than I am by about six years or so, my sister, Coralynn is what my older brother, Zane likes to call the oops baby. Whereas we’re two years apart, he and our baby sister are eight years apart. At least she doesn’t get the never-ending older brother tales that she’s adopted or is the milkman’s baby. I swear he’s a pain in the ass and I still love him even with his dumb jokes. “As for Blair, she quit this morning.”

Lyric’s mouth opens and closes, that’s about the size of it. I’d felt like a fish out of water, also trying to come up with a new instructor on the fly isn’t as easy as you’d think. Which means I’ll be working all of the classes and somehow finagling changing the schedule if I can.

“Are you looking for someone to replace her?” Lyric recovers, a thoughtful expression on her face.

“I would like to, but with the short notice she gave me and Coralynn being out of town it’s going to be hard.” Coralynn helps out with the dance classes, contemporary and ballet. I know she’d help, if she wasn’t boozing and sunning it up with her girl gang.

“Damn,” I nod, agreeing with her just as the phone on the desk rings.

“Hi, thank you for calling LITHE. This is Shae, how can I help you?” Lyric stays where she is, leaning on the counter, pulling out her phone, and texting someone. I

think it's safe to assume she's texting either Jagger, her man or the girls in her group. Winnie brings her son, Sebastian in, and she's probably letting her know the group might be canceled for the time being.

"This Camden & Gallo Obstetrics and Gynecology. I'm calling to confirm your appointment for tomorrow at one o'clock." I close my eyes, mouth the words. I've completely forgotten about my appointment with everything going on today.

"Is it possible to reschedule, something came up unexpectedly," Lyric raises her arms, waving them in a way to grab my attention. "Can you hold on for just a moment, please." I ask the receptionist.

"Sure thing, but if we get disconnected, you'll have to call back." She replies, makes sense, time is money and money is time.

"No problem," I cover the mouth piece.

"Is everything okay?" I question, feeling the lines in my forehead furrow.

"Yes, I'll do the class tomorrow. I'm not working at the clinic, you're in a pinch, and I'm available. Use me and if you can't find anyone to pick up Blair's shifts, I'm sure I can. Please, allow me to do this. I'm so bored that I've been tempted to ask Jagger for a job," Lyric's hands come up in a praying manner and as much as I'd like to say no. I can't, not only because she's Lyric Skye, almost Steele, she's sweet, pure, and genuine.

"Are you sure? I mean this is a big favor and of course, I'll pay you." There's a reason I'm hoping Lyric will pull through. I've had my period for longer than normal, above normal really. It started happening a couple of months ago. The normal three-to-five-day menstrual cycle went to two weeks. I let it roll off my back, figured stress could have caused it, when it ended, I put the notes in my period tracker app, and

went about my day. Then the damn thing came back a week later, I called the gynecologist immediately and between the clashing of schedules this has been the first available appointment.

“Yes, now tell the nice lady on the phone that you’ll be there tomorrow.” I do as Lyric says, breathing a sigh of relief when it’s all said and done.

“Thank you, are you looking for a job?” Lyric laughs, I’m not sure if she’s thinking I’m not being serious or not.

“Kind of, maybe. But.” she puts her finger up in the air, “I don’t want full-time. I especially don’t want later in the evening or weekends. God, I sound like a brat.” This time it’s me that laughs.

“Well, we can see how you like tomorrow and go from there. The mommy and me classes are during the day, so you wouldn’t have late evenings plus we don’t have them on weekends either,” Lyric probably knows the schedule backward and forward, she’s been here enough times with Winnie and Sebastian. Especially when we have our summer program and all the moms are looking to get the littles out of the heat while still getting their energy out.

“I can totally do this, I mean it’s basically coordinated chaos. But, just in case, show me the ropes. That way tomorrow we’re not rushing, and you won’t feel overwhelmed to get out the door.” The reason I’m seeing Doctor Gallo in the first place is from her recommendation to begin with. I’d bleed through my tampon, Lyric mentioned it before I could notice, being the type of real friend, everyone wants, and then I proceeded to break down on her.

“Exactly that. Come on, I’ll show you everything and grab you a shirt. The bottoms are up to you, leggings, shorts, or joggers are fine.” My clothes are mainly athleisure wear and today is no different, a pair of dark teal leggings and tank top set.

“Are biker shorts, okay?”

“Definitely.” I have another thirty minutes before the next class, enough time to show Lyric the ins and outs, hand over an application in case she decides to join the employee side of LITHE and take care of my womanhood that’s slowly trying to kill me off.

“Perfect,” she tosses her cup in the trash on the way to the back before we get into what I’ll be paying her tomorrow and the rates she could potentially make if she comes to work for me.

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“How much longer until you go on maternity leave?” I ask the next day, following Lennie through the halls of the gynecologist office. It’s nice to see a face I’m already familiar with, it’s helping calm my otherwise haywire nerves. When I told my mom I had an appointment today, she asked the usual, what, when where, and why. We went down the list, she hummed for a moment and then told me to keep her posted. It didn’t help in the least, I’m more than aware my mother had a hysterectomy at a young age. She had me and Zane in her early twenties, my bother at twenty, me at twenty-two, and my sister at twenty-eight. Six months post-partum and she’d been taken straight to the hospital from the doctor’s office for emergency surgery.

“This is my last week, I wanted to work until my delivery date, except my husband, Asher isn’t having any of that.” She says holding the door open to my room. We’ve already been through the intake forms, my weight, a urine sample, and now she’ll finish the rest of what I’m sure is taking my pulse, temperature, and blood pressure.

“You look amazing, and you’ve been able to keep up with the classes you’ve been taking too. I’m sure that will help with labor and delivery.” I sit down on a chair, preferring it over the exam table. My palms are sweating and no matter how many

times I wipe them down on the pair of jeans I'm wearing, nothing helps.

"It better, Doctor Gallo said staying active and hydrated is key. I swear between him and my husband, they're force feeding me water. I'm either peeing, eating, or sleeping." She gives a soft chuckle, acting put off but you can tell there's an excitement in her tone. Lennie goes about getting everything ready, pulling out a gown, and the instruments used to do a pelvic exam just in case.

The nurse over the phone explained they may have me come back, it'd be up to the doctor and what he decides. I'm lost in my own little world, when Lyric mentioned seeing Doctor Gallo, it reminded me that I no longer had a gynecologist of my own. He retired two years ago, and between the studio as well as life, things fell by the wayside.

"Knock, knock. Hey Lennie," the door opens, my eyes swinging to the door. My mouth goes dry, his voice is dripping with calm control, thick, and slow, drawing you deeper into the sound.

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“Hey, everything okay?” She asks, looking over her shoulder.

“Yes, can you help me in room three when you get a minute?” His gaze swings from Lennie’s to mine, a quick nod, yet he doesn’t look away.

“Of course, I won’t be but another minute or so.” Lennie’s response pulls him away.

“Thanks,” he backs out of the entrance, closing the door on his way out.

“Please tell me that’s not Doctor Gallo,” I say quietly in order for the mystery man not to hear me.

“No, that’s Luke. Well, Doctor Camden. He’s a friend of my husband’s. Well, he’s all of our friend now, once you’re in the fold, you’re in the fold. None of the women see Luke and probably why Lyric suggested Gallo to you to begin with.

“Thank god, that might have been awkward,” I fan myself. The man is sex on a stick and stringing two words along would probably take me out.

“Honey, if you think he’s hot. Wait until you meet the rest of the guys, every last one of them are good looking. Just don’t tell my husband I told you that, I’ll deny it and take it to my grave.” Lennie replies.

“Your secret is safe with me,” she goes about taking my vitals, sadly we both have to remain quiet while doing so. Which might be for the better, I may insert my foot into my mouth and make a complete fool out of myself.

“Everything looks good, Doctor Gallo will be in with you shortly. I’d stay in your clothes for the time being and if he decides to do a pelvic a nurse will be in the room with you.”

“Thank you,” I sit back in the chair, crossing my legs, and try to think calming thoughts like I would while teaching a class in my studio.

Too bad when I close my eyes, the only man I can see is Luke Camden.