



Don't Fall For A Bodyguard (Wayward Lane Backstage #2)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Payton DeLaine: As a celebrity hairstylist for the rock band Wayward Lane, I'm used to late nights and big parties. One moment, I'm celebrating the band's world tour announcement in Vegas, the next, I'm waking up with a ring on my finger and a blushing bodyguard in my bed.

I've been flirting with Lennie Rizzoli for over a year but I never thought it would go anywhere, least of all down the aisle. But getting married isn't the real shocker; I think I'm in love with my husband.

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CHAPTER 1

PAYTON

LAS VEGAS

A n incessant ringing woke me up. But even half-asleep, I recognized that the noise wasn't coming from my phone. I had a very particular ringtone (thank you, Adele).

What the hell?

I blinked and opened my eyes, but they were so dry that everything in front of me was a blur.

Flashes of last night reverberated in my head. Vegas. The Wayward Lane World Tour announcement. Getting the boys in the band styled for their concert. The party. The after party. The many, many shots. Cocktails. More shots. Something called a Porn Star that was deliciously sweet at first taste and then horribly sickening afterward. Thinking about hard liquor and whipped cream had my stomach doing dangerous somersaults. I hoped like hell that I wouldn't throw up.

Then I realized it wasn't just a phone ringing. It was my ears. My head was throbbing. Like someone had taken my flat iron, turned it to the highest heat setting, and was poking me in the head with it.

"Lord, I'm never having shots again," I groaned and slapped my hands over my face.

"Ow, that hurts."

I startled when I felt the cool brush of metal against my skin. That was weird. I never wore jewelry to bed. Unless it was a bedazzled thong. Hey, don't judge. I have a spectacular ass and it deserves to be showcased.

The phone stopped ringing. Thank God.

I sighed and closed my eyes again—until I heard another noise. It sounded like someone snoring. Oh, shit. I hated sleepovers with the men I fucked. Detested them, actually. I'd had too many of them tell me the next day that I was a mistake. Oh, it was fine to fuck me, but if I wanted more, like an actual date, forget it. I was too much. Too loud. Too flirtatious. Too femme. Too everything. I'd heard it all, and I'd grown so tired of that bullshit. Now I hooked up at clubs and that was it.

At twenty-nine, this boy was done looking for love. And the only man I allowed in my home, or my bed, was my cat, Finnigan.

Until today. Turning my head, I blinked again and sure enough, there was a massive man in my bed. He was lying on his stomach, facing away from me, so all I could see was a broad back. And the very large eagle tattoo that covered it.

Fuck, a bear of a man was my total weakness. So, no surprise why I'd invited—whoever this was—back to my hotel.

Last night, despite the party and being surrounded by tons of people, loneliness set in. Watching all the loved-up couples around me at work got me wondering, why them and not me?

Sighing at my silliness, I turned my attention back to the man beside me. Whoever he was, he had nice hair. A rich chestnut color that was all natural. Of course, I noticed. As a hairstylist, it was always the first thing that caught my attention. His hair was thick and short. Nothing fancy style-wise, but long enough to get a good grip. The

color and texture reminded me of someone, but with my ass-kicking hangover, I couldn't recall who.

Something else was odd. Even though this ripped guy was in my bed, I couldn't remember having sex with him. And my body didn't have the usual morning-after aches that came with a hard fucking down. I pulled back the white sheet and glanced down. No love bites, nothing. And I still had my fuchsia silk panties on. Maybe we'd both passed out before anything happened? Oh jeez, things were gonna be awkward as fuck when he woke up. Then again, I'd had a lot to drink last night, and I realized that things could have ended up much worse.

I ran my hands up over my face again and gasped when I noticed the ring on my hand. Wearing rings was unusual for me. Given my job, I tended to stick to necklaces and earrings, leaving my hands free from tangling up in my clients' tresses.

Then I noticed that the ring was on my left hand. On my fourth finger. Slowly, I turned my hand around and I jolted when a blush-pink oval gem winked back at me.

Gorgeous was my first thought. Then, it can't be real. I must be dreaming. I closed my eyes again, but when I opened them a second later, the ring was still there. Still stunning. Still on my fourth finger...

Don't panic.

Maybe I went midnight shopping? Plenty of jewelry stores in Vegas were open all night. That had to be it. Pink was my favorite color and I'd wanted to treat myself. That was the logical explanation.

Until the man lying beside me rolled over.

"What the fuck?" I blurted out. "Lennie ?!"

Lennie Rizzoli was the lead bodyguard for Wayward Lane. He was an intense guy with a rare smile and a strong presence that demanded attention. A man I'd flirted with for more than a year, to no avail. He was a private person and totally dedicated to his job. Which I respected, though his reserve had only piqued my curiosity. But after a while, I realized my flirting would go nowhere. Still, it didn't stop me from trying. And the normally stealthy man often fumbled around me. It was charming, and I couldn't resist teasing him.

But this morning—at least, I assumed it was morning—I wasn't in the mood for jokes.

“Lennie!” I hissed, pushing at his shoulder, trying to wake him up.

Suddenly, Lennie's bulky arm wrapped around me like a python, pulling me in tight to his body. Normally, I would have said ‘ fuck yes ’ to that kind of move and pounced on the man, but the ring on my finger had me freaked out.

“Go back to sleep, Angel,” he muttered and snuggled his face into the crook of my neck, his scruff setting off fireworks along my sensitive skin.

Angel ? My heart took off racing, and that wasn't helping matters at all.

God, not only was this man hot as hell, but he smelled good, too. No fancy cologne. Just a hint of sweat and musk, delicious. The sheet slid away, and I looked down, catching a glimpse of the curve of his taut ass cheek. Lord have mercy, he was finer than I'd imagined. And I had a damn good imagination.

Stop it, Payton. Now's not the time to think with your dick. Ask him about the ring.

“Lennie, wake up!” I pushed at him, and he finally, reluctantly, let go of me.

When his baby blues opened, shock and something headier flashed between us. An intense heat that had me swallowing hard. Either that or it was the effects of my hangover...

I held my hand up.

“What happened last night?” I asked as I pointed to the ring. “What is this ?”

“Uh, I don’t...I don’t know?” Lennie shook his head and then slowly sat up.

The sheet bunched around his hips, revealing a furry chest and a set of washboard abs that deserved ALL the attention. Despite my raging headache, my morning wood was now in full effect. Oh God.

“How did you end up here? What the hell is going on?” I asked again.

Lennie didn’t reply, but slowly lifted his left hand. There was a thick platinum band on his fourth finger.

“Oh, fuck,” he whispered, his face turning red. “Fuck, fuck, fuck. Did you and me, did we?—”

The phone rang again. Not mine.

“Shit, that could be work,” he whispered and turned over, reaching for the nightstand.

He tapped on his phone but didn’t take the call. More tapping, typing. When he stood up, the sheet fell away, and I bit back a dirty groan. His round ass was right there in front of me, so tempting, so biteable.

“Payton, what did you do?” He grumbled.

“Me?” I yanked on the top sheet, wrapped it around my hips, and slid off the bed.
“What did you do?”

Lennie turned around to face me, all six-foot-three of him, and the full frontal was as delectable as the back view.

“Have mercy,” I whispered as I stared at his long cock, half hard.

His raspy ‘ Jesus ’ had me looking up at his face. Cheeks flushed, Lennie reached for a pillow and placed it in front of his hips. I stifled a laugh at the picture he made. Still adorably shy for a man who worked with rockstars.

“Seriously, Payton?” His tone was gruff, but I didn’t miss the way his eyes gave me a long once-over.

I was slender and pale compared to him, but I was pretty damn fine, if I do say so myself. And the way he was looking at me, I was tempted to say fuck it, and throw the sheet away. But, for once, I reined in my naughty impulse.

Then he held his phone up in front of my face. A welcome distraction.

“Apparently, we got married at the Chapel of Everlasting Love last night.”

“What?!”

He sighed. “Then, you got a hold of my phone and texted everyone I know. My family, colleagues, friends. And you posted pictures of our wedding on all your socials.”

“No. No, that can’t be true,” I whispered as he passed me his phone. “I don’t remember doing any of that.”

But there we were, in full color. Me and Lennie kissing, standing at a makeshift altar with gold streamers, our arms wrapped around each other. Shit, we looked hot together. I was several inches shorter, and blond to his dark.

I wondered if he was a good kisser. Judging by the way I was about to climb his body in that photo, I'd say yes.

I read the text message that accompanied the photo. The message was sent to Mom. Holy shit, I'd texted Lennie's mom!

Lennie: I'm Payton, Lennie's hubbbiiiiieeee. We're marrrrrrriiiiiieed!!!! Loookie!

"Oh. My. God. How did this happen?" I squeaked.

"You were downing shots at the after-party like it was spring break!"

"Don't yell!" I shouted, making my head throb even harder. Then another memory flashed in my head. "And hey, I wasn't the only one. You were drinking along with me!"

"Jesus, I'm never doing that again."

"Fuck," I blurted out, running a hand through my curls. "But how did we end up getting to, you know, that?—"

I pointed to his hand, unable to say the word.

"Married?" Lennie stated with a raised eyebrow. "Right now, I have no freaking idea. But I have a feeling that by tracking my phone, texting Valen, and getting much-needed coffee, it'll eventually come to me."

“We can fix this,” I insisted. “Or maybe it didn’t happen at all? Maybe we bought cheap rings and posed as a joke?”

Lennie took his phone again and tapped on it. Then he showed me another picture. It was me and Len, signing what looked to be a marriage certificate. Both of us glassy-eyed, with ridiculous grins on our faces. Holy hell.

“Ah, shit!” Lennie exclaimed and sat down on the bed.

“What?”

“The chapel. I remembered. That’s where Brodie and Van got married. I must’ve overheard Regan or Dawson talk about it.”

Regan was Lennie’s boss, and Dawson was his former colleague. Dawson was now married to Wayward guitarist, Iain Holloway.

Lennie’s phone rang again. ‘ Mom ’ flashed on the screen.

“I’ll leave you to that,” I suggested, all but running to the bathroom, the sheet around my waist. “Shower first. Then we need to find a divorce lawyer.”

“The sooner the better.”

I whirled around at the last minute. “But I’m keeping the ring!”

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CHAPTER 2

LENNIE

I sat on Payton's bed, pillow on my lap, staring at my phone like it was about to detonate. Judging by the number of calls and texts over the past several hours, it was already too late.

My mom was calling for the tenth time in the past hour. I tapped decline and set my notifications to vibrate. I'd call her later. Much, much later. Fuck, my entire Italian family was gonna ream me out good. The replies had already started thanks to my husband's drunken antics with my phone last night. They'd be happy as fuck to see me married, but eloping? That was a big no. Weddings were sacred. And when they found out that this was all a drunken mistake? I'd be saying 'mi spiace'—I'm sorry—for the rest of my goddamn life.

Not to mention all the razzing from everyone in my security crew, including my boss, Regan, the other bodyguards, the guys in the band...

As I sat there and rubbed my head, memories of last night flickered in my mind, with more and more details coming to light. I'd drunk a lot, but not as much as Payton. I rarely drank and when I did, I didn't overdo it. I'd sometimes been called up to work on protective detail with little to no notice, so it was safer to avoid alcohol. And being on guard, I was always aware of my surroundings. It was my normal. When I did drink, I could handle a lot of booze. Or so I thought. Until last night.

Turns out, it wasn't the booze I couldn't handle. It was Payton DeLaine.

No surprise there. The sexy blond hairstylist was a force all his own. He had confidence and style to boot. And that booty? Mmm. Fucking sinful. He was made for Sin City. Payton sparkled brighter than the neon lights that bejewelled the strip.

Except for last night.

I remembered that much, at least. He'd been sitting at the bar during the band's after-party celebration, alone, downing shots at a rate that had me concerned. I was used to the party scene—I worked with rockstars, after all. But something was going on with Payton. He'd been quiet lately, not as flirty as he usually was. And he never drank heavily.

Even though I was technically off duty by that time, I monitored the situation, noting several men sitting at the bar, eyeing Payton. No surprise, the man was gorgeous, and when he walked into a room, everyone noticed. But, after an hour, Payton was so inebriated that he could barely stand up. When two strangers made their move on him, I intervened.

Protective wasn't work mode. It was me. And something about Payton had all my vigilant instincts working overtime.

Another memory flashed.

Most of the band's entourage had left the party for a club, but Payton refused to join them. Until it was just me and him sitting at the bar. And when he passed me several shots, I finally let my guard down. And I let him tease me, his favorite pastime. I'd hoped it would put his luminous smile back in place.

He was so damn pretty with those hazel eyes of his, more gold than green, and a flirty and fun personality that had everyone, even grumpy asses like me, smiling. Okay, maybe not on the outside. I didn't let him know how much he affected me. If I did, I

was certain he'd have me wrapped around those slender, talented fingers of his in no time.

Like that ring he was wearing. My ring. The one I'd obviously put there last night. At our wedding. Fucking hell. Funny enough, I could remember leaving the bar with him and hopping in a car. But the memories after that were still fuzzy.

Where did we get the rings? I glanced down at my hand. I could tell from the weight of the band that it was a quality piece of jewelry. And that sparkler Payton had on was near to blinding.

Think, Len, think.

It had to be the same place Van and Brodie bought theirs; it wasn't far from the chapel. I tapped on my rideshare app to see where we'd traveled to, but there were no trips from last night. We'd probably used Payton's phone.

Despite the razzing I knew was coming, I texted Regan to tell her I needed a) a sick day, b) a full tracking of my phone, c) the name of the jewelry store she'd taken Brodie and Van to, and d) any eyewitnesses from last night's party.

My boss's reply? No shit. Then she sent me the name of the jewelry store, a place called Dazzle which was located in a sketchy area of the city.

I tapped on another message, this one from Valen, one of my colleagues and closest friends.

Valen: Dude, you MARRIED Payton??? He's way out of your league LOL. And he's posting pics everywhere. Call me!

Here we go...

Lennie: FU. All I remember is taking shots with him in the bar. I don't know how we got to that chapel. No rideshare trips on my phone.

Valen: Doesn't matter how. It's done. Are you with him now?

Lennie: In his hotel room. Nothing happened, though. I'd never take advantage of him that way.

Valen: But you would marry him?

Lennie: He married me, too. And I'm off today so we can resolve this. Know any divorce lawyers?

Valen: It's Vegas, pretty sure you can find one NP. But are you sure? You're gonna break poor Payton's heart.

Lennie: Not funny

Valen: I'm not joking. His flirting with you is for real.

I didn't believe my friend. He was right when he said Payton was out of my league.

I glanced down at my phone again, at the pictures that were now common knowledge in our shared circle, especially the one of me and Payton kissing. In that moment, we looked like we fit, and I wished like hell I could remember that kiss.

"Don't be an idiot," I mumbled to myself. "He wouldn't date you, never mind marry you."

"Who wouldn't date you?" Payton asked.

I looked up to find my husband in nothing but a tiny white towel, his wet hair slicked back. I preferred the wild curls, but no matter what, he was stunning. He was staring at me, his beautiful eyes wide, and I nearly lost my train of thought.

“Uh, nothing,” I muttered.

“I can’t get the damn ring off.”

“I thought you were keeping it?” I snarked.

I got a rude gesture for that comment. Despite the ridiculousness of the situation, I smiled in return.

“We got them on, so it stands to reason we’ll get them off.”

I tugged on my ring, but it wouldn’t budge. Shit.

“We need soap,” I explained. “Or oil.”

“I tried soap in the shower, and it didn’t work,” Payton sighed, and then his face suddenly lit up. “Oh, I have lube! That’ll work.”

Jesus, I didn’t dare think about Payton pouring lube over his hand. And what he might do with said hand after that.

“Can we focus on finding a lawyer first?” I bit out. “Done is done after all, ring or not.”

“True.” He nodded and sauntered over to the closet, opening the door. “Bathroom’s all yours.”

“Thanks.” I looked around for my pants. They were on the chair on the other side of the room. Which meant I’d have to walk across the room naked or with this fucking pillow to cover myself. “Can you turn around?”

“Can you be serious?” He scoffed and dropped his towel.

I thought his ass in tight denim or pink satin was sexy, but bare? Oh, baby. It was high and tight, two sweet handfuls of perfection. Ngh . And he was standing three feet away from me. I was half hard and growing harder with every passing second.

Fuck it. If he didn’t care, why should I? So, what if I had a hard-on? It was a perfectly normal reaction.

I put the pillow aside and got up, stalking over to the bathroom, not daring to look back to see if the blond brat was watching me. This morning was so weird. I was never self-conscious about my body. And not around anyone I’d slept with. Well, technically, Payton and I hadn’t had sex. We just cuddled in bed.

Shaking my head, I glanced at my reflection in the mirror above the sink. I couldn’t stop staring at my hand. At how right the ring looked on my finger.

I’m still drunk.

No. I was hungover, not drunk. My eyes were bloodshot, my face pale. My beard was growing in fast, but I couldn’t be bothered shaving. So, I turned on the water in the shower as hot as it would go and then took my time scrubbing down.

Clean, and now mostly awake, I grabbed a white bath towel to wrap around my hips.

When I stepped back into the bedroom, my eyes locked on Payton standing in front of the window. And holy shit, he was dressed to kill in neon pink jeans, a gold mesh top,

and stiletto booties that showcased his long, lean body to full effect. My cock was liking the view way too much.

Payton turned around and when I glanced at his face—the dark eyeliner that made his eyes look brighter, and the slick lip gloss—there was nothing I could do to hide the fact that my dick was tenting my towel.

“We have a problem,” he stated, his eyes roaming down my body.

“Another one?” I replied and quickly walked over to the chair to grab my briefs, pants, and shirt. “Can’t we deal with our wedding fiasco first?”

“Brodie and the guys are waiting in the restaurant downstairs.”

“What? Why?” I asked.

“They want to take us out for a celebratory brunch.”

“Oh my God. Why didn’t you tell them what really happened?”

“I tried to,” Payton chuckled and sauntered towards me. “We might as well get all the teasing over with at once. Plus, I’m sure they know a good lawyer.”

“Elias Kain,” I blurted out and smacked my forehead.

“Who?”

“Wayward’s lawyer. God, I’m fucking slow on the uptake this morning. Anyway, I’m sure Elias can deal with our—” I paused; the remaining word stuck in my throat. “Divorce. Or he can refer us.”

I reached for my briefs, slid them on under my towel, and then threw the towel aside. Payton stood there, watching me get dressed. My hands started to shake, my cool, calm bodyguard demeanor nowhere to be found. And, of course, my cock was still fucking hard.

I tried three times to get my fly zipped. On the fourth try, Payton stepped up to me, pushed my shaky hands aside, zipped me up, and patted my abs. That didn't help my poor dick at all.

"You didn't need to do that," I whispered.

Fuck, his lips were so close and so tempting.

"Of course, I did. You're my husband," Payton replied with a flirty grin.

My heart raced out of control.

"For the next week, at least," he continued.

"A week?" I repeated.

"While you were in the shower, I googled how long it would take to get a divorce here. A week minimum. Usually, three to four weeks. And the chapel where we got married? They file the license the next day, so yes, the marriage is legal."

"So, we're looking at being married for a month?"

Payton nodded, biting his lower lip.

Why did that news make me feel calmer? Shouldn't I be stressed about being married at all, never mind like this?

Taking a deep breath, I reached for my shirt, slipped it on, and motioned to the door. “You ready to face the music, Mr. DeLaine?”

“I sure am,” Payton replied, picking up his designer handbag. “But remember, it’s Mr. Rizzoli now.”

Like always, Payton strutted out of the room and left me speechless.

CHAPTER 3

PAYTON

“Hold up!” Lennie called after me.

I was halfway down the hallway when I stopped short. It wasn't like me to be rude and walk away, but I needed distance. For once, I was running from Lennie, not the other way around.

Being in close contact with him this morning was playing havoc with my head, my hormones, and strangely enough, my heart. It started racing the moment I realized he was in my bed, and it hadn't calmed since.

When he finally caught up to me, he slid one arm around my waist, and I startled. Never mind racing. I was about to have a literal heart attack.

“What are you doing?” I asked, staring up into his eyes.

I couldn't breathe, never mind walk another step.

“I'm, uh—” He paused, his face reddening. He pulled his arm away. “I guess I'm back in bodyguard mode. I don't know. Sorry. Those stilettos are beautiful, but I don't want you to trip or anything.”

Was this man for real? I thought for sure when Lennie saw me in my heels, with makeup on, he'd have scampered out of my hotel room, and I'd never see him again.

Most of the men I'd slept with loved my look in private, but in public? Forget it. They didn't like the attention I got, and most of them didn't want to be seen with me.

You're not sleeping with Lennie, remember? And he sees you in makeup and heels all the time.

"That's very kind, Len, but you know I'm a pro when it comes to high heels," I replied. "I manage fine on my own."

I'd been doing everything that way since I was eighteen. After high school, I studied hair and makeup while working a full-time job, and I supported my mom when she got sick, taking care of her until her passing. With only a handful of family left, I was used to being independent. I didn't need anyone.

Least of all this sweet, handsome bodyguard who was immune to my flirting.

"I know that, but you were walking so fast," he added. "Be careful."

"Careful? We blew that out of the water last night."

Lennie chuckled and offered his arm to me like a gentleman. And me? Well, I figured I might as well enjoy his attention while I had it, right? I placed my hand on his forearm, and we walked to the elevator.

I should be freaking out like I was first thing this morning. Then again, it was a silly drunken wedding. There was nothing to worry about. We'd be divorced before I knew it. Back to normal.

Then I thought about the way Lennie was eyeing me up earlier. And the way his dick was about to poke a giant hole through that towel he had on. Was that about me, or was he horny in general? Probably the latter. After all, I'd tried for over a year to get

his attention, and it got me nowhere.

Focus, Payton.

I needed coffee, food, and after that, a flight back to Nashville. And then a divorce. Back to my condo and my cat. My usual. My life. I had a great one. A job I loved, a wonderful home that I owned, and good friends. What more could I ask for? Okay, maybe lately, the desire I had to share my life with someone special was haunting me. But I'd get over it. I didn't need a man. I had lots of men. Well, their attention. For an hour or two.

We headed into the elevator, and I was still holding tight to Lennie's arm, all but vibrating as we started to descend. We stopped at another floor and two couples joined us. I got a leering stare from one of the men, but it was short-lived. When I glanced up at Lennie, I realized why. My temporary husband was giving the stranger a glare so lethal, I'm surprised the man didn't drop on the spot. Bodyguard mode was right.

When we finally reached the ground floor, we headed out into the bright lobby, my heels clicking loudly on the marble floor. Lennie steered us to the right and down the hallway to the restaurant.

And there were the boys of Wayward Lane—Brodie, Holloway, Faise, and Ronin—and their security entourage, Valen, Petyr, and Regan. Not to mention Brodie's husband Van, and Holloway's husband, Dawson. The group's chatter quieted when they spotted us, and their shit-eating grins told me we were in for a hell of a wedding breakfast.

More like a roast...

"Oh Christ, here we go," Lennie muttered as we stepped closer.

“Don’t worry, I’ll protect you.” I squeezed his forearm. “And in a few weeks, this will all be a distant memory.”

“Really?” Lennie bit his lower lip. “Have you been witness to the jokes and pranks these guys pull? We’re gonna get teased about this for months, never mind weeks.”

“Well, maybe we can beat them at their own game,” I replied with a grin.

“What do you mean?”

“What if we act like last night wasn’t a colossal mistake? What if we pretend that we’re happy about what happened?” I suggested.

Lennie’s cheeks pinked up. “Uh, you mean, act like we’re actually a couple? Valen already knows what really happened. And the rest of them won’t believe it.”

I stopped walking and turned to him. “Why not?”

“Look at you and look at me,” Lennie replied.

“And? Is there something wrong with the way I look?” I snapped, pulling back my arm.

“No!” He reached for me again. “But come on, Payton. You’re, you know?—”

“No. What?” I bit out, ready to stomp right out of here.

“You’re sexy as hell,” he whispered, so low I barely heard him. “Why would you settle for me?”

Now, I was never speechless. Never. But right there, at that moment? I had no

fucking words. And, honey, it was a good thing Lennie grabbed my arm because I was suddenly weak-kneed. And stupefied. Why would he think that about himself?

“No one would ‘ settle ’ for you, Len. They’d be damn lucky to have you,” I finally replied. “You’re a total hottie, and more important than that, you’re kind, sweet, and caring. And I would never marry anyone, alcohol or not, if they weren’t all those things. Now, are you my husband for the next four weeks or not?”

Lennie finally cracked a shy smile, and it made me hot all over.

“Okay then.” I nodded. “Shall we?”

I held tightly to his arm as we walked up to the band.

“Hey there, happy couple!” Brodie called out with a smirk on his face. “Drinks are on us.”

“Please.” Lennie shook his head. “Don’t even mention alcohol right now.”

“Aw, is the honeymoon over already?” Holloway teased. “Maybe we should have invited Elias to join us today, and save you time?”

Lennie gave Holls his middle finger.

“Doesn’t anyone want to see my ring?” I announced, drawing attention away from my blushing husband.

I held my left hand out and everyone oohed and awed.

Faise whistled. “Shit, Payton, it’s even bigger than the picture.”

“That’s what he said,” Ronin chuckled.

Faise gave his fianc a playful shove.

Lennie sighed and turned to me. “Can we go back upstairs and have breakfast in our room?”

“No way!” Dawson called out. “We need to hear all about last night.”

“If you can remember any of it,” Valen chuckled.

Then he walked up to us and gave Lennie a side hug and did the same to me.

“You be good to my friend, eh?” Valen stated and pointed to me. “Don’t break his heart. Just his box spring.”

Poor Lennie turned bright red.

“You have nothing to worry about,” I assured him.

Lennie didn’t love me, so there was no chance of me breaking anything, least of all his heart.

Regan, the head of security, stepped up beside us, shaking her head and rolling her eyes. “Only you, Payton.”

“What?” I stared at Regan, trying my best to look innocent.

“Lennie, a word,” she demanded.

Regan and Lennie moved away from the group as they began talking in whispered

tones.

“So, are we gonna eat now or what?” Brodie suddenly asked and everyone turned to stare. “Hello? I’m fucking hungover and in desperate need of food. Don’t tell me I’m the only one.”

“No, but the rest of us are too polite to say anything,” Van teased his husband.

Once Regan and Lennie were done talking, they joined us, and we all filed into the restaurant. The place was already brimming with guests, and we were guided by the host to a private room. Patrons pulled their phones out when they spotted the band, but thankfully, no one made a bigger deal than taking pictures.

Once we were seated at our table, the server took our drink orders, double espressos all around. Jesse, the band’s manager, joined us last, looking more rested than the rest of us. Jesse was a former rocker himself, but he had a style that was more suited to a boardroom; short hair, dark-framed glasses, and always a button down, trousers, and suspenders. Then you noticed the copious tattoos on his forearms and hands, and the realization hit that he was so not a suit.

As the minutes ticked by, more memories from last night filtered through my brain. But the wedding itself was still murky. I recalled being in a room with soft music and the rainfall of glittery confetti, but not much else. Just a feeling. A moment of pure happiness, the kind of bubbly elation when everything aligns.

Speaking of bubbly, when the servers returned with our coffee, they also brought several bottles of champagne.

“Dee, you shouldn’t—” Lennie started, but the lead singer shook his head.

“No matter the occasion, we always celebrate stuff as a family,” Brodie interrupted.

“But—”

“No matter.”

There was no changing Brodie’s mind, so I squeezed Lennie’s thigh. “It’s okay.”

Instead of pulling my hand away, I left it there. And oddly enough, Len placed his much larger hand over mine, interlocking our fingers. I should’ve felt guilty. Lennie and I weren’t really married, so what the hell were we celebrating?

I glanced up and noticed Valen staring at us intently from across the table. But I refused to let go of Lennie’s hand. This time, I was protective of him . And when Valen winked at me, I got the same unsettled feeling that I did when I woke up this morning.

This marriage was going to be a hell of a lot more complicated than I first thought.

CHAPTER 4

LENNIE

The guys in the band sure knew how to celebrate an occasion. Even a fake wedding.

They all knew that Payton and I had made a drunken mistake, but instead of razzing us (too hard), they played along, and honestly? It was the first time since I woke up that I was relaxed. Okay, not completely. Holding Payton's hand made my pulse jump like crazy, but it also gave me a kind of confidence I hadn't expected. Like, we were both in this mess, but we'd find a way out. Together. Almost like real partners. Or co-conspirators. Whatever fit.

After fueling up on a platter of fluffy french toast and crispy bacon, and with caffeine now coursing through my veins, more details of our night together came flooding back. Each one headier than the last.

"Of course, you're gonna meet someone," I reassured Payton as we sat at the bar. "Any man would be lucky as fuck to marry you."

"Marry me? I just want a second date," Payton sighed.

"You deserve all the dates. And that man is out there. Once he finds you, he won't let go."

Payton placed his hand over mine and instead of pulling away, I gave in to temptation and gripped it tightly. But I resisted the urge to pull his hand up and kiss it. That

would be weird, right?

“You’re just saying that.” He shook his head. “And why don’t you have a boyfriend? Or a girlfriend. I shouldn’t assume you’re gay, but ? —”

“I am. But, like you, work makes finding a relationship difficult. All the traveling and odd hours. And in case you haven’t noticed, I’m not the prettiest man around.”

“Bullshit,” Payton snapped. “And there’s more to you than being handsome. Why do you think I’ve been flirting with you for ages?”

“I thought that was teasing.”

“Oh, darling, no. In fact, if you asked me, I’d go on a date with you. Hell, I’d marry you right here and now.”

A short while later, that was exactly what we did. Holy shit.

I took another sip of my coffee and glanced over at my husband, who was his usual smiling, bubbly self.

Payton, of course, was right at home being the center of attention. He started describing the wedding in vivid detail. Details that sounded familiar, even if I couldn’t remember them. Or maybe Payton just had a good imagination. Either way, if I didn’t know any better, he’d have had me fooled into believing that he was happy about this whole scenario. He laughed and flirted with the guys, as usual. But when he turned and stared at me with those beautiful eyes of his, I found myself reaching for a glass of champagne. Hangover be damned.

While Payton was talking, I surreptitiously texted Van.

An hour later, Brodie picked up the tab, and guilt gnawed away at me again. When we got up and said our goodbyes, Van pulled me aside.

“As requested, I gave Elias the head’s up about you and Payton. ”

Brodie’s husband was no longer the band’s manager, but he was always protective of our rock ‘n’ roll family. I swallowed hard and nodded. Contacting the band’s lawyer to get this divorce underway was necessary, but it made the food in my gut sit like a heavy weight.

“Thanks, Van.”

“Of course,” he replied. “But don’t rush into anything.”

“What?”

“You two are a match.” Van smiled at me, the lines at the corners of his eyes deepening. “I had to say it.”

I was about to deny his statement when Payton stepped up to us.

“You’re not trying to steal my new husband away from me, are you, Van?” Payton teased.

“Are you kidding?” Van glanced over at Brodie. “I already have my hands full with one.”

And he did. But given the heated way Van looked at Brodie, there was no mistaking that he was happy as hell.

We said our goodbyes to everyone. The band was headed straight to the airport for

their flight back to Nashville. Normally, I'd be with them, but not today.

"Let's get checked out," I said to Payton. "And then we have returns to make."

If we could get the damn rings off.

Payton nudge me with his elbow. "What were you and Regan talking about earlier?"

I paused. "She gave me a few more days off to, you know, get this situation sorted. Not that I can do much. But at least Van got me in touch with Elias."

"Email him and whatever the retainer, I'll pay my half."

"Now, Payton—" I started.

"I insist. It's only fair."

I nodded. "Okay."

We headed for the elevator and made our way back to Payton's room. Both of us were oddly quiet. It didn't feel like the morning after a wedding should feel.

Duh. It wasn't a real wedding.

I pulled out my phone and sent an email to Elias, detailing the joint request for the divorce. Then I tapped my banking app and pulled up my credit card statement. Sure enough, I purchased both our wedding rings from Dazzle late last night. The bill? 15K. Holy fuck.

I googled their location, saved it, and then I escorted Payton to his room.

“I’m gonna head up to my room and pack,” I said to Payton. “Meet you in the lobby in thirty minutes? Then we can visit the jewelry store. Oh, and I need your flight details.”

“Why?”

“I was supposed to be leaving with the band today, but given my change in plans, I might as well join you.”

“Okay.” He nodded in response. “Don’t forget to call your mom back. You don’t want her worrying.”

“She’s not worried,” I replied with a sigh. “She’s ready to kick my ass.”

Payton’s face fell. “That bad?”

“I come from a big Italian family. Weddings are a huge deal.”

“I’m sorry, I?—”

I shook my head and reached for his hand. “Nothing to be sorry about. It was a mistake, but I’m as much to blame. Anyway, it’s done. She’ll get over it. In about twenty or thirty years.”

Payton chuckled and seeing him smile again had that fluttery feeling in my gut roaring to life.

“See you in a bit.”

I waited until Payton was safely in his room, then headed for the elevator. By the time I got to my room, I had a dozen more messages from family and friends. Ignoring my

phone, I packed up my bag, checked the room one last time, and headed back down to the lobby.

While I was waiting for Payton, I called my mother. I took a deep breath—several—and waited for her to answer. She finally picked up on the third ring.

“Leonardo Andrea Rizzoli, what have you done?”

Her voice was so loud I held the phone away from my ear. I tapped Speaker and lowered the volume as much as I could.

“Hi, Ma.”

“That’s it?” she yelled. “My only son gets married without telling me and all you can say is ‘ hi, Ma ’?!”

It didn’t matter that I was thirty-two, an ex-army sergeant, and a black belt in taekwondo. When my mom yelled at me, I was done for.

“I’m sorry. It’s a long story, and?—”

“A long story, but a fast wedding. Don’t give me excuses,” she interrupted. “You didn’t even tell me you had a boyfriend. Then I get a text that you’re married? What’s going on?”

“Ma, here’s the thing?—”

Payton suddenly appeared beside me, and when I looked into his eyes, I forgot all about what I was going to say.

“Leonardo!” Mom yelled. “I want answers.”

‘ Leonardo ’? Payton mouthed, then bit back a laugh. I offered a rude gesture in return.

“Hello Mrs. Rizzoli, it’s Payton. A pleasure to meet you!” Payton yelled back.

People in the lobby stopped and stared at us. Jesus. Before my mom could respond with God knows what, I intervened.

“Ma, Payton and I have stuff to do today before we fly back to Nashville. I’ll call you when we get in, okay? Bye.”

I quickly tapped End and turned off the call notifications. Then I opened my rideshare app and got our trip booked.

“You’re really in for it now,” Payton quipped.

I ignored his teasing.

“We’ve got rings to return. Let’s go,” I said as I stood up, holding my hand out to him.

“What are you doing?” he asked, looking at my hand like it was gonna bite him.

“I’m being polite. Now take my hand already,” I grumbled.

I’ve no idea why I insisted, but it felt right.

“Yes, sir.” He smirked as he slid his hand into mine, jumpstarting my heart.

Funny how once I touched Payton, I didn't want to let go.

"I appreciate your manners," he continued as he stood up. "But you don't have to do that."

"Yes, I do," I insisted. "You're my husband, even if it's temporary. But more important than that, you're my friend. And this is who I am."

Payton stared at me with an expression on his pretty face I couldn't quite read.

"Payton?" I asked, suddenly concerned.

"Thank you," he whispered.

My phone pinged with the familiar rideshare notification. Reaching down with my other hand, I grabbed my bag, and we headed out of the lobby. The concierge held the door open, and I guided Payton to the edge of the sidewalk, the hit of dry desert air making my lungs seize.

Our car pulled up, and we hopped in. The drive to the jewelry store sparked more memories. Payton singing ' Lover ' at the top of his lungs. And, surprisingly, my joining in. The poor driver...

We headed to the outskirts of Vegas, and yeah, the area was run down, full of abandoned buildings and old lots. Dazzle was a nondescript storefront stuck between a nail salon and a payday loan place. It didn't look like they sold high-end jewelry, but appearances in this town were deceiving.

We headed inside and were greeted by an older man with white hair who beamed when he spotted Payton.

“Welcome back!” The man gushed and motioned for us to come closer to the display case.

There were so many rows of glittering diamonds, it was blinding.

“You recognize us from last night?” I asked. I had no memory of this salesperson at all.

“It’s not every day I sell a pink diamond ring,” he replied with a smile. “Wait! Don’t tell me, it’s...Payton and Lennie, right? And I’m Felix Halliday, the owner. Did you have a wonderful wedding?”

Oh man, if only he knew.

Before I could reply, Payton squeezed my arm. “So nice to see you again, Felix, and yes, we did have quite an interesting night.”

I snorted and Payton glared at me.

“Unfortunately,” Payton continued. “We won’t be staying married. So, we need to return the rings.”

Felix’s face fell. “Oh, I’m sorry. You two looked so happy last night. I thought for sure you were going to beat the odds. In any case, I’m afraid I can’t help you. We have a strict no-return policy.”

He pointed to the sign at the end of the display case. Fuck.

“All sales are final. These are wholesale prices. You get the best quality at the lowest price in the city, but no returns.”

Don't panic, don't panic. It's only fifteen grand. Your emergency fund will cover it.

"Out of curiosity," Payton added. "What was the total for both rings?"

"Fifteen thousand," I croaked. "I checked my credit card statement."

Then it hit me. I'd used the company card with no limit. Regan was going to put me on night shifts for a year.

Payton looked like he was about to faint. Or puke.

"Exactly," Felix nodded. "The pink diamond in the white gold setting was \$10,000. The platinum band was \$5,000."

This time, I reached for Payton's hand, steadying myself.

"So, the only thing we can do now is sell them?" Payton murmured.

Felix nodded. "But you won't get full price, only a fraction. That's the gem market."

"It's okay." I finally found my voice. "I'm sure Van or one of the guys knows someone we can sell them to. It'll be fine."

"Once we sell them, whatever the difference, I'm paying my half," Payton insisted.

"No."

"Yes. No arguments. All right?"

I finally nodded. We'd also have the legal fees for the divorce. Jesus, I was never drinking hard liquor again.

“Can I give you a piece of advice?” Felix asked, leaning forward. “Give it a few weeks. The value won’t change. Take your time and make sure you get the best price. I can give you the names of a few reputable buyers.”

“We’re heading back to Nashville today,” I added.

“That’s fine; two of them own online stores. If you give me your email, I’ll put you in touch with them.”

“Thanks, Felix.”

I tapped on my email and showed him my phone. While he was busy taking my information, I turned to Payton.

“I think it’d be cheaper if we stayed married,” he announced with a flirty grin.

“Angel, you took the words right out of my mouth.”

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CHAPTER 5

PAYTON

Lennie and I left Dazzle, rings still on our fingers, and took another rideshare to the airport.

Neither of us said anything in the car. I guess the shock of the past twelve hours finally caught up to us. First waking up in bed together, then the realization of our midnight wedding, and now the full weight of what we'd done.

Add to that, I nearly passed out when Lennie called me 'angel'. I don't think he even realized he'd done it. Or maybe he was joking, teasing me the way I did him. Either way, why the hell did I like it so much? Why did I like everything about this man?

There had to be something wrong with him. Maybe he was a total slob. Or picked his teeth. Or scratched his ass in public. Then again, I'd been around him long enough to notice if he was doing stuff like that.

He was a self-admitted hard-ass, especially when he was on the job, but I didn't consider that a bad thing (hard-asses forever LOL). Lennie was intense and focused. He had to be. In his job, there was no time for fooling around. And I liked the fact that I was one of the few people that could make him laugh. Make him trip over his words, and his feet.

Lennie. Leonardo. Why did I want to swoon at the sound of his full name? The more

I learned about him, the more I wanted to know.

The man was a bundle of nerves at this point, his knee bouncing up and down. I knew he was dreading the wedding conversation with his mother. But I envied him. What I wouldn't give to talk to my mom one more time. Even if she was giving me hell for sassing her—as I often did—it was better than nothing. I swallowed down the painful lump that lodged in my throat.

Lennie's left hand suddenly reached out and covered my right. Like he needed comfort from me. Why did he keep doing that? Opening doors, offering his hand, giving me reassurance, offering his. He was so thoughtful and protective. A true gentleman. A rarity in my world.

He protects people for a living. He's being nice.

Still, the gesture had my pulse kicking up. Worse than that, it made me wish for things. For a man who'd want me, not for one night, or as friends, but for so much more.

If only...

I was so caught up in my head that I didn't realize we'd pulled up to the departure zone at the airport. In fact, I didn't notice how long it took us to get here or what time it was. I hadn't even checked my phone since we'd left the hotel.

Of course, Lennie got out of the car first and held out his hand. I was spoiled at this point. And it had to stop. He wasn't my husband, not for real. I needed to put distance between us. After all, I was an independent man, and I was going to stay that way.

Thank fuck I had my sunglasses on, because I didn't want him to see how much his gesture affected me. Channeling my inner diva, I ignored his hand and stepped out of

the car, then thanked the driver for unloading our luggage. Turning around, I prepared to reach for my suitcase, but Lennie beat me to it, grabbing the handle and starting inside.

“I can haul my own baggage, thank you very much,” I snapped when I caught up to him.

“No.”

“No? What the hell, Len?” I reached for my suitcase.

“Our plane is due to leave in twenty-seven minutes. Do you want to stand here and argue, or do you want to get through security and catch our flight?”

Shit, the last thing we needed right now was a missed flight and another bill. The tab for this weekend was already higher than any vacation I’d ever taken in my life.

“Fine.”

“Good. Let’s go.” He started off again.

“Wait a minute.” I stopped short and shoved my sunglasses off my face. “What does our being late have to do with you insisting on taking my luggage?”

“Nothing. It was a diversion,” he said over his shoulder and kept walking.

A what now? God, this man drove me crazy. What’s next? Was he going to buy me flowers and call on me? Whatever, I didn’t care about my luggage at this point. If he wanted to haul my heavy-ass bag, he could go for it.

As we stood in line, Lennie leaned into me. “You know, it’s okay to let someone take

care of you once in a while.”

I met his intense blue gaze, and a strange ache settled in my chest.

“Only in the bedroom, darling.”

Then I strutted past him, stepping up to the kiosk to scan my e-ticket. But it wasn’t registering. Lennie walked up beside me and pulled out his phone. A minute later, he showed me his screen.

“Seats 2A and B,” Lennie announced.

I forgot that he’d rearranged our flights.

He motioned for me to walk ahead of him.

“This isn’t about you being a gentleman,” I commented. “You just want to stare at my ass.”

“Not true,” Lennie laughed. “Watching your ass is an add-on.”

“Add-on? Please. It’s the freaking star of the show,” I stated confidently and sauntered off, putting extra oomph in my strut.

Other passengers stared at me, but whatever. I was used to it.

When we got through security and finally boarded, I was surprised to find out we had two first-class seats.

“Are you determined to make this the most expensive elopement ever?” I asked him.

Lennie got our cases stored in the overhead bins and turned to me. “It’s a three-and-a-half-hour flight and we’ve had a stressful day. And night. Might as well relax in comfort. And, like the rings, I’m gonna cover it. It’s not a problem.”

I didn’t believe him, but I was too tired to argue. As soon as I sat down, the exhaustion from the trip set in. I stretched my legs out, buckled up, and pushed my seat back, closing my eyes.

“Wake me up when we get home,” I muttered.

Instead of replying, Lennie gave my thigh a firm squeeze.

So much for sleeping.

After fitful dreams, I woke up to the quiet hum of chatter and the clank of a trolley cart. When I blinked and looked around, Lennie was awake and working on his laptop.

“How long was I asleep?” I asked, my voice hoarse.

He turned and smiled. “Almost two hours. You want a drink?”

“Oh, yes.”

The steward stopped by our seats. “What can I get you?”

“Diet Coke with lots of ice, please,” I replied.

“I’ll have the same,” Lennie nodded. “And two cheese plates, thanks.”

The steward poured our drinks and pulled out two plates filled with different cheeses,

crackers, and fruit.

“I’m not really hungry,” I said, but I took the plate, anyway.

Lennie shut his laptop, shoved it back in his bag, and took his offered plate.

“What were you working on?” I asked.

“Security plans for the world tour. It’s the biggest gig I’ve ever been a part of. There’s a ton of prep work, but it’ll be worth it.”

I was going to make a dirty joke about prep always being worth it, but given that the steward was still nearby, I reined myself in.

“I can’t wait,” I replied, then took a long sip of my drink, enjoying the crisp, sweet taste. “I’ve never traveled to Asia before. It’s been on my bucket list for ages.”

“I’ve been to Japan. But it was only a stopover on my way to Hawaii when I was done my tour of duty in the military.”

“What was that like?”

Lennie paused, then took a sip of his Coke. “Take a naïve twenty-two-year-old, ship him halfway around the world, and drop him into a war zone. It was scary, dangerous, and haunting. Nothing prepares you for the reality of war. Nothing.”

I reached for his hand, holding it tight. “I’m sorry.”

Lennie shrugged, taking a deep breath, blinking fast.

“At least I came home. So many of my friends didn’t. With time and therapy, I did

okay,” Lennie sighed and turned to me. “And what about you? How’d you start working for a rock band?”

“Didn’t you read about my background in your security check?”

“Before my time,” he whispered. “And I’d rather hear it from you.”

Lennie looked at me with those big blue eyes of his and I let myself get lost in them.

“I was born and raised in Atlanta, an only child, raised by a single mom. I studied hair styling right after high school. Mom was sick at the time with a rare form of brain cancer, and I supported both of us, working a full time job while I was studying. She passed shortly after I got my first big gig, doing hair and makeup for a movie production.”

“Oh Payton, I’m so sorry for your loss.”

I blinked away the tears that threatened. “At least she got to see me find success. I take comfort in that. And the fact I was able to get her the best care.”

I tried to take a deep inhale, but my chest was tight.

“After she passed, I moved to New York,” I continued. “And I traveled to LA for private clients and movie productions. A friend of mine was doing hair and makeup in Nashville and when he had to cancel a job for Wayward Lane, I stepped in. And that was it. I liked being in Nashville so much, I made it my home base.”

“Do you still have private clients?”

“Yes, but mainly in the Nashville area. I gave up on the monthly trips to LA. But I have several clients that fly to me.”

“You’re incredibly talented, so no wonder.”

I squeezed his hand. “You have to stop complimenting me, Len. You know I’m a diva. My ego doesn’t need any more stroking.”

Lennie’s face flushed. “You’re so not a diva.”

“That’s not what I’ve been told.”

Lennie stared at me. “I’ve watched you at work. You put in long hours and you never complain. And you’ve got a knack for people, always making them feel at home. You’re sexy, smart, funny, sexy?—”

“You said ‘ sexy ’ twice,” I countered.

“It needed to be said twice. For Christ’s sake, people turn their heads when you walk by.”

“Yeah, and they usually have something judgmental to say.”

He shook his head. “Then they’re fuckheads. You’re gorgeous. With makeup, without. With heels, without. With clothes, without?—”

“Okay,” I burst out laughing. I couldn’t believe the words coming out of Lennie’s mouth. The people in the aisle next to us turned to stare, but whatever. “I get it.”

Lennie nodded, his expression suddenly serious. “I hope so. You’re an amazing person. Special. Which is why, most of the time, I’m tongue-tied around you. That’s not my normal, Angel. That’s all you.”

“Stop it. You’re gonna make me blush,” I teased him. “And what’s with the

nickname?”

He leaned in, his lips so fucking close. So tempting.

“I’m not a believer, but watching you walk into a room is definitely a religious experience,” he confessed.

Now my cheeks were on fire.

“And why hasn’t an incredible man snatched you up yet?” I asked him.

“He already has,” Lennie replied with a wink.

If only that were true.

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CHAPTER 6

LENNIE

O ur flight landed on time so I should've been happy. The sooner I got back home, the sooner I'd get back to my normal routine. Payton and I would get this divorce sorted, and that would be that.

But I was dreading this trip coming to an end. Dreading leaving Payton.

Maybe that's why my mouth ran ahead of my brain on the plane. Had I really admitted all that stuff to him? Fuck, I longed for the days when I could barely make a sentence around him. Now he probably assumed I had a crush on him.

Well, you did tell him he was sexy. Twice.

We decided to split a ride from the airport. Given that my place was closer, I was being dropped off first. We could've taken separate cars, but I didn't want to, and Payton didn't seem to mind. Even though when I went to carry his luggage again, he refused. Stubborn man.

It was only a fifteen-minute drive from the airport to my two-story townhome in midtown. I loved the area and bought in five years ago. The neighborhood was safe, quiet, and close to downtown. Plus, I had a driveway and a garage, rarities for this location.

As we pulled onto my street, however, I noticed a car parked in my driveway. A

familiar red SUV that had my earlier panic reaching new heights.

“Oh shit. Whatever you do, don’t get out of the car. In fact, keep your head down,” I urged Payton.

“What? Why? What’s going on?” He asked me.

“My mother’s here. That’s her SUV parked in my driveway. Dio mio, what the hell is she doing here? Fucking hell, I’m in so much freaking trouble.”

Payton patted my leg. “She’s obviously worried about you. And so what if she sees me? She already knows we’re married. I’m sure it won’t be that bad.”

I turned to him and shook my head. My mom was a force of nature any day, but when she was angry? Look the fuck out.

“You have no idea.”

The driver came to a stop, and I quickly stepped out of the car. To my utter shock, Payton did the same.

“What are you doing?” I hissed. “Get back inside. Go.”

“Leonardo Andrea.”

I nearly dropped my laptop case at the sound of my mom’s voice. Turning around, I found her and my dad standing in my doorway. Mom had her hands on her hips, her brown eyes boring into me. Dad stood behind her, shaking his head. Why did I ever think it was a good idea to give my parents my spare key? Panic and guilt hit me like a massive wave.

“Hey Ma, Dad,” I greeted them, my voice cracking. “What are you guys doing here?”

Then my younger sister Isabella stepped around my parents. The fuck? Was this an intervention or something?

“Hi, Mr. and Mrs. Rizzoli!” Payton announced and waved at my parents. “So nice to meet you in person.”

Oh, my God. I turned to Payton and motioned for him to get back in the car, but he ignored me, and beamed at my family with that incredible smile of his.

“You as well, Payton,” my mom replied with a hint of a smile. She stalked up to us, ignored me, and pulled Payton close. After she kissed him on both cheeks, Mom turned to glare at me. “Even though I’d rather have met you before the wedding.”

“You know, Len,” Payton continued, reaching for my hand. “So impatient. He wanted me all to himself and he couldn’t wait.”

“I’m sure. And please call me Gulia,” my mom added. Then she turned and stared at me with sharp eyes. “But you know, this whole thing is strange. Lennie’s never brought a boyfriend to meet the family before. Then bam, just like that, he’s married. No hint, no warning at all.”

My mom was vibrating at this point, her voice getting louder, like a sonic boom.

“Speaking of married, there’s something I need to tell you—” I started.

Payton squeezed my hand. “Let’s talk inside. It’s been a long trip.”

“Right. Of course.” The driver unloaded our suitcases, so I grabbed them and started up the driveway. Then I realized I hadn’t done the formal introduction to the rest of

my family. “Oh, sorry. This is my dad, David, and my sister, Isabella.”

“A pleasure.” Payton offered his hand to my dad. “And now I see where Len gets those beautiful blue eyes of his.”

My dad was a quiet man, a calm balance to my mother’s fiery nature, and kind of shy. He flushed at Payton’s comment and waved him off.

“Well, you two must be exhausted,” Dad replied. “We should leave you to?—”

My mom and sister gave my dad the stink eye, and he stopped talking.

“Isabella,” Payton announced, breaking the tension. “Such a pretty name. Can I call you Bella?”

“Of course,” my sister replied as she leaned forward and kissed Payton’s cheek. “We’re family now.”

Oh, Jesus.

“So, Payton, how long have you been dating my son?” Mom demanded.

“Ma,” I warned.

“What? Don’t I have a right to know?”

I ignored her comment, walking up the front steps and into the foyer of my townhouse.

“Oh, this is lovely,” Payton announced as he looked around. “There’s so much light in this space.”

Then Payton peered around the corner to the living room. “And a corner sofa, my favorite.”

My mom looked at Payton. “You’ve never been here? How long have you two been seeing each other?”

Shit.

“About that—” I started.

“Why don’t we sit down in the living room and talk?” Payton suggested. “Darling, how about getting your family drinks first? Something strong.”

Hell yes to that. I nodded, taking Payton’s cue, leaving our cases in the foyer. I headed down the hallway to the kitchen and went straight to the cupboard beside the fridge. Never mind coffee, this news called for bourbon.

And then I heard it.

The booming sound of my mom’s laughter. I had no idea what Payton said to her, but the fact he got her laughing after being with her for exactly two and a half minutes told me a lot. Was there anyone he couldn’t charm?

I grabbed a tray, several lowball glasses, poured a good two-ounce drink in each, and headed back out to see what was so damn funny.

Payton and my family were at home on my couch, everyone chuckling. Mom was laughing so hard that tears were running down her face. I placed the tray on the coffee table and handed out the glasses.

“Oh, Lennie,” she snorted. “Payton was telling us about the first time he met you. He

walked in on you changing in one of the dressing rooms and you...you covered yourself with a pillow?”

I looked at Payton, wondering why the hell he would’ve used that particular detail of our morning together to craft this story. When he raised one eyebrow, I finally clued in. Turns out, I wasn’t the only one good at diversion. And that tactic was useful. Like right fucking now.

“What else was I supposed to do?” I replied. “He was a stranger.”

Not a stranger. We were colleagues. Casual friends. Nothing more.

Sure, that’s why you told him he was sexy and called him ‘angel.’

“Not for long.” Payton winked at me. “He was adorably shy, and I was immediately charmed. Not to mention, he was standing in front of a mirror, so the pillow didn’t help with the back view. I could see every?—”

“Okay, they get it,” I interrupted, shaking my head. “Look, I—we—appreciate the visit, but we’ve had a busy weekend?—”

“I’ll bet,” Bella snickered.

“—And we’d like to have a bite and get settled in, so, if you don’t mind?”

“Of course.” My mom stood up. “Why don’t you let us help? You bring Payton’s stuff upstairs and we’ll serve dinner.”

“Upstairs?” I croaked.

“Dinner?” Payton squeaked.

“Yes. I brought two trays of lasagna. And we have wine?—”

“Ma, that’s not necessary. And I’d like to be alone with my husband.”

“Lennie,” Mom snapped, and my dad stood up and put his hands on her shoulders. “First, you deprive me of a wedding and now, you turn down my food! Why don’t you take a fork and stick it in my heart already?”

Oh God, the drama. My dad didn’t utter a word, smart man that he was, and my sister sat there watching us like we were characters on TV.

I glanced at Payton, hoping my panicked expression would encourage him to rescue me.

“Since you did go to all that trouble of cooking, the least we can do is sit down together for a nice family meal,” Payton replied. “Right, darling?”

“See. Payton understands,” Mom replied. “Learn from your husband.”

I bit the inside of my cheek. I could do this. What’s another hour or two?

“Fine,” I sighed and held out my hand to him. “Come on, Angel, let’s get freshened up.”

“You call him angel?” Bella gushed. “That’s so sweet.”

“He is for sure.” Payton smiled, and took my hand.

His touch had my pulse taking off. I didn’t know whether to pull him closer or push him away for good.

“We’ll be down in fifteen.”

I hustled Payton out of the living room and up the stairs to my bedroom. I’d come back for our luggage later.

“I like your family. They’re so down to earth,” he stated as we reached the landing. “And that went better than I thought.”

“Better? Better?” I whisper-shouted. “They think we’re actually married! And now that they’re here, they won’t leave for hours. This is a disaster! I should’ve just told them.”

“Your mom is already worked up. I couldn’t tell her the truth. A shock like that might be a lot for her to take,” Payton insisted.

He had a point. I kept walking, directing him down the hallway and into my bedroom. Jesus, Payton was in my bedroom.

“Lennie!” he exclaimed. “You’ve got a four-poster bed and a fireplace? You’re a secret romantic.”

“Will you be serious for a moment and focus?” I hissed. “Given how long my family dinners are, it’s likely they won’t leave until late. Which means?—”

“Relax. I’ll stay over so they won’t suspect. I can crash on your couch.”

“I’ve got a guest room.”

“Even better. See, there’s no problem. Tomorrow, we meet up with Elias about the divorce, and I’ll head home. Then, in a few days, when everything calms, you can tell your family the truth.”

“Okay, all right. That works,” I replied.

“You need to relax,” Payton urged and placed his hands on my shoulders, massaging the tense muscles. “It’ll all work out. It was a mistake, but we’ll fix it.”

Even after all the madness of today, being here with him didn’t feel like a mistake. He was standing so close, his pink lips a temptation that was getting harder and harder for me to ignore. But it was Payton’s eyes that did me in every time. And having him here, in my home? In my bedroom? All those wild feelings he inspired, feelings I’d suppressed for so long, were now rushing to the surface.

I placed my hands on his waist and heard his sharp inhale. When he licked his lips, I leaned closer.

“Payton, I?—”

“Lennie! Payton!” My sister yelled up the stairs. “You’ve got a visitor!”

Another one?

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CHAPTER 7

PAYTON

Was it my imagination or was Lennie about to kiss me? Oh, baby, I was more than ready to lock lips with this man.

No, Payton. You've already fucked up by marrying him. Now you're going to kiss him and make him even more confused?

Him? What about me? And I was staying overnight in his house?

The real kicker was that I liked Lennie. More than liked. I'd been attracted to him from the moment we met, but now? Give me water, stat, because I was fucking thirsty.

And I really liked his family, too. Despite my nerves from our fake wedding shenanigans, I was comfortable with them right away. And his parents didn't seem fazed by the fact that their new son-in-law was a proud femboy. It made my guarded heart want for things. Things like a real husband.

He's real, all right. But he's not mine.

"Did you hear me?" Bella yelled.

"We heard you!" Lennie shouted back. "We'll be down in a minute!"

Poor Len. He was going to need another week off to recuperate from the stress of this fiasco. Still, his mom looked so upset when we first arrived that I didn't have the heart to tell her the wedding was a sham. And now I was overwhelmed with guilt. I'd gotten him into this silly situation and things were getting worse.

"Another relative?" I asked.

"Who the fuck knows? It could be one of my aunts, or my cousins. Or my Nonna. Shit, she's gonna be pissed too."

"How big is your family?"

Lennie laughed, and it was so good to see him smile again.

"Big."

Reluctantly, I let go of his shoulders. Why was it so difficult to do that?

"I'll go down first and see who it is," he offered and gave my waist a final squeeze before letting go. "The spare room is at the end of the hallway, and the bathroom is on the right."

I nodded and swallowed down my protest. I didn't want him to let go of me at all.

But I ignored the desire to step back into his arms—and to steal another look around his bedroom—and wandered into the hallway while Lennie headed back downstairs.

It was so bright up here with the skylights. I located the bathroom, and it was as nicely decorated as the rest of the house, with dark green walls, gold accents, and a roomy shower. I didn't know what I'd expected his place to look like, but Lennie, as always, surprised me.

After washing up, I realized that I'd left my handbag downstairs. Oh well. I didn't care about fixing my makeup at this point. My curls were looking more like bedhead, too. The stylist in me screamed to fix it, but the jet-lagged version said fuck it.

But it was my eyes that had me taking a second look in the mirror. I hardly recognized the soft expression in them. Oh no. No, no, no. I couldn't allow this to happen. Not now. Not him.

"Payton, what have you done?" I asked myself out loud.

A sudden knock at the door startled me.

I placed a hand on my chest. "I'll be right out."

When I opened the door, Lennie was standing in the hallway, his hand on the doorjamb.

"Couldn't stay away from me, eh, handsome?" I quipped.

Thank fuck, my flirty attitude hadn't vanished.

You can do this. Keep it light and then tomorrow, get the hell out of here and don't look back.

Lennie ignored my comment. "My Nonna's here."

"Your...grandmother?"

"Yep. Get ready." Lennie shook his head. "Oh, and Zoe texted me."

"The band's PR rep? Why?"

“The wedding posts went viral and now she’s fielding calls and messages from the media. She’s asked us to stop by her office tomorrow first thing.”

“This is insane,” I replied. “Why would people care about our wedding?”

“Because we both work for the band. And Brodie commented on your post, then Holloway, and of course the fans went nuts, and now the whole thing is taking on a life of its own. Congrats, you’re now a celebrity in your own right.”

Lennie crossed his arms.

“It’ll die down,” I reassured him.

“You keep saying that and yet every hour brings something else.”

“There’s nothing we can do except roll with it. It’s a month. Four weeks. And then we quietly announce that the marriage didn’t work out and we move on.”

Lennie bit his lower lip and nodded. “I know. I’m sorry. I?—”

“What?” I asked, moving closer.

“I don’t take marriage lightly. It’s not a joke to me. And now, I’ve turned it into one. I’m lying to my family. And you deserve better.”

“I wouldn’t call what we did a joke. I was feeling lonely, and you comforted me. A little too well, unfortunately. Did we mess up? Yes. But it’s not the worst thing to happen. And I’d rather be fake married to you than anyone else.”

“You’re just saying that—” He moved to turn away.

I grabbed Lennie's arm. "I'm not. I know I tease a lot, but I'm serious about this. And it's because I like you—and your family—so much, that I'm finding it hard to tell them the truth."

He put his hand over mine. And I didn't want him to let go.

"Then let's not keep Nonna waiting," Lennie replied. "But fair warning, she's not the easiest person to win over. I love her, but she can be a hard-ass. Just ask my dad. And my mom, and my sister?—"

"You mean, she's just like you?" I chuckled. "If I can win you over, I think I can deal with your grandmother."

"Hey!" Lennie grumbled.

We headed for the stairs and the closer we got to the main floor, the stronger the aromas of garlic, onion, and tomato. I had a feeling dinner was going to spoil me. Then I heard boisterous laughter and chatter—my kind of party. Lennie was worried for nothing.

"In the kitchen," Lennie whispered in my ear.

We wandered into his spacious kitchen, with a large island and windows that looked out over the backyard. Lennie's mom was making a salad, his dad was pouring wine, and his sister was setting the table in the corner of the room.

Then I noticed a frail-looking woman, standing at the stove, no more than five-feet-five, with short white hair. She was dressed in a black skirt and sweater, and vigorously stirred a large pot.

"Nonna, I'd like you to meet my...husband, Payton," Lennie announced. "Payton, my

Nonna, Bianca Rizzoli.”

Nonna put the spoon aside, turned around, and gave me a slow once over that told me this woman was not to be messed with. She looked fragile at first glance, but her eyes were sharp as hell and when they met mine, I took a step back. And bumped into my husband. I mean, Lennie. I was acting ridiculous.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Rizzoli.” I gave her my best smile. “May I call you Bianca?”

“Come here,” she demanded in a raspy voice.

Okay, then, so much for trying the polite approach. I stepped closer to her and when I was within reach, she grabbed hold of my hand in hers, the grip so tight I nearly squeaked.

“You’re different,” she declared as she stared up at me, her blue eyes bright.

I almost said something sarcastic in response, but I nodded instead. Given the generation gap, I mentally braced myself for what might be coming next.

“But beautiful. Very beautiful,” she continued. “Unique. No wonder my Leonardo married you so hastily.”

My stomach unclenched a fraction.

“Well, you see—” I started.

Nonna waved her other hand in the air. “Done is done. My daughter-in-law will get over it. In time. You’re part of the family now. You cook?”

“Uh, sometimes. There’s only me though, so?—”

“You help me, yes? I’m making minestrone Milanese and polenta,” she paused.

“Leonardo, get your husband an apron. Ora! Sbrigati!”

I’d never seen Lennie move so fast. I held back a laugh, but it was a near thing. Nonna, of course, caught my grin.

“What about the lasagna?” I asked.

“That’s only part of the meal. And if you want to keep your husband happy, you need to feed him. A lot.”

“That sounds kind of?—”

“And Leonardo’s a good cook, too,” she added. “He will do the same for you. You take care of each other, capisce?”

“Yes, Bianca.” I nodded, smiling at her.

“You call me Nonna,” she insisted, gripping my hand tightly again.

I felt wonderful and horrible at the same time. Deceiving these lovely people who welcomed me as their own. Suddenly, Lennie was standing beside me, offering me an apron. He placed it gently over my head and then tied it around my waist.

“Thank you,” I whispered.

He gave my waist a squeeze, and I stared into his eyes for a lot longer than I should’ve.

“You have time for the sex later,” Nonna boldly announced. “First, we cook.”

“Nonna!” Lennie placed a hand over his head.

“What? I speak only the truth,” Nonna muttered.

“She’s right.” I winked at Lennie. “Food first.”

CHAPTER 8

LENNIE

I sat at my kitchen table, enjoying a glass of Barolo, and chatted with my mom, dad, and sister—while also keeping a close eye on Payton.

I'd offered to help, but Nonna told me to 'butt out ' (one of her favorite non-Italian expressions) because she had Payton to help her. But really, I'd volunteered to help Payton. Not that he needed my help, of course. And I shouldn't have been shocked. Nonna and Payton hit it off right away, since neither of them had any filter. He'd handled my outspoken grandmother with a grace and charm that I found irresistible.

As much as I grumbled about my family's antics, I loved them more than anything. And anyone who appreciated them as much as I did warmed my heart. Fuck, the things I was feeling right now were damn dangerous. I'd already made a fool of myself over this man—at work and in Vegas—and now I was letting my emotions roll right over the warnings in my head.

I couldn't take my eyes off Payton as he moved around my kitchen like it was his own. The man lit up a room, and that was no bullshit. His wild hand gestures rivaled Nonna's, and soon they were arguing one moment and laughing the next. I was only half paying attention to the conversation going on around me, too enamored with the sight of my husband making my favorite foods with one of my favorite persons.

"...don't you agree, Len? Lennie?"

My mom's voice cut through my musings.

"What? Sorry, I didn't catch what you said."

"I said, your father and I are taking Nonna home to Verona in late July. You and Payton should fly over and join us."

"Uh, well, we've got the world tour starting soon. I'll see what the schedule is like. The European portion is pretty hectic, and we don't have many days off in between countries."

And Payton wouldn't be my husband by then, so it wouldn't matter. Fuck. I took another sip of wine. A big one.

Suddenly, there was the clatter of a wooden spoon banging a pot.

"Mangiare! It's time to eat!" Nonna declared. "Bella, Gulia."

My mom and sister got up and headed for the kitchen, helping Payton plate the food.

"What about me?" I yelled out. "Can't I help?"

"No!" Nonna barked in response.

Alrighty then. I glanced across the table at Dad, and he gave me a knowing look.

"What?" I asked him.

"You don't have to keep up the pretense, you know. It's okay."

"I—" I couldn't speak.

Dad shook his head. "I know you. And I know you're only trying to protect your mother, but you don't have to. She can handle the truth."

I looked across the room at Payton again, and when his eyes met mine, I felt my face flush. I glanced back at my dad.

"It's complicated."

"I can see that."

"We'd both been drinking," I confessed. "Payton was feeling down. I couldn't help trying to cheer him up, and next thing I knew, we were married."

"So, it was all a mistake?"

"No. I mean, yes," I blurted out. "I don't know."

At first, I thought it was. But now, I wasn't sure. I was so fucking confused.

"You need to figure it out. And lying to your family isn't going to help matters."

I nodded. "I'm sorry. But mom was so upset when I called her, and Payton didn't want to make things worse."

Dad reached over and patted my hand. "He's a good one. It'll be okay."

"I'm not sure about that. I think I like Payton."

"Well, you married him," Dad chuckled.

"I'm serious. I mean, more than like him," I confessed.

Dad slowly smiled at me. “Then maybe you should tell him that.”

I nodded, biting my lip. “Maybe.”

“Judging by the way he looks at you, I’d say he feels the same.”

Payton was suddenly standing beside me, a steaming bowl of soup in his hands. He placed the bowl in front of me, gave my shoulder a reassuring squeeze, and headed back to the island.

Had he overheard what my dad and I were talking about? I started to sweat and pulled at my shirt.

Once everyone had their starter, we gathered around the table, Payton by my side.

Nonna raised her glass. “To Lennie and Payton and many happy years together. Salute!”

Payton clinked my glass, and I could only stop and stare at him as he took the first sip of wine. When he licked his lips, I so wanted to lean over and taste them. When I finally glanced up at his eyes, that spark of electricity snapped between us.

Both of us took another long sip of our drink.

“So, Payton. When are you moving in?” Dad asked.

Payton choked on his wine, sputtering and coughing. I gently patted his back.

“Sorry,” Payton finally whispered. “Um, I guess, uh, later this week? I’ve got to pick up Finnigan first. Right now, he’s staying with my friend Jaclyn.”

“Finnigan?” Bella asked.

“My cat. He’s a Russian blue. A beautiful boy, but he requires a lot of attention. And who knows how he’s going to take to Lennie. He tends to swipe at strangers.”

I scoffed. “If I can handle your claws, I can handle your cat’s.”

Payton’s glare had me reaching for my soup spoon.

Eat, don’t talk.

“You have pictures of him?” Mom asked.

Payton reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone. He tapped it once and then passed it around the table. Payton was right. Finnigan was a pretty cat, and he looked content in Payton’s arms. Lucky beast.

“So adorable,” Bella gushed.

Nonna glanced at the phone, but her expression told me she wasn’t impressed.

“I don’t like cats in my kitchen,” Nonna stated emphatically.

“Lucky for you, Finnigan will live here,” Mom replied and rolled her eyes at me.

“We didn’t have any pets when I was growing up,” I explained, turning to Payton.
“We weren’t allowed.”

“I have allergies,” Mom added.

“Had,” I countered. “You take medication now.”

Mom shrugged.

“Remember the time when you were twelve and stole the neighbor’s dog for the weekend?” Bella chuckled.

“What?” Payton laughed. “This I’ve got to hear.”

“Lennie kept bugging Mom and Dad for a dog, literally hounding them for months, but like Mom said, with her allergies, it was always a no,” Bella explained. “But Len didn’t give up so easily. When Mom and Dad went away for the weekend for their anniversary, Lennie stole?—”

I coughed into my fist. “Borrowed.”

“—stole our neighbor’s dog,” Belle finished.

“And the neighbor didn’t notice?” Payton asked.

“Not until the next day,” Bella explained. “They didn’t have a fenced yard and the dog would often wander off.”

“That dog wandered into our garden and ate all my tomatoes,” Mom sighed.

Bella shook her head. “Anyway, by Sunday night, when the dog didn’t come back, the neighbor came knocking on our door. Before we answered, I told Lennie to let the dog out via the back door, so the owner wouldn’t suspect anything.”

“I did,” I added. “But the dog didn’t want to leave our house.”

“Not at first,” Bella teased.

Dad leaned forward. “Gulia and I come back from our weekend away, pull into the driveway, and see the neighbor standing at our front door. We step out of the car, Lennie opens the front door, and this seventy-pound golden retriever comes barreling towards us, or more specifically, into Gulia. She’s screaming about hives because the dog is all over her, the neighbor starts yelling, and Lennie is trying to explain the whole thing.”

“And?” Payton turned to me.

“Grounded for three months.”

“Ouch.” Payton reached for my hand. Without hesitation, I interlocked our fingers.

“What about you? Did you get up to any hijinks when you were a kid?” I asked him.

“I was a handful, that’s for sure,” Payton replied.

“Was?”

He pinched my arm with his free hand, and I squeaked. Yes, a bodyguard hurts like everyone else.

“I was,” Payton added. “I had a knack for sassing, so my mama did not have it easy raising me. Then there was the fact that I was fascinated with her clothes and makeup. I wasn’t interested in looking like the other boys in my neighborhood. But she was always supportive of me, never questioning. I didn’t need to have a reason for liking something, or for dressing a certain way, it just was. She loved me, for me. And lord, I sure do miss her.”

I leaned over until my shoulder bumped Payton’s. “She sounds like an amazing mom.”

“She was,” Payton whispered, his hazel eyes filling up. Then he blinked fast. “And she’d be thrilled that I’ve got a career and a life I truly love. We used to watch all the entertainment shows when I was a kid and throw our own award parties. And here I am, working for celebrities and rockstars.”

“Tell me more about that, it sounds so exciting,” Bella urged. “Lennie never shares anything about his work.”

“You should stop by the studio sometime,” Payton offered. “Meet the band. And the entourage of bodyguards. Are you single?”

“Oh yes. Extremely,” Bella replied. “My last boyfriend was over a year ago. After four months of dating, I found out that he was cheating on me.”

“Been there, dated that loser.” Payton nodded. “Oh, you know who’d be perfect for you? Petyr, one of Lennie’s colleagues. He’s got a very dry sense of humor, so smart, not to mention freaking hot, and?—”

“Stop right there,” I interrupted. “You’re not setting up my sister with anyone I work with. Petyr, least of all. And hot?”

“Why not?” Payton raised one eyebrow. “And yes, he is.”

Something like jealousy burned in my gut. Or maybe it was the spicy soup.

“But not nearly as hot as you, darling.” Payton winked.

“The answer’s still no,” I grumbled.

“Ignore him, Bella,” Payton continued. “We’ll exchange numbers, and I’ll arrange it.”

“Payton,” I warned.

“Lennie,” he countered.

As I glanced into his eyes, I knew that arguing any further would be futile.

Lesson number one about being a good husband, even a fake one; no matter who’s right or wrong, I’m wrong.

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CHAPTER 9

PAYTON

After a four-course Italian feast, great wine, and lots of stories, Lennie's family said goodnight. Five hours after they'd arrived. Not that I minded, because they were wonderful people, and it was one of the best meals I'd ever had. But the longer we talked, the more guilt weighed down on me.

And the harder I fell for Leonardo Andrea Rizzoli. My Lennie.

No, not mine.

I couldn't wait until tomorrow. Maybe once I was back in my own place, and Lennie and I were back to our usual work interplay, these heady feelings I had for him would go away. Then again, how could things ever be the same between us? I couldn't ever forget what it was like to wake up in bed with him, or the first glimpse of his delectable body. Then, there was the glint in his blue eyes when he was about to lean in and say something sarcastic. And the fact that I could coax a smile out of him, one that changed his whole face. One that made a handsome guy the most unforgettable man I'd ever met.

Payton, what have you done?

Bad enough I was falling, but for a man I worked with? There'd be no escaping him. Especially not on the world tour when we'd be traveling together for months on end.

Ignoring the ache in my chest, I helped Lennie clear the table and clean the kitchen before we called it a night. I couldn't abide dirty plates and dishes sitting on counters and thankfully, Lennie was the same. Once we were done with the cleanup, he carried my suitcase upstairs, and got me settled in the spare bedroom.

We'd said goodnight on the landing and when he closed my door, and I was all alone, I had the strange urge to cry. It must have been all that earlier talk about my mom and family. Even though I played it off like being single was always a good time, I couldn't deny that I wanted a family of my own. A husband, children. The older I got, the more it felt like a need than a want. And part of me worried that I'd never achieve those dreams. And worst of all, that love wasn't in the cards for me.

No kidding, Payton, that's why you were drinking so hard in Vegas.

Ignoring my faraway wishes, I checked my phone and replied to several messages. Most of them were from friends like Jaclyn. Surprisingly, I also had one from Valen.

Valen: How's married life? You taking care of my friend?

Payton: We just had dinner with his family

Valen: LOL are you serious?

Payton: They were here at Len's when we arrived from the airport. His mom looked so upset. We couldn't tell her.

Valen: Man, I wish I'd been there to see Len's face. Are you still at his place?

Payton: It made sense to stay overnight

Valen: I'm sure it did. Remember what I said today. Please don't hurt him.

Payton: In a week's time, Lennie will forget this weekend ever happened.

Valen: I'm not sure about that. And what about you?

I didn't reply to the last comment. I was nowhere near ready to face my feelings, let alone tell someone else what was going on.

I put my phone aside and went through my usual nighttime routine; skincare and a scalp massage, and after that, I changed into my two-piece black lace pjs.

The bed was a comfortable queen, but despite that, and my exhaustion, sleep wouldn't come. I tossed and turned, and next thing I knew, it was after one in the morning. I was craving sweets, like I always did when I couldn't sleep. So, I quietly wandered out of my room and downstairs to the kitchen.

I needed ice cream. Or cookies. Anything with sugar. And hopefully, chocolate.

When I stepped into the kitchen, it was dark, save for the faint moonlight that filtered in from the windows. I reached for the light switch, when suddenly, I heard a door slam.

"Ahhh!" I yelled out loud, certain that I'd be confronting a burglar.

Until I realized it was Lennie. Standing in front of the fridge, in nothing but tight briefs, with a carton of juice in his hand. I stood on shaky legs, holding my hand to my chest, my heart pounding louder than a marching band during homecoming week. I was never getting to sleep after this.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"It's my house! And I was thirsty." He held up the container. "What are you doing

here?”

“I need chocolate, or ice cream. I can’t sleep.”

Lennie padded over to the stove and reached for the light above it. A soft glow lit up the kitchen.

But when Lennie turned around, he dropped the carton on the floor.

“Are you okay?” I asked him, moving closer.

“Yes! Good. Fine. Great,” he muttered.

He crouched down to pick up the carton, his taut thigh muscles flexing. Jesus. I was pretty sure I was drooling at this point, and it had nothing to do with salivating over the potential of ice cream.

When I finally made eye contact, Lennie was staring at me like he’d never seen me before.

“Are you okay, Len?”

“Yup. Great. Sure. So good,” he replied and quickly moved to stand behind the island. “Nothing.”

“Nothing? What does that mean?”

“Uh. Nothing’s wrong. That’s what I meant to say,” he paused. “Um, I think there’s ice cream. In the freezer. If you want it. Chocolate. Chocolate ice cream. In the freezer.”

I bit my lip to keep from laughing. Bumbling Lennie was back. But no matter what he said, or how he said it, this man always had my full attention. So much so that my cock was already half hard.

Needing a distraction for my dick—and to feed my oral fixation—I wandered over to the fridge and bent down to open the freezer drawer.

“Fuck me,” Lennie blurted out.

Then I remembered I hadn’t worn anything under my lace pjs. Oops. My cock was now hard as hell. Forget ice cream. I was still craving a sweet treat, but he was standing right behind me.

I stood up, turned around, and leaned back against the fridge. Unlike Len, I was not shy about what I wanted. And he was it. We’d already broken all the rules by getting married, we might as well go for broke.

“You like what I’m wearing?” I asked.

Lennie swallowed hard and nodded, beads of sweat dotting his forehead. “It’s very, um, sheer.”

“I love wearing lace. And silk. Anything soft. It makes me feel sexy and beautiful.”

“No argument here.”

I sauntered over to him and grabbed the carton that he’d nearly crushed in his grip, placing it on the counter.

“What about ice cream?” He whispered.

“I’ve changed my mind. I want something more...decadent.”

I boldly ran my hands up his strong, hairy forearms. Touching him was electric, and I didn’t want to stop.

“Payton,” he groaned, and the sound had goosebumps littering my skin.

“Yes?” I stared up into his eyes, hoping, praying, that he wouldn’t turn me away.

Anticipation flooded my veins. Lennie lowered his head, and I held my breath, waiting, aching for him to kiss me.

“You know how I’m always tongue-tied around you?” he whispered.

“Yes.”

He smiled slowly, like he knew a secret.

“Now it’s your turn.”

Lennie

I couldn’t sleep, and it was no wonder.

All I could think about was how right it felt to have Payton here, in my home. Fuck, he was down the hallway. Probably naked by now. Thinking about him in my bed, even if it was the spare one, had my cock painfully hard. So hard, I was lightheaded.

After a restless hour and a throbbing hard-on that I ruthlessly ignored, I got up and headed down to the kitchen to grab a snack. But of course, it wasn’t that simple.

I always took pride in my self-control. No matter the situation, I stayed calm and clear-headed. I never let my emotions get the better of me, not at work and not in my personal life.

Until Payton. First Vegas, now this.

He walked into my kitchen dressed in nothing but sheer black lace, and all my good intentions, my control? Obliterated. And when he touched me? When he looked up at me with those beautiful eyes of his? Fuck, I had no fight left. I willingly surrendered.

I cupped his face and took his lips the way I'd been fantasizing about for months. But reality was so much better than my dreams. Payton was warm and real. Sexy, beautiful, sinful.

Mine? I wanted like hell for him to be mine.

His lips parted, and I got the sweetest, hottest kiss of my life. His tongue teased mine, and what started out deep and slow turned frantic and dirty, shockwaves of pleasure coursing through my body.

I slid my hands down his back, feeling his muscles quiver, and cupped his tight ass cheeks. They fit perfectly in my palms.

"Put your arms around my neck," I demanded in between heated kisses. "And wrap those sexy legs around my waist."

"Lennie," he moaned my name, and I shivered in response.

"Do it, Angel."

Payton groaned even louder. When he climbed me, I held firm to his ass and carried

him through the kitchen, and over to the stairs. Until the wicked tease sucked on the tender skin of my neck, and I nearly lost my footing.

“Fuck, Payton.”

“Yes. Please, please fuck me.”

I managed to carry him up the stairs, but it was a near thing. I was lightheaded, the blood in my body rushing to my dick.

We tumbled into my bedroom and, thankfully, onto my bed. We didn’t kiss so much as devour each other, and I reached for his top, desperate to get him naked. But there were ten million buttons, and I was so turned on I was shaking, my big hands clumsy as hell.

Fuck it. I ripped his shirt open, and Payton gasped.

“Get those pants off, or they’re next,” I growled.

Payton scrambled to do as I demanded and threw the seductive garment aside. When he stretched out on my bed, naked, I finally took a breath, a moment, to admire the stunning man before me. Not that I had any air left in my lungs. It was a good thing that I was already horizontal, because this man knocked me flat on my ass. He was all long lines and smooth skin, his long cock resting hard and heavy on his stomach. And when I saw the intense heat in his gaze, I chased his mouth, unable to resist.

“Angel, you are so fucking beautiful,” I confessed, holding him tight, unwilling to let go.

“Lennie.”

Payton's skin flushed, and I reached out and traced it with my finger; from his cheekbones, down his neck, to his chest, and his abs. When I reached for Payton's cock, the moan that erupted from his throat was the dirtiest thing I'd ever heard.

"Yes, touch me," he whispered.

"Payton."

I spat in my hand and jerked him off, watching his expression the whole time, relishing his sharp inhales and breathy moans. But it wasn't enough. I wanted to give him all the pleasure.

I scooted down the bed and spread his legs. And fuck, he was smooth all over. I needed to taste him. Right fucking now.

"You don't have to?—"

Any further comment was silenced when I held his ass cheeks apart, and swiped my tongue across his tight pink hole.

"Oh fuck," Payton groaned and grabbed hold of my hair. "Len."

I swirled my tongue around his rim, teasing strokes, then up and over his taint, and back over his hole again. Of course, Payton tasted as heady as he looked, and now I was addicted. Pushing my face in his ass, I ate him out. He was writhing, but his grip on my hair loosened. Like he was afraid of hurting me. And then his moans quieted to barely a whisper. It was so unlike the fierce, passionate man I knew.

I swiped my tongue over his hole again and then leaned back, looking up at his face.

"Don't hold back. If you want to tug my hair and claw at my shoulders, do it, Angel."

Don't hide. Not from me."

"Jesus, Len, you're going to make me come already," Payton admitted.

I smiled at him, so wide that my cheeks hurt. "Good. Now ride my fucking face."

Leaning back down, I settled between his thighs. This time, Payton didn't hesitate to shove his gorgeous ass in my face. Yes. This. I was drunk on the sight and smell of him, my dick throbbing, leaking pre-cum like crazy.

"Fucking hell," I groaned loudly, and teased his ass, licking, sucking, then fucking his hole with my tongue.

He pulled my hair—hard—and didn't let go; the sting igniting sparks of pleasure down my spine. And when he spread his legs wider and pumped his hips, I didn't eat his ass, I fucking worshipped it.

"Don't stop, Len. Oh God, please, don't stop."

His frantic moans were so freaking sexy that I was humping the mattress, my dick desperate for friction.

"Touch yourself," I commanded, my voice hoarse with need.

Payton's legs began to shake, and his moans turned to whimpers.

"I'm going to come," he panted. "Oh fuck. Oh, God."

I didn't let up, fucking his ass with my tongue, until his body jolted, and whimpers turned to screams. Payton was screaming my name.

“Lennie!”

His orgasm ignited mine, and I jerked, coming hands-free. The pleasure was so intense that I was shaking hard. One year of Payton’s teasing was too much for this bodyguard to handle.

CHAPTER 10

PAYTON

This man. Lord, this man.

I often teased Lennie about his loss for words, but he was not lost for anything in bed. The total opposite. The way he took control? His dirty words and wicked tongue? He was demanding and so fucking sexy. Like when he was on the job. A total power top that made this needy bottom so happy that I could die right now and have no regrets.

But the best part? His kisses. No question, no doubt. The man knew how to kiss.

Even though I'd started to come down from my orgasm high, my heart was still beating a wild rhythm. And when Lennie collapsed beside me on the bed and pulled me into his arms, holding me so tight I could hardly breathe, I wanted to stay. Against all logic and reason, I wanted to stay.

"You okay, Angel?"

I was giddy every time he called me by that name. It was silly, really. Or maybe not. Lennie wasn't the type of guy who threw out cute nicknames for fun. Then again, he wasn't the type to marry a man on impulse, either.

Leaning back, I glanced up and caught the intense look in his baby blues. Lennie's expression was so serious, like he wanted to say something important.

I nervously licked my lips. “I...yeah. I...uh?—”

Shit.

Lennie’s laugh was deliciously dirty. “Cat got your tongue?”

“Yes,” I huffed. “Me, of all people.”

Lennie laughed and pulled me in for another crushing hug. “Say it ain’t so. I love to hear you talk.”

“Really? I’ve been told that I can be a bit much.”

“Are you kidding?” He gently kissed the top of my head and I swear my heart fluttered. “I could listen to you talk all day. You may not be a singer, but to me, your voice is like music. Being around you has been the highlight of my day for over a year.”

“Lennie,” I whispered as I looked up at him again. “What took you so long to tell me?”

Lennie chuckled. “I’ve already admitted that you’re way out of my league. Why would you bother with me when you can have any man you want?”

“I don’t want any man. The only man I’ve wanted is you.”

My blunt admission hung in the air between us. Oh fuck. I started to pull away, but Lennie held tight.

“I heard you. I can’t believe it, but I heard you. No take backs.”

He leaned over and kissed me, silencing any further denials.

“So, what are we doing?” I asked him when he let me come up for air.

“Well, we are married—” Lennie started.

I reached down and pinched his ass.

“Ow. What? It’s the truth,” he replied.

“And now it’s complicated,” I sighed.

“Not at all. We divorce, then we date. Simple.”

“That’s not the right order of things,” I chuckled.

“This is you and me. We do what feels right to us.”

“What do you want?”

Lennie wagged his eyebrows. “Take one guess, hot stuff.”

“Besides that. Do you really want to date me?”

“Isn’t that what’s been going on since our wedding?”

I pushed at Lennie’s shoulders, and he lay down on his back. Straddling his waist, I looked down at him.

“You might wake up tomorrow and change your mind,” I admitted.

“Same goes for you.”

Suddenly, all the ‘what ifs’ filled my head. What were we doing? Could this really work?

Bad enough we’d married each other, and now we’d gone and made everything even more confusing by having sex. Did he really want me for me, or was he reacting to the chaos of the past twenty-four hours?

He gently squeezed my waist, and I shook my head.

“I think I should go back to the spare bedroom,” I admitted, my stomach clenched tight. “I need time to think about this.”

“You do what you feel is right. In your heart,” Lennie replied, placing a hand over my chest.

There was no denying how fast my heart was racing or the reason why. I placed my hand over his and we stared at each other. Fuck, I didn’t want him to stop touching me. But I needed a moment to catch my breath. To think. Too often, I was impulsive—hello Vegas wedding—and it led nowhere good. The last thing I needed was a messy situationship, one that spilled over into my work life. And his.

It’s Lennie. He wouldn’t do that. You’re just scared.

“Take the time you need. I’m not going anywhere,” Lennie added, his eyes never leaving mine.

I nodded and reluctantly slid off him, off the bed, reaching for my pants. It was difficult to move, never mind speak.

“Do you understand what I’m saying, Angel? I’m not going anywhere,” he repeated.

I turned to face him. “I understand. And I’m sorry.”

Lennie shook his head and smiled at me.

“Nothing to be sorry about. I have no regrets when it comes to you. None.”

That was the ironic part. I didn’t want to cause him any. And yet, I still walked out of his bedroom.

What was worse? I didn’t look back.

Sleep eventually came, but hours later, and not for long.

My phone alarm sounded at eight. I rolled over, and my first thought was, ‘where’s Lennie?’, then I realized that I was in the wrong bed. And with the early morning light came the realization that, yet again, I’d fucked up.

Only, it wasn’t marrying Len. It was pushing him away last night.

My phone pinged with a reminder about our appointment with Elias. About the divorce. Shit. My stomach was one giant knot.

Mechanically, I forced myself to get up and headed for the bathroom. After taking a long, hot shower, I slowly got dressed. Nothing flashy today. Black jeans, a grey silk blouse, and patent booties. It felt like I was dressing for a funeral. I guess the death of a marriage qualified. Even one that never existed to begin with.

But unlike our wedding, I recalled every single detail from last night. I touched my bare lips, still swollen, and smiled when I thought about kissing Len. There was

passion and heat, not to mention a million butterflies. And the way he looked at me? Despite my fears, I knew it was special.

Maybe not anymore. Not after I left him lying there.

My heart took off running and my stomach dropped out. Leaning over the sink, I forced myself to take a deep breath, trying to stay calm.

“I’m not going anywhere.”

Lennie was so protective, possessive even, and yet, when I wanted to leave, he was gentle, like he knew if he pushed, I’d run faster and farther. He knew. He fucking knew me. That was the scariest revelation of all.

I reached for my makeup bag and began to do my face, the routine a necessary tonic for my nerves. Concealer—given the dark circles under my eyes—and touch of blush, and mascara. I’d save the lip gloss for after breakfast. That is, if I could eat.

It was going to be hella awkward when I walked down those stairs.

Grow up, Payton.

I’d had plenty of one-night stands. It was just sex. Then I looked at my reflection, at the lovesick expression on my face.

Just sex, my ass.

With one last look, I gathered up my stuff and headed back into the bedroom. I packed away my lace pants and then realized I’d left the top in Lennie’s bedroom. It was ripped anyway, so it’s not like I could use it again. Pushing the image of Lennie desperately trying to get me naked out of my head, I grabbed my suitcase and headed

down the stairs.

Walking down the hallway to the kitchen, I spotted Lennie at the stove. In slim-fit jeans, a navy crewneck sweater, and bare feet, he was humming a tune and cooking. His hair was still wet, sticking up on end, and he had a tea towel slung over one shoulder.

My heart literally ached looking at him. Too late, he glanced up and caught me staring.

“Morning,” he smiled and turned off the burner.

“Morning.”

I sauntered into the kitchen but hesitated at the last moment. It was not like me at all.

“Espresso?” Lennie asked.

“Please and thanks,” I replied and walked over to the stove. “Anything I can help with?”

“The gravy’s done. Biscuits are in the oven. Hungry?”

Oh darling, not for food.

“Lennie, I?—”

“Don’t, Payton. It’s fine. You’re entitled to change your mind, all right?”

Lennie was back in brisk work mode. And I hadn’t changed my mind; I freaked out. But I was too scared to tell him.

He turned away and started making our espressos, then placed them on the breakfast counter. I stared into the pot of gravy and absently reached for the spoon, stirring it. The smell was wonderful, but my stomach was clenched so tight there was no way I was going to be able to eat.

When a timer pinged, I glanced around for his potholders. Until Lennie placed his hands on my hips and gently moved me out aside so he could pull the biscuits from the oven.

“Can you grab two plates?” he asked me.

Now that I’d cooked in his kitchen, with his Nonna, I had familiarity with where everything was located. I opened the cupboard door near the fridge and grabbed two large plates, then passed them over to Len.

“Thanks. Go have a seat and I’ll plate this up,” he replied. “I hope you enjoy this. To be honest, I buy the frozen biscuits, but I made the gravy from scratch.”

God, how could he make normal conversation after last night? But this was what I wanted, right? Back to normal. After all, flirting with a man I worked with was one thing. A relationship was a whole other story.

Like a zombie, I shuffled over to the breakfast bar and slowly sat on one of the stools.

“How did you sleep?” Lennie asked. “Do you want juice? Water? I’ve got?—”

“Okay, stop,” I blurted out. “Can we talk about what happened last night instead of acting like it never did?”

Lennie placed a hot biscuit on each plate, cut them in half, and then spooned over the gravy. When he picked up the plates, I noticed the slight tremble in his hands. He set

them down slowly and took the seat beside me.

“I thought you wanted space,” he replied quietly. “And that meant not talking about it.”

I stared at the food in front of me. “I can’t do this.”

“Look, as soon as we’re done with Elias and Zoe, I’ll drive you home.”

“Not that! The food smells delicious, but I can’t eat. My stomach’s tied up in knots. And it’s all your fault.”

“My fault?”

“Yes, you, Leonardo!” I stared at him. “Why did you have to kiss me like that?”

“Like what?” Lennie chuckled, which only made my temper spark. “Like, I wanted to? And hey, you kissed me back.”

“Why is this so funny?” I demanded.

“There’s nothing funny about this situation, Angel. But your reaction is. We kissed, we came, it was nice. You don’t want to make anything more of it, so I’m not.” He paused. “Salt? Pepper?”

“No, I don’t want salt or pepper! Nice? Nice! I’ve never been so insulted in my entire life!” I snapped.

“Payton, you need to take a deep breath and take a large sip of your coffee, okay?”

“I...you...don’t?—”

This man had me totally out of my depth. And, out of words.

“Relax and eat your breakfast, sweetheart.”

“Don’t tell me to relax,” I huffed. “And I’m not your sweetheart.”

I wish.

Lennie’s head fell back, and he stared up at the ceiling. “Dio mio.”

He reached for his cup, took a long sip, and sighed. Then he put one arm around the back of my chair and leaned over. So close, I could smell the soap he used, warm and spicy, and the sweet coffee on his breath.

“What did I tell you last night?”

“When you were coming, or afterward?” I replied tartly.

“Don’t sass me,” Lennie growled. “What did I tell you?”

“That you’re—” I paused and reached for my espresso, my hand shaking. “You’re not going anywhere.”

I took a sip of coffee to distract myself from his intense perusal. But when Lennie sweetly kissed the top of my head, I started choking.

“You okay, Angel?” he asked me as he patted my back.

“Good. Fine,” I croaked, barely able to get the words out. “Give me warning next time.”

“Sorry. My bad. You’re too damn irresistible.”

How could I argue with that?

CHAPTER 11

LENNIE

I hadn't slept at all last night, but I didn't give a fuck. I'd trade any sleep, any day, for more time with Payton. As much as he'd flirted with me for months and months, I don't think he ever anticipated anything would come of it. I didn't either.

Until Vegas.

I knew what I wanted, but Payton needed time. For all his talk about wanting to find love and a boyfriend, he was scared. Scared to let anyone get close. Probably the result of some asshole(s) he'd dated who'd gotten into his head. And there was our work situation. I couldn't discount that.

But I knew my heart. I'd never fallen before, but there was no mistaking it. I'd give him all the time he needed, but I was not about to forget last night. Or the past two days. Or months of flirting. And, with each passing hour, our wedding seemed less like a mistake and more like fate.

Which was probably why, the closer we got to Elias Kain's office, the more anxious I became.

The office wasn't far from the studio downtown, so the location was familiar. And being a block from Broadway Street, the heart of the music action, it was busy. The area was wall to wall bars and clubs. I pulled up to the address and parked. Most of the buildings around here were commercial on the first floor, and rentals on the

second.

“Is this the right place?” Payton asked.

I nodded. “The address is 214A. I assume that means his office is located above the bar.”

“Kind of a strange place for a lawyer to have an office.”

“Not if all your clients are musicians.”

I got out of the truck and walked around to open Payton’s door. When I offered him my hand, he hesitated, then finally slipped his hand into mine. I was tempted to pull him into my arms and kiss sense into him, but I held back. He was skittish, and I knew that now was not the time for my demanding side.

We headed for the door, and I pressed the buzzer.

“Yes?”

“It’s Lennie and Payton.”

“Come on up.”

The door unlocked, and I reached for it, motioning for Payton to go first. The air inside reminded me of the nightlife around here—the underlying scent of alcohol, sweat, and cigarettes.

We climbed a long set of stairs and reached a landing with another door. 214A. I guess big time lawyers didn’t need to advertise.

I knocked once, and Elias opened the door. I'd never seen the man unkempt, and today was no exception. He was dressed in charcoal trousers, with a pink button-down and a patterned tie. With dark-rimmed glasses and slicked-back hair, he looked like he was ready for Wall Street, never mind Broadway.

"Lennie, Payton, nice to see you," he greeted us. "Come on in."

The office turned out to be an apartment with an open floor plan, including a kitchen and living room. Unlike the stairwell, this place was modern, bright, and smelled like citrus.

"This is an interesting location for a law office," Payton mused as he glanced around.

"I work with interesting people, so it suits. Besides, it's not only my office, it's my home. I own this entire building and I remodeled the place myself."

"You did?"

"I can write a brief and swing a hammer," Elias quipped as he motioned for us to follow him.

We passed the living room and entered an office, with more windows that looked out onto the street below. It was quiet up here. Good soundproofing for sure.

"Please, have a seat."

Payton and I sat down in the leather chairs across from his desk. Elias took his seat, and opened up his laptop.

"Zoe filled me in on some of the details about your weekend nuptials in Vegas. While I specialize in contract law, I also have experience with divorce. I take it that's how

you want to proceed? To file for divorce?”

I swallowed hard, suddenly feeling like I couldn't breathe. I didn't reply. Neither did Payton.

Elias raised one dark eyebrow. “Or maybe not?”

“Uh—”

“Well—”

Payton and I spoke at the same time.

Elias smiled, and the man looked like he was about to pose for the cover of GQ.

“It's really not my place, but perhaps it would be a good idea for the two of you to talk to a marriage counselor or a therapist before you file. If you still wish to proceed, I'll handle it as quickly and painlessly as possible.”

I glanced at Payton, and he stared back at me.

“What do you want to do?” he asked me.

“If we can't ask for it, we're probably not ready.”

Payton covered his face with his hands.

“Whoa, what a ring,” Elias commented. “Lennie, you went all out.”

“It's Payton. He deserves the best.”

“Lennie,” Payton sighed. “What are we doing?”

“We’re taking our time,” I replied. “Making sure we’re doing the right thing.”

“But shouldn’t we just file? I mean, this is crazy. It’s not like we’re going to actually stay married, right?”

I’m not gonna lie. His words hurt. Because, yes, it was crazy. But yes, I wanted to stay married to Payton. Holy fucking shit. I loved him. I was in love with Payton...

There’s nothing like the shock of realizing you’re in love with the man you’re about to divorce. I wanted to protest his statement, but I called on all my training to stay calm. To do what was best for Payton. He was my only concern. His happiness before mine.

“If you’re ready to move forward, then I’ll respect your wishes,” I bit out, my hands digging into the arms of the chair. I’m surprised I didn’t break the damn thing into pieces.

“Payton?” Elias looked at him. “We can start with the basic information since I assume this will be a no-contest divorce. As I said, it will take three to four weeks to finalize, maybe less. I’ll need your?—”

Payton shot up out of the chair. “I can’t do this.”

“What? But you just said?—”

“I know, but I need more time.” Payton looked at me and sat down again. “Is that okay?”

I nodded. Of course, it was okay. I was relieved and concerned all at once. It meant I

had time to convince him this marriage wasn't the worst thing that had ever happened to us, but the best. But as to how I was going to do that, I had no idea.

Elias leaned back in his chair and studied us. "Take a week or two, do what you need to, and then get back to me. Sound good?"

Payton nodded. "Thank you, Elias."

"You can call me El. And no worries. I hope you guys can work it out."

Man, I hoped so too.

Payton

"You ready to speak to Zoe?" Lennie asked. "We can walk to headquarters if you want. It's only five minutes from here."

Was I ready? I didn't know anything anymore.

"Payton? Are you feeling okay?"

"I'm fine."

I was so not fine. But I was sure that once I was back at my place, and then back to work, everything would be. Then I'd be ready to file for divorce. From Lennie. God, saying or thinking the word 'divorce' made me feel nauseous. I thought I was going to throw up in Elias's office. All over his desk, his laptop, and his designer outfit.

I stepped out of the building and onto the street, my legs shaky, almost losing my balance. Of course, Lennie offered his arm, and I couldn't resist.

“Thank you,” I whispered. “It must be the lack of sleep.”

“Hold on tight. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

I glanced up at his profile. The strong jawline, the slightly crooked nose. I so wanted to lean up and kiss him, to believe that what he said was true, but I held back. That would only confuse things. Not that things could get any more confused. Or complicated.

Until we got to the music label’s head office. Not only was Zoe there, but Jesse, the band’s manager. And his presence got me wondering. And worrying. Did the label have an issue with all the social media stuff about the wedding? I hoped to fuck that Lennie and I weren’t about to get fired.

“How did your meeting with Elias go?” Zoe asked us point blank.

“We’re not making a decision about the marriage yet,” Lennie replied. “A lot has happened in two days and it’s overwhelming.”

Zoe nodded. “Okay, so for now, we run with the story that this is a love match?”

“Do we need to say anything further?” I asked. “Can’t we ignore the comments? Or maybe I should delete my posts?”

Jesse leaned forward. “I wouldn’t delete anything. There’s been a huge amount of interest in your story from Wayward Lane fans. One of your wedding posts had over three million likes.”

“Not to sound crass, but we can’t buy publicity like that. Especially right before a world tour,” Zoe added. “We’re trying to create the biggest buzz possible as a lead-in and even though this may not be one of the ways we usually do it, it’s newsworthy.”

Fans love following the guys and their relationships, and insights about stuff that goes on behind the scenes. And a romance between one of the band's security, and their hairstylist? It's PR gold."

"I agree," Jesse nodded. "Music is storytelling, after all. The wedding is driving engagement. And, if you haven't made up your minds yet, I suggest you keep posting. Little teasers that will keep fans hungry for more."

"So, you want us to act like this is a real relationship?" I asked.

Lennie made a sound that was very similar to a growl.

I slowly turned to him. "Do you have something to say?"

Lennie leaned forward, his blue eyes full of fire.

"I'm gonna give you all the space you need, Angel, but let's get one thing clear. You and me? It's fucking real!" he barked.

"Lennie—"

"Don't start denying it. Not after last night."

My heart was about to fly right out of my chest.

Until I noticed Jesse and Zoe following our conversation with rapt attention, their eyes ping-ponging between the two of us.

"Not here," I hissed. "Not now."

"If not now, then when?" Lennie snapped. "Are you saying you feel nothing for me?"

After everything that's happened? And I'm not talking about the past two days, but all year."

I'd never seen Lennie so worked up before. Was it possible that he was feeling all the things I was?

"Okay, I'm sorry," I admitted. "You're right."

"Say that again?"

"I said, you're right."

He looked marginally calmer, but the flush on his face told me that this discussion was not over. But the knot that had lodged in my belly all morning? It finally loosened.

I turned back to face Zoe and Jesse, and the two of them were staring at us with their mouths wide open.

"What?" I stated. "Haven't you been around any married couples before?"

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CHAPTER 12

PAYTON

“If you’ll excuse us, we’ve had a long couple of days,” Lennie announced, standing up and motioning to the door.

“That’s fine. We’re done with this for now,” Zoe added. “I’ve got calls to return.”

“Me too.” Jesse stood up and beat us to the door. “Keep us updated on whatever’s happening between you two, okay?”

I nodded and stood up, following Lennie. As soon as we were out of Zoe’s office, he stalked off down the hallway toward the exit.

“I’ll drop you off at home,” Lennie muttered, shoving his sunglasses on.

“Okay.”

The walk back to the car had me shivering and it had everything to do with Lennie. I’d fucked this whole thing up and I didn’t know how to make things right.

Tell him you’re scared.

By the time we got to my place, I was all but jumping out of my skin.

“Come in with me,” I whispered.

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea right now.”

“Please.” I turned to him. “We need to talk.”

Lennie sighed and ran a hand over his face, then nodded.

“Thank you,” I sighed with relief. “But a warning. Jaclyn dropped Finnigan off this morning. He’s a good cat, but he doesn’t like strangers, so he might hiss at you.”

“I’m not worried. I can handle a frightened kitten.”

“He’s a cat, not a kitten.”

“I wasn’t talking about Finnigan,” Lennie added, sliding out of the driver’s side and slamming his door.

What? I sat there, fuming, until he opened the passenger door.

“Comparing me to a cat?” I asked.

“If the claws fit,” Lennie countered, offering his hand.

“You wish.”

“I do. That’s the problem.”

Once I was on solid ground, Lennie hauled out my suitcase and we made our way to the elevator. The ride was awkward; me fidgeting with my hair, my blouse, and checking my phone. Anything to distract my nerves. Lennie, meanwhile, was back in bodyguard mode, arms crossed, face expressionless, not a word or a breath to be heard. But I did notice the way that vein in this forehead was pulsing. He wasn’t

totally unaffected.

We finally reached my floor and I bolted. “I’m the last one on the right.”

When I opened the door, the mewling started.

“Hey baby, I’m home,” I whispered to Finnigan, who was sitting in my foyer, big tail swishing, ears back. He was not happy.

“Shit, he’s even prettier than in those pictures,” Lennie announced.

Finnigan was a beautiful boy with his smooth, velvety gray fur and pale green eyes. But given the hissing sounds he was making, Finnigan wasn’t impressed by our guest.

“That sounds like our wedding night,” Lennie muttered.

“Hilarious,” I replied and crouched down. “Come here, Finn. Daddy’s missed you.”

To my utter shock, Finnigan ran past me and rubbed up against Lennie’s leg.

“What the?—”

Turned out, I was the one being hissed at.

Lennie reached down and when his large hand ran over Finnigan’s back, hisses turned to loud purrs. Then Lennie did the unthinkable. He picked up my cat.

“He doesn’t even like the vet touching him,” I whispered, completely shocked.

Finnigan’s purrs amplified, and he butted his head on Lennie’s chin.

“He’s a selective boy. Like his daddy,” Lennie whispered, then glanced at me, smiling. “Stop fighting it, Angel. You know you like me.”

“Of course, I like you. More than like. That’s the damn problem.”

“Come here.”

I slowly walked towards him, and Lennie placed Finnigan back on the floor. My cat zipped back to the living room.

“Why?”

“Come here,” Lennie repeated.

I stalked up to him, and when I got within arm’s reach, Lennie placed his hands on my hips, pulling me in to his body as tight as I could get. Lord, it was hot in here.

“Stop worrying about the wedding. It doesn’t matter how it happened, it’s done. And I, for one, am so fucking happy.”

“You are?”

“Haven’t you been listening to anything I’ve said over the past forty-eight hours? I’m falling for you. Hard. And I don’t care if I make an ass of myself doing it. And no, before you start arguing, it’s not temporary, and no, it’s not the ‘ wedding effect .’ This has been building for a long time. All your flirting and teasing at work. I guess I couldn’t resist any longer.”

“Lennie.” I cupped his face. “I want you. I do. But fair warning. I’m no good at this.”

“What?”

“Relationships,” I admitted. “The flirting part, hell yes. The other stuff, no. I always come on too strong and then inevitably, the guy thinks I’m too much. And I don’t want to mess this up. You’re too important to me.”

He smiled and squeezed my waist. “Listen to me, okay? You’re never too much. Never. Be yourself. The proud, flirtatious, luminous Payton that I know and love.”

Did Lennie say that he loved me?

There was still trepidation. That I wasn’t good enough. That he’d regret this. But when I looked into Lennie’s eyes, I saw hope. And, more than that, I saw the truth. It was real. This, what was happening between us, was real.

“I’m yours, Angel,” he whispered.

As crazy as it might be, he was mine, too. I pushed the fear away. And I reached for Lennie.

Our kiss was all-consuming, frantic. I didn’t hold back, sliding my tongue deep into his mouth, tasting all of him. Wanting more. Both of us moaned and when I pushed at his shoulders, he leaned back against the door with a loud thud.

Dropping to my knees, I rubbed my hand over his jeans, cupping his dick, testing the weight of it. I’d barely had a chance to see all of him last night, never mind explore. And touching him like this confirmed what I glimpsed the morning after our wedding.

My man was big. All over. And all fucking mine.

“Payton, you don’t have to?—”

I unzipped his jeans.

“No, but I want to,” I replied and slid my hands inside, shoving his briefs and jeans down his hips, taking his hot, heavy cock in my hand. Jesus, I couldn’t wait to slide his thick dick down my throat. “I’ve wanted to suck you off for the longest time. I thought it would remain a fantasy. But reality is so much better.”

Lennie let out a deep groan. His dick was long and veiny, the head red and leaking so much pre-cum that my hand was already sticky. Leaning forward, I swirled my tongue around the head and that first salty taste hit me like the best kind of buzz.

“Please,” Lennie moaned. “More.”

I swallowed as much as I could on the first go, but he was fucking huge. With one hand around the base of his cock, I tongued the slit, teasing him, then swallowed again, this time as deep as I could get him, until my nose hit his pubes.

“Fuck!” Lennie panted. “Payton.”

My throat was going to be sore as fuck tomorrow, but I didn’t care.

My other hand reached for his balls, cupping and tugging, while my mouth kept up a steady suck and slide. Lennie was musky, so fucking delicious. And with every pass, Lennie’s moans got louder.

When his thighs began to shake, he gripped my head and guided my movements, punching his hips forward and fucking my face. Lennie knew what he wanted, and I wanted to give it to him.

My own cock was hard as hell, but I didn’t care about my pleasure. Only his.

I sucked harder, swallowing him down again, humming when his cockhead hit my throat.

“Oh fuck, baby, I’m gonna...fuck, I’m coming!” Lennie shouted.

His cock twitched and my mouth flooded with hot cum. I swallowed as much as I could, as fast as I could, but there was no way I could’ve taken all of it. It spilled out of the corners of my mouth and down my chin.

Lennie’s grip on my hair eased, and I slowly leaned back, letting his softening cock slip out from between my lips. My knees were sore, my throat too, but it was worth it. And I was finally able to take a deep breath. But breathing was overrated anyway. Especially when I made Lennie come hard like that.

“We forgot...to have...the sex talk,” Lennie panted. “Not the dirty kind. I mean, it was safe to swallow my load. I got tested three months ago. I’m good. There’s been no one since.”

“Me too,” I replied, my voice hoarse.

“Come here,” Lennie smiled and crooked his finger.

I glanced up at him, wiped my face with my hand, and licked my sore lips. “Maybe.”

“Maybe?” he replied, raising one eyebrow. “Don’t sass me, Angel.”

“But I have so much fun doing just that.”

“I’ll give you fun. Now get up here and give your man a kiss.”

“No.”

“No?”

I stood up on shaky legs and reached for him.

“It’ll be way more than one.”

CHAPTER 13

LENNIE

There was a shitload of howling and moaning going on. No, not me and Payton. Well, not at this exact moment.

It was Finnigan. Who, at this point, was not allowed in the bedroom. And the cat was not shy about making his complaint known.

“I think Finnigan wants to come in and snuggle with us.”

“Not yet,” Payton replied. “I’m not ready to share you.”

“That’s a given,” I chuckled, then squeezed him tighter. “But joking aside, that’s what I want. To be exclusive.”

“Well, we are married,” Payton smiled and kissed my chest. “And darling, to be clear, if another man makes a move on you, I won’t hesitate to use my flat iron as a weapon.”

“Ooh, vicious. I like it,” I replied, running my hands down his smooth back. “And the same goes. You think I’m protective in bodyguard mode, but you haven’t seen full husband mode yet.”

Payton rubbed his body against mine, and I cupped his ass.

“Husband mode, eh?” He teased me, biting his lower lip. “We skipped over the boyfriend part.”

“We did. And do you want to know a secret?”

“Always.”

“I love that you’re my husband,” I admitted. “Saying that turns me the fuck on.”

“Lennie.”

I tilted my hips, offering proof. “Yes, Angel?”

Payton kissed me languidly, and soon we were making out, lost in each other, lost in our pleasure.

“Are you asking me to be your one and only?” Payton whispered against my lips.

“Do you, Payton, take me, Lennie, to be your awfully wedded husband?”

Payton laughed out loud in response and the sight of his gorgeous smile, aimed at me, had me fucking giddy. His happiness was mine.

“I think you mean lawfully,” he quipped. “And, since we are married, and you’re my husband, I have to ask, does this mean no flirting with anyone else, ever?”

His expression was guarded, but I knew Payton. And as possessive as I felt about him, I wasn’t going to stifle him in any way.

“Angel, I don’t want you to be anything but yourself. You can tease and flirt with anyone you want, all you want, as long as that’s as far as it goes. No one else gets to

touch you.”

Payton didn't reply. He slid his hands up my chest, higher, until he cupped my face. Then he leaned in and devoured me.

“Show me I belong to you,” he whispered. “Fuck me.”

I groaned loudly as my dick grew to a raging hard-on. “Lube? Condom?”

Payton leaned over and yanked on the drawer of his nightstand.

“Lube. But no condoms.”

“You don't have any, or you don't want to use one?”

Payton grabbed the tube of lube and flipped to his back. Then he slicked up his hands and started without me.

“I want your cum,” he teased me, letting out a filthy moan when he slid his finger into his ass. “Does that answer your question?”

I was so caught up watching him finger fuck himself that I forgot what we were talking about.

Until Payton slid his other hand over my dick and stroked me off. It was good, but fuck, yes, I wanted to come in his ass. Only, if he kept touching me this way, I'd be coming before I got the chance to do just that.

I removed his wicked hand and placed it on my hip, and then I grabbed the lube and poured a generous amount over my fingers.

“My turn, Angel.”

Payton started jerking himself off, and I slid one finger in his ass, then two. A dark flush stained his cheekbones and fuck, he was so beautiful and all mine. He licked his swollen lips and thinking about how they looked when they were wrapped around my dick, then covered in my cum, had my balls drawing up tight.

I pushed my fingers in deeper, then crooked them.

“That’s it, Len. Don’t stop,” he groaned. “Please.”

I fucked into him with steady strokes, watching him come undone. He was so sexy like this, his blond curls messy, his long, lean form splayed out on the sheets. Payton deserved to be worshiped, and that was exactly what I was going to do.

I leaned down, unable to resist, and licked the rim of his asshole.

“Oh God,” he whimpered.

I added a third finger, making sure he was good and ready for my cock.

“Len.”

Reluctantly, I removed my fingers and added more lube to my hand, then slicked up my dick. I was so hard it was damn near painful. And when I finally notched the head of my dick to his hole, my thighs began to shake. I didn’t want to hurt him. And having sex without a condom? Nothing between us? Oh, baby.

I slipped his long, gorgeous legs over my arms, and then I realized that I wasn’t the only one who was trembling.

“You okay, Angel?”

“I will be once you fuck me with your enormous dick.”

I couldn't help the laugh that poured out of me, and why was that the most incredible feeling ever? Because there was simply no one, no one, like my Payton.

And once I slid all the way inside him? Bare? Fuuuuuuuck . My eyes rolled back in my head. I could die now. Good. Gone. Nirvana achieved.

“I'm gonna stay here inside you forever, m'kay?” I panted, staring down at him.

“I agree with that plan,” he whispered.

I thought watching him finger his ass was hot, but the view of my dick sliding into his hole was even better. Pumping my hips, I started out with short, slow strokes, giving him time to adjust. But Payton's heels dug into my ass, urging me on.

“Naughty,” I growled and playfully slapped his butt.

“Exactly,” Payton whispered as he stared up at me. “Harder, Len. I need you.”

I punched my hips forward, until my balls slapped his ass, and Payton's moan was so decadent it made me shiver. I was hot and desperate for him, and there was nothing else I wanted than to give him everything he needed.

Leaning down, placing my hands on either side of his hips, I fucked into him in a fierce rhythm; the bed shaking underneath us. I bent down, kissing his chest and licking his nipples. His tortured groans and whimpers drove me wild.

And then I took his lips in a decadent kiss, ravaging his lips, while I rutted into him

with abandon, needing to be as deep as I could get, claiming what was mine.

“Yes,” he groaned. “Fuck, yes. Don’t stop.”

No fucking way.

“Angel.”

He slid both hands around my back, holding on tight.

I reached for his dick, but he shook his head. “Don’t need that. I’m gonna come.”

My own climax raced to the finish line as I thrust harder, faster, the heat of his ass strangling my dick.

“Len!” Payton cried out and jolted in my arms, hot cum lashing my skin.

I leaned back, took hold of his hips, and pounded his pert ass until my balls drew up tight. The pleasure was so intense that I screamed as I came hard, releasing my load deep in his ass.

And when I saw my cum leaking out of Payton’s hole? There was no mistaking that he was mine.

“My cum... on you... hottest thing ever,” I panted, trying to catch my breath. “Sorry, I’m gonna pass out now.”

Payton wrapped his legs around my waist and held on tight as I collapsed on top of him. Not wanting to crush my husband, I rolled over and pulled him with me, switching our positions. Payton kissed my cheek and snuggled closer.

And me? I was so content I fell fast asleep in his arms.

Payton

I should've been exhausted, but instead of sleeping, like my husband, I was wide awake.

My husband.

I was still wrapping my brain around that. Lennie loved me, and this relationship was real. I couldn't stop staring at him. So thankful that this incredible man was mine.

For the first time in years my guard was gone, and I was ready to take that leap of faith. With Lennie.

I gave him one last kiss, slid out of bed, and opened the bedroom door, letting my cat in. Finnigan ignored me, hopped up on the bed, and made himself comfortable on Lennie's stomach.

"You ungrateful wench," I joked.

Finnigan closed his eyes, not having any of my attitude, and joined Lennie in dreamland.

Since I was sticky as hell, I headed for the shower. But I didn't recognize the man standing in front of my mirror. I looked...happy. Not the fake kind, like when you need to put on a good face at a party, but real happiness. The kind that comes from deep inside. The kind that made me deliriously high and at the same time, grounded, secure.

Is this what a real adult relationship feels like? If so, I was all in.

After I showered, I walked through the bedroom and headed for my closet. Both my men were still asleep, Lennie snoring so loud he drowned out Finnigan's purrs. I was tempted to take a picture of the two of them since the adorableness was off the charts. But I didn't want to risk waking them.

Turning back to my wardrobe, I looked for something to wear. Then I remembered that the silk robe I favored was still packed in my suitcase. As I searched my closet for another robe, I noticed one particular outfit that I'd yet to wear at all. A hot pink latex skirt and crop top I'd recently purchased. A total impulse buy. I thought it would be perfect for one of the band's private after-parties. Maybe for the world tour stop in Paris? Nothing shocked Parisiens, latex least of all.

I pulled on the knee-length skirt, and then the top. Given how tight the garments were, it took me more than a minute to get them on. The top had long sleeves and a high collar, but no back, save for the small piece around my ribcage. And the skirt showed off my legs and ass. The matching set was slick and sexy, and with heels and a pair of dramatic earrings, it would be stunning. I wanted to see the full effect, so I slipped on a pair of black leather stilettos and took one last look.

"Oh my God."

CHAPTER 14

PAYTON

I startled, turning around at the sound of Lennie's sleep-roughened voice. And I wasn't the only one who got a shock. My cat bounded off the bed and ran out the door.

"Am I in the middle of a sex dream?" Lennie asked. "Are you gonna tie me up and do wicked things to me? Because I didn't think I was into that kind of thing, but you, in that latex, and those heels, is giving me dirty, dirty ideas."

I sauntered over to the bed and turned around, modeling the outfit for him. I'd always had confidence in my style, but hearing his reaction made me blush.

"You like?" I asked innocently.

"Like?" Lennie growled. "Come here, Angel."

I shook my ass at him and headed back to the closet. I heard a rustle, and suddenly, Lennie was behind me, pinning me to the door with his hot, naked body.

Oh yes, this outfit was definitely a winner, whether or not I ever wore it again.

"You're gonna get sweat and cum all over me," I quipped.

"Damn right," He replied, his hot breath tickling my ear. "Now take your sexy ass

over to the bed and bend over, sweetheart.”

Lennie leaned back, and I slipped out from under him, strutting slowly, letting him enjoy the view as I walked away. When I bent over and placed my hands on the end of the bed, Lennie was right there, grabbing the edge of the skirt and shoving it up my thighs, until my ass was bared to him.

I was expecting to get railed, fast and hot. What I didn’t expect was Lennie’s sinful tongue flicking over my hole. Lord, this man knew how to rim me to another dimension.

Gripping the sheets tight, I pushed my hips back, needing more. When I glanced over my shoulder and saw Lennie’s large hands gripping my ass, my cock grew so hard, so fast, I was lightheaded. He continued to eat me out and I’m pretty sure all my neighbors heard me begging.

Lennie gave one of my cheeks a playful nip and stood up. He reached for the lube on the bed. I faced the headboard, trembling with anticipation.

When his slick cocked breached my hole, the burn was so fucking good, and I moaned like the loud, needy bottom I was.

“Fuck yes, like that,” I keened.

Lennie pushed all the way inside, and I was so damn full. With the added height of my heels, I dropped my weight to my forearms, changing the angle, taking him deeper.

“Want you,” Lennie groaned and punched his hips forward, rutting into me. “So fucking bad.”

“Lennie.”

“I’m gonna give you everything you need, Angel.”

“All I need is you.”

Lennie gripped my hips and pounded my ass, his cock nailing my prostate with every thrust. The headboard banged against the wall, making a racket, but I didn’t care. The pleasure was so good, and I loved how I was totally at Lennie’s mercy in this position. All I could do was take the fucking. And I was damn greedy for it.

“All. Fucking. Mine.” Lennie punctuated each word with a snap of his hips.

“Yes!”

I reached down to take my dick in hand, but Lennie got there first, jerking me off with his calloused grip, all the while never letting up, fucking into me at a frantic pace. Sweat was trickling down my neck and back as the pleasure grew sharper, stronger.

Dropping my head onto my arms, I gave in; to the awesome pleasure, to the heady touch of Lennie’s hands, his cock, his everything. I was surrounded by his hot, heavy body, and it was fucking amazing.

“Come for me, Angel.”

Two, three more strokes of my cock, and I was there, crying out when my orgasm unleashed. Lennie wasn’t far behind me, shouting my name and coming hard, filling me up with his cum.

We were both a panting, sweaty mess. He ran his hands over my body and more

shockwaves rolled through me. It was like he couldn't get enough. And he wasn't the only one. Then he massaged my back, my ass. My knees were about to give out at any moment.

"You fucked me so good I can't feel my legs," I whispered.

Lennie chuckled, slowly pulled out, and wrapped me up in his arms, holding me steady.

"My husbandly duty for the day is done."

God, this man. I held onto him, feeling safe and treasured. More shakes, and a total-body shiver washed over me. Lennie's cum was dripping out of my hole, and I loved it. Loved that he'd marked me. It brought a level of intimacy to sex that I'd yet to experience. And I wanted more.

Suddenly, he scooped me up, bridal style, and walked us to the bathroom.

"I don't know if I can get this latex off," I whispered. "With all the sweat, it feels like it's super-glued to my skin."

"Let me help you."

He gently placed me on my feet and then turned me around. The heels came off first. Then the top. It was a bit of a struggle given my sticky skin, but we got there. The skirt, however, was bunched around my waist. We eased it off, inch by inch, until finally, I was free.

And then I was standing naked in front of my husband. OMG, I had a husband.

Let that sink in, Payton. You're a married man.

“Thank you,” I whispered and reached up to kiss him.

Lennie resisted for a second. “You sure you want to kiss me right now?”

“I want to kiss you always,” I replied and cupped his face. “Especially after you eat my ass. I’m a dirty boy, or haven’t you figured that out yet, darling?”

There was no holding back for either of us after that.

Lennie

After a long shower and another make-out session, Payton and I finally managed to unglue ourselves and headed to the kitchen for a snack.

Finnigan was lying on top of the sofa, giving us a green glare that told me he was not happy about the sounds coming out of Payton’s bedroom. Too bad. The cat would have to get used to me being here. And also, he’d have to get used to visiting my place.

I rummaged through Payton’s cupboards and located a box of pasta and a jar of sun-dried tomatoes. He also had parmesan cheese, one onion, and a head of garlic. And not much else, except a few frozen meals, three containers of ice cream, and yogurt.

“We’ve got enough here to make dinner,” I announced. “You got a big pot and a frypan?”

Payton pulled open his pantry door and pulled out the necessary equipment.

“Can you get the water going?” I asked. “I’ll make the sauce.”

“You’re going to spoil me,” Payton commented.

“And?”

“Don’t stop.” Payton smiled. “But I’m going to ask again. How come some wonderful man hasn’t snatched you up?”

“I was waiting for you.”

I confirmed my statement by leaning down and giving him a fierce kiss.

“So, there are no crazy ex-boyfriends I have to worry about?”

I shook my head. “My only attempt at a relationship was three years ago. I dated a guy I met at the gym. We were together for five months. But he didn’t like the fact that I was working late nights, or that I was away for weeks at a time. Or the fact I’d be so tired after a tour run that I didn’t want to go out. And it made me think that maybe a relationship wasn’t to happen for me. Since then, I’ve done the casual thing. When I needed sex, I hit a bar or a club. What about you? Don’t tell me you don’t have boyfriend stories.”

“I do, but I’d rather forget about them.”

“That bad?”

I slid my arm around Payton’s waist and drew him in tight, kissing his curls. Knowing anyone had hurt him, hurt me. He was so much more than beautiful. My man had a sensitive heart. And he had a lot of love to give. I’d watched him at work, how welcoming he was with everyone in the crew. Always making people laugh and wanting them to be a part of the conversation.

“I always ended up falling for the wrong guys,” he confessed. “Being wanted behind closed doors but not out in the open does a number on you. I always play off like I’m

super confident and nothing ever gets to me. But when the person you love, or think you love, is ashamed to be seen with you, it hurts.”

I squeezed him tighter.

“A lot of people aren’t comfortable in their sexuality, their identity. Either accepting it or expressing it. Whatever the case, it’s their problem, not yours. The right person will step out into the spotlight with you and show you off to the world.”

Payton glanced at me, his eyes welling up. He blinked away the tears before they fell, but I saw them. My heart ached for him.

“Will you?” he whispered.

My heart was pounding wildly.

“Yes.”

His luminous smile hit me hard.

“You know what?” he asked.

“What?”

“I’ve decided that I’m keeping this gorgeous ring you bought me. And, more importantly, I’m keeping you.”

I was happy with that.

CHAPTER 15

LENNIE

Payton and I were finishing up our dinner when my phone rang.

It was Regan. I tapped my phone.

“Hey Regan, what’s up?”

“Are you able to work a shift tonight? I’m sorry about the short notice, but Valen’s sick, and Petyr too. They probably picked up a stomach bug in Vegas. I hope no one else on the team comes down with it.”

I didn’t want to leave Payton, but duty called. “I didn’t think there was anything on the schedule today. Is there a last-minute event going on?”

“Sort of. It’s an escort for Evert Jackson, the photographer who’s been hired for the world tour? He’s got a gallery showing tonight, and there will be press in attendance. His contract includes a detail for any events this year.”

“Right. Any issues?”

“No, it’s a standard contract. It’s a private event, but he’s been known to hit the clubs afterward. Door to door, you know the drill. Nine PM pickup. I’ll text you the address,” Regan replied.

“Okay. I’ll be there.”

“Thanks, Len. Apologies for interrupting your evening.”

“That’s all right.”

There was a pause on the other end of the line.

“Anything else?” I asked.

“How did your appointment go today?” She asked.

“I’ll tell you in person tomorrow.”

“See you at the studio at noon.”

I tapped End and put the phone down on the counter.

“I’m afraid I’m gonna eat and run,” I said to Payton. “Work. I’ve got to escort Evert Jackson to an event tonight.”

Suddenly, I worried that maybe history was going to repeat itself. Maybe Payton wouldn’t want to deal with my crazy schedule, either.

“Duty calls,” he replied and took a sip of his wine. “That’s the nature of our jobs.”

I chuckled, my nerves easing. “That’s exactly what I thought when Regan asked me to sub. Valen and Petyr are both sick with a stomach bug.”

Payton picked up his phone. “I’ll text them and see if they need anything.”

“That’s sweet. Thanks.”

“You don’t need to thank me.”

I leaned over and kissed him softly. “I’ll be late. Until probably two or three. Is it okay if I come back?”

“You better.” He smiled and stood up. “Hold on.”

Payton walked over to the kitchen and grabbed one of the ceramic containers on the counter. He opened the lid, reached in, and pulled out a set of keys. When he came back to sit beside me, he placed the keys in my hand.

“The parking garage code is 5712. The blue one is the key to the building, and the red one is for my condo.”

I gratefully pocketed the keys and reached for him. The kiss I planted on him was hard and quick, but no less potent than any touch between us.

“I’ll see you later, Angel.”

“Be safe.”

I grabbed my phone and headed for the door. By the time I got to my car, Regan had texted Evert’s address. Then I sent Valen and Petyr a quick group text.

Lennie: Regan gave me the lowdown. How’re you guys feeling? You need anything before I report to work?

Petyr: Puking my guts out like I’m back in basic training, but I’ll survive. Thanks, though. Appreciated.

Valen: I think I'm over the worst of it, but still nauseous. BTW, your husband texted us. Said to call him if we need anything. That's a sweet man you have. Hold on to him.

Lennie: I intend to

With that done, I got on the road. Evert lived in a condo complex only fifteen minutes from Payton's. It was one of those boutique buildings, a restored warehouse that housed a small number of exclusive condos.

Once inside, I buzzed Evert and took the elevator to the fourth floor. When I knocked on the door, the photographer in question answered it, phone to his ear, waving me inside.

He looked like one of his celebrity subjects, with long, blonde hair, wire-rimmed glasses, and copious tattoos running up his arms. And his place was as dramatic as I'd envisioned. Eclectic furniture was crammed into every nook, with photographs and paintings filling up the walls, floor to ceiling. Loft ceilings that were easily fifteen feet.

"Yes, I got the invite." Evert paused and ran a hand through his hair as he talked. "And no, I won't be going. You know how I feel about this whole thing. They wouldn't talk to Zachary when he was alive, but now, suddenly, they want to make a big deal out of memorializing him? No. I refuse to talk to those people. They're toxic. And that's the end of it. I have to go."

Evert tapped on his phone and shoved it in his pocket. Then he ran his hands along his forearms, his bracelets rattling.

"Sorry about that. Personal shit that has the worst timing ever."

“No worries,” I replied. “I could’ve waited in the hallway.”

Evert shook his head. “I’m going to be traveling with you and the crew for months on end. I’m sure by the end of it, you’ll know all my secrets.”

“Bodyguards are like lawyers,” I replied. “We hear the confessions, but we keep our mouths shut.”

“Good to know.” Evert nodded and offered a smile. “It’s kinda strange for me to have to have a bodyguard. I guess this means I’ve hit the big time.”

“With the tour coming up, there’s a lot of fan and media frenzy. Best to be safe.”

Evert’s phone rang again, but he ignored it. “I need to change. Do you want water or anything before we leave?”

“I’m good, but thanks.”

“Make yourself at home.”

Evert nodded and disappeared down the hallway.

I walked around the living room, taking in his enormous collection of artwork. Most of them were photographs that captured celebrities, musicians, and the like. There were lots of professional shots, album covers and the like, and candid pictures too. But the apartment had a strange feel to it. It was more like a gallery or a showroom than a home. Or maybe it was me. Not that it was any of my business.

Less than ten minutes later, Evert reappeared, minus his glasses and ripped jeans. Instead, he rocked leather pants, a pinstriped vest, and cowboy boots, his hair neatly braided down his back.

“I can’t get over the number of photographs on these walls. I assume they’re all yours?”

Evert’s smile disappeared completely. “No. Not all of them.”

When he didn’t say any more, I realized that I’d touched a no-go zone.

“We better get going,” I announced, changing the subject. “You don’t want to be late.”

“I’m an artist, that’s a given.”

I headed for the door and waited in the hallway while Evert locked up. On our way to the elevator, I noticed he was rubbing his left forearm. Nervous habit?

“So, you excited for the tour?” I asked.

Evert nodded. “I am. I’ve done a lot of shoots at concerts and events, but never a full world tour. You?”

“Not on this scale. Wayward has reached next level fame. And Killmine, the band they’re touring with, is awesome too. One thing’s for sure, it’s gonna be a year we’ll never forget.”

The rest of the ride down was quiet until Evert pointed to my left hand.

“I heard about your Vegas wedding. Should I offer congratulations or condolences?” he quipped.

We stepped out into the lobby.

“Congratulations would be welcome. Payton and I are—” I paused, lost for words. The whole thing was still surreal to me. I never thought we’d end up here.

Evert whistled. “Say no more. I can tell by the way you say his name that you’re a goner.”

“I am,” I replied as we headed for the door. “What about you? You dating anyone?”

I held the door open as we stepped out into the cool night.

“I don’t date. Not anymore.” He paused and offered a quick smile. “Hookups are my happy place.”

We hopped in my car and headed for the gallery. When we arrived, there was a line of security outside, checking guests’ credentials as people filed inside. Once we gave our names and IDs, we were guided inside. Evert got busy texting the gallery owner to advise that he’d arrived while I scoped out the room.

“Evening, guys.”

I turned, surprised to find Jesse standing behind us.

“Hey, Jesse.”

“What are you doing here?” Evert demanded.

Jesse crossed his arms. “I was invited.”

“Oh.”

“Your assistant, Bailey, sent me the invite. I’m sure everyone at Hardwick’s head

office got one.”

“Of course. Sorry,” Evert replied, a dark flush staining his cheeks. “Um, so, what do you think of the show?”

Jesse ran a hand over his buzzed hair. “But from what I’ve seen so far, it’s everything I’ve come to expect from your work. Sexy and bold. I can’t wait to see what you capture on tour.”

“A lot of that will depend on the bands and how much access they give me. Most of that work involves taking candid shots and behind-the-scenes stuff.”

That was gonna be interesting.

Jesse cleared his throat and nodded. “Just don’t take any of me.”

Evert gave Jesse a slow once-over and despite being in bodyguard mode, I couldn’t help but notice the tension between them.

“I go where the muse takes me, cari?o. Don’t be surprised if you end up on these walls someday,” Evert replied smoothly. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a gallery manager to flag down. Enjoy the rest of your evening.”

Jesse nodded, and I followed Evert into the crowd, scanning the room.

Jesse was right. One picture after another was stunning and sexy. There were famous faces I recognized, but not all of them. And there was a grittiness to the scenes that Evert captured—mostly in clubs, or at parties. These weren’t carefully manipulated poses in a studio. I’d seen his work in both spaces. Evert did a lot of promo shots for various bands, including Wayward Lane.

Evert finally managed to locate the manager, a twenty-something guy who didn't spare a glance at me. I guess since I wasn't a rich dude ready to buy all the artwork, I wasn't deserving of acknowledgment. Ignoring the guy's rudeness, Evert did the intros, and I said hello, but I didn't offer my hand. I could be rude as fuck, too, when warranted. Whatever. My job was to be seen and not heard. I stood nearby and picked up bits and pieces of the conversations going on around me.

The manager's talking jag came to an end when he got called away by another patron. The who's who of Nashville was here tonight and more people came up to talk to Evert about his work. There were lots of air kisses, tons of name-dropping, and invites to parties.

After an hour, Evert excused himself from the crowd and turned to me. "Where's the fucking bar in this place? I need a drink. No, make it three."

I bit back a laugh and looked around. "It's set up at the back of the room."

"Let's go," he replied as we took off into the crowd again. "Between you and me, Len, if I didn't need to pay my bills, I'd avoid this whole fucking scene."

"The art world?"

"The PR machine that goes with it. Give me egotistical musicians and loud music any day over this shit."

I totally agreed.

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CHAPTER 16

LENNIE

After the gallery event, Evert wanted to hit a couple of bars. He met up with friends at a local honkytonk, and I waited on the sideline, counting down the hours until I could go back to Payton.

When I dropped Evert at his place, around two, I was tired but wired. Thankfully, it didn't take long to get to Payton's. And when I opened the door to his condo, Finnigan was lying in the hallway, like he knew I was coming.

"Hey pretty boy, were you waiting up on me?"

The cat got up and rubbed against my legs while I locked the door. I reached down and picked him up, then headed for Payton's bedroom. He'd left a light on for me.

I placed Finnigan gently on the foot of the bed, then made my way to the bathroom. Once I was done washing up, I padded back into the room and slid between the sheets. I was about to turn off the bedside lamp when Payton rolled over and latched onto me like an octopus.

"You're home."

I clutched him tightly to me, my emotions bubbling up without warning. "I sure am."

His place, my place, it didn't matter. Home was Payton's arms. As long as he was

with me, I was happy.

“How was tonight?” Payton asked.

I kissed his head, and he snuggled in closer. “Evert’s photos are amazing. He sold a lot. And after the gallery, he met up with friends at Foster’s Way. Remember that place?”

Payton sat up and straddled my waist, his curls mussed, his eyes sleepy.

“Of course, they have line dancing. We met up with Wayward and Killmine, and you watched me ride the mechanical bull.”

That night was burned into my memory. I’d never been so distracted at work before. I should’ve known then that I was in trouble with this man.

“Well, I wanted to make sure you didn’t fall off and hurt yourself.”

“Is that why your eyes were latched onto my ass the whole time?” Payton quipped.

My cock began to fill, and I didn’t care if it was two in the morning. I needed him. Now.

“How about you show me those riding skills, Angel?”

“You’re not too tired?” Payton asked coyly.

“Does it feel like I’m tired?” I rubbed my aching cock against his naked ass. “Wait. Are you sore?”

Payton shook his head, scooted down the bed, and pulled down my briefs. He tossed

them aside, but they landed on Finnigan, who promptly hissed and fled the room.

I reached for the nightstand and threw the lube on the bed.

“I’m all yours, sweetheart.”

Payton raked his nails down my chest and teased my nipples. When he bent over and licked one, then the other, I nearly came off the bed. He had a wicked tongue, and he knew how to use it.

Grabbing the lube, he slicked up his hand and then my cock, stroking me off until I was sweating and swearing up a storm, desperate to come.

“That’s it, Angel. Take what belongs to you.”

Payton sat up and notched the head of my dick to his hole, slowly sinking onto my cock, one tormenting inch at a time.

“Fuck yes,” I moaned.

“So goddamn incredible,” Payton whispered, his eyes full of desire.

I groaned, unable to form any more words. Payton leaned back, one hand on the mattress between my legs, the other sliding up and down his dick as he rode me, fast and furious.

I grabbed his thighs and thrust my hips to meet him, fucking into him. The sound of our bodies slapping together and the heat of his ass strangling my cock was too much.

And watching Payton, completely uninhibited, taking what he wanted, was so fucking sexy. My climax burned higher and higher. Payton’s body clenched up tight as he

came, cum lashing on his hand and my abs. Watching his pleasure sparked mine, and I lost all rhythm as the orgasm took hold of me.

“Payton!” I shouted, coming hard, rutting into him.

I couldn’t get close enough, deep enough. And when Payton collapsed on top of me? I wrapped him up tight, and I wasn’t letting go. Not ever.

“Payton,” I whispered his name this time. “Angel?”

“Yes, love?” he replied and looked at me.

I paused, soaking up his affection. “I am, you know. Your love. I love you, Payton DeLaine Rizzoli.”

Payton gave me a devouring kiss. “Well, then I guess it’s a good thing we got married because I love you too, Leonardo Andrea Rizzoli DeLaine.”

“That sounds right. But it’s quite a mouthful.”

“You are,” Payton replied with a sinful grin. “But I can handle it.”

Then my sexy husband showed me exactly what he meant.

Payton - the next day

Lennie and I had breakfast and then headed back to his place so he could grab a change of clothes. Then we checked up on Valen and Petyr before heading to work. Thankfully, both guys were feeling better. Not great, but at least they were able to eat again. We insisted on giving them the rest of Nonna’s soup and Lennie assured his friends that it would set them right.

Both Valen and Petyr were more than happy to hear that Lennie and I were official.

After visiting our friends, we made our way to the studio before noon. Only this time, Lennie was holding my hand as we entered the building. Heads turned as we passed colleagues at reception, wishing them ‘ good morning .’ The studio grapevine was about to explode. Well, by now, everyone knew we were married, but they probably didn’t expect that it would take.

Lennie slipped his arm around my waist as we made our way to Zoe’s office. “You sure know how to make an entrance, Angel.”

“Darling, it’s not me. Or us,” I replied with a cheeky grin. “They’ve just never seen you smile before.”

Lennie reached down and pinched my ass in retaliation.

“Don’t start that here,” I warned him. “Or I’ll drag you into one of the sound booths.”

“Why not? I can’t tell you how many times I’ve caught the boys in the band doing the exact same thing. I’m surprised this place doesn’t have a vending machine that sells lube.”

I laughed at that and leaned in to kiss him.

“I see the honeymoon isn’t over.”

I looked over my shoulder to find Brodie standing behind us, his usual smirk in place.

“No, it’s not,” I bragged. “But since Lennie and I are forever, our honeymoon can wait. Your hair, on the other hand, can’t.”

“What’s wrong with my hair?” Brodie asked, reaching up to play with his dark curls.

Lennie chuckled and shook his head at me.

‘ You’re so bad ,’ he mouthed.

I stuck my tongue out in return. Hey, I was married. I didn’t say I was totally mature.

I turned to Brodie. “It’s looking less rockstar and more porn star.”

“And that’s a bad thing?” Brodie quipped.

“I’m all for that 70s look, but I can’t see your cheekbones. You need a trim on the sides, and texturizing on top. Let’s go up to the photo studio and get it done.”

When we reached the tenth floor, Jesse was already there, along with Evert, Holloway, Ronin, and Faise. Regan and Dawson were nearby, having what looked to be an intense conversation with Averell Jones, the head of the label’s marketing team.

Evert was setting up the scene for his photo shoot and waved us over.

“Hey Payton, Lennie,” he greeted us.

“I’m ready to get to work, what are you thinking style wise?” I asked Evert.

“I want the guys to look like it’s the end of the night, after a long performance. Slick skin, wet hair, smeared makeup.”

“Of course,” I replied, and motioned for the band to join me. “Brodie, you’re up first, since I have to cut the mane.”

“When are you gonna get to me, Payton?” Ronin teased. “I thought I was your favorite.”

“I told you before, Ronin, I only service one man at a time,” I teased.

“Does Lennie know that?” Ronin waggled his eyebrows.

Lennie didn’t reply, but his rude hand gesture said a lot. God, it was good to be back at work.

“Hair and makeup only, honey,” I retorted. “I’m a happily married man now.”

Lennie leaned down and gave me a kiss before walking over to talk to Regan.

“It’s real?” Holloway asked, eyes wide. “You guys are staying married?”

“We are.”

I’m pretty sure the wattage of my smile could power the entire studio.

“Called it!” Brodie yelled, and Holloway gave him a high five.

Regan’s voice suddenly interrupted us. “Payton, a word, please!”

“Ooh, trouble’s calling,” Faise teased. “And for once, it’s not about Ro.”

Ronin pulled Faise into his arms and kissed his fiancé quiet.

I headed over to talk with Regan and Lennie. “What’s up?”

“Lennie told me about your decision, and I want to offer you both my

congratulations,” Regan replied.

She smiled, which, for the security boss, was rare.

“Thanks, Regan.”

“But,” she added, her face stern again. “I want to reiterate that when Lennie is on duty, he can’t be distracted. If there are any personal issues between you, whatever they might be, you need to work it out on your own time. Understood?”

“Totally,” I replied, a hand over my heart.

“Good. Now, we have a world tour to get ready for. Lennie, meeting, my office, ten minutes.”

“Yes, boss.”

Regan sauntered off, waving to Averell and the guys on her way out.

“I better get the guys ready,” I said to Lennie. “Evert’s waiting.”

Lennie pulled me in and gave me a languid kiss. “Text me when you’re done, and I’ll meet you down here. You want to have dinner out tonight?”

“Like a real date?”

“Not like. A real date.” Lennie squeezed my waist. “What are you hungry for?”

More of this man.

“I have an incredible appetite for Italian.”

“I know just the place,” Lennie smiled at me.

“Darling, I’m not talking about food.”

“I know, Angel.” He kissed me again. “Later. First, I want to take my husband out. Because he deserves all the dates.”

For the first time in my life, I couldn’t think of a flirty reply. And you know what? I didn’t need one. For me and Lennie, love trumped all.

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PAYTON

A MONTH LATER

“What’s the rush? I thought the event didn’t start until ten?” I asked Lennie.

We were days away from the start of the world tour, and I was so excited. First stop: Japan. I couldn’t wait. The only thing I was worried about was leaving Finnigan for so long. But I knew he was in good hands with Lennie’s sister.

Two weeks ago, I’d packed up my stuff and moved in with Lennie. Bella was looking for a new place, so she rented my condo. It worked out great for all of us. And we didn’t need to hire a moving company. All the guys in Lennie’s protective detail volunteered to move me in.

And tonight? We had a party to attend before we flew to Asia. Lennie was on duty at this one. But even if I couldn’t dance or flirt with him, at least we’d still be in the same room.

I wore my a silk pantsuit—hot pink, of course—and Lennie was sexy AF in his navy tuxedo. But I had no idea who would be in attendance or what this event was about. Lennie and everyone at the label had been hush about details. I was told it was a black-tie gala with label executives and corporate sponsors.

“I promised Regan we’d be the first ones there,” Lennie replied, running a hand through his hair.

Again. All my styling work was going to be ruined in no time. Lennie had been acting strange all day. Fidgeting—with his hair, his watch, his tie, which was not like him. Not to mention, he checked his phone every two minutes, like he was expecting an update. On what, I had no idea.

He hustled me into the venue, which had no lights on. That was odd.

“What’s going?—”

“Surprise!!!”

Voices yelled out and suddenly, the room lit up. When I looked around, the place was packed with our friends and family.

“What’s this?” I gasped, too stunned to move.

Lennie kissed my hand. “Since we didn’t have a wedding reception in Vegas, I thought we could have one now. A vow renewal and then a proper party to celebrate.”

My eyes welled up as I looked around. The place was beautiful and decorated with every shade of pink imaginable, from the flowers to the table settings to the candles. There was even a rose carpet down the center of the room. It was over-the-top glam and so... me. This was the dream wedding I’d always wanted.

I reached for Lennie, kissing him soundly, too overcome to speak.

“Save that for later! Make it legal first!” Valen shouted.

Lennie gave me a tender kiss, then pointed to the end of the aisle. “Are you ready to make it official? Again?”

“Yes.”

I was shaking, wiping tears from my face. Thank God for waterproof mascara. Bella stepped forward, offering me a small bouquet of peonies. My favorite. Lennie thought of everything. This wonderful, sweet man of mine.

“Thank you,” I whispered, and leaned forward to give my sister-in-law a kiss.

Lennie and I walked down the makeshift aisle, hand in hand, and I spotted Evert at the front, taking pictures. Lennie’s mom and dad, his Nonna, aunts, uncles, and cousins were all here. So, too, were my aunt and uncle from Atlanta. And all the Wayward Lane boys, as well as Van, Dawson, and Jesse. Our road crew, including Ace and Tommy, Tommy’s boyfriend Nate, and his band brothers from Killmine. Every bodyguard and crew member that Lennie and I worked with. Our motley crew. One I was so proud to be a part of.

Lennie’s dad moved to stand at the end of the aisle to face us.

“If everyone can take their seat, we’ll begin,” my father-in-law stated.

Having David perform the ceremony for us was so meaningful. Our first wedding would always be special, no matter how it happened. But now we had a second celebration to cherish.

“You ready, Angel?” Lennie asked me.

I held on tight to his arm.

“For you? Always.”

Thank You for reading Don’t Fall For A Bodyguard! Read about the Wayward Lane boys in Punk-In (Brodie and Van), B-Mine (Holloway and Dawson), and 4-Ever

(Ronin and Faise).