



# The Bad Girl and the Baby

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**Category:** Erotic, Romance, New Adult

**Description:** Captain Matt Peterson prides himself on being able to handle anything...until he winds up as the guardian of his baby niece, Lulu. Two years and six nannies later, his well-ordered existence is in chaos. Still, he's all Lulu has. Except, well...there is an aunt... Darcy Butler has spent the last three years in prison for beating up her abusive brother-in-law. Her only regret is that she didn't hurt him worse and stop him from killing her sister in a drunken car crash six months later. But now, Darcy just wants to rebuild her life. Starting with finding her sister's child.

But Matt doesn't want an ex-con with a record for violence anywhere near Lulu. Unfortunately, he can't seem to keep away from Darcy, himself. Despite their differences, their chemistry is combustible...and the sex is incredible! Still, it can't possibly last. Can it?

**Total Pages (Source):** 86

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## Chapter One

“To not doing anything stupid,” Regan said, raising her glass.

Darcy scowled in response but clinked her own glass of white wine against her friend’s.

“To staying out of trouble,” Summer added, clicking hers gently against the other two.

This time Darcy plonked her glass down on the table, spilling wine over her fingers, and eyed her two best friends. “I’m not going to do anything stupid,” she growled. “We’re just here to have a drink and a good time. What’s the big deal?”

Regan snorted. “Hah. The wordstalkercomes to mind.”

“I’mnotstalking him.” She picked up her glass, swallowing the contents in one go as the now familiar sense of frustration tightened around her. “Okay, maybe I am stalking him. A little bit. But it’s his fault. If he’d been reasonable, then I wouldn’t have to do this.” She glanced around the nightclub—it really wasn’t her sort of scene. “Where the hell is he?”

“Just calm down,” Summer said. “Don’t get worked up. You know bad things happen when you get worked up.”

Darcy snarled, and Summer giggled. It was good to see her so happy. Both of them. Regan positively glowed. But then, inconceivable as it seemed, they were both in

love.

She was closer to these two women than she'd ever been to anyone in her life. Though she still found it hard to believe. They were all so different. In normal circumstances, they would have never met, and if they had, they would have no doubt just walked away. But it was hard to walk away when you were locked together in a twelve-by-twelve room for most of the day and night.

They'd met while sharing a prison cell in Holloway, and from the start, she'd been wary of them. Regan had seemed too cocky and Summer too shy. Besides, she'd been going through her bitter and twisted "life's unfair" stage and hadn't been inclined to be friendly. It was Summer who had brought them together. She clearly didn't fit in, had seemed way too good for that place, and Darcy had been sure she wouldn't make it through her whole sentence. Somehow, she and Regan had found themselves in the roles of protectors, only to discover that Summer possessed a core of steel, despite her fragile air.

They'd all made a vow that they were never going back to prison and a promise to one another to provide support. Darcy had offered them both a place to stay when they got out. There was a three-bedroom flat above the gym she owned in central London. Though, while they were officially still sharing, these days Regan and Summer spent more time with their men than at home. But they all made a point to meet at least once a week.

Their lives were going so well.

Hers, on the other hand, was a whole big pile of crap.

Which she would never get out from under unless she found some way to put the guilt behind her. Two months out of prison, she was still no closer to her goal. She wanted to be happy for her friends, but everything was such a mess. And she'd been

putting off this confrontation, partly because the couple of times she'd actually gotten her nerve up to confront the man, it was only to find he was off in some foreign land.

How the hell was he looking after her niece, Lulu, if he wasn't even in the same country?

"Hey," Summer said, interrupting her bad thoughts. "Things will work out."

"Yes," Regan added. "They will. So get that scowl off your face. It doesn't go with your pretty dress."

She glanced down at herself and felt her scowl deepen. She was wearing a white sundress printed with blue flowers that she'd borrowed from Regan. It wasn't her style. And a real honest-to-God cardigan—also borrowed—over the top. She couldn't remembereverwearing a cardigan in her life before. But it did an excellent job of covering up her tattoos. She needed to make a good impression. And she really hated that. She wasn't ashamed of who or what she was, but she'd allowed Regan and Summer to persuade her into the disguise. Her normally spiky hair was smoothed back, and she'd taken out her nose stud. She could cope with all those. The real killer was the heels. Why the hell would anyone wear goddamn heels? It made no sense.

"Still scowling," Regan murmured.

She closed her eyes for a moment and took a few deep, calming breaths, sending the bitterness back down deep inside her and locking it in. She could handle this. All she had to do was let him see she wasn't some sort of violent monster. Get him to agree to meet her so they could talk like sensible adults.

"Where the hell is he?" she asked for the hundredth time, staring at the door as if she could will him to appear. "Are you sure he'll be here tonight?"

“Are you questioning my private-eye skills? Or rather, Nate’s private-eye skills?”

Nate was Regan’s fiancé. An ex-detective who’d given up his career to be with Regan. They were in the process of setting up a security company together, and Nate had done a little checking into Captain Mathew Peterson for her.

“No. I’m sure Nate’s the best.”

“Oh, he is,” Regan answered with a smug smile. She raised her hand to a waiter, and a minute later, the man brought a replacement bottle and took away the empty one. Regan poured them all a glass. “Have a drink, and if he doesn’t come, we will just drink some more, and dance, and have a good time. And tomorrow, you’ll go see him like a normal person, and not like a stalker.”

“Dance?” she said. “You’re joking. I’m more likely to trip and break my neck in these heels.”

But what if she went to his house and he still refused to see her. They’d only communicated so far through his lawyer, who had told Darcy that under no circumstances would she be allowed to be part of Lulu’s life.

Not fair.

Lulu was her two-and-a-half-year-old niece, the only family Darcy had left; it certainly wasn’t fair. But what was? And she had to concede that things looked bad. She’d spent nearly three years in prison for supposedly attacking Lulu’s now dead father.

## Page 2

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Mathew Peterson's brother.

What worried her the most was that they had the same genes. Maybe he was just as big a bastard as his brother had been. And he had custody of Lulu. She had to find out. She owed it to her sister. And once she had, maybe she could put this all behind her and learn how to move on.

She forced herself to relax. She needed to be calm, cool, and collected. It was still early, and they'd snagged an empty table, though she'd been too wound up to sit. Now she perched herself on a stool where she could see the door. Regan sat next to her, and Summer opposite.

The door yielded a steady trickle of people, and she relaxed a little...which meant she was totally unprepared. She'd been about to take a sip of wine, and the glass froze halfway to her mouth. A large group entered together. They weren't in uniform, but she would have taken them for military even if she hadn't known. This was a stag night, but they were all dressed smartly, with short, military-style hair-cuts. All well-built. Her gaze homed in on him straight away. He was the image of his brother, and a wave of hatred washed through her. Her hand was shaking, and she put the glass down slowly.

Summer, who had been talking them through the arrangements for her up-and-coming wedding, fell silent and twisted on her stool. "Is he here?" she asked.

Darcy didn't take her eyes off him. "He's the one on the far right."

"Holy moly," Regan muttered. "I saw a photo, but it didn't do him justice. He's

stunning.”

“He looks like Steven.”

Regan reached out and patted her arm. “I’m sorry, sweetie. But that doesn’t mean he’s the same sort of man.”

Darcy could feel her heart beating slow and hard. She swallowed and made herself look at him objectively. There were actually significant differences. She knew he was a couple of years older than Steven, but he looked younger. Years of self-indulgence had taken their toll on Steven, who’d been slightly overweight. There wasn’t an ounce of spare fat on this man. He was long and lean. At least six-foot-three and dressed in black pants and a black shirt. Short black hair, and even across the length of the club, she could see his blue eyes.

He’d been talking to the man beside him, but now, he paused, as though he could sense her watching. He turned and stared straight at her. His face was all hard lines, his nose big and bony, high cheekbones and a mouth... On Steven, that mouth had looked sulky and self-indulgent, but on this man, it looked... Jesus.

Get a grip.

Summer leaned in close. “He’s staring at you,” she whispered.

“No, he isn’t.”

Yes, he is.

And his stare was causing queer tingles in her stomach. Hatred. Yes, that’s what it was. Maybe undeserved, but she knew she would never be able to look at this man objectively. His brother had as good as murdered her sister. How could she ever

forget that?

And why would she want to?

Except that if she wanted to get to know Lulu, she needed this man's cooperation.

Breaking the link, she looked away. She picked up her wine, swallowed it in one gulp, then leaned across and filled her glass again. When she finally glanced back, the group had moved on, and he was gone from her sight.

She exhaled. She'd always thought herself to be so tough. She was the one in charge. She'd always known what to do. Now, she was floundering in a swamp of doubt.

"Are you okay?" Regan asked.

"I'm fine." She forced a smile. "It was just a bigger shock seeing him than I expected. He's so like Steven. Yet, not really. Where are they?" She didn't want to be obvious and turn around and search for him.

"At the bar, behind you. And he's still looking."

"He's probably sensing the waves of hatred."

"Maybe. But he looks...interested."

Christ, that was the last thing she needed. She'd sworn off men until she got her life in order. She hadn't missed sex. Hadn't thought about it in a long time. There was too much else on her mind. Now, for the first time in years, she was aware of her body, and a surge of longing rose inside her, drowning out the logical arguments.

Longing for some sort of physical connection.



But with this man?

Never going to happen.

Things had to be kept on a business-like footing.

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But she could almost feel his eyes staring into her back.

“What’s he doing?” she asked.

“Drinking beer. Talking. Looking at you.” Regan raised a brow. “So what was the plan again?”

Plan? Had there been a plan? Her brain had turned to mush. What the hell had she been thinking? That this was neutral ground? That she’d take him by surprise, tell him who she was, and dazzle him with what a “nice” person she obviously was? Get him to agree to talk to her?

Instead, she sat frozen in place.

“Can we buy you girls a drink?”

The voice came from behind her. She knew instinctively it wasn’t her prey.

Summer’s eyes widened in panic, and she looked to Darcy, eyebrows raised, as if to say what the hell do we do?

Regan answered. She raised her hand, showing off the dazzling diamond engagement ring, and waved her other hand at Summer. “I’m afraid we’re taken.”

“What about your friend?”

“What about our friend?” Regan looked at her, her lips twitching. Yeah, she was so

funny. “Darcy?”

But she couldn't think of a thing to say. So she just glared at Regan.

“She's not feeling too well,” Summer said.

Summer was such an angel. And Regan was a bitch. What the hell had she ever seen in her?

“Okay,” the man said. “Maybe later.”

Maybe never.

She sensed him walk away. And her head dropped to the table. She banged it a couple of times. Then she sat up straight. “What the hell am I doing?” Other than making a total ass of herself. “This was a huge mistake.”

“They're going back,” Regan said. “Talking to him. My God, I think they're trying to set the two of you up.”

“I think we should leave,” she said, pushing herself to her feet. “I'm just going to the ladies' room. I need to...” What did she need? Her stomach churned. and her face was burning. She needed water. Preferably a bucket poured over her head to jolt some sense into her brain. “I'll see you outside.”

She thought Regan was about to argue, but she must have seen something in her face, and she gave a quick nod. “I think you're right. This isn't the time or place for this.”

They'd warned her. Both of them. But she'd just been desperate to do something, anything. And the lawyer had been adamant that she should go nowhere near his house. But tomorrow, lawyer or not, she would visit him at his home and try to

explain.

The club had gotten busier, the dance floor crowded, the music louder, and she had to push her way through. She had the ladies' room to herself, and she splashed water on her face and stared at herself for a few seconds. She looked like a stranger. A pale stranger.

Three years ago, she'd lost her temper and made a mistake. Her sister had paid for that mistake with her life. Darcy was still paying. Before that, she'd always felt in control. Now everything was getting away from her. She didn't know herself anymore, and she hated that.

As she came out, she glanced at their table—Regan and Summer were gone—and she made a beeline for the entrance, taking care not to look over at the group by the bar.

She almost banged into a man as he stepped out in front of her. His hands came out, and she flinched under his touch. She backed away, and her ankle twisted in the unfamiliar heels. Only his grip on her arms kept her upright.

It had to be him. Because that was the way her shitty, crappy luck was working at the moment. She could pull free, whirl around, kick him in the stomach, and run. But that might be hard to explain tomorrow when she went and tried to present herself as a sensible, suitable aunt for her niece. She was hoping to pass tonight off as coincidence.

Was she totally deluded?

Regan and Summer were right; this was beyond crazy. More evidence that she'd lost the plot completely.

She stared at the floor for a few seconds, then set a smile on her face and looked up,

straight into his dark blue eyes.

His gaze fixed on her face. “My friends won’t leave me alone unless I ask you to dance.”

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For a second, the words didn't make sense. She shook her head. "Sorry, I have to go."

He grinned. "Come on, just one. Then they'll stop harping at me."

She needed to pull herself together. Maybe this was fate. A chance to introduce herself. He obviously liked the look of her. She should take advantage of that. What was the worst he could do—accuse her of being a stalker? Yup. Report her? That could cause big trouble with her parole.

She was taking too long to answer. And he clearly took that as a yes. His hands slid down her arms, then his palms were against hers as he took her hands and pulled her closer.

Thoughts swirled in her head, but none of them made sense.

"You were watching me." He murmured the words in her ear, and she realized how close they were. She meant to push him away, but somehow her hands came up, pressing themselves flat against his chest. "I could feel you from the moment I walked in the door," he continued. "Did you like what you saw?"

She swallowed, her throat too dry for words. In a minute, she'd get up her nerve and she'd tell him—

Her thoughts broke off as his hands slid to her waist, and he pulled her even closer. She was tall for a woman, but still a head shorter than him and her hot face pressed against his throat.

As she breathed in the warm, masculine scent, she tried to slow her racing heart. Her hands were trapped between them, but she could get away easily. Christ, she ran a self-defense class for women; she knew exactly what to do. But she made no move. Because if she did this wrong, it would be the end of her chances. She might not get another one.

His body was hard against her. How long had it been since she'd been in a man's arms? Not since before she'd been locked up. His scent, his closeness, the wine she'd had...all mingled, and for a moment, she gave in to the lure of that physical connection she'd craved and relaxed against him.

He must have sensed her surrender, because his hands slid down to her ass and he pulled her closer. He was already hard, his erection nudging her, and things twisted low in her belly.

She had to move.

Get out of there.

This wasn't supposed to be happening. But somehow her hands slid up over his chest and gripped his shoulders. They weren't dancing, just swaying to the music, causing a delicious friction between their bodies, so her breasts tingled, and a little pulse throbbed between her thighs.

He stopped moving.

She wanted to scream. But what? Before she could decide, he released her, stepped back, and pulled a phone out of his pocket. He glanced at the screen.

"Shit," he muttered, then looked into her face. "Sorry. It's my babysitter. I have to leave."

She cleared her throat, thoughts of Lulu jolting her into awareness. “Is something wrong?”

“No, just a family thing.” He appeared about to say something, but then gave a small shake of his head. “It was nice dancing with you.”

“Yeah.” Really nice.

And then he was gone. She watched his back, his tight ass, and broad shoulders until he disappeared.

“Well, did you introduce yourself?” Regan asked from behind her.

She hugged her cardigan closer around herself. “No.”

“Girl, you are in so much trouble.”

“I know.”

“But you know what?” Regan said, her tone so jovial Darcy had to fight the urge to shove her borrowed cardigan down her best friend’s throat. “Tomorrow is another day.”

Darcy’s shoulders drooped. Because tomorrow had the potential to be so much worse.



### Chapter Two

Matt stood outside the club. He had half a mind to call his best friends, Gary and Angie—his babysitters for the night—back and tell them he was staying. But they'd set up the phone call so he could get away early. While he'd felt he had to come tonight, he hadn't wanted to stay long, and certainly hadn't wanted to stand around and watch the rest of the group get steadily inebriated as the evening went on.

But he hadn't counted on the girl.

As soon as he'd walked through the door, he'd sensed her watching him. He'd searched the room and found her straight away. And he had no clue why. She wasn't his usual type. At least, he reckoned she wasn't, but hell if he could remember. It had been so long that he didn't know if he even had a type anymore. He couldn't recall the last time he'd been with a woman. What he did know was—it had been before Lulu came into his life.

But something about this one had drawn him. There was an intensity about her. Something in the way she'd stared had intrigued him. She'd been interesting rather than beautiful, her dark eyes a contrast to her platinum blond hair.

And he was probably better off out of it.

He didn't need complications in his life right now. But he could still feel her body against his. She'd been lean without the softness he'd expect from a woman. But his dick had liked the feel of her. And now, just the memory made him twitch. He half turned to go back in, but at that moment, a cab came around the corner and his hand

lifted automatically.

Thirty minutes later, he let himself into the house. It was quiet, which sort of amazed him and worried him in equal amounts.

Gary and Angie were old mates from his early army days. They'd all enlisted together. Angie had joined as an alternative to a stay in a young offenders' institute. Gary had signed up because even at the early age of seventeen, he'd already realized that he loved blowing things up and was good at it. If Matt got the position he was aiming for in the new unit, he was hoping Gary could be appropriated. Gary was a sergeant and had been busted down to corporal more times than Matt could remember. Angie had left the army a few years back—she couldn't take being told what to do by a bunch of arseholes. Now she ran an advanced driving school, teaching bodyguards and the like how to make a fast getaway.

He was aware they both saw him as some sort of success story. Someone from the ranks making it to officer status, blurring the lines that had once been unpassable. A hope that the arseholes wouldn't always be in charge—that was how Angie had put it. They wanted him to succeed almost more than he wanted it himself. Gary had offered his babysitting skills so Matt could make an appearance tonight—he reckoned Matt needed to mix more with the other officers. And he'd volunteered Angie's help because after all, she was a girl, and everyone knew girls loved kids. Except Angie.

As Matt stepped into the sitting room, they were both seated on the sofa, dazed looks on their faces, surrounded by chaos. It was a look he was familiar with from previous babysitters. And nannies. And really, anyone who came into contact with his niece. Angie was a pretty brunette and usually as tough as shit, but she'd obviously met her match with Lulu.

He cleared his throat and they both jumped.

“Did everything go okay?” he asked when they remained silent.

“Define ‘okay,’” Gary said.

“Nobody died?” Did he sound hopeful?

Gary snorted. “I like your definition. And don’t worry, your little angel is fine.”

Matt almost smiled at the description, but not quite. Sadly, Lulu was as far from an angel as it was possible to get. Matt knew little about children, but he was pretty sure that if they were all like Lulu, the human race would have died out long ago.

“She’s a monster,” Angie said, getting to her feet and wiping her hands down her jeans. “She never stops. She’s the Terminator crossed with the Energizer Bunny. Never again.”

He listened for any sounds from upstairs. “She’s stopped now.”

“Gary bribed her.”

“What with?”

“My chocolate.”

“She’s not allowed chocolate.”

“Hah. You don’t get to make the rules if you’re not here.” She grinned. “I may have also promised her a puppy.”

Christ, that was bad news. Lulu had become fixated on dogs after meeting a very friendly Alsatian in the park last weekend. He didn’t like to think of the chaos Lulu

and a puppy could make of his once-orderly life.

“Come on,” Angie said to Gary. “Let’s get out while it’s safe.”

“You need a wife,” Gary said.

They’d both made the suggestion before. A good, respectable woman, who would make his chaotic life run smoothly, and cozy up to the other officer’s wives. Make him fit in. They’d even come up with a list of possible candidates, including his commanding officer’s daughter. That was never going to happen.

“Actually, no sane woman would put up with this,” Angie scoffed. “He needs a prison warden. And maybe a padded cell.”

He wanted to defend Lulu but somehow couldn’t make the lies come out of his mouth.

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It was probably his fault—he'd hardly provided an ideal home life for his niece. Lulu deserved better than what he was giving her. Especially after what happened to her parents.

He rubbed a hand across his scalp. He'd tried, but six nannies in eighteen months did not give continuity. And his job took him away for extended periods of time. And that would only get worse if he got this new position. And he wanted that position, had been working toward it for years. Jesus, his life was out of control and he hated that.

Gary punched him on the shoulder as he went out. "Good luck tomorrow."

He hopefully wouldn't need luck. The job—field command for a brand new, quick-response anti-terrorist unit—was just about his, and this last assessment a mere formality. He hoped.

After closing the door behind them, he leaned back against it. Maybe he did need a wife. For some reason, an image of the blonde from the club flashed up in his mind. But if he did go that route, he'd have to think with his head, not his dick.

In the meantime, he had a new nanny starting in the morning. She was expensive and came with the highest of recommendations. The agency assured him she had experience with difficult children. He hated the idea of Lulu being labeled as difficult so early on in her life, but apparently six nannies said otherwise.

He returned to the living room and methodically put everything away. He hated mess. Always had. The kitchen next—it looked like one of Gary's bombs had gone off.

Finally, everything was in its proper place and he headed up the stairs.

He opened the door just a crack and peered inside. Lulu was asleep in her cot bed, her blond hair splayed out across her pillow. As if sensing his presence, she rolled over in her sleep. He held his breath, but she just made a noise that sounded like “Woof” and settled again. Was she dreaming of puppies?

Chocolate was smeared all over her face and various other surfaces. He had an almost uncontrollable urge to go clean her up, but he knew from experience that if she woke now, she wouldn’t sleep again. At least not for a long time.

She would have to wait until morning. And the new nanny. God, he hoped this one worked out.

...

Darcy jumped off the bus. She hadn’t felt up to driving in the rush hour traffic. Her hands were shaking. Christ, she hadn’t felt this nervous since... In fact, she’d never felt this nervous. Not even before a major MMA tournament. Back then, she’d had the buzz of adrenaline, she’d felt alive. Now she just felt sick.

Summer had crept into her bedroom in the early hours and laid an outfit on the bed. She was wearing it now, and—like last night’s dress—it was not her typical style. But they were following a plan here. A plan she hadn’t been happy about, but which Summer and Regan had assured her was her best bet for success.

“We love you just the way you are,” Regan had said. “But you can come across a little bit scary.”

“First impressions are so important,” Summer added. “Just get through that first meeting, and after that, once he’s got to know what a truly...nice person you are, then

it won't matter. He'll see past the..." She waved a hand in Darcy's general direction.

Darcy disliked pretense of any kind. But she was willing to bow to their better judgment. So today she was wearing a black pencil skirt, a white button-down blouse that covered her tattoos, and luckily, black flats. So at least she could walk. Her hair needed cutting, and without gel it flopped onto her forehead. It gave her a softer look. She'd left off her nose stud and wore small hoops in her ears. Her fingernails were unpolished, free of her usual black varnish. She looked...hopefully nice.

"And smile," Regan had said.

"Try not to look so fierce," Summer suggested.

She growled, and then smiled through gritted teeth, which made Summer giggle. She was so goddamned happy, and she wanted Darcy to be happy as well. Whatever it took.

Lastly, she had a black bag slung over her shoulder, which contained the report on her brother-in-law.

She had the address memorized. From the information Nate had collected, she knew Captain Matt usually left the house at nine o'clock. It was half past eight, but maybe she'd get lucky and find him already gone.

Don't be a wimp.

She paused outside the gate and studied the house. It was smart. In a nice neighborhood; the sort of place where families lived. A semi-detached, with a red door and a small, neat garden out front. A boring house.

After wiping her hands down her skirt, she pushed open the gate and walked slowly

up the driveway. At the front door, she took a deep breath—I can do this—and pressed the bell.

It sounded somewhere inside the house, and she heard footsteps coming her way. She swallowed and gritted her teeth.

Whatever it takes.

The door opened. And there he was, and her heart started racing.

She'd never gone for the military type. She didn't like the clean-cut look. But Captain Mathew Peterson, in uniform, looked like some sort of fantasy guy. For the first time, she had an inkling of sympathy for her sister. She'd never understood her infatuation with Steven Peterson, but if he'd had half the charisma of his brother, it was at least a little understandable.

He was staring at her with narrowed eyes. "It's you." He shook his head then opened the door wider. "Did you know who I was last night?" Not waiting for her to answer, he gestured for her to enter. "I'm guessing not. It doesn't matter. Come in."



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She stood for a moment, having absolutely no clue what was happening.

“Ms. Prescott, isn’t it? Are you going to stand there all day? You’re late, which means I’m late. Even though your agency phoned, I can’t have this becoming a habit. I like punctuality.”

At that moment, a wail and a bang came from inside the house.

“Shit.” He turned and strode down the hallway.

Darcy stared after him for a few seconds and then followed him into the house. She was getting an inkling of what was going on. Obviously, he’d mistaken her for a nanny or a babysitter or something. What sort of man left a two-year-old with someone they’d never met before?

He disappeared through a door and the wail came again. “Lulu wants Matt.” The words were followed by a loud banging.

Whoa.

Darcy stopped short, her heart racing even faster. That was her niece in there, who she’d never seen before. The child was her only link to Emma. She gnawed on her lower lip. She should have introduced herself. But he’d hardly given her a chance. Now she couldn’t resist; she just had to see for herself.

She took the last few steps and stood in the doorway. Her gaze fixed on the toddler strapped in the highchair across from her. She’d been expecting a baby, but Lulu was

a little girl. And the moment Darcy's gaze landed on her, the world shifted and then stopped. When it started again, it was changed forever. This child was her only family. She'd seen photos of herself at the same age, and the resemblance was uncanny. Without a hint of childish chubbiness, Lulu had pale blond hair, a pointed chin, and dark eyes, slightly tilted—like Darcy's. Darcy was one-quarter Japanese, thanks to her maternal grandfather. He was the one who had introduced her to martial arts; he'd had a friend who ran a dojo. He'd first taken Darcy there at the age of four, when she'd apparently been driving her mother crazy with all her excess energy. Darcy had loved it and never looked back.

“Matt not go!” The words were accompanied by more banging—the plastic dish on the wooden table top—it was full of some sort of yellow gunge which splattered onto the table and the floor and Lulu.

“You know I have to, Lulu. But I'll be back soon.”

“Nooooo!”

Darcy resisted the urge to put her hands over her ears. How could so much noise come out of something so small?

He ignored it, crossed the room, and picked up a briefcase.

“Matt!” Lulu's face was screwing up now, everything crumpling. She threw her spoon. It hit him in the chest, then fell to the floor. He picked it up automatically, placed it in the sink, and wiped the yellow gunk from his jacket with the air of a man who'd done it many times before. Lulu dropped the bowl, her little hands formed into fists, and she thumped the table, screaming.

Seriously impressive.

Matt ignored it. How could he be so heartless?

He came to a halt in front of her. “I’d meant to show you the house,” he said. “But I really am late. But I’m sure you can cope—the agency said you’re the best. So just find your way around. I’ve left notes as to what she eats and her schedule over there.” He waved at a counter, then without another word, he was gone.

She heard the front door bang.

For a second there was silence and she exhaled. Was the worst over?

Then the little girl glared at her, opened her mouth, and screamed again. Louder this time.

What the hell was she supposed to do? Before prison, the idea of a children had never entered her head—probably because she’d never come close to meeting a man she wanted that sort of commitment with. Since she’d gotten out, she’d bought a couple of books on babies but hadn’t read them. It had seemed too much like tempting fate. Which all meant...she knew nothing.

Lulu screamed again. Her face was turning puce. Surely that couldn’t be healthy.

“Maaaatt!”

Darcy put her hands on her hips, faced off against her niece, and roared, “Quiet!”

Lulu went silent. She blinked. Opened her mouth. Closed it again.

Darcy took a tentative step closer. Then another. It was stupid to be scared of something so small. Really stupid.

“Hello, Lulu, I’m your Aunt Darcy.”

And the screaming started again.

...

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:10 am*

He'd been in meetings all day.

And the results were not all good.

First off, they'd offered him a desk job with the unit. He didn't want a crappy desk job. He'd been in on this project from the start. It was understood—he was to be second-in-command in charge of the field operations. Out there with them. In the field. Not behind a desk. His commanding officer had pointed out that those plans had been before his change in circumstances.

Lulu.

He'd replied that his “change in circumstance” made no difference. He had finally convinced them he was up for the job, and they'd promised it was his. But he needed to get his house in order. It had been noted that he'd taken more time off than was normal. They'd allowed him compassionate leave while he sorted things out after his brother's death, but the general consensus of opinion was...things should have been sorted by now.

He'd been based in the UK for that time, but working long hours setting up the new unit and the inevitable trips abroad always seemed to take longer than his nannies expected.

They didn't sign up for 24-7, one of them had told him as she handed in her notice.

Christ, he hoped this one lasted.

He'd been in too much of a rush that morning to really process the huge coincidence that his new nanny, and the girl who'd got his dick hot and hard last night, were one and the same.

He didn't believe in coincidence. It made him twitchy.

In a break between meetings, he'd even phoned the agency to check that the excellent nanny they had told him they were sending was actually the one that had showed up. They had assured him that Ms. Prescott had phoned in soon after she had arrived and confirmed she was on site with Lulu. Which relaxed him a little.

And as he drove home, he finally admitted to himself the small flicker of excitement. He was very aware of how much time had passed since he'd been with a woman. But she was the first who had got through to him since his brother's death, when his life had taken a turn for... It would be unfair to Lulu to say "for the worse." Even thinking it made him feel guilty. But he'd never intended to have a family. He liked order, and Lulu was chaos personified. But sometimes you had no choice. He'd made a promise to his brother. Steven had been concerned with securing Lulu's future. Had he had some portent of what was to happen? With their parents and sister across the world in Australia, Lulu's only other relative was an aunt who was apparently totally unsuitable.

But it was fair to say, while he'd not exactly put his life on hold—his career was moving forward in the direction he wanted, his dream job close at hand—his personal life had shuddered to a standstill.

Last night was the first time he'd even thought about sex. And he'd woken up that morning with a raging hard-on. He'd jerked off in the shower, closing his eyes and remembering the feel of her against him. When he'd opened the door that morning and seen her standing there, he'd been gobsmacked. Almost speechless, he'd retreated to cursory instructions and gotten out of there fast.

He sent up a silent prayer that Lulu had been good—or at least not a total monster—and hadn't scared off his new nanny already. He couldn't believe how much he was looking forward to seeing her again.

Hell, was he going to be one of those clichés who fell for the nanny?

Though there was no law against it.

He was deep in some fantasy where Ms. Prescott thought Lulu was an angel, had somehow brought order to chaos, and she also fancied him like mad. She'd stay late, and after Lulu was tucked up in bed, she'd suggest a nightcap, and they'd sit on the sofa and her hand would...

Jesus, he was pathetic.

He pulled up in front of the house and switched off the engine.

Just be cool.

The place was quiet as he entered. No screaming, which was unusual. Everything looked to be in place. The kitchen was spotless and empty of people.

He finally found his niece playing some sort of game on the floor in the living room. She glanced up, said, "woof,"—he guessed that was doggy language for hello—and went back to her game.

Matt turned his attention to the woman and the smile froze on his face.

A stranger was seated on his sofa. A pretty woman, probably around his age, slender with full breasts beneath a pink T-shirt.

She got to her feet as she saw him, her eyes widening. “Captain Peterson?”

“Matt,” he said automatically. Who was she? What had happened to his Ms. Prescott?

She took a step closer and held out her hand. “Hi. I’m Diana Prescott. I’m sorry I missed you this morning, but Lulu’s aunt said you’d had to leave.”

Okay, this was making no sense.

He took her hand and shook it. “Lulu’s aunt?”



## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:10 am*

A small frown formed between the woman's eyes. "Darcy. She said you'd had to leave for a meeting. I'm sorry about that. My car had a flat. It won't happen again. The agency did phone, didn't they?"

"Yes, they phoned. And no problem. What time did you get here?"

"Nine o'clock."

Half an hour after he'd left. Aside from his little sister, Lulu only had one aunt. Darcy Butler, a woman with a tendency to violence, who had recently spent time in prison for attacking his brother—Lulu's father. He was quite aware she'd been trying to get in touch with him, and he'd told his lawyer that there was no way that would happen. He'd presumed, from what Steven had told him about her, that she was just going through the motions. That she wasn't the type to want to have anything to do with children.

So what did she want?

Maybe money? Or perhaps she just wanted to make trouble. Steven had hated the woman, saying she'd tried to break up him and Emma.

She'd been at the club last night. How the hell had she even known he was going to be there? Because he no longer believed this had anything to do with coincidence. He'd have realized that this morning if he hadn't been in such a rush. Then again, she hadn't looked like the woman his brother had described. Last night, she'd been more conservatively dressed than most of the other women at the club. The same this morning—she'd looked more like a nanny than the vicious MMA fighter his brother

had described.

“Captain Peterson?”

He realized he’d been silent for a long time. “How long did she stay?”

“For about an hour. She played with Lulu while I tidied the place up.” She frowned. “Is everything okay? I normally wouldn’t let anyone into the house without your express permission, but she was here when I arrived, so I presumed...”

He shook himself. “No, everything is fine. Look, there’s something I need to do. Can you stick around for a while? I’ll pay you overtime, of course.”

“No problem. I can stay a couple of hours if that’s enough.”

“Wonderful.” He crossed the room, bent down and kissed Lulu on the forehead. “I’ll be back in a little while, angel.”

She stared up at him then her face crumpled. He hurried away and was closing the door as the first wail erupted.

Once alone, he allowed his anger to rise.

How the hell dare she creep around here, pretend to be someone she wasn’t? That was why she’d been watching him last night. It had nothing to do with being attracted to him.

He pulled his phone out of his pocket and found his lawyer’s number. When he was put through, he asked, “Can you give me an address for Darcy Butler?”

Goddamn fucking stalker.

### Chapter Three

Matt glanced at the paper gripped in his hand. This was definitely the address his lawyer had given him. He'd been expecting a residential area, probably a rundown one. Steven had said that Darcy Butler was into all sorts of bad things—drugs, and God knows what else.

His fury had risen on the drive over here. Then he hadn't been able to find a parking space, and his temperature had shot up even further. He'd ended up having to park ten minutes away and it was eating into his two hours. Though what he had to say to Darcy Butler would not take long. Stay the hell away from me and Lulu.

He'd come to a halt at what he thought was the right place. He glanced around—not a residential area at all, but a wide, prosperous-looking street lined with businesses. The one in front of him was a gym, but a smart one, with a big glass window—the sort of glass you couldn't see through—with Butler's Gymin black letters above the glass door. So he was in the right place. It just wasn't what he'd been expecting, and that knocked him off balance.

After pushing open the door, he stepped into a light, airy reception area. There was a counter across the wall across from him and a blonde sat behind it. She wore a black polo shirt with Butler's Gymin on the breast pocket, and she had a polite smile on her face.

“Can I help you?”

He took a step closer. “I'd like to see Darcy Butler.”

“Is she expecting you?”

“No.”

“Take a seat. I’ll call through and let her know you’re here.”

“I’d rather just go through.” He didn’t want to give her any warning. He’d rather catch her by surprise, the way she had him. “I’m her brother-in-law,” he added when the woman looked doubtful.

“Oh. Well, go on in, then. She’s in the main room, sparring. Through there”—she waved a hand at a door off to the side—“and first on the right.”

Matt strode across and pushed open the door, finding himself in a corridor with several doors leading off. He took the first and entered a large room. There were probably about fifteen people, some working on punching bags around the edges, but most just standing, watching the couple in the central ring. They were doing some sort of freestyle mixed martial arts. Matt had been trained in hand-to-hand combat himself, but this was a whole different level. Almost like an art form.

For a second, he didn’t recognize her; she looked totally different from the woman he’d met that morning. She was dressed in black leggings and a black tank top that left her flat midriff bare and showed off the red and black ink of tattoos snaking down her left arm. Her blond hair was no longer smooth but spiked up, and she wore a stud in her nose and a fierce expression on her face.

And she was fucking hot. If he’d been attracted to her the night before, it was nothing compared to the heat that zipped through him now. And that just pissed him off even more.

Deep down, he’d always had a hankering for bad girls. Maybe that’s what he’d

sensed in her last night, a hint of what she was really like. It was the one aberration in his orderly existence. And he'd always ignored that hankering, because that's not what he wanted his life to be about.

She was barefoot, and she moved with grace and strength, whirling, kicking out, moving fast, so a fine sheen of sweat glowed on her pale skin. Her opponent was a man half a foot taller than her and twice as wide at the shoulders, with dark skin and dreadlocks. But despite his extra size, she was more than holding her own. In fact, she was winning, and the man was falling back from the continuous assault.

Matt came to a halt below the ring. He wanted to stop the fight, because watching her was doing weird things to his insides. At the same time, he couldn't make himself move. He swallowed, then shifted. There wasn't an ounce of fat on her—she was all lean, graceful limbs. She'd gotten her opponent against the ropes now and wasn't letting up. Then she glanced down, and her gaze locked with his. Her eyes widened, and she stopped for a moment. Her opponent took advantage of her distraction, pushed off from the ropes, and swiped her legs out from under her so that she crashed to the floor.

Matt stepped closer, but then stopped himself. And waited. He could see the rise and fall of her small breasts.

Her eyes blinked open. "Shit," she muttered.

Her opponent had come to a halt above her, staring down, a frown on his face. "What the hell happened? You never let me get the drop on you. Are you okay?"

She pushed herself onto her elbows. "I'm fine. I just got a little distracted." Her gaze shifted sideways to settle on him, but she didn't meet his gaze. The man looked at him, eyes narrowed, then held out a hand to her. She ignored it and pushed herself to her feet. She crossed to the corner of the ring and picked up a towel from the ropes,

wiping her face, no doubt giving herself time to decide what to say, how to defend what she'd done.

Finally, she climbed out of the ring and came toward him. Her opponent followed, like some sort of bodyguard. As she came to a halt in front of Matt, she turned to him. "I've got this, Sam."

"You sure?" His dark gaze flicked suspiciously between the two of them.

She gave a shrug. "This is Emma's brother-in-law."

"The asshole's brother?"

What the hell did he know about Steven?

"Yeah," she answered.

"Then maybe I should stay."

"IsaidI could handle it." Now, she sounded pissed.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:10 am*

The guy pursed his lips but gave a nod. “I’ll just be over here. Call me if you need me.” He turned his attention to Matt. “Lay a finger on her and you’ll feel the consequences. Got me?”

Why the hell would he lay a finger on her? Did he look like the sort of man to hurt a woman? Hell, no. But before he could defend himself, Sam had already turned away. The guy was very protective. Was there something between him and Darcy? He didn’t like that. And he hated that he didn’t like it. She was nothing to him. And once this meeting was over, they would never lay eyes on each other again. It didn’t matter who she was seeing.

Her eyes were blank, dark like bitter chocolate and tilted at the corners. Lulu’s eyes, he realized with a start of shock. Her skin held an ivory tint, her cheekbones sharp, her chin pointed—again an echo of Lulu. A stud pierced the side of her nose. This was the woman Steven had described; edgy and tough. Though beneath the toughness, he detected an air of vulnerability. Then it was gone, her eyes hardened, and she folded her arms across her chest, an image of sheer belligerence.

“What sort of asshole lets a complete fucking stranger look after his kid?”

For a moment, the words didn’t make sense. He’d been all ready to blast into her, and her attack knocked the words he’d prepared out of his head. “I thought you were the nanny.” Then he couldn’t believe he’d actually tried to defend himself.

“And you hadn’t even met her? You hadn’t interviewed her? Found out if she was suitable? If Lulu liked her?”

“I—” He broke off his words. He’d been about to defend himself again. “You had no right to come around my house and pretend to be someone you’re not.”

“I didn’t pretend. You were in such a goddamned rush to get out of there, you almost dragged me in. You had no clue who I was. You didn’t ask for ID. I could have been a serial killer.”

“Instead, you’re a very violent woman with a history of mental instability.”

“What?” She shouted the word, and around them, the room went quiet and still. All eyes turned their way. Sam hurried across, but she made a cutting motion with her hand, and he stopped and went back to whatever it was he’d been doing—albeit slowly. And his gaze remained fixed on the two of them.

Matt returned his attention to Darcy. Her lips were a tight line, but as he watched, she seemed to visibly take control of herself and her locked muscles relaxed.

“I do not have a history of mental instability. If your brother told you that, he was a goddamn liar as well as a goddamn asshole.”

“Oh, yeah. Then what was last night about? You must have been watching me. Following me. You know how messed up that is?”

She shifted on her bare feet, a flicker of unease in her eyes. “I didn’t follow you.” She gave a little shrug. “I just had someone find out where you would be.” Then the unease was gone. “I wouldn’t have had to if you’d just talked to me. I’ve been trying for two months. But I keep getting fobbed off by your stupid lawyer.”

He took a step closer and she held her ground. “That’s because I don’t want to talk to you. I don’t want to see you, and I don’t want you anywhere near Lulu.”



“Why?”

Was she crazy? “Because you’re not a fit person to be around her.”

This time he knew he’d gotten through to her, and a stab of something—guilt maybe—jabbed him in the gut. But what the hell did he have to feel guilty about? He was only telling her the truth. She looked away for a moment, as if she didn’t want him to see what was in her eyes. Then she looked back. “You know nothing about me.”

“I know enough. I just came here tonight to give you a warning. Stay away from me. Stay away from Lulu. Otherwise I’ll go to the police. I understand you’re on parole. I could make things very messy for you, and you’ll be right back inside, where you no doubt belong.”

Without another look, he spun on his heels and headed for the door. For some reason he didn’t want to define, he felt like a complete shit. He wasn’t in the wrong here. He was pushing the door open when a hand came to rest on his arm, and he went still. Her fingers were long and slender, her nails short and unpainted. He turned slowly to face her. For a second, her expression was unguarded, and he saw pure hatred in her eyes, far beyond what their encounter warranted. Maybe she was unstable.

“You think you know me?” she asked. “Because of something your brother told you? Well, let me ask you something—how well did you really know your brother, Captain Peterson?”

The question caught him by surprise. The truth was he hadn’t known Steven that well. They’d not been particularly close as children and then five years with a few thousand miles between them had caused a deep divide they’d never really tried to overcome. Maybe he should have made more effort.

When he remained silent, she shook her head. “I have information about Steven you need to see.”

“What information?”

She gave a shrug. “I’m not going into that now, because I think we both need some time to cool down. But believe me—you’ll want to see it. And if you don’t, then I think it’s time to get a lawyer of my own involved.”

“Are you threatening me?”

She blew out her breath then swallowed. “Just meet me tomorrow morning, and I’ll show you. There’s a café across the street. Nine o’clock.” She bit her lip. “Please.” It sounded like the word was strangling her. “It’s important.”

He shook off her hand, turned away from her, and was through the door before she could say another word.

### Chapter Four

Darcy stirred her coffee. He wasn't going to come.

She felt like shit, but then, she hadn't slept. Because she'd messed up. Again. She shouldn't have lost her temper. She should have tried to be nice. Though she had said please—that word had nearly killed her—however contrary it was to her nature. But she'd been churning all day since she'd met Lulu. And then there he was and...

The truth was, she'd convinced herself that all she needed to do was check that Lulu was safe and happy. Then she would have done her duty to her sister, and she could relax. She hadn't intended to be part of Lulu's life—though actually, that wasn't quite the truth. She didn't feel she deserved to be part of Lulu's life. If she hadn't screwed up that day with Steven, if she'd behaved in a more rational manner, then she would have been there for her sister. And Lulu would have had a mother to care for her, not some messed up ex-fighter, who hadn't a clue how to tell one end of a baby from the other.

Emma had turned her back on her, siding with her husband. But Darcy knew her sister would have come to her senses eventually and seen Steven for what he was. And Darcy would have been there to help her get away from him. Start a new life. Instead she and her sister had been estranged. She hadn't seen Emma since the court case. She wouldn't have even known about Lulu's birth if Sam hadn't told her. Sam had known Emma well; her sister had often come to the gym to meet Darcy, and he was fond of her, though their friendship hadn't survived Emma's marriage. Among his other attributes, Steven had been a racist bigot. It was one of the reasons he'd disliked Darcy so much, and had done his best to drive a wedge between her and

Emma. Because in Darcy, their Japanese heritage was clear, and he hated any reminder that his wife had mixed blood.

But ultimately, Emma had forgiven her. Shortly before the accident, she'd written to Darcy, asking her to make sure Lulu was okay if anything ever happened to her. Had she had some sort of premonition?

Why the hell hadn't she left the bastard?

So Darcy had been determined to check that her niece was safe and happy, and then she'd planned to back out of her life. Because she was trouble and no good to anyone.

But from the moment she'd set eyes on Lulu, she'd experienced a connection she hadn't even imagined was possible. It tugged at her heart, and from that point on, everything had changed.

Now she couldn't walk away. She needed to see her niece again, just be a small part of her life. She didn't intend to make a nuisance of herself.

She'd had a go at Matt Peterson last night about leaving Lulu with a stranger, but really, he was probably doing the best he could. Lulu looked healthy and happy. And Darcy had talked to the nanny. The woman was well trained and came from the best agency. It must be costing him a fortune and she knew from the report Nate had drawn up that Matt wasn't a wealthy man. All he had was his captain's salary.

But he'd pissed her off.

And she'd lost her temper. The story of her life.

Plus, he'd been so angry that she'd had a little frisson of concern—maybe he shared more than looks with his brother. Maybe he had a disposition to match. In which

case, she owed it to her sister, and her niece, to somehow get Lulu away from him. Though she had no clue what that would involve. She was hardly in a position to take on a kid, even if she wanted to. She was on parole, for God's sake.

This morning, she'd made no concessions to her appearance. She'd dressed all in black to suit her mood, black jeans, a black T-shirt and Doc Martens. What was the point? He wasn't coming. Clearly, he believed the load of crap Steven had told him about her. Mentally unstable? She almost wished the bastard was alive so she could kill him.

She glanced at her watch. Nine o'clock exactly.

Something made her look up. There he was, right on the dot. He spotted her at the table and weaved his way toward her. He wasn't in uniform this morning but looked immaculate, in gray pants and a white button-down shirt. Even his shoes were shiny. Hair combed, cleanly shaved. He looked...perfect. He stopped by the table, and she looked up and into his blue eyes.

"I didn't think you'd come," she said.

"I wasn't going to."

"What changed your mind?"

He shrugged and sank into the chair across from her. A waiter appeared, and Matt ordered a coffee. "You want anything else?" he asked her. They were being so civilized. She hadn't even touched her drink yet, so she shook her head. He sighed. "It occurred to me that we need to finish this. I have the feeling that unless we're clear, you're going to keep coming at me. And I don't want that. I want you out of our lives. So what's it going to take?"

Was he trying to buy her off? Her temperature rose with her temper. “You think you can pay me to get out of Lulu’s life?”

“We just need to settle the price.”

He was amazing. “You don’t have enough money.”

“How do you know until you ask?”

“Because you live on your salary and right now, most of that goes to pay nannies and babysitters.”

“How the hell do you know that?”

“The same way I knew you’d be at that club the other night. I had you investigated.” What the hell was she doing? He was here, and she was supposed to be getting him to listen to her, not winding him up. Actually, he didn’t even have to listen to her. He just had to read the report lying on the table between them.

At that moment, the waiter arrived with his coffee and he bit back whatever words were hovering on his lips. Darcy took a few deep, calming breaths. She could do this. “I’m sorry. But I knew nothing about you, and you refused to speak to me. I had to find a way to get you to listen. Whatever your brother told you about me, it’s not the truth.”

“Why would he lie?”

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:10 am*

She shrugged. “He didn’t like me. He didn’t want Emma to have anyone she could turn to. Your brother was a violent man. He drank, flew into rages.”

“You’re lying.”

But there was a hint of confusion in his expression. She felt a flicker of hope. Reaching out, she slid the file across to him.

“What’s this?” he asked.

“I’ve got no proof of what Steven did to my sister, but I thought, if I could show you what sort of man he was, then maybe you would at least listen to me.”

He was going to refuse. A tic jumped in his cheek.

Pick it up.

At last he did. She held her breath as she waited. Nate had gotten the report while he’d still been on the force. It was a list of disciplinary actions against Steven Peterson. He’d been on report numerous times, excessive use of force, drunk on duty. At the time of his death, he’d been on his last warning. Another infringement and he would have been kicked off the force. There was also a coroner’s report stating that Steven had been three times over the alcohol limit when he’d crashed the car, killing himself and her sister. That had been kept quiet, never coming out at the inquest. The force looking after its own?

He stared at the last sheet for a long time. “I don’t believe this.”

“It’s true.”

He shook his head.

“Look,” she said, “I don’t want...” But she trailed off because he wasn’t listening. He pushed back his chair and rose to his feet, the file still clasped in his hand. Then without another word, he turned around and walked away.

Darcy stared after him. She half rose, meaning to follow, make him listen. But in the end, she sank back into her seat.

Even if she caught up with him, he wouldn’t hear her out now. For the first time, she saw it from his point of view. All she’d cared about was getting him to listen to her side of the story. But she’d just revealed to him that his own brother had been little better than a murderer.

That was bound to take some getting used to. She just had to hope that once it all sank in, he would come back and give her a chance.

...

Matt had been walking for fifteen minutes before he realized he was heading in the opposite direction of his car. He kept walking anyway. At first, his mind was blank, because he really didn’t want to think of the contents of the file in his hand.

Finally, the thoughts started creeping in and he knew he couldn’t put off thinking about it anymore. He passed a café and backtracked, went inside and found a corner booth. When the waiter came, he ordered a coffee and sat staring at the closed file until the cup was placed in front of him and he could put it off no longer.

He opened the file. There was a card stapled to the corner—Darcy’s name and a cell



phone number. He went to the back page first. The report from the accident that had killed his brother and his wife outright. Steven had apparently been three times over the legal alcohol limit at the time of his death. In Matt's mind, that was little better than murder. He'd only met Emma once, at the wedding, which had been a small affair, held in a registry office, and with no celebration afterward. Darcy hadn't been present. Emma had been totally different from her sister. Only the blond hair was the same, though Emma's had been long and silky straight. Her eyes were blue and her face rounded. She'd seemed sweet and very much in love with Steven. That was four years ago. Now she was dead.

He read the other reports. Most were from job disciplinary actions. Steven had been suspended twice.

Could this all be a fabrication? Surely he would have had some inkling if it were true.

He got out his phone and looked up the number of the station where Steven had worked. He'd met his brother's partner at the funeral—he'd seemed a decent man. When he got through to the switchboard, he asked to speak to Detective Sergeant Sands, gave his name, and said it was a personal matter.

The man picked up almost immediately. "Captain Peterson. How can I help you?"

"I just wanted to ask a few questions about my brother."

"What kind of questions?"

He thought for a moment. "What sort of man was my brother?"

"What's this about? Steven's dead. What difference can it make?"

"I don't know if you're aware, but I'm Steven's daughter's guardian."

“Lulu, yeah, I heard. How is she?”

“She’s good. But I’ve been approached by her maternal aunt who wants access to her. She was the one woman Steven wanted nowhere near Lulu, so I refused to see her.”

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“You’re talking about Darcy Butler? Christ, Steven hated that woman. And not without good reason—she broke his arm. He said she’d humiliated him, swore he would get his own back, and I suppose he did. She spent time for that.”

“She just gave me a file. It says Steven was drunk at the time of the crash. That he had numerous disciplinary actions against him. I need to know if it’s true.”

The man was silent for a moment. “Look, what can I say? He was my partner, but he had issues, and when he drank, he was a downright mean bastard.”

“So the file is true?”

“I’m guessing so. I’m sorry. A lot of us thought the Butler woman got a rough deal, but the force looks after its own, and Steven’s wife backed him up.”

“Thank you.” He ended the call and sat staring at the phone. He could contact the coroner’s office and check the report, but he knew what he would hear.

How could he not have known this?

He tried to remember his brother as a kid. Had there been anything then? He’d had to stop him a couple of times from bullying some younger boy who lived down the road, but that was normal, wasn’t it? Just boys being boys. And Steven had always had a temper. But the truth was, Matt had distanced himself from his family as soon as he was old enough. He’d loved his parents, but they’d driven him crazy. They’d split up and gotten back together five times before he was seventeen. The emigration to Australia had been after the last reconciliation, when they’d decided a total change of

scene might keep them together, and be exciting. They hadn't been back to the UK since, and Matt had seen them four times in those years. He had a ten-year-old sister, Hannah, who he hardly knew, born in Australia. He talked to them regularly—he found them easier to like at a distance. But then his mother had always said she was sure he'd been swapped in the hospital at birth. She could never have produced such an organized child.

Had they known any of this? He stared at his phone. Should he?

He'd gone into combat and not felt as terrified as he was now. It would be early evening over there, so his mother would still be awake. Finally, he hit the number and waited as the connection was made.

His mother answered straight away. "Sweetheart, how are you? Is anything wrong? Is Lulu okay?"

"Lulu is fine," he answered. "I just had something I needed to ask you."

"What's that?"

Christ, how was he to put this? Maybe he should have thought it through a bit more before he'd called. But it was too late now. "Did Steven have any...history of violence?"

She was quiet for what seemed like an age.

"Mom?"

"Why are you asking now?"

"Someone gave me a report stating that Steven had been drunk at the time of the

crash. Other stuff as well. Disciplinary actions at his work.”

“Who? Why now?”

“Emma’s sister. She wants to see Lulu. I’d refused—Steven said she was violent, unstable. I’m beginning to believe he lied.”

“We never heard anything. We thought everything was fine.”

Something in her voice caused his suspicions to stir, churning in his stomach. “But you expected to hear something?”

“Steven was in some trouble before he left here. A fight. He nearly killed a man. We managed to settle out of court, but the arrest was on his record. They turned him down for the police academy here. You remember—he always wanted to be a detective, even when he was a little boy. That was why he returned to the UK. Everything seemed to be going so well.”

“And out of sight, out of mind.”

“That’s not very kind, darling.”

No, it wasn’t, but he wasn’t feeling very kind. How the hell had he not known this? But he was as much to blame. He’d made no effort to get close to Steven since he’d returned to the UK. Had he somehow sensed his brother’s innate violence and steered away? If he had made that effort, would Emma be alive now? Could he have stopped Steven? He knew the idea would haunt him.

“When he married Emma, we thought he’d calmed down. Found what he wanted in life.”

“Emma’s sister claims he was”—he could hardly get the word out—“abusive.”

“Oh, no. I’m sorry. The poor girl. She always seemed like such a sweetheart.”

“And Steven as good as killed her. He was drunk. Lulu was in the car with them. She’s lucky to be alive.”

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“We didn’t know, Matt. We thought he was fine.”

What was he supposed to say? It was too late now for anything he said to have any meaning, or do any good. “How’s Hannah?” he asked instead.

“She’s good.” He could hear the relief in his mother’s voice that he’d changed the subject.

“Give her and Dad my love. I’ll talk to you soon.”

He ended the call and closed the file in front of him. He should phone Darcy. It looked like he owed her an apology, but he couldn’t face her right now. He needed some time to think things through, get his head straight. Instead he got out the card with her number, punched it in to his phone, and sent her a text.

We need to talk. Same time and place tomorrow.

In the meantime, he’d work himself up to that apology.

He had a flashback to watching her fight last night, all hard-assed attitude, the tattoos and the nose stud. She was hardly what he’d want as a role model for Lulu. But he no longer felt he had the right to deny her access to her niece.

Christ, what a mess.

And he hated messes. He needed to find a way to get some order into the situation. Bring everything back on track.

### Chapter Five

This time, he was there waiting for her at the same table. But then she was five minutes late. There had been a last-minute situation up at the gym, and Sam, her manager, hadn't arrived yet, so she'd had to sort it out.

She'd wanted to be on time, to be in place and waiting when he turned up—she wanted to be in control of the coming meeting. Also, she was guessing that punctuality was high on Captain Mathew Peterson's list of positive attributes, and she was going to do her best to impress him. To make this relationship work. Not that they had a relationship or anything. But she had given herself a stern talking to. No more losing her temper.

She was in the right, and he presumably must see that now or he wouldn't have arranged this meeting. All the same, she planned to try for a little humility.

She was interested to see how that would work.

His gaze burned into her as she crossed the road from the gym. She'd even worn a dress, black, sleeveless to show off her tattoos, ankle length—though split up the side to show her black Doc Martens, embroidered with blood-red roses.

There was a look in his eye she couldn't quite fathom. In all that had followed, she'd sort of forgotten that first night. He'd wanted her. She had a flashback to the feel of his erection pressed against her belly, and heat washed through her. She pushed the memory away; it would only confuse an already difficult situation.



He was out of uniform again, but looking just as sharp. He stood up as she approached. An officer and a gentleman. She waved at a passing waiter. “Can I have a coffee, please?”

“Sure thing, Darcy.”

She sat down in the seat across from him, her gaze drawn to the file on the table between them. Then she waited for him to speak.

“Tell me what happened,” he said. “Why you went to prison.”

It wasn’t what she’d been expecting—an apology perhaps—and she thought for a moment. How much should she tell him? All of it, probably. She took a deep breath and started from the beginning.

“Emma met your brother when she was seventeen. Our parents had been killed in a plane crash a few months earlier. She was still reeling from that, and I think she saw Steven as someone strong she could lean on. And I suspect he loved that.”

The waiter put her coffee down, and she tossed him a smile.

“Go on,” Matt said.

“I didn’t like him from the start. And the feeling was mutual. But if Emma was happy, then I was good. But one night, she phoned me up crying. I went around. He was gone, but she had a split lip and a black eye. I wanted to go after him, but she begged me not to, said he’d just had too much to drink and he hadn’t meant it. I couldn’t believe what she was saying. I tried to make her promise not to see him again, but she wouldn’t.”

“Why the hell would she stay? Why didn’t she report him?”

“I don’t know. I’d have killed the bastard.” She and Emma had always been opposites. Emma had been a sweet and placid child. Darcy had been a monster, into everything. Despite that, they’d been close growing up. But the death of their parents had hit Emma hard. Hell, it had hit Darcy hard as well, but maybe she’d fared better because she’d felt responsible for her sister. She hadn’t allowed herself to fall apart. “Anyway, it went on. Occasionally she would call me, and I’d go pick her up, get her away until he’d calmed down. They got married and she didn’t even tell me. She probably knew I’d try and talk her out of it.”

“I was at the wedding,” he said. “They seemed so happy.”

She shrugged. “I’m sure your brother could be very charming when he wanted to be. Plus, it gave him access to Emma’s money—we both had an inheritance from our parents—so of course, he was happy. I wasn’t invited. Maybe they thought I’d be some sort of specter at the feast.”

“There was no feast.”

“No.” That’s how Emma had excused not inviting her. She’d said it had just been a small affair at the local registry office.

“So how did you end up in prison?”

“A few months after the wedding, Emma called me, telling me she was pregnant. She was so goddamn happy. And she said Steven was happy. A ‘changed man,’ she said. Hah.” The familiar hatred flooded her system, tying her insides in knots. “A week later, she phoned me in a panic. Steven was drunk. She’d locked herself in the bathroom, but he was banging on the door. By the time I got there, he’d broken it down. He was beating the crap out of her and she was three months pregnant. I totally lost it. He ended up with four cracked ribs, a broken arm, and two black eyes. But he was drunk out of his head and just wouldn’t stop coming.” She took a sip of her

coffee. “I think it was the humiliation that hit him the hardest—that a woman had beaten him up. Among his other attributes, your brother was a misogynistic pig. He swore he would make me pay, and he did.”

“Didn’t your sister stand up for you? Say it was self-defense?”

“She came to see me. But she told me she had to stand by him. He was her husband, the father of her baby. He’d lose his job, and he’d sworn he wouldn’t drink again. He promised he would change.”

“So she let you go to prison for protecting her?”

Darcy looked away for a minute. At the time, she’d believed she would never forgive Emma. She’d been so furious. Through the whole court case, she’d been completely disbelieving, then afterward, she’d wrapped herself in a blanket of bitterness at the system that had protected Steven because he was one of them. She’d even started to hate her sister for being so goddamn stupid. In the end, Regan and Summer had pulled her out of it. At first, she’d tried to ignore them, especially Summer, who she’d believed was like Emma. A victim. And at that point, she wanted nothing more to do with saving anyone. But Summer was no victim. She was just about the nicest person Darcy had ever met—someone whose life had taken a wrong turn, but had a core of pure steel. With their help, Darcy had realized she had to forgive her sister, or she’d never be able to forgive herself. She’d written to Emma, told her she loved her and was there for her.

She’d received one letter of reply with a photo of Lulu and a plea that if anything should happen to her, she would make sure Lulu was safe and happy. Then a week later, she’d gotten the news that Emma was dead.

“Darcy?”

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She realized she'd been silent for a long time. Lost in her thoughts. "Yes. She let me go to prison. But I did a lot of reading while I was inside. About abusive relationships. I couldn't understand it, but I did forgive her. Then she died."

"I'm sorry."

"So am I." She turned her gaze to him, studied him. "You look so much like Steven."

"That's why you were staring at me the other night." He shook his head. "I thought you fancied me. Instead you hate me."

Did she? "I don't hate you," she said. Though she wasn't totally sure that was the truth. "I don't know you. You remind me of Steven and that makes me...uneasy."

His eyes narrowed and something flashed across his face. "You think I'm like that"—he waved a hand at the beige file lying between them—"you think I'm like my brother? That I would hit a woman?" She could almost see the heat rising inside him as he gritted his teeth. Was he going to lose his temper? Maybe he was like his brother, after all. She prayed not. But what did she know? And perhaps she needed to—needed to know what he would do when he was pushed.

"Why not?" She gave a shrug. "How do I know any different? You seem to spend a lot of time...angry."

He studied her for a moment, his gaze flicking from the file to her face. She raised a brow, let her skepticism show in her eyes, as well as a little of the hatred she'd felt for his brother. She could almost sense his inner battle. Maybe he still hadn't come to

terms with what his brother had been and was fighting the need to defend him. In the end, all he said was, “I’m not like my brother.”

“How the hell do you know that? From what I can tell, you know nothing about the man he really was.”

He shifted on the seat. “We weren’t close.”

“Really?” She filled her voice with scorn. “Yet he left his only child in your care.”

“There was no one else. He knew I’d do the right thing.”

She gave him a long cool look. “And do you always do the right thing, Captain Peterson?”

He ran a hand through his short hair, frustration hardening his features. But as she watched, he regained control of himself and the tension left him, his shoulders relaxing. “I try. And it’s been hard. I never wanted a family. Never expected one. But I’ve done my best—and it’s difficult with my job—but I think Lulu’s doing okay. And she’s not...the easiest child.”

She forced away her own tension. Because if she used her logical side, she believed him. There was something so controlled about Captain Mathew Peterson. With his perfectly smart clothes, his short, neat hair; she couldn’t imagine him losing control, letting go. It was her illogical side that couldn’t accept the similarities to a man she’d hated with every inch of her soul. And if she was honest, there was something else—because he hadn’t been totally off the mark with his comment about her fancying him. Beneath the surface, a very unwelcome attraction lurked, knocking her off balance. She couldn’t rid herself of the memory of how his hard body had felt against hers. It had just been too long. That was all. She was desperate.

“I’m afraid Lulu’s more like me than Emma.”

“She’s a fighter, all right.” He sighed. “So where do we go from here? What is it you want? I won’t give up custody. And to be honest”—he allowed his gaze to wander over her, and she held herself still—“you don’t come across as the maternal type.”

She didn’t like that. But she wasn’t sure why, because she’d never thought of herself as maternal, either. She’d never considered children before. And now, she’d built up walls around herself that she wasn’t willing to breach. No way would she let herself care for someone else. She was obviously crap at the relationship thing. She’d lost everyone she’d ever cared about. But never again.

“I’m not. I don’t want custody. At first, all I wanted to do was check that she was okay. Make sure that you weren’t like Steven and she was safe.”

“And you do believe that?”

“Yes,” she said grudgingly. “But everything changed when I saw her. I think I’d been in some sort of denial. She’s my only family, and I’d like to be part of her life.” She held her breath. She was quite aware she wasn’t anyone’s idea of a good influence. “Look, Captain—”

“Call me Matt,” he interrupted.

“Matt—I know I might not look like the perfect aunt, but give me a chance. I’ll never do anything to hurt her.”

“You own the gym?” He nodded across the street.

The question took her by surprise. “Yes. I told you, both Emma and I were left money by our parents. The gym was owned by a friend, and he wanted to retire. And

it's been successful. I'm solvent, if that's what you're trying to ask. The money's been coming in over the last few years, and I haven't had the chance to spend anything. I can help with Lulu, if you need it."

"I don't need help."

Had she offended him? Hard luck. She told it the way it was; she wasn't going to pussyfoot around him.

"Are you going back in the ring?" he asked.

It wasn't something she knew the answer to. Sam was pushing her to go back. But she'd changed. Somehow, she'd lost her competitive edge. Lost her faith in herself. She'd failed Emma. She knew that. "I don't know. Does it make a difference?"

"I don't know." He echoed her words. "I have no right to keep you from Lulu. She deserves all the family she can get. But...I don't know you. So we need to take things slowly."

“I can do slow.”

“Can you?” He sounded skeptical. “I’ll talk to my lawyer, get something drawn up.”

“Do we need that? Can’t we just sort it out between us?”

“I prefer to do things properly. I’ll try and get us a meeting for tomorrow. I won’t keep you waiting too long.”

“Okay.” She could feel a smile tugging at her lips. For the first time in an age, she felt optimistic. This was all she had wanted ever since she’d gotten out. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me. Morally, I don’t have a choice in this. But don’t get me wrong—if I decide you’re a bad influence, you’ll be out of her life.”

She gritted her teeth, hating that he believed he had the right to judge her. Why did she think that if he had a choice, she would never see him again?

“You’re not my perfect choice, either. But it looks like we’re stuck with each other.”

He placed some money on the table and pushed himself to his feet. “Until you mess up.”



### Chapter Six

The lawyer was a woman around Matt's age, in her early thirties. Darcy was predisposed to dislike her. She'd been the one standing between her and Matt all these weeks, refusing to even see Darcy. Matt was already there when she was shown into the office. Why wasn't she surprised? The man's middle name was probably "punctual." Matt Punctual Peterson. It wasn't as though she was late. She was right on time.

They both glanced up as Darcy entered, similar expressions of disapproval passing over their faces. She told herself she didn't care. She was perfectly respectable, in black jeans, a long-sleeved T-shirt, and her Doc Martens.

Matt was in uniform today, and he looked good. If she were the sort of girl to swoon over soldiers, she'd probably be swooning. Luckily, she wasn't. At least, she didn't think so. She'd never had much to do with them. He stood—perfect manners—and came toward her. "Darcy, good morning. Let me introduce you. This is Elinor Saunders, my lawyer."

The woman rose to her feet. She wore a dark gray suit and a white silk shirt. Her blond hair was long and pulled back from her face, and her makeup was discreet. She was the total opposite of Darcy. And no doubt, the sort of woman Matt usually associated with. Darcy had never cared what she looked like in the past, what impression she made or what people thought about her. It was part of her new insecurities that she even noticed their disapproval.

She came to a halt in front of the desk and held out her hand. For a second, she

thought the lawyer wasn't going to take it, but after a moment's hesitation, the woman gave her a limp handshake.

"Please take a seat."

She sat down in one of the upright chairs in front of the desk. Matt waited until she was seated and took the chair beside her. She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. He was watching her but looked away as he caught her gaze.

"Right, let's get started," the lawyer said. "I've told Matt that I think he's making a mistake."

Bitch.

"Elinor..." Matt's tone held a rebuke.

The woman gave a shrug. "I just think you're making a mistake. With Ms. Butler's record, it would be perfectly reasonable to deny access. I told you that."

"And I told you there are extenuating circumstances."

"Which you've refused to disclose to me."

Darcy glanced at him. So he hadn't told her about his brother. What did she think about that? To be honest, she had no clue. He returned her gaze. "I'll tell her if you insist."

Obviously, he didn't want people knowing what a bastard his brother was. Better they thought she was some sort of violent criminal. She told herself she didn't care. But inside, a little niggle of hurt nudged at her. She shrugged. "As long as I have access to Lulu, I really don't give a toss what your bitch of a lawyer thinks about me."

Did his lips twitch at that?

Elinor's mouth tightened into a thin red line. She wasn't happy. Oh dear.

"I've suggested that Matt get you to sign a release form stating that you have no intention of trying for custody."

"I don't want custody."

No one took any notice of her comment.

"Lulu has no money," Elinor said. "You would get nothing if you did gain custody."

"What about the house?" Emma had bought the marital home with what was left of her inheritance. She'd presumed it would be in trust for Lulu. Maybe not.

"Your sister signed the house over to Steven when they married."

"What a surprise."

"And it was mortgaged when they died."

"Again—what a surprise."

"So you see, there would be no financial gain to your pursuing a custody battle."

Was the woman deaf? "I told you I don't want custody."

"I'm just making the facts clear."

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“Draw up your goddamn form. I’ll sign it. Is that it?” She hoped so, because all sorts of feelings were churning up inside her. Feelings she didn’t want to put a name to.

“No. We need to discuss the terms of access. I’m recommending supervised visits only.”

“Supervised by who?”

“Me,” Matt said. “At first anyway. Later maybe with the nanny.”

She bit her lip, fighting her rising temper. “What the hell do you think I’m going to do?”

“That’s what we don’t know. But you have a record of violence.” The lawyer gave a little smile and another shrug. “I’ve discussed it with Matt, and what I’m suggesting is a one hour supervised visit per week. The most suitable time is between nine and ten o’clock on a Saturday morning. The visit will take place at Matt’s home, and you will not take the child from the house.”

“Are you kidding me?”

“On the contrary, I assure you I’m very serious.”

Darcy turned to Matt. “This is bullshit.” She got to her feet. “You know what? I don’t think I’m needed here. Why don’t you and your girlfriend just draw up your papers and bring them around for me to sign. But I want an afternoon a week. And we’ll be going out.”

She turned and headed for the door.

“Darcy,” Matt called, but she didn’t turn around until she reached the door. She felt about to explode, and that would not make a good impression. No doubt his stuck-up lawyer would see it as reason to deny her rights.

She took a deep breath and plastered a smile on her face before she turned to face them. “Yes.”

He gave a shrug. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for it to go this way.”

“What way did you mean for it to go?”

“I just wanted everything straight between us. So we both know where we stand.”

“Well, now we know. Just draw up the goddamn papers, and I’ll sign them. And it might be a good idea if we kept contact to a minimum. Because you’re starting to piss me off.”

And she slammed the door behind her.

Though the truth was, she wasn’t pissed off. She was hurt. And she hated that.

...

“You still want to go ahead with this?” Elinor asked. “The woman is clearly unstable. Why don’t you let me draw up an injunction instead? I don’t think the courts will argue it. And she hasn’t a leg to stand on. I can make it so that if she comes near either you or Lulu she’ll be in violation of her parole and back in prison, out of your hair for good.”

Matt rubbed the spot between his eyes. He had a headache. And he suspected the feeling nagging at his mind was guilt. He knew the scorn in Darcy's eyes as she'd left had been totally justified.

He hadn't revealed the truth about Steven to Elinor.

He'd told himself that it was for Lulu's sake. He didn't want it generally known what an asshole his brother had been. It was better for Lulu if she could believe her father had been a good man.

But in reality, he was ashamed of Steven. And ashamed that he hadn't known more about his brother. Maybe he could have gotten help for his problems. Instead Matt had kept his distance. Not gotten involved. "Draw up the papers giving her what she wants."

"What?"

"Steven was an abusive bastard who regularly beat up his wife. Darcy went to prison for trying to protect her sister. She doesn't deserve this."

"You know that for a fact?"

"Yes. She might not be the sort of role model I want for Lulu, but she has a right to see her niece, and I won't stand in her way. Now draw up the papers. I want to take them with me. I'll wait outside."

### Chapter Seven

The man Darcy had been sparring with—Sam, she had called him—was at the reception desk when Matt pushed through the door into Butler’s gym nearly two hours later. He suspected Elinor had kept him waiting on purpose. She hated to be in the wrong. He’d dated her for a while a couple of years back, but she’d ended up wanting more than he was willing to give. Maybe he should ask her out again. She’d been on Angie and Gary’s list of suitable wives. Someone who would help look after Lulu, and at the same time, be an asset to his career. But somehow, he couldn’t see Elinor as the maternal type. He had a brief image of Elinor in her immaculate suit, feeding breakfast to Lulu. Though he had no doubt she would be a great boost for his career. Everything an up and coming officer needed in a wife. Smart, beautiful...

Sam had a welcoming smile on his face, which disappeared when he recognized Matt. “What do you want?”

“To see Darcy. She’s expecting me,” he added, though he had no idea whether that was true. She’d said she wanted as little contact between them as possible, but she must know that wasn’t going to happen if she was serious about getting to know Lulu. And he was beginning to believe she was serious.

Sam’s expression was mutinous. Maybe he wasn’t going to get through to her.

“Your family has hurt her enough,” Sam growled.

It was odd, but she seemed too hard to be hurt. Then he remembered her expression as she’d left the meeting. Yes, she’d been pissed off, but beneath that had been a hint

of vulnerability. She'd spent nearly three years in prison, when she'd been guilty of nothing more than protecting her pregnant sister. She was bound to be bitter. She'd also lost her only sister just a few years after her parents. She'd taken a lot of knocks in her young life; it was no surprise she'd developed a hard veneer.

"I have no plans to hurt her. She wants to see Lulu, I'm trying to arrange that."

"What the hell is there to arrange? Just let her see the goddamn baby. She's her aunt."

He had no intention of talking about his private business with a stranger. At the same time, he didn't know how he'd get past him without a fight. While he was sure he could take the man, he was also sure that fighting would not improve his relations with Darcy. And going forward, they had to find some way to co-exist. So he took a deep breath and forced a conciliatory smile. Sam didn't seem impressed.

"I'm not going to hurt her. This"—he waved the envelope with the documents inside—"protects Darcy as much as it does me. I don't know her, but I suspect we're opposites and it's not going to be easy. I'm signing this as well. It means I can't turn around in a couple of weeks and deny her access."

Sam stared a moment longer then gave a grudging nod. "She's in her office, along the corridor, last door on the left."

He nodded back and headed off. It was early evening and the place was buzzing. Mainly men, but through a window he passed, he saw some sort of aerobics class with about twenty women. The gym was clearly doing well. The last door on the left was closed, and he paused for a moment then knocked sharply.

"I'm not in. Go away."

He recognized Darcy's voice.



He tried the door. The handle turned and he pushed it open. The room was big, empty but for a desk, a couple of chairs, and in the corner, a punching bag hanging from the ceiling.

Darcy had changed into black sweats and stripped off her long-sleeved T-shirt to leave her in a sports bra that bared her midriff and arms. He'd told himself that the attraction from the other night had been nothing but an aberration. Now he stood transfixed as fire shot along his nerves, settling in his groin. Her breasts were small but full, and he could see the shape clearly, her nipples hard little points against the black bra. The sweats hung low on her hips, and her belly button was pierced, a silver hoop with a little black jewel. He'd have sworn that body piercing did nothing for him, but his dick twitched in his pants, and he was glad he was wearing a jacket that at least covered him.

Christ, this was inconvenient.

Darcy was facing him, her eyes narrowed, a fierce scowl on her face as she punched the bag, a series of rapid hits with her bare fists. She glanced up as he entered, whirled round, sending the punching bag swaying with a kick to its center.

She grabbed it between her arms to stop the movement, then rested her forehead against it for a moment. Was she getting her thoughts together, ready to face him? Fight him? He had an instant image of them grappling on the floor, rolling, until she was under him, arms pinned above her head, their lower bodies melded together. And he got even harder.

This had the potential to be seriously embarrassing.

But she didn't look at him as she turned away. After picking up her T-shirt from where it lay on the desk, she wiped the sheen of sweat from her forehead and tossed it back.

She stood with her back to him, and he could see the rise and fall of her shoulders gradually decreasing. It seemed like an age, but was probably less than a minute, until she turned around. “I thought we were done for the day?”

He translated that to mean she’d seen quite enough of him. He held up the file. “You said to bring the papers to you.”

“I didn’t mean now, now.”

He shrugged and held out the envelope. “I like to get things organized.”

A grimace crossed her face. “I noticed.”

He guessed she wasn’t impressed by his organizational skills. She wiped her hands down her thighs then held one hand out. He handed her the envelope. He glanced around and took a seat in front of the desk, expecting her to take the one opposite, but she just pulled the papers free, dropped the envelope on the desk, and read them while pacing the room.

He stared out the window as she paced his way, then stared at her ass as she walked in the opposite direction. He couldn’t help himself. She had a great ass. She was long and lean, but there was a beautiful curve from her waist to her hips, and her ass was small and tight. He was tempted to slip his hand down her sweats to feel just how hard she was. He stretched out his legs to ease the pressure in his pants. His dick was almost painful now. He wanted to bend her over the desk, strip those pants down her hips, cup her ass with his hands, slide them lower—

“Captain Peterson?”

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He shook the image from his head, cleared his throat. “Call me Matt.”

She huffed out her breath, waved the papers in his direction, and then dropped them on her desk. “These seem fine. Very fair.”

She sounded as though she was surprised. He suspected she would always have difficulty separating him from his brother, and he was the least likely guy in the universe to get into her pants. Which was probably just as well.

Unsuitable was an understatement of gargantuan proportions.

At the same time, it pissed him off just a little. He’d spent his life doing what he believed to be the right thing. Making his little part of the world a better place. Now to be judged, and found wanting, for something he hadn’t even done, stuck in his gut. Made him want to prove her wrong. Or kiss her senseless so she had no room in her head for anything other than how soon could they fuck.

Where had that thought come from?

He made to stand up, but then decided, considering the state of his arousal, that it wasn’t the best idea. “Sign them, and I’ll be out of here.”

“I bet your lawyer didn’t approve.”

“I think she believes you’re a threat to my person.”

“What, little old me?”

“Anyway, she does what I tell her.” He took a deep breath. “I know you think I should have told her about Steven—”

She cut him off with a wave of her hand. “Maybe. But only until I was out of there and could think more clearly. She’s very irritating, your lawyer. Actually, I think it’s better for Lulu if it isn’t general knowledge what her father was like. It will be hard enough for her to grow up without him, but to realize he was a bastard who all but murdered her mother would be too much of a burden for any kid.” He winced. “Maybe one day we’ll decide to tell her, but not for a long time, and not until she’s ready.”

“That’s a very...mature attitude.”

“I’m twenty-six, hardly a kid.”

“You don’t mind people thinking you’re...violent?”

She grinned. “Actually, I quite like it. And who’s to say I’m not? Your brother deserved what he got. But I enjoyed beating the crap out of him, so maybe I am.” The smile turned her face from interesting to beautiful. “I’ve always loved fighting.”

“And are you happy that I’m not like my brother?” He didn’t know why he was pushing this. But he needed her to admit it.

She just shrugged. “Almost happy. I think Lulu will be safe with you. That is, if you don’t bore her to death with all your rules and regulations.”

He went still at her words, indignation holding him in place. No one had ever called him boring before. He was a fucking dangerous, special forces, kill-you-with-one-hand-tied-behind-his-back guy. Boring? He pushed himself to his feet and took a step closer to her, but she just stared up at him with that cocky smile on her face. Her

hands were shoved into her back pockets, pushing her breasts out. And her nipples were still hard, sending fire through his blood. “You think I’m boring?”

“Hell, yeah. Conservative, stuffy. You like the rules. I like breaking them.”

He had an underlying niggles that she was purposefully winding him up, whether it was to see if he lost his temper and thus proved he was like Steven, or whether she just wanted to...wind him up. Because he’d pissed her off earlier. He took a step closer until they were only inches apart, and his nostrils filled with the scent of hot woman, sending the last of his blood supply to his dick.

There was certainly none left to feed his brain and remind him what a bad idea this was.

They were poking each other with metaphorical sticks. Partly, he knew, because it was a way for them both to get a measure of each other. They were both fighters at heart. But there was something else. Even if she would never be honest enough to admit it.

The attraction had been there at that club the other night, sizzling between them. The difference was he’d seen no reason not to give in, see where it would take them. He’d expected a hot and heavy one-night stand and no regrets. Whereas she had already known exactly who he was. No amount of attraction could take them anywhere. There was too much history between them. And there was Lulu to consider. They needed to keep their relationship nice and impersonal. For Lulu’s sake.

Even so, it was there, the desire sizzling through his blood, setting his nerves on fire, making him want to overthrow the rules. Take her here, so hard and fast that she’d never forget the feel of him inside her, never again mistake him for any other man. Certainly not his brother.

They'd been silent for a full minute. She was watching him, but her breathing had picked up, and a little pulse beat frantically against the pale skin of her throat.

"So you think I'm stuffy?" he asked softly.

"Yeah." But the word lacked conviction.

He reached out, waiting for her to back away, but she held her ground. He trailed his knuckles down over the bare skin at her waist, and she flinched but still didn't move, then slid them across her flat, almost concave belly. She was so still, she might have been turned to stone. He caught the little ring in her navel between his fingers and thumb and tugged gently.

"I like this."

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:10 am*

“You do?” Her voice was breathy. “I’m surprised.”

“Why? Because I’m conservative?”

He didn’t give her a chance to answer. Instead he lowered his head and kissed her. The action took him by surprise as much as it did her. He wasn’t one for spontaneous gestures. And for a second, the logical part of his brain tried to put the brakes on. Just at that moment, her lips parted, and he was lost. And that logical part of his mind shut down completely.

His hand came up and he cupped the back of her neck, pulling her harder against him as he deepened the kiss, pushing his tongue into the warm cavern of her mouth. She tasted of heat and spices and sweetness that made his head swim. His spare hand went to her waist and encountered bare flesh.

She was tall; they fit well together, and he kissed her long and deeply until they both ran out of air and came up gasping. He caught her gaze and saw something flash behind her eyes. So he kissed her again before she could do the sensible thing and back away. For a second, she was tense against him. He slid his hand up her bare back, under the edge of the tight sports bra, and his palm splayed against her, pressing her toward him, molding her to the length of his body, so he could feel her breasts and her belly hard against his erection. He groaned into her mouth.

There was too much between them, and he released her for a second, tugged open the buttons on his jacket and shrugged out of it, dropping it to the floor. He had a sense that he had to move fast, before she came to her senses and remembered that she hated him. Or, if not hated him, then hated a man who looked very like him and was

responsible for what had to have been the worst time of her life. He ripped open the buttons on his shirt, grabbed her hand and pressed her palm against his heart.

Her eyes were hot and heavy as she stared at him, then slowly she stroked her hand down over his chest, her nails raking his nipple, then lower until her fingers grazed over his erection straining against his pants. Her hand rubbed against his hardness, sending pleasure shooting through him, tightening his balls, and he groaned again.

He pushed against her, backing her up until she hit the table behind her, then his hands went around her, gripped her ass, and lifted her so she perched on the smooth wood. He parted her knees and pressed in closer, shoving up against the junction of her thighs, and she returned the pressure, pushing back against him. He toyed with his fingers along the seam of her sweats, then, overcome by the need to discover if she was as turned on by this encounter as he obviously was, he shifted his hand upward, slipped it in the waistband of her pants, and found the silky curls between her thighs. She went still but made no move to stop him—thank Christ. He pushed lower, and she shifted to give him better access. Finally, one finger slipped between the folds of her sex, hot and wet. Her lashes fluttered closed as he ran his finger lower, finding the entrance to her body, so welcoming, and he pushed inside. A small moan escaped her lips, and he added another finger, stroking the inner walls of her pussy, loving the way her muscles clenched. He imagined his cock deep inside her, held in a tight grip, those muscles pulsing around him.

He moved his fingers, out of her and upward, finding the small swollen nub. A squeak escaped her as he grazed it lightly with the pad of his finger, and again so her hips lifted off the desk.

Soon.

He wanted to see her breasts, but he needed her to come first. Because after that, he was going to be deep inside her, and he reckoned he'd last all of about five seconds.



He stroked again.

“Harder,” she muttered.

“Ask me nicely.”

“Please,” she said, though her eyes narrowed. Then she lowered her back to the desk, arched her spine, widened her legs and she gave herself to him. He shoved his hand farther down her pants, cupping her sex. He crossed two fingers and pushed them inside her hard, at the same time he pressed down on her clit with the pad of his thumb, massaging the little nub. She was writhing on the desk top, and he held her still with his free hand cupping her breast, squeezing as his thumb rubbed hard circles over her. Her head went back and a small scream escaped her, and he slid his hand higher to cover her mouth.

He pressed harder and felt the heat of her release, the contractions against his fingers as she came for him.

Goddamn stuffy?He didn't think she would call him that again.

He pulled his hand free, as she came up on her elbows, then held her dark gaze while he licked the sweet salty taste of her from his fingers. Her cheeks were flushed, her lips slightly parted and, tattoos and all, she was the sexiest thing he had ever seen. Now he wanted her naked, her hands all over him, and he wanted to be deep inside her. She pushed herself up onto her elbows, then sat up, reaching for his belt buckle. Her hands fumbled a little as she unfastened it, then her fingers moved to his pants.

Soon.

His dick was so hard now, he might explode if she touched him—hell, when she touched him. This was happening. Nothing was stopping it. He didn't care how

inappropriate, he needed this like—

“Darcy Butler, put that soldier down.”

The words, spoken from behind him, stopped him short. He went instantly still. So did the hand so close to his dick. Fuck.

This wasn't happening. It was a good job he wasn't armed, because he might have shot whoever had interrupted.

He closed his eyes for a count of ten, then took a deep breath and stepped back. Darcy was watching him, one eyebrow raised, hand still outstretched. Her eyes held a sleepy, post-orgasmic look. At least one of them was satisfied. She gave a rueful shrug, and her hand dropped to her side. Her lips twitched as she studied him. “Maybe not so stuffy after all.”

He glanced down at himself. His shirt had come out of his pants and hung open. His erection still pushed at his fly but was wilting fast. He blew out his breath and tried to tell himself that it was just as well. For one thing, he didn't have any condoms. Gone were the days when he carried one...just in case. He hadn't really thought about sex since his brother died. Why did it have to be this woman who woke his dormant libido? Inappropriate. Inconvenient. And not going to happen.

But Christ, he needed to get laid.

Darcy jumped down off the desk, hitched up her sweats, and moved past him. He buttoned his shirt, tucked it in his pants, and looked around for his jacket. It lay on the floor, but before he could pick it up, someone beat him to it.

He took the jacket from the beautiful brunette and tried not to dislike her on principle. Because she had stopped his one chance of getting inside Darcy Butler. From now on,

he'd be forewarned. Avoid situations that might lead to temptation.

"Hi," she said as he shrugged into his jacket. "I'm Regan Malloy. Darcy's flatmate."

He thought about shaking hands, then remembered where his had been and decided against it. Instead he gave her a brief nod. "Matt Peterson." He recognized her now. She'd been with Darcy at the club that night, along with a pretty blonde.

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“I know who you are. What I don’t understand is what are you doing making out with my best friend on my best friend’s desk. Hmm?” Her gaze flashed between the two of them, one eyebrow raised.

“What do you want, Regan?” Darcy asked before he could come up with an answer.

She grinned. “Sam said you might need help. So I came running to the rescue. And what do I find...” She shook her head. “The two of you are in so much trouble.”

“No, we’re not. But thanks. I’m pretty sure you saved Matt here from doing something he was sure to regret.”

“Really?”

Both of them studied him, and he held himself very still to avoid squirming. He considered denying it, but hadn’t he thought the same thing only seconds before?

“I haven’t known him long,” Darcy continued, “but long enough to know that Matt here”—she waved a hand in his direction—“likes things in their proper place.”

“And his proper place isn’t screwing around on top of your desk?”

“Definitely not.”

“So I saved him from a fate worse than death?”

“You’re a positive heroine.”

He thought about saying something, but what? His brain had turned to mush. Darcy moved past him and picked up something from the floor—the papers he'd brought for signing. They must have been knocked to the floor when he'd put Darcy on the desk. She carried them around the other side, sat down in the chair, and pulled a pen from the drawer. As he watched, she scribbled her signature at the bottom of each page and then held them out to him.

He took them from her, glanced down, and then folded the papers and put them in his pocket.

“Does he talk?” Regan asked.

“Sometimes too much,” Darcy replied. “I actually quite like him when he's quiet.”

Matt decided he was outnumbered. It was time to go. He cleared his throat. “I take it you'd like to see Lulu this weekend?”

“Yes, please.”

“I'll call you with the arrangements.” With a last nod, he turned and walked past the brunette and out of the room. Sam was still at the reception desk as he passed.

“Thanks for that, mate,” he growled, and escaped the building.

### Chapter Eight

“The saying ‘the blind leading the blind’ comes to mind,” Regan said.

It was Friday night, and their weekly catch-up. Even though they supposedly lived together, both Regan and Summer spent most nights with their men. They made an effort to come back occasionally, and Darcy knew that was because they were worried about her.

That was sort of weird. She wasn’t used to people worrying about her. From an early age, she’d been the one to do the worrying. Looking out for Emma. Maybe she’d done too much, turning her sister into someone who needed to be looked after and had misguidedly thought she’d found that in Steven.

They were in a local wine bar, drinking chocolate martinis and talking about the totally alien subject of toddlers. She’d been asking for advice, but honestly between the three of them, they had exactly zero experience with children. And as their communal lack of practical knowledge became clearer, the knots in her stomach tied themselves tighter.

She didn’t get nervous.

And now she acknowledged to herself—she was terrified.

She’d read her books on child care from cover to cover. They hadn’t helped. Apparently, two-year-olds were a sort of combination of mini-tyrants and people-eating monsters. What would she do if Lulu acted up?

They were going to the zoo, which was apparently Lulu's favorite place. What if she got away, crawled into the lion pen, and got eaten? Or was trampled by elephants? Pecked to death by parrots?

The potential for disaster was limitless.

She downed her drink in one go.

"You're looking panicked again," Summer said. "Have another martini." She waved down a passing waiter and ordered another round.

"Maybe it's time to change the subject," Regan said. "From darling little Lulu to her Uncle Soldier Boy."

"And maybe it isn't," Darcy replied.

"Come on, Darcy. You can't not tell us. I was totally traumatized when I walked in on you—sorry about that, by the way. But Sam was worried."

She'd managed to avoid talking to Regan about the situation that day by disappearing into her bedroom and locking the door. She hadn't been ready to talk. Traumatized pretty much described her reaction as well.

She'd known he fancied her that night at the club, though she'd believed he'd gotten over that attraction as soon as he'd discovered who she was. But it wasn't really his actions that had shocked her, but her own.

She hated him.

While she knew it wasn't fair and rational, she couldn't get over the connection and the resemblance to his brother. Or so she'd thought. Then he'd kissed her and

everything had gone tits up, and five minutes later, she'd been on her desk with his hand down her pants.

How the hell had that happened?

But best orgasm ever.

Or maybe it had just been so long since she'd had an orgasm that wasn't self-induced. And it had felt so fucking good.

She pressed her thighs together as though she could bring back a little of that feeling.

"Aw look, she's gone all dreamy," Regan said.

"Leave her alone," Summer rebuked, but she sounded amused.

Great, her friends were so funny. But they deserved to know what was going on. They'd been so supportive. If it wasn't for Regan, she wouldn't have the report on Steven, and without that, she doubted she would have ever gotten Matt's attention.

I don't know what happened," she said. "One minute we were sort of trading insults, and the next he was kissing me. I think he took offense at me calling him stuffy and was trying to prove otherwise."

"And is he? Stuffy I mean?" Summer asked.

"He doesn't look stuffy," Regan added. "He looked hot. Like super-hot."

"I'll tell Nate you said so."



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“Hey, I might be engaged, but that doesn’t make me blind. No, your Captain Matt ishawt!”

Darcy had a flashback to him standing there, shirt undone, with what looked like a truly impressive erection trying to get out. She wanted to see that erection. Hell, she’d wanted to more than see it. She’d craved it deep inside her, where it had no right to be. Even now, just the memory made her all hot and wet and needy. She shifted in her seat and sighed. This whole thing would be easier if he was short, fat, and bald. “Yeah, he’s sort of stuffy. He likes to have rules, and he likes everything set out just so. And I’m...”

“Chaos incarnate?” Regan suggested.

She liked that, though it was probably a bit of an exaggeration. She just didn’t do well within confines, whether mental or physical. It had made prison super hard for her.

“Anyway, it was a bad idea, and it won’t be repeated.”

“Why?” Summer asked.

“Because, while in most things we are total opposites, I suspect neither of us is the happily-ever-after type. And we’re all Lulu’s got, so we need to find a way to get on. Sex will only complicate that. I need to stay objective.” Which meant she’d never get to see that erection for real. Life wasn’t fair. But there were other erections, which came with fewer complications. She glanced around her. The place was busy and there were lots of men around. One of them at the bar caught her gaze and smiled. She looked away. Perhaps she just wasn’t ready for dating yet.

“Maybe you’re right,” Regan said. “And are you convinced he’s not like Steven?”

“I think so. Though every time we meet, I get this overwhelming urge to wind him up. See what it takes to make him lose his temper. But so far, the only time he’s come near to it is when I suggested he might be like his brother.”

“That’s good. What happened to his parents? I take it they’re not around.”

“They’re alive. But they immigrated to Australia when Steven was sixteen—or so Emma told me. Steven went with them but came back five years later. Matt stayed here. He was a year older than Steven and he’d just joined the army.”

“Which would explain why they weren’t close,” Summer said.

“Yes. And Emma told me Steven had a sister born soon after they left.” Another aunt. Maybe one day Lulu would meet her. It would be nice for her to have some other family. But Australia was so far away.

Time to change the subject. “So, what do I do if I’m in the middle of a crowded place and Lulu starts screaming?”

“Run,” Regan suggested.

Definitely the blind leading the blind.

“I have an idea,” Regan said. “I know someone who’s had vast amounts of experience with children.” She pulled out her phone and pressed a number. “Mom, we have an emergency. How do you fancy a chocolate martini?” A minute later she put her phone away. “She’s on her way.”

...

He was nervous.

There, he'd admitted it.

Though nervous wasn't quite the right word. On edge? Wary? Horny?

Don't go there.

He'd been trying not to think about Darcy over the last couple of days. He'd been busy at work, which was good; it took his mind off sex. Diana, the new nanny, was working out well. She was a lovely woman. Lulu liked her and was behaving better than he'd ever known her to. He was also pretty sure Diana was interested in him but too professional to make it obvious. Which made him respect her more. She was the sort of woman he should be seeing.

He had a training exercise coming up in a couple of weeks. He would be away, out of the country for five days. He was hoping she'd stay over. If not, he wasn't sure what he would do. Though that had been part of the arrangement with the agency. He hadn't been on active duty since before Steven died, and he was eager to get back. This new role was something he'd been working toward.

A little niggle of guilt prodded him in the middle. He glanced to where Lulu sat on the floor, her expression concentrated, a small frown on her face as she tried to put a puzzle together.

The work would be dangerous, and he had responsibilities now.

What if he were killed? What would happen to Lulu? He didn't think Darcy would want the obligation of a child full time, despite the effort she'd expended to be part of Lulu's life. He suspected, reading between the lines, that much of that was due to guilt. And because her sister had asked her.

Maybe his parents would step in. He'd half expected them to offer when Steven died. But money was tight, and only his father had made it to the funeral. His mother had stayed in Australia with his sister, and the subject hadn't come up. Maybe he needed to talk to his mom.

Through the window, he saw Darcy walking up the driveway. She was right on time—no doubt making an impression, since he was guessing she wasn't normally the punctual type.

She wore the same black dress she'd worn the other morning. It almost touched the ground. Over it, she wore a denim jacket, and she had flat black boots on her feet, and a big black bag over her shoulder. If it was any consolation, she looked nervous as well. Her lower lip was caught between her teeth.

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They were all going out today. He'd told her when he called that he wouldn't go with them in the future, that he'd allow her some alone time with her niece. But this first time, it was better for Lulu if he accompanied them.

The doorbell rang. Lulu looked up. "Wait here, sweetheart." Did she look anxious? She'd started acting up whenever he left. Diana said it was normal for her age. But that didn't stop him from feeling guilty. "I'll be right back," he said.

Lulu smiled. "Woof."

She was so sweet when she wasn't being a total nightmare.

Darcy had her finger raised to ring the bell again when he opened the door. She dropped her hand and gave him a tentative smile. Her face was free of makeup, though she had a black stud in her nose and long black drop-earrings against her slender throat.

She opened her mouth, closed it, and then licked her lips, pulling his gaze to her mouth. He'd been doing his best to banish the memory of that mouth. Now, the taste of her flooded his mind.

Not happening again.

"I'm scared," she said.

"What?" He'd been focused on getting his wayward thoughts under control.

“I don’t know anything about children. I don’t know what to do.”

He liked her more for the admission. He guessed she wasn’t the sort of woman to admit to shortcomings with ease.

“You’ll be fine,” he said. “When I first met her, she was so small I thought I’d break her if I got too close.”

“I bought her a present.” She shrugged as though uncomfortable. “A couple of presents, actually. I hope that’s all right.”

“I don’t really approve of presents except on designated days.”

That chased the apprehension from her eyes, and they flashed as he’d known they would. “Designated days. Are you serious?”

He was, but decided not to push it. He needed this to go smoothly, and if she called him stuffy again, he might be tempted to prove otherwise. Again. And that was so not happening.

“I’m sure it will be all right this one time.” He thought for a moment. “As long as it doesn’t involve sugar. Lulu and sugar do not mix.”

He led her to the living room and pushed open the door. Lulu scrambled to her feet, her eyes wide as she saw Darcy. Presumably, she remembered her from the other day. “Come and say hello to your Aunt Darcy,” he said, holding his hand out to her.

“Aunt?” she asked. She sounded suspicious.

“She’s your mother’s sister.”

“I has mother?” She blinked up at him.

“Everyone has a mother. Yours just isn’t here any longer. But Darcy is her sister.”

“Lulu want sister.”

This was something new. The nanny had been taking her to a playgroup, and she’d decided that she wanted a sister of her own. He didn’t quite have the heart to tell her it wasn’t on the agenda.

“You wouldn’t want a sister. Not really,” he said. “You’d have to share your toys.”

“Oh.” She thought for a moment. “More toys?”

“Never going to happen, sweetheart.” Her eyes narrowed, and he continued quickly before she could get the bit between her teeth. “Now, say hello to your aunt.”

Darcy crouched down so she was eye level with Lulu. “Hi there. We met the other day.”

Seeing them together like this, the family resemblance was clear. The hair, the distinctive shape of the eyes. There was Asian blood in there somewhere, he was guessing, though Emma had shown no sign of it. She’d been the perfect English rose. Blond, blue-eyed, creamy skin. Both Lulu’s and Darcy’s had a slight ivory tint.

“Hello.” Lulu didn’t sound convinced, and Darcy cast him a worried glance. She really was scared.

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“Now might be a good time for that present,” he murmured.

“Oh, right.” She tugged the bag off her shoulder and delved inside, then brought out a pink wrapped package.

Lulu pursed her lips but took the parcel, shook it. “Puppy?”

“No, not a puppy,” she said.

“Thank Christ,” Matt muttered.

Lulu tore off the paper, and peered at the offering with narrowed eyes. “Lulu not like dolls,” she said.

“Since when?” he muttered. It was an MMA fighter doll in a white judo suit. Cute. It even had short blond hair like Darcy.

“Oh,” Darcy said, then frowned. “I didn’t like dolls, either.” She reached into her bag again and pulled out a second package. She glanced at him as she handed it to Lulu, and he just shrugged. You never could tell with Lulu.

She tore it open, revealing a little outfit identical to the one the doll was wearing. Lulu was intrigued, he could tell.

“You want to wear it?” he asked.

She stuck out her lower lip then looked at Darcy. “No.”



God, she could be a little bitch.

“Then let’s go.”

...

By the time the car pulled up outside Matt’s house, Darcy was as limp and deflated as an inflatable bouncy castle with a puncture. She couldn’t do this. Couldn’t even contemplate repeating the process next week.

Glancing in the mirror, her gaze fixed on Lulu—asleep at last. Or maybe not. The little girl’s eyes were open, and she stared back unblinking, no doubt contemplating her next evil move. Why did anyone do this to themselves? She’d told Matt the other day that she liked chaos. Just not this much.

“Sorry about your dress,” Matt said as he turned off the engine. “And the bruise—she didn’t mean it.” When Darcy didn’t answer, he gave her a quick sideways glance. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. Just wondering how quickly I can get my uterus removed.”

He grinned. “Yeah. I know the feeling. When I got her, she was sort of cute. That lasted a couple of months. Then I got back from a short deployment and she’d learned to move on her own. And Christ, she metamorphosed into the creature of chaos you saw today. Each time I come back, she seems to be that bit more hyperactive. Diana—the nanny you met the other day—says she needs more of a routine, but my life doesn’t work like that.”

Darcy suspected she needed less of a routine, not more. She was too like her; she needed to be kept off balance, or boredom kicked in.

“Lulu tired.”

The voice came from behind them.

“Hallelujah,” Matt muttered. “It had to happen. She’s running on empty.” He got out of the car, and Darcy did the same. Should she just go now? It sort of seemed anticlimactic.

“You want to come in while I put her to bed?” He grinned. “She really is sweet when she’s asleep. Then I’ll call you a cab.”

His words surprised her. He’d been pleasant enough during the day, if a little distant. She’d gotten the impression he was trying his best to not interfere. To let her get to know Lulu. It must have been hard, because it was abundantly clear to her that she was going to have to work on her maternal skills. Which right now were non-existent. Hell, she hadn’t even gotten the presents right.

She had no fucking clue.

“I’d like that,” she said.

She waited while he unfastened Lulu from the child seat and pulled her into his arms, then grabbed the enormous bag with her “things.” How could one little girl need so much stuff? A normal person took less on a two-week vacation than Lulu needed for one afternoon trip. But then, Darcy had seen inside the bag, and Matt had just about every possible scenario covered, including an alien invasion and the end of the world.

She followed him up the driveway, with Lulu watching her over his shoulder. She was fighting to keep her eyes open. Darcy sensed there was an element of possession there. Lulu was seeing her as competition for Matt’s attention, and clearly the little girl doted on her uncle. Darcy wanted to tell her she was welcome to him but didn’t

think Lulu would believe her.

Lulu tugged on his ear. “Lulu want a wolffy.”

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While she'd loved the zoo, the wolves had been her favorites—she'd thought they were big dogs and wanted to take one home. Matt had warned Darcy of Lulu's fascination with all things canine. And apparently a puppy was not on the agenda.

“Wolves aren't pets, sweetheart,” Matt said as he shuffled Lulu and the bag into one hand, unlocked the door, and pushed it open. “They're not like...” He trailed off as if realizing he was digging a hole for himself.

“Puppies?” Lulu finished for him. “Woof.”

“We don't need a puppy,” he said. “We've got you.” He tickled her so she giggled, then yawned and hid her face in his shoulder.

Darcy trailed behind him. He paused at the bottom of the stairs. “Why don't you go wait in the kitchen? There are beers in the fridge. I'll call you when she's down.”

She nodded. Beer sounded like a great idea. She hadn't been this knackered since—hell, she couldn't remember when. A big part of it was mental, not physical. Just trying to stay one step ahead of Lulu had kept her brain shifting all day. She grabbed a bottle of beer from the fridge and rolled the cold glass over her forehead. Then she collapsed into one of the chairs at the table and took a long gulp. So good. She downed the rest of the bottle, thought about getting another, but couldn't get herself to move.

How could something that “normal” women found so easy be so goddamn hard?

Was she missing some basic component?

She rested her chin on her hand as a wave of depression washed over her. She'd wanted this so badly, and she'd failed. Maybe she would be doing Lulu a favor if she backed out now. It would hurt, but perhaps it'd be better for everyone in the long run. She was sure Matt was wondering how he could limit her involvement. She could just help him out and walk away.

But she couldn't do it.

She had no clue why Lulu pulled at her heart so much. Was it just stubbornness?

The door opened and Matt appeared. She'd hardly noticed him all day, her attention taken up by Lulu. He was...smiling. He didn't speak but gestured for her to follow him. She did, trying not to admire his ass as he climbed the stairs ahead of her. He pushed open a door at the top and stood to the side, signaling her to move past him.

She stepped into the room. The light was dim, but she could see the small cot bed. Lulu's eyes were closed at last. And yes, she was sweet when she was asleep. Hard to believe. She made to turn away, but then looked back. Lulu was wearing the judo outfit she'd bought her, and the little fighter doll was clasped in her arms.

"She insisted," Matt murmured from behind her.

Her eyes pricked and she resisted the urge to go hug the little girl—not a good idea. "Aw."

They both tiptoed out of the room, and Matt pulled the door closed behind them. "She also asked me if she could have a nose stud, like Aunty Darcy. I said not yet."

Oh my God, she was going to get all mushy and cry. She didn't cry. Not ever. She got angry or sarcastic or something. Just not weepy. But for the first time, she thought that maybe things were going to be okay. Perhaps Lulu didn't hate her, after all. She

sniffed. “I think I’ll go home now.”

“I’ll call a cab.”

“No need. I’d like to walk.”

She needed to get herself under control before she got home. Just in case Regan or Summer was in residence. Otherwise she would never hear the end of this.

“Thank you,” she said.

“Next week?”

“Yeah. I should be recovered by then.”

### Chapter Nine

“Lulu wants to be a bridesmaid,” Darcy said.

“She does?” Matt appeared a little bemused.

Three weeks had passed since that first less-than-successful day. This was the second time she’d taken Lulu out alone. And while she was quite convinced she was never going to get any awards for her childcare skills, things were going better. Today had been the best so far. But then, she’d had support from Summer and Regan, and Lulu had clearly enjoyed being the center of attention for not just one aunt, but two extra surrogate aunts.

They’d been shopping.

It was something Darcy had resisted for as long as possible. But Summer was getting married in two weeks, and Darcy and Regan were bridesmaids. They needed dresses. Darcy had stated right from the start that no way was she wearing anything even remotely like a traditional bridesmaid’s dress. Certainly nothing pink and nothing flouncy.

The wedding wasn’t going to be a big one, and Summer had said she was welcome to wear whatever she liked as long as she was there. It was Regan who insisted they get something vaguely matching and suitable—she was probably setting a precedent for her own wedding, which wasn’t too far away.

Darcy didn’t think Lulu understood the concept of a wedding, but she did know

something was happening and wanted to be part of it.

“I think she wants to come to Summer’s wedding,” she said to Matt, and gave a shrug. “She’ll probably forget it.”

“And Summer is...?”

“My other flatmate. She’s getting married in a couple of weeks. We went shopping today for dresses.”

Lulu held out her arms, and Matt took her from Darcy. “Come in,” he said.

They’d got into the habit of Darcy coming in, waiting until Lulu was in bed, and saying good night. It was all very civilized...if you ignored the undercurrents.

“So did you get a dress?” he asked.

“Aunty Darcy pretty,” Lulu said.

“It took a while for us to find something everyone was happy with, but we got there in the end.”

The dresses they’d finally agreed on were pale purple, almost gray, strappy and unstructured, floor length. They’d gotten matching flat sandals—she’d refused heels, point-blank. Regan had looked beautiful in hers. Darcy wasn’t sure the dress was quite her.

“Go through,” Matt said, nodding to the kitchen, “I opened a bottle of wine.”

“You did?”



“I thought you might appreciate it.”

“Thanks.”

He carried Lulu up the stairs, whispering something in her ear, so she giggled. Darcy watched until they disappeared—she was starting to recognize the little tight feeling she got around her heart when she saw the two of them together—then made her way to the kitchen. It was spotless, as always. If he cooked here, there was no evidence of it. But an open bottle of red wine sat in the middle of the table, with two crystal glasses beside it.

She sat herself down and poured a glass, then took a sip. It was good, full of flavor, and for a minute she relaxed. Things were going well. The gym was doing great. She’d added some classes since she had gotten out. Some specifically aimed at women; self-defense classes. If she had her way, every woman would be able to defend themselves. Sam had also talked her into a fight, though she wasn’t sure that was where she wanted to go. The only way to succeed was to want it with all your heart. But she’d see how the fight went and then decide if she wanted to take it further. She had to have some sort of aim for her life. Now that she’d gotten what she wanted with Lulu, everything else seemed a little pointless.

Regan and Summer were both moving on. They were so in love, and while it wasn’t what she wanted for herself, she couldn’t help but feel a little as though she was missing out on something.

Regan had told her today that even if she didn’t want to fall in love, she needed to get laid. And maybe she was right. She spent way too much time thinking about sex. And not just any sex. Completely inappropriate sex. With the one man she’d told herself was totally off-limits.

Keep everything impersonal. That was the only way this would work. That didn’t

stop her from remembering what it had felt like to have his hands on her, in her. She squirmed on her seat as heat coursed through her system, then jumped guiltily as she heard his footsteps on the stairs.

No way was she going to let him know the effect he had on her.

She pushed herself up as Matt entered the room. “I’ll go say good night to Lulu and be off,” she said.

“Sit down. She’s fast asleep. You can go up later.” He crossed the room and poured himself a glass of wine. “You’ve exhausted her. She was asleep before she was down. You deserve a drink. Christ, you deserve a whole bottle—that’s no easy feat.”

“Oh. Okay.” She sank back down slowly. He made her feel like a teenager. All twitchy and hot and bothered. A little voice told her she should get out of there. Go have one last look at Lulu and take herself off. Out of temptation’s way.

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Instead, she took a sip of wine and cast him a quick glance. He was in jeans today—more casual than she'd ever seen him—and a white T-shirt that hugged his broad chest, with a flannel shirt over the top, open at the front. She could see the shape of his nipples beneath the thin cotton of the T-shirt. She was ogling him like a pervert, and she looked away quickly, drinking some more wine.

He leaned across and refilled her glass. "Do you want something to eat? I could order a takeaway. I thought we might talk."

She glanced at him suspiciously. Was he going to say this wasn't working? That she needed to back out of Lulu's life? But would he offer her food and then do that? "I'd love something to eat."

"Chinese?"

She nodded, and then waited while he phoned in an order without asking what she wanted. She tried not to let that wind her up. He clearly liked making decisions. And she ate just about everything, so why make waves merely to make a point? Hey, say hello to the new reasonable Darcy.

"What do you want to talk about?" she asked when he ended the call.

"Nothing bad."

That didn't mean it was something good. What could they have to talk about? She went over the possibilities. But really, apart from Lulu, they had nothing else in common. "Go ahead..." she said cautiously.

He pushed his chair out, put his hands behind his head, and did this sort of stretch thing. The movement raised the hem of his T-shirt, revealing a strip of tanned skin. Her gaze fixed on it, quite unable to tear away. He cleared his throat, and she jumped. Was he doing it on purpose, sexually tempting a desperate woman? Did he know she was desperate?

She finally managed to drag her gaze away, focused inward, concentrated on her breathing, and plastered a pleasant smile on her face. It didn't feel in any way natural.

"I think it's going well," Matt said, and she nearly fell off her seat.

"Really?" Her glass was empty again, and she reached across and filled it herself, topping his off at the same time.

"For the first time since Steven died, I feel like I have some sort of control over my life."

"You do?"

"Diana is working out extremely well."

Ugh. The nanny. Lulu adored her. Matt clearly liked her. Darcy didn't know her. She'd only met the woman once, on her first day, when Matt had mistaken her for the nanny. Other than that, all she knew was what she'd heard from the other two. All praise. She sounded like a female version of Matt. Little Ms. Perfect.

That was no reason to dislike the woman.

"I'm pleased." She got the words out somehow.

"She's agreed to move in."

“She has?” And why didn’t she like the idea of that? Not one little bit.

“Just Monday to Friday—she’ll go home weekends—for now at least. We’ll see how it works out.”

“That’s nice.”

He dropped his arms and shifted his chair closer to the table, then picked up his glass and swirled the wine. Took a sip. “You don’t sound happy,” he said, scrutinizing her. Looking for signs of...what?

“I’m supremely indifferent,” she said with a sniff.

His lips twitched. Didn’t he believe her? Had he caught her ogling him earlier?

“It was always in the cards,” he said. “The agency just felt there needed to be a probationary period to make sure it was going to work.”

Something occurred to her. “Can you afford it?”

“I’ll manage.”

“I can help. I have savings.”

“I don’t need your money.”

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Or want it, she guessed. That would be letting her in too far.

“Sorry,” he said, almost making her fall off her chair again. “That came out a little harsh. But we’re fine. I spend almost nothing. The army pays the rent on this place, and there are childcare funds I can get as a single parent. We’re doing okay.”

“So why do you need a live-in nanny?”

“We’ve never talked about my work. I’m not really allowed to.”

“Oooh, super secret?” she asked, more as a joke than anything else.

“A little.”

“Really?” She studied him some more. “I never imagined you fighting or anything. You always look so...tidy. I just can’t see you getting all messy and... Anyway, I thought you were one of those soldiers who...” She shook her head; she had no clue what she was talking about. “Stand around and look pretty.”

He gave a full-on grin then—it made him look younger and...nicer. “You think I’m pretty?”

What was she supposed to say to that? Hell, yeah. But she was trying not to think about it too much. Trying to remind herself that he looked like Steven, the man she hated most in the world. But in fact, the more she saw him, the less he reminded her of her brother-in-law. His eyes were bluer, his face thinner, all lean, hard lines. His lips were fuller. She found herself staring at that mouth as his tongue swiped across

his lower lip.

Shit, get a grip.

“Yeah, total pretty boy.” She tried to make the words come out as a sneer, but it was ineffective. “Anyway, my point was—I somehow can’t see you getting in anything as messy as a fight.”

“Really?”

She shrugged. Was she getting to him? She hoped so.

His chair scraped across the tiled floor as he pushed it back. He rose to his feet. Had she upset him? Was he walking out in a flounce? She placed her palms on the table and pushed herself up so she was facing him. She wasn’t sure why—maybe she needed to be ready for a quick getaway. Or maybe to chase him down...

But he didn’t move away. Instead, he remained, feet planted, while he shrugged out of the flannel shirt then tossed it onto the back of the chair behind him.

“What...” The words dried up in her throat as his fingers gripped the hem of his T-shirt and pulled it over his head, bunching it in his hand.

Oh. My. God.

She couldn’t look away. His skin was tinted dark from the summer just gone. Golden skin, taut over the swell of hard muscle. A light smattering of hair, thickening as it disappeared into the low waistband of his jeans. And he had a tattoo. She would have sworn he wasn’t the tattoo type. But maybe it was an army thing. Some sort of dagger and wings.

What was he doing?

Maybe now was the time for that quick getaway.

As she stared, he turned slightly and pointed to his left arm. There was a mark close to his shoulder, a sort of indentation.

“Sniper bullet in Afghanistan,” he said. “Luckily, I moved just at the right moment, as I’m guessing he was aiming for my head.”

He turned around completely so his broad back was facing her. Wide shoulders tapered to lean hips and a tight ass. Though she was sure that wasn’t what she was supposed to be staring at. She took a step closer, moving around the edge of the table, and her hand reached out, of its own accord. As she trailed her finger down the scar running from his right shoulder diagonally to his spine, his skin shivered under her touch.

“Knife—also in Afghanistan.” He turned back to face her, and her hand dropped to her side. His fingers went to his belt. She could do nothing but watch, dry-mouthed, as he tugged open the buckle, then flicked open the top button of his jeans, then the next so they slipped just a little.

What the hell is he doing?

He was naked from the waist up, except for a set of dog tags on a dark green nylon cord around his throat, and they just made him look sexier. And she had no clue why.

I do not fancy soldiers.

She swallowed, considering a strategic retreat, but stood rooted to the spot.



“This one’s my favorite,” he murmured. Taking a step closer, he picked up her limp hand from her side and placed her palm against the ridged muscles of his belly. So freaking hot. With his hand on top of hers, he pushed it inside the waistband of his jeans. What the hell...? Then she felt the sudden roughness of his skin under her fingers. Of course, he was just showing off his scars. There was absolutely nothing sexual about this. Except for the fact that there was something moving down there, and it wasn’t her hand.

“Shrapnel from a road bomb in Iran.” His voice had a husky edge.

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Darcy had been staring straight ahead, but now she raised her gaze to his face. His eyes were half closed, his lips parted.

Time for that strategic withdrawal. Except his hand was still over hers, holding her in place.

“Er, very impressive.”

“My point is,” he murmured, “that you know nothing about how...messy my life has been.” He pushed up closer, so her hand was caught between their bodies. “In fact, I can feel it getting a whole lot messier right now.”

What she could feel was the hardness of his erection pressing against the side of her hand. If she just shifted a little bit, she could wrap her fingers around him. She had an almost overwhelming urge to see Captain Matt losing control. Coming apart for her.

There were a whole load of reasons why that was a bad idea, but at this moment, every single one of them eluded her. The kitchen suddenly got super hot, and her insides were melting, a little pulse throbbing between her thighs.

She tried to slide her palm over, but there wasn't enough space, and she fumbled with her free hand, opening the remaining buttons and giving her the room she needed. She pushed her hand inside his boxers and found him, rock hard and red-hot.

Matt was perfectly still. Then she squeezed, and his head went back.

“Christ, Darcy.”

“I think I owe you an orgasm,” she said, holding his gaze. “And I hate to be in anyone’s debt.” She lowered herself to her knees. This was one of her favorite things about sex; she loved the feeling of being in control. All that masculine strength and power, all hers.

He was silent as she pushed his jeans and boxers down over his hips. He was beautiful, long and thick, flushed purple at the head, pale at the base where he was nestled in midnight dark curls. She considered him for a moment and heard him groan. She had an idea that this wasn’t going to last long, and that she wasn’t the only one here for whom it had been a while. She knew why in her case—she’d hardly had much option—but why had he been abstaining?

Now was not the time for thinking.

She leaned closer, breathing in the warm, musky scent of aroused male. It had been so long, and she almost swayed, her mouth watering.

She dropped a quick kiss on the tip, tasting his arousal, then licked her tongue from the base to the top, swirling around the swollen head.

A hand slid into her hair but gripped her gently as she took him in her mouth. She held him for a second without moving, and his fingers tightened. She slid her mouth up and down, as far as she could go. He thrust against her, probably couldn’t help himself, and she wrapped her hand around the base so she wouldn’t choke.

When she could feel him pumping rhythmically, pushing against her, and she could taste the saltiness on her tongue, she knew he was close. She concentrated on the head, sucking hard. From the tension in his body, he was about to come, and she cupped his balls with one hand, squeezed gently, and he exploded.

...

The best fucking feeling ever.

Each time he thought it was over, she'd squeeze and suck and send him flying again. Finally, he was drained, and she released him. His hand was still in her silky hair, and he loosened his grip as she pulled away. She sat back on her heels, stared up at him, and licked her lips. His dick twitched. He didn't think he'd take long to recover, and he meant to be buried deep inside her when he came next time.

He'd even gotten some condoms. All prepared, though he'd not had Darcy in mind when he'd bought them. Really, he hadn't.

Her cheeks were flushed, and her nipples pressed against her T-shirt.

Just this once.

They reached for each other at the same time, just as the doorbell rang. They both went still.

"Chinese," he said.

"Yeah." She pushed herself gracefully to her feet and cast him an amused glance. "I'll get it." She grabbed her bag from the side and disappeared into the hallway. A moment later, he heard the front door open and the murmur of voices.

He exhaled and ran a hand through his hair. His pants were around his ankles, and he leaned down and pulled them up, wincing from his still-sensitive dick. He fastened his pants, then patted the back pocket to check the condom was ready and at hand. Some food, a little rest, and then he'd offer to show Darcy the rest of the house. He reached for his wine and swallowed it in one gulp, then sank into his chair as Darcy returned. But she wasn't bringing him Chinese. A tall figure followed her in—Gary, carrying a bottle of scotch and a six pack of beers.

“Hi, mate.” He glanced from him to Darcy. “I didn’t know I was interrupting. For some reason, I thought you might be alone and lonely.”

“You’re not interrupting,” Darcy said. “I was just about to leave.” She turned to Matt. “I’m going clubbing with Regan.”

Matt thought about the condom in his pocket and had to bite back his roar of denial. He shot a look at Gary, who raised an eyebrow. “We haven’t finished talking yet.”

“We can talk next time,” she said.

No!

But at least there would be a next time. He pushed himself to his feet. “Sit,” he said to Gary. Then he led the way out into the hall, closing the doors behind him.

“I’m going to pop up and have a last peek at Lulu.”

He nodded and leaned against the wall to wait.

“She’s out cold,” she said as she came back, stepping past him. It took a moment to realize she was going to leave. Without any comment on what had just happened.

“Have you nothing to say?”

She gave him a shrug. “Fate seems determined to stop us from making a mistake. Thank you, fate.”

That stung. “Yeah, it was a mistake. Maybe you should remember that next time you offer a desperate guy a blowjob.”

She scowled. “Hey, mister, I’m not the one who took half my clothes off, then shoved some poor unsuspecting woman’s hand down my pants, and proceeded to get a goddamn boner.”

“You know how long it’s been since a woman had her hands down my pants—”

“No, and it’s none of my business.”

“Maybe, but the answer is a hell of a long time. It would have been more worrying if I hadn’t gotten a boner.”

“For you maybe,” she muttered.

“Okay. I agree. In retrospect, maybe the whole striptease thing wasn’t a good idea.” His brain was slowly starting to work again. “But I was showing you my scars. You were the one who grabbed my dick.” He knew the argument was weak, and he blew out his breath. “Look, maybe it’s better we know and can be on guard.”

“Know what?”

“Know that it’s safer to keep our hands off each other. I wanted you the first moment I saw you. But we both know this sort of attraction never lasts. It’s sex. Nothing else. We’re as different as two people can be, and while opposites attract—it can’t last. And I don’t want Lulu hurt in the fallout.”

“Forewarned is forearmed. Next time you start stripping, I’ll run for the hills.”

“There won’t be a next time. The clothes stay on.”

“A pity in some ways, but at least we’re even on the orgasms.”

He could have done without her mentioning that. His dick twitched at the memory.

“So Diana is moving in. That should give you more freedom.”

He knew she was changing the subject. And part of him wanted to keep talking about sex. He shook his head and moved his mind to safer channels. “I’m taking on a new role. It will mean quite a lot of traveling, so a live-in nanny is a must. It’s never worked before, but I’m hopeful Diana will be okay.”

Something occurred to her. “Is this new job dangerous?”

He shrugged. “Maybe a little.”

She studied him for a minute, head cocked to one side. “And what happens to Lulu if anything happens to you.”

“My parents.”

“In Australia?”

He nodded.

“Then we’d better hope that nothing happens to you.”

And she was gone. He stared at the closed door, then gave a sigh and strode back to the kitchen. Gary had opened a beer and sat down at the table.



“You look like you just got laid, mate.”

“Fuck off.” He emptied the bottle of wine into his glass. And took a gulp. The rest of his life was falling into place. He just had to get this inconvenient attraction out of his system and order would be restored.

“Who’s the new girlfriend? Not your usual nice-girl type.”

“She’s not my girlfriend. That’s Darcy Butler, Lulu’s aunt.”

“The violent ex-con with a drug problem?”

Suddenly he realized he didn’t want his friend thinking bad things about Darcy, and he had no clue why. “Steven lied about her. She’s nothing like that.”

“Why would he lie?”

“Because he was an abusive bastard who regularly beat up his wife. He was three times over the drink limit on the night he crashed his car and killed her.”

“Bastard. Well, I only met your brother once, and I thought he was an asshole.” He raised his beer and took a deep swallow. “Now Darcy Butler looks like my sort of woman.”

“Keep your hands off.”

Gary gave him a speculative look, under which he tried not to flinch, and then

grinned. “Interesting. Very interesting.”

“Fuck off.”

“But while she’s hot, she’s not for you. Have you asked the divine Diana out yet?”

“Not yet.” Gary and Angie had both met Lulu’s nanny and they reckoned he should try to move his relationship onto a more personal footing. He was thinking about it, though that was hard with the recent memory of having Darcy’s mouth on him.

He shook it off. They’d had a narrow escape. Another one.

“I’ll ask her to the regimental dance next week.”

“Good, she’s perfect for you.”

Gary was right. So why didn’t he feel more excited about the prospect?

He knew the answer—he didn’t want perfect. He wanted Darcy.

### Chapter Ten

She had to stop thinking that bad things were about to happen as soon as Matt said anything about needing to talk.

He'd phoned her up that morning and asked if she could meet him for a coffee after he finished for the day. So here she was, at their usual place.

She'd spent the afternoon training with Sam. She hadn't agreed to go back on the competition circuit, but he'd convinced her to do an exhibition match. He reckoned she needed some direction in her life, that she was just pissing around. Maybe he was right, but the time away had changed her. And it wasn't a matter of fitness. She was as fit as she'd ever been, even when she was going for the national championships. Training had been the one thing that kept her sane when she'd been locked up.

But something had changed during that time.

She'd always had a core of darkness inside her, one that gave her a competitive edge when she fought. A need to win. Now it was gone, burned away in her rage and grief over what had happened to Emma. She knew it could have gone either way. The darkness could have grown big enough to overwhelm her—for a while, she'd truly thought that might happen, and she'd been ready to embrace it. Thanks to Summer and Regan, that hadn't happened. They'd brought her back from the brink. Convinced her that life was worth living. Plus, the idea of Lulu had given her something to aim for. She'd told herself that she didn't want to be a part of Lulu's life, that she just wanted to make sure her niece was safe and happy.

But she'd been deluding herself. Lulu was the only family she had left, and that meant more to her than she'd ever believed possible. No way could she walk away now.

So, she wasn't sure she wanted to go back on the circuit. But if not, then she needed some focus for her life. The gym worked perfectly without her. She was running some classes, but it wasn't enough to keep her fully occupied.

Something had been working away in the back of her mind since she'd come out. She wanted to expand the classes. Do more self-defense training. Maybe work with people like Emma—the ones who'd survived. She could contact the shelters and offer free training. Do something useful with her life.

She glanced up as Matt crossed the road and headed for the café.

And right then and there, she had a flashback to the other night. It had been nearly a week, and she'd done her best not to think about it. But—hell—she'd seen his dick. She'd had it in her mouth. What had she been thinking? Still, he'd started the whole thing with his striptease. Her gaze dropped to the bulge in his pants.

He had a beautiful cock. Sad that she was never going to see it again.

So stop thinking about it. And stop staring at his groin.

With a gargantuan effort, she dragged her gaze away and caught the eye of the waiter inside the café.

The day was warm, so she'd taken one of the tables outside—she still felt the need to be outside as much as possible. When she was sure she could look at Matt again without remembering his dick in her mouth, she turned her attention back to him.

He looked relaxed. No uniform today, but she remembered reading somewhere that military personnel had been warned not to wear uniforms off base. That reminded her of their conversation—he was putting his life in danger. On a sunny day like this, it seemed hard to contemplate.

He sat in the seat opposite her, and a waiter appeared immediately. He took Matt's order—a black coffee—then turned to her.

“You want anything else, Darcy?”

“Another coffee, thanks.”

“They know you here?” Matt said.

“They get a lot of business from the gym. Makes me popular.” She leaned back and studied him. He did look more relaxed than she had ever seen him. For the first time, she looked at this from his perspective. He'd said he never intended to have a family—Lulu must have completely disrupted his ordered existence. And he'd done the best he could under the circumstances.

He was watching her in return. Was he remembering the blowjob?

She cleared her throat. “How's Lulu?”

“She's good. Well, maybe good isn't the right word. But she seems more relaxed—not quite so many tantrums. She gets on well with Diana.”

“I'm glad.” Really, she was. Totally glad.

His lips twitched, and she gritted her teeth. She was so funny. The last thing she needed was for Captain Matt to think she had a crush on him. Because she didn't. Just

because she thought—knew—he had a beautiful cock, that did not mean she had a crush. She'd forget in time. Luckily the waiter arrived with their coffees, and she had a chance to calm her temper. "You said you needed to talk to me?"

"Actually, I wanted to ask a favor."

Her mind searched but came up blank. "You did?"

"I have this thing tomorrow night."

"A thing?"

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“A sort of party—it’s an annual dinner-dance the regiment puts on. I’ve managed to be out of the country for the past few years, so I’ve missed it.”

“You don’t like parties?”

“Not my scene. But my commanding officer has made it clear he expects me there.”

Was he going to ask her to go with him? What the hell would she say? She didn’t do parties, either. And she was hardly the sort of girl to impress his commanding officer. Impress anyone for that matter. And she had nothing to wear. Christ, was she even considering saying yes?

“We never got around to talking about my job the other night.”

“We got sidetracked.”

“A little.” He looked away, and she was pretty sure the memory of the blowjob was rearing its head again.

He blew out his breath, took a sip of coffee, and then pushed the cup away. “Yeah. Anyway, I’m up for a new posting. It’s something I’ve been working toward, and I want it. But my life’s been a little disorganized recently, and though they’ve said yes in theory, they gave me a month to get everything in order before they make it final.”

Maybe she could borrow a dress from Summer. She had the sort of stuff that made you look like a good girl, the sort an officer would have on his arm.

“So I need to impress my boss. He needs to see that things are going smoothly at home. That I can give my all to this new position.”

“And can you?”

“I believe so.”

Or maybe Regan or Summer would come shopping with her. Steer her away from her usual style. Maybe something with long sleeves to hide the tattoos.

“Anyway,” he continued. “I thought I’d take Diana.”

All thoughts of shopping ceased as her brain ground to a standstill. “What?”

“To the party. She’s the sort of woman who’d make a good impression.”

“Of course she is.” It was a guarantee that the perfect Diana probably had a whole wardrobe full of appropriate dresses and not a single tattoo to cover up.

He gave her an odd look but pushed on. “The thing is, I could get Gary or Angie to babysit—though last time, they did say never again. But I thought you might like to spend some extra time with Lulu.”

She took a gulp of coffee to get herself under control. It was some consolation that she was pretty sure he hadn’t even realized she’d thought he was going to ask her. It had probably never occurred to him. She was okay for blowjobs but not to meet his goddamned commanding officer. She didn’t know why this was affecting her so much. She hated goddamn parties and she wasn’t all that fond of Captain Matt. He might have a gorgeous dick—but that was the only part of him she liked.

She plastered a smile on her face. “Of course. I’d love to babysit.”



What looked like a relieved smile curved his lips. “Good. You can just stay on after you bring her home. And it’s probably best if you stay the night—the party might go on quite late.”

“No problem.” It was Saturday night, but it wasn’t as though she had a date. She was tempted to bang her head on the table. God, she’d come so close to totally humiliating herself. Right now, she just had to get away from him, because her reaction had raised a whole load of insecurities that she hadn’t even realized existed. She shoved back her chair. “Look, I’ve got a class in ten minutes, so I have to go. But I’ll see you tomorrow.” She dug into her pocket and tossed some money on the table. Without waiting for him to say anything else, she stood up and walked away.

She could feel his gaze on her as she crossed the road. Though that was probably just more of her overactive imagination. The same imagination that had just thought Matt was going to ask her to a swanky party.

Never going to happen.

...

She didn’t go through the gym—she’d lied about the class, but she’d needed an excuse to get away—and she also hated that he’d turned her into a liar. Instead, she went down the alley that ran alongside the gym. She pulled her keys from her bag and let herself into the building, then headed up the stairs, pausing at the top. The door to Regan’s office was open. Regan was setting up a security business. She was a jewel thief and an expert safe cracker, and she was hoping people would employ her to find weaknesses in their security systems. Nate, her soon-to-be-husband and an ex-detective, was going to join her in the business, and they’d offer PI services as well. Darcy had offered Regan the office space above the gym, free of charge, while they were still in prison. Regan had taken her up on the offer but insisted on paying rent.

She pushed open the door and found Regan sitting on the sofa in the reception area, typing on a laptop. She glanced up as Darcy walked in then plunked down on the sofa beside her.

“What’s up?” Regan asked, putting the laptop on the table in front of her and turning to face Darcy.

“I just nearly made a total, complete ass of myself.”

Regan shrugged. “Well, you can’t be perfect all the time.”

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“Hah.” She rubbed her finger over the stud in her nose. She’d gotten it when she was sixteen after an argument with her father. Teenage rebellion at its most obvious. But she liked it—just as she liked her tattoos. “I knew I’d get some sympathy from you.”

“Summer’s the sympathetic one, and she’s not here. I’m the realist. Tell me all about it. I can have a good laugh, and you’ll realize it’s not the end of the world.”

She rested her head back against the leather sofa. “I don’t know who I am anymore.”

“Darcy Butler. The best friend ever.”

Her eyes pricked and she gave a sniff. That was something else. She never cried. Not ever. But these days, she felt teary all the time. Ugh.

“I wouldn’t have made it without you,” Regan said. “Summer certainly wouldn’t have. You made us both strong enough.”

“Ditto.” They’d helped one another.

“Okay. Tell me what happened. I won’t laugh. Promise.”

“I thought Captain Matt was going to ask me to a swanky party.”

“Go on...”

“And I was thinking about buying a dress, with long sleeves, so his friends would like me.”

“And...”

“Instead, he asked me to babysit Lulu so he could ask Diana, the super-perfect, tattoo-less, no-studs-in-her-nose nanny.” Regan’s lips twitched. “You dare laugh and I’ll punch you.”

Regan pursed her lips, no doubt to stop the laugh from falling out. She cocked her head to one side and studied Darcy. She had to hold herself still to keep from squirming. “Did you want him to ask you to the party?”

“To be honest, my brain never got as far as considering whether I wanted to go or not. It went straight to how do I turn myself into the sort of person he wants to be seen with. I don’t even like him.”

“You don’t?”

“He’s smug, and tidy, and perfect. Just like the goddamn nanny. And he reminds me of Steven.” Though that wasn’t totally true anymore. Not really. It hadn’t been for a while.

“And yet...you let him into your pants.”

She glared. “Your point?”

“Well, you’ve clearly got this whole subconscious thing going on with him. Your logical brain is telling you he’s off-limits, that he’s not your type. But underneath, there’s some serious I-want-to-fuck-you going on. Am I wrong?”

She rubbed her lower lip and remembered his penis. Yeah. She wanted to fuck that penis. It was just sad that it came attached to the rest of him. “Maybe not.”

“Aha. We’re being honest. You must be worried.”

“My dress was going to be long-sleeved and probably pink. Hell, yes, I’m worried.”

“Scary. Hmm. Could it be some sort of self-destruction thing?”

“I don’t want to self-destruct.” Did she?

“You feel you let Emma down. You don’t deserve to be happy. Blah, blah, blah.”

“I did let Emma down. But I don’t think I’m quite that bad. I’ve come to terms with it and I want to move on. I just seem stuck.”

“And maybe you’re fixating on Captain Matt because you know a relationship with him is never going anywhere. Maybe you like being stuck because it stops you from having to think about what you want to do next.”

“I do?” Was she that complicated?

“Don’t you?”

“Maybe. We’re total opposites. The only thing we have in common is Lulu. But because of Lulu, we’re in each other’s lives. Long term. If we sleep together, it won’t last. It never lasts. And I wouldn’t want it to anyway—have I mentioned he’s a boring prig?”

“He’s also a gorgeous guy, and there’s an element of the forbidden about him. Plus, it’s been way too long since you had a good shag.”

“All valid points.”

“Well, we can’t do anything about the gorgeous or the forbidden bit, because I think you’re right—it will mess things up with Lulu. Which means we’re going to have to work on the shag part. That, we can do something about.”

“I doubt it.”

“I like a challenge. Go get your glad rags on. We’re going on the pickup.”

### Chapter Eleven

He should be riding on a high.

The evening had been a total success. Diana had charmed everyone. Matt gave her a quick sideways glance. They were in a cab on the way back to her place. It was after midnight.

She was a beautiful woman, her makeup was subtle, her blond hair pulled back from her face but loose down her back. She wore a dark blue dress—the word tasteful came to mind. He also knew from the time he'd spent with her that she was a nice woman. Lulu got on well with her.

Right now, he should be thinking about how to persuade her to spend more time with him. To change their relationship to a personal one. Tonight was supposed to have been a run-up to that. He'd never wanted to marry. But there was no denying that a wife would make his life easier. How many people had told him that recently?

Was that reason enough to get married?

He supposed that if they both wanted the same things out of life, why not?

She must have sensed his gaze. She'd been staring out the window, and now she turned back to him and smiled. "I had a lovely time. Thank you."

"It was my pleasure."

“I don’t normally go out with clients.” She gave a small laugh. “Well, usually they’re married, so it’s not an option.”

“I’m glad you did.”

“I had a great time—it’s so...glamorous. All those uniforms. Like being in a movie.”

He’d never thought about it like that. But then, he usually avoided these sorts of affairs. He’d never really felt like he fitted in and had lacked the inclination to try. He’d come up from the ranks, though that had never bothered him. Truth was, he didn’t really give a toss what people thought about where he came from. He was good at his job. This part was just a necessary evil.

The cab pulled up outside her house. “Can you wait for me?” he asked the driver as he climbed out. He came around and opened the door for her, took her arm as he walked her up the driveway, and waited while she got her keys out of her bag. She put the key in the lock then hesitated and looked up at him.

He realized she was expecting a kiss...and that a kiss hadn’t even occurred to him. Hell, a few minutes ago, he’d been thinking about marriage, yet it hadn’t even occurred to him to kiss her? He lowered his head, taking her mouth with his. Her lips parted beneath his. She tasted sweet, and the kiss did absolutely nothing for him. He had an image of another mouth wrapped around his dick, and guilt made him take a step back.

It seemed like the height of bad manners to think about another woman at a time like this. But his dick jerked at the memory.

He took another step back.

“You could stay,” she said. “At least come in for a drink.”



He knew she was asking him for more than a drink. He'd even told Darcy that he might not be back. She'd given him a funny look but had just said not to do anything she wouldn't. He wasn't quite sure what that would entail.

"I'd better not. I told Darcy I wouldn't be too late."

Something flickered in her eyes. "Okay. Maybe another time."

"Of course."

He watched as she disappeared, and the door closed behind her. He returned to the cab and gave the driver his home address. Ten minutes later, he was opening the front door, a sense of anticipation filling him that he hadn't felt all evening.

But the house was quiet and in darkness. Likely Darcy had taken herself off to the guest bedroom. And the anticipation vanished, leaving a void that he didn't want to peer into.

Lucky escape.

He flicked on the light in the kitchen and stared at the scene of chaos that met his eyes. There was food everywhere.

She wouldn't have gone to bed and left this mess. Would she? Something must have happened. It looked like a bomb had exploded. Or the two of them had had a food fight. Darcy must have ordered a take-away—Indian by the smell of spices and the half-empty plate of food. He hoped she hadn't given Lulu curry, or likely they would both be sorry. How could she make so much mess in so little time? He'd only been gone five hours.

He went through into the lounge and found a similar scene of chaos. Just about every

toy Lulu owned was strewn about the floor along with cushions, a pair of black boots, an empty beer bottle...

And Darcy.

He stopped short at the sight of her. She was lying on her stomach on the sofa, bare feet hanging over the end, her face buried in a cushion, her hand dangling down, clutching the baby monitoring device. Which was thankfully silent, though the green light glowed, showing it was activated.

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He stood over her, staring down. She wore black leggings and a black tank top, which left her arms bare, showing the red and black ink of the tattoos down her left arm. He'd never had the chance to look at them closely. Now, he took in the intricate design. Roses and thorns. A unicorn and a phoenix. They were beautiful and a part of her.

His gaze slid down her body. The leggings were skin tight and hid nothing; she must be either wearing a thong or nothing at all beneath them. Her ass was a delectable curve, her legs long and slender, her feet arched. She wore a toe ring on her right foot and an ankle bracelet—a strand of leather and beads—around her left. Her waist was narrow. There was nothing soft about her. If anything she was too thin, and he could see the lean hardness of muscle beneath her pale skin. Her short hair revealed the long line of her neck, the black dangly earring that hung from one ear. The other had a small black stud.

For some unfathomable reason, he found her incredibly erotic, and his dick hardened in his pants.

Why the hell couldn't he have felt like this with Diana earlier? Then right now, he'd probably be in bed with her, no doubt in a nice, tastefully decorated bedroom. Yet, he was so glad he wasn't there. And right in that moment, he knew his fantasy about married life was just that—total make-believe.

He turned his attention back to the sleeping woman. He'd gone over in his head so many times just why this was a really bad idea.

Now he couldn't remember any of those reasons.

As long as they were both clear about what they were getting into—nothing heavy, just a little fun between consenting adults—why shouldn't they give in, enjoy what they both clearly wanted?

She shifted in her sleep, her ass lifting, her face snuggling farther into the cushion. He'd take her from behind, slide between those long slender thighs, and push himself deep inside her, hands gripping her hips.

His hand shifted to his dick. Hard.

There was still time to get out of there. Go give himself a wank in the shower. It would be way less dangerous.

Now he was being melodramatic. She wasn't dangerous.

She was just a woman. One he'd been hard for since the moment he met her, that first night before he'd even known who she was.

He stripped off his jacket, rolled up his sleeves, still not sure what he was going to do. If anything.

He should wake her, though. "Darcy."

No answer. She just shoved her head deeper into the cushion.

He sank down onto the sofa beside her. "Darcy?" When she didn't answer, he reached out and lightly touched her shoulder. Her skin was warm and soft, and his fingers nudged her gently.

She didn't move. If anything, she went totally still. She was awake...and obviously waiting. His hand seemed to move of its own volition, his fingers trailing over her

back, down the line of her spine. He could feel the bones beneath her skin. He held his breath, waiting for her to stop him, as his hand reached the small of her back and then the smooth curve of her ass. His mouth went dry as her hips rose and pushed against his palm.

His last remaining blood drained to his groin. It occurred to him to wonder just what twist of fate might interrupt them this time.

Maybe Darcy herself. She was as wary of the feelings between them as he was. And maybe with more reason than he had. He caressed the swell of her ass, no longer kidding himself that he was trying to wake her. He could feel the hardness of muscle, and he dug his fingers into her flesh, then massaged it with his palm.

He turned his attention back to her face and found her eyes open, watching him. He squeezed her buttock again, and they closed briefly.

She licked her lips, and heat sank lower, so his balls ached. He knew exactly how clever that mouth of hers was, and he wasn't going to get sidetracked.

Tonight, he was going to be deep inside her, and from the needy expression he'd glimpsed in her eyes, he reckoned she was in agreement.

"I fell asleep," she said. "I meant to have everything sorted out for when you got back, but she finished me off."

"She can do that."

"And I wasn't expecting you back." She pushed herself up, and he reluctantly released his hold on her ass so she could swing her legs around. She glanced at the baby monitor then placed it on the coffee table and turned her attention to him. "Sorry you didn't get lucky."

He shrugged. “I didn’t want to get lucky.”

“Really? But the two of you are so perfect together.”

Did he detect a hint of sarcasm? Probably. “Maybe I don’t like perfect.”

“Hah.” She looked around at the chaos surrounding them. “I bet you had a heart attack when you walked in here.”

“Maybe. Until I caught sight of Sleeping Beauty and everything else vanished from my head.”

“Aw, cute.”

“You have the sexiest ass I have ever seen.”

Her eyes widened. “You’ve been eyeing up my ass while I was sleeping. That’s seriously creepy, you know.”

“Actually, it was seriously hot. And you were sleeping on my sofa, after all. I had an overwhelming urge to kiss you awake, except your face was buried in the cushions. Your ass, on the other hand, was sticking up in the air.”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t be. I was just indulging in this fantasy, where I was fucking you from behind and absolutely no one interrupted us.”

She swallowed then licked her lips again. Was she doing it on purpose? He hoped so. “Are you aware I haven’t had sex in three years? You’re taking advantage of a desperate woman.”

He shrugged. “I haven’t had sex in nearly two. I’m quite desperate myself. We can be desperate together.”

“What happened to it being a mistake?”

“It doesn’t have to be. It’s sex. Neither of us is looking for anything more.”

“Isn’t that what you wanted from Diana? The perfect wife and mother.”

“Are you jealous?”

She cast him a look of scorn. “You wish.”

He blew out his breath. “A lot of people have been telling me recently that a wife would simplify my life. And as you said—Diana is perfect.” Was he trying to wind her up? Maybe a little. He reached out and stroked a finger up her arm, tracing the lines of the tattoo. She didn’t try to move away, and he continued to her shoulder, the sharp jut of her collarbone bared by the skimpy tank top, his finger settling on the rapid pulse beating at her throat.

“I don’t want perfect. Perfect doesn’t make me hot and hard.”

“What does?”

He took her hand and pressed it to his groin. His dick jerked in his pants. It wanted out. “You.” When he released her hand, she left it where it was, and he battled to think through the fog of lust. But maybe this needed to be said before he gave in to that lust. “I realized tonight—I don’t want a perfect wife. Hell, I don’t want any wife at all. And I sure as hell don’t want to marry just to give Lulu a mother. That’s a recipe for disaster.”

“So what do you want?” But her fingers were curving around his dick as she spoke. It must have been more than clear exactly what he wanted. Desperately.

“I want a bad girl. I want a bad girl who’s as desperate for me as I am for her. Who wants this as much as I do.” He pressed a hand down on top of hers. “But maybe I also want a friend. Someone I can ask for help when I need it. Someone I can trust to look out for Lulu when I’m not here.” He ran a hand through his hair. “Hell, neither



of us is the marrying type, and maybe that's why this can work. The sex is just that—it needn't affect anything else. That way, if it comes to the point where you want to move on, you meet someone you want more with, then we can still stay friends. And Lulu won't be affected."

"Sounds...logical."

"There's no reason why it shouldn't be." Except he didn't feel logical. Right now, he felt on the edge of explosion. His dick was hard, his balls ached, and he knew that if she said no now, he'd have to sit here and let her walk away and pretend it didn't matter.

But fuck. It mattered. He wanted her more than he'd ever wanted anyone.

"Okay," she said.

For a second, the word made no sense. "Okay?"

"I'll be your bad girl. But don't read more into this than there is. This is an act of pure desperation."

He didn't care, and he was through talking. Without another word, he rose to his feet. Without giving her a chance to say anything else, he reached down and put his hands around her waist—he could almost span it—and lifted her off the sofa, then tossed her over his shoulder.

"Hey." She punched him on the ass.

"Shhh," he whispered. "You'll wake the baby."

A giggle escaped her. "Just like a married couple."

“Who’ve never had sex...but are just about to.” He talked as he walked. Out of the sitting room and up the stairs. He kicked his bedroom door open, but quietly. The last thing he needed right now was Lulu waking up.

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He dropped her on the bed and then switched on the lamp—he wanted to see every second of this.

She lay resting on her elbows, looking up at him, a challenge in her eyes. But what was she challenging him to? He had an idea this might turn into a fight for dominance, and the idea turned him on fiercely.

He remembered how she'd looked at him last week. She'd liked looking at him. He tugged his shirt from his pants and unbuttoned it, her gaze following his every move. He shrugged out of the shirt then dropped it on the floor.

“You’re doing the striptease thing again,” she murmured.

“You like the striptease thing.”

“Perhaps.”

“So do I. Take your top off.”

Would she?

“You’re good at giving orders, aren’t you?”

“You want to call me sir?”

“Not in a million years.”

He grinned. “Take your top off...please.”

Her hands went to the hem, and she pulled it off over her head and threw it on top of his shirt.

“Lie back.”

This time she didn't argue; she just lay back on the bed and raised her arms above her head, pushing her breasts into the air. They were small but full and perfectly shaped, with hard little nipples, dusky pink.

His dick got even harder, so it was pressing almost painfully against his fly. He fumbled with his belt buckle, not taking his gaze off her lithe form. All long and slender and graceful. He unbuttoned his pants, almost groaning as he lowered his zipper. Then he moved toward her, pausing at the end of the bed to look at her some more.

“You're beautiful,” he murmured.

Her eyes opened, and she stared up at him. “So are you.”

She was naked except for the tight black leggings. He wrapped a hand around each ankle and parted her legs, then came down on one knee between them. She didn't move, but she was as turned on as he was—he could see it in the rapid rise and fall of her breasts. Her lower lip was clamped between her teeth.

He reached out and covered one breast with his palm, squeezed, then turned his attention to the other. He trailed a finger over her taut nipple and her back arched. Lowering his head, he stroked her with his tongue then sucked her into his mouth. Finally, he bit down gently, and a groan escaped her throat.

His cock pulsed. Next time, they'd take it slow. This time he needed to be inside her, and fast.

He stood up, shucked out of his pants, kicking off his dress shoes and socks. By the time he came down on the bed, he was naked and more than ready.

"Shit," she said. "That is one seriously pretty cock."

He didn't think his cock had ever been called pretty before. He grinned, wrapped his palm around himself and squeezed. "And it's all yours."

"That's nice. Tell me you have a condom."

"Brand new packet in the cabinet by the bed."

She rolled onto her back, came up on all fours, and crawled up the bed. His eyes fixed on her ass. She reached out, opened the drawer, and tossed him the packet, looking at him over her shoulder. "Prepared. I like that."

"I bought them last week," he said, his mind not really on the conversation. "Shortly after we'd had our little talk about how this was never going to happen."

Then he'd had enough of talking. He leaned toward her, hooked his fingers in the waistband of her leggings, and then slowly peeled them down over her hips and legs. She lifted each up to assist him. Beneath them, he could see the black lace of a thong almost hidden between her ass cheeks. He divested her of that last item as well and then sat back on his heels and stared.

Her ass was rounded, her thighs slender, and the curls between them pale blond. She glanced at him over her shoulder, one eyebrow raised.

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“Don’t move.” His voice came out almost a croak as he inched closer.

His finger traced the line down her ass, along the seam of her sex, sinking into the hot wet heat of her. She pushed back against him—clearly, she was no good at taking orders.

Lowering his head, he bit the curve of her ass cheek. She peered over her shoulder at him. “Ouch. What was that for?”

“I told you not to move.”

“I’m not one of your goddamn soldiers.”

He grinned. “Thank God. Or this would be extremely inappropriate.”

He licked the spot he’d bitten, then gave in to temptation and nuzzled between her thighs, breathing in the hot, musky scent of excited woman.

He was tempted to spend longer, but with this woman, he couldn’t help the feeling that something else might come along and interrupt them. He was conscious of the baby monitor beside the bed, but even Lulu wouldn’t be cruel enough to butt in on them now.

Just let him get inside her once. Was that too much to ask? He tore the condom wrapper with his teeth then rolled it down over his length, wincing because he was so sensitive. And he was ready. More than ready.

He shuffled closer, rested one palm against her ass then slid it lower to curve around her inner thigh. He repeated the process with the other thigh, parting them farther so he could see her pussy. Pink and glistening; she wanted him, and that was such a turn-on.

He released one thigh, cupped her sex, curled his fingers so they slid inside her, and then traced them upward until he found her clit. He teased her with his fingertip, drawing circles around the little bundle of nerves until her hips were jerking up toward him and her thighs were parting wider.

He was going to last no time at all. And he didn't give a fuck. There would be time later for long and slow.

He took his dick in his hand, aimed it at the exact spot he needed to be, then he steadied her with one hand curled around her hip and plunged deep inside her. She went down on her elbows, her ass lifting higher into the air. And she was tight, and hot and all slippery and welcoming. He paused as deep inside as he could go, kept one hand on her hip and slipped through the curls between her thighs with the other. He found her clit again, all swollen and needy, and stroked his fingers over her. She groaned, and he massaged the little bundle, hard then soft. When her hips were pushing against him, he withdrew, the grasp of her tight inner walls nearly pushing him over the edge, and he gritted his teeth and shoved back in hard. Then again and again, until he was moving easier inside her.

He held tight onto his control, because while this was not going to take long, no way was he coming until she did.

When he'd got a rhythm going, he turned his attention to her clit, rubbing it with his fingers, pressing hard then light, until little whimpering moans were coming from her, driving him crazy. The pressure was building in his balls, and he knew he wouldn't last much longer. He circled her once more then pinched her clit between

his thumb and finger while he shoved in hard. Then again, and he felt her come apart beneath him. She threw back her head and screamed. At the same time, her pussy wrapped tight around him, and he released the last of his control and came a second later, pumping into her. She bucked her hips, and he pinched her clit again, and she collapsed to the bed beneath him. He crashed down with her, pushing her to the mattress, still pumping, as he buried his head in the curve where her shoulder met her neck, biting down on the soft skin, and she went still beneath him.

Finally, he was empty, his cock lodged deep inside. He didn't want to move, but he was probably squashing her, though she hadn't complained yet. Pulling out, he rolled onto his back and lay staring up at the ceiling while his breath returned to normal and his brain started to function again.

He glanced sideways to where the baby monitor lay, still silent. Christ, if Darcy's screams hadn't awakened Lulu, nothing would.

"Next time, we gag you."

She rolled over so she lay on her side, face-to-face with him. Her eyes were dark, her skin flushed, her lips red. "Who says there will be a next time?"

"I do. Once was definitely not enough."

"I'm not sure I could move right now, even if I wanted to."

"Then don't. Stay there."

He rolled to his feet and headed into the small ensuite bathroom. After disposing of the condom, he washed his hands and splashed water over his face. When he returned to the bedroom, she was still lying on her side, naked, and so beautiful his chest ached and his dick twitched.



“You want a drink?”

“Beer?”

“Give me a second.” He tiptoed past Lulu’s room—all was quiet—then padded down the stairs and into the kitchen, doing his best to overlook the mess, though it was hard to ignore. It looked like every utensil in the place had been dipped in food and thrown at the walls. He grabbed two beers from the fridge, knocked off the tops, and headed back. She was sitting up in bed, the sheet pulled over her—he’d preferred the view from before, but at least she was still in the bed. He’d half expected her to be up and dressed, with an excuse on her lips as to why she had to go. She was more defensive than he was and that was pretty impressive.

He handed her a beer and slipped under the sheet beside her, and for a minute they drank in almost companionable silence. He cast her a sideways glance. The sheet was tucked under her armpits, and he wanted to see her breasts. He reached across and gave it a tug.

“Hey.”

“I like your breasts. Do you know how long it’s been since I sat this close to a pair of naked breasts?”

She cast him a glance, though her expression was amused. She looked as relaxed as he felt. They’d both needed this. They were just friends doing each other a favor. No harm, no foul. “I have no clue.”

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“Too long, and I’m not wasting a second of it. In fact”—he took her beer and put it on the bedside table along with his—“I need a better view.”

He twisted around, wrapping his hands around her narrow waist, and lifted her up. She caught on pretty quick and rested her hands on his shoulders as he put her down, straddling his hips. His cock thickened and straightened, and her eyes widened as she felt him beneath her. He tugged the sheet out of the way so there was nothing between them, and he could feel the heat and wetness of her against him. Her breasts were now level with his face, and he leaned forward and kissed one tight dusky nipple, then drew it into his mouth, suckling until she squirmed against him. Her skin tasted salty and sweet, and he had an urge to taste her all over, to press his mouth between her thighs. Soon.

He handed her beer back and watched as she raised it to her lips then swallowed. She caught his gaze and licked her tongue around the rim of the bottle, and heat flashed through him. She swallowed the last of the beer and handed him the empty bottle. “What now?”

He tugged on his lower lip as he considered her. Then he rested both hands at her hips as he slid down the bed until he lay flat on his back. “Now I want to find out if your pussy tastes as good as it looks.”

She swallowed, but then raised herself up on her knees, and he was pretty certain she’d caught on. She leaned over him, kissing his lips, dipping her tongue inside. Then she shuffled up the bed, clambered over his shoulders, and she was right where he wanted her, her thighs straddling his face. For a second, he breathed in her sweet intoxicating scent. It went straight to his dick until he was rock hard.

“Open your legs,” he murmured.

She came up on her knees, widened her legs, and the view was amazing—all pink glistening pussy. He gripped her hips and lowered her slightly, raising his head so he could lick along the seam of her sex. His nostrils filled with the scent of her arousal. He moved his hands so he could use his thumbs to part her sex and stare. A pulse throbbed in his dick. He doubted long and slow was going to happen this time, either. First, he had to make Darcy come screaming—quiet screams.

He pushed his tongue up inside her, felt the contractions grip him, then licked slow strokes over her sex, stopping just short of her clit, until she was moaning, pushing against him, his lips coated in her sweetness. He gripped her hips and pulled her down to him, his mouth latching onto her clit, sucking her into his mouth, massaging the swollen nub with his tongue, and then grazing it with the edge of his teeth.

She went still, everything clamping down tight, muscles locked. He bit down oh-so-gently, and she stiffened, threw back her head, and screamed. He sucked then nibbled, and she came again, collapsing against him.

### Chapter Twelve

The room was in darkness when Darcy woke up.

Her whole body tingled with the memory of more orgasms than she'd ever considered possible in a single night. Or was it just a dream? Maybe she was still sleeping on the sofa, waiting for Matt to come home, while believing he wouldn't. He'd be spending the night in the arms of the perfect Diana.

She stretched, the cotton sheets chafing her sensitive skin.

Even in the dark, she was quite aware that this wasn't the guest room Matt had shown her the previous day. She'd never been in here before.

And she guessed that would make it Captain Matt's room.

Her body felt great, all sated and relaxed and just a little bit sore. They'd made love over and over, then they'd fallen asleep, and he'd awoken her and they'd made love again. She didn't think she'd ever forget the feel of his mouth on her sex. She'd had oral sex before, but past boyfriends had always acted like they were doing her some sort of favor, whereas Matt... He'd seemed to enjoy himself as much as she did. Okay, maybe not quite as much.

She wriggled then stretched out her hands under the sheets, but she'd already sensed she was alone. And the feeling of loss worried at some deep, dark part of her mind. The clock on the bedside table glowed in the dark. It was early, before six. She should have guessed that Matt was an early riser.

She thought about pulling the sheets over her head and going back to sleep—because left to her own devices, she enjoyed sleeping in. She was a late night, late morning sort of person. But she also had a need to get up, go hunt Matt down, and get that first awkward, “oh my God, we slept together” moment over with.

Best sex ever.

Like ever, ever.

No need to share that with Matt, though. No point in making him big-headed.

There had been a bit of a power struggle going on, but she had to concede that once he'd taken control, she'd loved it. Most of her boyfriends in the past had let her take charge; maybe that's why she'd picked them, so she wouldn't have to give up that little piece of herself. And she'd fought it last night, but when she'd finally given in, it had been mind-blowing, a whole new level.

She stretched out across to Matt's side of the bed and switched on the lamp, then pulled herself up. She hadn't taken in much of the room last night. But it was pretty much as she'd expected Matt's room to be. Decorated in beige and gray, with a big bed. Everything was in its place, the top of the dresser clear of clutter. He'd even picked up their clothes from last night. Hers were folded neatly on the chair by her side of the bed.

If she ever needed proof that they were not meant to have more than sex between them, this was it, because the neatness set her teeth on edge. It drove her crazy, made her want to toss things around.

She pushed the sheet down. She was naked. Had he found her too skinny? Her breasts were small, but they were a nice shape. He'd certainly seemed to appreciate them. And her ass had been a great hit.

Was this a one-off?

Part of her suspected that would be the best idea. That they should just move on, try to find a way to be—what had he said?—friends. It seemed strange to even contemplate.

But most of her knew she'd be jumping Captain Matt's bones at the next opportunity. He'd been right last night. Neither of them was looking for anything permanent. She wasn't the homemaker type. Neither was he. But that didn't mean they couldn't enjoy each other. Eventually the desire would fade, and they could get on with their lives. They'd keep seeing each other because of Lulu, and they'd be friends and...

She didn't know. She'd never had sex with a friend before.

She needed a shower, but first she wanted to find Matt. A dressing gown hung on the door. It was gray to match the décor, and she pulled it on. It fell almost to the floor. Outside, the hall was in darkness. She felt her way along to Lulu's door and pushed it open, just a little. The night light was on, and she could see Lulu sleeping, her thumb in her mouth, the doll Darcy had brought her that first visit tucked in her arms. She was so goddamn cute when she was asleep, and a sweet ache squeezed at Darcy's heart. She saw so much of her younger self in her niece. How she had been before life had gotten so hard. But had she ever been that cute? Somehow she doubted it.

She backed out and pulled the door closed, then headed down the stairs. She peered into the living room. Empty. And spotlessly tidy. Either the cleaners had been in or Matt had been busy. She heard sounds from the kitchen and headed there. He was just wiping the last of the dishes. The room was as spotless as the living room, with everything back in its place. She'd meant to clean up last night, really she had. But after an afternoon running after Lulu, and an evening trying to get her to eat and then settle down, she'd just crashed.

And she really hadn't expected Matt to come back.

Couldn't he have waited to tidy? She would have done it once she'd woken up. He had a way of making her feel inadequate. She'd bet Diana never left a dish unwashed.

He put the last plate away and turned to face her.

And in that second, she forgave him his unnatural proclivity for tidiness, because he was naked except for a pair of faded jeans. His chest was bare, his feet were bare. And nearly-naked Matt had the power to leave her breathless.

She stepped into the kitchen and stalked toward him.

Her nipples tightened and heat pooled between her thighs. She finally managed to raise her gaze from where she'd been admiring the growing bulge in his jeans. He was leaning back against the counter, watching her through half-closed eyes. He hadn't shaved, no doubt that was next on his list, and his jawline was shadowed. It just made him look sexier. He could even pass for a bad boy with his stubble and his tattoo. She stopped in front of him then ran a finger over the ink. "Is this some Army thing?"

"Special Air Services."

"The SAS? You were in the SAS?" Wow. They were the ultimate badasses.

“I left when Steven died.”

“It’s cool.” She took a step closer. “You did the cleaning. You should have waited. I would have done it.”

“I was awake anyway. But I have to ask—what did you do in here last night? There was food everywhere.”

She shrugged. “We had this whole power thing going. Ended up in a bit of a fight.”

“A food fight?”

“Yeah. You never had one of those?”

“Not that I remember.”

“You haven’t lived. And I meant to clean up, really I did, but I thought I had all night. You did rather hint that you might not come back... And I was tired and...” She trailed off.

“I told you, it’s no problem. I’m just grateful you gave up your Saturday night.”

“My pleasure.” Well, the later part anyway. “So how did the party go? How come you didn’t spend the night in the arms of the perfect Diana?”

His lips twitched. “Maybe perfect doesn’t turn me on.”



She traced the line of silky hair that ran down the middle of his stomach, disappearing into the waistband of his jeans. “What does turn you on, Captain Matt?”

“Last night I had a hankering for a bad girl.”

“Is that how you see me?”

He shrugged. “Isn’t it how you see yourself?” He raised one hand, lightly touched the nose stud, and then trailed down the curve of her cheeks, leaving tingles in his wake, down her throat, pausing on the rapid pulse point, then lower, down her chest to where the V of her robe hindered his progress.

With his other hand, he loosened the belt, and the oversized robe fell open.

“Christ, you are beautiful.” His hand cupped one breast, sending tingles along her nerves to settle in her belly. Then he moved lower. He toyed with the small ring in her belly button, tugging on the tiny diamond. “I never thought I’d have a thing for body piercing, but for some reason, this is as hot as hell.”

“Maybe you should get your nipples pierced,” she suggested. “Or maybe a ring in the end of your cock.”

He winced. “Ouch. I don’t think so.” Then he looked thoughtful. “Would it make it better for you? Have you ever been with anyone...you know...?”

“No.” She giggled. “Maybe it’s not such a good idea. I’d be too scared of you getting it caught on something. Or ripping the condom...or. No, definitely not. Anyway, your cock needs no adornment—it’s perfect as it is.”

“Good. I think.”

Darcy moved closer, so she pressed up against him, feeling the hard length of his perfect erection, and she melted inside. Raising her head as Matt lowered his, their mouths met in a kiss that robbed her of the ability to think. Her arm came up without thought, her hand curling around the back of his neck as his slid beneath the robe to cup her ass and pull her closer.

When the kiss ended, she was gasping for air. Matt stared down at her. “I told myself I was going to be cool this morning, take it slow. But somehow, slow doesn’t work with us.” His hands shifted to her hips, and he lifted her, placing her on the counter behind her. She parted her thighs, and he stepped into the V, lowered his head, and kissed one nipple, then the next. His dark head against her breast was the most erotic thing she’d ever seen.

“I want to take you here, right now, in the goddamned kitchen,” he murmured against her skin, then straightened, with a rueful expression on his face.

“Have you never done it in the kitchen, Captain Matt?”

A smile curled the corners of his lips. “Before last night, I’d never done it in this house, never mind the kitchen.”

“Really?”

“Lulu has had a dampening effect on my libido.”

“Not that I noticed.”

He stared down at her, his hot gaze roaming over her body. “God, you make me feel like a man. But the kitchen will have to be another time. The condoms are upstairs.”

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She waved a hand to where her bag sat on the counter. “I might be able to help with that. In my bag.”

“You carry condoms in your bag?”

Did he sound censorial? She’d let him get away with it this once. “Doesn’t every sensible girl?” Then she gave a shrug. “Actually, they were a present from Regan. She took me out Friday night. She reckoned I needed to get laid.”

“So she’ll be happy, then.”

“Not really. She reckoned I needed to get laid to stop thinking about getting laid by you.”

“Oh. You were thinking about us?”

“Maybe.”

He frowned but reached across and slid the bag over to her. She rummaged inside and tossed him a condom. “And did you get laid on Friday night?”

“Hell, no. Regan said I was giving off ‘fuck you’ vibes when I should have been giving off ‘fuck me’ ones.”

He chuckled. “I’m glad. Not that I’m going to get possessive or anything.”

“Me neither.” But she’d had enough of talking. She pushed her fingers into the

waistband of his jeans, then flicked open the button, and rolled down the zipper. Underneath, he was naked. His cock sprang free, and she melted just a little bit more. As she wrapped one hand around him, he groaned.

He tore open the condom with his teeth, handed it to her...and the phone rang.

“Shit,” he muttered.

“Ignore it.” She reached for him, but he stepped back. She should have known he was the sort of person who couldn’t ignore a ringing phone.

“It’s six o’clock in the morning,” he said. “No one rings at six unless it’s important.”

He turned away, zipping his fly with difficulty, and crossed to the phone. He glanced at the caller ID and shook his head, but he picked up the phone. “Mom. It’s six o’clock in the morning.”

Darcy jumped down from the counter and fastened her robe. It didn’t seem right being naked while he talked to his mother.

She tuned out the call and wandered around the spotlessly clean kitchen, switching on the coffee pot, getting milk out of the fridge, a mug from the cupboard. By the time Matt ended the call, she was seated at the table, sipping her coffee.

“That was my mom,” he said, taking the seat opposite her and running a hand through his hair. He appeared a little hassled.

“Don’t you get on with your mother?”

He leaned back in his chair and considered his answer, so it clearly wasn’t a simple one. He got up, poured himself a mug of black coffee, then came back and sat down.

“Truth? I love her like crazy, but she drives me nuts. Always did. And Dad’s just the same.”

“Why?”

“They’re just the most unorganized, impulsive people I’ve ever come across.”

“Were you swapped in the hospital?”

“Hah. Probably. But they’re so volatile. Either up in the air or down in the dumps. Madly in love or hating each other. By the time I was seventeen, they’d split up and got back together again five times. I always felt I had to be the responsible one.”

“That’s how come you turned out so...”

He raised a brow.

“Organized?” she suggested.

“Someone had to be,” he grumbled. “The last time they got back together, they decided a new start was what they needed, and so they headed off halfway around the world.”

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“That’s when they immigrated to Australia?”

“Yeah. Took Steven with them, but I’d just joined the army, so I stayed.”

“Have they not been back?”

“Dad came back for Steven’s funeral, but otherwise, no. They don’t have a lot of spare money, and it’s an expensive trip. But I’ve been out there a few times. Otherwise I would never have met my sister.”

“How old is she?”

“Ten. She’s a lot like me—”

“Boring and stuffy and too tidy and—”

“Yeah. She’s a cool ten going on seventy. And she keeps them in order. Though they seem to have calmed down a little now. Anyway, that was my mother phoning to say they decided to come over. They’ve never met Lulu.”

“Why didn’t Steven ask them to take Lulu?” It was something she’d wondered ever since she’d heard that Matt had been made Lulu’s guardian.

“Steven was estranged from them when he died. He hadn’t seen them in years. Anyway, they’re getting on a plane tonight. And they’ll be here tomorrow.”

“Wow. Impulsive.”

“Guilt, I think. I was a little pissed off with them. I called Mom after you told me about Steven. Apparently, he’d been in trouble over there, and they hadn’t thought to mention it to me.”

“Would it have made a difference?”

“Who knows now? But I haven’t spoken to them since. My mother doesn’t like feeling in the wrong, so she’s flying over here for a bit of delayed maternal affection.”

“That’s nice.”

“Hmm. I’ve actually gotten on well with them since they moved. They haven’t pissed me off nearly as frequently.”

“A few thousand miles apart will do that.” She thought about her own parents. How she missed them. “Enjoy them. You never know when your family will be taken from you.”

His expression turned serious. “I’m sorry. I know you lost your parents and then your sister. It was insensitive of me.”

“Not really. And I’m glad Lulu has one set of grandparents to spoil her.”

“And Hannah will be another aunt.”

“Are they staying for long?”

“I have no clue. But fingers crossed they fly back before we all drive each other crazy.” He leaned back in his chair. “So where were we, before my mother so inconveniently interrupted?”

She pulled the condom out of her pocket and held it up. “Just about to christen your kitchen.”

And the telephone rang again. She raised a brow as he got up to answer. Then she threw the condom. It hit him in the chest and fell to the floor.

This time she listened. She gathered it was work of some kind, and it ended with, “I’ll be there in half an hour.”

As he put the phone down, she got to her feet. “I guess the kitchen will have to wait.”

He lifted one shoulder. “Sorry. Work. I don’t suppose you could look after Lulu?”

“No problem.” At least if she couldn’t have Matt, she could have Lulu, the next best thing.



### Chapter Thirteen

Matt grinned as he unlocked the door.

He'd been gone longer than expected, but for once, he didn't have to worry about the babysitter complaining, because it was Darcy.

Things were working out great. The sex had been the best ever. His dick twitched just thinking about it. And he wanted her again already. Maybe Lulu would be tired and they could put her to bed and...

Christ, they were like an old married couple. Except for the married part.

And that was another good thing. Darcy didn't want to get married any more than he did.

But as he stepped into the hallway, the house was quiet. No squealing Lulu running to meet him. He peered into the lounge, but it was empty. A few toys were strewn across the floor. A coloring book lay open on the table.

Where were they? Had something happened? But Darcy would have called him. She had a number where she could reach him in case of emergencies.

He headed to the kitchen. The breakfast dishes were piled in the sink, but otherwise the place was tidy. He smiled.

Then he noticed the note on the table. He crossed the room and picked it up.

I have an eleven o'clock class. Taken Lulu with me. Darcy.

She'd taken Lulu with her to the gym. Without asking him? Obviously. And he would have said no. Because it was no place for a two-year-old child. Besides, if Darcy was taking a class, then who was looking after Lulu?

He turned around and headed out of the house and back to his car. Fifteen minutes later, he'd worked himself up into a temper. He'd thought he could trust her, and the moment he turned his back... He pulled up in a no-parking zone across from the gym.

A blond woman was on reception. "Good morning. How can—?"

"Where's Darcy?" he asked, cutting her off.

"She's teaching a class, but—"

He didn't wait any longer, just headed through the door at the back that led to the training rooms.

He opened a couple of doors before he found the right one. It was a large bare room with mirrors along one wall. There were about ten people, a mix of men and women, doing some sort of martial art—Taekwondo probably. Darcy was at the front, performing some complicated movement that the others were following.

Where the hell was Lulu?

Then he saw her. She was at the end of the line in the front row. Dressed in the outfit Darcy had bought her that first day. Her back was to him, but he could see her in the mirror, her face an image of concentration as she tried to follow the moves. Then she looked straight into the mirror and her little face lit up.

“Matt!” she squealed.

Everyone stopped. Darcy straightened. She caught sight of him in the doorway, and a smile nearly broke but turned into a frown before she could complete the expression. She glanced at her watch and her frown deepened.

Lulu turned and ran straight at him. He reached down and picked her up, but when he turned to take her out of there, she screamed.

“No. No. No. No.” Then she punched him on the shoulder and wriggled.

What the hell?

“Lulu stay. Learn to fight. Like Darcy.”

They were the center of attention now, all eyes on them. Including Darcy’s. She was looking...pissed. What did she have to be pissed about?

“Sorry, folks,” she said. “I guess we’ll be cutting this session short. I’ll make it up next time. Promise.”

He held onto a wriggling Lulu until the last person had left and the door closed, then he lowered her to the floor. “I got back and you weren’t there.”

“I left you a note.”

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“You said you’d look after her. If you couldn’t do it, you should have said so.”

“You were late.”

“It took longer than I expected.” Was he defending himself? He tried to hold on to his righteous anger, but it was slipping away. And maybe it hadn’t been all that righteous, after all. He rallied his argument. “You could have phoned. I left my number.”

“You said that was for emergencies. This wasn’t an emergency.” She came to stand in front of him, hands on her hips, looking totally badass and sexy as hell. He had a sudden flashback to being deep inside her. He had a strange feeling that he might have fucked up his chances of that happening again anytime soon. “You shouldn’t have brought her here. This is no place for a child.”

Her nostrils flared, her eyes narrowed. “Why? Because it’s full of horrible, violent, drug-addicted people like me?”

“I didn’t say that.”

She raised an eyebrow. “You implied it. There’s nothing wrong with this place. She was having fun. Weren’t you, Lulu?”

He tore his gaze away to look at his niece. She was standing in exactly the same position as Darcy—hands on her hips, looking back at him. “Yes.”

God, he was going to be in trouble in a few years. Lulu was a mini Darcy in the

making. He looked back at Darcy. He had a weird feeling that he was totally in the wrong here. But he'd expected her to be there, and when she wasn't, he'd been...disappointed. That was an understatement, and maybe it had scared him a little, maybe making him...overreact? He was trying to work out how to make it right when Darcy spoke again.

"Hey, Lulu baby. You want to see how that last move works?"

"Yes!"

"Should I show you on Uncle Matt?"

"Matt, Matt, Matt." Lulu jumped up and down, clearly liking the idea.

He had an inkling of what was coming next. He saw it in the tenseness of her muscles as she prepared to move. He could have avoided it. Hell, he was trained in unarmed combat—he could have taken her down. But maybe he deserved this. So he gave a mental shrug, relaxed his muscles, and let her go ahead and give him a little payback.

She whirled around super-fast, with one leg raised, and kicked him firmly in the chest. He hadn't expected the force, and he toppled over backward, landing with a crash, the air whooshing out of his lungs.

He lay there for a moment, staring up at the ceiling.

He heard a giggle. "More. More." He turned his head. Lulu was bouncing up and down. Sadistic little monster.

"No more for now," Darcy said. Praise the Lord. "Let's go get a cold drink and cool down. Uncle Matt will join us when he's had time to think about what he wants to say next."

Sorry?

He watched as she took Lulu's hand and led her from the room, passing his audience as she went. He hadn't even heard the others come in. Two women, a blonde and a brunette—who he recognized as the woman who had interrupted him when he'd been about to screw Darcy over her desk. Regan. And a man, tall, with overlong blond hair and an amused grin on his face. At least he was providing someone with entertainment. The blonde he recognized from the first night he'd seen Darcy in the club.

He waited until Darcy and Lulu were gone and then he sat up and ran a hand through his hair.

“Well, that went well,” Regan murmured.

“I thought Darcy said he was in the SAS,” the blonde said. “That's a little worrying.”

“Actually, I'm pretty sure he let her knock him down.”

“He did? Why?”

“Probably because he realized he was being a total prick.”

Yeah. That about summed it up. But Darcy had that effect on him. She messed up his nice, organized life and fucked with his nice, organized brain.

“He's awfully quiet. Do you think he hit his head?” the blonde asked.

Regan took a step closer and crouched down beside him. She held up two fingers. “What am I trying to say?”

“Fuck off?” he suggested, and pushed himself to his feet.

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“Correct. No, I reckon his head is fine. Well, as fine as it was before Darcy knocked him on his ass. Which isn’t saying much.”

Okay, maybe he deserved that. But that didn’t mean he had to stick around and take any more abuse. “Where’s she gone?”

“Upstairs. But I’d give her a few minutes, if I were you. She looked pretty pissed. Anyway, Summer wants to talk to you.” She turned to the blonde. “Unless you’ve changed your mind now that you’ve met him.”

What could she possibly want to talk to him about?

She came toward him, a smile on her face, and he looked at her properly for the first time. She looked...sweet. Long silky blond hair, blue eyes, and she was small, probably a foot shorter than him, and slender in jeans and a white T-shirt. She held a hand out to him. “I’m Summer,” she said.

The name suited her. He took her hand in his and shook it briefly.

He recognized the name. Darcy’s other flatmate. They’d all shared a cell together in Holloway, but unlike Darcy, Summer didn’t look like an ex-con. He glanced from her to Regan, who was leaning against the wall, the man next to her.

“And this is Regan, who I think you’ve already met.”

She grinned. “When I rescued Darcy from his clutches once before.”



“Yeah, thanks for that,” he muttered.

“And this is Nate. Regan’s fiancé.” The man stepped forward and shook hands, the amused grin still on his face. Maybe he should offer commiserations. He remembered now—Darcy had said Regan’s fiancé had put together the report on Steven. “The detective?” he said.

“Ex-detective.”

“There was a little conflict of interest when he decided he wanted to marry me,” Regan added. “It was the force or me.”

Introductions over, Matt turned back to Summer. He needed to get after Darcy. “You wanted to talk to me?”

“Yes. I asked Donna—on reception—to let me know when you arrived.”

That’s how his audience had turned up. But he still had no clue what they had to talk about.

“I met Lulu the other day,” Summer continued.

“And...?”

“I sort of asked her to my wedding.”

“You’re getting married?” Though he remembered now, Darcy had said something about shopping for bridesmaids’ dresses.

“Next week. Darcy’s my best friend, and Lulu is her only family. I thought it would be nice. But Darcy’s also one of my bridesmaids, and Lulu is...”

“A bit of a handful?” Regan offered.

“She has a lot of energy,” Summer said. Yes, she was definitely nice. “So I wondered if you were free, if you’d like to come as well. Darcy said you’re brilliant with Lulu.”

She did? Why did that make him feel all warm and fuzzy?

“You could look after her while Darcy does her bridesmaid stuff.”

“Do I get to see Darcy in a bridesmaid dress?”

“Of course. And we ordered one for Lulu to match. They’re going to look so cute.”

“You’re talking about Darcy here?”

Suddenly she looked fierce. “Darcy can be cute if she wants to be.” She stepped closer and prodded him in the chest. “Darcy is the best person ever. You made her feel bad today, and I’m willing to overlook it this once because you don’t know her that well yet. But do it again and you’ll have to deal with me.”

“And me,” Regan said. She nudged the man at her side.

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“Yeah, me too,” Nate said. “Though I’m not sure I want to take on the SAS.”

“Ex-SAS.” Matt blew out his breath. “I’m glad she’s got friends like you. But I think Darcy can look after herself.”

“Maybe. But she’s lost so much, and she tries to hide it because she thinks she has to be tough.”

Did she? He’d believed the toughness went all the way through. Did he have the power to hurt her? That twisted something inside him. He’d thought her invulnerable. He’d liked that about her.

“I’d love to come to your wedding,” he said. “Now I’d better go convince Darcy that she actually wants me there.”

“She’s in the apartment. Along the corridor, up the stairs. The blue door.”

“Thank you.” He could feel their gazes on him as he walked away

He took the stairs two at a time, then hesitated at the top. He wasn’t used to apologizing. Hell, it took Darcy to make him act in a way that needed apologizing for. He tapped on the door but decided not to wait for her to open it—in case she didn’t. The door opened into a lounge area with a big window overlooking the street, but Darcy wasn’t anywhere in sight. He looked around. The room was large, with five doors leading off it. Darcy owned the gym and this place. Together, they must be worth millions. He remembered her offering to help out with Lulu—he’d thought she was just being polite, but she was a wealthy woman.

He could hear her voice intermingled with Lulu's, and he followed the sound. He found them both in the big kitchen. Lulu glanced up as he appeared in the doorway and squealed. She ran to him, and he scooped her up and gave her a hug.

At least Lulu wasn't mad at him—she had a short memory.

Darcy, he wasn't so sure of. She'd changed into jeans and a red shirt that made her skin look white. A wary expression crossed her face.

"I'm sorry," he said over Lulu's shoulder.

She raised an eyebrow. She wasn't going to make this easy for him.

"I overreacted," he continued. Still nothing. He could do this. "I got home and you weren't there. And I was...disappointed."

That got a reaction. Shock flashed in her eyes. "You were?"

"I was deep in this fantasy, where Lulu was tired and actually went to sleep in the middle of the day. And you and I could finish what we started this morning."

"Lulu not tired," she murmured against his neck, then gave a huge yawn.

"I know, sweetheart. It was a daydream." He rubbed her back. "Only you weren't there. I panicked, and then I found your note and...as I said, I was disappointed. And I didn't like that, so I got angry."

"Why didn't you like it?"

Jesus, she wanted her pound of flesh. But maybe he deserved this. He shrugged. "Give me a second." He carried Lulu back into the lounge and laid her down on the

sofa. “Don’t go to sleep,” he ordered.

“I won’t.” She shoved a fist in her mouth and her eyes closed. “Woof.”

Darcy hadn’t moved when he got back, and he took the seat opposite her, tracing a pattern on the table while he contemplated how much of himself he wanted to reveal. But maybe it was best to stick to the truth.

“I wanted you from the moment I met you. When I had no clue who you were. Then I found out. That didn’t go down well.”

“Hey, I get that. I was a mentally unstable, violent woman.” She got up and went to the refrigerator, then pulled out two bottles of beer, flipped the tops off, and handed him one. He hoped that was a sign that she was going to forgive him.

“Yes. Then you weren’t, but I still knew it would be a mistake. I don’t do relationships.”

She sipped her beer and gave him a not-very-friendly look over the top of the bottle. “I never asked you for one.”

“I know that. And even if you were looking, I’d probably be the last person on your list. We didn’t get off to a good start, and no doubt I’ll always remind you of Steven.”

“Maybe in the beginning. Not anymore.”

“And everyone was telling me I needed a good woman in my life. That I should stop being selfish. Get married for Lulu’s sake.”

“And even if I wasn’t unstable, no one would ever take me for a good woman.”

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He remembered what Summer had said. And suddenly he hated that Darcy thought she wasn't good. "You're different," he said. "Unique. Anyway, it only took one date for me to realize the 'good woman' thing wasn't going to work for me."

"Poor Diana." But she sounded far from sympathetic. "Just let her down easy and hopefully she won't resign."

Christ, he hadn't even thought of that. He'd lost a couple of former nannies because they'd decided they wanted more than a professional relationship from him. But he reckoned Diana was far too sensible to take offense. Wasn't she? He was coming to realize that he knew nothing about women. He pushed the worry aside—he'd address the problem if it arose. He had enough real ones without anticipating issues.

"After the dance Saturday night, I dropped her off. She invited me to stay."

"Aw, it must be hard, being so much in demand."

"Will you stop being so pissy and let me finish?"

She bared her teeth in a smile and gave a little nod. "Go ahead."

"I just wanted to get home, even if I wasn't ready to admit why. And there you were, asleep on my couch. Fucking hottest thing I have ever seen."

"You know it's creepy to watch people sleep."

Christ, she had a smart mouth. He knew only one way to stop that. He put down his

beer, leaned across the space between them, fisted the material of her shirt, and dragged her to him. Then he pressed his lips against hers. For a second, she pulled against him, and then she was kissing him back. He kissed her until the tension oozed from her taut figure, then he kissed her some more, loving the taste of her, the feel of her warm, velvet tongue stroking along the length of his. He kissed her until his dick was hard and his balls ached.

Finally, he released his hold on her and sat back.

She stared into his eyes, raised one brow. “You were saying?”

“Hottest fucking thing ever.” He picked up his beer and swallowed the rest in one go. He studied her for a moment. She might make out she was hard as nails, but that wasn’t who she was. And she was at least listening to him. “The thing is, Lulu forms a bond between us. That means we can’t afford to fall out or even just walk away if things get tough, or we piss each other off, or you get bored of me and want to move on to someone else.”

“Hey, you’re the one who went out on a date with another woman last night.”

“And you went on the pickup the night before.”

“I didn’t pick anyone up, though.”

“No, and that means something, because I’m sure you had plenty of offers.”

“Maybe.”

“But you wanted me.”

“Maybe.”

“And you can have me. We can have each other. I’ve been around enough to know that this sort of...connection isn’t normal. It’s hot as hell and it’s special. Why deny ourselves? We both know it won’t last, and we’re not going to get all freaked out when it’s over. Afterward, we can continue as friends, with Lulu between us.”

“Sounds easy.”

He had a funny idea that nothing with this woman would ever be easy. That he was maybe deluding himself because he wanted her so badly, needed to convince her that this could work.

She scrubbed a hand through her hair, so it stood on end, then rubbed her finger across her lower lip, something she did when she was thinking. “Okay,” she said. “Apology accepted.”

He’d actually forgotten what he was apologizing for. Oh, yeah, being a dick. “Good.”

“But I think you should take Lulu and go now. I need a little...space.”

What did that mean? That she hadn’t forgiven him? “Can I see you?”

“When?”

“My parents arrive tomorrow, so I’ll have to spend some time with them—get them settled. Tuesday night? After Lulu has gone to sleep. We could meet somewhere.”

“You can come here if you like.”



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He looked around the place. “Will your flatmates be here? I don’t think they like me.”

She grinned. “No. They spend most nights with their men. It will be just us.”

He heaved a sigh. “Sounds wonderful.” He rose to his feet, crossed to her, and leaned down, kissing her forehead. “This will work. We’ll make it work.” He stepped back. “And you can tell Summer I’ll be happy to come to the wedding next week.” He paused. “Who’s she marrying?” Was it going to be some criminal? Summer looked sweet, but she must have been in prison for something.

“A guy called Nik Masterton. He’s a billionaire.”

“Really? Good catch.”

“On his part, maybe. He’s lucky to have her.”

...

Darcy sat at the table for a long time after the front door slammed closed behind him.

The day had been a rollercoaster. It was only early afternoon and she was exhausted. Too much raw emotion.

He’d pissed her off good and proper when he’d stormed into her class earlier. But she was honest enough to admit that maybe she’d been primed and looking for an excuse to be pissed off.

She was scared.

She was coming to love Lulu, to feel a bond she hadn't suspected could exist. They were so alike, it was scary at times. And she didn't want to risk anything getting in the way of the budding relationship with her niece. Part of her suspected that this thing with Matt was exceedingly risky. He'd done a great job of talking away the downside. He'd made it sound so easy. They'd have sex until they didn't want to have sex, and then they'd be best buddies and everything would be lovely. It all sounded very civilized and sensible. Which was all well and good except...

She wasn't a particularly sensible person.

And while on the surface, Matt appeared organized, she guessed there were a lot of emotions simmering underneath. From what he had said about his childhood, she was guessing he'd locked his emotions away when he was very young. That didn't mean they would stay there.

They were two totally different people. What if Matt decided he was no longer interested in sex with her, while she was still desperate to jump his bones? It would hardly make for a comfortable relationship. And while she'd never considered herself the jealous type, last night she'd had an almost overwhelming urge to rend the perfect Diana limb from limb. Or at least mess up her perfect hair and makeup.

Matt clearly didn't see their relationship lasting long term. Neither did she. Really, she didn't. I do not do long term. So presumably, at some point, she was going to have to come face to face with another woman. Whatever he'd said about the last two years, he didn't come across as the celibate type. So no doubt there would be others in the future. Hell, by that time, he'd probably be thinking of her as his good mate Darcy, and she'd still be thinking about him naked. He'd probably ask her to babysit, and she'd have to, and she'd probably explode.

If she were sensible, she'd step back now. Before she got in deeper. Because she reckoned Matt's dick might just be addictive.

But—had she mentioned that she wasn't a sensible person?

Besides, her life had been such a pile of crap lately that she deserved something nice. Though Matt and nice didn't seem to be a match. The sex last night went way beyond nice.

Best ever.

So maybe she would give herself a while, just to enjoy this thing between them. But she'd be on her guard, and she would keep her emotions detached. Just keep reminding herself of what an anal dickhead he was. With a temper. And the cleverest mouth and fingers and...

Shut up.

She glanced up as Regan and Summer came into the room.

"You shagged him," Regan said, plonking herself down on the seat opposite. It wasn't a question. But how the hell did Regan know? Yeah, she might not have come home last night, but neither had Regan or Summer, so that wouldn't have given her away.

"Did we not warn you about sleeping with him? He's Steven's brother, remember?"

"He's not like Steven."

"And now you're defending him. This is serious."

“It’s not serious,” she said through gritted teeth.

“But you’re not denying the shagging bit?”

They were both studying her, and she resisted the urge to squirm. She told herself that they were just looking out for her. That was part of the pact they’d made before they’d been released. They had each other’s backs. “No.”

Regan gave a sly grin. “How was it?”

“None of your business.”

“Leave her alone,” Summer said. She got up and went to the fridge, pulled out a bottle of white wine then three glasses from the cabinet. She opened the bottle, poured wine into each glass, and handed them around. Then she took her seat again and grinned. “So how was it?”

Darcy downed the wine, held out her glass for more—there was just the one glass on Sunday, so the rest of the day was her own. She’d drink wine and lie on the sofa, maybe watch a movie. Summer filled her glass.

She realized the other two were waiting for an answer. She wasn’t going to discuss sex with Matt, but just to keep them off her back, she offered... “The best.” She drank some more wine. “But we’ve both agreed that it’s no big deal. Neither of us is looking for anything long term. We’ll just have...some fun.”

“Sounds like a plan. Except Mr. Serious Soldier Boy doesn’t look like the fun type.”

“He’s not the long-term relationship type, either.”

Regan cast her a sharp glance. “And are you? You planning to marry Soldier Boy?”

She gave Regan her best withering look. “Hardly.” She shrugged. “I don’t plan to marry anyone. And I’ll be careful. I won’t risk messing things up with Matt because of Lulu.”

The other two cast each other a meaningful glance. Trouble was, Darcy had no clue what it meant. “What?” she snapped.

“Well, honey, we’ve been there. We’ve done the whole ‘we’re not getting involved, it’s only sex’ thing. And it didn’t work.”

“Yes, but it was different for you two. You were both in love, and now you’re both getting married. That’s never going to happen with me and Matt.”

“Why?”

“Because he told me so.” She gave another shrug. “He doesn’t do marriage, and I don’t do love. We’re safe.”

“Except you’re more than halfway in love already,” Summer said.

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“I didn’t mean with Matt. I meant with Lulu. You make out you’re such a hard-ass, but we’ve seen you with her. You’d do anything for that little girl.”

Darcy wasn’t ready to go there. She was still trying to get her feelings about Lulu sorted out. But she knew Summer was right. And that scared the hell out of her. Lulu was so small, so vulnerable. She needed love and stability and a proper home. And Darcy could give her none of that. She hadn’t been able to keep Emma safe. Why would she think she could do any better with Emma’s daughter?

Luckily, it wasn’t down to Darcy. Matt would do his best for Lulu. Unless something happened to him. He’d all but admitted that his job was dangerous.

Don’t think about the future.

That was the best option. For now, at least. This would be a time out.

“I am a hard-ass. And I don’t need to do anything for Lulu. She’s got Matt.”

### Chapter Fourteen

A sense of anticipation tingled in his belly as he pushed open the door from the street into the gym. It was Thursday and the third night he'd come to see her.

Each night, after he came home from work, he'd put Lulu to bed—usually his mom would have given her dinner by then. He'd given Diana some paid leave while his family was here—his mom wanted to spend time with Lulu. Besides, he'd felt a little awkward around Diana after their date. And maybe a little guilty. She was clearly expecting something more from him, and what the hell was he supposed to say? So this, at least, put off an awkward situation.

Then he'd stick around the house until he was sure Lulu was settled for the night. Tonight, it had taken an age—he suspected Lulu could sense his eagerness to get away. Anyway, it had been eight thirty by the time she was asleep, and it was nearly nine by the time he'd gotten to Darcy's place.

He'd thought the excitement of that first night would fade. He'd had no doubt that the sex would continue to be good. Just not that good. But he'd been wrong. It got better. Darcy was wild and inventive and liked to experiment. Just the thought of that caused his dick to jerk in his pants and his blood to pulse in his brain.

He paused in the action of pushing open the door and took a deep breath.

Get a grip.

He was bordering on being out of control, and that scared him. He needed to get a



handle on things. Right now, he reckoned Darcy had all the control in this relationship. He needed to change that.

Donna, the girl on reception, looked up with a smile as the door closed behind him.

“Hi, Matt. You here to see Darcy?”

“Yeah. Is she down here?”

“She just finished a class. She’s in room four.”

“Thanks.”

Maybe he needed to prove to himself that he didn’t need sex. Yeah, he wanted it, but it wouldn’t control him. He’d control it.

He found Darcy packing away equipment. She was wearing her usual workout gear of black leggings and a black tank top that bared her midriff. Black sneakers. She turned around as he entered the room, a smile lighting her face, her gaze wandering over him in a way that made his mind turn instantly to sex. Well, turn back to sex. It was never far from his thoughts where Darcy was concerned. She stalked toward him, coming to a halt only inches away, so close he breathed in the scent of hot woman, fresh sweat, and something sweet.

Christ, she turned him on like nothing he could remember.

She looped a hand around his neck, her fingers curling into his hair, sending tingles running through him. She shifted even closer, coming up on tiptoe and pressing her lips to his as she thrust her body into him. His lips parted under her onslaught, and her tongue pushed inside as she took control of the kiss. Fire streaked through his blood, and he fought the urge to shove her up against the wall, to take her right then

and there. Her mouth slid from his, biting across his jawline, nipping and licking, sucking his earlobe into her mouth.

“Hi, soldier,” she murmured. “No hiding what you’re after.” As she whispered the words, she pushed her hips against his, rubbing against his dick, which was already hard.

Suddenly, he felt the need to exert himself. To prove he was stronger than this. He swallowed then stepped back. She raised an eyebrow, and he cleared his throat. “I thought we might go out for a drink.”

A little wrinkle formed between her eyes. “A drink?”

“Maybe to the wine bar down the road.”

“I have wine upstairs.”

“Don’t you want to go out with me? Are you ashamed of me, Darcy?”

The frown deepened, but she considered her answer carefully. “Not ashamed.” She gave him a bright smile. “Any girl would be proud to be seen with you. But let me tell you in on a little secret. I’m a sure thing. You don’t need to impress me or buy me drinks or...” She reached out and trailed a hand down over his stomach, lower, her fingers grazing the bulge in his pants. His eyes closed, and he groaned.

Jesus, what had he been thinking?

He was stronger than this. He had to prove, if only to himself, that he wasn’t completely at her mercy.

“I just thought we could...talk.”

She studied him, her head cocked to one side. “What do we have to talk about? Has something happened? Are things going okay with your parents?”

Things were actually going great. They all loved Lulu, especially Hannah, who was taking her role as aunt very seriously. And Lulu was loving the attention. He’d have to fit in a trip to Australia next year. Maybe Darcy would like to come. “They’re fine. I think my mom and dad might have finally grown up.” They were as infatuated with each other as ever, but they didn’t seem to strike so many sparks off each other and hadn’t fought once since they’d arrived. “I think they feel bad about Steven. It’s made them think. And Hannah is a sensible child—she keeps them in line.”

“She sounds like you.”

“Better than me. She’s the real thing.”

She smiled. “There, we’ve talked. Now can we fuck?”

Shit, she was so...direct.

“In a little while.”

“Have I worn you out?” She sounded worried. “Are you okay?”

What was he supposed to say? But he’d sworn to himself that he was going to be honest about this relationship. “Truth?”

“Why not?”

“It scares me how much I want you. Tonight was a sort of test. To prove I could control myself, put off the moment, as it were.”

Her lips twitched. “You did really well.” She considered him for a moment. “I don’t want to go out for a drink. But there is something I love almost as much as fucking.”

“There is?” He was intrigued.

“Yeah. Why don’t we fight?”

“What?” She’d taken him by surprise. She did that a lot.

“Let’s get physical in a different way. Show me what an SAS guy can do.”

“Ex-SAS,” he replied. He wasn’t sure he could fight her. He’d back off from causing her pain.

“Scared I’ll hurt you?” she asked.

He was terrified. But not physically. “Why not?”

She waved toward a door at the back of the room. “You’ll find some sweats in there. Go get changed.”

He went over and found the door led into a small changing room with a shower cubicle at one end. Shelving lined one wall, and there was a pile of clean sweats on it. He rummaged through and found some that looked like they would fit. He shrugged out of his shirt, leaving his white T-shirt on, then kicked off his shoes and dropped his pants.

“You have a gorgeous ass.”

He glanced over his shoulder and found her leaning against the open door, watching him. “Thank you.”

“Sure you want to do this? There’s still time to back out. We can just go upstairs where there’s a nice, comfortable bed waiting for us.”

“You think I’m a nice, comfortable kind of guy?”

She smirked. “Hell, yeah. You want to prove me different?”

“Hell, yeah.” He pulled on the sweats. She didn’t move as he headed out of the small

room, so he brushed against her as he passed, electric shocks shivering across his skin. He walked to the center of the room and turned to face her. She'd followed him and was standing relaxed. His gaze wandered down over her body. Her nipples were hard little peaks pushing against her top.

"Ready?" she asked, and he dragged his gaze upward to find her watching him with a small smile on her face.

"For anything."

"We'll see."

Then she whirled around and kicked him in the chest. The move took him by surprise, and he swayed but managed to keep his feet. Then she swept his legs out from under him, and he crashed to the floor.

"Never underestimate your enemy," she murmured.

Was she his enemy? He didn't think so. Not anymore. He just wasn't sure what she was. He got to his feet. "I was distracted by your nipples."

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Her gaze immediately lowered to her breasts, and he took advantage of her distraction and side-swiped her legs out from under her. She went down but was up again before he could open his mouth to gloat.

Then they were fighting.

He was stronger, but she was faster. Whirling, kicking out, punching... Soon he forgot he didn't want to hurt her and just concentrated on staying on his feet.

"I don't think you're trying," she murmured when there was a lull in the movement. And then she was off again. This time he zoned everything out, just focused on his opponent. His heart was racing. Darcy's skin gleamed with a fine sheen of sweat, and her breasts rose and fell. His momentary distraction was enough, and he found himself once again staring up at the ceiling. He didn't move.

"Had enough, soldier?" She stood over him, hands on her hips, the sexiest thing he had ever seen.

He reached out his hand and she took it. He gave a sharp tug and pulled her down on top of him, so she sprawled across his body, and heat shot through him.

"Your technique is good, but I'll always be stronger."

"I'll still end up on top," she said, coming up onto her elbows.

"Only if I want you there." He moved quickly, grabbed her hips, and turned her so she was flat on her back. He grasped her wrists, held them above her head. She licked

her lips, and the heat in his belly exploded. He pressed himself down against her, his dick hard, and she opened her legs, so he pushed up against her core.

“I could get away if I wanted to,” she said.

“But you don’t want to.”

She pressed her hips against him, wriggled, and his eyes closed for a second. When he opened them, she was staring back at him. “What do you think?”

He lowered his head and bit down on her nipple, then worked his way up, kissing along the taut line of her throat, sucking on her earlobe, finally kissing her lips. They parted beneath his, and he pushed inside, kissed her as flames licked along his nerves, kissed her until he ran out of oxygen and had to come up for air.

Okay, the fighting had been fun. But it was definitely time for the fucking. He released his grip on one wrist and came up on his elbow. They were both wearing far too many clothes. He dragged his gaze from Darcy’s mouth and caught sight of their image in the mirror, then his gaze shifted to something else. A figure stood leaning against the open door, and he went instantly still.

“Hey, asshole. You forget it’s my birthday?”

It was Angie, and she had a pissed-off expression on her face.

Hell, yes, he’d forgotten. Gary was away on maneuvers, and Matt had promised her weeks ago that he’d keep the night free, and they could go out for dinner. “Shit. I’m sorry.”

“I take it that’s a yes.”



...

Darcy's gaze shifted from the man on top of her to the woman at the door. She had no clue who she was, but she was guessing this was a friend of Matt's. More than a friend? She didn't think so. The expression on the woman's face was a combination of amused and pissed off.

She sighed. She was hot and wet and... She sighed again. She was going to get locks put on the doors, though she supposed it would take some explaining. So I can shag my fuck-buddy without interruption. She didn't think that would go down too well. Sam didn't approve of her relationship with Matt. Neither did Regan and Summer. They all reckoned she was heading for one great big heartbreak.

Of course she wasn't.

She could stop this anytime.

Matt hadn't moved, and she shoved at his chest with her free hand. He looked down, his expression so...frustrated...that she almost grinned. Not quite, though, because she was experiencing the same disappointment. "We could just tell her to piss off," she murmured.

His expression cleared a little, and he gave her a rueful smile. "I wish." He took a deep breath. "Just give me a minute." He closed his eyes, and she could almost see him taking control of himself. His erection no longer prodded her in the belly. How sad was that? Finally, he took another deep breath and pushed himself off her. He stood, running a hand through his hair, glancing from her to the strange woman hovering in the doorway.

"Aren't you going to introduce us?" the woman said. It occurred to Darcy that if she'd had any consideration at all, she would have backed out of the room as soon as

she had seen what was going on. Obviously, consideration wasn't high on this woman's list of priorities. She was attractive, with dark hair in a shoulder length bob and a strong face. Above medium height and athletic-looking.

"Darcy, this is Angie...an old friend. Angie, this is Darcy, Lulu's aunt." He gave a small shrug. "Chat among yourselves. I need a shower." And without another word, he headed into the changing room, leaving them alone. In silence. A minute later, the water started running.

Darcy heaved a huge sigh and pushed herself to her feet. Angie had stepped into the room and the door closed behind her. Polite chit-chat had never been her strong point, but Darcy had a sudden urge to know exactly who this woman was and what role she played in Matt's life.

"So," she said. "You're an old friend?"

"Yeah."

“How old? And how friendly?”

She stepped closer. “We met our first day in the army. We were both seventeen. We’re best friends—we look out for each other.”

“Aw, sweet.” Or not. Sweet didn’t seem to apply to either Matt or this woman. She pursed her lips. “And were you more than just friends?”

“Are you always this direct?”

“Not always. But usually. So?”

She shrugged. “No. He’s not my type. But we’ve been friends ever since. Served together overseas.”

“Are you still in the army?”

“No.”

Hmm. She cast a look at the door where Matt had disappeared. The water was still running. She tried again. “Happy birthday.”

The woman just studied her, eyes narrowed, and Darcy started to feel just the slightest pissed off. But this was her place. She wasn’t going to allow the woman to drive her away. “Feel free to wait outside,” she said, folding her arms across her chest.

“You should leave him alone,” Angie said.

“Leave who alone?” As if she didn’t know.

“Matt.”

“You see, that’s not really an option. Matt’s the guardian of my only niece.”

Angie waved a hand at the room. “This had nothing to do with Lulu.”

There was that pissed-off feeling again. “And this concerns you because...?”

“Because I care about Matt. And you’re bad for him. He’s an officer, and he needs someone who can support him and help him in his career. Not...”

Her own eyes narrowed. “Not?”

“No some ex-convict with tattoos and a whole lot of attitude. You’ll drag him down.” She shrugged. “I’m sorry, but it had to be said. If you care for him, you’ll let him go.”

Christ, this was like something out of a sappy movie. “You’re kidding me, right?” No one thought like that anymore. Did they?

“Image is important in the army. Matt came up from the ranks. There are a lot of people who expect him to fail. Want him to fail. He needs someone who’ll help him with his career, not hinder him.”

She had the urge to punch the woman on the nose. But that wasn’t who she was. At least, not anymore. So she smiled. “I take it you weren’t considered officer material.”

That made her mad. Yay. Her eyes narrowed. “I never applied.”

“Very sensible. It’s best to know your own limitations.” She blew out her breath. “Guess what? I don’t care what you think.” That was sort of a lie, but she’d worry about it later. Right now, she wanted Matt and his “bestie” out of here. Where the hell was he? She headed over to the changing room, opened the door, and shouted inside, “You’d better not be jacking off in there, soldier.”

Angie made a choking noise.

But at least Matt appeared in the doorway, his hair wet from the shower, fully clothed and back to his usual immaculate self. He looked between the two of them. “Everything okay?”

“Positively peachy,” she said with a saccharine smile.

“Er, good. Look, I promised Angie I’d take her out for dinner. You want to come?”

She cast him a look, which she hoped conveyed the extent of her disbelief. “And spoil the fun? I don’t think so.”

Matt obviously realized that the “peachy” comment held more than a hint of sarcasm. He looked at Angie. “Can you just wait outside for a minute?”

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Angie didn't look too keen on the idea. She opened her mouth, closed it again, cast Darcy a dirty look, and stalked out.

"Sorry," he muttered. "But I promised. It's her birthday and..."

"I think she likes you." Actually, she didn't really. She just wanted to see what Matt's reaction would be.

"What do you mean?"

"You know, likes you."

His eyes widened. "She likes women."

Oh. "Hmm, maybe she likes me, then." Ha, as if. She shrugged. "Whatever. Anyway, she doesn't like 'us.'"

"It's none of her business," he said.

"She doesn't see it that way. Apparently, I'm going to ruin your career."

He frowned. "She had no right to say that."

Suddenly, she was tired of it all. The truth was, she would be bad for his career. If they were planning on any sort of serious relationship. But they weren't. So it didn't matter. Except there was this knot of something hot and almost painful inside her. She forced herself to give a casual shrug. "Just tell her it's not serious between us."

She's worried about you."

He searched her face. "You sure you won't come? I'd like you to be friends."

"Not this time. Maybe another day. Right now, I've got a date with a hot bath and a bottle of wine."

"Jesus, I wish I could join you."

"Well, you can't."

"Will I see you tomorrow?"

"If you want to."

"I want to." He leaned down and kissed her, and then he was gone.

And for some weird reason she wanted to cry. And that was scary shit.

### Chapter Fifteen

Matt stood on the lawn of the stately home, where the wedding was taking place. Darcy had told him it was a small affair. Obviously, people's ideas of what constituted "small" differed drastically. But it was a beautiful place—the late summer leaves were just starting to turn on the huge oak trees. Flowers of every color lined the smooth lawns. Music drifted out from the open doorway.

Summer had arrived ten minutes ago, causing an explosion of excitement in his niece. He'd hefted her into his arms and carted her out just as her mouth opened on a scream. She'd shut it again. Once outside she'd informed him, very seriously, that she was going to vomit. She must have learned that word from Diana. It sounded odd and a little proper coming from a two-year-old.

He'd told her it would be a shame if she made a mess over her pretty new dress, and she'd decided she wasn't going to hurl after all.

"You okay, sweetheart?"

Lulu looked up at him with those big dark eyes and gave a solemn nod. "Lulu feel good. Back now?"

"Of course we can go back."

He picked her up and carried her up the stone staircase and into the huge hall. The actual wedding was taking place in one of the reception rooms through a set of double doors.



Summer hadn't gone in yet. Instead, she was standing outside with Regan and Darcy fussing around her. The bride seemed a little agitated, and he paused to listen.

"I told her small," Summer said. "This isn't small."

"Well, you did leave everything to his mother," Regan replied. "She's not what I would call a 'small' person."

"Just grit your teeth and think of the honeymoon," Darcy added. "And, by the way, you look so beautiful I think I'm going to cry."

Matt's eyes strayed to Darcy. And stopped. She looked beautiful as well. Her dress was a copy of Lulu's, a dusky purple sheath that left her arms bare and swept down to the floor. Otherwise, she'd made little concession to the wedding, with her hair spiked, her eyes ringed in black, and a purple stud in her nose. She caught his glance and wagged her fingers. Lulu waved wildly back and started bouncing again.

"Come on," he murmured to her. "You can play with Darcy afterward. She has important work to do now."

Before Lulu could express her disapproval of that idea, he whizzed her past the small group and slipped through the doors and into the room. Chairs were set out in rows. But Darcy had been right—it wasn't that big a wedding, maybe around fifty guests. They all looked around as he entered, probably expecting the bride. He slid into an empty chair in the back row, settling Lulu onto his lap and hoping this wouldn't take long.

Lulu wasn't that good at sitting still.

The door opened. But no bride. What the hell were they doing out there? A man entered, carrying a small dog with a purple bow in its hair. Lulu went totally

immobile on his lap, her gaze fixed on the little dog.

As the man sank into the seat next to them, Matt recognized him as Regan's boyfriend, Nate, the ex-detective.

"Hi," Nate said.

"Hi." He nodded. "Nice...dog." Actually, it looked more like a rat on a string. Maybe Lulu wouldn't even realize that it was a dog.

Nate grinned. "Don't be rude to Trixibell. She'll get upset."

Lulu reached out a hand, and the dog licked her fingers. "Woof."

Oh hell, he could see what was going to happen next. He looked down at his niece. She was staring, totally entranced. "Lulu want."

"Well, Lulu can't have."

She gritted her teeth, screwed up her face—

"Here," Nate said quickly. He placed the end of the lead in Lulu's small hand, and she grasped it tight, a huge smile splitting her face. Perhaps he should warn Nate that he might have a fight on his hands if he ever wanted Trixibell back. But for now, Lulu was happy. Matt shifted her onto the bench between them so she was in less danger of strangling the animal.

"What's happening out there?" he asked.

"Summer's having stage fright. She'll be okay."

At the front of the church, the groom stood, visibly twitching. Every few minutes, he'd glance over his shoulder toward the door where Summer would appear. Tall, blond, he reeked of money. He remembered Darcy telling him that Summer had snagged herself a billionaire, and that she wasn't happy about it. "What's Summer got against billionaires?" he asked.

"Has Darcy told you what Summer was in prison for?"

“No.”

“Do the two of you talk?”

He shrugged. Matt got the impression he wasn't particularly popular. What the hell had he done? He wasn't his fucking brother, but he wasn't going to defend himself, either. “So what was she in prison for?”

“Ask Darcy.”

“For that matter, what was Regan in prison for?”

“Mind your own business.”

“I'll ask Darcy, then.”

“Do that.”

They were silent for a minute. Still no bride.

“So,” Nate said. “Regan tells me you're having a thing with Darcy.”

His eyes narrowed. “A thing?”

Nate wagged his brows and sent a pointed glance at Lulu, who was, for once, sitting still, spellbound by her new friend.

“Mind your own business,” he muttered.

“Actually, it is my business. Anything that makes Regan unhappy is my business.”

Matt shifted in his seat so he could see the other man’s expression. “And my having a thing with Darcy is making Regan unhappy?”

“Actually, more pissed off than unhappy. She thinks you’re using Darcy and will break her heart and mess things up with Lulu.”

“I won’t break her heart.”

“So you are having a thing?”

“Jesus.” He took a deep breath, checked on Lulu; her whole attention was focused on the little dog, which had somehow managed to climb from Nate’s lap into hers, and was licking her face. “Not that it’s any of your business,” he said. “But Darcy is a grown-up. She knows what she’s doing, and there is zero chance of me breaking her heart.” What had she told Regan, though? Why would she even think he had a chance of hurting Darcy? “We don’t have that sort of relationship. We’re just friends.”

“Yeah, of course you are. Friends who—” He broke off whatever he was going to say, though Matt had a good idea of what it was. “Friends who do other things,” he said, with a glance at Lulu.

“Again—none of your business.”

Nate ignored the comment. “You may think you know what you’re doing,” he said. “But believe me, the whole no-strings-attached affair never works. I know. I tried it. And you and Darcy already have strings.” He shot Lulu another pointed glance.

“Did Regan put you up to this?”

He shrugged. “Yeah. As you said—it’s none of my business.”

“And I take it you’re referring to you and Regan.”

“We had the whole no-strings thing sorted out.”

“Why?”

“Because we knew it would never work out between us.”

Now he was curious. “Again—why?”

“I’m the detective who headed the case against her, arrested her, and was ultimately responsible for her spending nearly three years in prison.”

Yeah, that would do it. “Shit.”

Lulu batted him on the knee with her free hand. “Naughty, Matt.”

“Yeah, sorry, sweetheart.” He’d thought she hadn’t been paying attention. Hah.

“Plus,” Nate continued, “there’s the issue of her family. Well, maybe it’s best not to go there except to say that she loves them and they did not approve.”

“But things worked out between you.”

“And that’s my point. We set out to have a no-strings relationship and now guess what...? We’re getting married.”

“Well, that’s nice.”

He grinned. “It is. Best thing that ever happened to me. But it wasn’t supposed to happen. And it meant some major changes for both of us.”

Matt presumed he meant leaving the force. “So?”

“So...are you prepared for that?”

Was he talking about marriage? Between him and Darcy? It was never going to happen. He’d never met two people less suited to spending their lives together. Except maybe his mom and dad. Though things were working out for them, at last. They seemed happy and settled. And it had only taken about thirty years to get there.

All the same, he just wasn't the marrying type. And neither was Darcy. She'd told him so.

"We have it all under control."

Nate shook his head. "Self-delusion at its best."

He was saved from replying by the music starting up, and the door behind them opening.

...

The relief on Nik's face made Darcy grin. But what did he expect? He knew what Summer thought about ostentatious exhibitions of wealth, and how she would react to all this fuss. But she reckoned neither of them had thought too much about the actual wedding—they'd been too focused on the marriage. They were so in love, it was freaky. But that meant they'd left the preparations to Nik's mother—Summer's mom had been on her own honeymoon for the last two weeks, so she hadn't gotten involved—and Nik's mother positively thrived on ostentatious shows of wealth, the more extravagant the better.

It was all so gorgeous. The room, the flowers, the guests. Summer. Nik's mom had gotten one of her designer friends to design the dress, and it suited Summer perfectly. The simple lines showed off her slender figure. She wore no jewelry, just a circle of dark blue flowers in her hair.

And talking of beautiful things... Her gaze strayed to Matt as they passed. He looked stunning in his dress uniform. Tall and handsome and breathtakingly gorgeous. Lulu sat beside him with Trixie on her knee—that's why they'd heard nothing from her.

She dragged her gaze away and forced herself to focus.



A buffet lunch had been set out in a big marquee on the lawns. Then later that evening, Nik and Summer were flying out. Off on their honeymoon. A week in Scotland. The terms of Summer's parole didn't allow her to leave the country, but Nik had rented a goddamn fairy-tale castle in the Highlands.

Darcy wasn't hungry, but she snagged a glass of champagne and stood at the edge of the tent, people-watching. She caught sight of Matt through the crowd, and something melted inside her. He had hold of Lulu's hand, and she had hold of Trixie's lead. The handsome soldier, the little girl, and the dog. They looked so goddamn cute. Like a family. And she wasn't part of it.

That shouldn't hurt. She didn't want a family. They just left you in the end. She was better off alone. Stronger.

Regan came to a halt beside her. "You see him like that, with Lulu, and you have to think—he can't be all bad."

"Of course he's not all bad." The words came out automatically. But it was a long time since she'd worried that Matt might be like his brother. He was a good man, trying to do his best in a difficult situation.

"Oh hell, you have got it bad."

"No, I haven't." She sniffed. "I haven't got it at all. Just because you and Summer are both crazy in love doesn't mean I have to be as well. It's not contagious, you know."

Regan came around to stand in front of her and stop her forward momentum. "Tell me you know what you're doing."

"I know what I'm doing. We're friends, that's all."

“Friends with benefits.”

One look at Regan’s face, and she knew she wasn’t going to get away with a lie.

“Maybe. But it’s just sex.”

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Regan raised an eyebrow. “Hmm, where have I heard that before?”

“It’s not like you and Nate. Matt and me—we’re polar opposites. We have nothing in common but Lulu.”

“And sex.”

“That’s just convenient. It’s been a while for us both.” She shrugged. “I was frustrated. He was frustrated. It just happened.”

“Funny, it didn’t happen for either of you with anyone else.”

She really wished Regan would leave this alone. But she guessed that wasn’t going to happen. And really, she knew that Regan was just worried about her. “We discussed it. Neither of us want anything more, but we thought it best to get the sex thing out of our systems. Then we could just be friends.”

Regan patted her arm. “Well, good luck with that. I think you’ve been spotted. I’m going to find Nate.”

Darcy turned around. Lulu was dragging Matt and the little dog toward her. As she got closer, she dropped his hand and the dog lead and broke into a run. “Darcy!”

As Lulu reached her she bent down and picked her up, whirling her around. “Don’t you look pretty,” she said, putting her back on the ground as Matt joined them, Trixie at his side.

“You pretty, too,” Lulu said. “We the same.”

“Yes, we are.”

“Lulu got a Trixibell,” she said, taking the lead from Matt.

She gave Matt a smirk. “I’m thinking there might have to be a new addition to your little family in the not too distant future.”

“Don’t,” he groaned. “Not happening. Apparently, Dianna is allergic to dogs. I think that bastard did it on purpose. I don’t think he likes me.”

“Who? Nate?”

“Yeah. He just gave me the third degree,” he said.

“What about?” Though she could guess. He’d no doubt been primed by Regan.

“He thinks—or rather, your friend Regan thinks—that I’m going to break your heart.”

She snorted. “Never going to happen.”

“That’s what I said.”

And there was that funny twinge in her heart again. Bugger, she was in trouble.

Time to get a little emotional distance.

### Chapter Sixteen

She'd been in a hurry when she dropped Lulu off the previous day. Lulu hadn't wanted to leave the museum—she'd been totally captivated by the mummies—and had to be bribed with the promise of ice cream on the way home. Darcy always felt like a total failure when she resorted to bribery, but she'd been meeting Regan that evening to go to the theater and was running late. She'd bet any money that the perfect Diana never needed to use the lure of ice cream.

It hadn't helped that, as Matt had opened the door to them, Lulu had hurled chocolate ice cream all down his smart blue button-down shirt. Where was he going anyway? They'd both said they were going to be busy, but neither had asked the details. That wasn't the sort of relationship they had. But he'd better not be out on a date with a suitable woman. She didn't share. Even if they weren't serious.

Luckily, Lulu's regurgitated chocolate ice cream had managed to avoid Darcy—lovely child—and she'd handed Lulu over and made a hasty retreat, only to be stopped at the bottom of the driveway by Matt calling her back. She'd turned around reluctantly. Matt hurried toward her, still holding Lulu—he was usually so fastidious, but the vomit didn't seem to faze him at all. It must be all his SAS training.

“Sunday lunch, tomorrow, here with my parents,” he'd said and disappeared back into the house before she could say yes, no, or what the hell?

This would be their first meeting. Matt had told her that his mother felt guilty about the whole Steven thing, and she wasn't very good at dealing with guilt. But he'd

wanted them to meet before his parents returned home to Australia in a week's time.

So here she was. Dressed in her Sunday best. She'd actually been quite nervous when she was getting ready this morning—had even considered raiding Regan's and Summer's rooms for any garments they might have left behind. In the end, she'd sat herself down and given herself a talking to. It wasn't as though she was meeting the future in-laws or anything. But she did want them to like her. Lulu didn't have a big family, so the few people she did have owed it to her to get along. So while she hadn't gone as far as pilfering Regan's wardrobe, she'd done her best and was wearing an ankle length black skirt and a sleeveless white tunic, with flat black leather lace-up sandals.

Last night had been the first night she and Matt hadn't been together since the evening of the horrible Angie's birthday. And she'd hated to admit it, but she'd missed him. She tried to ignore the feeling.

Should she have brought something? Dessert. She'd stopped on the way and bought a bottle of white wine. Then she'd gone back and bought a bottle of red, just in case. She hoped they weren't teetotalers.

Grrr.

Before the whole Steven thing, she'd never doubted herself like this. That failure had bitten deeply into her self-confidence. Her belief in herself. She stood on the front doorstep, took a deep breath, and rang the bell.

The door opened immediately, and Matt stood there. His normally immaculate hair was ruffled as though he'd been running his fingers through it.

"You're late," he murmured.

She glanced at her watch. “One minute.” That was because she’d gone back for the second bottle of wine. She held the bottles out to him, one in each hand, but he ignored them. Grasping her upper arm, he tugged her inside, kicking the door closed behind them.

“I missed you.” He lowered his head and kissed her deeply, his tongue thrusting inside, his hard body pressing her up against the closed door. She couldn’t do much; she had a bottle of wine in each hand. Raising his head, he stared down into her face. “Tell me you missed me, too.”

“Nope.” She glanced past him, expecting to see his whole family lined up watching them. Great way to meet her niece’s grandparents.

“Liar.” He kissed her again, and she melted.

“Matt?”

He stepped back at the woman’s voice and gave a rueful smile. “Later,” he mouthed.

Darcy peered past him. A woman stood in the doorway to the living room. She had a look of Matt about her. The same black hair and blue eyes. Tall and slender, in a floor-length flowery dress, she didn’t look old enough to be his mother. She must have had him very young.

Darcy cleared her throat and forced a smile, then took a step forward and almost banged into Matt, who hadn’t moved. He probably couldn’t without giving away the huge erection that had been pressed up against her only seconds ago. Not something you’d want your mother to see.

She took pity on him and edged around his unmoving form. After putting her bottles of wine on the table, she walked across and held out her hand. “Hello, I’m Darcy

Butler, Lulu's aunt."

"I'm Jolene, Matt's mom. It's lovely to meet you at last. Lulu has told us all about you."

She seemed genuine and nice. Darcy knew from the few things he'd said about his family that Matt didn't really get on all that well with his parents. No doubt he had his reasons, but whatever they were, they weren't obvious. Then again, this woman had also produced Steven. So she'd wait to pass judgment.

"Come in, and I'll introduce you to the rest of the family."

Darcy followed her into the sitting room. A man sat on the sofa, bouncing Lulu on his lap as she chuckled to herself and waved at Darcy. A girl was sitting opposite him, reading a book, though she put it down immediately and got to her feet. She studied Darcy closely. Darcy guessed she'd heard all about Lulu's ex-con of an aunt. She came forward and held out her hand.

"Hi, I'm Hannah." She took after her father, with no look of Matt. Her hair was dark blond, her eyes hazel in a pointed face. She was tanned and wore jeans and a tank top. Darcy took her hand and shook it.

"I'm Darcy."

Hannah cocked her head to one side. "You look just like Lulu. Except for the tattoos, which are awesome, by the way."

"Thank you. And yes, Lulu takes after me more than she did Emma."



“I’m sorry about your sister.”

Perhaps she should say sorry about Steven, but she couldn’t get the words out, so she just nodded and turned to the man who’d risen to his feet and swung Lulu onto his shoulders.

“This is Matt’s dad, Gareth.” Jolene had come up beside them. “And no, you can’t have a tattoo,” she said to Hannah.

“But—”

“But nothing. We’ll talk about it when you’re eighteen.”

Darcy shook hands with Matt’s dad as the man himself came into the room. “You want a drink?” Matt asked. He brandished the red wine. “A glass of wine?”

“Please.” Did she sound desperate?

“Did you drive here?” Gareth asked.

She shook her head. She had a car that she’d inherited from her mother. It was a red open-topped sports car that her mom had loved, and Darcy kept it for sentimental reasons but rarely drove. She didn’t see the point in the city. “I took the bus.”

Matt handed her a glass, and she took a sip, not knowing quite what to do with herself.

“Why don’t you come and chat with me in the kitchen,” Jolene said. “The food is nearly ready.”

She followed Matt’s mother out into the hall and through to the big kitchen.

“Oh, shit,” Jolene said, hurrying across and pulling a pan from the oven and dropping it into the sink where it hissed and sputtered. “Oh well, luckily Gareth likes his food well done.” She grinned. “Or half raw. I never really got the hang of cooking. I should have let Matt do it, as he suggested.”

“So Matt didn’t get his cooking skills from you?”

Jolene picked up a half-empty glass of wine from the counter and took a sip. “In a way, he did. I wasn’t much of a mother. He learned early that if he wanted to eat, learning to cook was a good idea.”

“I’m sure you were a wonderful mom.”

“I was crap, but I was only seventeen when I had Matt. So was Gareth. We were school sweethearts and weren’t ready to settle down.”

“Matt seems to have turned out all right. And Hannah is lovely.” As soon as the words were out, she wished she could take them back. Because there was one member of the family who hadn’t turned out fine and who wasn’t lovely. Not in any way.

Jolene pursed her lips, a shadow crossing her face. She took another drink, as if getting her courage up. “I’m so sorry for what Steven did to your family.”

Part of her wished they could have ignored the issue, but most of her knew that it had to be put out into the open if they were to have any sort of honest relationship.

“We really believed Emma had changed him. But we should have made sure of that. We knew he had a temper. Just not that bad. I suppose a mother always tries to see the best in her children.”

Darcy had no clue what to say. Partly because what Jolene said was true. They should have checked up on Steven. Maybe Emma would be alive today if they had. And maybe she'd be alive if Darcy had behaved differently. She was in no position to cast blame.

She took a deep breath. “Look, it's over. Steven and Emma are dead. I think we all made mistakes, but nothing we do now will change that.”

“You spent nearly three years in prison because of Steven.”

“As I said—it's done. Over. I have to learn to move on, and so do you.”

“You're a good person.” She wiped her hands and turned to face Darcy. “Are you and Matt...seeing each other?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Well, he was kissing you in the hallway, and you weren't fighting him off.”

She shrugged. “It's nothing serious. We're just friends.”

“No chance you could be anything more?”

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Now a frown tugged her brows together. She suspected there was more to the question than a mother's curiosity but couldn't think what. "None. Neither of us is looking for a relationship. We'd drive each other crazy in no time. We're total opposites, with Lulu tying us together. That's all."

"Tell me, did you never think to try for custody of Lulu yourself?"

"No. First, I'm on parole, so I'm sure they'd just laugh. But I never considered a family. Never wanted one. Not like Emma did."

"But Matt says you went to a lot of bother to get to see her. You could have just walked away."

"She's my niece, my only family, and I'd promised Emma I would make sure she was okay. Don't get me wrong. If Steven had survived, I would have fought with everything I have to get Lulu away from him. But Matt's a good man, and Lulu loves him. I just want her to be safe and happy."

"Good." She smiled, relief in her eyes. "Let's take the burned offerings in."

The food was pretty terrible, but nobody commented, except Lulu, who threw a charred Brussels sprout across the table, and it landed in Gareth's wineglass. He made no comment, just fished it out, popped it in his mouth, and continued as though nothing had happened. Lulu giggled, threw another. Matt caught this one, then reached across and pulled the dish out of her reach.

Hannah kept up a constant stream of questions mainly aimed at Darcy and Matt. She

seemed genuinely fond of her soldier brother. They had ice cream for dessert, apparently the one thing his mother could be relied on not to burn. Afterward, Darcy put her spoon down and glanced around the table, intercepting a look between Jolene and Gareth, who gave a small nod.

“Hannah, why don’t you take Lulu up to her room and see if she’ll settle for a nap?”

“Are you going to ask them?” she said as she got to her feet and held out a hand to Lulu.

“Yes.”

“Okay then.”

They waited until the door had closed behind them.

“Ask us what?” Matt said.

“We’ve talked about it as a family. We would love to adopt Lulu and take her back to Australia with us.”

### Chapter Seventeen

Matt looked around the dinner table. His mother's expression was expectant, almost radiant. She was happy. Why hadn't he seen this coming? His father frowned as though he was less sure of an ecstatic reaction.

Why the hell hadn't his mom and dad warned him that they were going to drop this bombshell? He might have been more prepared. He might have also warned Darcy so she could have prepared herself.

But maybe that's what they'd wanted: to get an initial, unpremeditated reaction from them both together. It was the sort of thing they would do, and it pissed him off.

He couldn't get his head around the idea. It was just a big empty space where intelligent thoughts should be. And Darcy was no better. He couldn't get a handle on what she was thinking or feeling, at all. Her face had gone blank as soon as she'd processed the announcement. Keeping everything inside.

"What do you think?" his mom asked, beaming around the table. "We've talked it through, and it seems to be the best answer for everyone. Lulu will get a family and a sister. She'll love Australia."

And he would get to see her maybe once a year, if he was lucky. Darcy, the same.

"You could always think about a move to Australia," his mom continued, speaking to both of them. "Not right now. But sometime. There are wonderful opportunities out there."

Never going to happen. There wasn't much need for a British army captain in Aussieland.

"I'm on parole," Darcy said, her voice devoid of emotion. "For breaking your son's arm, among other things. I don't think they let convicts into Australia like they used to."

His mother's smile faded from her face as she glanced between the two of them. "Matt?"

He waved a hand at her. "Leave it for now, mom. It's just a surprise. We need to process it."

"But you do see it's the best option for Lulu?"

He didn't, right now. But he suspected with a bit more thought that yes, logically, it was the best option. But he wasn't feeling very logical at that moment.

Darcy pushed her chair back and stood up. "Thank you for a lovely dinner." It had actually been far from lovely. Most of it had been charred at the edges. "But I think I'll be leaving now. I have a class to prepare for tomorrow." She gave a general smile around the room and started to walk away.

He couldn't let her go like this. They needed to talk. He needed to find out what was going on in her head.

"Wait," he said. "I'll walk you part of the way."

She hesitated at the door, then turned and gave a brief nod. "I'm just going up to say good-bye to Lulu. I'll see you outside."

They didn't talk for the first five minutes, but just walked side by side, both lost in their own thoughts. Finally, she slowed her steps.

"Did you know?" she asked.

Was her question an accusation? "No. I knew nothing. This came as much a shock to me as to you. They never even hinted."

"You never asked them to take Lulu?"

He halted at the question. "Of course I never fucking asked them." How could she even think he would have done that without talking to her? But not even in the beginning, when he'd first heard about his brother's will, had he considered refusing the request. Maybe he'd done it out of guilt, because he felt deep inside that he'd let his brother down. His mother had never even seen Lulu.

"It would be the answer to your problems. I wouldn't blame you if you'd asked. I just wish you'd talked to me."

He gritted his teeth. That she would believe he would lie to her, after what they had together. "I never asked them," he replied through gritted teeth. "It never even occurred to me."

They walked on. But he supposed she was right. He could have his life back. The life before Lulu. And Darcy. He could go back to active duty without the inconvenient feelings of guilt. His money worries would vanish with no more childcare to pay. Hell, he should be ecstatic. He waited. Nope, no waves of relief or ecstasy washed over him. Just that blankness. And a little niggle of fear. Except he wasn't sure what he was afraid of. He cast a glance at Darcy and still couldn't tell what she was thinking.



Right at the start, she'd told him that all she wanted was to be sure that Lulu was safe and happy. He suspected things had changed since then.

He cleared his throat and asked the question. "What do you think?"

"I don't know. I have no clue." She turned to him and rested a hand on his chest. "Just give me a little time to process this and then we can talk."

"You want me to come back with you?"

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Right now, he could imagine nothing he'd rather do than forget everything and lose himself in Darcy's delectable body. But she gave a small shake of her head.

"No. I need a little space."

Space from him? Obviously.

But her expression was resolute. He didn't think he could change her mind. And more to the point—he didn't think he should try. She clearly did need time to consider his parent's offer. He cupped her cheeks with his palms, lowered his head and kissed her gently. She closed her eyes briefly, and when she opened them, they were bright.

Hell, he couldn't leave her like this. He hated to see her sad. She needed to look at the positives of this. Just like he did. But it felt like something was squeezing his heart.

She stepped back, and his hands dropped away. "There's my bus," she said, nodding down the road. He hadn't even realized they'd halted at a bus stop.

He ran his fingers through his hair. He had to let her go. Just not too far. "I'll be round tomorrow night."

She nodded almost absently. Then the bus stopped, the doors opened, and she climbed on board without a backward glance.

He waited until the bus had disappeared down the road. Then he shoved his hands in his pockets and headed home.

...

“Maybe it’s better she goes now,” Darcy said. She was seated on the sofa in the apartment, next to Regan, a big glass of red wine in her hand. “You know, before I have a chance to get really attached, and I make the wrong decision for selfish reasons. This is about Lulu, after all. Not me. Or Matt.”

Strangely, though, Matt hadn’t seemed happy.

“You think he’s telling the truth, that he didn’t put them up to it?”

“Oh, yes. Matt doesn’t lie. Besides, he looked as shocked as I was. And he didn’t jump up and shout ‘yes, take her now.’”

And really, it was a much bigger thing for Matt. His whole life had been turned upside down by the advent of a baby. It affected everything; where he lived, his job, his financial situation—which, whatever he said, had to be strained. She’d investigated the agency Diana worked for, and they were very expensive. For her, there would be hardly a ripple in her life if Lulu went. She’d have her Saturday afternoons back. That had to be good, right?

“It’s not as though I even like kids,” she said. “I never wanted them. Not like Emma did.”

“Aw, sweetie,” Regan said, patting her arm. “You love Lulu. At least accept that. Don’t make this decision by pretending she means nothing to you. Because it’s clear to everyone you love her. And she loves you.”

“She’ll forget me soon enough.” She took another slug of wine. “Hell, I won’t even be allowed out of the country until my parole is up. Lulu will have forgotten I even exist by then.”

“Maybe they’ll bring her for a visit.”

“This is the first time they’ve been back in over ten years. It’s not like popping down the road.”

“Perhaps Matt won’t agree.”

She remembered the shock on Matt’s face. And it hadn’t been a happy, this-is-the-answer-to-all-my-problems shock. But Matt would do what he believed was best for Lulu in the end. “I think he will.” She forced a smile. “They were great with Lulu. It was so sweet seeing her with Hannah.”

“What were they really like? I sort of got the impression from things you’ve said that Matt doesn’t get on too well with them.”

“He loves them. But he says they drove him crazy when he was a kid. I think they were just too young to settle down. And Matt likes things organized.”

“Weird. What about Steven?”

“What about him?” She did her best not to think about Steven, if she could possibly help it.

“Do you think it’s their fault Steven turned out the way he did? Is Lulu safe with them?”

This would be much easier if she even had any inkling of doubt on that matter. She could just say no. She had the report on Steven—she was sure she could make them back down. But she wouldn’t. “Without a doubt. They’re genuinely nice people. I suspect Steven was an asshole by nature rather than nurture. But his mom feels a lot of guilt about him. Maybe, like Matt, they let him go his own way too much and were

too engrossed in themselves to notice what he was becoming. Then they ignored it because he was a long way away.”

“So a little parental ineptitude, but no evil intent.”

“I guess.”

“Have some more wine.”

She held out her glass and Regan refilled it. She sipped it slowly, but the glass was empty by the time she spoke again. “Matt loves Lulu, but he won’t give up his life for her. If she stays, she’ll be brought up by a series of nannies, and while Diana is good, she could hand in her notice any day and leave. Lulu would be hurt, and maybe next time she’ll try not to care so much, and the time after that, she’ll shut herself off and won’t care at all. She’ll end up as screwed up as her Aunt Darcy.”

“Why don’t you look after her? And by the way, you are not screwed up. Give me a second.” She jumped up, disappeared into the kitchen, and came out ten seconds later with another bottle of wine and the corkscrew. “Why can’t you look after her full-time? Why not apply for custody if you think Matt really doesn’t want her?”

Actually, she didn’t think that; she truly believed Matt’s decision would be based on what was right for Lulu. “I could apply for custody, but how far do you think I’d get with my record? Besides, I’d make a crappy mom. I might just scrape through as an aunt. But I’m not the maternal type. It wouldn’t be fair to Lulu. What can I offer her? I’ll probably just mess up like I did with Emma, and Lulu will pay.”

“Emma was not your fault.”

She ignored the interruption. She was on a self-misery roll now. “Maybe some people are meant to be alone.”

“You are so fucking melodramatic. You are not alone. You have me and Summer and Sam and...Matt.”

She snorted. “If Lulu goes to Australia, how long do you think me and Matt will last? Lulu is the only thing we have in common.” She drank the new glass in one go then slammed it down on the table. “Time to get a grip. This is real life, not fucking fantasy land. It’s for the best. Lulu will be safe and happy and have a real family, and Matt will get his nice, organized life back and go back to shooting people or killing them with his bare hands or whatever it is he does.”

“And you?” Regan asked.

“Hell, you said it yourself. It’s about time I had some fun.”

She was going to tell Sam she was going back on the circuit. That’s what she needed, a few good fights.

“Why does that make me seriously scared?” Regan murmured.

Darcy grinned, even if it was a little forced. “Because you’re a pussy.”

### Chapter Eighteen

She'd been avoiding him.

Matt sat in the coffee shop across from the gym and waited until the light went on in the living room upstairs.

It had been three days since his mom had made her momentous announcement. Monday, Darcy had called him and left a message saying she couldn't make it that night. Something important had come up.

The same yesterday and today.

They needed to talk about this. His mom and dad had another week before they were scheduled to return to Australia. They'd extend their visit if they needed more time to sort out paperwork, but if it was a definite no to the adoption, then they would leave as planned. They'd been pushing him for an answer he didn't have.

He got the impression his mother believed it was a foregone conclusion—that he'd jump at the chance. Maybe that's what Darcy thought as well. But it wasn't only his decision to make—maybe legally it was, but morally, Darcy had as much say as he did. Why couldn't his parents have lived here, close by? Then he might not have questioned it. But Australia was half a world away. It was weird, but he'd been trying to imagine his life without Lulu—the freedom, living back on base, his dream job without the guilt that he was putting his life at risk. But the image just wouldn't gel in his head. He'd never wanted a family. Lulu would be happy with his parents, with a mother and father, and the added bonus of a big sister. He might not have considered



them perfect parents, but they'd learned from their mistakes. They'd done a fabulous job with Hannah, and Lulu already loved them.

He should be sitting here working out ways to persuade Darcy it was for the best, that she wouldn't lose access to Lulu. There were great ways to keep in contact now—all the same, no amount of FaceTime was as good as a cuddle. So instead, he was putting it off, hoping she would beg him not to go ahead with it. Take the decision away from him. Say no, to keep Lulu with him. And he'd have to because... Hell, he didn't know why it mattered so much. He had this horrid, nagging feeling gnawing away at his insides that he wasn't only going to lose Lulu, but he was losing Darcy as well. But you couldn't really lose something you'd never had.

So tonight, he'd ignored her text message and here he was.

He tossed some cash on the table and pushed himself up. He glanced once more at the apartment but couldn't see any movement. Maybe she wasn't even here. Maybe she hadn't been lying and something had come up.

Time to find out.

There was no answer when he rang the intercom at the entrance in the alley. He tried again and then pulled his phone from his pocket and hit her number on speed dial. The phone rang five times and then went to voicemail.

“Let me in, Darcy. I'm not leaving until you do.”

Of course she could just ignore him, and he half expected her to. She could be amazingly stubborn—he'd learned that in the weeks since he'd met her. But a second later, the door clicked. He pushed it open and headed up the stairs. At the top, the door to the apartment was open and Darcy stood there, leaning in the entrance, all badass attitude. She wore black jeans and a black tank top, both of which matched the

very impressive black eye she was sporting.

What the hell?

He came to a halt only inches away. “What happened to you?”

“Nothing.” She accompanied the word with a shrug.

Reaching out, he stroked his finger down over the swell of her cheek, and she gave an almost imperceptible wince.

“I was in an exhibition match last night. It’s what I do—no big deal.”

So she hadn’t been lying; she had been out last night. “Did you win?”

“Yeah.”

“Why did you do it?” Last time they had talked about her going back on the fight circuit, she’d been undecided.

Another shrug. “Why not?”

He could think of at least one reason—he didn’t like it. If she wanted to fight, then she could fight with him. But maybe that wasn’t an argument to get into right now. If ever. He just shook his head. “Can I come in?”

Her expression clearly showed that she’d rather he didn’t—when and why had he become the enemy? Again. But she shifted to the side so he could pass, pulling back to ensure they didn’t touch. Then she closed the door behind him. He stood for a moment in the hallway. He was pretty sure they were alone, which was good; he didn’t think he could handle Regan’s sarcasm just now.

He followed Darcy into the kitchen. She pulled a couple of beers from the fridge and handed one to him, then gestured to the table. He sat down and took a sip of his beer, studying her and trying to subdue the urge to find out who had given her the black eye and go kill the bastard.

She leaned back in her chair, not looking at him, sipping from the bottle of beer.

“Come on, Darcy,” he said. “You can’t ignore this. Tell me what you’re thinking.”

She put the bottle on the table, then pursed her lips. “I think it’s a fabulous opportunity for Lulu.”

“If it’s so good, why have you been avoiding me?”

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“I said for Lulu. Not for me. I’ve just found her, and now I’m going to lose her again. So, yes, I’ve been ignoring it. Like one of those things that if you don’t think about it, don’t talk about it, then it will just go away. But this isn’t going to go away.”

“It’s not a foregone conclusion.”

She raised a brow and swallowed the last of her beer, placing the bottle gently on the table as though she was holding everything in tight. “Isn’t it? Tell me you haven’t already made up your mind.”

“No, I haven’t, because it isn’t just my decision to make.”

“Yes, it is.”

“Legally, maybe. But we both know if my brother hadn’t been such an asshole, you wouldn’t have gone to prison and you would have no doubt gotten custody of Lulu from the start.”

“If your brother hadn’t been an asshole, Emma would still be alive and Lulu would be with her mother.”

“Good point. But you know what I’m saying.”

“So what? You’re offering me custody of Lulu?”

“Joint custody. If you want it.”

She went perfectly still, then blew out her breath. She got up, paced the room, went to stand by the window and look down to the street below. When she came back, he could see he'd shaken her. "I wasn't expecting that," she said.

"You're her aunt. She loves you. You love her."

"I'd be no good for her. I never wanted custody."

"That's because you're a coward. You think because you lost Emma, that you'll fail Lulu as well. But it wasn't your fault."

"Maybe not. But the truth is—this isn't about me and what I want. It's about what's best for Lulu. She deserves a family. With your parents, she'll get much more than she will with either you or me. They love her. And she loves them. There is no downside to this."

"For Lulu. What about us?"

She cocked her head to one side and studied him. "Will you miss her?"

"Hell, yes. I thought not, but I can't even imagine life without her now. But as you said—it's not about us."

"Will they be good to her? You don't sound as though you were too impressed with their parenting skills."

"They'll be great. I think Hannah is proof of that."

"She's a sweet girl. Lulu will be lucky to have her for a sister."

This was it. She was supposed to have saved him from this. He'd relied on her to be

the selfish one. To say no way, Lulu had to stay. And he would have had to agree, because she'd been dealt a shitty hand by his brother and she didn't deserve to be hurt anymore. Instead, she was being the strong one. He should have known she would do the right thing. But how could the right thing hurt so damn much? He took a deep breath. "It's agreed, then. I'll tell my parents to go ahead and start the paperwork."

"I don't think there was ever a question." She pressed her lips together in a tight line and swallowed.

He'd never expected to see her cry. She was so tough. Now he watched as a tear welled up and spilled out over her cheek. She dashed it away, but another followed. "Shit. Crap. Sorry." She sniffed. "Maybe you'd better go."

No way.

He pushed his chair back and got to his feet, moved around the table to stand next to her. He held out his hand. She looked at it for a minute then slid her palm into his. He pulled her to her feet and then into his arms, wrapping them tight around her.

For a minute, she was stiff in his arms, then the tension went out of her, she pressed her face against his throat, and he felt the wetness of her tears. She shivered, and he held her closer.

He was no good at comforting, but maybe he could make her forget for a little while.

Pulling back slightly, he lowered his head and kissed her.

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Why the hell was he being so nice? She needed to toughen up.

She'd told herself she could do this, that she just had to get the words out. And she had. If Matt had left straight afterward, or been horrible, then she would have been fine. But he hadn't, and she never cried, and yet now, she couldn't stop.

She'd also accepted that it was over between her and Matt. Lulu was the glue that had held them together. With Lulu gone, there was nothing. Better to accept that now and maybe move on with her life. That had been her thought behind doing the fight last night. She'd gotten Sam to pull some strings and arrange it. But she'd known almost straight away, as soon as she'd stepped into the ring, that the excitement had gone out of the fight circuit for her.

That returning to that life was going backward, and she had to find a way to move forward.

She should push him away. Really, she should, but instead she pressed her body closer to his. Her mouth opened beneath his, and she kissed him back with everything she felt inside. When she ran out of oxygen, she pulled away, buried her head in the curve where his neck met his shoulder, breathing in the warm, masculine scent of him.

Just once more. Surely, she could have that. Then she'd let him go, because she was no good for him. Just as she'd been no good for Emma and no doubt would have messed things up with Lulu as well.

But tonight, he was hers. She'd tried to push him away. She'd planned to call him

tomorrow, tell him that he should go ahead. Tell his parents that she supported them and wouldn't stand in their way of adopting Lulu. Not that she legally could have stopped it if Matt was determined to go ahead.

But he'd surprised her and given her the option to say no. And that had messed her up totally.

She knew he loved Lulu, but also that taking in his niece had complicated his life. And while she'd expected reservations, she'd also expected him to accept. Yet he'd given her the option of joint custody, and for a brief moment in time, she'd thought about it. But just for a moment. It wasn't really a viable option. His parents offered the whole deal; a proper family life. She'd seen pictures of their home, the big garden, the ready-made sister. How could she take that from Lulu? When she had so little to offer in return.

Matt stepped back, cupped her face in his palms, and wiped her cheeks with the pads of his thumbs.

She sniffed. "Sorry. Tears over."

He didn't answer, just lowered his head and kissed her cheeks, butterfly kisses, gentle and soft, that melted her insides. Finally, he returned to her lips and took them in a drugging kiss. His hands slid around her, and he picked her up, holding her against his chest without breaking the kiss. He carried her out of the kitchen, through the living room, and into her bedroom, kicking the door closed behind them. He carried her with ease. She wasn't small, and she could feel the strength in his arms, the muscles bunching.

He lowered her to the bed, came down over her, and she wrapped her legs around him, pulling him close, sliding her hands through his hair and holding him to her.



She pushed all thoughts from her mind and gave herself up to pure feelings. If this was the last time they'd be together, she wasn't going to spoil it with negative thoughts.

His hands stroked down over her torso, tugged her tank top up and over her head, then he came up on one elbow and stared down at her. She had a bruise over her rib cage, and he trailed over it with his fingertips then cupped her breast. Lowering his head, he kissed her nipple, stroked it with his tongue, sending waves of pleasure rolling through her. She shifted restlessly beneath him, an ache at her core. Tightening her legs around him, she rubbed her sex against his hardening erection, desperate for some sort of release.

His mouth shifted to her other breast, his teeth biting down, and fire flared in her belly. Without leaving her breasts, his hand slid down over her stomach, flicking open the button on her jeans and pushing inside. His fingers curled into her, sinking through the folds of her sex. She was drenched, and so sensitive, a gasp escaped her throat. She shifted her hips, pushing against him. His fingers rubbed over her clit, and suddenly she was frantic. She needed him inside her. Now.

Her hands went to her waist, and she shoved her jeans down over her hips, kicked off her sandals. He was in the way, and she pushed him off and freed herself of the last of her clothes. Matt must have gotten the idea. He stripped with amazing speed, cursing as his pants got caught on his erection. Finally, he was as naked as she was. His cock was hard, vertical against his belly, and her sex ached with want. She reached behind her and grabbed a condom from the bedside table, threw it at him, watching as he tore it open with his teeth then rolled it down over his shaft. Then he was on her, his weight pressing her down into the mattress. She opened her legs, and he slid between her thighs, his cock finding where it needed to be. She was so wet, he entered her easily, filling her, stretching her. When he was lodged deep inside, he stared down into her face. "I'll never regret this."

She didn't want him to talk. She didn't want real life to intrude, so she bucked her hips against him. Pleasure flashed across his face. She tightened her inner muscles, squeezing, sending the thoughts from his mind, the words from his lips. His eyes closed briefly, but when they opened, they blazed with desire. He withdrew slowly, her sex tingling, then pushed back in, pressing against her clit, and pleasure flooded her. He ground against her slowly then pulled out. She bucked her hips again, trying to make him speed up; she needed this hard and fast. Instead, he held onto his control, moving slowly, each thrust driving her higher. Each grind against her sensitive clit stoking the fires inside her. The pleasure was building, coalescing in her belly, tightening her muscles, until it burst over her, shattering her, dragging her under. And still he moved inside her, so the pleasure burst again.

She opened her eyes to find him staring down at her, his jaw clenched. She dug her nails into the hard swell of his ass, pushed herself against him, and his control finally snapped. He thrust into her hard and fast, and she came again, her back arching as he spilled himself deep inside her and kept on pumping. Holding her gaze with his.

He collapsed onto her, rolling onto his side then onto his back, dragging her with him so she sprawled across his hard body, limp and satiated but already wanting more.

"I love you."

The words were softly spoken, so quiet that she might have imagined them, except they were so far from anything she could have imagined, that they must be real.

He didn't love her. He couldn't love her. Love was never meant to be part of this.

She'd lost everyone she had ever loved.

This was not happening.

She made to roll off him, and he held her tight. She gritted her teeth and pushed harder. Finally, he released his hold, and she pulled free and got to her feet. Her legs shook. She didn't look at him as she crossed to the wardrobe, pulled out a black T-shirt dress, and dragged it over her head. She couldn't do this naked. When she turned back to him, he was still lying on his back, his long, lean body so beautiful, she had to drag her gaze away.

He didn't love her.

This was just heightened emotion. The whole Lulu thing was messing with his head. As it had messed with hers.

Because she didn't love him, either. She just liked him. Liked the way he made her feel. But that wasn't love. She paced the room. Could she pretend she hadn't heard? Pretend he'd never said the words?

“Are you going to deny you feel something for me?”

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The words brought her up short, and she whirled around and faced him. Her body ached. From the fight last night. From making love. From the idea that they might never be together again.

Regan had warned her. Why hadn't she listened?

She swallowed. Tried to think of what to say. Her eyes felt hot and tight, and she so wasn't going to cry again.

She licked her lips.

"Don't worry," he said. "I know you don't feel the same. But I wanted you to know." He sat up and ran a hand through his hair. "I won't be a nuisance. Once Lulu has gone, I'll be moving overseas. I'll be out of your life. You won't need to see me again."

That was exactly what she'd intended. To never see him again. But now, the very idea sent pain stabbing through her. She cleared her throat, forced the words out of her dry throat. "That's good. I know it's what you wanted." He'd always been very clear that he wasn't a long-term relationship sort of guy.

"And you can go back to fighting," he said. "What you do best."

She didn't disabuse him of the idea. "I can. And I won't have to explain the bruises to Lulu."

"It's all working out."

He stood up, grabbed his pants from the floor, and pulled them on. He shook his head. “I never expected to say ‘I love you’ to anyone. So I probably fucked it up.” Shrugging, he bent down and picked up his shirt. “But as I said—you needed to know. I’m sorry my brother messed up your life.” He sat on the edge of the bed and pulled on his socks and shoes. Then he rose to his feet and crossed to where she stood. Her heart hurt. And she had no words, or none that would make things any better, so she stood speechless as he cupped her face in his palm. “You’re a good person, Darcy Butler. And I’m glad I met you.”

Then his hand dropped to his side, and he turned around and walked away.

She didn’t move until she heard the slam of the front door. Then she collapsed to the floor. Hugging her knees to her chest, she waited for the pain to subside. It was so familiar. She remembered it well from when her parents had died. Her sister. When she’d known she had to let Lulu go. But it didn’t go away, just ate into her, leaving a raw, empty place inside.

She didn’t love him. She wouldn’t allow herself to love him.

Because she lost everyone that she loved, and she didn’t think she could take one more blow.

She didn’t love him, and yet here she was, broken and alone.

She had no clue how long she sat huddled on the floor as the room went dark around her. Finally, she took a deep breath and pushed herself to her feet. And started the process of putting herself back together. Again.

### Chapter Nineteen

Matt emptied his glass in one gulp then slammed it onto the bar. The scotch burned as it went down his throat and settled in his belly with a fiery heat. He could already feel the buzz in his brain. It was far from his first drink of the night. He was sitting at the bar, in a pub, with Gary and Angie perched on barstools on either side of him. The pub was nice—very old-worldly and just around the corner from Darcy's gym—but that wasn't why he was here. Just pure coincidence. Because it was over between them. He was a trained soldier. He knew when to make a strategic withdrawal.

“Are you planning on getting shit-faced?” Gary asked.

Waves of disapproval wafted across from Gary and Angie, who were both sipping delicately on their beers. They felt more like jailers tonight than friends intent on letting him drown his sorrows. Except he didn't have any sorrows, because everything was working out amazingly well. Anyway, what the hell was it to them if he wanted to get pissed? They were always telling him to loosen the fuck up, and as soon as he did, they came down on him.

Some people were never happy.

Unlike him. He was fucking deliriously happy. Everything was going his way. His parents had extended their stay another week, they had a flight booked for Sunday, including a ticket for Lulu. The paperwork was going through with the help of the Australian embassy. The adoption wouldn't be finalized, but they had permission to take her. It was all going fucking great. So here he was, celebrating.

Thoughts of Lulu invariably brought Darcy to the forefront of his mind. The two were inextricably entwined. Lulu and Darcy. It had been a week since he'd seen her, since he'd made the monumentally stupid mistake of telling her he loved her. She'd taken Lulu out on Saturday as usual, but he'd made himself scarce. She'd been more than clear that she didn't want to see him again, and he owed it to her to make this as easy as possible.

Why the hell had he told her he loved her?

Why couldn't he have left well enough alone? She didn't need to know. More to the point, she didn't want to know, and he'd just made things worse. What had he expected? A declaration of love in return? And then what? Darcy had always made it very clear that she didn't do love. Or long-term relationships. She'd never wanted to be a mother to Lulu.

"Well?" Angie prompted, tearing him from his happy thoughts.

He turned to face her, raised his glass, and emptied it in one go. "Yes," he answered. "I plan on getting totally, rat-arsed, shit-faced. And as my best friends, I expect you to keep me company."

"Why?" Angie asked.

"Why what?"

"Why are you so...angry?"

He thought about that one. Was he angry? Actually, he didn't recognize the feelings churning inside him. Maybe he didn't want to inspect them too closely. Because he was scared of what he'd find. "I'm not fucking angry. I have no reason to be angry. I'm deliriously happy. Everything is going great. My life is back on track, and I'm

just trying to celebrate with my friends. So..." He banged his glass on the bar to get the bartender's attention. "Another round," he said, then turned his attention back to Angie, who was watching him, her eyes narrowed. "What now?" he asked with an impatient sigh.

"You never got drunk before," Angie replied in a way too reasonable voice.

"People change. I've had responsibilities for nearly two years. Now, I'm free. Yay!"

"You're doing the right thing, mate," Gary said.

"Of course I am."

"The best thing for everyone," Angie added. "Not just Lulu."

"Yes, everyone involved is very happy with the way things have turned out." It had been a mistake to come out tonight. But he'd been restless, fed up with his own company, and if he was honest, in danger of giving in and calling Darcy, begging her to see him again. Only that was not part of their agreement. He'd had a good day at work, including a meeting with his commanding officer. His dream position was in his grasp. Soon, he'd be too busy to think about anything else. He'd be doing something useful. A job he'd trained for. With that edge of danger to add a little excitement. Except somehow, he couldn't seem to get excited about it. He just needed to give himself time—he'd get over this. The truth was Lulu had weaseled herself into his heart. She was in there too deep to easily let go. This was always going to be a shit time. It just had to be gotten through. So when Gary had called up and asked him to meet them for a drink, he'd said a reluctant yes.

And here he was.

"It's Darcy, isn't it?"



He gritted his teeth. He was quite aware that Angie had never approved of Darcy, and he didn't really understand why. They were both strong women. He would have thought they'd feel some sort of affinity. He wasn't going to answer her question, so he asked one of his own. "Why don't you like her?"

Angie looked a little taken aback by the question. "I don't not like her."

He raised a skeptical brow then turned to Gary. "What about you?"

"I like her."

"But...?"

He shrugged. "She's just not right for you. You're a success story. You made it—the whole enlisted-to-officer thing. You need someone to support you in that, and she's..."

"An ex-con?" Suddenly he was furiously angry. "She went to prison for trying to protect her sister from my bastard of a brother. She did nothing wrong. And I can't believe you're the type of people to look down on someone for doing the right thing."

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Angie bit her lip. “You’re right. We just want what’s best for you.”

“Well, you’ll be pleased to know—so does Darcy.”

“You care about her.”

It wasn’t a question. And he ran a hand through his hair. “It doesn’t matter. It’s over.”

Gary slapped him on the shoulder. “It’s for the best.”

Of course it was for the best. Like everything else. “Can we drop the subject and have a fucking drink now?”

“Yeah.” They both picked up their drinks and raised them. “Congratulations on the new position,” Gary said.

“Thanks.”

They talked of other things then, not really the job, because that was not something he was allowed to talk about. They kept the subjects neutral, and he felt a little like he was walking on the edge of a precipice. But the alcohol was doing its job and there was a nice buzz in his brain. All the same, he felt restless. As though his skin was too tight, his muscles tense.

A couple was arguing at a corner table, intruding on his nice buzz, and he turned to look at them. There was a big man with long hair pulled into a ponytail and tattoos down his arm. The woman sitting across from him was tiny and blond and pretty.

Fear flashed in her eyes as the man reached out and grasped her wrist. She cried out in pain and tried to pull free.

Bastard.

Matt was on his feet before he could think better of it. He swayed a little—clearly, he wasn't used to this amount of alcohol. But he steadied himself and then crossed the room, coming to a halt in front of the couple. The big guy still held her way too tightly.

“Let her go.”

They both went immediately still, then the man glanced up. Ugly bastard. “This is none of your business. Fuck off.”

Matt turned his attention to the woman. Her eyes were bright with tears, a flush across her cheeks. “Say the word and I'll get him off you.”

The man snorted in disbelief, and she forced a smile. “I'm all right. Really.” The grip on her fragile wrist tightened, and she winced. “There's not a problem. You should go.”

He sensed Gary come up beside him, Angie on his other side. “What's the problem?” Gary asked.

He waved a hand at the man. “He needs to get his fucking hands off her. Right now.”

How many times had Darcy's sister been in this position? How many times had Steven used his superior strength to browbeat her into submission? And people would have watched and done nothing. Because people didn't like to interfere. It was none of their business. To hell with that.

Two more men approached the table. Friends of the asshole, judging by their tattoos and matching ponytails. Good. He doubted one was going to be enough.

“What’s going on?”

“This guy is pushing his nose in where it’s not wanted.”

“You want us to make him disappear?”

“Try it,” Matt murmured, and in that moment, it was exactly what he wanted. He wanted to release the rage churning inside him. Wanted a legitimate enemy that he could let go his frustrations on. He straightened and squared his shoulders.

“Please, just go,” the woman said, her eyes pleading and embarrassed at the same time. He’d always wondered why anyone would put up with being abused. But he’d done some reading on the subject since he’d found out about Steven. It was a complex issue and often as much about the abused as the abuser. Darcy had told him that Emma had been in an emotional state when she’d met Steven. Their parents had just died, and she’d been looking for support. Steven had used that against her. “You’ll just make things worse,” she finished.

“Yeah,” the man said. “Listen to her. You’ll just make things worse.”

Actually, he was going to make sure that the man wasn’t in any condition to make things worse for anyone. Angie rested a hand on his arm and tugged. When he didn’t budge, her grip tightened. “Drop it, Matt. You can’t afford to get into a fight.”

“I’m just supposed to let this asshole walk away? Do what the fuck he likes?” He was too late to help Darcy’s sister, but this time, he wasn’t looking the other way. He was never looking the other way again. He’d done that far too much with Steven. He should have seen what was going on. He recognized then the guilt that had been

eating him from inside since he'd learned the truth about Steven and Emma. He shook himself free of Angie's grasp. "Stay out of this." He turned to Gary. "You, too."

"This is a really bad idea, mate."

"Well, I've had a few of them lately." He turned back to the man. "Let her go."

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When he got no response except an insolent smile, he leaned down, took the man's wrist, and squeezed tight. Then tighter, until the bones grated together. He held the man's gaze. Finally, when he thought the bones might snap—like he gave a toss—the asshole let go of the woman. Matt dropped his hold and stepped back, swaying a little. That scotch really was strong stuff. He liked it. "Outside."

The man stood up. He was huge. A good three inches taller than Matt's six-foot-three, and broad at the shoulders, his muscles big and bulky. Too many steroids.

"This is so not good," Angie said.

It felt pretty good to him. "It will be all right." He patted her arm but suspected from the way she was gnawing her lower lip that she wasn't reassured. "I said outside. And feel free to invite your friends to join us. I don't want this over too soon."

"Jesus," Gary said. "Are you goddamn crazy, Matt?"

"Yeah." But crazy felt like the new normal right now. At least it felt a hell of a lot better than pathetic, lovesick loser.

Gary ignored him and turned to his opponents. "You do realize this man is SAS. He's a trained lethal weapon, and you lot are all fucked."

"Of course he is." The asshole sounded skeptical, but actually took a step back. If he wasn't careful, they were going to back out. He needed this fight. He wanted this fight.

“He’s lying,” he said. “I’m not a soldier. I’m a plumber.” He shrugged out of his jacket and handed it to Angie. “Let’s go.”

“Oh, hell,” Angie said. “This is so bad. Think of something. Fast.”

...

Darcy was sharing a bottle of wine with Regan, sitting at a roadside table at the cafe across the street from the gym. She’d needed to get out but hadn’t wanted to “go out” as such. So when Regan had called, she’d suggested they meet up here.

Across the road, Darcy could see the gym was still busy. It was after nine—they closed at ten thirty—but there were still people entering. Business was good. If she wanted to move on, she would have no trouble selling the business. And she’d be left with enough money to live on for the rest of her life. Property prices in this part of London had sky-rocketed over the last few years. It would give her enough so she need never work again. Enough to visit Lulu halfway across the world whenever she wanted. Once her parole was over.

But she couldn’t imagine it. What would she do with her time?

“What are you thinking?” Regan asked. “I know it’s not about Lulu or Matt because you haven’t got that pathetic, misty, my-heart-is-broken look in your eyes.”

“Piss off,” she said.

“Not likely. I have orders that I am not to allow you too much time alone.” Orders from Summer, she guessed. She was flying back from her honeymoon tonight, but no doubt Regan had been in touch. “You’re not allowed to wallow in misery.”

“I’m not miserable.”

Regan rolled her eyes. “Don’t lie to someone who’s been there.”

Regan had gone through hell with Nate. A jewel thief from a family of habitual criminals and a second-generation detective. And not just any detective, but the one who had put her away. The things against them had seemed insurmountable. But in the end, love had won out.

Darcy snorted.

“What?” Regan asked.

“Just thinking about you and Nate. Like a goddamn fairy tale.”

It was Regan’s turn to look misty-eyed—a look Darcy had never expected to see on her friend’s face. None of them had had men on their agendas when they’d been released from prison.

“And don’t forget Summer and Nik.”

She shrugged. “Well, two out of three isn’t bad.”

Regan reached across and patted her arm. “Maybe you should fight for what you want?”

Darcy took a gulp of wine and glanced at Regan warily. She didn’t want to talk about this. She was getting through by mixing denial with work. But she couldn’t resist the question. “And what is it you think I want?” she asked.

“You want Soldier Boy and the baby all wrapped up in one nice package.”

“No, I don’t.” The idea was ludicrous. “Ha, just imagine me as the Captain’s wife.



Going to regimental tea parties. And discussing schools with the other wives.”

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“You could do it. You could do absolutely anything you want to.”

“Well, I don’t want to. And neither does Matt. And if Lulu was old enough to be given the choice, she would probably choose to go to Australia, too.” All she’d talked about on their last outing was her grandparents and Hannah and the puppy they had promised her when they got home. She pursed her lips, hoping Regan would drop the subject. No such luck.

“Maybe you wouldn’t be a typical army wife, but that’s not why you’re doing this. Or rather, not doing this.”

“This?”

“Going after what you really want. Fighting for the people you love.”

“People?” She gave Regan her best narrow-eyed stare.

“Don’t snap my head off, Darcy Butler. You don’t scare me. You love Lulu, and you love Matt, and that terrifies you to death, because you don’t think you deserve either of them.”

She looked away, wishing she could get up and put an end to this conversation, but she had a suspicion that Regan would just follow her.

“You still blame yourself for Emma’s death. But it wasn’t your fault. Any more than it was Matt’s fault or Steven’s parents’ fault. It was all down to Steven.” She hesitated for a moment, then took a deep breath and continued. “And Emma.”

Darcy glanced away, felt her eyes prick—she was turning into a positive waterworks. “I always looked after her. I remember my gramps telling me—I must have been only four years old—that she wasn’t as tough as me, and I had to look out for her. So I did. Stopped her from being bullied at school, beat up this guy who kissed her when she was twelve.” She grinned. “She wasn’t too happy about that one.”

“You know,” Regan said. “That’s the first time I’ve ever seen you smile when you’ve talked about Emma.”

The comment brought her up short. It was a cliché, but it was true that time did heal wounds. She would always be heartbroken by what had happened with Emma, but she could also remember the good times.

“But my point is, Emma was a grown woman. She wasn’t stupid, and she made a choice to stay with Steven. God knows why.” Regan shook her head. “How could two sisters be so different? I can’t imagine you putting up with bullshit like that for more than five seconds.”

She imagined asshole Steven trying to hit her, then she imagined her fist smashing into his face and enjoying every moment. “One second.”

“Yeah. But Emma stayed. When she was on her own, that might have been understandable, but once she had Lulu, it was indefensible. She wasn’t only risking her own life; she was also risking Lulu’s.”

Trust Regan to get it right.

Yeah, she’d been grief-stricken when her sister died. But she’d also been furiously angry with Emma. Only that anger had nowhere to go because Emma was dead. So it had turned inward, and she’d taken the blame on herself.

Now for the first time, she accepted where the real blame lay. Steven and Emma.

A tight band loosened from around her.

She hadn't even realized it was there, it had been part of her for so long. She felt light and free. "Thank you," she said.

Regan shrugged. "It was time someone said it. You wouldn't have listened before. So, now that we've decided you don't deserve to be punished for the rest of your life, and perhaps you deserve love as much as any of us, can we get back to the subject of Soldier Boy and your broken heart?"

"It's not broken, just a little bent out of shape."

"Stop being brave—it's smashed into lots of sharp little pieces. It looks like it hurts every time you take a breath."

Darcy poured herself a glass of wine and drank it while she considered her answer. "He told me he loved me."

Regan had been about to take a sip of wine, but now she lowered the glass to the table and stared. "He loves you?"

"It doesn't matter. It makes no difference. We're incompatible. Total opposites. He's OCD, and I'm chaos and..."

"And?"

"He's got a really dangerous job. I've lost everybody. I can't spend my life worrying about losing him. Anyway, he said he loved me—he didn't say he wanted to marry me or anything. He knows as well as I do that it would be a disaster."

Regan shook her head. “Did I just say you were brave? I take it back. You want polar opposites—look at me and Nate.”

“He gave up everything for you.”

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Regan preened. “Believe me, I’m worth it!”

Darcy huffed out a laugh. She didn’t want someone giving up everything for her. She didn’t want that responsibility. Maybe she was a coward, after all.

At that moment, her cell phone rang and she pulled it out of her bag. Caller ID said it was Matt, and her heart rate increased. She’d been ignoring his calls, but maybe that was just another sign of her cowardice. It was time she grew some balls. Stopped hiding from herself.

“What?”

But it wasn’t Matt who replied. “Darcy?”

“Yes.”

“This is Angie, Matt’s friend. We have a problem.”

“We do?”

“Matt is just about to get into a fight with three of the biggest fucking bikers I have ever seen.”

“Why?”

“Who the fuck knows? Actually, that’s not true, but there’s no time to go into it right now. You’ve got to get over here.”

“I do?”

“He’s not listening to us. But he might listen to you...though maybe not with the amount of scotch he’s had. But I can’t think of anything else right now.”

Shock punched her straight in the gut. “Matt’s drunk?” Somehow, she couldn’t imagine that.

“As a skunk.”

“Where are you?”

“Just around the corner from your place. The Red Lion.”

“I’m on my way.”

“What’s happening?” Regan asked as she got to her feet.

“We need to go rescue Matt.”

“Six-foot-three, SAS-trained, lethal-weapon, Matt?”

“Yeah, come on.” She waved at the waiter as she passed. “I’ll pay my bill tomorrow.” Then she was dragging Regan along the pavement. The pub was only a few streets down. She knew it well; it was all old-world charm and horse brasses, and usually catered to affluent city types. She bypassed the door, because there was a small crowd at the entrance to an alley that ran alongside the pub. She spotted Angie and pushed through the people, then patted her on the shoulder. Angie whirled around then pulled up as she recognized Darcy.

“Your boyfriend is an asshole,” she muttered.

“He’s not my boyfriend.” She tried to make sense of the situation. It wasn’t a fight so much as a scrap. And Matt was right in the middle. Surrounded.

“The police will be here soon. He will get into so much shit for this.”

“Hmm. Not exactly behavior befitting an officer and a gentleman.”

“Actually, it was, really. The biker guy was beating up on his girlfriend. The little blonde over there.” She nodded to where a woman stood, cradling her wrist against her chest, chewing on her lower lip.

Sirens sounded in the background.

“We have to get him away from here,” Angie said. “Gary has gone to get the car, but Matt’s totally ignoring me. Asshole.”

There were three on one. Matt was swinging wildly, but not managing to hit anything. Someone got a punch in on his shoulder, and he was knocked around and straight into one of the others. They grappled. It was messy. Time to put a stop to it.



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She waded in. Touched the third guy on his shoulder. He turned as Darcy kicked out, slamming him to the floor. “Stay there,” she suggested.

The second guy went down as easily, a punch to the solar plexus and a chop to the back of the neck. That just left the one grappling against the wall with Matt. She approached cautiously, not wanting to get caught by one of his madly flailing arms. She studied them for a moment, then hooked one foot around the bad guy’s leg, pulling him off balance. He released his hold on Matt, turned, pulled back his fist, but then stopped as he took in his attacker.

“Get the fuck away from him,” she growled.

He looked her up and down. “I don’t fight girls.”

“No, you just beat them up.” She so wanted to hurt this guy. But she’d done enough, and if she got caught, she’d risk her parole. Suddenly, she grinned. Because she’d controlled her anger, not the other way around. Whatever else came out of this fiasco, she could take that with her. “Piss off and take your friends with you.” She didn’t bother to watch as they moved away. Instead, she switched her attention to Matt.

He gave her a wide, beatific smile. “My hero,” he slurred, then slid down the wall to the floor, his eyes closed. She sank down next to him, felt his pulse, which was slow but strong.

“If it’s any consolation,” Angie said from behind her, “I don’t think he’s hurt. I think he’s passed out.”

A car pulled up beside them, and the front door opened just as Matt lifted his head and his lashes flickered. He was coming around.

“Take him home,” she said.

“Aren’t you coming?”

“No. As you once told me, I’m a bad influence.”

She turned and walked away, but then paused as she passed the blonde. After delving into her bag, she pulled out a business card and handed it to the woman. “Make this mean something,” she said. “I’m giving free self-defense classes. Come and sign up.”

And she was out of there.

### Chapter Twenty

His head hurt. His eyes were glued together.

He'd just woken up, but he wasn't in bed. At a guess, he was lying face down on the sofa, his legs hanging over the side. What the fuck? He rolled over, squinted one eye open, but the light was too bright, and he closed it again. He scrubbed a hand through his hair. He had a vague feeling that all was not right with his world. But his fuzzy head was doing a good job of protecting him from remembering what he was sure was better not remembered.

A loud crash made him bolt upright, and he winced as pain shot through his ribs.

The fight.

It was coming back to him. He'd picked a fight in a bar. That was a first. And not with just one man, because that wouldn't have been stupid enough for him, but with three. The asshole had deserved it. Except he wasn't actually sure whether he'd won or not. He remembered pretty well everything until he'd stepped outside, but the moment the fresh air had hit him, the drink had gone straight to his head, and after that, everything was blurry.

He had a vague memory of someone coming to rescue him. A guardian angel?

“Aw, Sleeping Beauty awakens.”

The woman's voice came from the direction of the kitchen, and he forced himself to

turn his head—slowly. Regan leaned in the open doorway, a steaming mug in her hand. Summer stood just behind her. She'd put on weight, but it suited her. As marriage clearly did—she looked radiant.

He peered past them, but there was no sign of Darcy. And he couldn't believe the stab to his guts. Of course, she wasn't here. There was no reason for her to be. Then again, there was no reason for Regan and Summer to be here, either, and yet here they were.

"She's not here," Regan said.

He ran another hand across his scalp, pressing down, trying to ease the ache. "How did you get in?" he asked.

"Your nanny let us in. She came to clear out her stuff, but she's gone now." Christ, he remembered now. He'd arranged with Diana to come that morning, explained that Lulu was leaving—that there was no nanny job any longer. "We said we'd do any nannying that was required," Regan continued. "Do you need a nanny, Soldier Boy?"

"Fuck off," he muttered. Then shook his head. "Sorry."

Regan's lips twitched. Great. He was just so amusing. "I think Mr. Perfect is unraveling." She looked around her. "This place is a mess."

He hadn't been doing the housework. What was the point? Lulu had been with his parents the last few days—they were off visiting old friends. They'd decided it would make the change easier if she spent the last few days with them. He hadn't wanted to agree, but he saw the sense in it. And really, every moment he spent with Lulu hurt right now. He told himself things would feel better once she was gone and it was settled, but he hadn't managed to convince himself of that.

He wanted Darcy. Not for sex. He wanted to burrow his head against her breasts. He

wanted her to stroke his hair and tell him everything would be all right.

Except it wasn't. And he had an inkling he'd messed up so badly things would never be right again.

Anyway. Housework had seemed unimportant when everything that really mattered was slipping away. The room was littered with clothes and coffee cups, papers...

Summer pushed past her friend. She carried two mugs—she was an angel—and handed him one, then reached into her pocket, pulled out a bottle of painkillers, and handed him those as well. She was clearly the nice one of the group. He put down the mug, shook a couple out, and swallowed them. He couldn't remember the last time he'd taken painkillers. Probably not since his last injury. "Thank you," he muttered, then picked up his mug, sat back, and closed his eyes.

When he opened them, they were still there, staring down at him.

What did they want?

Why couldn't they just go and let him suffer alone?

Regan sat down opposite him and sipped her coffee. Summer took the seat beside her. They both watched him, gazes unwavering. He stopped himself from twitching through force of will. He reckoned being interrogated would be easier than this. Maybe they were about to waterboard him. He'd gone through that in training. Finally, he broke. "What do you want?"

Regan put her mug down. "She said you love her. Is it true?"

Not what he'd been expecting. Except he hadn't actually been expecting anything. Part of him wanted to tell them to mind their own business. But the rest of him liked

the idea that Darcy had these two looking out for her. She thought she was alone, but she wasn't. She'd let these two in. Or maybe they'd pushed their way in, like they had into his home.

“Yes.”

Summer smiled. “I'm glad.”

“Don't be. It makes no difference. She doesn't want my love. Or Lulu's.”

“Well,” Regan said, “as you've just given Lulu away like an unwanted puppy, that might be just as well.”

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“I offered Darcy joint custody,” he said. “She didn’t want it.”

Regan raised a brow. “Hmm, she didn’t tell me that. I wonder why.”

“She’s scared,” Summer said softly. “Scared of losing you. But that just means she cares a lot.”

He knew that. He’d recognized her fear. She didn’t want to risk her heart on someone like him. He wasn’t a good bet. And he would always remind her of Steven. Why the hell would she ever want to love him?

“And you’re scared as well,” Summer continued. He wanted to interrupt, to refute her words. He was just being sensible, but she didn’t give him the chance. “That’s okay. This is scary stuff. You’ve just got to decide if you want her enough to face your fears.”

With her words, he realized he’d been in denial. That churning in his gut, the feeling he’d been trying to ignore, but which had been his constant companion since his mother’s offer to take Lulu, was fear. Plain and simple. He’d encountered it many times before. He recognized it from going into combat. The difference was, he’d never before given in to it. He’d always conquered his fear. Now it was conquering him. He was allowing his fear to get the better of him. Make decisions for him.

But he’d never been this scared in his entire life.

“I suppose what you really need to do”—Regan cut into his thoughts—“is decide whether you want to be a lonely, pompous prick all your life. Or whether you’re

going to grab the chance to be happy.”

“Darcy is the best person in the whole world,” Summer said. “She’s stronger than all of us. She just thinks she’s broken.”

“And,” Regan added, “this whole thing with you has just reinforced that conviction.”

“But she isn’t broken.”

Finally, they went silent. What the hell did they want from him? He’d tried.

“I told her I loved her. That I wanted to keep seeing her. I offered her joint custody. It makes no difference. She doesn’t want us.”

“You didn’t offer her enough,” Regan ground out. “You have to offer her everything. Not some half-assed, let’s-keep-fucking-seeing-each-other, crappy offer. Not joint custody. Every-fucking-thing. And you have to convince her you mean it. Which means first you have to convince yourself. Is Darcy what you want? More than anything?” She rose to her feet.

Summer followed. “We’ve said enough. It’s down to you now. But you’re a good man. You’ll do the right thing.”

“You’d better,” Regan muttered. “Hey, isn’t your motto ‘Who dares, wins’? Well, time to start daring, Soldier Boy.”

They let themselves out. Matt stayed where he was. He leaned back and stared at the ceiling.

Could he do it? Could he conquer his fears?



In that moment, he knew he had to. Or live with this gnawing sense of loss for the rest of his life.

...

This had been Matt's mom's suggestion. A going away party. Something Lulu would remember.

They were flying out tonight. Darcy was going to the airport with them. She was trying not to think about it, because that would definitely put a damper on the party spirit.

Darcy suspected the party was also a plan to get Lulu so exhausted that she would sleep on the plane. Highly unlikely.

Regan and Nate were here, as were Summer and Nik. They appeared so happy—it made her sniff every time she looked at them. At least, that was her excuse. And Summer's mom, Elizabeth, and her husband, Phil, came as well. They were having the party in one of the training rooms because the apartment didn't have wheelchair access. Lulu had been fascinated by Elizabeth's wheelchair and insisted on sitting on her lap, squealing loudly as Elizabeth drove it around the room.

Darcy stood off to one side, watching, with Sam beside her. He was finally accepting that she wasn't going back on the fight circuit.

"What will you do?" he asked. "You're not selling up are you?"

She'd been thinking about it a lot. "No. I'll keep the gym. But I want to do some work with women's groups. Offer more self-defense classes. I've been talking with social services about holding some meetings at the shelters." She was excited about the idea. If she could change just one woman's life, make them see that they were

strong, could defend themselves, then it would make her feel like she was doing something worthwhile.

The wheelchair came to a halt in front of her, and Lulu held out her arms to her. “Lulu love Darcy.”

Tears pricked at her eyes, but she forced a smile. “And Darcy loves Lulu.”

“I know.” Lulu gave her a kiss on the cheek, and Darcy whirled her around until she was squealing again. “Zoo next week?” Lulu asked when they stopped.

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“Not next week, sweetheart. You’re going to Australia with your Gran and Grandpa and Hannah.”

“Darcy come to Stralia?”

“Not right now. But soon. I promise.” It would be another year before she would be allowed to leave the country. But maybe it was best not to tell Lulu that, though her niece had very little concept of time.

The only person absent was Matt. He’d said he had a meeting at the barracks. More likely, he just couldn’t face her or Lulu. She knew he was hurting. The other night had demonstrated how much. Her perfect Matt, drunk and in a bar brawl. And for a good cause. She must tell him that the woman he’d been defending had turned up at the gym the following day and signed up for Darcy’s self-defense class.

He had promised to make it to the airport. He wouldn’t be such a coward as to miss that.

It was nearly time to go.

“Come on, let’s say your good-byes to everyone.”

“Don’t want to go.”

“Of course you do.”

“Where’s Matt?” Lulu was starting to look mutinous. She had a strange idea that Lulu

hadn't cottoned on that Matt wouldn't be going with her to her new life. Another thing that was probably best not to go into. "Lulu want Matt."

"He'll be at the airport. You'll see him soon."

"Promise?"

"I promise."

"Now say good-bye to Regan." She handed her over to Regan, who gave her a hug and a kiss, then handed her on to Summer. Lulu made the rounds of the room and finally got back to Darcy. She hugged the little girl close, and everything hurt. Just a couple more hours, and she could have a nice, quiet breakdown, all alone. Then she could put herself back together. Again.

Matt's mom came over. "The taxi is here."

She nodded. "We're coming. Go load your luggage."

She took a deep breath as she watched them leave the room. Regan came up beside her. "It will be all right."

"I know." But she didn't believe it. She had a horrible feeling she had totally messed up, and it was too late to ever put things right. She shifted Lulu in her arms. "Time to go."

### Chapter Twenty-One

Christ, he hoped he hadn't left it too late.

He was still in uniform. He'd had a meeting and hadn't had time to change. And he'd left his cap in the taxi. His hands had been full of other things. Now he stopped and searched the departure lounge. They couldn't have gone through security yet. If they had, he'd have to find a way to go after them. He'd just have to talk his way through. He could say it was official army business, probably putting everyone in a panic. He didn't care. And anyway, Darcy would still be this side. She wasn't flying.

Finally, he saw them, and the breath left him. He closed his eyes for a second. They were still there when he opened them.

His mom and dad were both wheeling trolleys with luggage. Hannah walked beside them, Darcy on the other side, with Lulu in her arms. Lulu was chattering. Darcy looked pale but had a smile on her face. She wouldn't want to upset Lulu.

Would she say yes?

He didn't know, and there was that churning in his gut again.

He tightened his grip on the squirming thing in his arms and moved toward them.

When he was about ten feet away, Lulu caught sight of him and screamed. "Matt!"

She banged her little fist on Darcy's shoulder, and she halted and turned slowly.

Darcy was expecting him—he'd promised to be here. All the same, her eyes widened when she saw him. She'd once said that he was Mr. Perfect, but he was guessing he looked a little ruffled around now. And probably shit-scared as well. Her gaze dropped down over him, and she frowned.

Then Lulu wriggled, and she put the little girl down on the floor. She ran to Matt and stopped in front of him, eyes wide as she stared up. "Puppy? For Lulu?" she asked.

"Yeah, princess. For you."

She stretched up and put out a tentative hand. The puppy licked her fingers and she giggled. "Woof."

Whichever way this thing went with Darcy, he knew he couldn't give Lulu up. They might not be the perfect family, but he'd do his best for her. He just hoped he'd have Darcy at his side to help him. Would she forgive him for being an ass? For not seeing what was in front of him sooner? For that matter, would she be able to overcome her own fears? Could he convince her that it was safe to love him and Lulu?

His mom and dad had also come to a halt, with Hannah beside them. She grinned at him.

"Look after that," he said, and dumped the squirming puppy into his sister's arms, then took hold of Lulu's outstretched hand, squeezed.

"You got a puppy?" Darcy said. She sounded dazed.

"I did. I wanted to get a rescue one. But they had to do house checks, and all sorts, and I needed one now. It means we'll end up with two dogs, as I'd already said yes to the rescue and—" He broke off. He was babbling. Christ, he'd never been this nervous.

“Why?”

“In a moment.” First, he had an apology to make. He turned to his parents. “I’m sorry, Mom, Dad.”

His mom looked sad but resigned. “I sort of thought you might have a change of heart. I just didn’t think you would leave it this late.”

“Sorry,” he said again with a shrug.

“For what it’s worth—I think you’re making the right decision. Lulu already sees you as her father. Now, I’m guessing you’d like to talk to Darcy alone.”

He nodded. A knot formed in his throat and he swallowed. “Go pat your new puppy,” he said to Lulu and handed her to his mother.

Darcy hadn’t moved. “You got Lulu a puppy? She’s not going to be able to take it on the plane.”

“She’s not going on the plane.”

“She’s not?”

“Lulu belongs with me. Actually, she belongs with us.”

Something flickered in her expression. “What happened to ‘she’s better off with a real family.’”

He shrugged. “I’m her family. But I’m hoping that I can give her a real family. Complete with a dog.”

“Or two.”

“Yes.” Then something occurred to him. “Christ, tell me you like dogs.”

“I love dogs.”

Thank God. He took a deep breath. “Marry me.”

Her eyes widened. “What?”

“I love you. This is nothing to do with Lulu. Just you and me.”

“I...” She bit her lip. Was she thinking of everyone she had lost? Did she think a soldier was a bad bet?

When she didn’t speak, he hurried on. “I had to go into work—that’s why I was late. I told them I was turning down the position as second in command. I asked for a desk job.”

“But you’ve been working toward that job for years. You said so. It was all you wanted.”

“It was too dangerous. I have responsibilities now. I’ll still be working with the unit, but training and liaison here in the UK. I didn’t want you worrying all the time. I didn’t want Lulu to lose her father.”

“You shouldn’t have given up your dream for me.”



“I’ve new dreams now. Look, I know you’re scared. But give us a chance. I can’t promise that I won’t be taken from you. No one knows what the future will bring, but I’ll do everything in my power to be there for you. Forever, if you’ll have me.” He reached out and cupped her cheek. “Marry me. Please.”

She swallowed and gave an almost imperceptible nod, and the tight band around his heart loosened. But he needed to hear the words. “Say it.”

“I love you.” Her lashes fluttered closed for a second, then she opened her eyes and stared straight into his. “That was the hardest thing I’ve ever said.”

“You can’t take it back.”

“I don’t want to. I never want to take it back.”

“And the rest. I want everything. Marry me?”

She grinned. “Hell, we’ve already got a daughter and a dog—two dogs. I guess I’ll have to make an honest man of you.”

“Say it.”

“I will.”

### Epilogue

It was a year to the day she'd been released from prison.

And who better to celebrate it with than Summer and Regan, who had been through so much with her? She'd booked a private room at the Ritz, where she had come with Summer on the day of her release. The place had happy memories for her. Her grandmother used to bring her and Emma here for afternoon tea when they were children. Emma had enjoyed dressing up, and she'd loved all the fancy china and pretty things. They'd been so different. Darcy could think of Emma now without bitterness, and remember the good times, though thoughts of Matt's brother still made her want to punch something hard. So she tried not to think about him.

How could everything change so totally in a year? She'd been such a mixed-up mess when she came out of prison. Now her life was everything she could have ever dreamed of. Except she'd never dreamed of soldiers or babies, and now she had both, and she wouldn't change anything for the world.

Sometimes being in love scared her, as though she still couldn't believe she deserved to be so happy. In those moments, she felt like she stood on the edge of a precipice... But Regan and Summer were always there to talk her down. They still met each week for lunch or dinner. She could imagine them still meeting when they were little old ladies. But there was a lot of living to do before then.

She raised her glass of champagne. "To new lives," she said.

"To staying on the straight and narrow." Regan clinked her glass with Darcy's.

“To giving up our freedom for a good cause,” Summer said, joining in the toast. “Well, three good causes.” Summer was drinking sparkling water instead of champagne—she was four months pregnant and glowing.

“How’s the baby?” Darcy asked, waving a hand at Summer’s expanding belly.

“Babies,” Summer replied. “We found out today—we’re expecting twins.”

“Wow.” Regan sounded a little envious. She and Nate had decided to put off having a family for a few years while they built up their business. But they were young, there was time. And the business was already doing well. Clearly, the whole idea of “use a thief to catch a thief” was taking off.

Darcy—with Matt’s help—was trying hard for a baby, which was fun. They wanted to give Lulu a little brother or sister, or two...or three.

“Identical twins.” Summer patted her stomach. “If they’re girls, I’m going to call them Regan and Darcy.”

“Aw.” Darcy sniffed, her eyes pricking. “I’m so glad we all found one another. I never would have made it without you two.”

“None of us would,” Summer said. “And look at us now.”

They’d all come such a long way.

She’d married Matt almost straight after he proposed. She had a vague notion that he thought she might wriggle out of it if he didn’t get the ring on her finger fast. But she’d had no intention of letting him go. Yeah, she was still scared. More so. She had so much to lose now. Sometimes, she’d creep into Lulu’s room at night and just watch her sleeping.

Summer and Regan had been maids of honor at the wedding. Surprisingly, so had Angie, who had become a friend after finally admitting that maybe Darcy was good enough for Matt. Lulu and Hannah had been bridesmaids. Matt's parents had stayed around for the wedding. They were back in Australia now, but Darcy suspected that it wouldn't be for long, that they would return for good in the not too distant future. His mom had confided in Darcy that they wanted to be part of their grandchild's life. Not only that, but she wanted to find a way to get closer to Matt. She had a lot of guilt about his childhood.

The door opened at that moment, and there he was. He was flanked by Nate and Nik, and she heard a collective sigh of appreciation from around the table. They were all stunning, but Matt was hers. Her heart gave a little flutter. He was in uniform and handsome enough to stop her breathing.

"They are something, aren't they?" Regan said from beside her.

"Did you ever think we'd be so happy?" Summer asked. Her tone was wistful and a little disbelieving.

"Never."

Prison had been hard for all of them. But the truth was, they had all done wrong and they had paid the price. And they'd found one another. Together, they'd learned a valuable lesson—how to forgive themselves and move on.

She lifted her glass again. "To us," she said, "And to happy ever after."