



Challenging Jayce (Kringle Security #3)

Author: *Elizabella Baker*

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Description: As a romance author, Kennedy knows all about happily ever afters. She just never thought they were for her. She was happier writing about her fantasies than living them out.

Until Jayce Pierce came along.

But Jayce is nothing like the book boyfriends she's used to writing about. He's grumpy, full of hate, and has a chip on his shoulder.

All Jayce ever wanted in life was a family he could take care of. But when his ex-wife cheated on him, he vowed to never make that mistake again.

Now fifteen years later, he was about to learn that everything he thought he knew had been a lie. He has a fifteen-year-old son named Michael who was raised by another man. And Michael's life could now be in danger.

It will be up to Jayce to find what other secrets have been hidden from him and how he can keep his son from the consequences of his mother.

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CHAPTER 1

Jayce walked into Luke's office with a scowl. It wasn't like his friend to summon one of them. They all saw Luke as their unofficial leader, but he never acted like it.

Until today.

Until this morning.

Not exactly how he wanted to start his workday.

"You rang?" Jayce didn't bother to keep the annoyance out of his tone. They were used to his surly attitude at this point. No one even commented about it anymore.

"Close the door."

This couldn't be good. Luke never did anything behind closed doors. They had an open-door policy, and Luke was the biggest stickler about it. They all had an equal stake in Kringle Security, and as such, everything was discussed between all of them.

Jayce closed the door with a soft click and took the seat opposite Luke's desk. The space was meticulously clean, due to the fact that Luke rarely used it. But it was the look on his friend's face that put him on edge. Something big was about to go down.

"I just got off the phone with Shaun."

Jayce instantly tensed up. There was only one Shaun he knew and he hadn't seen the

man in fifteen years. Not after the bullshit with his ex. The last thing he wanted to hear about was how the man was doing.

"I didn't know the two of you still talked."

Shaun had been in the same unit as them, but he did his four years and got out, taking Jayce's wife with him.

"We don't, but he needed to get in touch with you and figured I was the best person to do it."

"I've got nothing to say to him." He was grinding his teeth so much, it was any wonder they weren't completely gone.

"I told him as much but then he informed me Jasmine passed away this week."

The mention of his ex-wife's name only further put him on edge. He hadn't uttered that name in the fifteen years since he found out she was cheating on him with one of his best friends.

"I would say send my condolences, but we both know that would be a lie. I don't care what happened to her. She lost that right when she ripped my heart out."

"Any other time I would agree with you, but Jasmine left a note when she died and Shaun thought it was imperative that you knew what it said."

A bright danger sign flashed in his head. It was never good when someone confessed something on their deathbed. It usually meant that whatever they had to say was bad enough they couldn't do it while they were alive.

It turned out this was no different.

"Jasmine confessed that Michael isn't Shaun's son. He's yours."

Motherfucker.

Rage poured out of him in waves. "Are you fucking kidding me? She expects me to believe her bullshit all these years later?" No fucking way was he falling for that.

"Shaun had a DNA test done before he called. Michael isn't his."

His hackles rose. This couldn't be happening, not after everything that went down.

"So then he must be someone else's. I doubt Shaun was the only guy she cheated on me with. He doesn't have to me mine."

"Her letter said otherwise. Shaun insists you read it."

"Yeah, well, Shaun can go fuck himself. He stopped getting a say when he fucked my wife behind my back."

Jayce stormed out of Luke's office and didn't bother to look back. In fact, he didn't bother to stay at work. He climbed into his beat-up truck and drove the long distance to his crappy one-bedroom apartment in a shitty part of town. Unlike his friends, he wasn't living it up in some nice house or luxury apartment. He didn't want anything to do with that nonsense after he divorced Jasmine.

She was the one who wanted the high life. The one who cared about money and how the world viewed every decision she made. Jasmine was sure he would amount to nothing, so that was exactly how he made sure people saw him. No one knew the kind of money he had sitting in the bank because he never flashed it.

He drove a vehicle that was ten years past its due date. The old pickup belonged in a

junkyard, but until it actually died, he would continue to love it.

The rent for his apartment was minimal, thanks to the million things that were wrong with the building. It was one step away from being condemned, but considering it was only a place to rest his head at night, it worked just fine. His apartment was by far the cleanest, which wasn't saying much; he lived amongst druggies and criminals who didn't care about the building's mold problems.

Jayce unlocked the door of his apartment and stepped inside. He didn't have a clue why he chose to come home. He hated this place. He never spent time here and yet he didn't want to be at work. It was too early to go to the bar or to his usual hangout places. Basically, he was screwed.

He dropped his chin to his chest with a long exaggerated sigh. Running away wouldn't do any good and he would always wonder if Jasmine was screwing with him again.

"Fuck it," he said out loud to no one. He needed to at least know if there was even a hint of truth to Jasmine's dying declaration.

He sent out a quick message to Luke asking for the address, then mentally made a list of what he needed to pack depending on how far away they lived.

Luke got back to him immediately and Jayce grew even more agitated when he read the address.

This whole time Jasmine was barely an hour away.

It looked like he didn't need to pack much at all. The trip could be made in a day, and then when he found out Michael wasn't his, he could come back to his shitty apartment and continue to hate his life, like he'd done every other day for the past

fifteen years.

CHAPTER 2

"Can you please stop pacing?" It wasn't so much of a request as it was a demand. For the last hour she'd had the displeasure of watching her brother burn a hole in his living room floor. Ever since he got a text from some guy named Luke.

"You don't get it, sis. Jayce is on his way here and he's going to lose his ever-loving mind."

"As he should. Jasmine screwed him over. But he's not the only one who should be hurt by what she said in that note."

Kennedy never liked her sister-in-law. Shaun married her because he thought he was the father of her baby, something they were now learning wasn't true. She could never understand how her brother managed to stay married to the stuck-up bitch all these years, and now that she knew what really happened, she wished she could bring Jasmine back just to kill her for the torment she was putting Shaun through. Jasmine was nothing more than a selfish twat.

"It's pointless to be angry at a dead woman."

Maybe so, but no one ever said she was rational.

"What time is Jayce supposed to show up?" She needed to change the subject before she said something she couldn't take back.

"Any minute now." Shaun had moved from the living room to the foyer where he was

checking the long windows beside the front door every few seconds. The stress of waiting was going to give him ulcers.

"Does Michael know what's going on?"

Shaun scoffed. "No, and he won't until after I speak with Jayce. I'm not taking any chances with how he's going to react to the news."

"Are you referring to Jayce or Michael?"

"Jayce. When he found out about Jasmine and me, he lost his shit. He loved her fiercely and having a family with her was all he ever wanted. In his eyes, I took that all away from him."

Her hatred for Jasmine grew tenfold. The C-U-next-Tuesday ruined one too many lives with her lies.

"But it turns out you didn't."

"I doubt he's going to see it that way."

Shaun had his back to the front door when the doorbell finally rang, and she moved to open it before he could get there. He might be her older brother, but she was protective as hell of him, and if this Jayce fellow thought he was going to give her brother shit because of Jasmine, he had another thing coming.

She flung the door open and had to make a conscious effort not to let her jaw smack off the floor. Kennedy wasn't naive enough to think her brother wasn't handsome. She had heard it enough growing up. Her friends always had crushes on him, but he was nothing compared to the man standing on the front porch glaring at her.

The man was ruggedly sexy in a way that should be a sin. Work boots that showed he knew how to get dirty. Worn jeans that weren't just a fashion trend but were likely that old. A flannel shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows and a ball cap that was pulled low enough to cover his dark eyes. At least she thought they were dark but couldn't entirely be sure. He also wore a scowl that looked to be permanently etched on his face.

"You must be Jayce." Not the nicest greeting she had ever given someone but it felt right considering how nervous Shaun was.

"And I have no idea who the hell you are." Jayce sounded as gruff as he looked. "Where's Shaun?"

Wow. Such a pleasant man. Maybe she could understand why Jasmine left his ass. She was getting ready to tell him where he could shove his attitude but Shaun beat her to it.

"Watch how you speak to my sister, Jayce."

"Sister? And here I thought you were quick to have someone new in your bed."

Kennedy had a powerful urge to slap the shit out of Jayce, but Shaun had his arm around her middle and was hauling her off before she could make her move.

"Let me go!" She beat on her brother's arm but it did no good. "He can't get away with talking to you like that."

Shaun grunted the more she struggled. "He can because until he knows the truth, I'm the enemy."

"I doubt even knowing the truth will make me stop believing you're the asshole in

this situation."

She wanted to scream that he had no idea what he was talking about, but she promised Shaun she would keep her mouth shut. He wanted to be the one to tell Jayce everything that happened fifteen years ago. But if Jayce continued to talk shit about her brother, she was going to be breaking some promises. Or maybe some noses. She would decide when the time came.

"How about you shut your mouth and listen for once?" she snapped.

"For once?" She could envision his eyebrow popping up if it wasn't covered by his hat. "You haven't known me long enough to make that assumption."

"And I don't want to know you, with an attitude like that."

It was a partial lie. Her brain, and her heart, might not want to know him, but her body certainly did. Even with her brother in the room, it didn't matter. He was lighting her nether region on fire and not just because he frustrated her.

She wished that were the reason. Then she wouldn't feel so guilty.

"The feeling is mutual," he deadpanned.

It was even more annoying to know that the sexual attraction was one-sided. She was beyond flustered, but Jayce was as cool as a cucumber.

The bastard.

"I'm only here to figure out what the truth is. Or if this is just more of Jasmine's lies."

"They aren't lies," she snapped, even if she wished more than anything they were. Her

heart shattered when Shaun shared the news, and then again when the DNA test proved what Jasmine said was true.

"We'll see."

CHAPTER 3

Jayce didn't want to be here. And furthermore, he didn't want to like how good Shaun's sister looked. He hated the man and by default hated his sister, no matter how sexy her ass looked in those tight jeans.

"Yeah, you will," Kennedy snarked. "You'll be eating your words soon enough."

The little spitfire's challenge made him rock hard. Thankfully Shaun chose that moment to spin her around so the two of them could argue in hushed whispers while he discreetly adjusted himself. It was best she didn't know the effect she had on him.

"Let me go grab the letter. I'll be right back. Kennedy, you're with me," Shaun snapped out. It was probably best he put some distance between the two of them. There was no telling what would happen if Jayce was left alone with her, for even a second.

It had been years since a woman so much as made his cock stir, let alone interested him. Sex was merely a tool when his hand no longer did the job, a way to release the pent-up frustration before it became a problem he couldn't handle.

Now that he thought about it, he was probably past that point and needed to find a release soon so he didn't do something stupid.

Jayce looked around the middle-class house. It was two stories. If he had to guess, it had three to four bedrooms upstairs with a kitchen, living room, dining room, and bathroom downstairs. Maybe even a small office or sitting room in one corner.

He hadn't made it past the front entryway and he didn't want to. If it were up to him, he would be leaving within ten minutes.

"Here you go." Shaun thrust a crumpled piece of paper in his direction.

He recognized the handwriting as Jasmine's. When they were first married, she had sent him numerous letters while he was deployed. The charm quickly wore off.

Dear Shaun,

The letter wasn't even written to him. He wanted to shove it back at Shaun but curiosity won out in the end.

If you're reading this, it means I didn't win the battle. I'm writing you this letter because I'm too ashamed to admit the truth to your face. I knew you would be disappointed in me and I couldn't bear to see that look on your face. Before I confess, after the lies I've told you over the years, I want you to know just how sorry I am. I never intentionally set out to hurt you but I needed a way out and saw you there, staring at me.

Michael isn't your son. I never cheated on Jayce with you. I made it all up and used your drunken state to my advantage. Jayce was so determined to start a family that I started tracking my cycle like crazy to ensure it never happened. The night we conceived Michael was a mistake. I went out with my friends and had too much to drink. We all know how horny I would get after I drank. I realized my mistake the next morning and knew I had to fix it. I contemplated getting an abortion but I could never do that to an innocent baby. Just because I didn't want a family with Jayce didn't mean I never wanted to be a mother.

All week I tried to figure out a way to fix things but it wasn't until the ball that I figured it out. You were passed out drunk and all it took was me slipping into your

room to make it look like we slept together. I never thought you would do the honorable thing and marry me.

But you did, and over the years, I came to love you. You were a great father to Michael. I couldn't ask for someone better, but I needed you to know the truth. You can choose to tell Jayce or not. That's your decision. I never wanted the life of a career military wife. I knew as soon as Jayce told me he was considering staying in longer, I needed to get out of the marriage.

I'm truly sorry for the hurt I caused you. I just ask that you don't let this hurt Michael. He doesn't deserve to be punished for my choices. I did love you.

Jasmine

Jayce crushed the note in his hand and threw it on the ground. "She didn't care if you told me? What a self-centered bitch, even in death."

"I'm not disagreeing with you that she had a few flaws."

"A few flaws?" he snapped. "Is that what you call cheating on your husband, hiding the birth father's identity, and then not caring if I ever found out either way?"

Shaun sighed. "You read the note. You know she never cheated on you. She just made it look that way."

He scoffed. That's if he believed what her note said. He wasn't sure about that yet.

"Why did you call Luke? You could've ignored what she said and I never would've been any wiser."

Shaun looked down at the tiled entry floor but didn't say anything at first. It was

several minutes of silence that slowly ate away at Jayce's patience. "I always felt bad about what happened. I told you at the time I didn't remember sleeping with Jasmine. I never would've done that to you. I knew how badly you wanted a family with her. When I read the note, it was a no-brainer. You deserved to know."

Huh. Maybe there was a decent bone in Shaun's body after all.

"I want a DNA test. I know what the note said but I want proof. I wouldn't put it past Jasmine to pull something over on me, even from the grave."

Shaun nodded his head in agreement. "The lab already has Michael's. They just need yours. I can have it rushed so you aren't forced to spend too much time here."

It wasn't a hardship. The ironic part was they lived in Seattle. This whole time they hadn't been far away, but he wasn't about to share and details of his life with anyone until he knew what the results were.

"I should probably get . . ."

He didn't get to finish the sentence before the front door was opening up at his back.

"Michael? What are you doing home so early?" There was no mistaking the panic in Shaun's voice. It had him turning around quickly to see what was going on.

"Today was an early release."

The whole world melted away when he got a look at the boy. There wouldn't be a need for a DNA test. He was looking at a younger version of himself, just with shaggier hair.

Jayce whipped around and shot daggers at Shaun. "Are you fu . . ."

Shaun cut him off when he spoke to Michael. "Michael, this is Jayce. He once knew your mother and me. How about you run upstairs and start your homework. I forgot you were getting out early today."

"But I don't . . ."

"Please, Michael." Shaun sounded like he was at the end of his rope. Jayce wanted to wring the man's neck for snapping at his son.

"Fine." Michael pushed his way through the group without another word. If he noticed the resemblance between himself and Jayce, he didn't say a word.

Jayce waited until Michael was out of sight before he let his anger fly. "Are you fucking kidding me ? He's my fucking twin. You expect me to believe you never noticed that before?"

Shaun released a long exhale and leaned against the wall. "I did notice about two years ago, but I convinced myself it couldn't be true. I always wondered why his hair was so light when both Jasmine and I had dark hair, but I thought it would change over time. At thirteen there was no denying it anymore. Michael was a spitting image of you when we first met."

"No shit," he spat out. "Why didn't you reach out to me then?"

"Because I was scared," Shaun argued back. "Sure, I was the name listed on the birth certificate, but if I went behind Jasmine's back, she would take him away from me. Michael might not be mine biologically, but he's my son."

"No, he's my son," Jayce growled.

"Biologically, yes . . ."

He cut Shaun off before he could add a “but” to the end of that sentence. "It should've been me but you and Jasmine took that away from me." He spat her name out. He hated allowing it to cross his lips but the alternative wasn't kind at all.

" Jasmine took that away from you. I wasn't sure until the DNA test came back."

"Semantics." Shaun didn't deserve the full force of his ire. The problem was there was no one else to take it out on. Kennedy never came back after stepping away with Shaun, and Michael was sent upstairs. Not that he wanted his son to see how angry he was.

"Look, Jayce, I get it." Shaun rubbed his hand up and down his cheek. "I would be pissed if I was in your shoes. What Jasmine did was wrong, but you have to believe me that I never set out to fuck you over. Not with Jasmine getting pregnant and certainly not by keeping Michael from you. I reached out as soon as I could to try and make things right."

"I want that DNA test done and then I want Michael to know who his real father is." Jayce turned around and yanked the front door open. He hadn't gotten further than the entryway, but that was okay. He hadn't wanted to see the life his ex had created without him. He could hate her all he wanted, but it would never stop the hurt from festering.

He stomped all the way out to his rust bucket of a truck but stopped before wrenching the door open. Someone was watching him. Jayce turned around expecting to find Shaun or his sister staring him down but all the windows on the first floor were empty. The same couldn't be said for the second floor.

A quick glance to the window on the right side of the front of the house showed Michael staring back at him. Jayce made eye contact for a brief moment before his son walked away.

With a huff, he climbed into the truck.

One day. He would give Shaun one day and then he was going to talk to Michael about who he was and how he planned to be in his life.

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CHAPTER 4

It was her turn to pace back and forth. Unlike Shaun, she was wearing a hole in the kitchen where her brother chastised her like a child.

She let him have it though as soon as she heard the front door slam shut. Kennedy marched right back out to the entryway.

"Are you seriously going to let him get away with talking to you like that?"

Shaun looked like he aged ten years in the mere minutes they were separated. For his sake, she wanted to let it go but this was her nephew they were talking about. Shaun could scrub his face with his hands and huff all he wanted. She was looking out for her nephew and his best interests.

"What choice do I have? You saw Jayce. Can you deny Michael is his?"

"Is that why I needed to have blood drawn?"

Neither of them had heard Michael come down the stairs. They turned around to find him sitting on one of the steps about halfway up the staircase.

"Uh . . ." Shaun completely froze.

"It's complicated." She did her best to come up with an explanation on the fly but she was drawing a blank as much as Shaun was. Quick thinking was never one of her strong suits.

"It's really not." Hurt was carved into every feature on Michael's face. "Dad just admitted there's no denying I'm that guy's son. Even I can see how much I look like him."

Shit, fuck, and damn. This would've been a bajillion times easier if Michael wasn't a carbon copy of the bastard.

"Your mother left me a note, and in it, she claimed Jayce was your father."

"How did she know him?"

She could only imagine what was going through her nephew's mind. To him, Jasmine was the best person. He was never forced to see what a shitty human she could really be. Whether she was a great mother or just that good of an actress was still to be determined.

"Jayce is your mother's ex-husband."

"How long were they divorced before you and mom got together?"

Shaun sighed. "They weren't."

"I see."

"Like I said, complicated." She was going to sound like a broken record if she had to keep using that phrase. The reality was there was nothing complicated about the situation. Jasmine was a bitch and she screwed over both Jayce and Shaun. But that didn't mean she had to like the man.

"Your mother made a few mistakes but she loved you. Just like I love you." Shaun begged for her nephew to understand.

"And Jayce? Or I guess, my sperm donor?"

Shaun shook his head. "Don't call him that. This isn't Jayce's fault. Your mother never told him you were his son. He's reacting to the fact that a big secret was kept from him for fifteen years."

"There had to be a reason mom didn't want him to be my father."

The kid was too smart for his own good.

"Yeah, she didn't want you to be raised an Army brat."

Kennedy gasped. That was news to her. Then again, she didn't read the letter, nor did she know Jasmine all that well. She might've been her sister-in-law, but they weren't close.

"I think I'll go back to my room now." Michael pushed off the railing.

"Michael, wait." Shaun tried to get his son's attention but her nephew walked away without any acknowledgment.

"Give him some time. That was a lot to take in."

"I didn't want him to find out that way, but I couldn't lie to him either. Jasmine did enough of that for the both of us," Shaun sighed.

"I know you asked me to be nice because she was your wife, and I know it's rude to speak ill of the dead. However . . ."

"Jasmine was a bitch," Shaun finished for her.

"I mean if the shoe fits, and in this case, it really does."

"I married her because she was pregnant. I stayed married because I love Michael. Even knowing what I do now, I wouldn't change a thing. What kind of man does that make me?"

Kennedy looped her arm through her brother's and rested her head on his bicep. He was a good five inches taller than her, but still shorter than Jayce. It was one of the first things she noticed when he walked in the door; how small he made the rest of them feel.

"It means you're a good man. Jasmine knew that. I don't agree with the choice she made and I don't know Jayce, but she picked a great man."

"The Jayce you met today isn't the man he always was. He worshipped the ground Jasmine walked on. He loved her unconditionally and it was no secret he wanted a family with her. Her decision to take that away from him was a selfish one. I have no doubt that, if she told him to leave the Army, he would've."

That made things so much worse. She was torn between feeling bad for Jayce and all he missed out on, and being selfish. If Jasmine had never tricked Shaun, then she wouldn't have the amazing nephew she did.

"It looks like he never got over it."

Her brother huffed. "No, definitely not, and I don't know what that means for my relationship with Michael. Jayce hates me and for good reason. He thought his wife cheated on him with me. I doubt a letter is going to change his feelings overnight."

She tensed. "He can't just take Michael away from you. You're his father. The man listed on the birth certificate and the only father Michael has known. Jayce has to

realize he can't just yank my nephew away from everything he knows."

Shaun shrugged and the uncertainty was clear as day on his face. "The old Jayce would never have done that. He would do what was best for the kid. I don't know this new version of him and I can't tell what he will do out of anger. I just hope he'll let it die with Jasmine."

So did she, because losing Michael wouldn't just kill Shaun. It would kill her as well.

"I think Michael has calmed down enough. Do you want me to go up and try talking to him?"

She'd always had a special relationship with her nephew. He would seek her out to talk, long before he would go to his parents. It was why when Jasmine announced two years ago that they were moving to Seattle, she was more than happy to come with. Shaun and Michael were the only family she had. It wouldn't have felt right to be so far away from them.

"No, I'll go. I don't want him to think anything has changed just because biologically he's not mine. No matter what, I will always consider him my son."

Kennedy watched her brother head up the stairs. Maybe she was a bit biased but Shaun was a great man. He always put others' needs before his own.

Case in point, Jasmine.

He said over the years he fell in love with his wife, but Kennedy didn't for a minute think it was true love. She always got the feeling it was more of a "friendship" kind of love than anything else, but maybe that was enough for him.

Personally, she wanted the all-consuming kind. She wanted the man she married to

love her so much that the thought of being without her was heartbreaking. And she wanted to feel the same about her husband. She refused to settle for anything less.

She headed toward the kitchen when she heard Shaun yelling frantically for Michael. Taking off up the stairs two at a time, Kennedy nearly tripped twice but managed to right herself. She crashed into Shaun just as she turned left on the landing.

"What's going on?"

"Michael's gone!" Shaun panted. "I checked all the rooms but he's not here. Michael's not here!"

Shit, fuck, and damn. This wasn't good.

CHAPTER 5

The thought of day drinking at one in the afternoon was appealing. Except his gut was telling him something big was about to happen and he refused to have his reflexes dulled even a little bit.

"What can I get you?" the hotel bartender tossed a rag over his shoulder and asked.

"Just a Coke and a burger, please."

He didn't bother to look at a menu. Most bars had a burger on the menu and he wasn't particularly picky about what kind at the present moment.

He couldn't check into a room yet. The nice desk clerk explained there was a concert in town that was filling hotels up. He was lucky they had a room available at all, but he had to wait another hour for it to be cleaned before he could check in.

It was fine. Wasting the hour eating at the bar wasn't a hardship. Thinking about that letter and Michael, on the other hand? Well, that was an entirely different story. He couldn't get Michael's face out of his head. It was like looking in a mirror twenty years ago. The similarities were uncanny and there was no way Jasmine could hide his paternity forever.

One chance meeting and they both would've figured it out. Unless Michael believed in doppelgangers. He might not, but others did.

The bartender slid the glass across the bar just as his phone rang. As soon as he saw

the name on the screen, he was tempted to reject the call. The only reason he didn't was because of what he just learned.

"What do you want, Shaun?"

There was no time for pleasantries. Not with his current mood.

"Michael is missing."

No way he could've heard Shaun correctly.

"I'm sorry, say that again, but much slower this time," he hissed.

"Michael's missing. He overheard us talking and knows that you're his father. We talked a little about why Jasmine kept it from him and then he ran up to his room. I tried giving him some time to cool down, but when I went up to talk to him, he was gone."

Jayce pushed up from the bar and threw some money down before walking away. It would cover the meal he wasn't going to get to eat.

"You looked everywhere in the house?"

Shaun's home wasn't small but it wasn't that large either. It wouldn't take long to do a thorough search and it wasn't like Michael was a small child. He was a teenage boy who was barely two inches shorter than Jayce.

"I'm not an idiot, Jayce. Yes, I looked everywhere before I called you. I even reached out to his friends to see if they'd heard from him. No one has."

Shaun's statement had him stumbling for a second. Shaun knew Michael's friends. He

knew who to call and who his son hung out with. Jayce didn't because Jasmine took that from him.

"Drive the neighborhood and work your way out. How long has he been gone?"

"Fifteen minutes. Twenty tops."

Jayce calculated how far a kid could make it in that time.

"I'll start on the outskirts and work my way in to you. Between the two of us, we'll find him."

He could barely remember the rest of the conversation. Jayce was running on automatic and using every ounce of knowledge he learned in the Army and the Secret Service to find his son. He started about three miles from Shaun's home and worked in a clockwise direction through the neighborhood. After an hour, he began to feel helpless.

His first day as a father and already he had lost his son. Not that he actually did the losing. That credit went to Shaun, but still. Michael was missing and he had the feeling it was partially his fault.

Jayce thought about what he would do if he needed time to get away from people. Normally sitting on a park bench helped.

That was it.

He pulled out his phone and looked for parks in the area. It turned out there was one about a mile and a half from the house.

Five minutes later, he was pulling up to the small park. It was more of a playground

than an actual park but sitting at one of the picnic tables just staring aimlessly at the swings was Michael.

Jayce: I found him. Give me time to talk to him and then I'll bring him home.

He put his phone in his pocket and ignored the buzz a few seconds later. Shaun could wait. His son could not. Climbing out of the rust bucket, Jayce headed straight for the table area.

"Mind if I join you?"

Michael didn't look up when he answered. "It's a free country. From what I'm told, you had something to do with that."

Jayce settled on the opposite side so he could get a good look at his son. "I think it was men long before me who made that happen but I didn't mind doing my part in ensuring it stayed that way."

"My father." Michael shook his head. "Shaun told me that my mother didn't want me to be an Army brat and that's why she lied about who my father is."

"Shaun is still your father no matter what DNA says. He raised you the last fifteen years and I'm not here to take that away from him." Jayce was surprised to find he actually meant that. It wasn't Shaun's fault and he wouldn't blame the man. "As for your mother, yes, she didn't want to be an Army wife. Had I known how strongly she felt about it, I never would have mentioned reenlisting."

Little did Jasmine know, he decided against going career Army. He left after his next enlistment and joined the Secret Service. Four years. She only had to stay with him for four more years and then she could've had everything she wanted.

She got what she wanted though. She got out quick.

"My mother cheated on you with my father. I'm not sure how I'm supposed to feel about that."

"She didn't cheat. At least, not according to the note she left, and you don't need to feel anything. She was your mother. She might not have loved me enough to stay, but she loved you so much that she wanted a better life for you."

Michael tilted his head to the side a bit. "You don't think I would've had a good life if you were my father?"

Jayce let out a humorless laugh. "You sure know how to call a man out on his shit, don't you?" He slapped his hand upside his head. "Shit, I'm probably not supposed to say shit in front of you."

This conversation wasn't going as planned. "And I said it again," he huffed.

"Don't worry." Michael chuckled. A real one, unlike his. "My parents curse all the time. They usually follow it up by telling me not to swear like they do."

"Okay, good. Let's go with that, then. Don't swear like I do."

"Whatever you say . . . Dad." Michael scrunched up his nose.

"Feels weird?" he asked even while his stomach did a little flip-flop from hearing the word.

"Maybe a little, but not as much as I thought it would."

Jayce was quickly learning that Michael was a cool kid. He didn't have much

experience with children, but so far, his son seemed down to earth.

"As I was trying to say, life with me wouldn't have been bad. Sure, I moved around a lot but I never would've joined the Secret Service if I was still married to your mother."

"Wait, you worked for the Secret Service?" Michael's eyes lit up. "Did you get to meet the president?"

"I did. Two different ones in fact. Plus, vice presidents, senators, and a ton of dignitaries. It was pretty cool actually."

"That's awesome." Michael's look was close enough to hero worship that Jayce actually cracked a real smile.

"So tell me more about you."

"Well, I'm in tenth grade. I like school but some of the kids in my grade can be immature. I play basketball. Wait, no, I love to play basketball. I'm hoping to make it to the NBA someday. There's this girl Katie in my grade that I think is cute. She cheers for the team but I have yet to ask her out. Mom always wanted me to but I don't know." Michael shrugged. "Ummm . . . I have a few close friends. Mostly guys on the basketball team."

This went on for an hour; him listening as Michael spoke. He had so many questions but most got stuck in his throat. There were times it took a lot of restraint not to throw something or scream at the top of his lungs at the unfairness of the situation. He'd never hated someone as much as he did Jasmine, but he kept those emotions locked down tight, and soaked up the time with his newly found son.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:23 pm

CHAPTER 6

They had resorted to walking the neighborhood in hopes that would lead them to Michael sooner when Shaun's phone pinged with a text.

It was clear that whatever news her brother received was of the good variety, based on the sudden relief that appeared to consume him.

"Well . . ." Patience was never one of her strong suits.

"Jayce found him. He's going to talk to Michael and then bring him home," Shaun answered as he turned around to head back in the direction of his house.

"That's it? He didn't tell you where he found him or if he was okay?"

What the hell was wrong with her normally overprotective brother? This new calm behavior was starting to freak her the fuck out.

"Jayce is a man of few words, but I can promise you, if Michael was hurt, he would've let me know. He deserves this time to talk to the son he didn't know existed."

Well, shit, when he put it like that. But it didn't stop her from playing devil's advocate. What kind of sister would she be if she didn't challenge him? "You haven't see the man in fifteen years. How do you know he hasn't changed?"

Shaun stopped and let out an annoyed sigh. "Men like Jayce and me don't change.

Not when it comes to how protective we are of those we care about. He might've just learned he had a son, but there's nothing that will stop Jayce from protecting Michael. It's in his DNA. Like I said before, Jasmine already took too much away from him. I won't take any more."

It was hard to continue arguing with a statement like that.

"Fine, but I want to talk to Jayce when he and Michael get back. You might trust him, but I still need to form an opinion."

It was over an hour before Michael finally came home, and surprise, surprise, her brother didn't let her speak to Jayce.

In fact, he banished her once again to the kitchen. It was no surprise considering she was acting like a mean girl in one of the books she wrote. This wasn't normally like her. She was the first person to usually give someone the benefit of the doubt, but the thought of losing Michael scared the crap out of her.

* * *

Eavesdropping to discover Jayce's location? Easy peasy.

Schmoozing the young desk clerk to give her Jayce's room number? Surprisingly easy.

Everyone wanted to take part in a love story and convincing the college woman that she was there to surprise her boyfriend on a work trip didn't take more than batting her eyelashes and a promise that she wasn't here to cause trouble.

That last part would depend on how Jayce reacted to her just showing up at his hotel.

She rapped her knuckles on the hotel room door and waited for him to answer. And waited. And waited some more until the thought that he might not be in his room crossed her mind.

Kennedy was about to turn around and walk away when she heard grumbling on the other side of the door. Seconds later, it opened to a half-naked Jayce.

And by half-naked, she meant he only wore a towel around his waist.

“You!” he snapped.

It took her a moment, or maybe ten, to answer and she had to admit her answer wasn’t very intelligent.

“Me,” she replied.

“What are you doing here?”

If she wanted to make up for the bitch she was earlier today, she needed to start being a hell of a lot nicer. A feat that would’ve been easier if she wasn’t tongue-tied staring at Jayce’s extremely chiseled chest.

Clearing her throat, she met his angry eyes. “I wanted to talk to you. Can I come in?”

“Sure, since hanging out in the hallway in just a towel is probably highly frowned upon.” Jayce took a step back and waved her in.

Hesitantly she stepped through the doorway and into the room. She jumped at the sound of the door slamming behind her.

“Start talking so I can get back to what I was doing,” he said from behind her.

She spun around and confronted him head-on with her hands on her hips. “And what exactly were you doing that was so important you can’t take five minutes to talk to me?”

“You don’t want to challenge me right now, Kennedy. I’m frustrated and it’s either fucking or fighting that’s going to help me, so how about you get on with it so I can get back to fucking my hand already.”

She didn’t know what possessed her to say her next words, or to step in his space and challenge him. “I can think of better things to fuck than your hand.”

CHAPTER 7

“You want to fuck out my frustration?” Jayce stepped closer to Kennedy and met her challenge with one of his own, despite knowing it was a bad idea.

As soon as she nodded her head yes, he lost all control.

With zero finesse he spun her around and slammed her back against the door. There was no kissing. No affection that normally came with two people screwing around. Jayce got right down to business and whipped his towel off his waist, allowing his growing erection to stand proud between them. He smirked when Kennedy’s eyes grew wide but he didn’t bother to give her a chance to take him in for long before he was yanking her shorts and panties down her legs.

“Lift your foot,” he demanded with a tap to said foot.

Like a good girl, Kennedy didn’t hesitate to do his bidding. He didn’t bother repeating the act with the other side. This wasn’t that kind of fucking. He did however grab her ass and pick her up so that her legs could wrap around his waist on his way back to standing up.

“Hang on. This is going to be a fast fuck.”

He dragged his cock through her wet folds a few times to make sure she was good and ready to take him. He might be an asshole but he wasn’t looking to hurt her. Once he was sure she was wet enough, he slammed into her tight channel and fucked her repeatedly against the door.

There was nothing gentle about the way he took her, and based on the claw marks that would surely be visible on his back tomorrow, Kennedy liked what he was doing to her. A very small part of him that still contained his humanity cared that she was enjoying their time together, even though it had been years since he bothered to give that to a woman.

Moments later, Kennedy moaned his name with her release and it was then that he realized what he was doing. He pulled out so fast that he almost dropped Kennedy in his haste to get out of her before he finished.

“Fuck!” he roared. “You need to leave.”

Kennedy leaned against the door as she tried to catch her breath. “Wha . . .?”

“I said you need to leave. This never should’ve happened.”

He bent down and grabbed her clothes, practically throwing them at her. “Leave and don’t come back.”

“Fucking asshole,” Kennedy hissed from behind him where he had turned his back on her. He didn’t bother to turn around until he heard the door opening.

Jayce banged his head against the door Kennedy had slammed in his face, and with good reason.

He was an asshole.

One with absolutely no control of his hormones apparently.

Well, that wasn't true. He regained control but at the most inopportune time, as his still-hard cock reminded him. He hadn't let himself finish, and he wouldn't. It was the

least he deserved after taking Kennedy against the wall with no condom.

How could he be so stupid? He never lost control like that. He never allowed it. Sex was one of those things that he only had when the circumstances were exactly as he preferred it.

It had to be with a woman he didn't know and would never see again. Kennedy didn't fit either of those requirements, considering she was Michael's aunt and in his life.

It had to be with someone who didn't resemble Jasmine. Fortunately, Kennedy looked nothing like his ex-wife.

Normally, a very direct conversation happened first. He needed to be sure the woman he had sex with understood there would never be anything afterwards. No cuddling, no awkward morning after and definitely no sleepovers. No such conversation ever happened with Kennedy. He had attacked her like his life depended on it.

No, he had screwed everything up.

CHAPTER 8

"Where have you been?" Shaun's demand had her nearly jumping out of her skin as she snuck in the back door of his house.

With a hand over her rapidly beating heart, she scowled at her brother and snapped out, "Don't scare me like that!"

He was sitting in the dark, on a stool at the island. The faint glow of the under-cabinet lights barely illuminated his face enough for her to see the concern in his eyes.

"I wouldn't have scared you if you weren't trying to sneak in like a rebellious teenager. Now, care to tell me where you ran off to?"

With both hands on her hips, she was prepared for a fight. After how Jayce ended things, she needed to expel some extra frustration. "I don't think that's any of your business. I didn't move in with you and Michael so you could watch my every move. I did it so you weren't forced to raise your son on your own."

"You went to see him, didn't you?" Shaun was up off the stool and pacing around the semi-large kitchen. "Dammit, Kennedy, you couldn't just leave well enough alone, could you?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Deny. Deny. Deny.

"Bullshit. You were always a shit liar," Shaun spat. "Now, tell me what the hell happened when you confronted Jayce."

Uh, yeah, no. There wasn't a chance in hell she was going to tell her brother what happened between her and Jayce. He would likely storm off and kill the man.

"We talked. That's it."

"About what?"

Well, shit! She walked right into that one.

"I just wanted to form my own opinion about him, and I have. Now if you don't mind, I'm tired and would like to go to bed."

She didn't wait for her brother to respond, or give him the chance to ask any more questions. She hightailed her ass out of the kitchen and straight up the stairs to the guest bedroom she now considered hers.

She'd been the only one to use it since Shaun and Jasmine bought the house in Sammamish, despite her having an apartment further in the city. It was an easy decision to give her place up and move in with her brother when Jasmine took a turn for the worst. There were times Shaun worked late or on the weekends and he didn't want Michael to be left alone for long periods of time.

Now she wished she had kept her apartment. At least she would've had a place to escape to when Shaun took his big-brother role a little too seriously.

Then she walked into the en suite bathroom and remembered why she was so eager to move in. Her apartment didn't come close to having the large bathroom this place did. Nor did it have a luxurious claw-foot tub that she could sink into any time she

wanted, and right now, that was exactly what she needed to relax her sore muscles.

Jayce was no small man and she couldn't remember the last time she had sex; before she moved to Seattle, for sure, which, now that she thought about it, was pretty damn pathetic. Then there was the fact that Jayce hadn't spent time preparing her, so now her vagina and thighs were burning from an exercise she hadn't stretched for.

All in all, bed could wait. A bath couldn't.

Kennedy had just settled back into the hot water when her phone buzzed on the cute bench just to the left of the tub.

Who the hell could possibly be texting me at this hour?

It wasn't like she had many friends in the area. She was a loner by nature. Working from home did that to a person. Besides, she had only been in the Seattle area for two years, not nearly enough time for her to meet people. A normal person yes but she wasn't normal.

Drying her hands off on the tea towel she'd left near her phone, she picked it up to see who was interrupting her relaxation.

UNKNOWN NUMBER: I wanted to say I'm sorry.

She scrunched her nose up. It was probably a wrong number that she should ignore but curiosity got the better of her.

KENNEDY: Sorry for what?

With any luck it would be someone groveling for something stupid they did, and would be good content for her to use in a future book.

UNKNOWN NUMBER: For what I said before I kicked you out of my hotel room.

Well, well, well.

KENNEDY: Jayce?

The response was instantaneous.

UNKNOWN NUMBER: Have you been in someone else's hotel room tonight?

She leaned back into the warm water but kept her elbows on the lip of the tub so her hands would stay dry. With any luck this would be an interesting conversation. She certainly enjoyed challenging him before he freaked out. She stored his name in her phone before responding back.

KENNEDY: I mean maybe. The first didn't end well, so why not try my luck with someone else?

JAYCE: If that's the case, then this conversation is over.

Shit! For a second she forgot all about the circumstances that led to his divorce.

KENNEDY: I'm sorry, I didn't mean that. I was trying to be funny but I missed the mark big-time.

Crickets. Not even the little bubbles that showed he was typing popped up.

KENNEDY: I came straight home and argued with Shaun. He's the only other guy I've seen or spoken to since leaving your room.

Again, nothing.

KENNEDY: Jayce, I truly am sorry for what I said. I didn't mean it.

This time the little bubbles appeared but it took them disappearing a few times and plenty of anxiety on her part before his response popped up.

JAYCE: What did you and Shaun fight about?

She would take a question over him shutting her out.

KENNEDY: He figured out that I came to see you and wasn't happy about it.

JAYCE: Why?

KENNEDY: Why what?

This was probably a conversation they should've been having in person, or at least talking on the phone, rather than texting, but something told her if she tried to call him right now, he wouldn't answer.

JAYCE: Why didn't he want you to come see me?

She thought about how honest she wanted to be and, in the end, decided fuck it. She already lost her pride when she let him screw her against his hotel room door.

KENNEDY: Because I've been very vocal about my feelings toward you.

JAYCE: No offense but you don't know a damn thing about me.

He wasn't making this easy on her.

KENNEDY: Exactly and I happen to be very protective of my nephew. I don't allow

just anyone into his life.

She almost dropped the phone when it suddenly started to ring in her hand. Why was Jayce calling her? She didn't take him for a man to talk on the phone.

It almost rang out before she finally got the nerve to hit the accept button.

"Hello?" There was no hiding the question in her tone, but if Jayce noticed it, he didn't say anything.

"I'm not just anyone. I'm Michael's father."

Looked like they were going to pick up right where the texts left off.

"A fact that has yet to be confirmed."

Jayce snorted. "He's a fucking mini me."

She sighed. "Okay, I'll give you that. But I don't know anything about you."

The answer to that was nothing but silence. In fact, it lasted so long that she pulled the phone from her ear to see if the call had become disconnected.

Nope.

The call was still active, so Jayce was just being quiet.

Any other time she would've filled the space with chatter. She wasn't the type of person who sat in silence very well. Actually, she hated it. So much so that it usually made her antsy, but she was determined to ride this out and see what Jayce had to say.

Either he hated silence as much as she did—something she didn't think was accurate—or Jayce finally figured out what he wanted to say. But eventually, he spoke first.

"I don't let people get to know me anymore. Especially not of the female variety."

Well, that was just sad.

"Not every female is as bad as Jasmine."

"Maybe not, but I don't have to find out the hard way if I keep everyone at a distance."

Okay, never mind. That was heartbreaking.

"Look, I know it's not proper to badmouth a dead person, and I get that she was my sister-in-law, but you won't find me defending Jasmine. She was a shitty person, and if she was my only representation of the female population, then I too would hate women, but I can promise you we aren't all like that."

"I know."

Wait, what?

"I'm sorry, what did you say?"

Jayce was quiet when he answered again. "I said I know. That's why I freaked out. You showed me in just a few minutes that not every woman is like Jasmine. I promised myself, when she left, that I would never lose myself in another female the way I used to with her. Then I did with you tonight and I couldn't handle it. But I couldn't let you think you did anything wrong either."

"That's why you texted?"

"Yes, it's why I texted you."

Speaking of ...

"How did you get my number, anyway?"

Jayce chuckled and she vowed to do everything in her power to get him to do it more often because it was magical. Even through the speaker of her phone, it was the best sound she ever heard in her life. She could only imagine how it would transform his face in person.

"That's kinda my job."

She doubted it was what he was going for, but she was more intrigued than ever now. But it didn't appear she was going to get the chance to find out anything more tonight.

"Good night, Kennedy. I'll be talking to you soon."

"Yeah, good night."

He hung up before she could say anything more and maybe that was best, because the frustration she felt on the way home was now long gone. It was replaced with curiosity and she knew from experience that always got her in trouble. She was sure this time wouldn't be any different.

CHAPTER 9

Shaun wasn't kidding when he said the results of the DNA test would be quick. Jayce had his blood drawn earlier that morning and he already had the results back that afternoon. Michael was his son.

Again, not that he believed any differently after seeing the boy, but it was nice to have proof.

Maybe “nice” wasn't the right word because now that he had confirmation, he was pissed all over again for the years he lost out on; all the things he didn't know about his son because Jasmine hadn't wanted him in Michael's life.

It was a good thing Jasmine was dead because he couldn't be sure he could play well with her at the moment. It would be hard enough having to go through Shaun. He might hate the man but he wouldn't take Shaun out of Michael's life. He wasn't that much of a bastard and he wanted this to be as smooth of a transition as he could make it. That meant changing a few things in his life.

Jayce grabbed his phone off the nightstand and called one of his co-workers. Caden answered after the second ring.

"Everything okay?"

Of course he would think something was wrong. He hadn't spoken with any of his friends since storming out of the office yesterday and it was unlike him not to be at work.

"What did Luke tell everyone?"

It was better to see what everyone already knew before he spilled too much. He would need to tell them eventually but he wanted to keep it to himself for a little longer.

"Nothing. Just that you needed some time off and we weren't to reach out unless it was an emergency."

He owed Luke big-time.

"I need a favor."

"You're not going to tell me what's going on, are you?"

He thought about it some more. Caden wouldn't gossip and he would need to give his friend something if he expected help. Otherwise, Caden would be going in blind and that wasn't fair.

"Jasmine passed away and left a note claiming Michael is my son. I had a DNA test done today to confirm it."

"Holy shit," Caden cursed. "That's . . . A LOT. How you holding up?"

He blew out a sarcastic breath. "I'm not even sure, to be honest. I'm pissed but have no one to take it out on. Jasmine is dead and she never told Shaun. He found out when she left him a note. Michael looks like me, and sure, he could've confronted her about it, but what good would that have done? We all know she was a spiteful bitch and would've cut Shaun out without a second thought."

The more he thought about it, the more he realized Shaun was in a no-win situation.

There was no scenario where Shaun would've won against Jasmine if she dug her heels in. She cared only about herself, as proven by the note she left.

"I never could understand how you tolerated her."

"Blinded by love. I only saw what I wanted to see."

Which was the number one reason he would never allow another female to get close. He wouldn't be stupid enough to make the same mistake twice.

"So what favor did you need from me?"

"I need you to look into Jasmine. I want to know everything she's done over the past fifteen years. She mentioned losing a battle in her letter. I want to know what she meant by that, her full medical history if possible and what it means for my son."

The last word got stuck in his throat. He still couldn't believe it was true.

"You got it. Anything else?"

Jayce thought about it for a second, then said screw it. He was all in at this point.

"As a matter of fact, yes. Can I get the name of the realtor you used?"

There was no mistaking the sharp inhale of Caden's breath. "You finally allowing yourself to move out of that shithole you call an apartment?"

"Don't have much of a choice now, do I? I can't bring Michael there and Shaun's going to want to make sure I have something suitable. Might as well get a head start."

He didn't have the first clue what the future looked like for him and Michael but

having a livable place to stay was probably a necessity.

"I'll text you her information."

"Thanks. I appreciate it."

"Anything for you, man. I'll let you know when I have something."

They exchanged goodbyes before hanging up.

He barely got the phone away from his ear before it was dingling that he had an incoming message.

Caden proved he was as efficient as ever. Waiting in a text was the contact information for a realtor. Not wanting to waste any time, he hit "call" on the number.

It rang three times before a strong, confident female voice answered. "Amber Lee realty. Amber speaking. How may I help you?"

"Uhh . . . hi, this is Jayce Pierce. My buddy Caden Ford gave me your number. You helped him find a house and I was hoping you could do the same for me."

He really needed to work on his people skills. They were severely lacking if he stumbled talking to someone on the phone.

"Ah, yes. Caden just texted me that I might be hearing from you. Can you tell me a little bit about what you're looking for so I can pull a few listings?"

Of course his friend already messaged the woman. He probably wanted to make sure he didn't back out. Damn Caden for knowing him so well.

"Umm, maybe the same or a similar neighborhood to where Caden lives." He had only been there once but it seemed like as good of a place as any.

"And how about bedrooms? How many do you need? Any specific style home you're looking for? Any must haves? Garage, no garage?"

What was with all the questions? He wanted a house. Was that too much to ask for?

"Two or three bedrooms," he huffed. "I don't care about the style but a garage would be good."

If Amber was getting frustrated by his lack of responses, she didn't let on. In fact, she was downright understanding.

"I can tell this is a lot for you, so how about this? I have a few places in mind. Give me an hour to get some listings together for you and I'll send them over. Once you've had a chance to look at them, we can talk some more. How does that sound?"

"Sounds good," he grumbled.

It didn't sound good at all. By the time he got off the phone, he was regretting his decision to find a house, even if it was the smart choice.

With an hour to waste, Jayce decided to hit the hotel gym to get in a run and a short workout.

Amber kept her word, and barely an hour later, he had over ten house listings to look over. Opening up the first one, he realized instantly he was in over his head. He needed help. Before he could overthink his decision, he sent out a text.

CHAPTER 10

For the tenth time in the past hour, Kennedy checked her phone to see if she had any waiting messages. This was supposed to be her writing time but not even the dragons, swords, or princesses could take her mind off Jayce.

It wasn't just the sex either. It was the conversation last night that stuck in her mind. Something told her Jayce didn't apologize often, or open up about himself, and he had done both. She didn't know what that meant.

Glancing at her phone again, Kennedy chastised herself. She was ready to put the dang thing in another room when it lit up with a notification.

JAYCE: I need your help.

Okay, not the text she had been hoping for but it piqued her curiosity.

KENNEDY: That sounds ominous. What exactly does this help entail?

Completely forgetting about the story she was supposed to be writing, Kennedy watched the bubbles appear and waited anxiously to see what he needed.

JAYCE: I need to find a house but the realtor sent too many options.

This was not a conversation she could have through text. Without giving herself time to think about it, she hit the call button.

"Why are you looking at houses?" she asked as soon as Jayce answered.

He sighed before answering. "Because right now I live in a shitty apartment in a really crappy part of town. Not exactly the kind of home I want Michael visiting."

Her heart skipped a beat. Whether it was from him describing his current living situation or the fact that he wanted better for her nephew was anyone's guess.

"I'd be happy to help." Kennedy hoped she didn't sound as choked up as she felt. Something told her Jayce didn't do well with overly emotional women.

"Great. I'm not sure what your day or evening looks like . . ."

She slammed her computer shut. "I can come now. I wasn't doing anything anyway."

Not a total lie. No amount of effort she gave would have her putting words onto paper at the moment.

"Okay, great. See you in a bit."

He didn't give her the opportunity to respond before he hung up.

A side note for the future: Jayce was not much of a talker, so don't take his abruptness personally.

Kennedy made quick work of shoving her arms in a hoodie and her feet into a pair of slides. Not her most attractive outfit but she never claimed to be someone who cared about what others thought. She was of the mindset that a person needed to accept her for who she was. Flaws and all.

Based on the hungry look Jayce gave her when she showed up at his hotel room door

twenty-five minutes later, he also didn't give a shit about impressing someone.

"I'm in way over my head."

She could tell. Jayce looked frazzled. His hair was sticking up in all different directions as if he had run his hands through it countless times. She pictured her own fingers doing the same. Their encounter yesterday left her wanting more, but now wasn't the time. She was there to help, not fantasize about having sex with him again.

"Show me what she sent and let's see if we can narrow it down."

"Or you could just pick a place and I'll buy it."

That stopped her in her tracks. She doubted he meant anything by it, but the thought that he wanted to buy the place she picked was causing her romantic heart to do extra flips. She needed to shut those thoughts down and fast.

"Or . . ." she countered. "You can show me the places and we go from there."

There was no use arguing when he looked determined to push the task off. There was something about his flippant attitude toward house-buying that made her want to dig deeper.

"Fine. Here are the places." He grumbled, shoving his phone at her. It was unlocked and opened to his email app. A slew of links filled the page.

Kennedy clicked on the first one and took her time looking through the pictures and reading the description of the house. Right off the bat she knew it wasn't the one. The interior was too high class, despite it being a one story. It reminded her of a place Jasmine would've picked because of the bronze fixtures throughout.

The next one was a little better, but in her opinion, it was too small. It had only two bedrooms, and based on the dimensions, those rooms weren't all that big. Jayce might be used to sleeping in a crappy apartment but that didn't mean he needed it in the house he bought.

"Anything specific you were looking for in a house?"

It would help if she knew what he liked. Otherwise she was going in blind.

Jayce huffed. "A place to rest my head at night in a good neighborhood. Otherwise, I really don't care."

Well, alrighty then. That was the most unhelpful answer she'd ever received.

"How about price range?"

She had clicked on a few of the links, but the prices were all over the map. If Jayce gave the realtor a direction to go, he or she apparently didn't care.

"I'm not worried about price."

This man sure knew how to frustrate a person. If these were the kinds of responses he gave the realtor, it was no wonder the houses were all over the place.

"How many bedrooms? Bathrooms? Does it need to have a finished basement? How about a man cave? A certain number of rooms? A garage? You've got to give me something here."

There had to be something he cared about in a house.

"A garage. It needs to have a garage. I don't care about any of that other stuff."

She blew out a breath. Well, that was something. Not really helpful in narrowing things down though since all of these listings had a garage. It was probably the only requirement he gave the realtor as well.

Now that she knew this wasn't going to be a quick fix, she kicked her shoes off, climbed up on the bed and had a seat. With her back against the headboard, she crossed her legs and got comfortable clicking on the links.

Wanting to make her life easier and to narrow it down a bit, she copied all the links into the notes app. It was easy enough to eliminate a few just from one glance. Too gaudy was an automatic no.

"How about a fixer-upper?" She glanced up mid listing when an idea came to mind.

Jayce merely shrugged. "Sure. I can do the work but I don't know the first thing about matching shit, so I would need a designer or someone for input."

She was a visual person and right now the house she was looking at had potential. Real potential, with the right love.

"Okay, hear me out." She patted the bed next to her until he joined her. Then she put the phone between them and started flipping through the pictures. "I'm no interior designer but I've got one hell of an imagination and this house has so much potential to be great."

He wasn't saying no and he looked genuinely interested in the pictures she was showing him. She took that as a good sign. When he didn't say anything after looking at the pictures the first time, she flipped through them again, letting him take over the swiping of the photos.

"You really think you could make this into a livable place?"

"I do." She nodded eagerly. "I know it doesn't help your current situation but I'm sure Shaun would be willing to let you guys spend time together at his place."

She could see the walls going back up in his eyes. He had opened up in the little time she was here, but now that guarded man she first met was back.

"Yeah, Shaun," he spat.

He grabbed his phone back without another word and typed out a message quickly. It wasn't until he was done and the phone was back on the bed that he spoke again.

"I messaged the realtor back and said I would take that one. I asked that she make a cash offer. I'm willing to pay over the asking price to get it done sooner, so we'll see what the owner has to say. In the meantime, if you could use the pictures to come up with some kind of preliminary design, that would be great."

"Wait, that's it? Don't you want to see it? Have an inspector go over and look at it? I've never purchased a house but isn't that what people usually do?"

Jayce barely shrugged. It was like the situation didn't deserve that much effort. But it should. He was buying a house for goodness' sake. A place he was going to live. That should warrant a hell of a lot more than a barely there shrug.

"I messaged one of my friends. He'll have his inspector check it out and I don't need to see it. I already told you to pick one."

Just like that. This man was unbelievable.

"I wish I had a tenth of your nonchalant attitude when it came to life-changing decisions."

She could hardly make a decision without agonizing over it and weighing every option. The only reason she made the decision on the house was because she knew stripping it down to the studs meant a clean slate, something fresh to work with.

"It's just a house . A place you sleep and occasionally eat."

His words shocked her. "How can you be so callous about this? A house isn't just a building. It's a home . A place to represent who you are." The words were out of her mouth before she could stop them and she immediately wanted to take them back.

"Trust me, I know. My bitch of an ex-wife made that very clear when she left. I appreciate all your help, but I think it's time you leave."

He didn't even bother to sugarcoat his dismissal of her. She understood but it still stung.

"I'm happy to help anytime."

With those parting words, she stood up from the bed, slipped on her shoes, and walked straight out the door.

The worst part? A small sliver of her heart had hoped he would call her back, but he never did.

CHAPTER 11

Jayce regretted his outburst as soon as the hotel room door slammed shut.

How many times had his friends yelled at him for hanging on to the past? Too many to count. So much so that they had finally stopped ragging on him. They didn't bother to question his apartment when they settled down in Seattle. At this point, they were used to his grumpy ass constantly torturing himself because of Jasmine's words.

Fifteen years later and he was still holding on to the hurt like it happened yesterday. He needed to stop. If he wanted to have any kind of future with his son, he needed to be a better person and that started with apologizing to Kennedy.

He rushed out of the hotel room and headed straight for the elevator. When the doors didn't immediately open after hitting the button three times like an impatient toddler, he opted for the stairwell. He deserved the extra pain the stairwell forced on him after what he said to Kennedy.

The hurt in her eyes when he snapped at her was a knife to the organ that he didn't know still worked. Sure, it pumped blood throughout his body, that was its main function after all, but to care about someone? To have feelings? His heart hadn't known that purpose in a very long time.

He burst through the stairwell door and straight into the lobby causing several side and concerned glances. He probably looked like a deranged psychopath on the run. He gave them a smile to calm their nerves, but based on the way they stepped back, he missed the mark. With his luck they would call the police. He needed to get to the

parking lot before that could happen.

Jayce took off across the short lobby in a sprint. If the other guests thought he was deranged, then who was he to prove them wrong? If he stopped to really think about what was happening in his life, there was a good chance he was actually crazy.

He just found out he had a son, and the woman who was bringing his heart back to life was the sister of the man who raised his son. If that didn't qualify for a little insanity, then he didn't know what would.

It didn't take him long to find Kennedy. She was sitting in a parking spot not far from the main entrance. Her car was running but her forehead was leaning against the steering wheel. He didn't mean to scare her, but she jumped when he rapped his knuckle against the driver's side glass.

It was then that he saw the tears in her eyes and he wanted to kick his own ass all over again. Tears were his kryptonite. Jasmine used to wield them like a weapon against him and he thought he had hardened himself against the offensive droplets.

Apparently not. At least, not when it came to this woman.

Jayce yanked the door open and squatted down so that he was looking up at her. Just the way it should be.

"I'm sorry I'm such a jerk."

She tried to brush away the tears, to hide her feelings from him, but he stopped her movements. If anyone was going to relieve her of those, it would be him. He owed her that much at least.

"I'm sorry I called you callous."

He ran his thumb along the apple of her cheek. "You don't need to apologize. You did nothing wrong. People have been calling me callous for years. It doesn't bother me because I know it's true."

She didn't look like she understood, so he continued. "It was you talking about what a home should be and how it represented a person that set me off. My ex-wife only cared about her image, as I'm sure you know. She would constantly throw it in my face that I didn't care about providing her with nice things or that I didn't give enough of a shit what kind of house we lived in. I grew up dirt poor. I was happy to have a house that wasn't falling apart, but that was never good enough for her. I know I need to have someplace good for Michael to come to, that's why I'm doing this, but no, I don't care what the inside looks like, as long as it's better than what I have now."

He didn't know if that helped his cause or not, but it was the truth. If there was one thing he was insistent on, it was that people didn't lie to him, and he didn't lie to others.

It was several moments before she spoke. "I can only imagine how badly Jasmine screwed with you but I'm not her. I don't give a shit about materialistic things. Hell, I live with my brother because it was easier to help him then it was to keep my own space. Plus, it pissed Jasmine off and I was all about that."

That made his lips turn up a bit. He wouldn't call it a smile but he was working on it. "Really not a fan, huh?"

She closed her eyes and dropped her head back on the seat with a groan. "Not at all. I don't know how Shaun put up with her for so long." Her eyes popped back open. "I know you don't like my brother, but I promise, this isn't his fault."

"I know it's not. No one understands Jasmine's manipulations better than I do. I'm glad I'm getting the chance now to make up for all the things I missed out on. I don't

want to ruin it by holding on to a grudge."

If his friends could hear him, they wouldn't believe the words he just uttered. Bitterness was practically his *modus operandi*.

"I should probably get going. People are going to start giving us weird looks if I sit here any longer."

"Or you could come back upstairs and we could talk more about those ideas you have for the house?"

He watched the indecision play out in her eyes but he didn't say more. He didn't do anything to sway her either way. She needed to come to him, to be fully aware of what she was getting herself into, and he didn't just mean the house.

Jayce was a broken man. He never cared to fix the messed-up parts of himself. Not for Jasmine. Not for his friends. And certainly not for himself.

Now he wanted to, and it wasn't just for his son. It was also for the woman who challenged him at every turn.

"Okay." She turned the car off and looked him in the eyes. "Let's go talk and see how I can help you."

If only she understood the full impact of those words.

He pushed off the seat and stood to his full height, while offering his hand to her. Jayce didn't let her pull away once she was standing. Instead he intertwined their fingers and headed back into the hotel.

Thankfully, no one had called the cops for a crazy man sprinting through the place.

People still gave him strange looks but they were less call the cops , and more intrigued by the new development.

Jayce understood how these people felt.

He waited until they were back in his room before he spoke again. "You've gone quiet on me."

Just like the first time she came up, she kicked her shoes off next to the bed and climbed up onto it until her back was against the headboard. It was crazy how much he liked having her there.

"I never know what to expect from you. I feel like it's been a roller-coaster ride since the moment I met you."

He guffawed at that. "We didn't exactly meet on the best terms. If I remember correctly, you didn't like me from the moment you saw me."

Her cheeks turned a cute shade of red. "That's because Shaun was freaking out before you arrived and then the first words out of your mouth were condescending. I only reciprocated."

Yeah, he hadn't exactly given the best first impression. That was nothing new for him though. There was a reason he was never introduced to clients or agencies until after they met his friends. The guys knew he would probably be an asshole and fuck something up. It never bothered him because diplomacy wasn't his thing. Getting the job done was.

"I'll give you that one and I guess I can see how you would think I've been all over the place. I've never felt so many different things in a short period of time. To be honest, I haven't felt anything in years. I hardened my heart a long time ago."

The expression on her face looked a lot like pity and that was something he never wanted. "Don't you dare feel bad for me. Yes, Jasmine fucked me up with how she left but it was my choice to shut down and push everyone away. It didn't start with her. She was the catalyst that finally pushed me over the edge."

The pity in her eyes didn't go away.

"Will you tell me how it started?"

If it had been anyone else asking him that question, he would've shut down immediately. People were nosy bastards by nature. He didn't get that feeling from Kennedy.

"I already told you, I was raised dirt poor. My mama was one of the good ones but she chose to stay with a shitty husband. My father was the devil himself. A mean drunk and even meaner when he was sober because that's when all his problems surfaced. He couldn't hold down a job to save his life. My mama tried to support us but it was never enough. My father would piss it away on alcohol or his next get-rich-quick scheme. I vowed to be different. I joined the Army and saved every penny I could."

"And Jasmine hated that," Kennedy correctly assumed.

"She did. To her, if there was five dollars in the bank, then she had to spend four dollars and fifty cents of it. She didn't know the meaning of savings and forget military housing. She wanted something better. Something bigger and nicer. She wanted to show off what she had. See, we came from similar backgrounds, but where I was compelled to save, she was compelled to show off how far she had come.

"It was just one of the many things we fought about in our marriage and should've been a sign for me to get out. Instead I stayed and had my heart smashed in the

process.”

If you had left, you wouldn't have Michael.

"You mean she wanted to show off how far you had come? Unless she worked while the two of you were married because she sure as hell didn't while married to my brother."

Jayce huffed. "No, she didn't work while we were married, even though she could have. She always used the excuse it was important she spent time with the other military wives. Especially the officers' wives."

So many signs he had missed. He had thought countless times that it was just a phase; that eventually she would get over needing to show off that she was better than her upbringing but it never happened. Now he realized it was just her personality.

"Can I ask what you saw in her? Because after a decade and a half, I still couldn't find a single decent quality." Kennedy's hands flew up to cover her mouth. "I shouldn't have asked that." She waved her arms out in front of her. "Please forget that came out of my mouth."

"No, it's okay. It's a fair question and the only thing I can come up with is I was young and stupid. We had similar childhoods, so I thought that gave us common ground. At the start of our relationship, she gave me what I thought I needed. Someone to take care of me the way my father never did for our family. It wasn't until later on I realized she was a leech and would only take. Never contribute. Then, in the end, she took the one thing from me I always wanted. A family."

He wanted, needed, to prove that he could be a better father than the one he was stuck with. Jasmine stole that from him. Now he was being given a second chance and he refused to fuck it up.

And it all started with having a stable home for Michael to come visit.

CHAPTER 12

Kennedy had left not too long ago. He had walked her down to her car and kissed her goodbye on the cheek.

After spilling his guts about his life, she had dazzled him with her ideas for the house. He had to say, she was pretty damn good. She used some app on her phone to pin a ton of suggestions. Each one she had asked his opinion on, even though he told her multiple times his input didn't matter. Apparently to her they did, so he finally opened up and gave feedback when he could. It was rare she showed him something he didn't like. It was clear after a few minutes she didn't have any of the same tastes in design as Jasmine. Something he was grateful for.

Now he was in his hotel room by himself wondering why he didn't ask her to stay. It had been too long since he was a part of the dating scene and it would appear he was rusty.

He would have to work on getting better. Loneliness never bothered him before but it was suffocating him tonight.

Jayce jumped at the chance to talk to someone when his phone rang moments later. He was disappointed to see the caller was Caden but he answered it anyway.

"What's up?"

"I got the information on Jasmine you wanted, including her medical records. The first ten or so years was what you would expect from the backstabbing bitch but then

things changed when she got her diagnosis."

"Changed how? Did she suddenly see all the shitty things she did?"

He doubted it. Kennedy had nothing nice to say about her. That wouldn't have been the case if Jasmine had a come-to-Jesus moment.

"Not in the slightest. She started traveling to Mexico almost monthly. I took the liberty of researching a few things, and from what I could find, she was visiting a holistic doctor."

"A holistic doctor? Are you sure your information is correct? Jasmine would never believe in anything hooky like that. She would consider that beneath her."

"Yup. I guess a person gets desperate when her prognosis isn't good. She was diagnosed with an . . . dro . . . blas . . . toma, a rare ovarian cancer. They removed both of her ovaries and she underwent chemotherapy. It looked like she was in the clear, but during one of her many yearly checkups, the cancer had returned. This time spreading to other organs. That's when she moved to Seattle to seek a new specialist."

A small sliver of his conscious felt bad for all the negative thoughts he'd had since hearing about her letter. It didn't matter how horrible a person was. No one deserved a cancer diagnosis that they couldn't survive.

"But before you feel too bad, I should tell you her visits to Mexico weren't completely self-sacrificing for the good of her health."

Of course they weren't.

"What was she really doing?"

"Transporting drugs for the cartel. I guess border patrol feels guilty searching a cancer survivor just seeking alternative medications."

"She took advantage of her situation to do something illegal. That sounds more like the Jasmine I used to know. She always thought she was above the law."

"Yes, well, I don't think her move to Seattle was as innocent as she wanted her family to believe."

His hackles rose. The more Caden spoke, the less guilty he felt. He never thought he would say this about someone with cancer, but maybe Jasmine had what was coming to her.

"What do you mean?"

"She was either running from the cartel or helping them expand. I'm still not sure which one."

Anger, like he had never felt before, consumed him.

"She put Michael in fucking danger?" he growled.

Caden's sigh vibrated in his ear. "I don't see how she couldn't have."

Son of a bitch. "Did Shaun know?" He would kill the man if that was the case. Fuck what everyone would think about him. He would cut the man's throat.

"I can't answer that for sure, but my guess is no. He would be stupid to reach out to you if he was hiding from the cartel."

"Unless he assumed we would help him."

"Maybe . . ." Caden dragged the word out. "But I wouldn't buy it. Too many variables."

"I can't take that chance. I need to go over there and find out."

"You really think that's a smart move?"

Nope, but he was going to do it anyway. He hung up on Caden without answering him and five minutes later was on the road to Shaun's house.

When Jayce pulled into the driveway, he couldn't remember most of the ride over. For all he knew he ran every red light and broke every speeding law known to man. He didn't care if he did.

With determination spurring him on, he charged up the sidewalk and banged on the door. There was no mistaking the confusion on Kennedy's face when she swung the door open.

"Jayce? What are you doing here? Is everything okay?"

"Where the hell is Shaun?" he asked as he pushed past her and marched straight into the house.

"I'm not sure what the hell happened since I last saw you, but what gives you the right to charge in here demanding things?"

Kennedy was pissed and rightfully so. They had left things on good terms and now he was acting like a gigantic asshole. If he wasn't so worried about his son, he would care more about how he was treating her.

"Just tell me where the hell Shaun is!" he barked.

"I'm right here," Shaun hollered down from where he stood at the top of the stairs before walking down them to join them.

"Did you know what she was doing?" he questioned before Shaun made it all the way to the bottom.

"Who?" Shaun looked genuinely confused by the question.

"Jasmine. Did you know she was smuggling drugs for the cartel across the border?"

Shaun looked like someone had punched him in the face. His head snapped back and his body faltered. "What are you talking about?"

"Her trips to Mexico. She was smuggling drugs back for the cartel."

"No . . ." Shaun shook his head violently. "She was going down there to meet with a hormone doctor because of the cancer. She was in remission but some of the side effects from the tumor still lingered. It made her self-conscious, and when she couldn't find anything here in the States to help, her friend recommended a doctor in Mexico."

He scoffed at the thought of Jasmine being self-conscious. That woman was the most egotistical woman he had ever met.

"Yeah, well, she was smuggling drugs as well. Then she moved you here to Seattle. Caden is looking into it more but his guess is she was either on the run or helped move the operation north."

"Wait, does that mean someone is after Michael and Shaun?" Kennedy pushed herself back into the conversation. He had almost forgotten she was in the room.

"That's what I'm here to figure out."

"I swear I didn't know. Jasmine refused to talk to me about her diagnosis. She was too embarrassed and God forbid I asked or spoke to anyone else about it. She insisted we kept it quiet, so that's what I did."

"That makes no sense. Why would she want to keep it quiet? I would've thought she would thrive on the attention it gave her." Hiding news like that was never his ex-wife's strong suit.

"Did Caden tell you about her diagnosis?"

"He told me the name. Andro something or other. Not gonna lie, I was only half listening to the medical jargon. I know he said it had to do with her ovaries."

"Androblastoma. And yes, it's a rare tumor in the ovaries. It's when testosterone is produced. They caught it because of the signs and symptoms. Jasmine's voice suddenly got deeper and she grew facial hair."

Now things started to make sense. A woman like Jasmine, who prided herself on how she looked, wouldn't accept the fact that was happening. And she definitely wouldn't want people to know about it.

"That's why she sought out a hormone doctor."

Shaun nodded his head. "She was obsessed with reversing what was happening with her."

"And you had no idea she was running drugs from Mexico?" he asked for clarification purposes.

"I swear I had no idea she was working with the cartel. I believed her when she said she was going there to meet with a doctor. For a while, she seemed happy, so I didn't bother questioning her. Then the cancer came back and spread. When she said we needed to move to Seattle from Texas because there was a doctor here that specialized in her condition, I didn't argue. I requested a transfer and followed her."

Jayce didn't know what to think about everything he was learning. Shaun was always a pushover and Jasmine clearly wore the pants in their relationship. Not that he was surprised by that. It was what she wanted when they were married, but he could never give to her.

"Where is Michael now?"

He hadn't been quiet when he stormed in the house, but his son never came out to see what the noise was.

"Basketball practice. He'll be home in about thirty minutes."

Jayce nodded his head. "I should get going, I don't want to ambush him again."

"Michael has a basketball game tomorrow night. Why don't you come? You can see how good he is."

"I'd like that. Send me the details and I'll be there."

"I'll walk you out," Kennedy spoke up again.

He followed her out the door and wasn't the least bit surprised when she started on him as soon as they were out of Shaun's earshot.

"Really, Jayce? You come here, guns blazing like that? You have to know Shaun

would never put Michael at risk."

"I don't know that, Kennedy. All I know is that people lied to me for fifteen years, and now I have a son who may or may not be vulnerable because of what his mother was doing. I don't have the luxury to make assumptions. I'll be damned if I lose Michael after just finding out he's mine."

Kennedy sighed. "You're right. I know it's hard, but Shaun's not the enemy here. Their marriage was shit, if one could even call it that. They were more like frenemies raising a kid together. Most days Jasmine couldn't stand Shaun but she stuck it out because I think she knew she didn't have a choice. All her talk about love was bullshit. I don't think she understood the meaning of the word. And now after hearing what she did, I think it's obvious the only person she loved was herself."

He couldn't argue with that.

"I can't lose him, Kennedy." He didn't hide the desperation in his voice and she stepped up to him until he took her in his arms.

"I know you can't and you won't. Michael has two amazing fathers who are going to keep him safe. He's a lucky kid."

A smile spread slowly across his face as he held her tight and rested his head on top of hers. She felt so good in his arms. He never thought another woman would get that honor.

"Thank you for your faith."

She stepped back just enough that he could stare into her eyes. "Anytime, and I mean that."

Jayce smiled down at her. "I better get going."

"Yes, you better. I'll see you tomorrow at Michael's game."

Jayce leaned down and brushed his lips across hers. Not the claiming kind he wanted to give her, but a soft barely there touch. That was over too soon.

"See you tomorrow." He squeezed her arm gently, then pulled away to climb in his truck, but he didn't take his eyes off the woman who was slowly breaking his heart of stone.

CHAPTER 13

She waited for Jayce's vehicle to pull away before she walked back into the house. There was so much swirling in her head that she needed a minute to process it all. Shaun was waiting for her when she walked through the house to the kitchen.

"Can you believe that?"

The urge to come to Jayce's defense was strong.

"I don't think he meant anything by it when he asked if you knew. He was probably just shocked and trying to process everything."

Shaun waved her off. "I'm not talking about that. I would've done the same thing if I was in his position. I'm talking about Jasmine. I knew she would never win mother of the year, but I never thought she would be stupid enough to put our family at risk."

She wished she could say the same, but unfortunately nothing Jasmine did surprised her anymore.

"She was selfish. I always knew that."

Shaun sighed. "Yeah, I know. I guess I was just hoping she had morals."

Kennedy wanted to laugh. Jasmine was the last person who understood the importance of morals. "What are you going to do?"

"I already reached out to Annie and Frankie while you were walking Jayce out. They know that area. I told them what Jayce said. They are going to look into things and get back to me."

"You don't trust Jayce?"

Her brother looked at her curiously. "I trust him, and I trust Caden, but they don't know that area the way Annie does. Caden is relying on information he can access. Annie will have boots on the ground."

Fair point. She had met Annie and Frankie twice before. Jasmine wasn't a fan because like Shaun, Annie was Army. Jasmine did her best to distance Shaun away from anyone with that connection. But it only took meeting them once to know they were good people; childhood sweethearts who adored one another. Kennedy had never met a couple more in love than those two. It was almost sickening how endearing they were to the other.

"That's true. For your, and Michael's, sake, I want Jayce to be wrong, but my gut is telling me Jasmine was into some shady shit. The whole bored-housewife thing. She never had enough to keep her busy."

Shaun gave a sad laugh. "I know exactly what you mean. Nothing was ever enough for her."

"Then why the hell did you put up with that?"

She had wanted to ask him that question a million times even though she knew the answer.

"Michael." Yup, she was right. "I would do anything for Michael. I wasn't an idiot. I knew what I was getting into when I married her. I watched Jayce go through with it."

I told myself repeatedly it was what I deserved for my part in things. Looking back, I wouldn't change a thing because it protected Michael. Divorcing her would've meant leaving him to be raised solely by her. I would never subject my son to that. He needed at least one parent who cared."

Kennedy hated how right he was. She saw it firsthand. Michael was nothing but a tool for Jasmine to use. She only cared about him when it suited her. She missed more of his activities than she attended and that was before she was diagnosed with cancer. After her diagnosis, she used the excuse like a weapon to make Michael and Shaun feel guilty any time they asked for something. It was sickening, actually.

"I'm glad he had you, and now Jayce as well."

"Me too, but I wish Michael had known Jayce from the beginning. He would've made a great father."

"I can see that."

"Care to tell me what's going on between you two?" Before she could object, Shaun cut in. "I saw him pull you in his arms out there. I walked away before I could see much else but it was clear he cares for you. I never thought I would see the day Jayce cared about anyone again after what Jasmine did to him."

She thought about all Jayce had told her.

"I'm falling for him. I know it's soon and I know it's messy but I can't help it. I see my future with him."

It was crazy to think like that so soon but she couldn't help how she felt. She wanted to blame it on the house project and how it was giving her romantic ideas, but it was more than that. It was just him in general. Most people would pity Jayce but she saw

beneath all that and saw the strength he tried to hide.

“It’s not crazy if it’s real. There were so many days that I wished I had the opportunity to find my soulmate.”

“You still can,” she encouraged her brother.

“I know and maybe someday I will, but right now I just want to get Michael through high school and ensure he has a good relationship with his father.”

This was why she loved her brother so much. He cared more about others than himself. He was the complete opposite of Jasmine. Those who said opposites attract clearly never saw her brother’s relationship. If they had, they never would consider that a trope, which was the reason she never wrote it.

It was silly to think how much her life affected her writing without even realizing it. Speaking of writing . . . “I’m going to go get some words in. I’ll see you for dinner.”

“Okay, sis.”

She had a new book she needed to plot and a certain someone she wanted to base the hero off of.

CHAPTER 14

The roar of the crowd was deafening.

"Is it always like this?" Jayce had to scream to be heard.

"No." Shaun shook his head. "But if they win this game, they are in the playoffs. It's been a few years since they've even come close."

Michael was number ten and he was killing it.

"Isn't Michael a little young to be playing on varsity?"

Jayce didn't know a thing about high school sports. He'd never had the opportunity to play anything, but Michael was only a sophomore and he would've thought that was too young for a varsity sport.

"He started out on JV but was quickly pulled up to varsity when they realized how good he was. He's the third top scorer for the team. He'll absolutely have a thousand-point career before he graduates. Most likely higher."

Pride filled his chest even if he didn't understand half of what Shaun was saying. Asking Michael to teach him about basketball was high on the list of things he wanted to do with his son to help build a relationship.

Michael went up for another three-point shot, and just like many of his other shots, it went straight through the net without hitting the backboard. He and Shaun jumped up

and clapped along with everyone else on their side of the gym.

Cheerleaders screamed, the crowd roared. It was hard not to get caught up in the excitement when the team was winning sixty-four to fifty-six. Michael ran down the court, and glanced over to where they were sitting and smiled.

Shaun had mentioned when he showed up that Michael was excited he was coming to a game. Apparently it was rare for Jasmine to show, but Shaun and Kennedy made every one.

Kennedy sat to his right while Shaun was on his left. She had yet to say anything other than a brief hello when he found them in the crowd. Jayce didn't know what it meant. He couldn't imagine why she would be mad at him. When he left yesterday, after confronting Shaun, he thought they were on good terms but now he wondered if he managed to screw up in another way. It wouldn't surprise him.

One of Michael's teammates took a shot at the basket but missed. Fortunately, Michael was right there to grab the ball before the other team could get to it. He thought he heard Shaun holler about having a good rebound but he couldn't be sure. It was hard to distinguish between all the yelling going on around him.

The rest of the game went by in a flash. Michael's team won by twenty points. The players jumped up and down in the middle of the court in celebration. Cheerleaders ran out to join in, along with some of the student body who had been in the stands. The announcer screamed in the microphone that it was the first time in seven years the team was going to the playoffs.

It was nearly thirty minutes after the game ended, and more than half of the gym had cleared out, before the players emerged from the locker room one by one. Jayce expected Michael to be one of the last ones out as he celebrated with his teammates, but his son was practically first. There was no mistaking the excitement in his son's

eyes when he approached.

"That was one hell of a game, bud," Jayce said. "I'm glad I was here to see it."

"Yeah?" Michael looked unsure. "I'm glad you came." He hefted the bag farther up on his shoulder.

"I do have to say though, I don't know the first thing about basketball. You're going to have to teach me so when I come to your games, I know what I'm talking about."

Michael's eyes lit up. "You're going to come to another one?"

"You get me your schedule and I promise to be at every one of them."

The look on Michael's face alone was reason enough to show up to every game. To hell with work. Luke would understand him taking time off and it wasn't like he had anything else going on in his life. It was easy to make Michael his priority at the moment.

"Okay, cool. And yeah, I'll teach you. It's pretty simple once you learn the basics."

"So what do you normally do after a big game like that?" He wasn't ready to say goodbye even though it was a school night. He wanted some extra time with his son.

"Can we go for pizza?" Michael asked Shaun. "I'm starving."

"Why not?" Shaun shrugged. "A game like that deserves to be celebrated."

"Yes!" Michael pumped his fist in the air. "Can I ride with . . . Jayce?"

He wished Michael had used the word "dad" but he understood his hesitation,

especially around Shaun. For Michael's whole life Shaun had been his dad and now to learn that wasn't the case, the transition was bound to be awkward when the three of them were together. Kennedy stood off to the side silently observing the interaction and he wondered what she thought about Michael pausing before saying his name.

"Of course. We'll hit up your favorite place. You can show your father where it is."

It was in that moment Jayce knew things were going to be okay. Shaun was doing his best to include him and that was all he wanted; to be involved in Michael's life moving forward.

The walk out to his truck was quiet. It wasn't until they were out of the school parking lot before Michael spoke again.

"Thank you again for coming to my game. It means a lot to me."

Jayce cleared his throat. "I know we don't know each other yet, but I promise to be at every event you have from now on. I know I missed the first fifteen years of your life but I don't want to miss any more."

Michael fidgeted in his seat. "Mom hardly ever came. She hated basketball. Said it was boring and she had other things that required her attention."

Fuck Jasmine and her self-centered way of life.

"Well, I'm not your mother and I have to disagree. I enjoyed watching you play. There was nothing boring about it."

He might not have known a damn thing about the sport but just having the opportunity to watch Michael was enough to make it fun for him.

"Are things going to change now that you're my dad?"

They were stopped at a red light, so Jayce put his forearm on the steering wheel and turned so he was looking at his son. "Change how?"

"Where I go to school and who I live with?" Michael didn't look at him. He played with the strap of his bag that sat on the floor between his legs.

"Michael, look at me." It took a moment for his son's eyes to come up. "I promise you, I'm not taking you away from your life. Shaun is your father just as much as I am. He raised you. I wouldn't think to take that from you. Would I like for you to spend some days with me? Absolutely, but no, I'm not taking you away from anything."

A car honked behind him and he was tempted to stick his hand out the window and give the person the finger. Instead he shifted gears and rolled through the light.

"Do you live far from here?"

"A little less than an hour away. I'm in the process of buying a house though, and that will be a little bit closer."

"You don't live in a house now?"

Well, this wasn't the conversation he wanted to have. The hope was he would never need to explain his current living situation. That plan was shot to hell.

"No, I live in a one-bedroom apartment, but now that I have you in my life, I'm going to buy a house. Your aunt Kennedy helped me pick it out. It's a fixer-upper, so it might take some time before I can have you over."

"Aunt Kennedy loves to decorate. She did my room. Mom wasn't happy because she wanted it to be more sophisticated but Aunt Kennedy knew what I liked."

He would keep that in mind when it came to decorating Michael's room at the new house. He didn't have the first clue what teenage boys liked. He had barely been one himself because life forced him to grow up too quickly.

"Then I guess it's a good thing she's helping me."

The rest of the drive to the pizza place was more relaxed, as was the conversation while they ate. The entire evening turned out great, and it was nice to see how their future looked.

CHAPTER 15

When Jayce asked her to meet him at the house he bought, she thought it would just be the two of them. She never thought she would be meeting his friends and their significant others.

With the way Jayce spoke about his life, she didn't think he let many people get close, but based on the number of people in his house, that wasn't the case.

"This place certainly has potential," Austin, or at least that's who she thought he was, said from where he stood in the open living area.

Kennedy had been introduced to everyone in the room but names weren't her strongest quality. She remembered Monica only because the woman walked in wearing a power suit in deep red with matching heels. She looked every bit the mighty CEO Jayce introduced her as.

"That's what Kennedy said." Jayce shrugged. "I don't see it but I'll trust her judgment."

His friends looked at one another. She could only imagine what they were thinking.

"Well, the inspector said the foundation is good as well as the framing and the roof. It's mostly cosmetic work needed and we can help with that." She was pretty sure that was Caden who spoke. The man walked in with a computer, and she remembered Shaun talking about him.

"I wasn't aware wielding a hammer was one of your specialties." That was definitely Ryker. She only remembered his name because he was sure to tell her that he was the jokester of the team. "I thought if it didn't involve computers, it wasn't in your wheelhouse."

"I can wield a gun just fine. Care for me to remind you of that skill?" Caden fired back.

"Enough!" Monica cut off the banter with the same tone Kennedy was sure she used in the boardroom. "There will be no spilling of blood in Jayce's new home."

"What about in the yard?" Ryker pushed.

"Amelia? Can't you control your man?" Monica huffed.

Ryker put his arm around Amelia and smiled. "We all know there's no controlling me. Besides, Amelia loves my attitude. She wouldn't change a thing about me."

"I wouldn't go that far," Amelia grumbled, and everyone in the room laughed.

So far Kennedy liked this group. They were funny and didn't have a problem harassing each other. It was a good dynamic and something she could use in one of her future series. Banter was popular amongst her readers.

"I brought you guys here to see the place because you wouldn't shut up about it, not so that you can annoy the fuck out of each other. You could do that back at the office." Jayce shook his head in frustration.

"We could've, but then we wouldn't get to see you finally grow up and get your own place," Ryker teased.

"I've always had my own place, dickhead."

"Uh, no," Ryker argued back. "You had a shitty apartment in a shitty building that should've been condemned years ago."

"It was still my own place."

"Potato, poh-ta-toh. This is what I consider having your own place. That other thing was nothing more than a shoebox for drug addicts."

Ouch. Kennedy hadn't seen his other place but that seemed harsh. Except Jayce wasn't arguing back, so maybe his apartment was that bad.

"Are we here to critique my living situation or are any of you going to tell me how you plan to help?"

Everyone in the room started to talk at once. Discussions about sheetrock and framing flew around. Then plumbing and electrical. She didn't have the slightest idea who knew how to do what but it appeared Jayce would have his bases covered with this group.

"You've been awfully quiet since you walked in," Monica slid up beside her and remarked.

"Just taking it all in. I'm not sure why Jayce asked me to be here today."

"I thought that was obvious. He likes you and wanted you to meet everyone."

She looked at Monica with a confused expression.

"I don't think that's true."

"Don't take my word for it. God knows trying to decipher Jayce is the hardest thing I've ever done. I was convinced the first time I met him that he couldn't stand me. Amelia thought the same when she met him. But Luke promises me that's not the case. He was also the one to tell me why we're all here. If anyone knows Jayce, it's these guys."

"How long have they known each other?"

"Twenty years, I think. Maybe more. Maybe less. I know they knew Jayce when he was married to Jasmine but none of them talk about that time, so it's hard to know for sure."

She could understand why none of them wanted to discuss Jasmine. Fifteen years she had known the woman and she wished she could forget her as well. The only good thing to come out of that time in her life was Michael.

"Jasmine was a bitch," she said before she could think better of it.

Monica laughed. "So I've heard. It's a good thing I never met her. I'm not exactly known for hiding my feelings, so I would've given her a piece of my mind. I can assure you it wouldn't have been nice."

It was her turn to laugh. "She would've deserved it. I wish I could've done the same, but if I wanted to see my nephew, I had to play nice."

"Luke and I have talked about meeting him. It's a shame what Jasmine did to Jayce all these years."

Kennedy was angry all over again at the situation. After spending time with the man, she could one hundred percent say he deserved better than what he got.

"He's a great kid, and Jayce is so good with him."

"I can see that. Luke told me how badly he wanted a family back when he and Jasmine were married. I guess that's why the situation sucked so hard. It wasn't like she took Michael away because Jayce was a deadbeat. She was just selfish."

"Shaun's a great father too." She felt the need to defend her brother.

"Oh my God," Monica gasped. "I didn't mean to imply he wasn't. I've heard good things about him. Well, as good as they could be considering everyone thought he helped Jasmine cheat. I haven't had the chance to ask Jayce but I can only assume Jayce likes what he sees since he isn't begging Luke to find a way to steal Michael."

She wasn't sure that explanation was any better, but she knew what Monica was trying to say. There was no doubt in her mind that, if Jayce thought Shaun was a bad father, he would've swooped in and demanded parental rights of his son.

"I hope you know Amelia and I are happy you're here. We want Jayce to be happy and it looks like you do that for him."

Kennedy wasn't so sure that was the case. The two of them had barely spoken since he discovered that Jasmine was working with the cartel. They had seen each other at Michael's basketball games but to actually speak? Not so much.

She didn't want to bother him, in case he was pulling away for some reason. There had been countless times she had picked up the phone to call him or send him a message, and every time she had talked herself out of it. Instead she focused on the book she was writing. She had a deadline to meet, so it was easy enough to force herself to get lost in it, even if her mind tended to wander.

Missing a deadline was unacceptable in her opinion, so when push came to shove, she

prioritized that over everything else.

"I hope I didn't overstep by saying that." Monica's voice pulled her out of her musings.

She shook her head. "Sorry, I was thinking about work. Sometimes it consumes me."

"Oh? What do you do for a living?" Monica sounded genuinely interested when she asked.

"I'm a romance author. I'm in the middle of writing a book, so sometimes a scene pops into my head at the strangest times."

"You're an author? How exciting!" Monica squealed. "You'll have to tell me the name of one of your books. I know several people who love to read. You would be the second author I got to meet."

"Who's the first?" She tilted her head slightly as she asked, curious who Monica could possibly have met.

The author community wasn't small but maybe it was someone she knew.

"Leslie Cameron. She's actually a friend of a friend. It's a long story but I've had the pleasure of meeting her a few times when I've visited Texas. She's super nice," Monica rambled with excitement.

She snapped her fingers in acknowledgment. "I know Leslie. She's trad published whereas I chose to self-publish, but I know who she is and have seen her at conferences we attended together. She's a sweetheart and her books are amazing. I haven't seen her since I left Austin. I kinda became a hermit when we moved here." Sadness crept into her voice.

Back in Austin she had a community of authors she used to meet up with on a semi-regular basis. She had yet to find that here in Seattle. Not that she was trying very hard. All of her free time was spent with her brother or nephew.

"Well, I guess Amelia and I will have to bring you out of that shell." Monica bumped her shoulder. "We might not be authors but we sure can be fun when we want to."

"That would be great."

Discussions about man caves and weekly poker nights filled the space.

"It looks like that's our cue to jump back into the conversation before the guys decide this needs to be hangout central."

Monica walked away with Amelia, who had yet to speak. She seemed okay to let the other woman do all the talking.

Kennedy wasn't sure dissuading the group from their conversation was the best idea. If Jayce was okay with everyone hanging out at his place, then she wanted that for him. It was time he let people in and she hoped to be the first.

CHAPTER 16

It took forever but he finally managed to kick everyone out of his new house except Kennedy. He wasn't staying in the place yet because it wasn't even close to livable, but he wanted her thoughts. She'd been quiet while his friends were over and hadn't spoken to anyone, until Monica cornered her.

"So what do you think?"

Things had been weird between them. He hadn't known how to talk to her after losing his shit about Jasmine. There had been several times he was tempted to call her, but between buying the house and working with Caden on getting information on the cartel, he'd been a bit busy. Kennedy was staring off across the kitchen, deep in thought, when she finally spoke.

"It's going to look great when it's all done. Your friends had a lot of good suggestions."

He nodded his agreement. "They did, but I only care about what you think. You're the one I want picking stuff out."

Jayce watched her face carefully for any hint of what she was feeling.

"You still want my opinion?" she questioned, eyebrow raised.

He walked straight over to her and put his hands on her upper arms. "I want more than your opinion. I want you to design the whole thing, from the floors to the paint

and everything in between. You choose the furniture and the other shit that people put in houses."

That got a laugh out of her. "Pretty sure people don't call accessories shit, Jayce."

"They do when they haven't had stuff like that in their apartment in over a decade."

There was nothing but the essentials in his current place. Just a recliner and a side table he used to eat off of. Not a single photograph. If he didn't use it every day, it never came into his apartment.

"That's sad."

"Maybe so but it's the truth."

"Why me?" she asked.

He picked her up and set her ass on the kitchen island. "Because I want a piece of you in this house, always. I have no idea where the future is going to take us, and when it comes to sweet words, I'm so far out of practice I don't even know if I could remember any of them. But for the first time in fifteen years I want to try. I want to see where this can go."

Expressing how he felt no longer came natural to him but for her he would try. He would figure it out eventually.

Kennedy hooked her legs around his waist and pulled him closer. "I'll take honesty over sweet words any day of the week."

"How about this for honesty? I want you. Right now."

“Oh yeah?” She smirked at him. “How bad?”

“Bad enough that I remembered a condom and have every intention of not running off before I finish,” he teased. He was a little rusty but he figured he did pretty good when she tossed her head back with a laugh.

“I guess we’re christening the new house,” she finally responded.

“I was hoping you would say that.” He dipped his fingers under her shirt and grabbed her hips as he leaned down to kiss her.

Her lips were soft and it didn’t take him long to realize that he wanted to spend the rest of his life kissing them as often as he could. Unlike last time, the thought didn’t send him running. It had him digging his fingers in harder as to not lose her.

Her hands slipped under his shirt and he nearly chuckled when she let out an annoyed growl. “Would you like me to lift my arms?” he asked after reluctantly pulling his lips away.

“Yes, dammit. I want to touch your skin,” she huffed.

“Well, since you asked so nicely ...” He removed his hands from her body and lifted his arms above his head, allowing Kennedy to wiggle his shirt off him.

“Much better.” Her palms rested against his chest and he took a deep breath in. Her touch felt incredible.

Since he had no plans of removing his lips once he got them on her again, he snagged the hem of her shirt and yanked it off. Then he unclipped her bra and flung it across the kitchen.

He froze for a moment, just to take in how beautifully full her tits were. Deciding to wait on capturing her lips, he leaned down to take one of her breasts in his mouth and the other in his palm.

Kennedy dropped her head back with a groan and her fingers went into his hair. He knew he was a goner when she tugged ever so gently while simultaneously pushing his head to keep him going.

He gave equal attention to both tits until she finally begged him for more.

“Take your pants off,” he demanded as he grabbed his wallet from his back pocket.

Flipping open the fold, he pulled a condom out and tossed the wallet on the island. He watched in fascination as Kennedy shimmied out of her tight pants.

“Are you just going to watch or do you plan to join me in being naked?”

“Oh, I’m going to do both,” he told her as he unzipped his pants and shoved them down his legs along with his boxers. He kicked them off, then used his teeth to rip open the condom wrapper.

“Let me.”

Yup, I’m in heaven.

That was all he could think as she rolled the condom on his thick shaft. He was further in nirvana when she wrapped her delicate hands around his cock and pumped not once, not twice, but three times. Before he could prematurely come, he moved her hand aside and lined up with her wet heat.

“You ready for me?” He ran his thumb over her sensitive nub and slipped slowly

inside when she moaned.

He promised himself in that moment that the first room he would finish would be the master bedroom. He needed to get Kennedy into a bed ASAP.

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CHAPTER 17

"Wouldn't this be more comfortable at your apartment? I know you don't like the place but I wouldn't judge you."

They sat on the bare floor with a blanket under them that Kennedy found in the trunk of her car. Containers of shrimp lo mein and General Tso's chicken was spread out between them. Jayce might claim he doesn't do sweet but this was pretty damn romantic.

"No way in hell. I'm not worried about you judging me. I'm worried about your safety. I put my own life at risk living there. I would never subject anyone else to that."

That was just sad. But considering he was moving out of there soon, she wasn't going to keep harping on it.

They ate in comfortable silence until Jayce's phone ringing cut through the quiet.

"It's Caden," he told her before answering.

"I'm here with Kennedy. I'm going to put you on speaker." He set the phone on the blanket and Caden's booming voice filled the otherwise silent room.

"I asked Luke to speak with his contact at the FBI. They had nothing on Jasmine Davis but had a whole lot to say on Jasmine Pierce."

"Wait." Jayce held up his hand. "The FBI was looking into Jasmine while we were married? There's no way. I would've known."

"Not while you were married."

Jayce genuinely looked confused, but Kennedy was starting to put the pieces together. "That's the name she was using while transporting drugs." The words tumbled out of her mouth in disbelief.

"That would be correct." Caden was quick to confirm her suspicions.

"That lying manipulative bitch," Jayce seethed. "She couldn't wait to change her name after the divorce but she didn't mind using it to break the law. Why does nothing surprise me anymore?"

"Because Jasmine was selfish and only cared about herself. It was obvious while you were married to her, but you were too blinded by love to see it."

Caden didn't bother to mince words, and she supported the hell out of it. Jayce needed those kinds of friends in his life.

"What else did the FBI tell you?"

"A lot actually. Jasmine got involved with the Diego Cartel, transporting cocaine across the border. She got greedy though and stole about two hundred thousand dollars. That's when she split and escaped to Seattle."

"If the FBI had all this information, why the hell didn't they pull her in?"

She could see Jayce was ready to explode but she didn't have the slightest clue how to help him. This was out of her wheelhouse.

"You know how bureaucracy works. They always want the bigger shark. They were keeping their eyes on Jasmine in Seattle in hopes the Diego Cartel would come after her but no such luck. Then she passed away and they backed off since there was no sign the cartel knew her true identity."

"And you all wonder why I hate federal agencies so fucking much. They sit on their asses waiting for a big fucking payday rather than doing their jobs. Does the DEA have anything more useful?"

"Not all agents are that way, and yes, I asked Nash to reach out to his former partner."

"Fine. You, Luke, and Nash are the exception, but considering the three of you all left your agencies because of the red-tape bullshit, I stand by my thoughts."

Caden sighed and Kennedy could understand his frustration. Broody Jayce was back even though just an hour ago he had been happy while inside her.

"I'll let you know what Nash finds out about the Diego Cartel and the drugs they're smuggling. In the meantime, leave the federal agencies to me. You telling them how much they suck helps no one."

Jayce didn't look the least bit offended by his friend's remark. She would be sure to ask him about that just as soon as he was off the phone.

Jayce promised not to call anyone and then hung up. He went straight back to eating his food but Kennedy was no longer hungry. Her curiosity got the better of her.

"Your friends seem to know a lot of people in federal agencies."

Jayce sucked up some of his lo mein and chewed before answering. "Luke is former FBI. Caden was CIA and Nash DEA. We all served in the Army together but went

our separate ways when we got out. Ryker was NYPD. Austin went to the marshals and Dom actually stayed in the Army."

"And you?"

"I joined the Secret Service. I hated watching over politicians who thought they were better than me simply because they had a lot of money and power. When Luke approached me about starting Kringle Security, I was happy for the change."

"Wait, Kringle Security?"

Jayce huffed out a small laugh. "Let's just say it's not smart to pick a name while drinking but a promise is a promise and Kringle Security was born."

Interesting name, but from the little she had seen, Jayce's friends were an interesting bunch of guys.

"Got it. So you all worked for different agencies and now have contacts when you need information."

He shrugged. "I guess that's a good way of putting it. As you heard, I don't play well with others, so Luke usually prefers if I don't talk to the agents. My specialty is protection detail and I much prefer to do that."

"I think you underestimate yourself."

Jayce laughed. "And I think you give me more credit than I'm due. My mouth has no filter. I say exactly what's on my mind and most of the time it's not appropriate. The two times I was forced to speak to an agent, I called them a lazy bastard. Needless to say, Luke wasn't happy."

"Well, never mind. I take it back."

They both chuckled at the way she said those seven little words. Then they fell into another comfortable silence.

It was several minutes later before she asked, "Do you plan on living here while the work is being done?"

Jayce looked around the first floor. "I don't see why not. The bedrooms upstairs are mostly cosmetic work. They're a decent size, and I've certainly lived in worse. I would think it would be easy enough to crash in one of the rooms. Why, what are your plans for the design?"

She bit her lip and wondered if she was about to say too much or overstep.

"The bedrooms are decent but the master bath needs major updating and a bigger closet. You could either keep the fourth bedroom, or convert it for the upgrades to the master."

"I have no arguments about redoing the master bath but the clothes I own wouldn't even fill up half of the current closet."

Kennedy didn't let him dissuade her. "You never know where the future might lead." She didn't say what she really wanted to; that one day, maybe she would be sharing that closet with him.

Jayce might not be ready to admit where things were going between them but she didn't have the same hangup. She was a romantic and a dreamer. It was a necessity for her career and right now she saw a future with him.

"You're right," he said, as her comment sunk in and realization appeared on his face.

One side of his lips turned up in a half smile. She would take it. One slow step at a time.

CHAPTER 18

Jayce's phone ringing pulled his attention away from the files he was looking over. Caden had given him the information the FBI and DEA had on the Diego Cartel and Jasmine.

"Hello?" It was Michael calling him and his son had never done that before even though they exchanged numbers.

"Uh . . . Dad?" Michael still struggled to call him that. "There's an FBI agent outside the house asking to talk to me and I'm home alone."

He tossed the files on the small table in the hotel room and snatched up his keys.

"I'm on my way. Don't open the door until I get there. Where's Shaun and Kennedy?"

Michael was obviously old enough to be left home alone, but with everything going on, he would've thought Shaun wouldn't be far from his son.

"Aunt Kennedy went to the coffee shop to work. And Dad got a call for a patient who was in crisis, so he had to go to the VA."

Coincidence or unfortunate luck?

"Okay. I need to add someone to this call. He's my co-worker and used to work for the FBI. Did the agent tell you his name?"

"Special Agent Andrew Thornton."

"Good work. Hang on while I add Luke."

Jayce hit the button to add a call. After three rings, Luke answered. "Hey, man. Everything okay?"

"Not exactly. I have Michael on the line with us."

"Hey, Michael."

"Hi," his son answered with confidence.

"Michael's home alone and a Special Agent Andrew Thornton is there trying to talk to him."

"You didn't open the door for him, right?" Luke immediately went into protector mode.

"No, I called Dad and he called you."

"I'm on my way over there now," Jayce added. "About five minutes away."

"Smart kid. Okay, let me make a few calls and find out who the special agent is and what he wants. In the meantime, try to be nice."

That warning was clearly for him. How nice he was would depend on the agent's attitude when he showed up.

"I can't make any promises."

Luke's sigh came through the line clear as day. "Just don't do anything that I can't talk my way out of."

Jayce didn't bother to answer because he wasn't a man who made false promises.

"Let me know what you find out."

Luke hung up with another sigh and it was just the two of them again. "I'm two minutes out, bud."

"What did Luke mean about not doing anything he can't talk his way out of?"

Jayce didn't want to explain because he didn't want Michael to look at him differently, but lying wasn't an option.

"Luke knows I'm not a big fan of federal agents. I don't hide my distaste for them and sometimes my mouth says things before I think it through." He left out the part where Luke knew him well enough to know he would want to kick the guy's ass for scaring his kid.

"Oh . . . I don't want to get you in trouble."

"Don't worry about me, bud. I just want to know why he wants to talk to you. I'm pulling up now."

Parked on the street in front of the house was the typical black SUV that most federal agents drove and standing on the front porch was a man in an impeccable suit. The guy looked just a little too put together for a federal agent.

Jayce stepped out of his old truck and moved at a fast clip up the sidewalk. "Can I help you?"

Special Agent Andrew Thornton turned around with a smile that could only be described as overeager and creepy.

"Special Agent Andrew Thornton. I'm here to speak with Michael Davis about his mother."

"You're here to speak with a fifteen-year-old boy without a parent present? I'm no special agent but even I know you can't speak to a minor without parental consent."

"And you are?"

He crossed his arms over his chest and ignored the hand the agent put out. "Jayce Pierce. Michael's biological father."

The agent dropped his hand but not his annoying smirk. "I show a Shaun Davis as the father."

"As I said, biological father." He emphasized the word so maybe the too-good-looking agent would get it through his thick skull.

"Alright, then. Do you mind if I speak to Michael?"

"I do actually. As you might know, Michael recently lost his mother, and he's taking it hard. I don't think talking to him about her right now is for the best. How about you tell me what this is about?"

Andrew lost some of his charm and a hard glint in his eyes took its place.

"I wanted to speak to him about his mother's frequent trips to Mexico and if he ever accompanied her."

Jayce tried to keep the annoyance out of his tone when he answered. "Last I heard, that was over two years ago, so I'm not sure why you're bringing it up now, and besides, she was there seeking medical help for cancer."

"Just trying to follow up on a few things."

Right. Follow up, my ass.

"Well, like I said before, now isn't a good time but how about you give me your card and I'll make sure to set a time up."

The agent pulled a card from his pocket and handed it over. "Make sure that you do."

Jayce waited until the man got in his vehicle and pulled away before he walked the rest of the way up to the house. His foot hit the first step when the door flung open.

"What did he want?" Michael blurted out.

"Let's get inside. I want to text Shaun and then see what Luke found out."

He pulled his phone out and shot Shaun a message to get home as soon as he was done with his crisis. Then he pulled Luke's number up and gave him a call.

"I was just about to call you," Luke answered after one ring.

"What did you find out?" There was no point in wasting time with idol chitchat.

"Special Agent Andrew Thornton is a pain in the bureau's ass. He's always looking for the next big bust but doesn't want to put the work in. He would rather intimidate witnesses to give him what he wants. Supposedly he's had a hard-on for the Diego Cartel for a while now, but since they do most of their work in Mexico, his hands are

tied."

Jayce clenched his left hand in a fist and had to force his right hand to stay lax so he didn't break his phone. The asshole came here to intimidate his son. It was a damn good thing Michael knew better than to open the door. "Well, he picked the wrong fucking family to mess with."

"I told my old supervisor as much. He's going to make some calls. Let Special Agent Thornton know Michael is off-limits. That all questions from here on out can go through me."

Jayce let out a relieved sigh. "I appreciate it."

"Trust me, it's a selfish gesture. I'm sure it took a lot of restraint not to punch the asshole. I don't want to test that control again."

Jayce laughed. His friend was right. If he hadn't known Michael was watching from inside the house, there was a good chance he would've knocked the agent on his ass. That would've gotten him in more trouble than he needed.

"I texted Shaun to get here after he's done with the VA. I want this shit dealt with sooner rather than later. I know the FBI can't do anything about the cartel since their base is in Mexico, but isn't that why they hire us? To clean up the messes they can't?"

"It is," Luke answered hesitantly. "What did you have in mind?"

"I say we cut the head off the snake once and for all. I read the files you sent over. No one is going to be sad if we take out the Diego Cartel. The amount of cocaine they are pumping into the States is reason enough."

"We don't kill people without just cause," Luke reminded him.

"So, what, we wait until they figure out who Michael is? You know they're going to go after him for what Jasmine did. It's only a matter of time before they figure it out. The FBI are putting things together now that I'm in the picture, and we know damn well the cartels have ears everywhere. Why not be proactive instead of reactive for once? Hell, I'll go down and do it myself. No need to drag anyone else into it."

Luke didn't speak at first and Jayce gave him the time to process all that he said. He didn't care about his job. He had plenty of money stashed away to live on for years if it came down to it. If Luke didn't want to help him, then he would be fine on his own. He would do anything to protect his son from the mess Jasmine created.

"Let me speak to everyone else about it. Decisions like this need to be made as a group. I'll call you back once I talk to them."

Jayce nodded even though Luke couldn't see him. He wasn't worried about what his friends would say. They would have his back because that was just who they were.

He hung up the phone just as Shaun was calling in.

"You need to get home pronto," he said in lieu of hello.

"I'm on my way now. What happened?"

"I'll explain when you get here. Have Kennedy come back too. This is a conversation for the entire family."

"Okay. Be there soon."

Jayce disconnected the call and looked at Michael. "Shaun will be here soon and so will Aunt Kennedy."

"Do you think I'm in danger?"

Shit. He hadn't bothered to censor himself when he spoke to Luke. He was too focused on getting Luke to see his point of view that he forgot Michael was in the room.

"I don't think so but I think you could be if we don't stop things ahead of time."

"What did my mom do?"

Jayce really needed to pay more attention when he spoke. "She got in some trouble with some bad people but you don't need to worry. I'm going to take care of it. I promise."

He didn't care what it required him to do. Michael would be safe because he would make sure of it.

CHAPTER 19

SHAUN: Get home now!

Kennedy slammed her laptop shut and shoved it back into the soft case. Nothing good ever came from her brother demanding she get home. Especially when he knew she was working feverishly to finish a book on time. She came to the cafe down the street because a change of location always helped the creative juices to start flowing. And it had worked. In the short time since she had been there, she managed to get over three thousand words in. A major accomplishment considering the block she had the last few days.

She drove faster than needed to get back home and managed to beat Shaun. But she did find Jayce's old pickup parked on the street. Rushing out of her car, Kennedy forgot her laptop and ran back to grab it before racing through the front door.

"What's going on?" she asked Jayce, out of breath.

"I'll tell you as soon as Shaun arrives. I don't want to say everything twice."

He might not want to repeat himself but she didn't want to be patient either. Something was happening and she wanted to know what it was.

Thankfully Shaun didn't make her wait too long. Less than ten minutes later he was rushing into the house. Except, unlike her, Shaun wasn't out of breath.

"What happened?"

"Let's take this to the living room?"

She wanted to scream at Jayce and tell him to spit it out already. Her brother must've understood her frustration because he gave her a look and a shake of his head. She squinted her eyes at him in return and all but screamed her displeasure with him.

When all four of them were settled on the couch, Jayce went into a no-nonsense description of what happened. She was mad all over again but this time at the special agent who dared to show up to speak with her nephew.

Then guilt took over for leaving. Even though she had been gone before Shaun was called into work, if she had been home, she could've intervened.

"I'm sorry you had to deal with that." She grabbed Michael's hand. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Dad showed up and I never had to speak to the guy."

Dad. She liked hearing him refer to Jayce that way and it would appear so did her brother. It wasn't a conventional parenting situation, but it looked like it was going to work for them.

"So what's the plan?" Shaun asked.

"I wait for Luke to get back to me, but either way, I'm going after the Diego Cartel."

"I know someone in Texas who can help you."

Jayce lifted his brow at her brother's declaration.

"One of the guys I worked with at the VA. His wife was a Green Beret and has crazy

good connections. I already asked her to look into things. I know she would be willing to help. They're good people."

"What are their names?"

"Frankie and Annie Sanders. Like I said, they're good people."

"I'm not saying they aren't, but I'll have Caden check into them anyway. I trust him with my life."

Shaun nodded his head in agreement.

"If they check out, then I'll stop over in Texas. I'll need to find a way to cross over into Mexico. Preferably undetected."

"I'm sure Annie can help with that. Her connections are pretty damn incredible."

Kennedy just sat back with Michael as Jayce and Shaun worked through a plan. Words like passport and helos were thrown around. She only half listened while giving the rest of her attention to her nephew. This was their domain, not hers, so she would leave all the planning to them and instead wait until the time was right to help as she could.

CHAPTER 20

It only took a couple of days but he was in Texas. Just as he thought, his friends had readily agreed that being proactive in this situation was for the best. As it turned out, Annie and Frankie weren't just friends of Shaun's but they also knew the mysterious Tex who was constantly helping his team. Because of their connection, Caden gave them glowing recommendations; a good thing too, since it would appear Annie had been extremely busy since Shaun reached out to her.

"Jayce, this is Annie and her husband, Frankie. Guys, this is Jayce. He's the one looking to take out the Diego Cartel before they come after Michael."

Shaun had given him a rundown of his friends on the flight down. Frankie worked at the VA helping vets adjust to hearing loss. Based on the cochlear implant Frankie had, he was a great person for the job.

Annie, on the other hand, was attending med school after leaving the Army. Jayce respected the woman without even knowing her. She was a former Green Beret who commanded her own team. That alone was both a difficult and impressive feat.

"Michael is such a great kid. We're more than happy to help in any way we can." Annie took charge just like he expected she would.

Frankie looked content to hang back and listen.

"Shaun mentioned you already had some information for us."

"Yes," Annie answered, getting straight to the point. He preferred that. "Between the help of Tex and my father, we were able to get the main location for the Diego Cartel. My father went down with one of his friends to scout the area until you get there but the leader of the cartel, Manuel Diego, and his two top guys are all here at the moment. The locals say they spend a couple weeks a month there at a time, so as long as you move quickly, you should catch them."

Good. He would rather this was done as soon as humanly possible. He didn't want to give them time to make the connection to Michael. So far, it would seem they hadn't, but it was only a matter of time.

"Are we able to get into Mexico undetected?" he turned to Caden and asked. In addition to Shaun, Luke, Caden, and Nash had joined the trip down south. Ryker, Austin, and Dom stayed back to guard Michael and Kennedy. Oh, and to help with the remodel since Kennedy thought it would be the perfect thing to help distract both her and Michael.

"Yes," Caden replied, "but I would prefer to keep the specifics to myself. Plausible deniability and all that."

"I don't care how I get there as long as I get in and out without any issues."

He didn't need specifics, he trusted Caden implicitly. The man had saved his ass on more than one occasion. If he said not knowing was the best course of action, then so be it.

They spent the next few hours going over a plan. When they were sure they could slip in and out of Mexico without being detected, Jayce called Kennedy to give her an update and to check up on her. It had been a while since he cared enough about a person to contact them while on an assignment, and if he were being honest with himself, he kind of liked it.

CHAPTER 21

When she pictured remodeling Jayce's house, she thought he would be doing it with her. Instead, she got Austin, the former marshal who was absolutely pulling double duty at the moment.

"So you were a marshal and a plumber before coming here?"

Austin chuckled. "Don't forget the Army. I'm a man of many talents."

That was obvious. "So where did you learn to do this stuff?"

The wall between the fourth bedroom and the old master bathroom was torn down. Austin was currently reworking the plumbing so the shower could be moved and made bigger.

"Videos mostly. Self-taught for a vast majority of it and the rest I learned from my father and uncle. They believed a man needs to dabble in a little bit of everything if he wants to survive."

That was a good piece of advice. She wondered what Jayce knew how to do since he mentioned a remodel wouldn't be a problem.

"You've known Jayce awhile, right?"

If Austin was surprised by the abrupt change of subject, he didn't let on. "Since our days in the Army. Seventeen years, I believe. We all stayed in touch when we got out

and would get together at least once a year before we decided to start the security company together."

"Did he always force himself to live in crappy apartments?"

It was probably against some man code to be asking these questions and expecting Austin to answer but she was curious. No, it was more than that. She needed insight into who Jayce was.

"It was different when he worked for the Secret Service. He traveled so much that having a place was pointless, so he lived mostly out of hotel rooms. We tried to convince him to get a cheap studio and eventually he caved, but yeah, it was pretty much the same. Run-down in a crappy neighborhood."

Devastating. She hated to think he spent all his time telling himself he had to live that way.

"I'm glad he's finally getting away from that kind of thing."

"It's because of you and Michael."

She shook her head. "It's all Michael. I'm just helping design the house."

Austin scoffed. "Don't sell yourself short. Jayce could've easily purchased a house, had a designer come in and furnish it in a week and not even thought twice about it. He has the means. The fact that he took your advice and purchased this house and is now letting you help design it is telling enough. This isn't just about Michael."

She bit her lip and thought about what he said.

"I'm worried Jasmine messed him up too much," she admitted.

"Oh, she messed him up alright, but he let her have that control for far too long. He should've gotten over that hurt fifteen years ago. Instead he tortured himself for not being good enough. We were starting to lose hope that he would ever change. Then you came along, and for the first time, we're seeing our old friend again."

Suddenly that felt like a lot of pressure and she wasn't sure she could handle it. "You give me too much credit."

Austin looked her in the eye when he said, "No, you aren't giving yourself enough. I know my friend. He's going to guard his heart after what Jasmine did to him and then after finding out about Michael. But what you don't see is the way he's different around you. Trust me when I tell you, him asking for your help on this is his way of extending an olive branch. It's going to take him time to give more but he will. I can see it."

She smiled at the thought but also felt the need to reassure Austin. "I'm not going to hurt him."

Austin didn't break eye contact when he answered. "I know that."

Well, now she was curious. "How do you know that?"

He chuckled. "I happen to be good at reading people and I like to observe those around me. I could tell within five minutes of spending time with you that you were good for Jayce. Besides, I've heard how fiercely overprotective you are of your nephew. No way in hell do you screw that up by breaking Jayce's heart."

He had her there.

"Jayce is lucky to have you," she told him after a few moments of silence.

“No, I’m the lucky one. Jayce can be prickly, but because of the things that happened to him, there’s no one you will find who’s more loyal.”

Kennedy smiled while letting Austin get back to work. She had her own work to do anyway. There were plenty of rooms she needed to pick furniture and accessories for and now she had more ambition than ever. She wanted everything to be perfect for the man who was finally letting himself feel again.

CHAPTER 22

Jayce and Nash were nestled in the hills just north of the Diego compound. Luke and Caden took up a position on the south side. Both teams were in a sniper nest, prepared to take out the enemy without drawing attention to themselves.

Annie's father, Fletcher, and his friend Hollywood had met them in town and handed over the information they had collected. Luke asked that they remain in town in case an emergency evac was required. With any luck, it wouldn't be needed and they could slip out as easily as they slipped in.

"I've got eyes on Manuel, but we got a problem," he radioed over his mic to Luke.

"We need to remain problem-free," Luke reminded him.

"Manuel has a woman chained up in the bedroom and it doesn't look like the kinky kind of chained up." He handed the binoculars to Nash.

"Son of a bitch," Nash growled.

His friend had three younger sisters and always took it harder than most when women were involved. Especially women of abuse.

"We need to bring in EMTs." He said the words that he knew would change their plan. They hadn't accounted for a hostage and he wondered why Fletcher hadn't known about her.

Jayce took the binoculars back and examined the room, and the female. Some of the cuts looked fresh but the bruises were in different states of healing. There was no indication in sight that the woman had been on the bed. Jayce wondered if she was recently moved to the bedroom.

"Take out Manuel and his men as planned. Then take out the guards. Once the place is clear, we'll move in for the rescue."

Just as he suspected, the plan changed. Originally they had agreed to kill only those in command. None of them wanted a high body count. Now there was no choice.

"I've got Manuel in my sights," he told the others.

"We've got the other two," Luke advised. "Take your shot."

Keeping his breathing steady, Jayce squeezed the trigger and watched as Manuel's head exploded on the other end of his scope. He racked the chamber and waited to see if someone noticed the shot. Four seconds later, two guards rushed in.

"Left," he said at the same time Nash commented, "Right." They took their respective shots and ended two more lives.

Racking the chamber one more time, he waited to see who else would come to investigate. After two whole minutes, when it was clear no one else was coming into the room, he radioed Luke.

"Bedroom is clear."

"Rear is clear," Luke returned. "Take out the rest of the guards and move in."

He lined up his next shots alongside Nash and slowly took out the guards one by one.

It wasn't nearly as satisfying as a close-up kill, but knowing that, with each shot, he was making his son safe, made up for the lack of excitement.

"All clear in the front."

"Back is clear. Move in."

Jayce stood up, slung his rifle over his shoulder, and unholstered his Sig while Nash did the same next to him. They traveled down the hill and hopped the wall that secured the compound. Dropping down onto his feet, he crouched and waited for footsteps. When no one approached, he turned to Nash who was in a similar position.

"It's almost too easy."

"You would think getting through an assignment unscathed was too easy."

He smirked at the exasperated tone of his friend. He much preferred a challenge, whereas Nash liked things simple. It didn't make for the best partnership, but in this case, Jayce was enjoying himself.

"Let's go get the girl and get the hell out of here."

It wasn't until they rounded the corner that they ran into another guard. One shot between the eyes and another threat was neutralized.

"You enjoyed that too much." Nash shook his head as he spoke.

"Taking a target out from a sniper nest doesn't give me a challenge. This, on the other hand"—he motioned to the dead guard—"is a much better use of my skills."

Nash continued to shake his head but echoed his words from earlier. "Let's go."

They made it to the bedroom without any further incident, but he and Nash cursed the second they stepped over the threshold.

Chained to an old gold radiator was a woman curled up in a ball. The few clothes she wore were filthy, like wherever she had been kept before this was full of dirt and grime. Her ankle, where the chain was attached, was red, raw, and bleeding. And if the smell was any indication, possibly infected. There was fresh blood near her but the lack of dried blood only further confirmed his suspicion that she was recently brought to this room.

He and Nash stepped over the three dead bodies and slowly made their way over to the shaking woman.

“It’s okay,” Nash soothed. “We aren’t here to hurt you.”

He let his friend take the lead. Nash was better at these things and women tended to trust his easy smile better than the scowl Jayce wore, like a suit of honor.

The chained woman shook more violently the closer they got, so he chose to stay back and let his friend handle the situation while he called Luke over the mic.

“Make sure those EMTs are on standby. Looks like our package has an infection from being chained up.”

He could imagine the cursing Luke did before he responded back since it took him a few moments. “Copy that.”

Jayce was listening to Nash try to convince their hostage that she was safe to come with us when Luke spoke again. “EMTs will be standing by at the rendezvous point to stabilize her until we can get back to the States. Annie will take over care from there.”

He had almost forgotten Annie was in med school. “We need to move,” he told Nash.

His friend snapped back, “I’m working on it.”

They both winced when the woman flinched and further tried to make herself one with the wall.

“Sorry.” And he actually meant it. As much as they did need to get a move on, the last thing he wanted to do was scare the woman.

It took a few more minutes but Nash finally managed to calm the woman enough to allow Nash to cut the chain from her ankle. After that, it was a flurry of events.

The half-naked hostage threw herself at Nash, almost causing him to lose his balance. She was crying hysterically and mumbling something in another language.

Now that she no longer considered Nash a threat, she wasn’t letting him go. His friend had to use the wall to stand up because there was no way Jayce was getting closer and ruining the progress Nash made. Finally, Nash had her cradled in his arms and they were on the move. Thankfully they weren’t met with any resistance on their way out of the compound.

In less than ten minutes they were off the compound and at the meeting spot where an EMT was waiting for them. Their hostage—who, Nash now told them, was named Maria—refused to leave Nash’s arms while being treated. She was given a round of antibiotics and a quick assessment to ensure nothing was broken before they were once again sneaking out of Mexico.

CHAPTER 23

Kennedy sat with Austin and a couple of his teammates as they waited for the rest of the team to return from Texas. It was the first time she was seeing where Jayce worked, and she had to admit, she was impressed with what the seven men had accomplished.

They weren't working out of some shack. Kringle Security was modestly decorated in modern fashion. The space they owned was on the upper floor of a two-story building. Based on the name, she expected to find some crazy Santa logo but instead it was just a simple K mirrored and pushed together.

The office space was devoid of clutter. Desks were spread out and each workstation was also clean and organized. It made her wonder how often they actually worked inside the building. She was about to ask someone when footsteps on the stairs caught her attention. Jayce was the first one through the door and she took off like a rocket to greet him. She crashed straight into him and wrapped her arms around his waist. Kennedy half expected Jayce not to return the public display, but she shouldn't have worried. He was picking her up in a bear hug in no time.

"I like this kind of greeting when I return," he whispered in her ear.

A huge grin broke out across her face.

"I know it's silly, but I missed you," she whispered right back.

"There's nothing silly about missing someone."

She thought she heard a hitch in his voice but she couldn't be sure. She also wasn't about to ask him in front of his friends.

Then it hit her.

Jayce's friends were in the room while she practically climbed him to get closer. She felt her face go a deep shade of red as she buried her head farther in his chest.

"I forgot where we were." Her words were muffled by his shirt but he must've heard what she said because she felt the rumble of his laughter.

"I can assure you no one cares based on the grins they're all wearing."

She turned her head but didn't let go. Sure enough, everyone in the room had a smile from ear to ear on their face.

"If I didn't suspect all the staring was because you're happy for your friend, I would think you're all creepers."

Ryker was the first to bust out laughing. "I knew she would fit in perfectly."

She was sure her face was even more red now than it had been a few moments ago.

"Okay, enough," Luke chuckled. "Clearly we're embarrassing her. Job well done. It's late, so how about we get the hell out of here?"

Kennedy liked that plan and so did everyone else. She waited until everyone left before stepping out of Jayce's arms. "What do you say we go back to your house?"

"Our house."

She almost choked on the air that got caught in her throat. “Huh?” The one-word squeak was all she managed to get out.

“Do you really think after you picked out the house, and are currently helping renovate it, that the house isn’t yours as well?”

Well, when he said it like that ...

“I mean, I kinda hoped you would want me to stay there with you occasionally.”

She nearly melted when he framed her face with his hands. “I want more than occasionally. I want always.”

Kennedy needed to insert some humor before she turned into a pile of goo on his work floor. “Let’s see if you feel the same way after I finish designing the space. Oh, and speaking of the house, I have a surprise for you!”

“A surprise, huh?” Jayce raised his eyebrow.

“Yup, but I’m not telling you until we get there.”

Jayce took her hand and was practically sprinting for the door. “Let’s get a move on, then.”

It was great to see this playful side of him. She hoped their relationship was always like this.

CHAPTER 24

When Kennedy said she had a surprise for him, he didn't expect to walk into his new house and see a romantic setup.

A king-size mattress sat in the middle of what would soon be the living room. A teepee tent covered half of it and twinkling lights made the whole thing glow. Colorful pillows were tossed haphazardly near the top and a large lush blanket was folded on the lower half of the mattress. A tray with candles and a deck of cards sat in the middle of the blanket just waiting for someone to use.

"You set this all up?"

"There's also a cooler in the kitchen with some snacks and drinks. I figured we could spend our nights here like this while construction is going on rather than you going back to your apartment."

Ah, so that was what this was about.

"Are you worried about my well-being?"

He snagged her around the waist and brought her close that she had to lean her head back to look at him.

"Maybe a little," she practically whispered to him.

He smiled at the concern. "Then I guess it's a good thing I had no intention of going

back there anyway.”

“Really?” He could see the hope in her eyes.

“Really.” He nuzzled her neck. “That time in my life is over. I’m ready to move forward.”

More than ready, actually. It was like killing the Diego Cartel was the final piece he needed to shed Jasmine and the hurt she caused. His friends had been right all these years; it was time to stop punishing himself for something he didn’t do.

“So how long before the master bedroom is ready?” he asked in between kisses to her neck.

“A couple of weeks at minimum, so you better get used to sleeping on this mattress on the floor,” she answered on a moan.

“Is it by chance the new mattress for our bed?”

Kennedy had asked his opinion on a bedroom set before he left for Texas but he hadn’t cared then and he didn’t care now what kind it was. As long as he could toss her down on it sooner rather than later.

“It is. Why?” She tried to pull away but he wasn’t about to let her go for a second.

Jayce scooped her up in his arms and carried her over to the beautiful setup she created.

“Because I fully plan to christen it tonight,” he told her matter-of-factly.

And that was exactly how they spent the rest of the night and the next day. Not

moving from their little heaven.

CHAPTER 25

One Month Later

Today was the day. Michael was seeing the house for the first time and she was more nervous than Jayce. At least, he didn't look nervous standing next to her.

"Are we sure this is a good idea?" she asked for what was probably the millionth time.

"The bedroom or the living together?" Jayce asked but didn't give her time to answer before he spoke again. "Because yes to both. He's going to love his room. You already ran some of the ideas past him and everything else he told you to do as you please. And the living together? We've had this discussion. Plenty of times. Michael has said repeatedly he's fine with it. Don't you believe him?"

She chewed on the inside of her cheek. "Of course I believe him but it's a lot of change in a month. And sure, he's seen us together but that's always when we go out as a group of four. Never just the two of us."

And honestly, they kept things PG in front of her brother and nephew. Yes, they held hands, and yes, they kissed but it wasn't like when they were inside the house. Jayce was a thousand times more handsy and playful when they were alone.

"Michael will be fine. He's a teenage boy and he just wants us to be happy together."

"Knock, knock."

Oh God. Her time was up. Michael was here.

They all agreed that Shaun would drop Michael off; that this time was just meant for the three of them. Shaun felt Michael and Jayce deserved that alone time together without him interfering.

Plus, she was almost positive her brother was seeing someone even if he refused to admit it.

“In the kitchen!” Jayce hollered back.

“Oh good, I’m not interrupting anything,” Michael said as soon as he walked in.

“See?” She slapped Jayce on the chest but he only laughed.

“The boy is teasing you.”

“Yeah, Aunt Kennedy. I’m just playin’. I’m happy Dad has you. It’s better than meeting some other strange chick.”

That did not make her feel better one bit, but the smile on her nephew’s face did. It was the same smile Jayce now wore more often than not.

“Gee thanks. You ready to see your room?”

“Yup.”

She had no idea why she was so nervous about this. Michael was going to love it. They expanded the closet so instead of dressers in the room, there were built-ins inside the closet. The queen-size bed took up one of the walls and there was a basketball hoop directly across from it so Michael could practice his shots any time

he wanted from the comfort of his bed.

A decent-size gaming desk and chair sat against another wall. Sports posters of all of Michael's favorite players gave the room the teenage vibe she knew her nephew would love.

"So, what do you think?" she hesitantly asked as soon as they got upstairs and hooked a left.

Michael looked around the room in awe. He smiled when he noticed his favorite basketball player's poster hung on the wall.

"It's perfect, Aunt Kennedy. Just like I knew it would be." Michael pulled her into a big hug. Her nephew already towered over her and wasn't even done growing yet.

"You sure? Because you can change anything you want."

"He said it's perfect." Jayce yanked her out of Michael's arms and into his own. "I told you you're overthinking this."

"I just want him to be comfortable when he comes to visit us," she grumbled but looked Michael in the eye when she said it.

Jayce might be acting cool and collected, but she knew from their discussion earlier in the day that he wanted this to work just as much as she did. They just expressed it differently.

"Aunt Kennedy, I would be comfortable sleeping on the couch as long as I was spending time with Dad."

Because she was still in Jayce's arms, she felt more than heard the hitch in Jayce's

breath. She figured she was right as Jayce spoke. “Come here, son.” There was so much emotion in those three little words.

Michael joined their three-way hug and Kennedy soaked up the happiness radiating from everyone. This was an excellent start to their future.

“Okay, enough mushy stuff. I’m hungry.”

And just like that the moment was gone but not ruined. Michael was a growing boy after all and it was important they fed him. But dinner was just the start of what would be an amazing weekend watching father and son bond.

EPILOGUE

Austin

There are people in a person's life that they will never forget, no matter how much time has passed. Even if the only interaction was a text message once a year on their shared birthdays.

Annabelle Carsen was that person for Austin. Or, as the rest of the world knew her, Belle Sweets, America's Sweetheart. A country music sensation that took the world by storm when she was only sixteen years old. Now nearly fifteen years later, she was still releasing albums and touring around the world to sold-out stadiums. And just like thousands of others across the world, he loved her music.

He would wait every year for her one text wishing him a happy birthday. She never forgot, and he never changed his number for that exact reason. That day he would smile bigger and not for the reasons his friends thought. He never cared that it was his birthday. He only cared that it was hers as well.

For one day, he would be happier than ever before, but it always ended.

This year was different though. This year, when his phone lit up with a text, it wasn't on his birthday and it wasn't something happy.

It was one word.

BELLS: Help!

That was all she said and Austin knew without a shadow of a doubt that he would drop everything to do what she asked. Because Annabelle wasn't just an old high school friend, she was the woman who owned his heart.