



# Forever Your Touch

## (Manwhore #4)

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**Category:** Romance

**Description:** Mason Kincaid is a player.

He learned from the best—his brothers. He knows he’s a good-looking bastard and isn’t afraid to use his baby face on the ladies. Life is sweet until he receives a call from his best friend begging Mason to look out for his baby sister, Josephine. A babysitting job is not on his list of things to do, but Keith is like a brother to him, and he can’t say no.

Then he meets Josephine and feels like a fifteen-year-old fanboy. Josephine isn’t just Keith’s little sister—she’s Mason’s favorite YouTuber, and Keith damn well knew it. The bastard probably laughed his ass off.

Celebrity crush or not, he takes his role as her fill-in big brother seriously, and he immediately understands Keith’s dislike of Jo’s self-centered boyfriend. The more time Mason spends with her, the harder it is not to beat the asshole black and blue. And the harder it is to guard his heart. Before long, the player is played. He falls in love with a woman who is not only taken, but seems to truly love her boyfriend.

But Mason is a Kincaid, and Kincaids don’t back down. He’s determined to change his manwhore ways and show Jo what it means to be treated right, cared for, and loved, even though she fights him with every breath.

But can he convince her to listen to her heart before it’s too late—and they lose the one thing they’ll never find again?

**Total Pages (Source):** 30

## CHAPTER ONE

The incessant ringing forced him awake.

“What?” he barked into the phone.

“Wake the hell up, Mason. I need your help.”

Keith Maxwell’s panicked voice broke through Mason Kincaid’s drunken haze like nothing else could. He rubbed his eyes and sat up, ignoring the girl asleep beside him. Checking the clock, he saw it was three in the morning.

“I’m up,” he yawned. “What’s going on?”

“It’s my sister.”

“Which one?” Keith was his best friend, but Mason had only ever met one of his four sisters. He and Keith met their freshman year in college, and they’d been fast friends since.

“Josephine, my baby sister.” Keith took a deep breath and let it out. “She’s gone and moved in with a guy none of us likes or trusts.”

Some of the worry went out of him. Girl shit. He should have known.

“Keith, man, girls date guys their families don’t approve of all the time. It happens.”

“She moved to New York, asshole. This guy fucking convinced her to move to New York with him, away from all her family. She doesn’t know anyone there. What if he’s an abuser? We wouldn’t even know.”

Okay, he got why Keith was freaked. His baby sister moved across the country. Hell, if he had a sister, he’d be pissed too. “Okay, calm down, dude. What is it you want me to do?”

“I need for you to be me.” Keith broke off and started talking to someone else.

He was probably calling from Mason’s old frat house.

Mason could hear the sounds of the party still going on downstairs here at their NYU chapter where he currently resided.

Friday nights were party nights at Alpha, no matter what state you were in.

What the hell did that mean? For him to be Keith?

“Explain.” He was too drunk for this shit.

“Jo doesn’t have any family there. I need for you to be me, to be her fill-in brother.”

He did not hear that right.

“Keith, what the hell?—”

“Look, Mase, I know it’s a lot to ask, but you’re my best friend. You’re the only person I trust to look out for my sister. You need to watch that bastard she’s shacked up with, make sure he’s treating her right. You know I’d do the same for you.”

Fucker.

Mason growled, knowing Keith would do the same for him. No way in hell was he getting out of this now that Keith pulled the best friend card.

“Fine, asshole. Text me her address, and I’ll go check on her.”

“Not just check on her, Mase. Be there for her. Be me.”

“Fucker, it’s three in the morning, and I’m so drunk I’m seeing two of everything. Call me tomorrow and tell me about this shit.”

“Fine, I’ll call you tomorrow. Sleep it off.”

Fingers curled around his cock, and he turned his head to see the brunette wide awake and ready to play. Sleep would come later. He had business to attend to right now.

He hung up the phone and turned all his attention to the girl with the magical lips.

Morning came and went. It was well past noon before Mason kicked the brunette out of his room and went to shower, his head buzzing.

Hangovers were rare for him. He’d grown up with five brothers, and they’d taught him how to hold his liquor.

He ran a hand through his shaggy, thick black hair as he skirted around people still passed out cold in the hallway.

It must have been a wild party. Once he hooked up, the party faded, and he’d continued it in his bedroom.

The party scene was getting old. He'd loved it when he was a freshman, but the older he got, the less he wanted to get drunk off his ass and behave like an idiot. It was why he'd retired to his room instead of partaking in the festivities going on downstairs.

Kade, his oldest brother, would tell him he was growing up. Mason curled his lip at the thought. He loved being carefree and not having responsibilities outside insurance for his truck. He was young and intended to enjoy every moment of it.

The shower helped to clear some of the fuzz left over from last night. Didn't take long to find clean clothes and head down to the kitchen to get some grub. The mess that greeted him made him change his mind. God only knew what was left in the fridge. Drunken fools ate like nobody's business.

He hauled ass to Mae's Diner. They served breakfast all day, and he was starved.

"Late night, Mase?" Sheryl, his favorite waitress, greeted him.

He'd been here enough everyone knew him by name.

He loved this old fifties-style diner, from its black and white checkered floors to the light blue upholstered seats.

Records hung on the walls, and the staff wore poodle skirts and black strappy flats.

The women kept their hair up in ponytails, and the guys—well, they were guys and wore their hair however. He wasn't going to judge.

"Yeah." Sheryl looked tired today. She was in her mid to late twenties and supported three kids on her wages. Mason always tipped her well for that reason. "Everything okay?"

She nodded.

“Kids okay?”

She rocked back and forth on her feet, and he got the vibe she didn’t want to talk about it. “What can I get you, darlin’?”

“Pancakes and your breakfast platter. Lots and lots of syrup. And the biggest coffee you have. I’m in caffeine withdrawal.”

He frowned after Sheryl, an uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach. Something was wrong there, but the shrill ringing of his phone steered him away from that thought.

Keith.

The conversation from last night slammed into him. Babysitting duty. Shit.

He swiped the phone to answer the call. “Hey, man.”

“You sober?”

“Gettin’ there.” Mason waved to a few girls who came in and tossed them an easy smile, but he looked away before they took it as an invitation to join him. “Now, tell me what’s going on with your sister.”

“She met this guy in high school, Ray Daniels. He’s a real douchebag.”

“Are you sure you don’t think that just because he’s dating your sister?” Sheryl dropped off a steaming mug of coffee, and he mouthed her a thank you.

“Fuck, man, I wish it was that. This guy doesn’t treat her right. It’s like nothing’s

good enough for him, and he hates spending time with us. He'd rather do anything than come over for Sunday dinner."

"Doesn't treat her right, how?" Mason savored the first burst of flavor as the coffee hit his tongue. So good.

"You've never met Jo," Keith said, something odd in his voice, but Mason was too sleepy to question it.

"No. I only ever met Amanda. She came to one of our frat parties, and you kicked her out." Mason smiled at the memory. He'd seriously thought Keith was gonna get his ass beat by a girl that night.

"She had no business being at a frat party." Keith still sounded miffed about it. If it had been him, he'd rather have his sister at his party where he could keep an eye on her, as opposed to one he had no control over. He wasn't about to judge, though. He didn't have a sister. Thank fuck.

"Jo's the baby of the family. As sweet and gentle as she is, she's also very naive. This guy has her wrapped around his finger. He talks shit, he puts himself first, and he's tearing her away from us, Mason. It's not cool. A man puts his girl first, especially if he loves her."

Mason saw how his brothers treated their wives. They definitely put the needs of their women ahead of their own. One of the first things his papa taught them all was to treat women with respect, and if you were lucky enough to find the right one, you better damn well show her how special she was.

One of the girls who had come in earlier caught Mason's eye and smiled at him. He knew her...last week's party, maybe? He made a habit not to sleep with the same girl more than a few times in case they got ideas. He wasn't looking for a relationship,

just some fun.

He ignored her and went back to his phone call. “Okay, I get it. What exactly do you want me to do?”

“First and foremost, go check on her. She’s enrolled at the same college you are, so it shouldn’t be hard to keep an eye on her. She’s shackled up with Ray off campus, though.”

“You thinking he might hurt her or something?” The thought brought out his protective side.

Domestic violence was a topic that hit near and dear to home.

His sister-in-law, Sara Jane, had been in an abusive marriage before she married his brother, Viktor.

Sara left the bastard when he hit their daughter, Delia.

Mason’s lip curled in a snarl thinking about it.

He loved that girl like his own and was glad they’d finally been able to scrub the bastard’s last name off her. She was now officially a Kincaid.

“That’s the thing, man, I just don’t know.” Keith let out a growl of frustration. “I know him, have known him since they started dating. He’s always rubbed me the wrong way.”

No one was ever going to be good enough for any of Keith’s sisters. It was a fact. Mason felt the same way about Delia. Just the thought of some future asshole trying to get cozy with his niece set his teeth to clenching.



Keith was pretty laidback, though, and usually let his sisters do their own thing.

He'd intervene when necessary and kept an eye on them, even his older sisters, but he wasn't a stalker brother.

With Jo, he seemed to be in full-on stalker mode, and Mason didn't dismiss his worry out of hand.

If Keith had a bad feeling about this guy, there was probably a good reason.

"I'll swing by her place after breakfast and check on her. Just text me the address."

"Thanks, Mase." The relief in his best friend's voice was palpable. Keith really didn't like this dude.

Sheryl put his breakfast in front of him, and he flashed her a smile. The scent of bacon hit his nose, and his stomach growled.

"Food's here. I'll call you as soon as the recon mission is done."

With that, he said his goodbyes and dug into the best breakfast in New York.

### CHAPTER TWO

Josephine Maxwell stood at the kitchen table folding laundry.

She needed to get this done so she could go buy her books at the campus bookstore.

Getting them on the Saturday before classes started wasn't ideal, but it couldn't be helped.

She and Ray had only moved here earlier this week.

She'd come and registered and all that weeks ago, but they'd put off moving until the last minute.

No, that wasn't quite true. She'd put off telling her family she was moving from California to New York to be with Ray.

Jo knew how her family felt about Ray, especially Keith, but she wouldn't let their hang-ups stop her from being happy.

Ray could be an ass sometimes, but he could also be the sweetest man when it came to her.

She loved him. And if her family couldn't get behind that, well, that just sucked for them.

"Jo, have you seen my favorite shirt?" Ray stuck his head in the kitchen, frowning at

the mess of unfolded clothes on the table.

“Yeah, I just got it out of the dryer.” She fished it out of the pile and tossed it to him.

He sniffed it. “What’d you wash this in? It stinks.”

“It’s the detergent you bought.” He didn’t look pleased, but there was nothing to be done about it now.

“Go get some new stuff today and rewash this shit.” He threw the shirt back at her and strolled into the kitchen to grab a cup of coffee.

Jo took a moment to let her gaze sweep over him.

Ray wasn’t tall, not even six feet, but that was okay.

Jo herself was only five-two. His brown hair showed blond highlights where the sun hit it in front of the window over the sink.

Brown eyes met hers over the rim of his cup.

She looked over his body. Ray wasn’t ripped, and he didn’t have a six-pack, but she didn’t care about that.

He was your average, normal guy. She liked normal.

Ray walked over and sat down, taking her hand. “You happy, Jo? I know moving here was a big deal for you.”

“I am.” She twined her fingers with his.

“Good.” He leaned over and kissed her then settled back in the chair. “Mom wants us to come to dinner tonight.”

His parents were the one sour spot in this whole move.

They didn’t like her. When they moved here last year, she’d been afraid Ray would as well and leave her behind.

Instead, he’d asked her to come with him.

He’d told her she could enroll at NYU. He didn’t want her to quit school for him.

It was the reason they’d waited, originally, but when May came and went, she found it harder to tell her mom and dad she was leaving, so they’d waited some more.

August rolled around, and there was no more putting it off.

“I gotta go get my books today. It’s the last day the campus bookstore is open before classes on Monday.”

“That’s fine. Just make sure you’re home before five. I promised Mom we’d be there by five thirty. It’ll be good to eat some decent food.”

Jo bit back the snarky comment on the tip of her tongue. She couldn’t cook. He knew this before he asked her to move in with him. So why did he like to make little digs about it? It wasn’t as if she wasn’t trying to learn.

“Can I use the car?” She started putting all the laundry back in the baskets. No use folding it if she was gonna have to rewash it.

“No. I need it.”

Jo frowned. “You going out?”

“Maybe later.” He shrugged and stood, taking his cup and putting it in the sink.

She pushed down her irritation. She’d bet good money he wouldn’t leave the house today, but it was his car and not hers. There wasn’t a lot she could say.

The sound of someone knocking at the door interrupted her irritable thoughts. “Your mom coming by this morning?”

He shook his head. “Mom wouldn’t knock.”

Right. His parents had keys to the house since they were paying the rent on it until Ray got settled. Jo didn’t like them having keys. What if his parents decided to come over and interrupted them having sex? Not something she looked forward to, but she was betting it was gonna happen.

Ray went to answer the door, and she finished cleaning up the table. If she called a cab now, she’d be able to get there and back before five. It was only a little after two. They didn’t live that far from campus.

“Who the hell are you?”

The anger in Ray’s tone sent shivers of alarm racing up her spine, and she sprinted to see what was going on.

She stumbled, barely stopping herself from falling.

Stupid klutzy feet. The sound of a chuckle pulled her attention back to the situation at hand.

A guy stood in the doorway, a mischievous smile gracing his lips.

He was tall, well over six feet, so he towered over Ray.

Black hair glinted blue in the sunlight, and his coal black gaze swept past Ray and landed on her.

She knew exactly who this was. She'd seen him in enough photos on her brother's Instagram.

Mason Kincaid. Of course Keith would send him here.

He needed eyes on her. As much as she loved her brother's overprotective streak, she wished he'd lay off.

There was no need for Mason to come check up on her.

"I'm Jo's FIBB."

"Her what?" Ray frowned.

"Fill-in big brother," Mason explained. "Hey, Josephine."

No one called her that. Not even her mother. She hated it.

Jo came farther into the room, mindful of her feet. It would be just her luck to fall face first and embarrass herself. "What are you doing here, Mason?"

Ray's head snapped back toward her. "You know this guy?"

"He's Keith's best friend."

“Fucking Keith,” Ray muttered.

“Watch it.” Mason’s playful smile disappeared. “I’d be real careful what you say about Keith.”

Ray glared, but Jo cut him off before he said something stupid. “Again, what are you doing here, Mason?”

His smile reappeared, and it sent a little wave of butterflies through her stomach. “Promised your brother I’d come check on you.”

“As you can see, I’m fine.”

“That you are.” There was definite appreciation in those eyes when he looked her over from head to toe. Did he not see her boyfriend standing right in front of him?

“Well, you can go report back to my brother now.”

“Oh, I will.” He flashed her another smile.

“You can go now.”

He laughed, and the sound did something to her. Those butterflies took flight. “Nope, darlin’. I’m your FIBB, which means I’m Keith while he’s not here. You’re stuck with me.”

“I don’t want to be stuck with you.”

“Doesn’t matter.” Devilry played in those black eyes. “I’m a keeper. You’ll never know what you did without me before the week is out.”

Ray growled. "Listen here..."

Mason ignored him. "Keith said you had to get your books today. I'm headed to the bookstore now. Why don't you let me give you a lift?"

That would solve her problem of a ride and maybe give her a chance to warn him to butt out. Her brother probably told him his opinion of Ray, and Mason would be just as overbearing as Keith because of it.

"She's not going..."

"Fine, you can give me a lift."

Ray's glare was hot enough to singe the hair from her head, but she paid it no mind.

"Just let me grab my bag."

Ray followed her out of the room. "What the hell, Jo?"

"Look, I need to set him straight. I don't want or need a watchdog, much to my brother's dismay. I won't be gone long. Promise."

He frowned. "I don't like this, not one little bit."

Jo leaned up on her tiptoes and kissed him. "Don't worry. He's just another bratty brother."

"He is not your brother," Ray all but snarled.

God's truth, there.



“He might as well be since he’s gone and declared himself as such.” She shook her head at the sheer nonsense of that—FIBB, indeed. “The sooner I go, the sooner I get back.”

“Fine.” Ray looked like he wanted to argue, but for once, he didn’t.

Jo ran into the bedroom to grab her phone and purse before hurrying back to where Mason waited on the front porch.

Mason watched her come back into the living room, Ray following close behind.

He’d nearly had a heart attack when he saw her.

He knew her. Why the fuck didn’t Keith tell him his little sister was Mason’s favorite YouTuber?

He talked about her gaming channel all the damn time.

Fucker. He was going to beat his ass first chance he got.

God, she was tiny. Barely five feet if she was an inch. Wild blonde hair framed eyes so blue they made the summer sky envious. She was gorgeous.

The kiss she planted on Ray made him want to rip her away from him. Chill , he told himself. She’s Keith’s little sister . He’d asked Mason to look out for her, not try to get her into his bed. But damn, for such a little thing, she had a body that could cause more than a few stiff dicks.

“Let’s go.” She swept past him, clearly pissed off, and pulled the door closed behind her. He couldn’t resist inhaling as she went. The woman smelled like strawberries, his favorite fruit.

Her foot caught on the top step, and she pitched forward. Mason leaped to catch her before she face-planted. She sputtered out a mumbled “thank you” as she pulled away from him and hurried toward the drive.

He chuckled when she stopped at his beat-up pickup with a dubious expression.

It didn’t look like much, but it ran like a dream and got him from point A to point B.

Dimitri’s wife, Becca, had helped him fix the old girl right after they all moved to New York last year.

His other sister-in-law, Lily, had helped too.

It was a little off-putting to know the women in his family knew more about auto mechanics than he did, but hey.

He was an easygoing guy. He went with the flow.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:34 am*

“This is your ride?” Her eyebrows raced toward her hairline, and he grinned at her incredulity.

If she weren’t in sweats and a t-shirt, he’d swear she was a high maintenance girl.

Then again, she was always in some kind of t-shirt when she recorded her Let’s Plays with her hair in a mess.

It was cute as hell. She was funny too. He kinda liked this spitfire side of her as much as he did her online persona.

“Don’t be talking about Bess like that. You’ll hurt her feelings.” He patted the hood and leaned down to whisper, “Don’t listen to her, girl. You’re beautiful.”

Jo huffed and got in the truck. “You talk to your truck?”

He turned the ignition and backed out of the drive, aware of the woman staring at them from through her living room window next door. “Who’s that?”

Jo rolled her eyes. “Ray’s mother.”

“You live beside his parents?” It was his turn to sound incredulous.

The sigh that rolled out of Jo spoke more than anything she could have said. Chick wasn’t happy about it. “Yes.”

“Back to your question. Yes, I talk to my truck. How else is she going to know how I

feel?”

“Cars and trucks don’t have feelings.”

He gasped like she’d shot him. “Watch your tongue, woman. Bess has sensitive feelings.”

“Where did you even find something this old?”

Mason didn’t miss the smile that tugged at the corners of her mouth.

“It was my grandfather’s. My uncle gave it to me when I turned sixteen. None of my brothers wanted her, so I took her.”

“I can see why they didn’t. It’s straight out of the Stone Age.”

Mason stroked the dashboard. “She’s just jealous, Bess. You’re a good truck.” He shot her a glare. “Josephine clearly doesn’t appreciate a classic.”

“Just Jo,” she said and shifted in the seat, tugging at the seatbelt.

“I like Josephine.”

“I don’t.”

“Too bad.” He tossed her a cheeky grin. It was so easy to get her riled.

She looked ready to throttle him. “Here’s the thing, Mason. The only reason I came was so I could tell you I don’t need a babysitter, no matter how much Keith thinks I do.”

“I’m not your babysitter. I’m your FIBB.”

“That is the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard.” She tossed her hair back in a classic girl flip. “You are not my brother.”

“Thank fuck for that,” he muttered.

Her eyes narrowed, but he interrupted her before she could say anything.

“Keith’s worried about you. I promised him I’d watch out for you, and I will.”

“He just wants you to watch Ray.”

He heard her frustration, and he understood it. “Keith didn’t hide the fact he doesn’t like your boyfriend, but I don’t know Ray, so I can’t say what kind of person he is or isn’t. I like to form my own opinions about people. He’s not why I’m here, though.”

“He’s not?” That pissed-off look came back when she thought he was referring to him being her babysitter. She was damn cute when she was mad.

“Let me ask you something. Do you know anyone in this city besides Ray?”

She shook her head.

“That’s why I’m here. You need a friend, someone to come to when you need help or just want to shoot the shit.”

“Why would you do that? You don’t even know me.”

“I know Keith. You’re his sister. He’s family to me, and so when he asked me to be him while you were here, I agreed.”

“I don’t want...”

He reached over and put a finger to her lips, relishing how soft they felt. “I told you. I’m a keeper.”

“You’re ridiculous.”

“Always.” He flipped on the radio, and a country song blared out of the speakers.

“Country?”

“Yup.” He turned his attention back to the road. “You a music snob?”

“No, I like country. I just didn’t think it’d be your thing.”

He started belting out the lyrics to Dirt Road Anthem right along with Jason Aldean.

Truth was, he didn’t used to like country, but being around Becca this last year, he’d grown to love it.

Country was her favorite kind of music. Dimitri pretended to hate it, but Mason had caught him jamming out to it on more than one occasion.

“I’m a big fan of your channel,” he blurted and snapped back like he’d just punched himself in the face. Shit. He hadn’t meant to say that.

“You watch my videos?” A real smile broke out across her face, and he felt like he’d been sucker punched. This girl was getting under his skin without even trying.

“Yeah, you’re my go-to for Let’s Play.” Damn, he sounded like some kind of thirteen-year-old fanboy.

But what did he expect? He'd had the biggest crush on her since he found her channel a couple of years ago.

Of course he was acting like a thirteen-year-old around her.

Fucking Keith hadn't even warned him. Maybe if he'd had time to prepare, he wouldn't be sounding like a fucking virgin fumbling on the big night.

Get your shit together, Mase.

"Keith never told me you liked the show." She kicked her flip flops off and tucked her feet under her knees, turning to face him.

He didn't say a word about her putting her feet on the seats.

Usually, he bitched out anyone who dared, but she looked so cute sitting there, he couldn't bring himself to do it.

"Yeah, well, Keith never told me his sister was JoJo either." Fucking Keith. His ass was grass.

She laughed. "He doesn't usually tell people."

"Yeah, well, I'm not just anyone."

She quirked an eyebrow in question.

"I talk about your show all the time. He knows I'm a fan. Fucker never said a word."

Her laughter filled the truck. "He talks about your show."

“What?” His eyes widened. Keith told her about his show? Jo had over two million subscribers, while he barely scraped together a little over a hundred thousand.

“I checked it out.”

His head snapped around to stare at her.

“Once.”

His ego deflated like a burst balloon. Once. She’d watched it once.

“You’re funny.”

Once.

Shit.

Here he was, gushing like some damn woman, and she’d only seen his channel once. Fuck.

“Thanks.” He turned into the campus and drove straight to the bookstore.

“Why are there no pictures of you on his Instagram or Facebook?” That was where he was having a problem. Not that he really paid attention to Keith’s family photos, but he’d have paid attention to Jo.

“He used to have them on there until he started getting badgered with requests to meet me. I told him to delete everything about me and we’d just use FaceTime and texts.”

Well, that made sense.



“What are you majoring in?” she asked as they made their way inside.

“Computer science and engineering with a minor in communications.”

“Hmm.”

“Hmm, what?” He opened the door for her, not liking her tone at all.

“You just don’t seem like the science kind of guy, is all.”

“Really? What do I seem like?”

She dug her schedule out and led the way into the rows of books. When she didn’t answer him, he got irritated, something that almost never happened. He refused to let anything get to him. Life was too short to go around angry.

“Josephine, what do I seem like?”

Her blue eyes twinkled when they met his. “A flirt, a comedian, maybe a football jock, and definitely a frat boy.”

Jo worked hard to keep the smile off her face when his eyes narrowed. He was hard not to like. She understood how he and her brother became best friends overnight. He just had that kind of personality. She wanted to be pissed at him, but she couldn’t.

“Busted.” He flashed her another one of those megawatt smiles designed to melt the panties right off a girl. “I am all of those things, though I don’t play football anymore.”

“Hey, Mason!”

They turned to see several girls a few feet away, eyeing Mason like he was man candy. Well, he was, but still. Women shouldn't ogle him like he was. They should do it from a distance. Have some class about it.

"Ladies." He nodded and smiled at them. She didn't see a spark of recognition in his eyes. "Y'all are looking mighty fine. Coming by the house tonight? Big party going on."

"Of course," the most brazen of the lot said. Stick figure Barbie wannabe. Her makeup was so thick, Jo wondered if she had any real skin left under it. "I'll look for you."

Mason winked at them. "See you there." When he turned back to Jo, the grin slipped from his face. He pulled out his own schedule, and they started searching for books in earnest.

As they worked their way through the bookstore, more and more people stopped Mason to talk.

He seemed to be very popular. He had an easy smile for them all, but she saw the impatience glittering beneath the surface.

He seemed irritated at the attention, which didn't fit the persona she'd tacked onto him over the last two hours.

All the traffic stops by way of his friends had kept them at the bookstore longer than she'd expected.

Jo had a feeling there was more to him than the easygoing, laidback guy he let people see.

“You got everything?” he asked when he finally managed to slip away from the last of them.

“Yeah.”

“Let’s roll, babe. I got shit to do today.”

“I didn’t ask you to bring me.” He sounded angry he’d had to bring her when he was the one who’d all but ordered her to come with him. Asshole.

“No, I volunteered myself as your personal chauffeur for the day.” He shot her a sheepish look. “Sorry. I don’t mean to sound grumpy. I got a lot to do before the party at the frat tonight. Sleeping until noon doesn’t help either.”

Jo hefted her books and started to walk in front of him, but she stumbled over her own feet and flew forward, her books flying every which way. She closed her eyes, embarrassed at the snickers and outright laughs. Why, oh, why, did she have to be so clumsy?

Strong hands hauled her up, and she groaned, knowing her face must be flaming red.

“You okay?” Mason asked, concerned as he gathered her books.

“Fine.” She tried to take her books from him, but he shook his head.

“Nope. You are hazardous to their health.”

Jo sputtered, angry and embarrassed all over again.

“Come on.” He wrapped an arm around her shoulders and hauled her to the checkout line. “Let’s get you checked out before you kill yourself.”

“I’m not that bad.” She had to go and embarrass herself in front of him, didn’t she?

“Whatever you say, darlin’.”

They checked out and walked back to the truck.

Mason took her books from her the second she paid for them.

They were heavy, but so were his. As embarrassed as she felt, it was kind of nice.

She’d forgotten what it was like to have someone carry things for her.

Ray stopped a few months after they got together in high school.

“Why don’t you and Ray come to the frat party tonight?” Mason asked once they were back on the road.

“We have dinner with his parents tonight.” Something she wasn’t looking forward to.

“Come after. These things run all night.”

“I’ve never been to a frat party before,” she confessed. She’d wanted to say yes the second he’d asked her to go, but Ray wouldn’t want to.

“Why the hell not?”

“Ray never wanted to go to any, so…”

Mason shook his head. “Well, invitation’s open. Come if you want. They’re a hell of a lot of fun.”

The rest of the drive home was silent. She snuck a few glances at Mason. He looked deep in thought. His scent wafted over to her, a mixture of leather and something else she couldn't identify, but she liked it.

He was Ray's polar opposite. Tall, muscled...ripped with a six-pack she saw through his skintight t-shirt. Mason worked out. You couldn't get that kind of body—or at least keep it—if you didn't. In every photo she'd ever seen of him, he was smiling, his eyes laughing. He was the same in person.

She was startled when the engine cut off. Looking up, she saw they were at her place. His smile was back when he got out and reached into the truck bed to retrieve her bags full of books. "Meet me for breakfast on Monday?"

"Mason..."

He shushed her again. "Nope, FIBB, remember? It's a requirement to come eat with me when I ask you to."

She wanted to say no. She should say no, but there was something about the hopeful way he grinned. "Fine. Where?"

"Mae's Diner. Best breakfast place around. It's across the street from the admin office at school."

"What time?"

"What time is your first class?"

"Eight."

He looked so horrified, she laughed. "What the fuck you getting up that early for?"

“Because it’s the time my class starts?”

He blanched. “My first class doesn’t start before ten. You trying to kill me, getting me up at the butt crack of dawn?”

“We don’t have to go to breakfast.”

He scrunched his nose. “Fine. I’ll be waiting for you at seven.”

“I’ll check the bus route to make sure there’s one that runs by here at that time or grab a cab.”

His eyes narrowed. “Why would you do that? Don’t you have a car?”

“No. The one car we have is Ray’s and he needs it for work.”

“He can drop you off, then.”

She shook her head. Ray would not drop her off. “The school is in the opposite direction he goes.”

“I don’t give a fuck. You don’t put your woman on a public bus or cab in a city as dangerous as New York.” Now he looked beyond pissed.

“Mason...”

“You planning on always taking the bus or a cab to and from school?”

“Well, yeah.” That only pissed him off more.

“No, you’re not. I’ll swing by and pick you up. Take you to and from school too.”

“You don’t have to...”

“Yeah, Josephine, I do.” His eyes hardened. “You ain’t getting raped or killed on my watch. So just say, ‘Thank you, Mason.’”

Arguing wasn’t going to get her out of this. He’d made up his mind. “Thank you, Mason.”

He walked her up the front porch and kept a watchful eye on her. Probably scared she’d fall again. He put her bags down beside the door. “Pick you up at six-thirty on Monday.”

She watched him walk back down the drive, get in the truck, and pull away.

What had she just gotten herself into?

### CHAPTER THREE

Mason had his phone out before he'd even left the driveway.

"Yo." Keith answered on the first ring.

"You motherfucking son of..."

"You better not be thinking of calling my mother a whore or a bitch," he warned, laughter in his voice.

"Why the ever-loving fuck did you not fucking tell me who your fucking sister was?"

Keith whistled. "Three fucks in one sentence."

"Keith..."

"Calm down, man," Keith said. "I don't tell anyone about my sister."

"You didn't even fucking warn me!" Mason hissed, still pissed. He'd acted like some starstruck kid around her.

"I would have paid good money to have seen your face," Keith snickered.

Mason growled into the phone. "Motherfucker..."

"You're really pissed," Keith said, his laughter drying up. "You don't normally cuss



this much.”

It was true. Mason had a filthy mouth, but he’d learned to control it, thanks to being around his niece so much. He hadn’t used this much profanity since his last year at UCLA. But fuck...Keith could have fucking warned him.

“It’s not every fucking day I look up and see my girl crush standing there looking pissed off and ready to beat my ass!”

“Girl crush?”

“Fucker, you know I love that girl’s channel. Watch it every fucking day. And not once did you ever tell your best friend who always fucking has your back, ‘Oh, by the way, JoJo? She’s my fucking sister!’”

“I’m sorry,” Keith said quietly. “I shoulda told you.”

“Hells yeah, you shoulda told me.”

“How is she?”

“Pissed off at you for sending her a babysitter.” Mason let out a breath.

Fuck, he needed to go to the gym and work this off.

He hated being pissed and angry. Instead of turning back toward the school, he headed to Planet Fitness.

Had to get this shit out of his system. He was supposed to go eat dinner with Viktor and the family tonight before the party.

Best not to go there this worked up. He didn't want to scare Delia.

She'd spent enough time around her abusive sperm donor to be terrified when men were angry.

"I figured she would be, but how is she?"

"She's fine. No bruises, nothing weird. Doesn't look like he's abusive physically. She's not happy about living next door to his parents, though."

Something spewed and Keith started coughing. "He moved her in beside his parents?"

"Yeah. Fucker thinks it's okay for her to call a cab or use Uber or some shit to and from school too."

"The hell you say?" Keith sounded as pissed as Mason felt over that one.

"Why the hell doesn't she have a car?"

"Because she was using Mom's car. If I knew the fuckwad wasn't going to escort her to school, I'd have given her mine. The city's dangerous. What is he thinking?"

"I handled it. Told her I'd pick her up in the mornings and then take her home when she was done."

"You know what time she gets up for class, yeah?"

"Don't fucking remind me!" Mason groaned.

"Thanks, Mase." Keith got quiet for a minute. "I know you don't have to do that, and

it means a lot.”

“She’s your sister. You think I’m gonna let her asshole of a boyfriend get her into a bad situation? Hell no. You owe me, though, for dragging my ass out of bed at the butt crack of dawn.”

“You think it’s safe for me to call her, or will she take my head off?”

Mason laughed. “She’ll hand your head to you on a silver platter.”

“Shit.”

“Hey, text me her number. I forgot to get it from her.”

“Fanboying, were you?”

“Fuck yeah.”

Keith laughed and agreed to shoot her number to him before hanging up.

Mason turned down the street, seeing the gym ahead.

He needed to get in and out, shower back at the frat, and head to Viktor’s.

Sara promised him homemade lasagna. He wasn’t missing out on that.

Pulling into the parking lot, he grabbed his gym bag he kept behind the seat and rolled into the place, glad to be able to work off some of this frustration.

Viktor, Kade, and Dimitri all lived in the same small town right outside the city.

They'd bought up about sixty acres of land and had homes built, except for Dimitri.

His section of the acreage already had a house.

He and Becca remodeled it, of course, but they'd been able to move in a lot sooner than Kade and Viktor.

There was enough room if Mason, Conner, and Nik ever wanted to build on the family compound, as Kade referred to it.

Mason wasn't sure what he wanted to do. He liked living in the city and would probably rent an apartment when he graduated.

Nik and Lily bought an apartment in the city as well.

Now that his sister-in-law had just had a baby girl, they might change their mind about that. The city was no place to raise kids.

He pulled into Viktor's drive and cut the engine.

The place was nice. Sporting two stories of stone and natural wood, it blended into the forest like it belonged there.

The place had plenty of room for kids to run and play.

He saw Delia's pink bike lying on its side in the grass.

He shook his head. They'd all warned her about leaving it out to get rained on.

The chain would rust up and might cause her to crash.

Getting out, he picked up the bike and rolled it into the garage. Girl was never gonna learn. He used his key to get in the house and called out, “Princess Peach!”

He heard the pounding of footsteps down the stairs and braced for it. Seconds later, she barreled into him, and had he not been ready, he’d have fallen backward. Picking her up, he swung her around and around, loving her squeal of laughter.

“Uncle Mason!” She wrapped her little arms around his neck and hugged him tight. “I missed you.”

“I missed you too, Princess.” He gave her a sloppy kiss on the cheek. “Where’s everyone?”

“Mommy’s upstairs with the twins, and Papa’s in his office. I was watching cartoons.”

Storm gray eyes smiled at him amid her wild mess of blonde hair, and his heart swelled.

He loved this kid more than anything. He loved the twins, of course, and Mateo, Kade’s little boy as well as Nikoli’s daughter, but Delia was special to him.

After everything she’d gone through with the sperm donor, she deserved as much love as she could get.

“Found your bike in the grass.”

Her eyes widened, and she ducked her head against his shoulder. “I forgot.”

“Supposed to rain tomorrow, Peach. Bike’ll rust up.” He started walking toward Viktor’s office and kept her in his arms. She was almost eight now, but to him, she

was still a kid and needed to be held and loved. Hell, he'd probably be giving her piggyback rides when she was sixteen.

"Yo, Viktor!" he called as he headed down the hall and found his brother sitting at his desk, head buried in his computer.

Viktor rolled his shoulders and turned off the monitor. He looked rough, his eyes bloodshot with bags under them. The twins must not be letting them get much sleep.

"You look like shit."

The glare his brother shot him would have felled most, but Mason merely grinned.

"You try working on two hours of sleep a night. I passed out at the office today and missed an online meeting with a client. Kade nearly took my head off."

"The boys haven't settled into a routine yet?"

"Delia squirmed, and he put her down. She went over to where Viktor had his medals from the Marines showcased on the wall.

She did that a lot. Mason had a feeling the girl would join the Marines when she got older.

Good thing they were teaching her to fight now.

"Do I look like they have?" Viktor stood and stretched, a yawn overtaking him. "You ready to eat?"

"Starved."

The three of them walked into the kitchen, Delia telling him all about her new classroom.

They'd had orientation a few days ago where the kids got to meet their teacher, and school lists were given out.

Viktor had a heart attack when he'd seen the long list of things he needed to buy.

It was more like he was stocking the classroom instead of things for Delia, but like Becca pointed out, the schools had no budgets for these things.

What the parents bought wouldn't even come close to what the teachers spent out of their own pocket over the year to keep the classrooms stocked.

Sara was already there, pulling the lasagna out of the oven. The heavenly scent hit his nose, and his stomach growled. Delia giggled at the sound, and he winked at her. Sara looked a lot like her daughter, but Delia's hair was a true blonde, while her mother's was a more brownish shade.

While Viktor mauled his wife, he and Delia got the salad and a gallon of milk out of the fridge and took it to the dining room. The table was already set, so he got Delia settled in her chair and took a seat across from her. Viktor and Sara would bring everything else.

"I got new makeup." Delia shot him a sly smile, and he groaned. Last time she dolled him up, it took two hours to get that shit off his face and out of his hair.

"Uncle Mason has a party to go to tonight, Peach."

Her lip wobbled, and he knew it was over before it even started.

“Please, Uncle Mason?”

How the fuck was he supposed to say no to that face?

“Fine, kid. Do your worst after dinner.”

Her face lit up like he’d just given her a puppy.

“Suckered you into a makeover, did she?” Viktor laughed when he and Sara came in carrying the lasagna, bread, and a bottle of wine.

“Like you’re any better.” Sara smiled softly at Viktor. “She had you wearing a man-sized tutu and helping her practice her ballet.”

Mason burst out laughing at the verbal picture she painted. “I hope to hell you got that on video.”

“Oh, I did.”

Viktor glared at his wife. “Don’t you even think of sending that out to the family, woman.”

“Maybe I will, and maybe I won’t.”

“How are my nephews?” Mason took the plate of lasagna passed to him, inhaling the aroma. So good.

“Sleeping during the day and keeping us both up all night.” Sara took a piece of garlic bread then handed the basket to Viktor. “I think they’re secretly plotting our deaths from lack of sleep.”



“You got plans for next weekend?” Viktor asked, his voice a little too casual.

“Depends.”

“On?”

“What you want.”

“I need sleep.”

“And?”

“We were hoping you’d babysit on Friday and Saturday night so Sara and I can get some sleep. We are not going to last much longer. Between Delia and the boys, we’re wiped.”

“You want me to take care of babies?” Mason nearly choked on the wine he was sipping. “I don’t know shit about babies.”

“It’s not hard.” Delia slurped her milk. “They sleep most of the time. Just eat, poop, and drool.”

“People are eating, malyshka ,” Viktor admonished, but he couldn’t hide the grin on his face. Mason remembered when they were kids they used to try to gross their mama out at the kitchen table too. Their father reprimanded them, but he’d secretly loved it.

An idea popped in his head. “I’ll do it on one condition.”

Viktor raised a brow.

“I need a background check on a guy. Ray Daniels.”

“Who’s he?”

“You remember Keith? My best friend from UCLA?”

Viktor nodded.

“His sister shackled up with the guy. Keith’s worried about her. He moved them here to New York away from all her family. She’s been with him since high school, but there’s a lot of things that can be hidden. Just want to make sure there’s no reason to worry.”

“Not a problem. Just get me his details.”

“Then I shall be here Friday night, ready to man up and be Uncle Mason, the weekend nanny.”

“Will you play princess with me?”

“Sure thing, sweetheart. We can dress up to your heart’s content. I’ll even shove my legs into a mermaid’s tail if you want me to.”

Sara had tried to thank him for everything he did for Delia once, but like he told her, Delia was his family, and he’d do anything he could to make her smile every day for the rest of her life.

Including put on dresses, tutus, and mermaid tails.

“You’ll never believe who Keith’s sister is. I was ready to murder him when he let me walk in with no warning.”

“This sounds interesting.” Sara put her fork down, the writer in her coming out.

“My favorite YouTuber. Watch her every single day. I had a serious fanboy freak-out moment, there.”

Viktor shook his head. He knew Mason had his own channel but didn’t think it was going anywhere.

He thought it was a phase. What he didn’t realize was Mason was getting some serious cash out of his channel.

He might not be in the upper tier of ads, but between merchandise, Patreon, and the tips he got, he made more than a decent living.

“Her boyfriend is a total ass, though.”

Sara sighed at his language. She still thought she could break the Kincaid men of their foul mouths. Wasn’t gonna happen. It was like breathing to them, something vital and ingrained.

Delia steered the subject away from Ray and onto her ballet recital coming at the end of the month.

Mason was glad because he felt all that anger rushing back at the thought of Jo alone in a cab or an Uber.

Most cabbies were on the up and up, but some weren’t.

No need to put her into a bad situation if it could be helped.

And he didn’t even want to get started on Uber.

His blood pressure might spike if he did.

The rest of the dinner was spent listening to Delia chatter and catching up before she hauled him off to the living room, where he sat for over an hour and let her apply makeup to his face and put ribbons in his hair.

The things he did for this kid.

He wouldn't have it any other way, though.

### CHAPTER FOUR

The sound of the rain hitting the roof woke Jo long before her alarm went off. Ray snored beside her. She laughed softly when she heard him. He swore he didn't snore, but the man was louder than a lawnmower.

Slipping out of bed, she reset the alarm for Ray then took a quick shower. Jo was nervous, and not just because it was her first day at a new school. Mason was picking her up for breakfast.

Fill-in big brother.

She shook her head as she pulled on a pair of well-worn jeans then tugged on a baby blue t-shirt.

Leave it to Keith to find a way to keep an eye on her.

He'd called her yesterday, and as pissed as she was, Jo couldn't fault her brother for looking out for her.

It was actually very sweet and something Keith had spent his entire life doing.

She just wished he could get behind her and Ray.

Why her family didn't like him, she had no idea. She loved Ray, and he made her happy. He wasn't perfect, but neither was she. No one was perfect. She could only hope they'd come around, because Ray wasn't going anywhere.

She looked at the clock. Six twenty. Mason would be here soon.

How had she let herself get roped into not only breakfast, but being chauffeured by the guy?

Not that she minded the rides to and from school.

It would save her a lot of money, but Mason stirred up feelings in her she shouldn't be having.

Feelings that made her feel guilty because she truly did love her boyfriend.

The honk of the horn pulled her out of her thoughts, and she grabbed her bookbag and let herself out of the house, locking the door. Mason's truck sat in the drive. It seriously needed a paint job.

"Morning," she said after she'd gotten in and put on her seatbelt.

He just grunted.

Mason did not look like the same vibrant person she'd met on Saturday. His hair was messy, his eyes bloodshot, and he was still wearing his pajama bottoms and a white t-shirt. Definitely not a morning person.

"Thanks for picking me up."

He nodded, still not saying anything.

"So, you go to this place a lot?"

"You're one of those people, aren't you?"

Boy, he was grumpy. “Those people?”

“Those bright and chipper morning people who have sunshine and rainbows shooting out of their ass before they even get a cup of coffee.”

She laughed at the surly note in his voice. “Yeah, I guess I am.”

He shot her an even grumpier look.

“You’re the one who volunteered to come get me,” Jo reminded him. “I can easily catch a bus to school...”

“No.” He put a hand up, cutting her off. “Absolutely not. Keith would beat my ass black and blue.”

“Then don’t complain about my morning personality.”

He huffed. “Did you get the text I sent you last night?”

“That was you?” An unknown name came up, and she ignored it.

“Yeah. Keith gave me your number, so I shot off a text. You need to be able to reach me.”

Jo pulled out her phone and opened the unknown text then added Mason’s name into her contacts. While she and Mason might not know each other well, it was nice to have at least one friend in New York.

The rest of the drive to Mae’s was spent in silence. She decided to leave Mason in peace. He had gotten up before dawn to pick her up.

Mason let out a relieved sigh when he pulled into Mae's parking lot. He needed coffee in a bad, bad way. He led the way in and took the first empty booth he came to. It was just starting to get busy in here.

Another waitress who knew him by name came over. Heather worked here part time to help supplement her scholarship funds. He'd had two classes with her last semester.

"Morning, Mason." Her gaze bounced to Jo, curious, as she handed them menus. He never came in with a girl. "What can I get y'all?"

"Coffee," he muttered. "Four cups of coffee. Three for me, one for Jo."

"Three?" Jo asked, her eyebrows waging a war with her hairline.

"Don't judge, Josephine. Not all of us are born with the ability to be so perky at this godawful hour."

"What's good here?" Jo picked up her menu and started looking it over. Mason watched her study the specials, her teeth worrying her bottom lip.

"Everything." He tapped his foot impatiently, needing Heather to hurry up and bring his coffee. He'd barely dragged himself out of bed in time to pick Jo up. His eyes felt like sandpaper, and all he wanted to do was lay his head down and sleep.

"Here you go." Heather set four cups of coffee on the table along with a carafe of whole milk. Mason wasted no time in picking one up and taking several long drinks. It burned his tongue, but he didn't care. He needed the caffeine.

"Do you know what you want to order?" Heather and Jo were both staring at him in amazement. He ignored them and drank down half the cup.



“Pancakes.” Jo dumped some sugar in her coffee and added milk.

“My usual.” Finally, the jittery feeling in his stomach started to settle. He decided then and there to invest in a Keurig so he could survive waking up this early.

“Feeling better?” Jo asked, staring at him over the rim of her coffee cup.

He nodded. “Yeah. I don’t function well without coffee in the morning.

” He pulled the second cup to him and doctored it with milk.

He couldn’t stand sugar in his coffee, but he loved milk.

After Angel got him used to using milk, creamer held no appeal.

Thank God the people here knew that and he didn’t have to constantly remind them to bring him milk.

As much money as he spent at this place, they better know his order, though.

“I can see that.” There was an unmistakable smirk in her voice. He didn’t even have to look up to see it. Damn perky morning people.

He yawned and sat back. There was a definite smirk on her face. She was still sexy as hell even with those blue eyes of hers laughing at him.

“You need to email me your class schedule. I sent my email address in the text last night.” The smell of bacon and eggs assaulted him, and his stomach growled.

“Are you always going to be this grumpy in the mornings?”

“Yup.” He took another sip of his coffee. “You never told me what you were majoring in.”

“Psychology.” Her gaze swept over the diner, and he found he couldn’t rip his focus away from her. Damn, but she was gorgeous.

And she had a boyfriend, he reminded himself.

Asshole of a boyfriend, but still a boyfriend.

And she was Keith’s little sister.

“Why psychology? You have a huge YouTube channel. I thought you’d be doing something that could help you with that.”

“Human behavior fascinates me. I’ve even been thinking of getting my PhD in criminal psychology and working with the FBI.”

“My brother, Kade, used to work with the BAU.”

Her eyes lit up. “Really?”

“Yeah. He and Viktor own Kincaid Security and Investigations now.”

“How many brothers do you have?”

“Five.” He watched her eyes widen and laughed. “My family is just as big as yours. If I remember, you have three sisters and Keith.”

“Any sisters?”

“Thank fuck, no, but I do have three nieces now. Delia, Arielle and Rose. Rose is only a couple of weeks old. Delia is almost eight and Arielle isn’t quite a year. We’re already stockpiling weapons.”

“I think you have a few years yet.”

Conversation stopped when Heather brought their food. He thanked her and dug into his eggs and bacon, his stomach agreeing wholeheartedly. He loved food, but then all his brothers did.

“These are good.” She sounded surprised.

He looked up to see syrup dripping down her chin. Without thinking, he reached over and swiped it with his fingers and then sucked them clean.

He ignored her sharp intake of breath and his own shock. “They make everything from scratch.”

“You going back to bed after breakfast?”

“God knows I’m gonna try. My first class today isn’t until one.”

“I thought you said it was at ten.”

“Nah, that’s my Tuesday and Thursday class. I got them mixed up.”

“Mason!”

They both looked up to see a couple of guys making their way over. It was some of his frat brothers. “Hey, guys.”

“You’re up early.” Mark Stevens leaned against the booth and eye fucked Jo. “I can see why, though.”

“Jo, these are my frat brothers, Mark, Scott, and Devin. Guys, this is my pseudo sister, Jo. She’s off limits.”

“Hey, Jo. Good to meet you.” Scott was the first one to recover from Mason’s snarled statement.

“Nice to meet you too.” She smiled, and Mason had the sudden urge to pull her across the table and tuck her into his side, away from the guys staring at her.

“She has a boyfriend.” The edge in his voice was a clear warning, and Scott took it as such. He’d had to knock the fucker out his first semester here. Idiot thought he could haze the new guy. Fat chance of that.

“I do.” Josephine looked at Mason like he’d grown a second head. He sounded almost jealous when the guys came over. That couldn’t be right, though.

“Yeah, but are you attached to said boyfriend?” the third guy, Devin, asked, a twinkle in his eye.

“I live with him, so I’m pretty attached.”

“Damn, girl, all the good ones got to be taken, don’t they?” Devin teased.

Jo wasn’t really paying attention to Devin. She was too focused on Mason. He looked pissed.

“She’s taken, so fuck off.” Mason turned his head so he could see them. “We’re eating. Go get your own table.”

Scott held out his hands in surrender. “Fine, grouchy. We’ll leave you the fuck alone.”

As soon as they walked away, Mason relaxed. “Stay away from those three.”

“Why?”

“Because there has been some shady shit go down at the frat, and those three are at the center of all of it. We can’t prove anything, but that don’t mean shit.”

“Noted.” She took another bite of her pancakes, careful of her hands. It would be her luck to spill something. “So, I was looking through your videos last night.”

Now, that got his attention. He stopped glaring at the guys a few booths away and turned his attention back to her. Jo had never seen anyone with eyes like Mason’s. They were a true black. You couldn’t tell where the pupil ended and the iris began. They were beautiful.

“You did?”

She nodded and sipped her coffee. “Yeah. You do some funny skits. I even saw a few Let’s Plays on there.”

“I only record the games I really want to play. The last two I did were Resident Evil Two remake and the Outlast Trials. I typically keep it light and funny.”

“So, horror games are light and funny?”

“Well, no, but they make for some funny moments seeing me scream my ass off onscreen.” He smiled sheepishly. “I’ve been thinking of adding movie reviews as well.”

“I was thinking of doing movie reviews too.” Jo made a note to look up his playlist for those games.

Mason screaming like a girl was something she definitely wanted to watch.

She pushed her plate away, unable to eat anything else.

“Think maybe you might want to go watch a couple movies with me, and we can do them together? Swap it from channel to channel each week, and that way fans don’t think we’re straying too far from the content they expect from us?”

Mason’s eyes got huge. “Really?”

“Really. Maybe give your channel a boost in the process. I figure if you can haul me back and forth from school, I can introduce you to my subscribers.”

“I’d like that.” He gave her a shit-eating grin. “I’d really like that, and not just because of the channel. I have a feeling you and I are gonna be really good friends, Josephine.”

“I could use a friend.”

He took her hand, his thumb stroking the back of it, sending a wave of shivers along her arm. “You got one, moye dragotsenny .”

“What does that mean?” His accent was thicker today. She’d barely detected it yesterday. Keith told her Mason grew up in Russia, but hearing him speak it in that accent did things to her girly parts, and she felt a blush race up her neck and bloom on her cheeks.

Mason leaned forward, his black eyes intent. “You’re blushing, Josephine.”

“I, uh...”

“You two ready for the check?”

Jo took a shaky breath and pulled her hand from Mason’s, grateful for the waitress’s interruption. Spending time with Mason might not be the best idea after all, but she wasn’t about to back out of her offer to do a movie review segment for their shows. It wouldn’t be right.

“Sure thing, Heather.” Mason never looked away from her, and it made her blush run even hotter.

“Paying separate or together?”

“Together,” Mason answered before she could. When she opened her mouth to protest, he cut her off. “Don’t even think it. I asked you to breakfast, which means I’m paying.”

This was new for her. She and Ray usually split the check when they went out. He’d never offered to pay her half before. Her old boyfriend always footed the bill. She’d been with Ray so long, she’d forgotten what it was like not to split everything.

It was nice.

Once the check was taken care of, Mason dropped her at her building and drove off, presumably back to his frat to get some sleep.

She went inside and hurried to her first class, even though it was a little early.

The smile on her face seemed to want to linger, and that was all because of Mason.

She couldn't help but compare him to Ray, and sadly, her boyfriend came up lacking.

Didn't mean she didn't love him, only that she saw his flaws a little more clearly.

Taking out her laptop, she shot off an email to Mason with her schedule. She refused to let herself think about how much she was looking forward to seeing him later. It was only because she desperately wanted a friend.

That...and nothing else.



### CHAPTER FIVE

Jo opened her front door and threw her bookbag down beside the hallway table. It had been a long first week at school. Classes were harder this year too. So much homework. And she was taking a math class. She hated math. It was her biggest weakness when it came to school. Always had been.

Mason picked her up every morning, brought her home every evening.

He ate lunch with her most days too. Sometimes he got caught up in frat business, and she'd had to wait for him once or twice.

It was nice to have one friend. He never hit on her, even if he did flirt, but that was just Mason as she'd come to learn.

He flirted with everyone. It was part of his charm.

And good Lord, but he was a goofball, always laughing and smiling.

His attitude was infectious and rubbed off on her.

It was why she'd walked in smiling. He'd made her belt out the lyrics to "Barbie Doll" along with him on the way home.

The expressions and hand gestures he'd come up with to go along with the song were hilarious.

“Ray?” she called. His car was in the drive, so he had to be here somewhere. Not in the bedroom or the bathroom. Maybe he went to his parents’. Oh, well. It gave her a little time to edit some videos she needed to upload soon.

Going into the kitchen to grab a bottle of water, she saw the note sitting on the kitchen table.

Hey, Babe.

Dad and I are going fishing this weekend. Be back late Sunday.

Ray

She closed her eyes and counted to ten. He left her alone their first real weekend in New York. Didn’t even call to say goodbye, no text or anything. Just a note.

Ray loved fishing, especially with his dad. She just thought maybe he wouldn’t leave her alone until she’d made a few friends to hang out with so she wouldn’t be so lonely.

It pissed her off.

She found a bottle of water in the fridge and stormed into her makeshift studio in the spare bedroom. The walls were bare, and she couldn’t record until she got the foam panels up to buffer the echoes, but she could edit what she’d done before dismantling her studio at home.

Turning on her computer, she tapped her foot as she waited for it to come on. Her cell rang, and she picked it up hoping it’d be Ray. Her brother’s face flashed across the screen instead.

“Hey, Keith.”

“Lil’ sis.” Keith yawned into the phone. “Whatcha up to?”

“Getting ready to do some video editing. My computer is being slow. I think it’s finally crapping out.”

“Make Mason look at it. He’s a whiz with those things.”

“I might. I can’t afford to buy a new one.”

“So, how are things working out with Mase? He looking out for you?”

“He’s been really cool. Takes me to and from school every day. I don’t think he’s much of a morning person, though.”

Keith laughed. “He’s not. Doesn’t like to get out of bed before noon if he can help it.”

“He’s like a zombie in the mornings, grumpy, growly, and rabid until he gets coffee. I think I’m going to buy some of those disposable coffee cups and bring him a cup in the mornings.”

“It might wake him up, but I’m guaranteeing he’d need more than one cup. We had to get up once for a class project at five a.m. None of us had time to stop for a quick cup of coffee. He walked around in a daze all day. Boy is addicted to caffeine.”

Jo smiled thinking of him stumbling around in the wee hours of the morning, coffee-free. She shook her head at the thought. “You know, Keith, I appreciate everything he’s doing, but it’s not fair to make him get up and haul me to and from school. I’m not even his sister.”

“But you’re mine, and if the roles were reversed, I’d do it for him in a heartbeat. Mason knows that. Plus, he likes you. He nearly took my head off when he found out who you were. He had a serious fanboy moment, there.”

“Really?” Jo frowned, thinking back to that first day. “He didn’t seem like it.”

“Mason’s good at covering up his feelings, but trust me, he was freaking out.”

“Huh.”

“So how you doing up there all by your lonesome?”

“It’s different, but I’m okay. Getting used to the school is taking longer than I expected. It’s so much bigger than the college I was attending before. I got lost, like, three times already.”

“Well, it’s a good school. I checked it out to make sure. You didn’t need to be in that small college in the first place. You should have been at a university.”

Jo sighed. She hadn’t gone to a university because of Ray. She didn’t want to be so far away from him. Keith held that against him even though it wasn’t his fault. She’d made that choice.

“Well, I’m here now, so stop playing the blame game.”

Keith was quiet for a long moment. “What do you think of Mason?”

“What do you mean?”

“Just what I asked. What do you think of him?”

Jo frowned. Why would he be asking that? “He’s cool, like I said. Good guy. Funny. Why?”

“No reason.”

Her eyes narrowed. He sounded way too casual. “Keith...you’re not trying to play matchmaker, are you?”

“No.”

“Good, because I love Ray. I don’t know how else to get that through your head. I love him.”

“You love someone who puts himself before you.” This time there was no mistaking the anger in her brother’s voice. “Hell, even Mason saw that. Pissed him off, and he didn’t even know you.”

“Keith...”

“Don’t Keith me. I’m right about this. I’m hoping being around Mase will show you how a man is supposed to treat you.”

Jo ran a hand over her eyes. Her brother was never going to accept Ray. “Keith, I’m not arguing with you about this. Mason is just a friend. It’s all he’s ever going to be. If you start trying to shove your best friend at me, I’ll push him so far away, he won’t even remember my name!”

“Don’t do that, Jo.” Clear frustration poured out of her brother. “You need someone there to rely on. Mason is family to me and the only person I trust to take care of you when I can’t.”

Her temper flared. First, she came home to an empty house and an absentee boyfriend, and then Keith pointing shit out she was already seeing only made her madder.

“Then stop interfering and be my brother who loves me.”

He let out a long sigh. “I’m just worried about you.”

“I know.”

“Love you, Sis.”

“Love you too.”

She hung up with him a few minutes later and sat back in her office chair, exhausted. Physically and emotionally exhausted. It had been a hell of a week.

When the computer finally came on, she checked her email and dealt with some fan letters.

Then she spent a couple of hours editing a few game segments and set them to upload.

Once that was done, she checked the clock.

It was only a little after five. Friday was her early day. She’d finished with classes at one.

She wandered through the house and finally flopped down in front of the TV just for the noise. She hated the quiet. She grew up in a house full of family, and all this silence was getting to her. Another quick look at her phone showed no calls or texts

from Ray.

It irritated her.

He'd gone off and left without so much as a goodbye. She hadn't told Keith because it would only be one more thing to fight about. And the last thing she wanted to do was fight with her big brother for trying his best to look out for her, even if it wasn't needed.

Flipping through the channels, she found absolutely nothing to interest her.

It was because she was mad. Mad at Ray, mad at Keith, and maybe even a little mad at herself.

Jo knew Ray sometimes put himself ahead of her, but she loved him and overlooked his flaws.

He loved her as much as she did him. Only he didn't always show it so well.

And that was the problem that had been grating on her nerves for a few months now.

She was hoping with this move, that would improve.

Ray had always complained about the pressure her family put him under, and that was no longer an issue.

He didn't even have to talk to her family, and still he seemed to forget about her needs.

Jo understood her family's frustration with Ray.

If she were in their shoes, she would probably be yelling at her too, but they didn't understand.

She and Ray had gone through a lot. They'd shared something she'd never told her family about that cemented her loyalty to him.

He'd been there, stood by her, and helped her get through it.

He could be an ass, and she knew how he treated her wasn't always right, but she'd decided a long time ago to stand by him because he had her.

Didn't make her weak, blind, or stupid.

She owed him for keeping her whole when her world splintered apart around her.

Shaking her head, she turned the TV off. This wasn't distracting her from painful memories. She couldn't afford to go down that rabbit hole. Not today while she was alone and feeling vulnerable. What she needed was a distraction.

On impulse, she called Mason. Maybe they could start their movie review segment tonight. He picked up on the third ring.

"Something wrong, Josephine?"

"No. I was just wondering if you wanted to go catch a movie and start our review segment we talked about."

"I wish, but I'm on nanny duty this weekend."

"Is that some kind of weird new frat thing?" Jo scrunched her nose, imagining all kinds of insanity. Rush week would soon be approaching. Lord only knew what kind



of stupidity they had planned for the new pledges.

“No, but that is an awesome idea.” Laughter rang out over the line. “I’m watching Delia and the twins so my brother and his wife can get some sleep. The boys seem to think it’s funny to keep them awake all night.”

“You’re babysitting?” Dear God, those poor kids.

He laughed. “Don’t sound so shocked. I am perfectly capable of handling nanny duty.”

“If you say so.”

He huffed into the phone. “Ray working tonight? Is that why you wanted to go to the movies?”

“No. He’s gone fishing with his dad this weekend.”

Mason got so quiet, she thought for a moment he’d hung and then she wished that was exactly what happened.

“He left you alone your first weekend in New York?”

Jo winced when Mason said it. The anger vibrating in his voice made her glad she’d kept that little nugget of information from Keith. Her brother’s temper would have skyrocketed.

“It’s no big deal. He and his dad go fishing all the time.”

Mason muttered something she couldn’t quite make out.

“Well, I guess I’ll let you go since you’re busy. I’ll find something on Netflix to binge.”

“Do you wanna come help me babysit? It’s just going to be me, a seven-year-old, and twin boys who are just a couple months old.”

“Just you?” Did he even realize what he was getting himself into? She’d babysat all through junior high and high school. Three kids were a lot for even her to handle, especially if two of them were infants.

“Again, there is disbelief in your voice. Haven’t you realized how awesome I am by now, Josephine?”

She laughed. He was so full of himself, but not in a bad way.

“Awesome or not, taking care of twins the whole weekend is going to kick your ass.”

“Pfft, ye of little faith. So, you wanna come keep me company or not?”

She started to say no but then changed her mind. Mason was her friend, and Ray abandoned her for the entire weekend. There was no reason she shouldn’t go help him babysit. It beat sitting around an empty house listening to nothing but silence.

“Sure. I’ll come keep you from suffering a nervous breakdown.”

“Uh-huh. You’ll see. I have awesome uncle skills.”

She laughed at his knowing tone.

“I’ll swing by in a few minutes and pick you up. You need to pack a bag. We’re gonna be there until Sunday when Viktor and Sara get back. Don’t forget your

toothbrush. I'm not sharing."

"So, if I forget mine, you'd deal with my stinky breath all weekend?"

"Hmmm, maybe by Sunday I'd break. Get your shit together, Josephine, and I'll see you soon."

Jo hung up the phone and ran to the bedroom, stumbling twice thanks to her own klutziness, found an overnight bag, and started packing. She couldn't stop smiling.

It was going to be an interesting weekend.

### CHAPTER SIX

Mason hummed as he pulled into Viktor's driveway and parked beside one of the Kincaid Security & Investigation SUVs.

It was Viktor's personal vehicle, but it was decked out in security features, as were all the other SUVs at the firm.

He wanted one, but until he fully committed to working for his brother, he was denied.

Mason didn't know if he wanted to work for the security agency or not.

It did let him use his hacking skills, but he got bored so easily.

Maybe he'd figure it out by the time he graduated.

Jo bounced in the seat next to him, her eyes wide at the sight of the house. He'd gotten used to it, but he guessed someone else might be a little starstruck by the very expensive home.

"You sure they know I'm coming?" she asked for the fifth time.

"Like I told you before, I called Viktor to let him know. He and Sara are cool with it. I want to tell you about Delia before we go in."

"Okay?"

“Viktor adopted her. Her sperm donor was a real piece of shit who hit her. Her and her mother both. She’s skittish around new people. So, if she hides or is really shy, that’s why. It might take her a bit to warm up to you.”

“That poor baby.”

“We’re all protective of her.” Mason shut off the engine. “You ready to meet the fam?” He sounded nervous, even to himself. He typically didn’t bring girls home. Hell, he didn’t have one friend who was a girl. Jo was his first female friend. His sisters-in-laws didn’t count. They were family.

“Lead the way, Mr. Nanny.”

He rolled his eyes, and she only grinned, getting out of the truck. Damn, but her smile was beautiful. It always made something tighten in his chest, something unfamiliar, but not unpleasant.

He got out, locked the truck, and reached in the back, grabbing their bags. He led the way and used his keys to open the front door. He walked in, setting the bags down to the side.

“Princess Peach! Uncle Mason’s here!”

Jo barely closed the door before feet pounded down the stairs, and a blonde fluffball came flying at Mason. He braced for the impact then picked up the little girl and swung her around and around. The child’s laughter was musical and full of joy. He hugged her to him.

“Miss me, Peach?”

“Yes.” Her smile was wide, but then it fell when she spotted Jo. It was like her entire

face closed off and she held on tighter to Mason. Jo's heart broke. That poor, poor baby.

Mason, seeing the change come over Delia, turned them to face Jo.

"Delia this is my friend, Jo. She's gonna help me take care of you and the boys this weekend. She's really, really nice."

"Hi, Delia." Jo made no move to get closer to the child. "It's nice to meet you."

She buried her head in Mason's shoulder, and he smiled ruefully. He had warned her it might take some time for Delia to warm up to her.

"Mason, is that you?"

They all turned to see Sara coming down the stairs. She looked worn out and haggard. Twins would definitely do that to a person. Jo had babysat one set from the time they were born until she'd moved to New York. They could be a handful.

"You look like shit, Sara."

"Mason!" Jo gasped. "You don't tell a woman that."

Sara laughed. "It's okay. I probably do." She reached over and pinched his earlobe. Hard.

"Owww! What the hell was that for?"

She did it again. "Language, Mason. Language."

He reached up and rubbed his ear. "There is no cause for pinching."

“She’s been pinching Papa’s ear too,” Delia whispered with a giggle.

“Vicious.” Mason shook his head.

Sara ignored him and moved to Jo. “Hello. You must be Josephine. I’m Sara Kincaid.”

“Just Jo.” Jo took her offered hand and shook it. “I told him I’d come and keep him from having a nervous breakdown. Twins can be hard to manage.”

“You’ve been around twins before?” Sara asked, her gray eyes a perfect match for her daughter’s.

“You are looking at the most requested babysitter five years running back home. I’ve worked with lots of kids, including twins.”

“Thank God,” Sara breathed. “I was terrified about leaving him here alone with all three of them, but I was desperate for sleep.”

“Hey!” Mason tried his best to look upset. “I got mad uncle nanny skills.”

Jo and Sara both stared at him.

“No faith from either of you. I’m hurt.” He put a hand to his chest like they’d wounded him. “You believe me, don’t you, Peach?”

The little girl nodded, still not looking at Jo.

“See, at least one woman in my life has faith in me.”

“I don’t think she counts since she’s seven,” Sara replied dryly. “Come on in, Jo. I’m

going to go find my husband and get him moving.”

Mason led them into the living room where he put Delia down. She ran behind his legs and peeped at Jo. He hoped she’d get over her shyness soon. She’d love Jo if she gave her a chance.

Sara came back and told him Viktor wanted to talk to him. The serious expression on her face caused him a little bit of alarm. He handed Delia off to her and went to find his brother, throwing an apologetic glance at Jo, who waved him off.

Viktor stood staring out the window in his office, his face drawn. Something was wrong.

“ Brat ?”

Viktor turned to face Mason. He was shaking. “Mason, take a seat.”

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s Papa.”

His stomach bottomed out. His papa had been sick for a while, a cough that wouldn’t go away. “What about Papa?”

“Sit down, Mason.” Viktor went to his desk and pulled out a bottle of bourbon. He poured two glasses, sloshing some over the side because of how badly his fingers shook. He picked them up and handed one to Mason, leading him to the small couch.

“Just tell me.”

Viktor nodded, holding his drink so tightly his knuckles were white. “Mama called a



few minutes ago. They got Papa's test results back. He has stage two lung cancer."

"No," Mason whispered, fear taking hold of every part of his body. "No."

"They're going in tomorrow to sit down with the oncologists in Russia to work out his medical regimen."

"He can't be sick. He's Papa. He can't...Viktor. No."

"I don't want to believe it either, brat, but he is sick."

"Viktor tossed back his drink and set the empty glass on the table."

"I called Conner as soon as I got off the phone with Mama. He's flying out tonight and bringing them home, whether Mama likes it or not."

"We have better doctors here in the States."

Mason nodded. "He needs to be here, but he's still on active duty. He can't just leave his post."

"Conner will take care of it. He'll drag them back kicking and screaming if he has to."

"Viktor ran a hand through his hair. "We kept trying to get him to go to the doctor. He was supposed to go last year, but then that mess happened in the Middle East, and he was shipped over there to help out. Mama made him go to the doctor last week when he came home coughing worse than when he left."

"He should have already retired." Mason jumped up, unable to sit, and started to pace. "Why the fuck would he go and not check his health? Why wouldn't the Marines give him a physical before they sent him anywhere?"

“You know Papa, Mason. He does what he wants.”

Mason clenched his hands, fear and anger warring inside. He needed to scream, to hit something, to do something.

“I’ll take the semester off, get on the first flight, and help Conner pack them up and bring them home.”

“No, you won’t.” This time there was some bite to his brother’s tone.

“It would hurt them to see you sacrificing your education. You know how Papa feels about that. Conner will bring them home, and then we’ll all pitch in and help.

Make sure he does what he’s supposed to. He’ll be here soon enough.”

“Fuck!” Mason put his head in his hands. He didn’t know how to deal with this. His papa, the strongest man he’d ever met, had cancer. Eating away at his lungs. His papa, sick.

No.

Strong arms wrapped around him, and the tears burst through. His shoulders shook as he sobbed. “Shh, brat , it’s going to be okay.” Viktor’s voice was low and rough with his own tears. “He’ll be okay.”

But they couldn’t know that. Cancer was a beast of a disease, and there really was no cure. If it had spread from his lungs, chances were they wouldn’t be able to do anything.

“He can’t die, Vik, he can’t.” Mason sounded more like the little kid who’d just lost his puppy when he was six than a grown-ass man, but he didn’t care. His whole world

had just crashed down around him.

“He’s not going to die.” Viktor’s voice shook. He didn’t believe it either.

Mason finally pulled away from his brother, brushing the tears from his eyes. “What are we going to do?”

“We’re going to get him the best doctors money can buy.” Viktor walked over to his desk and poured himself another drink. “Then we’re going to pray and hope for the best. It’s all we can do.”

Mason nodded, feeling numb. He didn’t know how to process or deal. He just stood there in the middle of the floor feeling helpless.

“Why don’t you stay the night? There’s no way I’m going to get any sleep, and you’re in no condition to babysit.”

“No.” Mason finally turned to face his brother. “You and Sara look about ready to drop. You need some sleep. I have Jo with me too. She’s apparently an expert babysitter.”

“I was surprised when you called and said you were bringing her.” Viktor took another long drink from his glass. “You never bring girls home. Not even when you were in high school.”

“Her boyfriend went fishing with his father and left her alone. She doesn’t know anyone but me, so I brought her along.”

Viktor gave him an assessing look that Mason ignored.

“Is she the girl you were talking about the other night? Keith’s sister?”

“Yeah.” Mason finally went and sat down. “Her boyfriend is the one I asked you to check on. How long before Conner brings them here?”

“It depends on how fast he can get either a leave of absence or Papa’s retirement pushed through.”

“If Papa will retire, you mean.”

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:34 am*

A ghost of a smile crossed Viktor's face. "If is right. The old man lives for the military."

"Mama never wanted to come to the U.S. It's not her home. She's always lived in Russia. What if she hates it here?"

"She'll change her mind once she meets all her grandchildren."

That, she might. She always complained that they never came to visit, but it was hard to travel with infants. Mason hoped she loved it here, because if something happened to his papa, they were not letting her go back to Russia. She would need her sons as much as they would need her.

"When are you and Sara leaving?"

"We're not leaving, Mason. I already told Sara. There is no way I'll be able to sleep tonight, and like I said earlier, you're in no shape to babysit. You and Jo stay the night, though. Maybe help out with the kids a little?"

"We can do that."

"We decided to not tell Delia anything right now, at least not until we have to. Think you can pull it together for her?"

"Peach doesn't need to know her dedushka is sick," Mason agreed.

"I'll do everything I can to make sure she doesn't know anything is wrong."

” Mason picked up his abandoned liquor and downed it in one shot.

The liquid fire chased some of the numbness away.

He had to hold it together for Delia, he reminded himself.

“Come on. Sara’s ordering pizza for dinner.” Viktor hauled him up and gave him another tight hug. “We’re gonna get through this.”

“I know.” Mason hugged his brother so hard he might have cut off Viktor’s oxygen supply, but he never complained.

When they walked back into the living room, his eyes sought out Jo. She was on the floor, feeding one of the twins. A small smile tilted his lips. She looked so peaceful and happy making silly faces at the baby.

Little fingers slipped into his, and he looked down to see Delia smiling shyly up at him. The kid was pretty as a peach, hence her nickname. “How you doing, Peach?”

She tugged his hand, and he let her lead him to the end of the coffee table where she had her makeup and other shit already set out. He laughed, and it eased some of the pain in his chest.

“Please, Uncle Mason?”

“Do your worst, kid.” He plopped down, and she squealed in happiness.

“First, the curlers.” She picked up some kind of sponge roller things he eyeballed suspiciously.

“What are those?”

“They make your hair curly, duh.” She rolled her eyes like he should have already known this. “Mommy says they give you Shirley Temple curls.”

“Who the hell is Shirley Temple?”

“Do you want me to wring your ear again?” Sara asked, exasperated.

“Keep those evil fingers to yourself woman.” Mason winked at Delia and winced when she tugged a little too hard on his hair.

Jo watched him closely. Something was off. He might be smiling and joking, but he seemed subdued. His eyes caught hers, and he shook his head slightly, a clear sign he didn’t want to talk about it. At least not in front of his niece.

“So, Jo, Mason says you’re Keith’s sister?”

Viktor’s question pulled her attention from Mason. He and Mason looked enough alike it was obvious they were brothers, but not twin-ish. Her older sisters looked so much alike it was hard to tell them apart sometimes.

“Yeah. I’m the youngest of us all.” The baby smacked at the bottle in her hand, and she smiled down at Riley. He was such a sweetheart.

“How many siblings do you have?” Sara asked, her eyes going round.

Curious, Jo turned her head to see Delia struggling to twist the curlers in Mason’s hair. She was chuckling to herself, and Mason couldn’t stop cringing with every pull of his hair.

It was the most adorable thing she’d ever seen. Here was a grown man sitting down and letting his niece doll him up. Even Keith wouldn’t let his nieces do this to him.

Mason was an incredibly sweet man.

“Jo?”

“Huh?” She dragged her eyes away from them at Sara’s prompting.

“How many brothers and sisters do you have?”

“Oh...uh, three older sisters and Keith.”

Sara grinned, a knowing expression in her eyes when Jo kept glancing back at Mason and Delia.

“So, a big family, then?” Viktor asked, taking Ronin from Sara. He cuddled the baby close, kissing him softly on the forehead.

“Yeah, it was always noisy in our house growing up because of all the friends who came over. I actually miss the noise.”

“And your boyfriend, does he have a big family?” Sara started picking up toys and putting them in a small toy chest tucked in a corner beside the fireplace.

“No. He has one sister who lives in Michigan. Caroline has a little boy and a little girl. Aside from his parents, that’s the only family he has.”

“No cousins?” Sara frowned at a stain on her white rug.

“No, his parents didn’t have any brothers and sisters. Both sets of grandparents have passed.”

“Well, at least he has you now.” Sara wasn’t watching Jo when she said that, but



Mason.

Jo followed her gaze to see Mason's jaw clenched.

She wasn't sure if it was from Delia pulling his hair out by the roots or from what Sara said.

Butterflies fluttered in her stomach, thinking it might be from what Sara said.

No, Jo, you are not going there. You love Ray.

"He does." Jo put the bottle down and shifted the baby over her shoulder so she could burp him.

The doorbell rang, and Sara waved her husband back down. "It's the pizza. I'll get it. Why don't you and Jo put the boys in the Pack 'n Play while we eat?"

Viktor nodded and walked over to the Pack 'n Play set up beside the fireplace. They were using it as a makeshift bassinet at the moment. When the twins got older, it would turn into a playpen. Once she got Riley to burp, she laid him down beside his brother. They were identical. If Sara hadn't dressed them in different outfits, she'd never know which one was which.

"Malyshka, you'll have to do Mason's makeup after we eat." Viktor chuckled when Mason shot him a grateful look.

"Pepperoni?" the little girl asked, her eyes skating over to Jo and then quickly away.

"Maybe." Viktor reached out his hand, and his daughter latched on, allowing her father to lead her into the kitchen.

“Sooo...” Jo grinned at Mason, who sat on the floor with a pinched, resigned expression. “You play makeover a lot, I take it.”

“Every time I’m here.” He took her outstretched hand and let her pull him up. “It makes her happy.”

“She adores you.”

“She’s my girl.” Mason hooked his arm through hers, and they started walking toward the kitchen where they could hear Delia telling her parents she wanted chocolate milk.

“Is everything okay?” She looked up at him. He was so much taller than she was. “You seem sad.”

In that second, her foot decided to tangle with the floor in an odd movement, and she pitched forward, bringing Mason with her. He landed on top of her. She closed her eyes, mortified. Dammit. Why was she such a klutz?

“You’re becoming hazardous to my health now, Josephine.” Mason pushed himself up, but not off her.

“Sorry,” she muttered and tried to push him off, but he didn’t move. “Uh, Mase. You need to move so we can get up.”

“But what if I like it here?”

She ignored the blatant flirtation. “Too damn bad. Now move your ass before Delia comes running to see what’s keeping you.”

“She’d ask a thousand questions.”

Still, he didn't move, and Jo finally forced herself to look up.

Despite his teasing tone, his expression was so far from that, she sucked in a breath.

His face was a hair's breadth from hers.

His lips were within kissing distance, and when his tongue darted out to wet his lips, she fought back the urge to lean up and kiss him.

"Then don't you think we should get up?" Jo cringed. She sounded breathy, the way she'd sound if she was in that wishful, lustful, please-kiss-me state. Which she wasn't.

"I guess." He leaned forward and kissed her forehead. "You are a distraction, Josephine. Thank you."

"What?" That made no sense.

"I'll tell you why I'm sad and why I needed the distraction after Delia goes to bed. We don't want her to know anything's wrong."

"Okay." She hoped nothing was really wrong, but at least he was going to tell her.

Holding things inside was never good for anyone.

She knew it from experience. After helping her up, she and Mason found his family in the dining room already passing out plates.

They sat at the table and spent the next hour laughing and listening to Delia tell them some crazy story she'd made up. It was a nice evening.

### CHAPTER SEVEN

Mason slouched on the couch, exhausted. His scalp was sore to the touch, thanks to Delia's need to put him in curlers. He hadn't even bothered to look in the mirror at the makeup job. It would take him at least half an hour to scrub that shit off. The things he did for his princess.

"Delia doesn't do a half bad makeup job." Jo sat beside him and handed over a steaming mug of coffee. It was just how he liked it. More milk than coffee, and no sugar.

"You remember how I like my coffee?"

"We've been eating together all week. I picked up on it."

"You're a good friend, Josephine." He gave her a small smile and laid his head back against the couch.

"So, you want to tell me what has you looking like someone kicked your favorite puppy?"

Mason's gut clenched. He set his coffee down before he spilled it. Just the memory of that conversation made him shake.

"It's my papa. Mama called tonight and told us he has stage two lung cancer." He blinked back tears. "We didn't want Delia to know anything yet."

“Mason, I’m sorry.” She reached over and pulled him into a hug. “I’m so, so sorry.”

“I don’t know what to do.” Mason buried his head in the crook of her neck. “I want to get on a plane, but Conner went to get him and bring him back to the States. We have better doctors here.”

“Shh,” Jo soothed. “I know it’s hard, but he’ll be home soon.”

“But what then?” he asked. “What happens when he comes home? What if there’s nothing we can do? What if he waited too long before going to the doctor? What do I do if my papa dies, moye dragotsennyy ?”

“You survive.” She stroked his hair, trying to calm him.

“My grandmother died from breast cancer a few years ago. It’s hard, but you put on a happy face, and you stay strong for them.

Your dad will need your strength. Knowing he has you and the rest of your family there for him, it will give him the will to fight this thing. ”

“I don’t know if I can survive the loss of my papa.”

Jo’s heart broke hearing him say that. Cancer was such an ugly disease.

It robbed you of everything. She’d seen Gran fight for years against it.

It went into remission once, but when it came back, it came back hard and spread everywhere.

It nearly killed Jo when her gran passed.

She spent as much time at her grandparents' house as she did her own growing up.

Gran was more a second mother to her than a grandparent.

Mason's pain was one she understood well.

"You can." She pulled him closer, feeling his shoulders shake as he silently sobbed. "But, Mason, you're giving up on him even before you know what's going on. Let him get here, let the doctors do their thing before you borrow trouble. He might be able to beat this thing."

"You think?" He pulled back and looked at her. The depth of pain reflected in those wide black eyes was staggering. He didn't try to hide his tears from her. Her father once told her it took a stronger man to cry than it did one who hid his feelings.

"Yeah, Mason, I think. We have to pray and hope for the best. If you go in thinking he's going to die, he'll see that.

You have to be strong for him. This is going to be a long, hard battle, and if he thinks his family doesn't believe he can beat it, that can be just as bad as the cancer eating away at him.

You can't let him see your doubts or your fears. "

"Papa is the strongest man I know. He taught us everything. How do I face him when I'm so scared it feels like I can't breathe?"

"You take tonight, and you let yourself feel all the pain you're in right now.

Let it out, and then when he comes home, you walk in there like the cocky, carefree man I've come to know.

Be his baby boy and tell him how much you love him and believe in him.

Being yourself and not some sad, morose version of you will help him more than anything else. ”

He nodded and hugged her again, his arms so tight, they made it hard to pull air into her lungs, but she took it. He was hurting so much right now. It caused her own heart to ache for the torment his family was about to go through.

“Thank you,” he murmured against her ear. His warm breath teased her hair, and she fought the shudder that threatened.

“You’re welcome,” she whispered back. “Lay down and get some sleep. I’ll be on baby watch for now.”

Instead of moving over to the other side of the couch, he stretched out and put his head in her lap. She froze for a heartbeat, but then gave in to the urge to run her fingers through his hair. It was a little longish and on the shaggy side, but it was softer than her own.

It didn’t take him long to find sleep. He was emotionally exhausted. She glanced over at the Pack ‘n Play where the twins slept. They’d convinced Viktor and Sara to leave them down here so the two of them could get some actual sleep. They both looked beyond tired.

Mr. Nanny indeed. She laughed softly when she thought of him telling her in no uncertain terms that he would be fine dealing with all three kids on his own. He’d have been toast if she hadn’t been here.

Mason told her how much he adored Delia, but to see it was an entirely different matter. He was gentle and patient with her, letting her do what she wanted to him

because it made her happy. It took a strong man to do that. Another thing she learned from her father.

She couldn't help but think of Ray with his niece and nephew. For the most part, he ignored them. When he did have to deal with them, he tended to get impatient. He would never sit down on the floor and let Molly curl his hair or put makeup on him.

He and Mason were so different, and that was what her brother was counting on.

Jo sighed. She was beginning to see that things with Ray were far from perfect because of Mason.

Didn't mean she was going to break up with him, because she loved Ray, and she owed him.

It simply meant she was more aware of his flaws.

She'd talk to him. Maybe they could work out a few things that bothered her about the way he treated her sometimes.

The babies woke up an hour later, and she fed and changed them both then put them back down, singing a lullaby softly until they fell out.

She smiled at their beautiful little faces.

At least Mason's father would get to meet them in case he didn't beat the cancer.

These two would bring him such joy. Babies did that for everyone. You couldn't help but smile at them.

Jo nodded off around two and was jostled awake when the twins started to cry. She



started to rise, but Mason was already up, and he waved her down. He picked up one baby and tried to rock him a little, but he only cried harder.

“What the hell am I doing wrong?” he asked, looking unsure of himself.

“He’s hungry.” She got up and went into the kitchen to warm two bottles. Once that was done, she came back into the living room and picked up Ronin. She popped one bottle in his mouth and handed the other to Mason, who mimicked her.

“You’re good with them.” Mason sat beside her on the couch and rested the baby on his knee, keeping his head elevated.

“I love babies.” She stroked Riley’s cheek. “They are our own personal pieces of Heaven to take care of for the time we have them.”

Mason’s breath caught at the look on her face. She was so damn beautiful with her eyes shining and that soft smile gracing her lips. And she wasn’t only beautiful on the outside. Her kindness and compassion shined through. Jo was amazing.

“Do you want kids?”

“Sure.” She wiggled the bottle to see if Ronin was done eating, and the little bugger started sucking again. Riley, he saw, was dozing with the bottle in his mouth, and he pulled it out. The baby’s face scrunched up, getting ready to wail, and he stuck the bottle right back in.

“How many?”

“At least four or five. I grew up in a huge family. I want my kids to have lots of brothers and sisters to lean on.”

“Me too.” Saying it out loud, he realized it was true. He wanted lots and lots of kids. Being around his nieces and nephews had made him start thinking about family and what he wanted more than he was ready to admit to himself.

“How about Ray? How many kids does he want?” Just saying the guy’s name left a foul taste in Mason’s mouth.

“I don’t know. We’ve never really discussed it.”

“How long have you two been dating?” A tendril of blonde hair had escaped her ponytail sometime while she slept.

It seemed to want to tease the baby, and his little fist tried to catch it.

She laughed at his antics, and the sound pierced his soul.

It was full of so much joy. He needed that right now when his own heart was breaking for his papa.

“We got together in high school. I was seventeen, so, three years.”

“That’s a long time.” Mason heard Ronin sucking air, and he removed the bottle, throwing the baby up on his shoulder to burp him like Sara had taught him to do. “You guys discussed marriage?”

“Off and on, but not seriously. That’s part of why I moved in with him. I wanted to see what it would be like to be married before I jumped in that particular frying pan.”

“Keith would be proud.” He smirked, thinking of the relief on his best friend’s face when he told him that bit of information.

Jo shook her head. “I would have told him that if he hadn’t acted like such an asshole.”

“Brothers get carte blanche to act like assholes.”

“Bullshit.”

“All my brothers were assholes to me growing up, but when I need them, they’re always there.

Keith would do just about anything to protect you, Josephine.

Don’t discount that. Family is all you have in this world.

” He heard Ronin burp and pulled him down to cuddle him close.

“This right here is more important than all the bullshit piled up together.”

“You’re not who I thought you were at all.” She regarded him with a hint of curiosity.

“What do you mean?”

“You come off as this cocky, carefree guy who doesn’t have a serious bone in his body. But I think that’s a front.”

“You do, do you?”

She nodded. “Yeah, I do. You have this big heart, and you feel deeply. I think deep down, you are a very serious person with values and morals, and you’ll do what’s right, no matter the personal cost to you.”

Shit. How had she seen what he kept hidden from everyone, even his brothers? They'd only known each other a week and she'd already seen into the very heart of him. It shook him.

So he did what he always did when things shook him.

"Don't be telling anyone else these lies. Can't have rumors ruining my rep."

"Your rep?" She quirked a brow.

"I'm the fun guy, the ladies' man. If you go spouting that, the women will think I'm a catch, and I don't want that. I'm as big of a manwhore as the rest of my brothers. Can't be letting the women on campus think otherwise."

"Manwhore?"

He laughed softly so as not to disturb the twins, who looked to be going back to sleep.

"We're all whores when it comes to women.

Except Viktor. He always looked for love, and Nik calls himself a connoisseur of women, but he's a whore like the rest of us.

We don't do relationships. We never sleep with a woman more than once.

The women know that going into it, though.

It keeps things simple and uncomplicated. "

"So, you're saying you're a manwhore too?"

“Hells yeah, baby.” He tossed her his most charming grin.

“That’s awful, Mason.”

“Why?”

“Because...well, aren’t you looking for someone to love too?”

“Nah. I’m only twenty-two. I got years before I have to worry about that shit. I don’t want the responsibility of a girlfriend or a family right now. Freedom is the magic of all that is fun, and I’m all about the fun, babe.”

She studied him, and he worked hard to keep the carefree look on his face. This girl. She saw him like no one else did. Best to not let her under his skin too deep. She was already taken, and he did not want the pain of that heartache.

“Somehow, I don’t believe you.”

He shrugged. “Believe it or not. It’s true, nonetheless.”

“If you say so.”

“I do.”

Silence reigned for the next few minutes. It wasn’t uncomfortable either. Girls could sometimes get weird when it came to silence. They felt the need to fill it up with useless chatter, which tended to irritate Mason. Jo, however, seemed content to sit there and watch the twins sleep.

“Thanks for earlier.” Mason slid down and propped the now sleeping baby on his chest. He wasn’t about to move him for fear of waking him. “It helped.”

“You’re welcome.” She smiled, and his heart clenched up the tiniest bit. “I’ll keep your dad in my prayers.”

“Thank you, Josephine.”

They slipped back into silence until they both fell asleep right along with the twins.

### CHAPTER EIGHT

“Hey, babe!”

Jo sighed. This was the third time Ray had interrupted her.

And it would be the third time she’d had to start over on her Let’s Play of the new horror game her subscribers asked for.

It didn’t do to have the boyfriend talking in the background of one of her videos.

Not like he wanted to be on her show, anyway.

She’d tried several times to get him to do some quirky videos for Valentine’s Day or Christmas, but he just turned his nose up.

She got up and found him in their bedroom, packing for his week-long trip. He worked construction, and they’d be away on the job site.

“Yeah?”

He frowned, rummaging through a dresser drawer. “Why can’t I find my blue dress shirt?”

“What do you need a dress shirt for? I thought you were going to be on the site all day.”

“Because we might go out for drinks or something. I don’t want to wear work clothes.” He gave her a duh look.

It was her turn to frown. She didn’t know if she liked the thought of him going out for drinks with the guys...

guys she didn’t know. What if he...no. Ray would not cheat on her.

In the years they’d been together, he’d never cheated.

Not once. She’d trust him not to cheat now, even if he was four hours away around people who wouldn’t tell her if he was doing something he shouldn’t.

He’d earned that trust.

She went to the closet and found his shirt. “Here you go.”

“Thanks, babe.” He flashed her a smile and tucked the shirt in his suitcase. “Want to go out to dinner before I have to leave?”

This was the first time he’d asked her to go out since they’d arrived in New York. As much work as she had to do, a date night trumped it.

“That sounds awesome. Let me grab a shower, and I’ll be ready to go in half an hour?”

He nodded. “That works. Gives me time to finish packing.”

Jo rushed through her shower in record time, blew out her hair, and then dug through the dresser for a pair of nice jeans and blue lace top, a black tank under it.



She found Ray in the kitchen going through his phone. He looked up and whistled.  
“Looking good, babe. You ready?”

“Yeah. Where are we going?”

“Josh told me about this great burger place. Thought we could try it out. Make it a once a week kind of thing if I like it.”

“Sounds good.” She followed him out to the car, and they spent the next half hour talking about the new project his construction company was working on.

They were building a huge apartment complex.

Ray said it would end up being close to three months before it was finished.

Which meant she was going to be by herself for most of the next three months.

Well, damn.

They ended up at a place called Burgerz.

It was all brick and wood on the inside, where cozy tables and booths rested under soft lights.

It smelled delicious. The smoky air only heightened the atmosphere.

A waiter walked by holding a tray with a smoking pan.

So, that was where all the smoke came from.

Once they were seated, Jo dived into the menu. The place offered a large variety of

burgers, but they had salads and other sandwiches as well. This could easily turn out to be a favorite spot of hers, even if Ray decided he disliked it.

“See anything you like?” Ray asked, taking a sip of his Dr. Pepper.

“What isn’t there to like?” She grinned, trying to decide on one thing. “It all sounds so good!”

“I’m getting the southwestern burger with onion rings. You want to try it too?”

“No. I don’t like barbeque on my burgers. I think I’m going to get the chicken club. I had a burger for lunch.”

“How’s school?” Ray asked after the waitress took their order.

“Harder than I thought.” Jo shook her head ruefully. “The coursework is drowning me. Makes me miss my old school. We never had this much to do.”

“NYU is a better university than the small college you went to in California. It’s bound to be harder, babe.”

“I guess.”

A loud group came in, and Jo turned to look. She spotted Mason right away. He and a group of friends had just entered. Jo started to wave but froze when she saw him slip his arm around a very pretty brunette. The girl giggled at whatever he said. Jo quickly turned back around.

It bothered her. It shouldn’t, but it did. Seeing him with another girl, all hugged up and laughing, caused a pain in her chest. One she knew shouldn’t be there, especially with her boyfriend sitting across from her. As hard as she tried to push the feeling

away, it stubbornly clung to her.

“Hey, isn’t that your brother’s friend?” Ray asked, finally looking up from his phone. He gestured behind her.

She looked again, and sure enough, Mason and the brunette Barbie were still attached at the hip. This time Mason saw her. He grinned and waved. She tossed her hand in the air and waved back but couldn’t force a smile.

“Yeah, that’s Mason. Be nice if he comes over. He’s been really good to me.”

“You okay?” Ray asked, concerned. “You look ready to hurl.”

“I’m fine.” Her reply came out short and a little harder than she’d meant. “I just have a queasy stomach. Haven’t eaten in hours.”

Mason and his friends were seated two booths down from them, Mason facing her. She didn’t look at him. Instead, she focused on Ray. Like she should. He was her boyfriend, after all, and she loved him.

“Can I use the car while you’re gone? I need to go grocery shopping and do some errands.”

“No.” He put his phone down on the table. “I don’t want more miles put on it than necessary.”

“But, Ray…”

“No buts, Jo. I mean it. The less we use it, the less likely we’ll need to fix it.”

That made no sense. Things went bad on cars all the time, whether you drove them or

not. Parts rusted. She wasn't going to push the subject, though. It wasn't worth the fight.

"Is there anything you need to pick up for the week before we head home?"

"Nah, I got everything." He toyed with the napkin.

"What time do you leave?"

"Josh is picking me up at eight. We're driving down to the hotel we'll be staying in. We start work at nine in the morning. We're building it from the ground up."

"It sounds like a big job." She risked a glance at Mason. He had his head buried in Barbie's neck. Her stomach cramped. This should not be affecting her like this, but it was.

The arrival of their food pulled her attention away from Mason. Her appetite seemed to have fled as well. She picked at her food while she listened to Ray tell her all about the apartment complex and how excited everyone was to have a steady gig for the fall.

"You should eat more than that, Jo." Ray nodded to her almost untouched meal. "It'll settle your stomach."

"I know, I just can't bring myself to. I'm afraid I really might hurl." Lies, but it was easier than admitting the truth, even to herself.

"You ready to go home?"

"Please."

Ray called for their check and a to-go box for her food, saying she might get hungry later. She nodded, not really paying attention. All she wanted was to get out of here.

She felt him before she saw him. It was a sensation she'd gotten used to over the last few weeks.

It was odd, really, to know the moment when someone walked into a room or to feel them before they came into one's line of sight.

She'd never experienced this with Ray, but it was like breathing when it came to Mason.

"Josephine, Ray."

"Mason." Ray's smile was tight, and she rolled her eyes. Ray did not like Mason and hated that she spent time with him. She wasn't too fond of Josh either, but she wasn't rude to him like Ray tended to be toward Mason.

"You guys heading out?"

"Yeah. Jo's not feeling well."

"You okay?" Mason squatted so he could look her in the eye, his expression full of concern. "You were fine at lunch."

"I think I have a stomach bug or something. It struck all at once."

"That seriously sucks." Mason moved out of the way so the waitress could set the check down.

Jo pulled her wallet out, glancing at the check. Taking out a twenty, she handed it to

Ray, who did the same.

And it pissed Mason off. He tossed her money back to her and took out his own wallet to pay her half of the check.

“Mason...”

“Not a word, Josephine.” She glanced up at his hard tone. His eyes were glacial. “When you take a woman out, whether it’s your girlfriend, wife, sister, or friend, you damn well pay the bill. It’s disrespectful to make your woman pay half of it.”

Ray snarled at him. “This is none of your business, frat boy. Jo and I...”

“That’s where you’re wrong. I’m her FIBB, and that makes her my business. Does Keith know you make his little sister foot half the check? Wonder what he’ll say when I tell him.”

“Mason, please don’t.” Jo grabbed hold of his hand to get him to look at her. “I have enough problems without adding Keith to them. Please don’t tell him anything.”

His eyes softened a fraction when they looked at her. “Moye dragotsennyy ...”

“What the hell does that mean?” Ray’s fist curled.

“None of your fucking business.” Mason smiled, but it wasn’t at all friendly. His accent thickened as well, making Jo swallow hard. “All you need to know is if you don’t start treating her right, you won’t only have Keith to deal with, you’ll have me. And I guarantee you don’t want that.”

“Can both of you please tone down the testosterone?” Jo rubbed her temple, a headache starting to bloom. “I just want to go home. I’m tired, and I’m sick. I don’t

feel like sitting here listening to two idiots growl at each other.”

With that, she got up and walked out of the restaurant.

She wanted to hit them both. For different reasons, but still, they’d both pissed her off.

Ray caught up to her by the time she reached the car. He didn’t say a single word, just unlocked the door and got in. The ride home was deathly quiet, but she didn’t care.

He barely said two words to her the rest of the evening. He picked up his suitcase and walked out when Josh pulled up, not even telling her goodbye.

Now that hurt.

Sure, Mason was an idiot and embarrassed Ray by paying her half of the bill, but to not tell her goodbye? That was just mean. She sank down on the couch, pulled her legs up, and rested her cheek on her knees. When had her life gotten so difficult? And painful?

Since that day Mason showed up on her front porch.

And it didn’t look like her life was going to get any less messy any time soon.

With that thought, she curled up on the couch and drifted off to sleep, her headache starting to pound right behind her eyes.

### CHAPTER NINE

Mason tossed the beer bottle in the trash and grabbed another.

His date was hanging on his arm. He couldn't shake her loose.

Bad idea letting Jack talk him into this.

Normally, he didn't date, period. He hooked up, and that was it, but Jack begged him.

His girlfriend's best friend was in town, and she wanted her to have a good time.

Mason knew it was a mistake from the moment her eyes landed on him. She looked way too eager.

Her name was Angela, maybe? He honestly couldn't remember.

"I gotta piss." He shoved away from the table the keg was on and wandered down the hall toward the main floor bathroom. They'd all come back to the frat house after dinner, and his brooding started. Hell, he'd been brooding before then. The second he spotted Jo sitting with Ray, his mood soured.

He'd barely paid attention to the conversation at his own table. Jack had to ask him a question twice at one point. When it was evident Jo was leaving, he'd excused himself to talk to her. It would be rude not to. At least that was what he'd told himself when he ambled over to her table.



He'd lost his temper when she forked over half the bill. In hindsight, he shouldn't have overreacted, but dammit, it pissed him off! His father taught him better than that, and he wasn't about to stand there and let her be disrespected.

The line at the bathroom was long, and he really did have to piss, so he went outside and found the privacy of some bushes.

When he was done, he looked back at the house, and the thought of Angela pawing him didn't give him a good reason to go back inside.

Instead, he found the darkest corner in the back yard and pulled out his phone.

No new messages from his brothers, so his papa hadn't made it back to the States yet. That particular worry was heightening every emotion he felt these days. He should probably apologize to Jo for losing it on her and Ray at the restaurant.

It was after midnight, though. She was probably asleep.

Didn't stop him from calling.

She picked up on the fifth ring, her sleepy voice a balm to his frazzled nerves.

"Mason?"

"Hey, JoJo." His voice was only slightly slurred. Six beers and countless shots would do that to a person.

"Are you drunk, Mason?"

"Not nearly drunk enough to deal with Angela." He yawned and plopped down on the ground, leaning against the fence. "You okay?"

“I’m fine. Why are you calling so late, and who is Angela?”

“Because you said you were sick, and I wanted to check on you. Angela is Jack’s girl’s friend or some shit.”

“She’s the girl you were with earlier?”

“Yeah.” He yawned around the word. “He suckered me into a blind date.”

“Not going well?”

“She’s clingy.” He cleared his throat. “I wanted to apologize too. I shouldn’t have gone off like I did on Ray. It’s just this thing with my papa has my temper flaring at the smallest things.”

“How is your dad? Any news?”

The concern in her tone eased some of the tension in his chest. She wasn’t overly mad at him. “Not yet. Conner hasn’t called to tell us when they’re coming.”

“I’m sorry.”

He let out a humorless laugh. “I’m the one who needs to apologize, not you, JoJo.”

“You’ve never called me that before.”

It was her YouTube screen name. He’d purposely not called her that so he wouldn’t seem like a star-struck fanboy. But...

“I’m drunk. Don’t hold it against me.”

“I’m sorry I blew up too.”

“You had every right. Is Ray still mad?”

“No clue. He left for work and didn’t say a word to me.”

“Work? I thought he did construction.”

“He does. They’re gonna be out of town every week for the next couple of months. He may not be home some weekends. He and Josh left tonight. They start tomorrow.”

“He left you alone for months?” He blinked, his vision blurring.

“He has to work, Mason.”

“It’s just shitty, you being alone.”

She laughed. “That’s what I have my FIBB for, I thought?”

“Fuck, yeah. This FIBB is there for anything you want me for, baby girl.” He took another long swig from his beer bottle.

“You’re insane.”

“And proud of it, sugar doll.”

“You really are drunk.” Again, her laughter floated over the phone, and it calmed him even more.

“Yeah, but not so drunk I don’t remember you were sick. Stomach bug, right?”

“Mmhmm.” Mason heard ruffling and the sound of her mattress. “I’m feeling better now, though.”

“You sleepy?” Another yawn tackled him.

“I think you need sleep more than I do, Mase.”

“Can’t go inside.”

“Why not?”

“The date’s inside. I think I’ll sleep out here against the fence.”

“Mason, you can’t sleep against the fence.”

“Why not?” It felt damn comfortable.

“Well, because you can’t.”

“I like it out here.”

“You won’t when you wake up cold with a big crick in your neck.”

“A what?”

“A crick.”

“Why the hell would I have a cricket in my neck?” The longer he talked, his accent became more dominant. Hell, he barely understood himself, it was so thick.

“Not a cricket, a crick. A pulled muscle in your neck. Feels swollen and stiff. It’s an

American saying.”

He snorted. “I got something swollen and stiff, all right, but it ain’t no fucking cricket.”

She went completely silent, and he frowned, trying to figure out why. His eyes widened. “Did I say that out loud?”

“Yes.”

“Shit. Sorry, moye dragotsennyy .” He needed to hang up the damn phone before he said anything else he didn’t mean to.

“You never told me what that meant.”

“Google it.”

“I tried, but I think I misspelled it or something.”

“It means ‘my precious.’”

“You seriously are not calling me ‘my precious’ like Sméagol does in Lord of the Rings , are you?”

She sounded so outraged, he bent over laughing. He hadn’t even thought of that movie when he started calling her that.

“My precious,” he said, mimicking Sméagol perfectly.

Her gasp almost made him drop the phone, he laughed so hard.

“This is not funny, Mason.”

Anger burned in her words, and it only set off another fit of laughter.

“I’m hanging up.”

He brushed tears from his eyes. God, he hadn’t laughed like that in a while. “No, JoJo, don’t hang up.”

“Don’t call me that, then.”

“It’s meant as a term of endearment. I never even thought of the ugly little guy. Really.”

“I still don’t like it.”

“You don’t like someone thinking you’re the most precious thing in the world?”

“I…you really think that?”

“Sure do, my borrowed sister. You’re my only friend who’s a girl, outside of my family, so that makes you precious to me.”

“That’s actually kinda sweet.”

“What can I say? I have a way with all the girls. They can’t resist me.”

“Is that so?”

“Yup, baby, it’s a fact.”

“Now you’re getting cocky.”

“That’s not a bad thing.” He drained his beer. “Shit, I’m outta beer, but I don’t wanna go back inside.”

“If you weren’t drunk, I’d tell you to come over.”

Damn. Why had he decided to get drunk?

“Ray left and didn’t even say goodbye.” The hurt in her voice sobered him like nothing else could.

“That’s because of me. I’m so sorry.”

“He’s never left like that before. I even texted him to be safe, and he hasn’t texted back. How hard is it to take two seconds and reply? You called, even though I know you were mad. Why hasn’t Ray called?”

Because he was a selfish bastard, but he didn’t say that out loud.

“I’m sure he’ll call in the morning. Hard to know if he’s within cell range or he could have bad reception. Probably late when he got to the hotel too, and he didn’t want to wake you up.”

Why the hell he was defending the bastard was beyond him, but he hated the thought of her hurting.

“You’re a good friend, Mason.”

He wanted to be more than a good friend, but as long as Ray was around, it was all he could be. And he’d have to settle for that or risk losing her.

Fate sure handed him a curveball, and there was nothing he could do about it.

“Get some sleep, JoJo. I’ll be by to pick you up for school in the morning.”

“Go inside and go to bed.”

“I will.”

“Promise me you won’t sleep outside?”

“I promise, moye dragotsennyy .”

He listened until he heard her hang up.

He was screwed.



### CHAPTER TEN

Four days.

It had been four days since Ray left the house, pissed off and silent.

And in all that time, not even one text.

She'd left him countless voicemails and texts, but he refused to respond.

At first, Jo had been hurt, but now she was starting to get pissed off herself.

She understood his embarrassment, but he had no right to take his anger at Mason out on her.

The knock at the door interrupted her silent rant. It had to be Mason. He'd promised to come over and help her set up her studio. Homework had been keeping her so busy, she still hadn't managed to put up the soundproofing tiles on the walls or get the rest of her stuff unboxed.

She hadn't even managed to record anything new.

Thankfully, she'd had enough pre-recorded before the move to get her through, but those were winding down, and she needed to do some new recordings.

Several games had come out she'd meant to do some Let's Plays for, but school had pretty much taken up all her time.

“Hey, Josephine.” Mason grinned at her when she opened the door, his expression looking easier and more relaxed than it had in weeks.

“What’s up with you?”

“My papa is on his way home tomorrow.” He brushed past her and went straight to the kitchen, looking for coffee. She’d put a pot on when he called to say he was on his way over.

“That’s great, Mason!” She closed the door and followed him into the kitchen. Before she realized what he was doing, he’d grabbed her around the waist and swung her up and around, holding her tight. She laughed at the spontaneity of it. “I’m so happy for you.”

“You have to come meet him, Mama, and Babushka .”

“Bab-a-what-a?”

“ Babushka , it means grandmother.” He set her back down and went looking for coffee mugs. “She’s a trip. Insists on finding ways to incorporate the word ‘booty’ into all her conversations. Drives Mama mad.”

“She does not!” She could just imagine this tiny elderly lady saying booty. It was such a Mason move.

“My brother Nikoli and I promised to take her trolling for some hot guys at bingo night down at the community center.” Mason winked and handed her a steaming cup of coffee with just the right amount of milk and sugar. He always brought her coffee in the mornings and knew exactly how she liked it.

“So, you’re gonna be like her wingman or something?” Jo arched a brow, trying to

picture Mason whispering to his grandmother about some old guy in a wheelchair with oxygen strapped to him. She grinned thinking about it. He was a nut.

“Hells yeah! Got to watch out for my Babby . She needs to at least find someone who has teeth, be it their own or dentures. Can you imagine kissing someone who’s all gums? Gross.” He mock-shuddered.

“Come on, Casanova. Time for the free labor to begin.” Jo chuckled as she led him toward her makeshift studio that doubled as the spare bedroom.

She’d managed to drag the boxes with the soundproofing tiles up from the basement last night.

It had taken a bit to find them buried in all the boxes they still hadn’t unpacked.

Mason came in right behind her, standing so close she could feel the heat wafting off his body. It seeped into her, and she shivered. Not from cold, but from something she shoved so far down, she could almost pretend she didn’t feel it.

“We need to get the tiles up on the walls before we start moving the furniture in. The couch stays. It has a foldout bed in it, so if we have guests over, they’ll at least have a place to sleep.” She took several steps away from him under the guise of going through boxes.

“This is pretty out of date.” She looked over to see Mason checking out her recording equipment. “Especially this microphone. This thing has to be five years old.”

“I can’t afford anything else at the moment.”

“Why the hell not? You have millions of subscribers.”

“Which doesn’t translate to millions of dollars,” she replied, not able to hold back the sarcasm. “I’m not part of the top tier of ad revenue on YouTube.”

“That still doesn’t make sense.” Mason sat down on her desk and did his best to keep his eyes off her ass.

She had on shorts that barely covered her, with a green tank top that drew his eyes straight to her cleavage.

And, man, did she have cleavage. He itched to cup them. They’d fill his hands and then some.

“What doesn’t make sense about it?”

He blinked, tearing his eyes away from her ass before she caught him staring. “I barely have a hundred thousand subscribers, and I make decent money. You should be making triple what I do.”

“I don’t.”

“We need to figure out why. Do you have your YouTube channel linked to Twitch and Patreon? And why don’t you have any merch? I get a ton of revenue from my t-shirts, hats, and other stuff.”

She just blinked at him, her blue eyes wide and suddenly overwhelmed. “Um, I don’t have a Twitch or Patreon account.”

The fuck?

He blinked, sure he’d misunderstood her.

She was huge on YouTube. She had to have at least a Patreon account.

People who enjoyed her work could donate or tip her on Patreon to support her so she could continue to create great content.

And Twitch? It was a must for a gamer, especially a Let's Player.

You streamed live and had paid followers.

Twitch took half, but it was a steady monthly income.

“You don't?”

She shook her head, her blonde pigtails whipping around her head. It distracted him momentarily, but he refocused quickly. He'd always just watched her on YouTube. He was such a dumbass for not checking this shit before.

“Is that why you haven't bought yourself a car?”

“I can't afford one.” She looked down, her face flushing with embarrassment.

“And why aren't you using Ray's while he's not here?”

She looked away, and his fist clenched. “It's not my car.”

“So? Ray's not using it.”

“He doesn't want to put extra miles on it.”

A sound he didn't recognize escaped him, forcing Josephine to meet his gaze. She flinched, and he couldn't even hazard a guess as to what his expression must hold.

The fucker wouldn't let her use his car while he was away?

"Mason..."

He put up his hand. "Not a word, Josephine." If she defended the fucker right now, he couldn't guarantee what came out of his mouth wouldn't land him a verbal beatdown by Jo. He walked out of the room and back downstairs.

Pulling out his phone, he called Viktor, who answered on the second ring. " Brat ."

"My favorite brother."

"What do you want?"

"I can't call you just to shoot the shit?"

"Not when you start off with 'my favorite brother.'" Viktor said something to someone. "Cut the shit. What do you want?"

"Fine, don't let me be nice to my brother." He sat on the couch, his anger vibrating in every cell in his body.

"What's got you angry, brat ?" Viktor asked. "I can hear it in your voice."

"Jo's fucked-up boyfriend." Mason's foot tapped absently on the floor. "Fuckers won't even let her use his car while he's gone all week. Doesn't want to put miles on it."

"The fuck?"

"That's what I said. The more I learn about ass-wipe, the more I wonder what the

fuck she sees in someone who treats her like that. I'm beginning to understand Keith's hatred of him."

"I gave all his information to Dylan. If there's anything to find, he'll find it. We can worry about him once we have the file. Now tell me why you called."

"I need a favor."

"Ah-ha! I knew it."

"Fucker..." Mason's lips tilted in a grin.

Viktor was his favorite brother besides Dimitri.

Viktor always managed to cheer him up and lessen his anger.

It was a gift with his brother. He could do that with all of them, even more than Dimitri could.

Maybe that was why he'd subconsciously called him instead of Kade.

He needed to calm down so he could be around Jo without tearing into her.

"What do you need, Mase?" The sound of a screaming baby pierced his ear. "Sara...no, I am on the phone...you want me to what...change diapers..."

Mason burst out laughing at the horror in his brother's voice. He himself had never changed a diaper and had no intention of ever doing so. It was gross. Thankfully, Jo had changed the twins both times last Friday night. The smell alone had caused his stomach to revolt.

“I think I can get you out of that threat.”

“Thank God,” Viktor breathed out over the phone.

“I need some equipment. One of the microphones I ordered a couple weeks back, a web cam, and some of the video equipment.”

“You setting up a sting?”

“Fuck, no.” Mason grimaced at the thought.

He’d let Kade talk him into going along on one of his cases where they’d had to trail a man’s wife to get the goods on her.

Most boring two days of his life. He’d been forced to sit in the car for hours listening to Kade lecture him on his lack of interest in a career that made sense while they listened to some kind of new age music that hurt his ears.

He loved his brother, but he never wanted to go through that again.

“Your shit break?”

“No. It’s for Josephine. Her shit is about five years out of date, and she’s broke.

Girl has no idea how to maximize her ad revenue.

She’ll never be able to set up what she needs to with the equipment she has now.

I was hoping you’d be feeling generous, since bringing all that over here will get you out of diaper duty. ”



“You like her, don’t you?”

“Well, yeah. She’s the first girl I’ve ever had as a friend. It’s weird, but a good weird.”

Viktor was a little too quiet for a heartbeat. “Mason, I think it’s great you’re watching out for her.”

“But?” Mason heard the but coming.

“But I don’t want you to get hurt here, little brother. She has a boyfriend. One she loves enough to pack up and move across the country and live with.”

“I know that.” It ate away at him constantly.

“Just be careful, here, okay?”

“You know me, Vik. I’m not a relationship kind of guy.”

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“Neither were Nik or Dimitri. Look where they are now.”

“Their bad, not mine.”

“Send me a list of what you need, and I’ll bring it over. I need her address as well.”

He asked his brother for one more thing on the spur of the moment before he hung up with Vik and ordered dinner and snacks from Papa John’s.

He could hear Jo moving around upstairs, and he felt bad about leaving her to start the work by herself, but he’d needed to cool down.

His temper seemed to be on a hair trigger these days, but dammit.

Shit like Ray was pulling wasn’t right. She needed a car.

Mason had class, and he worked for Viktor part-time.

He wasn’t always available, and she might need transportation during those times.

That was why he called Viktor. He was going to get her set up so she could start earning the money she deserved.

The doorbell rang. “Josephine, get your ass in gear. Pizza’s here!”

It wasn’t the pizza guy at the door when he answered it, though. It was a woman in her mid-forties or so. Her blonde hair was perfectly styled, and her smile seemed a

little strained.

“Can I help you, ma’am?”

“Who are you?” She was very blunt, and her brown eyes twitched.

“I’m Mason, Jo’s friend. Who are you?”

“Ray’s mother.”

The mother who liked to spy on him through her window. “You here to see Jo?”

“I just wanted to come check on her while Ray’s away.”

“Mrs. Daniels?” Jo came to stand behind him. “Is everything okay?”

“Is it?” Ray’s mother’s eyes glittered with suspicion.

Jo gasped, but before she could say anything, Mason did. “Of course, it is. I’m here as her FIBB to help set up her studio.”

“Her what?”

“Fill-in big brother,” Mason explained. “Since her brother is three thousand miles away, I promised him I’d keep an eye out for his little sister while he can’t.”

“Is there something you need?” Jo asked, her voice very small and quiet. He didn’t like it one little bit. She’d told him Ray’s mother didn’t like her, and from the way the woman stared at Jo, she was absolutely right.

“No, I just wanted to check on you.”

“Goodbye, then.” Mason shut the door in her face.

“Mason!” Jo’s outraged gasp only made him grin at her.

“What?” He shrugged innocently. “I didn’t like the way she was staring at you.”

“She’s probably going to call Ray and tell him I’m over here cheating or something.”

“He should know better than that.”

“Yeah, well, I wouldn’t know what he’s thinking since he hasn’t returned any of my messages.”

Mason had the sudden urge to drive to wherever fuck-face was and beat the living shit out of him. What the hell did she see in Ray?

“He’s an idiot.” Mason walked over and cupped her face in his hands, trying to ignore the way his dick jumped.

“Don’t let his stupidity ruin your mood.

He can believe what he wants. You and I know the truth.

If he doesn’t trust you, that says more about him than it does you.

” He leaned in and kissed her forehead before taking a step back.

“Thank you, Mason.” Jo blinked back tears. He always knew exactly what to say to her.

“You’re welcome. Now, we need to get your studio up and running. I have a surprise

for you too.”

“What is it?” Today was turning into a piss poor one. She didn’t even know if Ray was coming home tomorrow or not, and now his mother was probably telling tales.

“It wouldn’t be a surprise if I told you, now, would it?”

“You’re one of those people.” She narrowed her eyes.

“Which people?”

“The ones who like to torture a person by not telling them what the surprise is.”

His head tilted, and he gave her a devilish smile. “Then what would be the point of a surprise?”

“The word should be stricken from the English language, in my opinion.”

The doorbell rang, and he went to answer it, this time bringing back several boxes along with a bag she was pretty sure held some kind of soda. “Come on, sugar. Let’s eat. I know for a fact you didn’t even touch your lunch, since I was there.”

She stuck her tongue out at him once his back was turned.

He had no plans to tell her about his surprise.

Her annoyance only amused him. She went and got plates and glasses out of the cabinet while he set all his goodies out on the table.

When she returned, her eyes widened. He’d ordered three boxes of pizza, wings, and cheese bread.

“Are we feeding an army? Didn’t invite your frat brothers over or anything?”

He laughed, his eyes twinkling. “Nope. Trust me, what you don’t eat, I will.”

“Do you have some kind of eating death wish?”

“Nah, I just eat a lot.”

She glanced from him to the food set out on the table. “Where does it all go?”

He patted his stomach. “Right here.”

“How are you not five hundred pounds?”

“I work out. Daily. All my brothers do. We eat like pigs, so we work to keep these hot bodies.”

“You think you’re hot, do you?”

“I sure do.” He gave her a smile she could only classify as the most charming thing she’d ever seen. “Just ask the girls around campus.”

Those poor girls. Did they even stand a chance against a smile like that?

She passed him a plate and cup. “What kind of pizza did you get?”

“I got two Supremes and one pepperoni, Italian sausage, and mushroom. That’s all yours. I kept the mushrooms off mine.”

He didn’t even bother with a plate, just pulled one of the boxes over to him and lifted out a piece. She took one of the slices from the box and placed it on her plate before

filling both cups with Coke, careful not to accidentally knock the cups over as she was prone to do.

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure.” She passed him a cup.

“How did you meet Ray?”

She pursed her lips. Was he trying to dig out information he could use against her? Her brother was famous for doing that.

“I’m just curious, Josephine. I’m not your brother.”

“How did you know that’s what I was thinking?”

“Your eyes are expressive, sugar. It was right there for me to read. I promise, I’m only curious.”

She took another bite of her pizza and studied him.

He looked sincere enough. He hadn’t lied to her yet that she knew about.

Why not? If he got to know Ray better through her, Mason might actually start liking him instead of trying to find imaginative ways of murdering her boyfriend.

Mason had become very important to her, and she wanted them all to be friends.

“I met him in high school. I was a sophomore, and he was a senior. I had gone to sit on the bleachers for lunch. I remember being pissed at my best friend for something, I don’t even remember what.

I wanted a little time to myself.” She smiled, remembering that day.

“Ray plopped down beside me, and I nearly jumped out of my skin. I had my headphones in and my head down playing a game on my phone.”

“So, you were a gamer even back then?”

Jo laughed. “I was a gamer from the time I could pick up a controller. My sisters never much cared for it, but Keith and I lived on a game console to the point my parents used to lock up whatever console we were playing just so we’d go outside and get some sunshine.

Once Keith got into football, my parents stopped worrying about him. ”

“But not you?” Mason shoved another slice of pizza into his mouth, eating half in one bite. How the hell did he do that? It was kinda gross, yet oddly fascinating.

“No. I liked games more than I did people at one point. It wasn’t until my mom got me to try out for cheerleading that I started focusing on other things outside of games.

The blonde hair fit the part more than my cheerleading skills back in junior high.

I didn’t care. Keith and I were always close, and I missed him when he got consumed by football.

Being a cheerleader gave me back my brother. ”

“Did Ray play?”

“No. He’s as unathletic as they come. It’s why I was so surprised to see him on the bleachers that day. He caught me before I face planted and embarrassed myself even



more.”

“He was there to talk to you.” Mason nodded, a knowing look in his eyes. “I’d have done the same thing if you were alone.”

“Do all guys think alike?”

He winked. “I’m not giving away secrets. I’ll get thrown out of the club.”

“What club?”

“If I told you, I’d have to kill you.”

She stuck her tongue out at him. “Such a dork.”

He gasped and put his hand over his heart. “Why, Josephine. I’m hurt. I’m a charmer, not a dork.”

“You keep telling yourself that.” Had no one ever called him on his bullshit before? He was funny, but at the same time, he had a massive ego.

He picked up his soda and took a long drink, eyeballing her. “Continue your story while I nurse my hurt feelings.”

Jo rolled her eyes. He was such a cute egomaniac. It was hard to ever get mad at him, let alone stay mad at him. She felt so sorry for the girls who fell for him.

“He introduced himself, and he asked me what game I was playing, and we got to talking from there. We almost missed the first bell warning us lunch was over. He met me at my locker at the end of the day and asked if I wanted to go out Saturday night. He knew I had a game on Friday.”

“He knew your schedule, which means he did his research. Another good move on his part.” Mason nodded and tipped his cup to the empty seat as if Ray were sitting there.

“We went out. Just a movie and a quick bite to eat at Logan’s Steakhouse.”

“Did he make you pay half on that first date?”

“No, it wasn’t until we’d been going out for a while that we decided to split the bill. It wasn’t fair that Ray had to pay for everything. He worked part time at a grocery store. He wasn’t made of money, Mason.”

He grunted but didn’t say anything. She suspected he strongly disagreed.

“Ray was sweet, and he made me laugh. I fell hard for him.”

“Why does your family have issues with him?”

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This was where she became cautious. She didn't want Mason to dislike him any more than he already did, and if she were completely open about her family's feelings, he might end up on their side of the situation.

"I think it's more that no one is good enough for their little girl."

"Bullshit." He set his cup down and leaned forward. "It's more than that, or Keith wouldn't have called me in the middle of the night to beg me to be your FIBB."

"I don't want their feelings to taint yours toward him, Mason. I want us all to be friends."

"I make my own judgements based on my own experiences with people. I don't fall in line with the crowd. Keith'll tell you that."

God, she hoped that was true. She couldn't stand fighting about Ray with even one more person, especially Mason. He was fast becoming her best friend.

"They didn't like him from day one. Dad said he was too schmoozy.

Mom got a 'vibe' off him she didn't like.

My sister Claire, the only one home at that point, told me he was cute enough, but she didn't trust him.

When I asked her why, she couldn't explain it.

It was just a feeling. And Keith? He hated him on sight. Said he didn't treat me right."

"Why would he say that?" Mason fiddled with the lid of the pizza box and sat back. Jo could only guess what was going through his head. And none of it good.

"He didn't think Ray put me first. He especially got irritated whenever Ray would come over and then rush us out.

He wasn't one to stay for family dinners and things.

Keith said it was disrespectful to leave when all they were trying to do was get to know him.

I can understand that, I guess, but that doesn't qualify as him not treating me right. More him not respecting my family..."

Mason quirked a brow when she said that, and she slammed her mouth shut. Well, hell. No wonder her family didn't like him. Why should they bother if he didn't even put in an effort with them?

She'd never thought of it like that before. Not until the words tumbled out had she even realized they were true. It was a little disheartening.

"Okay, he was shitty to them. I get it." Jo shook her head. How had she not seen this before? Because you had no one to compare him to, her inner voice whispered.

"Ray the first guy you ever loved?" Mason's voice was quiet, but not judgmental. She appreciated that more than she'd ever be able to tell him.

"Yes, but I did have one other boyfriend I broke up with because he wanted sex and I

didn't. Ray was the first guy I loved, the first guy I had sex with, the first guy I moved in with. He was my first everything."

"First loves can blind you to a lot of things."

"Who was your first love?"

"Nadia in second grade. She was always taking my candy, and I didn't think anything of it until I caught her giving it to Peter. My first love and my first heartbreak." He adopted the saddest expression known to man and let out a heavy sigh.

"Poor guy." Jo reached over and patted his hand, doing her best not to laugh and to ignore the electricity running along the length of her arm from that simple touch.

"Tragic, I know." He pushed out his bottom lip much like she'd seen his niece do over the weekend. It was adorable on her, and on him, it was sexy as hell.

The doorbell rang again, and Mason jumped up and ran before she could even think about who it might be. He looked way too eager...her surprise! She followed him and found his brother Viktor with a box in his arms.

"Hello, Jo." He shot her a quick smile. He still looked tired and worried, but there was a bit of relief in his expression. "There's more in the car. Get your ass out there, Mase. I'm not carrying all this shit by myself."

"What is this?"

"Your surprise." Mason gently pushed her toward the box Viktor set down. "Go take a look while we unload the car."

Jo stared after them as they went back outside, beyond curious. When she turned her

attention to the box, she couldn't stop the shriek from escaping when she opened it. He didn't...how...no.

Hands shaking, she lifted out a 4090 graphics card. Then she noticed the best capture card currently on the market, along with a new webcam sitting in the box. She sank to the floor, the video card gripped so hard in her hands, she crushed the box.

“Hey, now, what's the tears for?” Mason squatted beside her, alarmed. He thought she'd be happy. He hadn't meant to upset her.

“Why did you do this?” Big blue eyes full of confusion and something akin to pain looked at him, and his heart clenched. A heavy pressure settled in his chest, threatening to cut off his air supply.

“Because you needed it, moye dragotsennyy .” He cupped her cheek, his fingers splayed out over her neck. “I did this because I wanted to see you smile about something today.”

“I can't take this, Mason.” She tried to move away, and he tightened his hold on her. “It's too much.”

“No, it's not.” The feel of her skin made him want to run his hands all along her body, but he kept tight control over himself.

“I'm your FIBB, remember? It's my job to look out for you and make sure you have everything you need.

And that equipment in your studio is junk.

I have this shit just laying around, so let me do what a big brother does, okay? ”

She blinked, and a single tear escaped. He caught it with his thumb. “No more arguments, Josephine. Take this box upstairs while I talk to my brother for a minute. I’ll be up as soon as he leaves. And do your best not to break your neck going upstairs.”

Mason stood and helped Jo up, pushing her gently toward the stairs that led up to the spare bedroom she was using as a studio. He went into the kitchen, doing his best to ignore his brother’s troubled expression.

He shoved the unopened box of pizza at Viktor. “You hungry?”

“When am I not hungry?” Viktor asked and took the box from him. “What is it?”

“Supreme minus the mushrooms.”

Viktor took a slice and leaned against the sink. “Mason...”

“Don’t.” He held up a hand. “Don’t start in, Vik.”

“I’m your brother. It’s my job to take care of you.” He threw the words Mason just told Jo right back at him. “She has a boyfriend.”

“I know that.”

“What you just did for her was your equivalent of a dozen roses and a box of chocolates.”

“It was nothing, just shit I had lying around.”

“Bullshit. Some of that is KSI’s equipment. There’s a state of the art security system in one of those boxes. I know you asked for it because you’re worried she’s here by

herself, but you don't borrow that for just anyone. You're falling for that girl."

"You don't know what you're talking about." He turned away from his brother so Viktor wouldn't see the pain he was feeling. Jo wasn't just anybody. He wasn't falling. He'd already fallen so hard there was no going back.

"I don't want to see you get hurt, brat ." Viktor set his paper plate down and walked over to him, placing a hand on his shoulder. "This might not turn out the way you want."

"You think I don't fucking know that?" He turned away from Viktor and his sympathy, clenching his fists at his sides. The need to punch someone or something simmered under the surface of his skin.

"Whatever happens, you know I'm here for you, da ?"

"Da ," he whispered. " Spasibo ."

"You're welcome."

Mason walked his brother out then went upstairs to find Josephine, his heart aching. They spent the next couple hours setting up her studio, and for once, he was grateful to escape. Being around her right now hurt more than anything else, but he knew he'd not be able to stay away from her long.

But for tonight, he needed the breather.



### CHAPTER ELEVEN

All five of them met the plane. It had been years since Mason had seen his parents and his grandmother.

He paced, as did Kade. Nikoli sat in one of the very uncomfortable chairs by the baggage claim working on his new game that was very hush-hush.

He wouldn't even let Lily, his wife, test it out.

She was as big a gamer as Nik and Mason were.

"The plane's landed, brat . Calm down," Dimitri said, looking at the terminal boards.

"They have to get through customs, and then they'll be here."

"I know. I'm just so worried about Papa.

" Anxiousness ate away at his sanity thinking his father could die.

It was a worry that never left him. Out of all six of them, Mason had spent the most time with their father.

Ronin had taken the base job about a year before Nik left for high school, but Mason stayed longer.

He hadn't moved to Virginia until his sophomore year.

It gave him time to get close to his father.

Just the thought of losing him nearly broke Mason.

They'd scheduled an appointment with the best oncologist in New York, but it wasn't until next Thursday. How were they supposed to get through nearly a week without knowing what was going on?

"How's Becca doing?" Dimitri's wife was close to the due date of their first child. No one knew if it was a boy or a girl because the baby had decided to be stubborn and not cooperate.

"Cranky, miserable, and ready to be done with being pregnant." He sighed. "She swears if I ever put her through this again, she's leaving me."

Mason laughed despite his foul mood. Becca was the sweetest person he'd ever met. She never had an unkind word for anyone. If you didn't know her, you'd think Dimitri could walk all over her, but that woman bossed his brother like nobody's business. Mason adored her.

"You fuckers will be coming over the day the kid is born to help me paint the damn nursery. Becca has picked out two colors, pink and a soft blue. She refuses to let me paint it a neutral color like yellow. We have everything for the room, but until we know the sex, it's an empty shell."

"You put the furniture and shit together, didn't you?"

"No. Becca won't let me until the room is painted for fear we'd get a drop of paint on something." He shook his head. "That's what plastic sheeting is for."

"Didn't she tell me yesterday her brother is coming to visit when the baby's born?"

Dimitri's face went from disgruntled to unsure. "Yeah."

"But?" he prompted.

"But I don't know. Her brother just got out of jail. He's an ex-con and a member of an outlaw MC. How do you tell your wife you don't want her brother around your kid because of all that?"

"Wait, her brother's in a motorcycle club?" His eyes widened. Mason was fascinated with motorcycle clubs. He watched every show he could on bikes. He even had an old, rusted out frame of a bike in his uncle's barn. Once he got his own place, he wanted to start restoring it.

Dimitri rolled his eyes. "Leave it to you to skip over the ex-con part and go straight to the motorcycle aspect."

"Dude, chill. Becca loves her brother. From what she told me, the two of them looked out for each other growing up. He's the only reason she didn't starve to death when she was little.

I think if you try to keep him away from her, Becca will put the fear of God in you.

He's family. Ex-con or not, he's always going to be her family, which means he's our family now too. Deal with it, fucker."

"Tío Conner!"

They both turned to see Kade's son, Mateo, launch himself at Conner.

The man picked the boy up and hugged him, a grin spreading across his normally stoic face.

The kid loved Conner more than he did both his parents.

Mason kept that observation to himself, though.

He wasn't sure what happened between Conner and Mateo down in Florida, but it left a lasting impression with the boy.

Mateo had been stolen from his parents at birth and raised in the Los Muertos cartel. Conner, Kade, and Angel went after him as soon as they discovered this, but a lot of mental damage had been done to the kid. Mason wasn't sure Mateo would ever be truly all right.

“You’ve grown a foot since I saw you, sobrino !

” Conner’s black eyes twinkled. Mateo was helping to bring Conner back from whatever dark place he’d been in when he came back from Afghanistan or wherever the hell he’d been stationed.

They’d all feared they’d never get their brother back, but Mateo was helping to pull him back into the light.

Mason would always be grateful to the kid for that.

“No tengo .” The little boy grinned with his denial. Mateo still spoke a lot of Spanish, but with everyone’s help, his English was almost as good as his grasp on his first language.

Mason spotted his mother first and all but ran to grab her up.

Irinia Kincaid was tiny. She was barely five feet, but that never stopped her from bossing all the men in her family who towered over her by over a foot.

She looked like Dimitri, all blonde and blue-eyed.

Dimitri was the only Kincaid brother who hadn't inherited their father's black eyes and hair.

Fucker stood out like a sore thumb in family photos.

"Mama." He hugged her so hard she gasped. "I missed you."

"My beautiful boy." Irinia cupped his face and kissed his forehead. She'd never be able to do that if Mason hadn't picked her up. "I missed you too, syn."

"Don't hog Mama, brat." Kade tapped him on the shoulder. "The rest of us need a hug too."

Mason released her and looked for his papa.

The difference in his appearance from the last time he'd seen his father nearly crippled Mason.

Ronin Kincaid had always been an imposing figure.

His black hair was now a salt and pepper color that made his pale face stand out even more.

He'd lost weight. Not just a little, but a good sixty or seventy pounds.

He looked small and fragile. The cough that rattled out of his lungs made Mason's hands shake.

Ronin was very, very sick.

“Mason.” His papa held out his arms, and he went right to him, letting him enfold him. He fought back tears. His papa didn’t need to see him break down. He had to be strong for him.

“I love you, Papa,” he whispered right by his ear. The familiar smell of Old Spice and tobacco assaulted his nose. His father smoked all his life, and he was paying for it now.

“I’m not dead yet, boy,” Ronin grouched and pulled back. “Don’t you all start acting like I am.”

“You no be ornery to my deties , Ronin Kincaid!” His grandmother, bless her soul, was shaking her finger at his papa and demanding respect for her “babies.” God, he’d missed the old woman.

“Love you too, Babby .” Nikoli swooped in and stole a kiss. “You ready to go trolling the old folks’ homes for your new man?”

“I need to find me some booty.” She winked at Nik when Irinia gasped. “You and Mason are still taking me, da ?”

“ Da .” Nikoli laughed at his mother’s outraged expression. “We have a date for next Friday night at bingo.”

“Do not encourage her!” Irinia’s lips thinned, but Mason saw the sparkle of laughter in her eyes.

“But, Mama, if we don’t encourage her outlandish behavior, who will?” Viktor asked mildly.

Irinia rolled her eyes but smiled when Viktor hugged her. “When do we get to see the

rest of our grandbabies?”

“We’re headed to my house. All the women are there with the children.”

“Mateo, do you remember your abuela ?” Conner was behind Irinia, and she jumped when he spoke. Fucker was always quiet as a cat. He still held Mateo, who was watching the reunion with curiosity. He’d met his grandparents once before but hadn’t seen them since.

The smile that graced their mother’s face could part the heavens when she turned and saw Mateo. “Hello, sweetheart.”

Mateo didn’t say anything; he just watched her. It reminded him of Kade. He was a trained FBI agent, and he tended to watch everything without trying. His son had picked up on that particular habit. The kid looked just like him too. A mini Kade with his mama’s piercing green eyes.

Eyes that sometimes looked dead. It didn’t happen so much anymore, thanks to Delia, but when that look appeared in his nephew’s eyes, it was a punch to the gut for Mason. Especially since he didn’t know how to help the kid.

Mateo clung tighter to Conner when Irinia stepped closer.

“Say hello to your grandmother, Mateo.” Conner’s firm tone pushed the boy to do as he was told.

“ Hola, abuela .”

“Move out of the way and let me see my grandson.” Ronin pushed past his boys and wasted no time in plucking the boy out of Conner’s arms. They all saw the panic flare on the little boy’s face, but Ronin paid it no mind. “Your papa teaching you

Russian?”

“ Sí ,” Mateo whispered.

“ Da ,” Ronin corrected him. “‘Yes’ in Russian is da .”

“ Da ,” Mateo said, his eyes going blank.

Kade retrieved his son, worried at the blank stare. Mason was too. This all had to be too much for Mateo. “Hey, kid. I’m taking Delia for some ice cream later. You wanna come?”

Mateo looked over at him, his eyes so expressionless, it hurt Mason’s heart. “Strawberry?”

Mason smiled. “Yeah, kid. If you want strawberry, you can have strawberry.”

“Can I, Papa?”

“As long as you mind your uncle.” Kade shot Mason a grateful look. They all did what they could to help Mateo.

“Then da, Tío Mason . I want to go.”

After that, they all gathered up the luggage and headed back to Viktor’s house, where the grandparents spent the rest of the day gushing over the grandkids, and the brothers spent the day worrying about their father.



## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:35 am*

Mason dropped the kids off after their ice cream run then went back to his frat.

He was exhausted. His father looked awful.

He locked his door and collapsed on the bed, letting the tears he'd been holding back all day finally flow.

He'd been raised that men didn't cry. His father's doing, but right now he didn't feel like a man.

He felt like a lost little boy who didn't know which way to turn.

So he called Jo.

"Hey, Mase!" He sighed at the sound of her voice. "Did your family get in okay?"

"Yeah. Ray get home?"

"He got in a few hours ago. He's helping his dad put up shelves in the basement right now. You don't sound so good, Mason."

"He looks awful." Mason sat up, wiping his eyes. "He's lost so much weight, and when he coughs, it sounds like he's hacking up a lung. I don't know if he's going to come back from this."

"Don't give up on him." Jo's soothing voice helped to calm him more than anything else had today. "Have a little faith."

“That’s what Mama said. Told me to have faith and trust in the Lord.” He laughed.  
“That is not comforting right now. So many good people die from cancer, JoJo. I’m not sure God has anything to do with it.”

The sigh that came across the phone line was heavy.

“I know you don’t want to hear it right now, but your mom’s right.

Prayer and faith aren’t always about a good outcome.

It’s about knowing you’re not alone while you face the worst moment of your life.

God may not be able to work a miracle and save your father, but He will be there to hold you and give you comfort. Trust in that.”

Mason shook his head. His mother would love this girl. He wasn’t in a very Christian mood at the moment, though. He and God wouldn’t be on good terms for a while if his papa died. Wasn’t going to say that to either Jo or his mother, though. They’d lecture him.

“Did you get the rest of your space set up?” He changed the subject, and Jo let it drop. The girl knew him too well.

“Yeah. I was gonna do some recording tonight. Ray said he was tired and was going to bed after he finished up in the basement.”

“Want some company?” The thought of staring at the walls all night alone with his thoughts was not something he really wanted to do.

“Sure. You can sleep on the couch tonight too, if you want.”

“I’d like that, moye dragotsennyy .”

He said his goodbyes, changed his clothes, grabbed a pair of pajama bottoms and a white t-shirt, and then drove over to Jo’s. He could give a rat’s ass if Ray liked it or not. He didn’t want to be alone.

Ray met him at the door. “Hey, man. Jo told me about your dad. I’m sorry.”

“Thanks.” Mason was surprised at the sincerity. He didn’t think the guy had it in him.

“I don’t know what I’d do if my dad got sick. Let me know if I can do anything to help.”

“Letting me come over and sleep on your couch is help enough. My head’s all messed up right now, and I don’t want to have time to think.”

“I get it. You want a beer?”

“Sure, thanks.” Mason regarded him, frowning. This was a side to Ray he had never seen before. This had to be the side Jo fell in love with, and he had to admit, this version of Ray was someone he could like. Maybe even be friends with.

Ray came back in the living room and sat down after handing Mason the beer. “I wanted to say thanks too.”

“For what?” Mason took a seat on the couch as well.

“For looking out for Jo, for putting a security system in to keep her safe. She needs more friends, and I get that you’re her friend.

I was an ass to you. I was afraid you were trying to move in on her or were going to

judge me like the rest of her family does.

She told me what you said, that you weren't her brother and you'd judge me based on your own experiences.

Not that those have been too good, but I'm hoping we can be friends.

Jo wants us to get along, and all I want is for her to be happy. ”

Wow. Mason honestly didn't know what to say to that. He took a sip of his now opened beer instead.

“Can we start over?” Ray held out his hand and Mason stared at it for a heartbeat before begrudgingly shaking it.

“We can, but I will be honest with you. I don't like how you treat her.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not saying you're abusive or anything, but the way I was raised, you don't let your woman ride a bus or a cab in a city known for crime.

You don't make her pay for half the bill, you don't go a week without calling or texting and making her feel like shit.

I was raised to treat a woman like the most precious thing in the world. ”

Ray let out a long sigh. “I know. I guess we were raised differently. In my house, women are taken care of, but we treat them as equals. My mom grew up with a self-reliant single mother, and she taught me to treat women like they are as good as a man, and if they want to be equal, then they should be treated equal in every respect, and that means sharing everything. Even the bill at a restaurant.”

“I get that, man, I do, but that doesn’t explain walking away mad and not calling Jo for the whole week.”

“It was a douche move. I was pissed, and she was pissed, and I was afraid I’d say something I couldn’t take back. It seemed easier to not say anything.”

“For the whole week?”

Ray had the good sense to look guilty. “That was me being petty. I’m not proud of it, and I apologized as soon as I got home.”

“You start treating her better, and me and you will be good.” Mason forced the words out. Ray was trying, and he knew it was more than the guy had ever done with Jo’s family. Mason would try too, even though he hated the thought.

“I’ll do my best. We cool?”

“Yeah.”

“Jo’s upstairs in her studio. You go on up. I need to go to get some sleep. Hotel rooms, especially cheap ones, are not conducive to sleep.”

“God’s truth.”

He picked up his beer and went upstairs. Jo was sitting at her desk, headphones on, intent on whatever she was doing. Walking over, he saw her designing her Twitch page. She had some really cool graphics made a while back she wanted to incorporate on her new Twitch profile.

He smiled thinking about how shocked she’d been when her YouTube subscribers flooded to Twitch. Jo didn’t really do a whole lot of live streams on YouTube, but

with the revenue she was getting, it made it worth her while to do at least a few streams a week on Twitch.

He tapped her shoulder to get her attention, and it startled her so badly, she reared back, toppling the chair and herself onto the floor. He shook his head and stared down at her. “How did you make it to your twentieth birthday?”

“By the skin of my teeth.” She blushed and scrambled up off the floor, only to catch her foot on the chair and fall forward.

Mason caught her before she face-planted, but it brought her right up against him.

It wasn’t like when he hugged her either.

She was pressed against his chest so close, he could feel her nipples harden.

His nose flared at the sudden rush of lust.

She made a noise he had no words for, and it drove his lust even higher.

His gaze landed on her lips—her wet, pink lips he’d wanted to kiss for as long as he could remember. He lowered his head, his lips brushing against her jawline.

“Mason...” The breathy tone drove him crazy. It had been weeks since he’d been laid. Every fucking girl he looked at turned into Jo, and he couldn’t find relief with them when he realized they weren’t her.

He groaned, trying to fight the urge to kiss her. He’d just been downstairs with Ray promising to try to be friends. Kissing his girl would derail that like nothing else could. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

As much as he wanted to, he couldn't kiss her. He shoved her away, albeit gently so she wouldn't fall. Picking up her chair, he walked over to study the shit she'd put in the bookshelves he'd helped her put together. Lots of girly stuff intertwined with her gaming icons.

"Mason?"

He closed his eyes against the question. He was so totally fucked.

"I'm sorry." Shoving his hands in his pockets, he turned around to face her. "It's been a shitty day."

She nodded, biting her lip. She always bit that fucking lip.

"I understand." She gave him a tentative smile. "I won't ask if you're okay because I know you're not, but I'm here if you need me."

"I know, Josephine, and thank you."

"You're very welcome."

"So, what do you need help with?" Anything to distract him from his urgent need to pull her close and kiss her until she forgot Ray ever existed.

"It's pretty late to do a live stream, but I thought you might want to play Cuphead with me."

"Isn't that the one the entire gaming community lamented about because of how hard it is?"

"He hadn't really watched many of the videos on the game when it came out a few

years ago.

He'd been too immersed in catching up on his classes.

Jo wasn't kidding when she said the professors were trying to kill them.

Jo rolled her eyes. "Idiots. Everything that is slightly hard is another Dark Souls."

"Hey, that game kicked my ass. It's fucking hard."

She came over and patted his shoulder like he was a little kid. "It's okay if the harder games terrify you. We'll find something else to play."

"I never said I was afraid of it."

"If it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck..." Jo let her voice trail off, and Mason's eyes narrowed.

She knew she'd wounded his pride. All guys thought they were badass gamers, when in truth, most of them sucked.

She had no idea if Mason was any good or not.

Given his brother was a game designer, she was betting on him being at least decent.

"Woman, shut the hell up with that nonsense and boot up the damn game."

She laughed and motioned for him to pull up the other office chair while she got everything booted up. The new capture card Mason had given her was the bomb. She'd tested it out last night after he left. Meant she only got a couple hours' sleep, but it was so worth it.



Jo had played this game on her channel before. Her subscribers loved the series, and she'd wanted to murder the developer. Truth be told, she got so much more satisfaction out of beating a level because it was hard and she'd earned the victory.

"Can I ask a question?"

"Shoot." Jo pulled the game up, its 1930s look so charming, it had won her over despite her ill will toward its difficulty.

"You told me you were a cheerleader in high school, yeah?"

"I was." Where was he going with this? "And a damn good one."

"How did you not kill yourself?" His eyes twinkled with mischief.

"I am not that clumsy." Well, she was, but that was beside the point.

He just looked at her, and she finally sighed. "I don't know what it was about cheerleading, but I wasn't that clumsy when I cheered. Maybe it was because of muscle memory or something, I don't know, but I didn't fall or cause anyone else to. Not much, anyway. Shocked the hell out of my family."

"Me too."

"Hey!" She smacked him in the arm.

"If it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck..."

He threw her words back at her. Damn him. She laughed; she couldn't help it. "You're incorrigible."

“I try.” He preened and batted his eyes.

It was good to see him smile. Mason had walked in here looking like he was ready to curl up in a ball and cry until there was nothing left.

He had to be scared out of his mind if his father actually looked sick.

Being able to distract him from that could at least start paying back everything he’d done for her.

“You ready to get your ass kicked in front of the camera?” she teased.

“You might get your ass kicked, but I am kicking this game’s ass.”

“Have you played before?”

“No, but I’ve seen the Let’s Plays. I’m confident I can do it since I know what’s coming and how to conquer the bosses.”

“Uh-huh. You keep believing that.” She patted his shoulder again, knowing how much it irritated him.

“Bring it.”

She made her expression as fierce as she could but lost it two seconds later. He was so going down.

Jo checked the camera one more time to make sure both she and Mason could be seen before starting her intro and introducing Mason by his YouTube name, CutiePie.

To her it sounded girly, but from what she’d read on the comments, his female

subscribers loved it.

Hopefully, this would help him gain some subscribers too.

His content was hilarious, and he deserved to be noticed more.

Then they sat down and started playing. Cuphead, despite its adorable artwork, was hard as hell.

They were both shouting and growling at the game before too long, but she had more fun than she'd had in a long time.

Mason was naturally funny. It was a perfect counter to her more serious tone.

This was going to be gold on her channel.

Four hours later, they finally shut the computer down. Jo found Mason some sheets, a pillow, and a blanket for the couch while he changed into his pajamas. She'd changed into hers before she went digging for bedding.

She went downstairs and made up the couch. He was loud when he came into the room, probably so as not to startle her. She'd fall and injured herself. Some days she hated how awkward she was. It was her cross to bear, she supposed.

"You sure you don't want to use the pullout upstairs?"

"Nah. I need to be close to the coffee machine in the morning." He took the pillow she offered him. "Thanks for tonight, Josephine. It helped a lot."

Her entire demeanor softened, and she hugged him. "I'm always here for you, Mase. I'll be right here for as long as you need me."

“I’m your FIBB, remember. Being there is my job, not yours.”

“I...” She cleared her throat, getting a little choked up at the expression in Mason’s eyes. She had no words to define it, but it was important. And she chose to ignore it for obvious reasons. “You need to meet up with your parents early?”

He shook his head.

“Then get some sleep, Mase. You need it. We can talk some more when you wake up.”

He leaned down and kissed her forehead. “Night, moye dragotsenny .”

“Good night, Mason.”

She disentangled herself and went to her own bedroom, slipping in beside a now snoring Ray. She lay there for the longest time, sleep eluding her as she fought the feeling of wanting someone else beside her instead of the man she’d loved for three years.

She was in some serious emotional trouble here.

And she had no idea how to fix it.

### CHAPTER TWELVE

Mason woke up to the sound of screaming.

He jumped up, bleary-eyed, and looked around.

It was coming from outside, and it was definitely Jo.

He ran, and a fear so deep it ached settled in his chest. Ripping the door open, he bounded down the steps, and he would never forget the sight that greeted him.

Jo lay on the ground, her leg under the lawnmower—the still running lawnmower. The more she tried to get out from under it, the more she screamed. Ray's mother stood frozen on the front porch of her house, staring in absolute horror.

Mason, however, was not frozen. He ran and shut the thing off before trying to move it away from Jo. Her leg was a bloody mess. The blades had ripped all through her lower calf. His hands shook as he tried to assess the damage.

“Is she okay?” Mrs. Daniels asked, finally coming over.

“No, she's fucking not okay,” Mason snarled. “Call 9-1-1 and then bring me some towels. We have to stop the bleeding.”

The woman didn't say a word, just disappeared into the house.

Fuck. Mason ran his hands through his hair. She was still crying, but at least she'd

stopped screaming.

“What the fuck were you thinking, woman?” Mason tried to straighten out her leg to see where the worst of the bleeding was coming from. Her scream stopped him cold. He was hurting her more and that’s the last thing he wanted to do.

“Here.” Mrs. Daniels shoved a bunch of towels at him.

“The grass needed to be cut.” Jo whimpered when he lifted her leg up to slide the now open towels under it. He wrapped each one as tightly as he could. There were too many cuts.

“Mrs. Daniels, you’re going to have to help me. Press down along the top half, and I’ll do the lower half. Put as much pressure as you can on it. We have to try to stop the bleeding.”

He waited until she did as he asked before taking several deep breaths. He needed to calm the fuck down or he’d yell at Jo.

“Moye dragotsennyy , why were you out here cutting the damn lawn when you know how accident-prone you are?”

“I asked Ray if he could cut the grass this weekend, and he said he wasn’t going to have time. He was going fishing with his dad, and he had to leave early tomorrow for work. No one else was going to do it, so I did.”

“Motherfucker!” Mason seethed with anger. “It’s his fucking job to fucking cut the grass. Not yours. You should never have been out here doing this. If your bastard boyfriend can’t find the time to cut his own damn grass, then I’ll fucking do it from now on to keep you safe from yourself!”

Both Jo and Mrs. Daniels gasped, but for entirely different reasons.

“How dare you speak of my son like that?”

“No one has to keep me safe from myself.” Jo’s angry eyes bored into his, the blue so brilliant, it could make the deepest oceans weep. “I’m perfectly capable...”

He put a hand over her mouth. “No, Josephine, you are not. The bloody mess under this towel says you’re not. When you need the damn grass cut, you call me.” He closed his eyes, trying to get a handle on his temper. “Why didn’t you wake me up?”

“Because you were exhausted.” She cried out when she moved her leg.

“Don’t move.” He locked his hand around her calf, making sure she wouldn’t. “I might have been tired, but it doesn’t mean I can’t help you. I’m your FIBB, remember? We discussed this last night. It’s my job.”

The wail of sirens sounded. Thank God. He needed to get her to the ER before she bled to death. The towels they had wrapped around her had already soaked through.

Mason and Mrs. Daniels moved out of the way while the EMTs worked. He couldn’t stop the wince at her scream when they moved her from the ground to the gurney. Shit, shit, shit.

He pulled out his phone and called Keith. Thank God he picked up.

“Yo, Mase. How’s it going?”

“It’s Josephine. There was an accident.”

“What the fuck? Is she okay?” Fear, the same fear Mason was feeling, bled out of the

phone.

“No. She was trying to cut the fucking grass, and I guess she slipped and...hell, I don’t know what the fuck happened, but her leg ended up under the mower. It’s pretty bad.”

“Fuck.”

“Call your parents, and I’ll call you as soon as I know more...” He paused when the EMT asked if anyone was riding with them. “Mrs. Daniels, can you ride to the hospital with her? I’ll follow in my truck.”

“I can’t. I have a lot to do today.”

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me. She’s your son’s girlfriend, the woman he loves, and you can’t go to the hospital with her?”

“She’s not my daughter.”

“Thank God for that small miracle. I’ll ride with her. One of my brothers can pick up my truck.” He gave the woman one last disgusted look and climbed in the ambulance. “Piece of shit.”

The EMTs looked like they agreed with his estimation of the woman.

The squawking coming from his phone made him remember Keith. “Shit, I forgot you were there.”

“Did that bitch just refuse to go the hospital with my sister?” Keith was quiet. It was his tell. When he got quiet, you got worried.



“I’m going with Josephine to the ER. You want to talk to her?”

“Yeah. I want to talk to her.”

Jo took the phone from Mason, her eyes wide. She’d never seen him this angry in the short time she’d known him. He looked ready to murder someone, preferably Ray’s mom.

“Keith...” The tremor in her voice belied how brave she was trying to be.

“You okay, Jo Beans?” Anger vibrated in Keith’s voice.

Not that she could blame him after overhearing Ray’s mom.

If it had been Ray and her parents, either of them would have ridden to the hospital with him, despite how much they disliked him.

They would have done it because of how much she loved him.

“No, I’m not okay, Keith. It really hurts.” Tears spilled over. She wanted her brother so much right now. He was always the one who was there every single time she’d seriously hurt herself growing up. She just wanted her family.

“I’m getting on a plane, okay? I’ll be there as soon as I can. I promise.”

“Thank you.” She pulled in a breath, the sound gasping and full of tears. “Here’s Mase. I can’t talk anymore.”

She didn’t bother to listen to the rest of the conversation. All she could feel was the blinding pain in her leg. Why had she even tried to cut the damn grass? She knew she was prone to accidents, being the biggest klutz on the planet. It was such a stupid

move on her part, but she'd been mad.

Pissed off at Ray. That was all she seemed to be anymore.

He'd come home, apologized for his behavior, and then gone to his parents' for a couple hours instead of being with her. Then this morning, when she'd asked if he could cut the grass, he said he was going fishing with his dad.

Again, everything but being with his girlfriend.

She'd told him she'd cut the damn grass, and he'd just nodded and said "Thanks" while he got his fishing gear together. Didn't stop even once to think about her inability to stand on two feet for very long.

A part of her was starting to think maybe Keith and the rest of her family were right.

Ray loved her; she knew that. She saw it in his eyes.

What they'd gone through, well, it bound them forever.

But sometimes love wasn't enough. Maybe the past should be left in the past. The more she was here without anyone telling her what she didn't want to hear, the more she was starting to realize they were right.

Especially since Mason came into her life.

He'd been so angry she hadn't woken him up to cut the grass. Had Ray been standing there, she had no doubt Mason would have beaten him to within an inch of his life. And right now, she might even welcome that. Ray knew she could get hurt, and he hadn't cared.

But she'd been the one stupid enough to try to do it.

It was as much on her as it was Ray. She knew better.

Especially after the last time she'd tried to mow the lawn back home and this nearly happened.

Her dad had saved her from any real harm.

He'd been as upset as Mason too, but she'd only been trying to help out. He'd been so tired that day.

She felt the ambulance stop. The pain radiated all the way up her leg when it did. Jo knew without even seeing the x-ray and whatever other kind of test they ran she'd really screwed up this time. God only knew what kind of damage she'd done to herself. Stupid, stupid, stupid.

She was rushed to a trauma room and away from Mason.

She tried to explain what happened while they worked to get the bleeding stopped.

It hurt like hell, but she was already woozy from blood loss.

Once that was done, she was taken to x-ray and then to have an MRI.

During all this, not once did they give her anything for the pain. Bastards.

All this took about an hour, and she was grateful when they finally took her to a room in the ER to await the results. They came and did blood work too.

"Miss?"

“What?” Jo blinked, not realizing the nurse was even in the room.

“Do you have insurance, honey?” The nurse was young, not much older than herself. She seemed nice, her smile sympathetic.

“I do. I just don’t have my purse with me. Can I have someone bring it in later? Or maybe call my dad. My insurance is through him since I’m still in school. He might be able to give you the policy number.”

“That will work. What’s his number?”

Jo rattled it off and then started answering the nurse’s questions. One of her jobs must be admission work since Jo was taken to a trauma room instead of check-in on arrival.

“You go to school at NYU?” the nurse asked when she inquired about Jo’s occupation.

“Yeah. I’m a sophomore there.”

“Me too.” The girl grinned. “I’m getting my RN. I got my LPN license at the vocational school my senior year in high school. My name’s Beth.”

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*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:35 am*

“Nice to meet you, Beth.” Jo had met a couple of people since school started, but none she liked as much as this nurse. It was weird. She’d barely met the girl, but something clicked the way it had with her best friend back home. “I just moved here, actually. Great way to ruin the semester.”

“I’m sorry.” Beth scrunched her face in sympathy. “Tell you what, once we get you out of here, why don’t you come meet me and my friends for a cup of coffee or something? We’ll show you around.”

“That would be really great.” At least one good thing came out of this crappy day. She might have found a new friend.

“You decent, Josephine?” Mason called.

“Yeah, come on back.” She shifted, and a little hiss escaped her from the pain.

“Didn’t they give you anything for the pain?” Mason asked as soon as he saw her face. She shook her head, and he looked mad enough to hit something. “I’ll take care of that right the fuck now.”

“Boyfriend?” Beth asked as she turned off the computer and turned around.

“No. He’s my brother’s best friend and has declared himself my fill-in big brother. I’m just glad he’s here. My boyfriend, Ray, is fishing with his dad.”

“At least you have someone here. I’ll come check on you in a bit. My shift’s almost over, but let me get your phone number. We’ll hook up for lunch when you’re feeling

better.”

“Sure.” Jo scribbled her number down in the little notebook the nurse carried, along with her name.

“The doc will be in shortly,” Mason announced, coming back into the room. “Fuckers. I told them to get their asses in gear. There is no excuse for letting you sit here in pain.”

Beth’s eyes went round when she finally saw Mason. They glazed over a little too. It was something Jo was used to. She couldn’t not be and spend any time around Mason. He wasn’t merely cute or handsome. He was gorgeous, but more than that, his personality drew people to him like flies.

It always amazed her he enjoyed spending time with her at all.

Jo was a very boring person. She knew this.

Hell, she could go hours without saying a single word.

She’d rather stay in and read than go to a party.

Sure, she had a lot of fun playing video games and interacting with her subscribers, but deep down, she was pretty bland.

Mason was as far from bland as you could get.

Maybe that was why they balanced each other out so well.

He pulled her into fun things, and she reminded him not to go so overboard he got into trouble.

“You know what’s wrong with your leg yet?”

“No.” She nodded to Beth. “This is Beth. She goes to NYU too.”

Mason’s eyes flickered to Beth, and he jutted his chin out in greeting. “Hey.”

“Hi,” she squeaked and then blushed. “I have to go.”

He rolled his eyes when she scampered out of the room. He didn’t care what kind of effect he had on women. He seemed to be more and more irritated by it these days.

Mason pulled a chair over to her bed and sat, taking her hand. “How ya doin’, moye dragotsennyy ?”

“Not so good. I’m woozy and in a lot of pain.”

He rubbed his eyes with his free hand. “Don’t ever scare me like that again, Josephine. I don’t think my heart can take it. Plus, Keith will beat me black and blue if anything happens to you.”

“He said he was coming.”

“Yeah. He’ll be here in a couple of hours. I already got one of the brothers at the frat locked down to go pick him up when his flight gets in.”

“Can I see your phone?” He wasn’t going to like this, but...

“Why?” His eyes narrowed.

“I need to call Ray and tell him what happened.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” he exploded, and she flinched. “That fucker is why you’re here right now!”

“No, he’s not. I’m here right now because I chose to try to cut the grass, knowing it could turn out badly.”

Mason’s mouth opened and closed several times. Jo saw the war in his eyes. He didn’t want her to call Ray. He blamed him for what happened, and sure, it was partly his fault for agreeing it was okay for her to cut the grass. But not all of it.

“I hate that fucker.” He handed over his phone then stormed out of the hospital room, his back ramrod straight and his fists clenched tightly.

She texted Ray to tell him she’d be calling from Mason’s phone. It took him five minutes to text her back. She was lucky he did. He hardly ever looked at his phone while fishing.

He picked up on the first ring. “What is it?”

She gritted her teeth at his irritated tone.

“Did your mom call and tell you I’m in the hospital?”

“What?” Something rattled and bounced. His fishing rod, maybe. “What’s wrong? Are you okay?”

“I’m at the hospital, Ray, so no, I’m not all right. I was cutting the grass and tripped. The lawnmower ran over my leg.”

“Shit, Jo. How bad is it?”



“I don’t know. Doctor hasn’t come in yet to tell me. It hurts like hell, though. Mason is raising hell trying to make them bring me some pain meds. Nurses can’t until the doctor comes in or orders it.”

“Fuck, yeah. He needs to raise hell about that. They shouldn’t leave you sitting there in pain.” He pulled the phone away, and she heard him telling his dad what was going on. “Thank God Mason stayed over last night.”

“Yeah, especially since your mom didn’t think it was her responsibility to come to the ER with me when Mase asked her to. He was going to follow in his truck. Instead, he ended up riding in the ambulance with me.”

“Mom knew and didn’t go with you?” The puzzlement behind his words was almost laughable. She kept telling him how much his mother disliked her, but he never quite believed her.

“Yeah, Mason made her help him stop the bleeding. I bled all over her towels.”

He was silent for the longest time. “She’s just not sociable, Jo. You know this.”

“Sociable?” Jo laughed into the phone, her pain making her harsher than she normally would have been. “She left your girlfriend in pain and severely injured. Had it been you, any of my family would have been there for you, and you know it.”

“What do you want me to say here, Jo?”

“I want you to take my side. For once in your life, take my side.”

He let out a long sigh. “I’m not going to fight over the phone about this. Call me back when the doctor comes, okay?”

“Fine. Are you heading back now?”

“Why would I head back? There’s nothing I can do right now that will help.”

“Seriously?” she all but screamed into the phone. “I’m lying in a hospital bed, in pain and scared, and you’re going to fish instead of being here with me? What is wrong with you?”

“Jo, calm down. You’re not by yourself. You just said so. Mason’s there.”

“Mason isn’t my fucking boyfriend. You are!”

“Call me when the doctor comes, okay?”

She counted to ten, but it didn’t help. “Do you love me?”

“You know I do.”

“Then why is fishing more important than me?”

“That’s not it, Jo. My dad and I always go fishing on his weekends off. He doesn’t get another for almost a month, and it might be too cold by then.”

“You know, Ray, maybe my family is right, and I’m an idiot. If you don’t get your ass here, then we are going to have a serious discussion about me moving the hell out and breaking up with you.”

“Jo...”

“No. Here are your choices. Stay at the lake with your dad and say goodbye to me or get your ass here to the hospital where you should be because you love me!” She

hung up before he could respond.

Asshole.

Why she was even surprised was beyond her. She'd known what he'd say when she called, but she hoped she'd be wrong. Classic Ray.

Mason came in hot on the heels of who she hoped was the doctor.

"Ms. Maxwell." The older man in the scrubs smiled kindly at her. "Seems like you had a pretty bad accident."

"I'm the clumsiest person I know, so I'm not surprised."

He clucked at her. "You've done some damage.

The blades severed ligaments and tendons both as well as shredding the muscles in your calf.

I'm not your surgeon, but if I were a betting man, I'd say you're looking at several surgeries to fix it all.

I've got you scheduled to go up immediately.

Your surgeon will meet you there and answer any questions you have.

The sooner we start the repair process, the better.

You also lost a lot of blood, more than we realized.

You'll need a blood transfusion as well while you're in surgery. "

“I need surgery?” Her hands shook. She’d never hurt herself like this.

Before she freaked out, Mason was right there.

He sat on the edge of the bed and pulled her to him, careful not to jostle her leg.

His familiar scent helped to calm her, and when he wrapped his arms around her, she let him comfort her. She needed it.

“Yes, young lady, you do.” The doctor nodded.

“I’ve ordered some pain meds for you. I’m sorry we couldn’t give them to you earlier.

I had a suspicion you might need surgery, and I didn’t want to do anything that would interfere with the anesthesia.

I’ve consulted the anesthesiologist, and he signed off on what you could take and still go under.

The nurse will be in to give you the meds and take you upstairs to the surgical ward. ”

“Where can I wait?” Mason asked and picked up her hand, twining his fingers with hers. It felt so right, she went completely still. Her heart hit a fast beat, and she almost yanked her hand from his. She might have had she not been scared out of her mind.

“I’ll have the nurse show you to the surgical waiting room when they come and collect Ms. Maxwell.” With that, the doctor left them alone.

“I’m scared.” Jo gripped Mason’s hand. “I’ve never had any kind of surgery.”

“It’s gonna be okay, moye dragotsennyy .

I promise.” Mason hugged her, and Jo let herself sink into the embrace.

He was here, hadn’t thought twice about coming, and Ray wanted to stay on the lake and finish his fishing trip.

She was beginning to realize exactly how stupid she was.

The past could only keep her bound for so long.

“Mason?”

“Yeah?” he whispered.

“Promise you won’t leave me alone.”

“Never, Jojo. Never.”

They stayed that way until the nurse came and took them upstairs. Mason kissed her forehead, as was his habit, and gave her an encouraging smile. She could do this. She could be brave.

It was going to be okay. It wasn’t a life and death surgery. They were just repairing her leg.

It was going to be fine.

### CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Mason paced.

He sat and fidgeted.

He paced some more.

Waiting was a bitch.

He asked the nurse if there were any updates, but she told him no.

He tried calling Keith, but he was in the air, so his phone was off.

He paced until the other people in the room asked him to sit.

He sat and fidgeted some more.

Leaving wasn't an option. What if the surgeon came while he was gone? He and Jo both agreed to tell the hospital he was her brother so they would let him stay.

It wasn't like she was having heart surgery or anything. They were fixing her leg. Nothing to be worried about.

But he was terrified.

She'd looked so afraid when they'd told him he couldn't go any farther, it shattered

him. He felt helpless, and that feeling only got worse as the minutes passed.

The watch on his wrist laughed at him. She'd only been gone about forty-five minutes, but it felt like hours. They'd needed to prep her, so she might be in surgery by now or she might not.

He was going nuts.

His phone buzzed. He glanced at it. Ray.

Motherfucker.

He let it go to voicemail.

He started pacing again, and the other people gave him looks that promised repercussions if he didn't knock it off.

Fuck them.

He'd do whatever the hell he wanted to do.

His phone buzzed again, and he ripped it out of his jeans, ready to scream at Ray, but found a text from Dimitri instead. Becca was on her way to Saint Mary's. Her water broke.

Jesus. Thank fuck he was already at Saint Mary's. He shot off a text saying as much and to call him as soon as he got here. Becca had to be freaking the hell out. The girl was terrified of crowded places, and an emergency room in New York City could be crowded as fuck.

One more fucking thing to pace about.

His life had become a series of worries. He was the carefree one. When the shit had he started caring this much about people?

When his brothers' wives came into the picture and introduced him to the world of being an uncle.

Sure, he loved his brothers and their wives, but his nieces and nephews? He'd literally die for them. The new baby counted in the latter category.

He missed fun Mason.

But he wouldn't trade those kids for the player he used to be. They owned him.

About as much as Josephine owned his heart.

The player had been played.

What the fuck was he going to do about his feelings for her? She'd shown him earlier how much she loved the fucker she lived with. Despite everything, she'd wanted to call him. He was the cause of her hurt, and she wanted to call the motherfucker.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

He was so screwed.

His phone beeped again. It was a series of text messages from his family telling him to get his ass to the hospital. The baby was coming.

He sent back a group text to let them know where he was and why.

And the flood of replies began. He stopped trying to keep up with them and shoved



the phone back in his pocket.

His family would come find him here. As much as he wanted to be down there with them for Becca, he'd promised Jo he wouldn't leave her alone.

And dammit, he wasn't going to leave her alone. Becca would have his entire family with her. Jo would only have him until Keith arrived. Or Ray. He was probably on his way here now. Mason still hadn't decided if he was going to punch him or hold him while Keith did. Or maybe they could take turns.

Jo would be pissed, but he didn't fucking care. It was about time someone taught Ray the etiquette of taking care of his woman and the consequences when he didn't.

Viktor and Sara arrived first, minus the kids. The babysitters had been on alert for the last two weeks and were ready at a moment's notice. They were going to earn some serious cash tonight.

"Is she okay?" Sara hugged him. She gave the tightest hugs, and Mason needed it more than ever.

"No, they took her into surgery a little over an hour ago. Her leg's all mangled.

The ligaments and tendons are torn and severed.

The doctor didn't say too much, but I got the feeling it was really bad.

"He sorta got the vibe the good doctor was going to let the surgeon explain to Jo exactly how bad it was.

"What happened?" Viktor asked, handing him a cup of coffee, which Mason took gratefully.

“Her bastard boyfriend, knowing the girl can’t take two steps without potentially killing herself, let her cut the grass.

The lawnmower went right over her leg.” He closed his eyes, remembering the sight of her butchered flesh.

“She soaked through the towels before the ambulance even got there. They managed to get the bleeding stopped and then rushed her to surgery.”

“She’s clumsy?” Sara let him go and stepped back. “She didn’t seem that way when she was at the house.”

“She sat most of the time there. She told me with the babies, she tried to stay seated as much as possible. Couldn’t risk falling and hurting them.”

“Where’s her boyfriend?” Viktor frowned.

“Fishing.”

“The fuck?”

Conner had somehow snuck up on them all, Mateo attached at the hip. Kade couldn’t be far behind. He and Angel never let that kid out of their sight for long. Mason wasn’t surprised they’d brought him.

“Fucker, don’t go stealing my lines.” Viktor fist bumped his twin.

“Language.” Sara wagged her finger at them all and then pointed to Mateo. At eight, he was still small, and they all assumed it was his premature birth. The kid had been born at twenty weeks and survived. He might be small, but he was a hell of a fighter.

“Your girl good?” Conner asked after winking at Sara, who rolled her eyes and walked away muttering about hot sauce.

“Hot sauce?” He glanced to Viktor for an explanation.

“She’s threatening to catch me asleep and put hot sauce in my ear.” Viktor shrugged.

“Not sure what that would do, but...”

Conner laughed. A full-on laugh that made both Viktor and Mason go completely still. It was such a rarity to hear him laugh.

“It will cause severe pain, and you won’t be able to hear right for weeks. It’s a hell of a good torture instrument.”

“ Sí .” Mateo nodded. “Juan has done to me.”

That shut them all up. Being raised in the cartel meant the kid saw a lot, and sometimes the things out of his mouth terrified them.

But when he spoke of the torture he’d endured, not realizing that was what it was, it made them all want to hunt Juan, the man responsible for raising Mateo, and murder him.

“Juan will never hurt you again, mio .” Conner squatted to look the boy in the eyes.

“Remember my promise?”

“ Sí .” The kid’s green eyes went hard and cold, and it made Mason swallow nervously.

“I will bring you proof next week.”

“You found him?”

“Sí.” Conner grinned, the smile full of the promise of death. The expression in his black eyes matched the one in his nephew’s perfectly.

Dear God.

“Enough of that,” Viktor said, ending that particular conversation. “Kade hears you talking about that, he’ll be pissed.”

“Promises are promises, Viktor.” Conner stood and ruffled the boy’s hair. “I’m just fulfilling a family obligation.”

They all let it drop.

“Now, about your girl...”

“She’s not my girl.” Mason cut Conner off.

“Why the hell not?”

“Uh, because she’s in love with someone else?”

“When has that ever stopped a Kincaid? Boy, didn’t we teach you anything?”

“Fucker...”

Mateo giggled, and some of the tension went out of him. That boy’s laugh was magical, considering he’d looked like a stone-cold killer moments before. Maybe he would be all right.

“Conner’s right,” Viktor said. “You need to fight for her.”

“Weren’t you the one warning me off her a few days ago?” Mason shook his head. These people and their advice were whiplash-worthy.

“That was before you told me the asshat was fishing instead of at her bedside. No respect. He needs to go. I like that girl, and I like you around her. Some of that cockiness goes away, and the real you shines through. It’s nice to see.”

“Asshole, you’re just as cocky as me, and you know it.”

“True, but it’s toned down around my family. I’m more me since I met Sara. I like me, and I’m liking you more and more around Josephine.”

“Jo,” Mason corrected him. “She doesn’t like to be called Josephine.”

“Isn’t that what you call her, though?” Viktor arched a brow.

“Hells yeah.” His first hint of a smile slipped out. “I only do it because it irritates her.”

“The little things are what you’ll remember the most, son.”

They all jumped when Ronin Kincaid spoke. Bastard could skulk better than even Conner could.

“Where’s Mama?” Conner asked, pushing Mateo out from behind his legs and giving the boy a look.

“Downstairs with your brother and his wife. The girl’s spooked.”

“They’re here already?” Shit. How was he going to be there for both Jo and his family?

“Yes, I came up here to check on you.” Ronin slapped him on the back, his father’s way of hugging his grown-ass son. “How is she?”

“In surgery. We won’t know anything until they come out and talk to us.”

“Then we’ll take turns waiting with you and Becca.” Ronin walked over and sat down, a cough slipping out. “Girl’s as nervous as a cat. Dimitri’s with her, but the minute more than two or three people come in the room, she gets antsy.”

“She’s got severe anxiety of crowds, Papa.” Mason took a seat beside him, needing to be near his father. Ronin exuded the kind of strength all his sons could only wish for. “She had a rough life. It left a mark on her. Don’t judge her. You don’t know her story.”

Mason did. She’d told him all about growing up with a father who was more interested in his motorcycle club than how her crack whore mother treated his kids.

She’d confessed how she and Jackson, her brother, sometimes stole food from the grocery store so they wouldn’t starve.

Becca had been through enough without her father-in-law adding to it.

The softest smile graced his father’s face. “You’re growing into a fine man, Mason. I’m proud of you.”

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:35 am*

His father was never one to hand out compliments, but he'd been doing it a lot this last year. And now they knew why. He might be dying, and he wanted his boys to know what they meant to him.

"Now, tell me about this girl you're sweet on."

Mason laughed. He was more than sweet on her. He loved her. He'd suspected but fought those feelings. It wasn't until he saw her lying bloody and screaming that he admitted it to himself.

"She's not sweet on me, Papa." He sighed and settled into the hard chair while he told his papa all about Josephine Marie Maxwell.

"And then, knowing the bastard caused this, she wanted to call him. I don't know how to fight that kind of blind love.

How do you convince the most stubborn person on the planet they deserve better? "

"Through your own stubbornness." Ronin nodded like this was gospel or something. "You keep being there for her, wear her down, boy. Don't give up the fight. If she's really worth it, then put in the time."

"You gotta tell her, though." Vik finally put in his two cents. "Won't mean as much if she doesn't know you're fighting for her."

"But what if she doesn't want that? Want me? What if she tells me to get the hell out and not come back?"

This was his biggest fear. He'd decided to be her friend for this very reason.

"Give her your most charming smile and tell her that shit's not happening. She's stuck with you until she comes to her senses." Viktor smirked, proud of himself for thinking that up.

"Shithead, it's the twenty-first century. Going all caveman on a woman doesn't work so much anymore. They are allowed to have opinions now."

Ronin shook his head. "Son, here I thought you'd learned a thing or two from your brothers.

Not so much if you don't understand the man-woman relationship hasn't really changed all that much since creation.

Men and women fight, then they make up and fight some more.

It's what you do in between that counts.

Man up, Mason and be the Kincaid man I taught you to be. "

Mason wasn't about to argue the point. Kincaid men were hardheaded and learned it from Ronin.

He wasn't his father or his brothers. He wasn't going to go in there and tell her she was his, and that was that.

That might have worked with their women, but he had a feeling that shit wouldn't fly with Josephine.

Nik, Viktor, and Dimitri all used that mentality with their women, and maybe Lily,



Sara, and Becca needed that.

They'd suffered so much in their lives. It must have been a relief on some level to have someone to take care of everything.

With Angel, well, her initial relationship with Kade was built on a lie.

They'd had a lot of shit to work through.

He could understand the caveman mentality with all of them. Hell, he even approved of it.

But Jo? She wasn't anything like them. Sure, she might think it was okay for Ray to put himself first, but he wasn't abusive. Just apathetic. Jo had been raised in a loving home and treated the way a normal kid should be.

That was the crux of it. She was normal. There were no demons to overcome, no lie to get past.

Just him baring his soul to her and hoping she didn't kick him out of her life for good.

"Slow down, brat ...you're not making sense."

Viktor's sharp words pulled Mason out of his deep worries. Something was wrong.

"No, we'll be right there. Just stay calm and don't let Becca see your fear." Viktor hung up the phone and closed his eyes. "There's something wrong with the baby."

Jo was in surgery, but Dimitri needed him too.

He hated having to leave, but this was important.

Jo would understand. He stopped at the nurses' station and left his number in case the doctor came looking for him.

They rode down the elevator to the maternity floor.

The rest of the clan was huddled together in the waiting room, or the family room, as the nurses called it.

"I'll tell Becca after you explain it to me." Dimitri faced the woman in a lab coat. Had to be the doc. "She's already nervous and scared enough. You trying to tell her this...it'll cause a full-blown panic attack. It's better if I tell her."

"Fine, Mr. Kincaid, but let her know I can answer any question she has." The doctor, a brunette in her mid-to late-forties, looked tired.

Chances were she'd been on call at the hospital for a while.

He hoped to God she wasn't too tired. Mistakes happened all the time when people weren't dead dog tired. Worse mistakes happened when they were.

Ronin went to stand next to Dimitri, placing a hand on his shoulder. "What's wrong with my grandson?"

The doctor smiled slightly. "Granddaughters, Mr. Kincaid."

Wait...twins? Dimitri was having twin girls? That got all their attention. They'd just assumed the baby was a boy. They were fucked. No way in hell could they protect all these girls.

"Twins?" Dimitri stumbled back. "But we never saw a second baby during the ultrasounds."

“It’s not uncommon for one baby to hide behind the other, and their heartbeats can be so in sync it only sounds like one heartbeat.”

“But there’s a problem with my girls?” Dimitri’s voice shook. “What is it?”

“We didn’t know about baby B. If we had, we would have caught this sooner.

” The doctor motioned for Dimitri to sit, and he let Papa lead him over to one of the waiting room chairs.

“Sometimes, twins develop a type of illness invitro. It’s called TTTS, twin to twin transfusion syndrome.

What happens is twin A ends up with the bulk of the blood, the nutrients, everything. Twin B usually doesn’t survive.”

“You’re telling me one of my babies is going to die?”

Fuck no. No, no, no, no, no. This wasn’t happening. God wouldn’t be this cruel, Mason thought. They were going through enough right now dealing with his father’s cancer. They couldn’t lose one of the girls. It wouldn’t just destroy Dimitri. It would destroy them all.

“I’m preparing you for that possibility, Mr. Kincaid.

Right now, she’s alive. She’s significantly smaller than her sister, and we’re not sure what kind of complications are going to arise once we deliver.

Sometimes the kinder thing to do is to let them slip away.

You can hold her and sit peacefully with her during the process.

We can give her something for pain or even keep her asleep. ”

“You’re acting like you’ve already decided not to try to help her.” The anger vibrating in his brother’s voice had them all on their feet. Bitch was giving up on his niece already? Oh, hell no.

“That’s not what I’m saying...”

“Who’s the best neo-natal physician in the country?”

“Mr. Kincaid...”

“Who?” Dimitri bit out.

“It’s Dr. Gloria Macnamara. She’s based in Seattle, Washington.” Nik shut his laptop.

“Call her and see how soon she can get here. Fly her in. I’ll cover the cost.”

“She’s going to tell you the same thing I am,” Dr. No Hope said.

“Maybe, maybe not, but you’re not getting anywhere near Becca or my kids.”

“Mr. Kincaid, I have been Becca’s doctor from the beginning. She knows me, and it makes her less anxious.”

He laughed. “You think she’s going to want you in that room when she finds out you want to do nothing but let our daughter die? I don’t think so. Now, get the hell out and find me a new doctor to monitor my wife until we can get Dr. Macnamara here.”

The doctor shook her head and left, realizing there was nothing she could do or say to

change Dimitri's mind.

“Dimitri, you need to go tell Becca what's going on.” Irinia hugged her son. “The rest of us will go light a candle for both my granddaughters and pray for them.”

“ Spasibo , Mama.” A tear finally slipped free, and Dimitri buried his face in their mother's hair. “ Spasibo .”

“You're welcome, my beautiful boy. Now go, be with your wife. Whatever happens, we are all here for you.”

Mason filed after the rest of them toward the chapel. He didn't just light a candle for the twins and Becca, but one for Jo as well. How had today gone from the peacefulness of a sound sleep to fucked as hell?

Only God knew the answer to that one.

### CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Mason sat in the chair by Jo's hospital bed, his feet propped up on her mattress and well away from her injured leg.

They were going to keep her for a few days to monitor for blood clots and infection.

The girl had done a number on herself. They didn't want her walking anytime soon and the ER doctor was right.

The orthopedic surgeon said she'd need at least three more surgeries to repair all the damage.

Mason wasn't sure what that meant for school.

He'd check with the dean for her. Maybe she could do her stuff online and through email.

School managed it during COVID so he didn't see why they couldn't accommodate her for something that wasn't her fault.

Nik was passed out in the other chair, not wanting to leave him alone. Lily took the other hospital bed in the room and was out to the world. She and Nik had just had their little girl, Rose, three weeks ago. This had to be hitting them both hard.

He scrubbed at his tired and burning eyes and checked the time. A little after midnight. Keith had gone to the airport to pick up his parents. They'd flown in on the

next available flight. Keith grabbed the only open seat on the one he took.

There was a soft knock at the door, and Angel, Kade's wife, came in. She had some kind of fuzzy throws with her. She used one to cover both Nik and Lily and gave the other to him. "How's she doing?"

"The pain meds she's on are pretty much keeping her asleep," he whispered. He didn't want to wake up Nik or Lily. They were both worn out, thanks to baby Rose. "Otherwise, as well as can be expected. You want to sit? I need to stand up and stretch, anyway."

"No, you stay there. I've been sitting all night. Kade went to meet the doctor at the airport and bring her back. We should know something soon about Ava."

Becca had named her daughters Sasha Irinia and Ava Jaqueline, after their mother and her brother, Jackson.

She said Jackson was the most stubborn person she'd ever met, including all the Kincaid men.

She wanted to give her daughter a fighting chance, and giving her Jackson's name was as good as anything.

Dimitri was "allowed" to give them their first names on the condition they didn't suck. Becca's words, not his.

They were all terrified for little Ava, but all they could do right now was wait and pray.

"Did he take Mateo home?"

“No.” Angel shook her head, her red hair swaying with the movement. “He’s asleep on Conner’s lap.”

“Ava will be okay.” Mason took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Just look at Mateo. He survived the impossible. She’s a Kincaid, and she’ll beat this too.”

“I hope so.” Angel’s face softened. “I haven’t even seen her, and I already love her.”

“Me too.” Mason took his sister-in-law’s hand and squeezed. “She’s got a fierce family rooting for her, Angel girl. She’ll make it.” They’d all adopted Nik’s nickname for Angel. Nikoli had gotten to know her in the bar he frequented back in Boston, never knowing she was his sister-in-law.

“You decide what you’re going to do about her yet?” Angel nodded toward Jo, still fast asleep.

“Yeah, I guess I have. I just need to talk to Keith first.” It was only right.

Keith asked him to look out for Jo, not fall for her.

Wasn’t it some kind of taboo thing to date your best friend’s little sister?

Mason didn’t really care, though. He wanted Jo, and he was going to fight for her.

He knew he was going to have a hard road, because she loved the asshole, but she was worth it.

“You want some coffee? Your dad found an all-night Starbucks across the street.”

“Yeah, but send Conner. You shouldn’t be out this time of night by yourself.”



She laughed. “You know, for the sweetest of the bunch, you have their same overprotective tendencies.”

Mason shrugged. “We were all raised by the same man.”

“That, you were.” Angel gave him another small smile. “What kind of coffee do you want, and please don’t give me a huge complicated order. It’s late, and my brain can’t handle it.”

If it were any other day, he’d call BS. Angel owned a bar and could remember a customer’s favorite drink long after they’d left her establishment.

It was how she got people back. Well, that and employing hot bartenders, both male and female.

The stress of today, though? He’d cut her some slack. They were all wiped.

He gave her his very simple order of half milk, half coffee, which happened to be her own order since he’d learned it from her, and then sat back to wait for Jo’s family to arrive. He’d never met them, since Keith drove home, and he’d gone to Dimitri’s when the school closed for holidays.

The last time Mason remembered feeling this drained was his high school championship football game. They’d won, but barely. The team they’d faced gave them all a beatdown that lasted for days.

Jo shifted in her sleep, muttering something.

He leaned closer and heard her call for Ray.

It was like a little knife twisting in his gut.

How could she love a guy who didn't even come to the hospital when she was seriously hurt?

He understood her family's dislike of him now. He understood it all too well.

Ray went and pulled a stunt like this after Mason decided to try to like him for Jo's sake. That went out the window as the hours passed and he didn't show. It brought out those overprotective instincts Angel had been talking about.

He just needed a plan.

And telling her his intentions right now was out of the question. She had enough to deal with. Besides, Mason wasn't sure how she'd react, and he couldn't run the risk of her flipping out and telling him to leave. She needed someone who had her best interest at heart.

The door opened, and Keith came in followed by who he assumed were their parents. They were both older, late forties, maybe early fifties for their father. Josephine could have been her mother's twin sister. They were alike right down to the facial expressions.

"She's still asleep?" Keith frowned, concerned.

"They gave her some heavy-duty pain meds. The nurse said not to be surprised if she slept through the morning." Mason kept his voice down so as not to wake anyone.

"Mom, Dad, meet Mason Kincaid, my best friend and Jo's fill-in big brother."

"Mason." Keith's mom rushed over and hugged him. "Keith told us everything you've been doing for Jo. Thank you, honey. If you hadn't been there today, God knows how bad it would have been."

“You slept over at her house?” Her father’s brown eyes narrowed, the expression in them calculating.

“Yes, sir. She and Ray let me sleep on the couch. My dad just arrived from Russia. He has cancer and yesterday was a bad day for me. Jo helped me not to go out of my mind.”

“Keith mentioned your father was sick. I’m sorry to hear that.” Some of the tension went out of Cooper Maxwell. “Are these friends of Jo’s?” Mr. Maxwell gestured to Nik and Lily.

“No, they’re my brother and sister-in-law. They came to wait with her too.”

“Why?” Mr. Maxwell frowned.

“Jo’s family to me, which means she’s family to them. There’s not a chance they’d let her stay here by herself. Even if Becca wasn’t in the hospital, there would be a revolving door of my family in and out.”

“Dimitri’s wife?” Keith asked.

“Yeah. She went into labor, and we found out she was having twins, but there’s a problem with one of the babies. Twin to twin transfusion or something. Ava is tiny, and they’re telling us she might not survive.”

“And you’re here instead of with her?”

Mason nodded. “I promised Jo I wouldn’t leave her. I’ve been in to see Becca, said a few prayers in the chapel for her and Ava, but otherwise, I’ve kept my butt planted right here in this chair. My entire family’s been in and out checking on her. She hasn’t been alone today. I promise.”

“You’re a good boy, Mason.” Jo’s mother kissed his cheek, and he barely hid the wince at the word boy. “Jo’s lucky to have you.”

“I’m the lucky one.” Mason glanced at Jo, and he actually felt his expression soften. “She made me think about a lot of stuff, and it’s changed me for the better.”

Keith’s expression changed, and Mason knew it was time to get the hell out of Dodge. He wasn’t ready to talk to his best friend yet. Soon, but not yet.

“I’ll go and let you guys spend some time with her. I need to check on Becca anyway. These two have a newborn at home, so they’re not getting any sleep. I would appreciate it if you could let them snooze until they wake up.”

“Of course,” Mrs. Maxwell said and took the seat Mason vacated. He should have offered her the chair straightaway. His mother would be disappointed in him, which was why he wasn’t about to tell her. He blamed it on him being damn tired.

“Keith, I’ll catch up to you in a bit.”

“Sure, man. I think we need to talk, yeah?”

Keith knew exactly what they needed to talk about. He’d never been able to hide a damn thing from him.

“Yeah, we do.”

With that, Mason left them alone and went in search of his family, his thoughts turning to Becca and baby Ava.

He only hoped the specialist could keep his niece alive.

### CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Mason walked outside, unable to take seeing his family in so much pain.

Some fresh air would be good for him. Well, it wasn't exactly fresh, but it would do.

It was times like this he missed his uncle's farm out in Virginia.

The autumn air would be crisp and smell of the coming winter.

New York had an odd scent. It smelled of machines, of the fumes from the subway, of urine in some places, but amidst all that you caught the various delicious smells of the food vendors and the coffee shops. It wasn't unpleasant, just different.

He walked around the side of the building, wanting to stay out of the ambulances' way should they pull up. The emergency room exit was the only one open this time of night.

There was another guy lounging against the building smoking a cigarette. What caught Mason's attention was the MC kutte he wore. The black leather looked worn and dusty, like he'd just stopped from a long ride. Becca's brother, maybe?

The light wasn't great out here, but Mason could make out short cropped blond hair.

He was tall, well over six feet. Mason figured he was about Dimitri's height.

D was the tallest of the brothers. Hell, all of Mason's brothers were bigger than he

was.

He was the runt of the litter. Sure, he worked out so he could eat like a horse, but he wasn't as tall or nearly as broad as his brothers.

Mason wasn't short—he was six-two, himself—but he felt short in his family of muscled giants, something he'd learned not to let bother him over the years.

“Hey,” he greeted the guy when he got closer. “You Jackson?”

The man turned and studied him. He had eyes as blue as Becca's. This had to be her brother.

“Who's asking?”

“I'm Mason Kincaid, her brother-in-law.”

All the tension eased from his shoulders. He didn't smile, but he did nod. “Yeah, I'm Jackson.”

“It's good you're here. At least you'll get to see Ava in case...” He trailed off, unable to even say it. The kid would be okay.

“In case?” Jackson tilted his head, his blue eyes turning to ice.

“Didn't anyone call you?” Mason frowned. Surely Dimitri or Becca would have at least texted Jackson?

“She called earlier today to say she was going into labor. I was already on my way, so I checked out of the hotel and hit the road. Just got in. Wanted a smoke before I went upstairs. Is something wrong with the baby?”

Mason explained about the twins and why Ava was in danger. Jackson got paler and paler as Mason talked.

“Shit. I need to go see Becca.” Jackson started to run a hand through his hair before realizing it was too short for that. Mason remembered Dimitri saying he’d just gotten out of jail. They must have made him keep it short while behind bars.

“I just came from there. She finally went to sleep, but I can take you up to the nursery to see Sasha. I’m not sure if you’re on the list to see Ava or not. NICU requirements. If you’re not, I’m sure Becca will add you when she wakes up if Dimitri doesn’t first.”

“Thanks.” Jackson took another hit off his cigarette. “I need to quit these damn things, but they help with the stress.”

“My Papa has lung cancer now because of those things, but you can’t keep them from him either. My brother caught him sneaking one last week.”

Jackson threw the butt end of the cigarette down and used his foot to snuff it out. “These things are as bad as alcohol, but I’m not about to quit that either. Let’s head up to the nursery, kid.”

Once they were back inside, Mason was able to see Jackson’s cut much better.

Knights of Carnage. The emblem of a knight holding a reaper’s scythe with flames bursting out behind the knight took up most of the back of his cut.

The front held his name, no other patches.

Mason frowned. He knew for a fact Jackson held some kind of position with the MC.

He'd asked Becca about it, but according to his cut, he was just a member.

"You staying long?" Mason hit the button in the elevator for the maternity ward.

"Yeah. I transferred up from Virginia so I could be near Becca. We have a charter in the same town she's in."

"Really? I've never seen any bikes cruising the streets."

"That's because most of us just got out. Last big sting the feds did took down over half the members in all our chapters. We all agreed to keep things quiet and out of sight."

"If you're gonna be around for a while, think you might help me with my bike?"

Jackson didn't answer right away because the door sprang open, and Mason led him to the nursery window. "Sasha's the third one in the front row."

The biker finally cracked a smile when he saw Sasha. "She looks like a little old woman with all those wrinkles."

"My babushka says we come in this world the same as we go out, wrinkled and grouchy as hell."

"What's a babushka?"

"My grandmother."

"She's not wrong, then." Jackson rotated his head, working some of the kinks out of his neck. "So, you like bikes?"



“Yeah. My parents aren’t any happier about that than me not wanting to join the respectable workplace either.”

“You’re in college, yeah?”

Mason nodded. “Studying computers and engineering. I figured might as well major in something I’m already good at. I do some hacking too. That’s why my brother Kade gave me a part-time job at his security firm. He thinks if I hack legally, it’ll keep me away from the illegal stuff.”

“Does it?”

“No.”

Jackson laughed. “Nice. Tell you what. Once this shit with Ava gets sorted, I’ll look at your bike. Might bring you by the clubhouse. Those guys know a lot about them too.”

“Cool.” Mason leaned against the wall while Jackson went in to hold his niece. He was going to get to visit a real MC clubhouse.

Awesome.

Jo blinked, the light from the windows hurting her eyes.

She heard the steady beeping of machines and yesterday hit her full throttle.

As soon as she remembered, the pain came back.

She had no clue why the brain did that, but it always worked like that.

You didn't feel the pain until you either saw the injury or remembered it. The weirdness of the human brain.

She looked around and saw her parents quietly talking in the corner and a strange guy passed out in the chair against the wall. The bed held a strange girl as well. She didn't appear to be a patient. She wasn't hooked up to anything, and she still had all her own clothes on.

"Finally." Her head twisted around to see Keith sitting in the chair. His familiar face was a welcome sight. She'd missed him so much. Despite her anger at him trying to control her life, she loved her brother. More than she did her sisters, but she'd never admit that out loud.

"Honey!" Her mother rushed over and hugged her, tears slipping down her face. "Thank God."

"Mom, I'm okay." She patted her back awkwardly. "Really."

"What the hell were you thinking?" Her father might look relieved, but he was pissed as hell.

"That I was gonna mow the grass?" She cleared her throat. "Is there any water in here?"

Keith got it for her, and she took several long gulps. Her throat and mouth resembled sandpaper more than anything else.

"Thanks." She handed the Styrofoam cup back to him. "Where's Ray?"

"Not here." At Keith's clipped words, her heart sank. He hadn't come.

“Who are the people sleeping?”

“Nik and Lily. They’re Mason’s family. Mase said they came up here to stay with you while he went to the chapel to pray for the baby.”

“Baby?”

“His sister-in-law went into labor with her twins. Something’s wrong with one of them.”

“Oh no,” she murmured. Mason had to be going out of his mind with worry. He loved his family like she did her own.

“His family has been in and out all day yesterday and all night checking on you,” Keith went on. “Just because you’re important to Mason.”

“They did?” Something fluttered in her stomach, and she felt her chest tighten. His family, who didn’t know her, for the most part, checked on her? Ray’s parents had never done that.

“Yes. We thanked them for watching out for you. The Kincaids are the nicest people.” Her mother took the last empty chair by her bed. “I like them, especially Mason. He cares a lot about you.”

“He’s turned into my best friend.” She moved, and pain shot up her entire leg into her hip, ripping a cry out of her. Damn, that hurt.

It woke both Lily and Nik, who sat up, their eyes going straight to her. Nik looked like Mason, a carbon copy of him actually. Nik was bigger than Mason. That was the only real difference between the two of them. It was a little freaky.

“Oh, hey.” Nik ran a hand through his very messy hair. “How you feeling, Jo?”

“Like my leg got run over by a lawnmower?” She noticed how quickly he got up and went over to where Lily was sitting quietly, her blue eyes wide. She reminded Jo of Snow White. Creamy ivory skin, hair as black as Nik’s, and the most beautiful dark blue eyes.

Were all the Kincaids outright beautiful? She wanted to hate them or envy them, but she couldn’t. They’d been too nice to her and her family.

Nik didn’t touch Lily right away. He gave her a second, and she blew out a breath before nodding slightly. Then he pulled her to him, giving her a quick kiss. “Good morning, Lily Bells.”

“Good morning,” she whispered. “Is there any news on the baby?”

Nik looked over to them, and Keith shook his head. “Last I heard, the doc took Ava into surgery. There were some complications. I think your family is in the chapel right now.”

“Thank you. We’ll come back and see you in a bit, Jo.” Nik took his wife’s hand and led her out of the room, presumably to find the chapel.

“That is just awful.”

“We’ve been praying for them,” her mother said. “They have to be so scared.”

“About as scared as we were when Keith told us you’d let the lawnmower run over your leg,” her dad said, the anger still in his voice.

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“I didn’t let the lawnmower do anything.” She sank back against the pillow, starting to become irritated herself. “It decided to run away on its own.”

“How do you even fall and get your whole leg under the thing?” Keith leaned forward, propping his elbows on the bed. “I mean, I could understand a foot or something, but your whole leg? Lawnmowers are pretty close to the ground, Sis.”

“You know me.” She tried for flippant but failed miserably.

“Yeah, we do.” Keith laughed, his blue eyes alight with merriment. “I think you’re going to die before you hit thirty in some kind of freak accident caused by you tripping over your own two feet.”

“That is not funny, Keith.”

He flashed his mother a smile, one that tried to be innocent, but totally wasn’t.

“So, what’s the prognosis?” She gestured to her leg. “How much damage did I do? I know the surgeon explained it to me yesterday, but I can’t remember any of it. I was too scared to pay attention.”

“You severed the main tendon that goes from your knee to your ankle. All the ligaments in your lower leg are pretty much shredded as well as the muscles.” Her mother winced as she spoke.

“They said you’re going to need several more surgeries before they’ll even talk about letting you walk on it, and then you’re going to have to go to physical therapy. ”

“Holy shit.”

“Language, young lady,” her mother reprimanded her, but there was no heat to it. This was a situation that called for cursing.

“What am I going to do about school?”

“Mason said he’s going to talk to the dean on Monday to see what can be worked out.” Keith sat back and stretched.

“Mason seems to be a stand-up guy.” Her father dragged the chair Nik had been in over to the one her mother sat in.

“He is. Stayed with me through everything. He was the only one with the sense to wrap my leg and hold pressure in the worst spots.”

“That boy saved your life.” Her mother gripped her hand. “You lost a lot of blood, Jo Beans. And I mean a lot. You nicked an artery, and had he not done what he did so quickly, they told us you could have bled to death before they got you here.”

Holy shit. This time she said it in her head, but holy shit. She’d been that badly injured? She remembered feeling woozy, but she had no idea she’d lost that much blood. Sure, the doctor had ordered blood, but it hadn’t registered with her why he’d done it.

She really was a walking death trap.

How had she survived this long?

There was a knock on the door, and Sara came in with what looked like a menu. “Good morning.”

“Hey, Sara.” Jo finally smiled. She liked Sara and Viktor.

“How you feeling, honey?”

“I’ve been better. How’s the baby?”

Sara’s face darkened. “She came through surgery, and they have her in NICU. She’s hanging in there, but she’s very sick.

Her organs are underdeveloped, and her intestines were outside her body when she was born.

Thank God the doctor was able to fix that.

She has a heart defect they’re going to go back in and try to repair in a few days when she’s stronger. ”

“I am so sorry.” Her heart broke for the family who was already dealing with their patriarch having lung cancer. They didn’t deserve any of this.

Sara smiled sadly. “She’s a fighter, and we’re all praying for her. No one is giving up on her.”

“We’ll keep her in our prayers as well.”

“Thank you, Evelyn. That means a lot. Ava needs as many people in her corner as she can get.” Sara blinked and cleared her throat. “I came to get everyone’s breakfast order. Nik knows a great place a few blocks down the street. He had a menu in his car. He’ll go get breakfast and bring it back.”

“You don’t have to do that,” her father protested. “We can find our own breakfast.”

“I’m sure you can,” Sara said and handed the menu to Jo, “but not this morning. I refuse to let this girl eat hospital food. It’s rank. We’re all tired and hungry, so I’m not taking no for an answer. Circle what you want or write your name or whatever.”

“It’s very nice of you. Thank you.”

Sara yawned. “Jo’s family, so that makes all of you family by default.”

Jo frowned and looked up. Sara laughed at her confused expression.

“Mason says you’re his family, so as such, you got adopted into the Kincaid clan, and the rest of your family did too by default.”

“Mason thinks of me as family?” She got all warm and fuzzy at the thought.

Sara laughed, outright laughed. “Sweetheart, that boy’s in love with you. I’m surprised you haven’t noticed it.”

“What?” Her mouth dropped open. “He is not. He’s just my friend...”

This time Keith laughed. “Why do you think I asked him to come look out for you? He was in love with JoJo the YouTube star. I knew if he got to know the real Jo, he’d fall hard.”

She looked at her brother, and instead of confusion, anger simmered in her gut. Why couldn’t he stop? She was not a little girl to be bossed or told what to do or who to love.

“This has to stop, all of you. I love Ray. Mason is my friend, and he’s not in love with me. He’s my best friend. That’s all.”



“Did Mason tell you anything about my past?” Sara startled her with the question.

“A little. He said your ex was abusive.”

“Roger was. I told myself for years I loved him. I didn’t listen to anyone who tried to tell me things weren’t right.

It’s taken quite a few therapy sessions for me to realize I stayed because I was afraid of being alone.

That fear drove me to let him wear me down until I had nothing left.

I know your situation isn’t the same. Mason’s told me Ray’s not physically abusive, but being apathetic can be just as bad. ”

Sara came over and stood by the bed to stare down into Jo’s face.

“Before you write Mason off because you’ve convinced yourself Ray is the only one for you, think about a few things.

Compare the two of them. But more than anything, who stayed on the lake to fish while you were here having major surgery, and who hasn’t left this hospital even once? I think that’s a very telling thing.”

“I…”

“Don’t say anything right now, sweetheart. Just think about it. Now, let’s get these breakfast orders in, okay?”

Jo’s family wisely left her alone after Sara’s statement. Perhaps they understood it was more profound coming from a basic stranger than it was from her family who

seemed hellbent on controlling her. At least it seemed that way to her.

She told them to go get some rest after Viktor delivered breakfast. They'd checked into the hotel last night before coming to the hospital. As much as she was glad they were here, she wanted them out of her hair with their determination to make her break up with Ray.

Not that she wasn't thinking about it already. She'd given him an ultimatum yesterday. He chose to stay on the lake, and it hurt so much, it felt like she couldn't breathe. Had the roles been reversed, she would have gone through hell and high water to get to him.

And then all that stuff about Mason being in love with her?

No. That wasn't true. She ignored the sharp little pain in her chest her denial caused.

She knew deep down she had feelings for Mason, feelings that were getting stronger and stronger every day.

But at the same time, she'd invested years in her relationship with Ray.

She couldn't just give up and walk away.

Even if he chose fishing over her?

How could she stay with him after that? He'd obviously cared more about fishing with his dad than he did her. How was she supposed to respond to that? To get past it?

Her head ached with all the questions.

“Knock, knock.”

Her entire body tensed at the sound of Mason’s voice. She looked up to see him standing at the door, holding two cups of coffee from Starbucks.

“Hey.” Even her voice sounded strained.

“You okay?” He looked so concerned. Why had Ray never looked at her with that much care? It wasn’t fair.

“Yeah, just a rough morning.”

He walked into the room and sat down, handing her one of the cups. “Just the way you like it with all that junk in it.”

“Thanks.” She took the cup and sipped. Her favorite mocha. Mason always remembered.

“You feeling better? I can get the nurse to get you more pain meds if you need them.”

“No, no more pain meds. I don’t want to get hooked on that stuff.”

“I don’t think a few doses during the first couple days can hook you.”

“Yes, they can. My friend Abby’s brother was hooked in less than a week. Drug addiction is nasty stuff.”

“Well, how about some high-powered Motrin or something?”

“I’ll tell the nurse when she comes in.”

Mason frowned. She was being weird.

“You sure you’re okay?” he asked again.

“Yeah. Just tired and in some pain.” The smile she offered was watery at best. “I heard about the baby. I’m sorry, Mase.”

He took a deep breath, trying his best not to think about the baby.

He’d seen her earlier, and as soon as he was out of Dimitri’s sight, he’d locked himself in the bathroom and lost his shit.

Ava was so small, barely three and half pounds.

Hooked up to wires and machines. She had to make it. For all their sakes.

“Thanks, Josephine.” He took a sip of his coffee and stared at the blank wall. “Ray called my phone while I was getting coffee.” As much as he hated letting her know, he had to. She’d get mad if she found out later. Pulling it out, he tossed it to her. “Go ahead and use my phone to call.”

“No, I don’t think so.” She picked up the phone and placed it on the foot of the bed. “He didn’t bother coming yesterday, so I’m not going to bother to return his calls today. If he wants to talk to me, he can get his ass down here.”

Mason wasn’t sure whether he should be surprised at her backbone or be damn proud of her. Maybe both. Either way, he liked this new sassy side to her, even if she was acting weird.

“Want to see pictures of Sasha and Ava?”

That brightened her up. She sat up and let out a hiss. “Damn, that hurts.”

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Mason grabbed his phone and pulled up pictures of a very healthy Sasha and showed it to her. “This is Sasha.” Then he scrolled to Ava’s photo in the “toaster” with all her tubes and wires. “Ava is hanging in there. She’s our little fighter. I think I’m gonna nickname her Rocky.”

“She needs a tough name. Rocky’s good.”

“Becca didn’t think so.” Mason chuckled, remembering her horrified reaction when he said he was going to start calling her that.

“Well, Becca is her mom, and moms can get a little testy about these things.”

“She’ll get used to it. I called one of my frat brothers, and he’s going to bring over my gaming laptop for you to use while you’re stuck in here. At least you’ll have something to do.”

“You don’t have to, Mason. I have my own laptop.”

“True, but I’ve seen your laptop. It’s shitty. Mine’s an ASUS Republic of Gamers laptop. Seventeen-inch display. You’ll bow down and worship at my feet later.”

“Hardly,” she scoffed. “I’ll just beat the high scores on your shit.”

“You can try. I don’t play fluff games. Hardcore, baby, hardcore.”

She gave him a what-the-fuck look. They both knew she could kick his ass any damn day of the week on any game she chose. He was just trying to get her to smile. The

pain on her face was a mixture of physical aches and the emotional pain Ray had caused her.

“We need to lay down a bet on that.”

“Uh, no. I like to keep my hard-earned money, thank you very much.” He stood to throw his now empty coffee cup away, and he heard her gasp. “What’s wrong?”

“Your shirt...it’s all bloody.”

Oh. She’d scared him for a minute. “You asked me not to leave you, and I didn’t, Josephine. That meant no going home to change.”

“You stayed all night?”

“Yeah. I slept on the floor. Nik needed the lounge more than I did. Fuckers doesn’t get much sleep since Rose came home.” He came back over and sat down, finally catching the expression on her face. It was filled with shock, wonder, and something he couldn’t put a name to.

“No one’s ever done something that nice for me except my family.”

Mason leaned up and kissed her forehead. “You deserve a little nice here and there.”

His phone buzzed again, and they saw it was Ray. He was tired of the fucker calling his phone, so he answered it. “Ray.”

“Can I talk to her?”

“She doesn’t want to talk to you.” He hardened his voice. “Now, stop calling my fucking phone.”

“Asshole, let me speak to my girlfriend.”

“Why the fuck aren’t you down here at the hospital instead of calling my damn phone?” Fucker didn’t know when to quit.

“Because I had to clean up the mess in the front yard.” He said this like he was talking to a five-year-old. “Mom said the neighbors had been gawking at it since yesterday and gossiping. Mom hates to be gossiped about.”

“So, your mom’s feelings came before your worry for Josephine?” This time the anger was hard to hold back. “You fucking shit-faced bastard. When Keith and I get our hands on you, you are going to learn how to treat a woman instead of being some pansy assed little mama’s boy.”

“Mason!”

He glanced at Josephine. Her face was screwed up with worry.

“Not a word, moye dragotsennyy . It’s time someone taught him to be a man.”

“Is that Jo?”

“Yeah, and she doesn’t want to fucking talk to you.

Come on over here, I dare you. Keith and I will be waiting.

” He hung up on the bastard and tossed his phone back on the bed.

Fuck, he needed a good fight. If Jo went to sleep later, maybe he and one of his brothers or Keith could hit the ring.



Anything to get rid of this pent-up anger.

“Don’t hurt him, Mason. Please.”

She was crying, and it wrenched his heart apart. She still loved the bastard. Didn’t mean he wasn’t going to teach Ray the lesson of a lifetime.

“Don’t cry, JoJo.” He jumped up and sat with her on the bed, pulling her close. “It’s going to be okay.”

“No, it’s not.” Tears spilled, and great heaving sobs came out of her chest. “I have to leave him, and I don’t know what I’m going to do.

I love him, but I don’t think he loves me as much as I do him.

It’s not right, Mason. I try to ignore how much it hurts because I love him, but him putting his fishing trip ahead of being here with me, this time it was too much.

I gave him an ultimatum. He chose fishing. ”

That fucking bastard. He was going to beat him bloody.

“Josephine, I need to ask you something, and I hope you’ll be honest with me.”

She nodded, her face scrunched up.

“Like I told you before, I make my own decisions about people based on my own experiences with them. When it comes to Ray, your family is right about him. He’s shit.”

Her face crumbled, but he didn’t let it sway him.

“I need you to explain to me how someone as smart, independent, and honest can stay with someone who treats them like Ray does you. You know better than that. You were raised like I was, to respect yourself and everyone else. I talked to your parents and to Keith yesterday, thinking maybe you’d had a boyfriend before Ray who treated you the same way.

I thought maybe you had it in your head that was how women were treated or something, despite the very good relationship your parents have.

I don’t understand how you can love Ray when he treats you like a second-class girlfriend on a daily basis. ”

“There’s more to the story than you know, Mason. Something I never even told my family about.”

“Will you tell me? Because I’m having a hard time here, Josephine.”

She was silent for so long, Mason thought she was going to say no, so he was surprised when she nodded.

“Ray and I had been together for about a year when I got pregnant. It was an accident. The condom tore, and the antibiotics I was on screwed with my birth control.”

“Did you have an abortion?”

“God, no. I don’t believe in that, but the miscarriage was my fault.” She took a shuddering breath. “Me, and my klutzy curse.”

“Josephine...”

She held up a hand to stop him, and he retreated into silence.

“We were camping, and I decided to hike up the hill. I was bored and wanted to do something besides sit and look at the lake. My feet got tangled together, and I fell, bouncing down the hill, and landed on a rock. Hard. The cramping started soon after that. By the time Ray got me to the hospital, I’d lost the baby. ”

“Oh, sweetheart, I’m so sorry.”

“It was my fault I lost our baby, but Ray never blamed me. He took care of me. He was there when I needed him, stood by me through my depression and rage. He was sweet and kind even when I didn’t deserve it.

I’ll always blame myself for it. I owe him my loyalty, Mason, because he was loyal to me during the worst moment of my life. ”

Fuck. He’d never suspected anything like that. His heart broke for her.

“Jo, it wasn’t your fault. It was an accident. You may not believe it now, but it was. Ray was right to stand by you like he did, but that doesn’t give him the right to treat you like he does now. No one deserves to be treated like a flyaway thought.”

“I know.” She took a deep breath. “Being around you and away from my family has opened my eyes to a lot of things. Losing our child was awful and the guilt...my God, the guilt, Mason.” Jo shook her head, her heart shattering all over again thinking about the worst day of her life.

“I made up for losing our baby by letting him treat me that way. I thought I deserved it for the longest time, but I can’t do it anymore.

I can’t keep letting him put everything before me.

I needed him here with me yesterday, and he chose his dad and their fishing trip over me.

Despite what happened to our baby, I deserve better than that. ”

Not knowing how else to comfort her, he pushed her over slightly and crawled into the bed with her, pulling her close. “It’s okay, moye dragotsennyy . Everything’s going to be okay.”

“I’m saying goodbye to the last three years of my life, Mason. It’s going to take a while before it’s all okay.”

“You’ve got me.” He leaned over and kissed her temple. “Your FIBB will always be here when you need a shoulder to cry on or when you get too lonely.”

“That may be harder than you think when I’m three thousand miles away. I don’t want to go back to California, but my parents are going to insist on it when I tell them I’m breaking up with Ray.”

“Do you have any other place you can stay besides Ray’s?”

She thought for a few minutes. “Maybe, if my sorority has a house on campus. They might have a room.”

“You’re in a sorority?” He was shocked to the bone. She so wasn’t that kind of girl.

“My friend Abby dragged me to Kappa during rush week our freshman year. They knew who I was and thought I’d be good publicity for them.

That’s what I figured, anyway. Who the hell would want the world’s biggest klutz as a member?

They realized how clumsy I was the first fundraiser we organized.

” She laughed and Mason thought it was the best sound he’d heard in days.

“After that, I got to sit and help out. No more accidents.”

“Kappa does have a house on campus.” He grabbed his phone and texted one of his brothers to haul Kappa’s president over to the hospital.

He was doing his best not to crow. She was leaving the bastard, and now he might have a chance with her.

Keeping the victory off his face was hard, but she’d just told him about the worst moment of her life.

Showing how happy he was right now wasn’t the best way to handle her baring her soul to him.

“I’m having one of my buddies bring the president over here to talk to you.

If they don’t have any room, we’ll figure something out. You’re not going back to California.”

“It can wait a few days, Mason. I’m not leaving here anytime soon.”

“Yeah, well, I’m getting this shit locked down today so you’ll have a plan when your parents try to get you to come home.”

“You’re intent on me staying in New York, huh?”

He saw something in her blue eyes that he pushed away.

He didn't want to scare her. She was just getting the courage to leave Ray.

He couldn't push her. Not yet, anyway. He'd keep his feelings tucked away for when she not only was ready to hear them, but when she could also be in a place where to respond to them.

"You're staying right where you belong."

"And where do I belong, Mason?" Her voice went soft and a little husky at the same time.

"Here."

Before he could say anything else, the parade of his family started. He was grateful. If she'd kept pushing, he might have blurted out the whole truth despite his resolve not to.

He planned on showing her how he felt before he confessed how much he loved her.

If this had a shot, Josephine needed to understand her own self-worth. She'd begun her journey today by deciding to leave Ray, but Mason wasn't stupid enough to think that was all it was going to take. He planned on teaching her the value of her .

And then he'd claim her.

### CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Jo let out a sigh and tried to get comfortable. She'd convinced Mason to go home and get a shower earlier. The boy stank. He'd argued he could use the shower in her room, but as she pointed out, putting blood soaked clothes back on wouldn't help with the odor he was giving off.

Seriously, the boy reeked.

Keith promised her he'd take Mason with him to go pack up her stuff at Ray's. Jo knew she was taking the coward's way out by not doing it herself, but she couldn't do it. Physically, it would be weeks before she'd be able to stand, but that wasn't the reason she wasn't going to supervise.

She and Ray had been inseparable for three years. It nearly killed her to tell him she was leaving. If she went to pack her things up, she was a little afraid she'd give in to his pleas and stay.

Jo loved Ray with all her heart. Every time he did something that caused her step back and allow him to be apathetic or to put himself first, she'd known it was wrong.

Yet she'd allowed it. She knew the kind man, the man who loved her.

She knew the man who would get her blue roses every year for her birthday because they were her favorite flower.

She knew the man who had sat with her while she cried after she lost her baby.

She knew the man who told her it would be okay.

That he loved her and there would be more babies.

Ray wasn't all bad.

He was just bad for her.

Because while she knew the kind man, she also knew the other side of him.

The side who didn't care that she could cause herself bodily harm with a lawnmower.

She knew the man who had stayed at the lake with his dad fishing while she'd been in major surgery.

She knew the man who wouldn't let her use his car while it sat there for weeks even though he understood how dangerous public transportation was in New York.

She knew the man who only wanted to go eat where he liked to go.

To only go see the movies he liked. Who only cared about what he wanted.

Somewhere along the way, Jo had let herself get pushed into the background, to become second best. Out of guilt and loyalty.

Part of her thought she deserved it because of the miscarriage.

That part of her had been dominant the last two years.

The more her family argued against Ray, the tighter she'd held on because she didn't want to admit they were right.



It was only after she'd gotten away from their constant badgering that she'd started to open her eyes.

Yes, Mason played a part of that, but mostly it had been her seeing Ray's faults up close and personal and not having to defend them to anyone but herself.

She understood it wasn't a healthy relationship for her.

Yet, if she had to walk into that house and face him, she might not leave. It had taken everything she had to decide to call it quits with Ray and she'd had the courage because she'd done it over the phone. She hadn't had to look him in the eye and tell him she wanted to end things.

Cowardly.

She shifted again, and pain raced up her leg, as if to agree her actions were cowardly. She was supposed to go home today, but she was running a fever and they said she'd gotten an infection. It was no wonder with the amount of dirt and grass that had been in the wounds.

There was a knock and she looked up, expecting to see her parents who promised they'd be here later and to bring her decent food. Hospital food was the worst.

Instead, it was the one person she didn't want to see.

Ray.

"Hey, Jo." His eyes were big and sorrowful and she glanced away, unable to see the pain in them.

"Ray, what are you doing here?"

He shuffled closer, his baseball hat in his hand. "I came to take you home, Jo."

She blinked. "What?"

"They said you were being released today..."

"Who told you that?"

"I called last night, but you were asleep. The lady I spoke with said you'd be going home today. I wanted to be here to pick you up."

"Why aren't you at work?"

"Because you're hurt Jo. I would have come over yesterday after I finished cleaning up the yard, but you were mad and I...I know I messed up Jo. I'm sorry. I should have come here before I cleaned the yard."

He looked so contrite and apologetic, but he didn't get it. He really didn't get it and that was why she knew she'd made the right decision.

"I'm not going home today, Ray."

"Is something wrong?" He came over and sat in the chair Mason had vacated about an hour ago.

"I got an infection. I can't go anywhere until I'm fever free for at least twenty-four hours."

"I'm sorry, babe." He took my hand and squeezed it. "I'll be here to take you home when you get released though. I took the whole week off work for you."

Jo closed her eyes. This was the caring, sweet man who had gotten her through those months after the baby. This was the man she loved. But it wasn't who he was all the time. And that was why she had to stay strong.

"No, Ray. I'm not coming home. I meant what I said. I can't do this anymore."

He frowned. "I don't understand."

"Ray, you decided staying at the lake and fishing with your dad was more important than being here with me while I underwent major surgery. Don't you see something wrong with that?"

"Me being here did nothing to help you."

"That's not the point!" Even though her heart was breaking, her temper flared.

"Then what's the point, Jo? You gotta help me here, babe."

"The point is..." She took a deep breath. "Ray, I love you more than anything in this world."

"I love you too, babe." He squeezed her hand again, his smile reassuring.

Jo pulled her hand out of his. Why was this so hard?

"I know you love me, but you don't love me enough. I'm not sure you even know how to love someone the way they're supposed to be loved."

"That makes no sense."

"Not to you, but it does to me. I didn't see it before, but once I got away from my

family and didn't have to defend your actions to them day in and day out, I started having to defend you to myself.

I should never have to make excuses for the way you treat me and force myself to not only accept it but to be okay with it. ”

“The way I treat you?”

How did she explain to him if only he was the man sitting here right now every single day, they wouldn't even be having this conversation.

“Ray, you don't put me first, not even sometimes.

It's always about what you want or your parents.

You don't care about my wishes. You don't care about my safety.

The lawnmower was just one instance. You know how prone I am to accidents and yet you thought it was fine for me to cut the grass.

” She gestured to her leg which was suspended off the bed in some kind of sling. “I almost died Ray.”

“What?” he whispered.

“I nicked an artery and almost bled to death. If Mason hadn't of been there with enough sense to try and stop the bleeding, I probably wouldn't have made it to the hospital. I had to have blood transfusions.”

“I didn't know...Mom never said...”

“Your mom doesn’t care enough about me to think it worth mentioning.

And that’s another thing. You expect me to accept your mother’s treatment of me and yet, you want nothing to do with my parents.

All they ever wanted to do was to get to know you and you basically spit in their faces at every turn. How is that remotely fair?”

“I never thought about it like that.”

No, and the truth was, he probably wouldn’t care about it five minutes after he left. For the moment, it mattered to him. But later? When all this died down? It would go right back to the way it’d always been.

“You never think, Ray. You didn’t think about what kind of hell an accident with the lawn mower would cause when you said thanks and walked out the door. You didn’t think or you didn’t care. I honestly don’t know which is true.”

“Of course I care, Jo. I love you. I don’t want to see you hurt.”

“Then why say thanks and walk out the damn door knowing how badly I could get hurt?” she exploded, her temper finally starting to rear its head.

He had the good sense to look ashamed. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s not just that, though. It’s so many things that all snowballed into the final straw of the lawnmower.”

“Like what?”

“Like the car. You know how dangerous New York is and yet you won’t let me use

the car to go to school or run errands when you're not using it. It sits in the driveway all week."

"Mason was taking you to school, so I don't see why..."

"Mason's not my boyfriend! He shouldn't care more about my safety than you do, the man who's supposed to love and take care of me."

He flinched. Really, what could he say to that?

"It wasn't Mason's job to haul me around everywhere because as he said and I quote, "You're not getting raped or killed on my watch.

"It's not Mason's job to make sure there's a security system installed at the house when I'm there alone for days at a time.

It's not Mason's job to take me grocery shopping. It's not Mason's job to be you."

"Is that what this is? Are you trying to break up with me for Mason?"

Jo closed her eyes. She couldn't believe that was what he took from all that. He really didn't understand where he was in the wrong.

"Mason is my friend, Ray. That's all he is."

He snarled. "I don't think so. What were you two doing all those nights I was away, working to put food on the table?"

"How dare you?" she whispered. "After everything we've been through, how dare you accuse me of cheating on you. I would never do that. Unlike you, I respect you enough to break up with you before I did anything like that."

“You want to break up, Jo, so what’s that tell me?”

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*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:35 am*

“It should tell you that he’s shown me more kindness over the last few months than you’ve shown me in years.

Keith pushed him at me, hoping I’d fall for him, or at the very least give me someone to compare your treatment of me too.

And you know what? As much as I didn’t want to believe it, my brother actually knew what he was talking about.

Mason showed me I was worth more than barely a second thought.

He showed me what it meant to have someone look out for me, to protect me, and to be there for me when I needed them. ”

“So you’re saying he’s better than me?” There was no denying the hurt in his eyes.

“No, he’s not better than you, but he treats me better than you do.

And part of this is my fault. I was the one who allowed you to treat me the way you do.

I felt so guilty after we lost the baby and you stepped up then.

You put me first for the first time ever and I fell back in love with you all over again, but then you went back to ignoring me for what you wanted.

I thought I deserved to be second best because I couldn’t’ protect our baby.



I let you do what you did. I accepted it and I made it right.

But it wasn't, Ray. I deserved to be loved and cherished.

I deserve to be put first sometimes. I deserve better than I've been given in this relationship. And I can't do it anymore. I can't."

"So that's it. After three years, you're just going to throw it all away?"

Jo closed her eyes and a single tear leaked out. This was why she didn't want to face Ray. This right here.

"Like you said, we've been through a lot. We've survived the loss of our child because we did it together. I...I can be better, but if you're not willing to even try..."

"I've been trying. It's why I agreed to come to New York.

I thought maybe if we left all our problems behind in California, we could get a fresh start here.

But it didn't work. You just got even more apathetic.

We're not working anymore. We haven't for a long time, but I didn't want to face it.

You need someone who doesn't care if you're all about you and I need someone who cares about my needs. Someone who puts me first."

"Someone like Mason?"

"Mason is my friend."

“He wants to be more.”

“Ray, let me tell you about Mason. When he heard me screaming, he ran out of the house and I’ll never forget the look of abject fear on his face.

He stopped the bleeding and got me to the hospital when your mother was too busy.

I begged him not to leave me alone because I was so scared.

He stayed. He spent all night sleeping on the floor in my room in blood soaked clothes because he promised me he wouldn’t leave.

And where were you? I asked you to come not because you could do anything, but because I was scared out of my mind.

You could have been here to hold me, to tell me it was going to be okay.

That’s what you could have done, but you chose fishing over me.

And the man who slept on the floor chose me over everything else. ”

He reared back like Jo hit him. And maybe in a way she had. A metaphorical punch to the gut.

“Mason taught me it was okay to want things, that it was okay to choose me first sometimes. He taught me that I deserved better than you’ve given me.”

“I screwed up.” Ray’s shoulders slumped. “I get it. I screwed up big time, but you have to let me try to fix it. I can be better. I swear I can.”

“It’s not working, Ray. Like I said, it hasn’t for a long.”

“That’s not true.”

“When was the last time you touched me? The last time you even thought about anything but sleeping at night?”

“I’ve been working my ass off. When I get home on the weekends, I’m tired.”

“Not too tired to go fishing though.”

“You’re not going to get past that are you?”

She shook her head. No way in hell was she getting past that. It hurt. Her heart took a beating from the knowledge fishing with his dad was more important to Ray than she was.

“I’m done talking about this. My mind is made up. We’re not working anymore, and I need you to accept that. Keith and Mason are going to come by your house and pick up my things for me.”

“Our house, Jo, not mine. Ours.”

“No, Ray, it was never ours. It was always yours. You just allowed me to take up some space there.”

“Don’t do this, please don’t do this. Let me try to be the man you need me to be. I can change. I know I can if you just let me try. Please, babe, please don’t do this.”

Jo turned away, the tears streaming down her face in earnest. God, this was hard because she loved him. So very, very much. Part of her wanted to give in, to take the pain out of his voice. She didn’t want him to hurt.

“Please, babe.” He got up and hugged her to him and a sob broke free. “Please, Jo, please say you forgive me and we can try again. Please.”

Her hand found the on-call button for the nurse and pushed it.

Someone was in her room in under a minute.

The nurse cleared her throat. “Ms. Maxwell, you called for us?”

Jo pushed away from Ray. “I need him to be escorted out of my room and not allowed back in.” She hiccupped on her tears.

“Jo, please...”

She shook her head. “I’m sorry, Ray, but the answer is no. I can’t do this anymore.”

“Sir, if the patient doesn’t want you here, I have to ask you to leave.”

“Jo...” His voice shook with his own pain. “Don’t do this.”

“I have to. Please, don’t make this harder than it has to be. Please, just leave.”

He reached for her, and she flinched away.

The nurse said something that she didn’t quite hear, but Ray stiffened and stood up. “I’m not giving up, Jo. You’re going to forgive me and realize we’re all that matters. We can get through this.”

She closed her eyes and tried to breathe through her sobs. When she heard him leave, she collapsed onto the mattress and cried.

She cried until she fell asleep, her heart shattered and bleeding.

### CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Mason shook out his fist and flexed his fingers. The satisfying crunch of bone on bone was music to his ears. He and Keith were in the middle of delivering a lesson Ray would never forget.

“We told you she didn’t want to see your sorry ass.” Keith punched Ray again. “And you went to the hospital anyway.” Another punch to the face. “Asshole.”

“This is all your fault!” Ray lunged at Mason and he dodged it easily. “You’re the reason...”

“Uh uh. I told you if you treated her right, we’d be good, but then you went fucking fishing and left her to mow the lawn.

Why the fuck didn’t you wake me up, you sorry motherfucker?

I would have done it. Don’t blame this shit on me.

You made your own damn choices and now you’re going to live with them. ”

They’d just finished packing up the rest of Jo’s shit when the fucker showed up, all angry and ready to fight. He’d even thrown the first punch. Neighbors were out and could vouch for it. And even if they didn’t, the security cam would have caught it on tape.

“You’ve been after my girlfriend from day one and now you’ve got exactly what you

wanted.

” Ray swung his fist and Mason caught it.

Ray didn’t have the advantage of getting an ass beating on the daily from five older brothers or playing football for years.

Mason could take a hit and stay standing.

Fortunately, the man could no more fight than he could take care of his woman.

Mason almost felt bad when he punched him again.

Almost.

“I’m not the one who left her alone and scared in the fucking hospital!”

“But she wasn’t alone, was she?” Ray asked, anger vibrating in his words. “You were right there.”

“Thank fuck he was,” Keith said. “Or my sister might be dead right now. No thanks to you, motherfucker.” Keith plowed his fist into Ray’s gut and all the air left the man.

He stumbled and fell to his knees. “You don’t deserve her.

You never have and now she’s finally wised the hell up and dropped your sorry ass.”

Sirens wailed in the distance. It was inevitable someone would call the cops, but Mason had hoped it would take them longer than this to arrive. They were just warming up.

“Josephine deserves better than you,” he told Ray. “Hell, she deserves better than me, but I guarantee with me, she’ll always come first. She’ll never be left wondering if I care about her. She’ll always be my number one priority and you’ll never be able to say that.”

“She doesn’t love you.” Ray spat out blood.

“Maybe not, but she will.”

Rage flashed in Ray’s brown eyes and Mason smirked. Asshole knew it was true too. Josephine would love him as much as he did her when she realized it was okay to want something for herself. Mason was a patient man. He could wait until she was ready to admit to herself that she loved him.

A police cruiser came to a halt in front of the house and two uniforms stepped out. They took in the scene and then did a sweep of the street.

“We got a report of fighting.” The older officer came over to stand by them. His ebony skin glinted in the late afternoon sunlight and he was built like a linebacker. Not someone Mason would want to tangle with in a fair fight. Dude would obliterate him.

“We came over to pack my sister’s things up and her ex-boyfriend decided to take his anger out on us. He started it.”

“I did not!” Ray denied hotly. “You hit me.”

Mason nodded toward the camera on the porch. “Can’t lie when we’ve got evidence to back it up.”

“I want them arrested for assault.” Ray picked himself up, his face bruised and



bloody. Mason was pretty sure he'd broken the bastard's nose. "They're on my property and I have every right to file charges."

"You do, sir. I can arrest them, but I think the judge might have something to say about who to charge if this young man's statement is true. You three might find all of yourselves under arrest if they decide to press charges."

The second officer was across the street talking to the neighbors. This might be bad. Mason took out his phone and called Viktor.

"Brat?" He answered on the first ring. "Is something wrong with Ava or Jo?"

Damn. He'd forgotten Viktor went home to relieve Sara from baby duty. "Shit. I should have called Kade."

"What's going on?"

"Keith and I are about to get arrested. Think you can come bail us out or send Kade?"

"Arrested? What the fuck, Mason?"

He told him about the fight. "Shit."

"Yup."

"Don't say a word until your attorney gets there. I'll have him meet you guys at the station." Viktor muttered a few choice words. "Does Jo know?"

"No, and I'd appreciate you not telling her. She doesn't need to worry about this shit. She's developed an infection and this will just stress her out more."

“Okay. Let me call Brian. Remember, not a word to anyone until he gets there. Don’t even talk about it with Keith. Someone’s always listening.”

Mason thanked his brother and didn’t protest when he and Keith were bundled into the back of the police cruiser. Ray stood there, a wide bloody grin plastered on his face.

“Viktor’s having an attorney meet us at the station. He said not to say a word until the guy got there, not even to each other.”

“Truth man. Big brother’s always listening.”

When the cops got back in the car, the younger one turned to him. “I need your names.”

“I’m Keith Maxwell and this is Mason Kincaid.”

“Kincaid?” Officer Burlly turned to face him. “Are you any relation to Kade Kincaid of Kincaid Security and Investigations?”

“He’s my brother and I work for his company.”

“Tell me the truth right here and now. Did you start this or did he?”

“He did. We were here to pack up Jo’s things.

She didn’t want to have to face the guy.

He threw the first punch. We defended ourselves.

When you watch the tape, you’ll see him continuously attack us until we were forced

to defend ourselves.

” That might be a stretching of the truth, but he’d claim that until he was blue in the face.

Burly took a deep breath and got back out of the car.

“What’s going on?” Keith asked.

“KSI has done us some solids over the last year. I’m guessing the Sarge is going to try to make this go away.”

Mason watched as Ray argued with the Sargeant.

When the man took his handcuffs out, Ray took an involuntary step back, but the man just followed.

He turned Ray around and cuffed him and then the shouting started in earnest. Five minutes later, the cuffs came off and the two of them were let out of the cruiser.

“Mr. Daniels has decided not to press charges if you’ll both agree you won’t press charges either.”

“We won’t as long as he doesn’t try to see my sister again.” Keith cracked his knuckles. “She doesn’t want anything else to do with him.”

“Mr. Daniels?”

“Fine, she needs some time anyway. She’ll call me when she’s ready to talk.”

Good luck with that.

It took them another couple of hours to go and unload Jo's stuff at her new home, the sorority house.

They'd put her clothes and shit in the room she'd be sharing with whoever and then they put all her electronics and wall padding in the basement room.

The house president promised it would be safe until Jo was well enough to come home.

Once Mason was finally showered and sitting in his room at his frat, the day finally started to set in.

"Shit, man, we almost got arrested."

Keith laughed. "I knew the weasel wouldn't have the courage to go through with it once he was gonna get arrested."

"Such an asshole."

Keith became serious. "So, about you and my sister."

Mason cursed. Here was the conversation he'd been dreading.

"Yeah, man, I know she's your sister and there's probably some unwritten rule about that, but..."

"But you've been crushing on her since before you knew who she was." Keith got up and pulled two beers out of the small mini fridge Mason kept in the room. "I get it. That's part of why I never told you about her. I knew you'd make a play for her and I wasn't comfortable with that."

Mason ran a hand through his overly long hair. Fuck, he needed a haircut. “I love her, Keith. Yes, I had a huge crush on her, but now that I’ve gotten to know her, I fell hard. She’s the most important thing in the world to me.”

“Even though I pushed her towards you, I’m not going to say I’m okay with this. I thought I would be, but fuck man, the image of you and my sister is not one I ever wanted to see. The only thing that makes this even a little okay is that you’ll treat her better than fuckwad ever did.”

“Yeah, I will.”

“Ray’s not wrong, though. She might not love you and even if she does, she’s probably in so much denial, it’ll take you months to get her to face that. She loved fuckwad and that won’t go away overnight.”

“I know that. I’ve already planned for it.

I’m going to give her as much time as she needs.

Her sense of self-worth is so far out of whack, it’s not even funny.

She needs to understand it’s okay to put herself first. And that will take a shit load of time.

I’ll be there for her as her FIBB. I’ll be her shoulder to cry on, the man she can punch when she needs to.

I’ll make her laugh and I’ll help ease the pain. I got a solid plan here.”

“FIBB?”

“Fill in big brother. She thinks it’s stupid, but it made her laugh and that’s what was most important.”

Keith laughed. “FIBB. I like it.”

Mason shrugged and took a sip of his beer. He had to drive back to the hospital, so he wasn’t going to drink much.

“You think the house here will have a room for me if I transfer to finish my final semester?”

“You only have one semester left, man. Why would you leave school?”

“Because I know my parents. They’re going to fight hard to get Jo to come home and if I’m here, that’s one more reason for them to be more comfortable with their baby girl so far from home.

She wants to be here and I’m going to make sure she stays.

Plus I miss you, man. Going drinking isn’t as fun as it used to be. ”

“I miss you too.” Mason rolled his head, trying to alleviate some of the stress bunching at the base of his skull. “I’ll kick Dave out of our room. He can sleep in the basement. He won’t care anyway. Dude’s stoned most of the time as it is.”

“You’ll talk to the prez?”

Mason nodded. “Ben’ll be cool with it. He’s trying to recruit some better quality.”

“What do you mean?”

“There’s a couple guys in the house who are into some shady shit. We can prove it yet, but as soon as they slip up, they’re gone. I’ve already warned them off Jo and vice versa.”

“You guys are on top of it then?”

“Yeah, just got to catch them doing something we can break their charter for.”

“I’mma use the shower. We can go back to the hospital as soon as I’m done.”

“Cool.” Mason got up and stretched out on the bed. “I think I’m gonna nap for a few. Wake me up when you’re done.”

He barely heard Keith’s reply as his eyes closed and the last two days hit him. It took him seconds to fall asleep.

### CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The phone ringing woke her up. She yawned and went to reach for her cell, only to be brought up short by a burst of pain. Groaning, she remembered she wasn't home. She was in the hospital. And she didn't have her cell phone.

It was the phone beside her bed ringing and she gingerly reached out to snatch it up.

"Hello?" she asked, sleepily.

"Hi."

"Hi." She smiled despite the throbbing in her leg. "What time is it?"

"A little after three in the morning. Keith said he didn't have the heart to wake me up when he got done. Fucker passed out on my roommate's bed or we'd have been back to the hospital. He's still snoring like a freight train."

"Mason, you don't need to spend every second here with me. You need sleep just as much as I do."

"I don't want you to be by yourself."

"I'm not. Your family has been in and out of here all day. Angel left about an hour ago to sit with Becca while Dimitri got some sleep or she'd have been here with me."

"They know I consider you family and therefore you're family to them. Same with



Keith. You'll never be alone again, Jojo. I promise."

"Ray came by," she whispered, rubbing her chest where the pain ached.

"I know, baby. He showed up here as we were loading the last of your stuff into my truck."

"You didn't do anything stupid, did you?"

"I'm not in jail, am I?"

She knew Ray and his family. They'd have pressed charges against Mason and Keith faster than she could blink.

"That doesn't really tell me anything, but I'm going to count it as a positive that no one had to bail you guys out."

Mason laughed and she heard the mattress shift.

"You good, Josephine? I know it had to be hard to talk to him."

"No, I'm not okay, but I know deep down I did the right thing. I just need to convince myself to live with the decision."

"I'm here, Josephine. Whatever you need, your FIBB is here."

She took a deep breath. "Mason, I need to talk to you about...I can't..."

"Shh," he hushed her. "All I want from you is to be your friend, sugar. Nothing else. I'm here when you need me. My only goal is to get you walking again and to hear you laugh every single day."

“Really?”

“Really.”

“Thank you, Mason. I couldn’t handle anything else right now.”

“Moye dragotsennyy, all I want is for you to be safe and happy. Right now, we need to get you better. Don’t worry about feelings. Just know I’m your FIBB and I am going to get you through this.”

“Ray was so mad, Mason. He thought I broke up with him for you.”

“That’s his own stupidity talking. Pay it no mind.”

“Then he got all sad and it almost broke my heart to tell him to leave and not come back. It hurt so much.”

“I know, baby. It’s going to be okay. Not tonight, not tomorrow, hell maybe not until next year, but it will get better.”

“Promise?”

“I promise.”

Jo was silent for a heartbeat. “Mason?”

“Yeah?”

“Don’t ever leave me.”

“Never gonna happen sugar. You’re stuck with your FIBB for life.”

“I am, huh?”

“You know you can’t go without the awesomeness that is Mason Xavier Kincaid.”

God, she was so thankful for him, his larger than life ego and all.

“Did you eat?”

“No. Keith and I were gonna pick up food and bring it back and eat with you, but we both passed the fuck out. I’ll swing by Mae’s and pick up breakfast when it opens. Then we’ll come spend the day with you. Keith has some news he wants to tell you about himself.”

“News?”

“He wants to tell you in person, Josephine.”

“Fine. You know how much I hate surprises though.”

“Then you’re going to be a Grumpy Gus for the next few weeks, because I have a surprise a day planned out for you.”

“Oh boy.”

“Just you wait, sugar. You’ll be anticipating what each new day will bring.”

“I don’t think so.”

Mason gasped. “You doubt your FIBB?”

“I sure do.”

“Pfft, woman. Just you wait and see. I’ll prove you wrong.” She heard him get out of bed. “I’m starved, but I need to be quiet going down the stairs. People are asleep. So give me a second.”

She heard the door creak open and then the quick jog he did going down the stairs.

“Made it,” he said. “Ben gets pissed if we interrupt his sleep.”

“Those guys party all hours of the night, Mason.”

“Only on the weekends. Most of us take school seriously. We have to keep a certain GPA to stay in the frat.”

She’d forgotten about that. Her own sorority had a GPA requirement.

“Damn, why is there no food in this fridge?”

“Uh, because you live in a house full of guys who probably have never had to shop for food in their lives?”

“Shit.” He slammed the fridge door shut and went rummaging in cabinets. “Well, this is some fucking shit. Coffee can’s empty. Who the fuck made the last pot of coffee and didn’t bother replacing it? House rules state you have to buy a new container. I’m going to roll heads come morning.”

Him and his coffee.

“Did you find someplace safe for all my computer equipment?”

“Sure did. Amber let us put it in the basement room that has a lock on it. Only she has the key. She said if you wanted to use it as your new studio you could. I’ll help you

set it up as soon as you're ready."

"Mason?"

"Yeah, sugar?" She heard him rummaging around and smiled. God, he was so good for her. "Thanks for everything and for..."

"For?" he prompted when she didn't finish.

"For not pushing."

"What's your FIBB for, sweetheart? I'm here for whatever you need me to be. Enough with the thank yous, though. How are you feeling? I probably shouldn't have woken you up, but I wanted to hear your voice."

"You did?"

"Yeah."

A door opened and shut and she heard a squeak. "Where are you?"

"Front porch swing."

"Why are you outside? It's cold! You'll get sick."

He laughed. "It's not cold out Josephine."

"It is too," she argued. "It's got to be in the low sixties."

"That's not cold."

“It is too,” she insisted stubbornly.

“Baby, don’t forget I grew up in Russia. This feels like a summer day to me.”

“I grew up in California and this feels like the dead of winter to me.”

“I can’t wait until it snows. I want to watch you as you watch the snowflakes fall from the heavens. The first snow of the season is always the most special.”

“Snow leads to ice, Mason. I could potentially fall and injure myself further.”

“Nope, not gonna happen, sugar. Your FIBB will make sure of it. You’ll be safe as a babe in the arms of her mother when you step outside your door and into the winter wonderland the city becomes.”

“You and I are gonna have to disagree on this.”

“We’ll see.” He shifted and the porch swing squeaked. “So, back to you. How are you feeling? Is the pain okay?”

“It’s better today than it was yesterday. If this fever would go away, I’d feel a lot better. Then I could get out of here.”

“It’s better you’re there right now, Josephine. You’re sick and they can get your infection under control. Imagine if you’d gone home without antibiotics right away. You could be seriously worse off than you are.”

One thing she’d always say for Mason. Her safety, and in this instance, her health meant a lot to him. He constantly looked out for her. He’s the reason she was able to realize she deserved more than she had. Thank God for him. He was turning into her grace.

“Whatcha thinkin’ about?” he asked when she grew quiet.

“Have you ever heard that song Grace by Callum Scott?”

“Can’t say that I have. Is it a good song?”

“Yeah, it’s one of my favorites and it reminds me of you.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. You saved me in more ways than I can ever tell you, Mason.”

“No more thank yous.” She could just imagine him holding his hand up to stop her.

“You deserve to be happy, Jojo.”

He only ever used that nickname when he was serious.

“Fuck, this thing is uncomfortable to lay on. I’m going to have to invest in some cushions or some shit.”

“You’re not sleeping outside are you?”

“It’s quiet and it’s cool. Perfect sleeping weather.”

“Mason, you can’t sleep on the porch!”

“Why not?”

“Because...because you can’t. You’ll get sick.”

“Nope, moye dragotsennyy. I’m immune to the cold.”

“You’re crazy, you know that?”

“All part of my charm.”

The nurse came in just then to poke and prod her. The lab technician was right behind her.

“I have to go, Mason. They’re here to torture me. Promise me you’ll go inside. You can’t sleep on the porch swing.”

“I promise. Keith and I’ll be there in a couple of hours with decent food for you. Goodnight, Josephine.”

“Goodnight,” she whispered, tears suddenly choking. There was no reason for them but hearing him speak so softly and so full of warmth and care, made her want to cry. She didn’t deserve him.

The nurse smiled when she hung up the phone. “Boyfriend?”

“No, just the best friend a girl could ever ask for.”

And he was. Maybe one day he’d be more, but like he said, for right now, all she could deal with was her FIBB and that’s what he was being.

Thank God for Mason Kincaid.



### CHAPTER NINETEEN

“I don’t know about this.”

Mason hid a grin as he wheeled her out into the middle of central park. It was about damn time she got out and saw some of the nicer aspects of New York. Since it was Saturday, the place was full of kids and dogs and families as well as the usual runners.

“What’s not to know?” He parked her chair and sat down in the grass beside her. “We’re surrounded by nature.”

“Exactly,” she said dryly. “Nature and I are not BFF’s. It tries to murder me on the regular.”

“No, your own two feet try to do that, not the great outdoors.”

Someone snickered as they went past and heard his comment. Jo’s face flamed the cutest shade of pink.

“It’s cold, Mason.”

“Got you covered, moye dragotsennyy.” He reached into the book bag he’d brought and pulled out a warm fuzzy throw and covered her legs.

Honestly, it wasn’t that cold. October was starting to bleed into November and while it was cooler, the days were still fairly warm with the evenings turning colder.

“You can’t tell me you don’t think it’s gorgeous out here with all the leaves changing colors.”

“No, it’s beautiful, but I’m still worried. What if I trip?”

“Woman, your ass is parked in a wheel chair. You’re not tripping.”

“Do you know me?”

She had a fair point. The woman could trip in anything.

“That’s why I’m here. FIBB on duty!”

Mason pulled out his phone and started snapping photos and then took a selfie with her. It went up on Instagram a second later with the message “Will she survive her own two feet in a wheelchair?”

“That is not funny.”

“Sugar that is funny as shit.”

Jo sighed and he felt contrite. “Sorry, I’m not making fun of you. I swear.”

“Uh huh.”

Well hell, now he did feel bad. He’d wanted to make her laugh, not upset her. She’d been in a mood since he picked her up.

Squatting in front of her, he tucked the blanket around her legs. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“You can’t lie to your FIBB. I know you too well. Something’s definitely wrong so you might as well fess up.”

Jo sighed. Of course he knew something was wrong. Mason knew her better than anyone, including her brother. Which was odd considering she’d only known him a few months. It was still true though.

“It’s Ray.”

His expression went blank. He did his best to keep his anger and hate of her ex to himself because he knew it upset her. She appreciated that. More than she could ever tell him.

“What’s Ray done now?”

“He keeps calling and leaving me messages and texting me. I’m starting to get a little worried about him.”

“Worried?”

“I don’t know. He sounds almost desperate. I have this urge to pick up the phone when he calls.”

“Give me your phone, Josephine.”

She handed it to him.

“Unlock it please.”

She did and handed it back to him. He did something and gave it back to her.

“He won’t call you again.”

“What did you do?”

“I blocked his number.”

He did what? Oh, hell no.

“Mason, you had no right...”

He put a finger to her lips. “Jojo, tell me how you feel. How you’ve been feeling since leaving him.”

She frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Have you spent a single day feeling less than worthwhile or not appreciated?”

“No.”

“Have you enjoyed being independent, being able to do what you want, and not worrying about what he’ll think or say or do?”

“I have.”

“Does that mean you’re happy right now?”

“I...” she trailed off and actually thought about it.

Since leaving Ray, she had been happy. She was sad too because she missed him.

The first week was the worst. She missed his smell, the sound of his laugh, she’d

even missed his nasty habit of leaving his dirty underwear laying in the bathroom floor.

She missed hearing him breathe at night and snore when he was dead tired. She missed feeling him beside her.

But as the weeks passed some of the hurt eased and she started to come out of her funk and depression.

Mason made sure she was able to do anything she wanted even stuck in this wheelchair.

He'd taken her shopping for warmer clothes.

He'd even modeled some of the things she was thinking about to make her laugh.

He'd taken her to the movies. He'd taken her to a concert in the park.

He'd come by every morning to bring her coffee.

Well his "mornings" which ranged from around nine to noon.

He kept her busy and it helped her to forget her pain.

He helped her learn to start to put her first.

Did that mean she was happy?

Yeah, maybe it did. Right now, she wasn't hurting. That meant a lot in the grand scheme of feelings.

“I think I’m learning to be happy, Mason. It doesn’t hurt so much anymore, and I can get through days without thinking about him. Except for those phone calls.”

“And those phone calls and text messages are going to keep you from finishing your journey of self-love.”

“Self-love?” She laughed at the thought.

“Yeah, Josephine. When I first met you, I understood that right away. You didn’t love yourself.

You let Ray beat you down with his apathy until you got lost and it was just about him.

Now, you’re learning to be the woman you were without him.

You’re learning the value of your own self-worth and you’re starting to love the girl that’s picked herself up out of the ashes of heartbreak.

She’s learning to fly and loving every second of it. ”

Wow. She didn’t think Mason had it in him to sound so...so...beautiful.

“I...” He put a finger to her lips again. “Listen to me, Josephine. I know you’re pissed, but I know you. You wouldn’t have done it and you might have called him back. I don’t want to see you sucked back down into his darkness. You’re getting better and that’s what’s most important to me.”

“I’d forgotten how to be me. The clumsy, sassy girl who smiled all the time and laughed at herself. I like me.”

“I like you too, Josephine, just the way you are.” He couldn’t stop the smile if he’d wanted to.

“You’re mostly the reason I’m so happy. If it weren’t for you, I’m not sure I could have found my way back to myself.”

“You’re stronger than you think you. You would have found your way back, but I will take all the credit because I’m just that damn awesome.”

“You’re just that damn cocky.” Jo laughed. “But I like you anyway.”

Mason studied her, gauging her mood. He wanted to kiss her so bad, but if she wasn’t ready for that, then she’d be pissed as hell.

“Jo?”

She cocked her head curiously. He’d never called her Jo before and she had to be wondering what was up.

“Yeah?”

“I uh...” He pressed his lips together, afraid to let the words tumble out for fear of her rejection.

“You, uh, what?”

“How mad would you be if I kissed you?”

Her eyes widened, the pupils all but blowing. “You want to what?”

“I understand if you’re not ready, moye dragotsennyy .”

He wanted to kiss her? Was she ready to be kissed by anyone? Or was she nervous because it was Mason, someone who meant more to her than almost anyone.

She swallowed. "I uh, I'm not sure, Mason."

"It's okay, Josephine. It's just a question. I love you and I'm a patient man. I can wait until you're ready to try to handle all of this." He waved to himself and winked. "Until then I'll be your FIBB with no strings attached."

"You love me?"

He smiled. "Don't freak out, moye dragotsennyy. You're not ready to hear that any more than you're for me to kiss you. It's okay. There will never be any pressure for you to say it back to me until you mean it."

"You're not mad?"

He grinned and tweaked her nose. "I could never be mad at you, sugar. My only goal is to get you whole and happy. I can put myself on the backburner until you're ready for me."

"Thank you, Mason."

"You're very welcome. Now, hush, they're setting up." He pointed to the left and she saw that indeed a small stage of some sort had gone up while they were talking.

"What's that?"

"Today's surprise." His eyes twinkled. "Puppets."

"Puppets?" She glanced at the stage again and back to him. No wonder there were so



many families here setting up on the grass. “You mean like a puppet show? That’s a stage though, not one of those little box things they’re usually in.”

“Look up top, see the people moving around? They’ll be moving them from up there.”

She’d seen something like that once in fourth grade when a puppet show had come to their school. She’d fallen in love with it.

“What story are they performing?”

“Romeo and Juliet, only dumbbed down for the kiddos.”

“Really?” Jo gasped. “I love Romeo and Juliet!”

“I know, baby. I told you, each of my surprises were well thought out and things you’d love.”

She squealed when she saw the first of the puppets appear on stage, clapping her hands. This was the best surprise ever.

Mason stood and walked over to a food vendor. He came back with hotdogs and sodas.

“Here you go.” He handed her food to her and sat down beside her, leaning his head against her knee. “Are you happy, Jo?”

It was the same question Ray had asked her the day she met Mason. She’d been happy then, or she thought she had. Sitting here, wheelchair and all, with this man who had spent every waking minute doing everything he could to make her happy, she realized the difference.

“Yeah, Mason, I’m very happy.”

She tapped his head and he looked up at her.

Taking a deep breath, she did something she didn’t think she had the courage to do. She leaned down and kissed him.

A slow burn set in, and she let herself get lost in it. Heat pooled in her belly when he deepened the kiss, and she groaned, her hands tangling in his slightly too long hair. Her tongue snaked out to duel with his when he came to his knees and she wrapped herself around him.

Mason had kissed a lot of women. Enjoyed it too. But none of them was Josephine Maxwell.

When his lips met hers, fire licked across his skin, and the most euphoric feeling captured him. Kissing Jo was like coming home. He deepened the kiss when she didn’t pull away. He’d wanted this for so very long, and now that he had it, he couldn’t get enough.

The sound of giggles broke them apart. Mason looked over to see his niece laughing. Delia was standing beside Mateo who didn’t even look interested. He was too busy watching the puppets being set up.

“About time you did that.” Viktor slapped him on the back.

“I didn’t. She did.”

“Well, it’s about time either way.” Viktor spread a blanket out for Sara and the kids.

“Where are the twins?” Jo asked.

“Lily agreed to watch them while we brought the kids to the puppet show.” Sara came over, carrying food and drinks. “I told Viktor we shouldn’t crash your surprise, but he was insistent and Mateo was so excited.”

Mason’s eyes swung back to his nephew. The kid wasn’t paying attention to anyone except for those puppets. He had the biggest smile on his face, though. It was rare and Mason wouldn’t be mad about his family crashing his and Jo’s party. That smile was worth it all.

Jo nudged his shoulder. “He looks so happy.”

“Yeah.” His lips tilted in a half-smile. “As much as I want to spend the entire show kissing you, that smile is worth missing out.”

“We got a lifetime of kissing to do.” She kissed his temple. “Right now, let’s focus on him and just be happy he’s happy.”

That right there was why he loved this girl so much.

And she was right, they did have a lifetime to finish this.

A lifetime he was going to look forward to and cherish every single day.

### CHAPTER TWENTY

“Come on, I’m not going to let you fall.”

Jo shook her head, stubborn as the day she was born. There was no freaking way she was going out there. It was snowing. There was ice. She’d just started to walk semi-decently and he wanted her to risk falling and undoing all the healing she’d managed.

Nope. Not gonna happen.

“Josephine Marie Maxwell, get your ass out here.”

“Mason Xavier Kincaid, no. You get your ass in here.”

“Your surprise requires you to come outside. I have something special planned.”

She shook her head. The girls behind her were laughing, but they didn’t know what kind of klutz she was.

Mason sighed dramatically and came up the steps.

Without warning, he bent and threw her over his shoulder.

She shrieked and the girls inside burst out laughing.

Mason deposited her in his truck and then went back inside, carrying her coat, gloves, and a toboggan.

The dreaded cane was in his other hand. She had to use it to walk with and she hated it.

“No fair,” she growled when he got in.

Instead of answering her, he reached over and snapped her seatbelt in place.

“There’s a cup of hot chocolate for you.

” He gestured to the McDonald’s cup. It was her favorite hot chocolate much to Mason’s disgust. His entire family really.

They all made theirs from scratch - not the Swiss Miss powered kind either.

They made it out of real chocolate. She wasn’t that good in a kitchen.

She’d boil the milk over and set something on fire.

She took the blanket lying beside her and covered her legs with it.

He knew how cold she got. New York was so much colder than California.

Mason kept telling her she’d get used to the falling temperatures, but she wasn’t buying what he was selling.

The man grew up in Russia. Of course the cold didn’t bother him.

“You left my purse.”

“You don’t need your purse where we’re going, moye dragotsennyy.”

“You know I hate surprises.”

“You love my surprises.”

“Do not.” She took a sip of her hot chocolate. She did love his surprises, but he didn’t need to know that.

He hummed and turned the radio on to his favorite country channel. Jo had never been the biggest country music fan, but she found herself tuning into it more and more. Mason’s fault.

“Where are we going?”

“You’ll see.”

When they pulled into the Kincaid family neighborhood, she got even more curious.

She expected them to stop at Viktor’s, but they drove a little further down to a different house.

It had the same wood and stone inflections as Viktor’s but there were more touches of modern design to this particular house.

“Where are we?”

“Kade’s.” Mason parked behind Kade’s SUV and unsnapped her seatbelt. “Put your coat on, Josephine. You’re going to need it.”

She did as he told her, adding the gloves and hat for good measure. He opened her door and pulled her out, letting her slide down his body.

“Hi, baby.”

“Hi,” she whispered back, suddenly shy for some reason.

He leaned in until his forehead rested against hers. “You good?”

She nodded.

He kissed her, the softest kiss he’d ever given her and she’d have fallen if he hadn’t been holding her up. He could rob her of her sanity with a normal kiss, but when he got this gentle, it became impossible to think straight.

“You ready for Christmas with the family?”

“Christmas? That’s not for another two weeks, Mason.”

“Yeah, but you’re going back to California for Christmas break and I wanted to do something special for you.”

He was so sweet.

“What does Christmas with the family entail?”

“We’re gathering at the eldest son’s house to decorate the tree, have a big dinner, and watch Christmas cartoons with the kids. Plus there might be a snowball fight or two thrown in the mix. This is the first big snow of the season.”

“Uh...”

He laughed. “Don’t worry, Jojo. I’ll protect you.”

“Can I sit the snowball fight out?”

“Nope. Kincaid family rules. We all participate.”

“I’m not a Kincaid.”

“You’re mine, Josephine, and that’s all that matters to the family. You’re as much of a Kincaid to them as Lily, Becca, Angel, and Sara are. I love you so the entire fam loves you.”

She blinked. This family...they took her in without question because of Mason. They never so much as batted an eye. They loved her. She didn’t doubt that any more than she doubted she loved all of them.

“Come on. Let’s get inside. I’m sure the kids are gonna want to go outside. We’re the last ones to arrive.”

True to his words, as soon as they walked through the door, Delia and Mateo dived bombed them, demanding to go outside and build snowmen.

This wasn’t her first time seeing snow. When she was nine, her parents had loaded them up and taken them skiing one Christmas. She’d fallen and broken her ankle. Her and snow were not BFF’s. No way, no how. Ice was her mortal enemy.

The entire family geared up and went out back.

Kade had enough land for three houses encased in his fence.

The whole thing was covered in eight inches of snow.

This could be an epic failure resulting in a trip to the ER for her, but when little Mateo took her hand and asked for help with his snowman, her heart melted.

She nodded and carefully made her way down the steps, clutching her cane like her life depended on it.

Mateo was patient. He waited on her and didn’t rush. He was as sweet as Mason.



“My snowman is going to be this big.” Delia jumped and put her hand up, indicating a snowman at least twice her size. “Uncle Mason said so.”

“ Non, chica . Mine is going to be moya grande ,” Mateo said. “Aunt Jo is helping me.”

Delia stuck her tongue out at him and Mason dunked her in a snow bank.

She came up squealing, her gray eyes so bright, they shone like the brightest star in the night sky.

It took Jo a moment to realize Mateo had called her Aunt Jo. She looked to his mother who had tears in her eyes. Angel gave Jo a watery smile and her heart melted all over again. He was such a good boy.

“Come on, sweetie, let’s go show them how to build a snowman.”

For the next three hours, they played outside and Jo had a blast. She fell more times than she could count, but the snow broke her fall. All of the men tried to catch her every time, too, but there was no saving her.

The Kincaid elders arrived during the middle of the madness. None of them joined in, but they sat on the back porch and laughed at the nonsense going on.

Mason told everyone they were skipping dinner, so they decided to decorate the tree first. Jo soon saw why.

Once the lights were up, the kids grew all solemn.

Mason watched his girl carefully. He hoped this wasn’t too soon for her, but Sara insisted. When the kids opened the black box that held the special ornaments, he grew apprehensive.

The first ones they put up were his mama's and papa's and babushka's.

Each unique ornament had their names inscribed on them.

They were hand crafted in Russia and given to Angel by his mama to keep the tradition going.

It was something she started when Kade was born.

All the wives and the children had their own too.

Jo smiled as she watched all the ornaments go up. She oohed and ahed over them. Mason couldn't stop smiling because she was smiling. Family meant as much to her as it did to him.

It was Mateo who handed the next ornament to Jo. She looked down at it and her expression was priceless. Mason would never forget the look of wonder on her face as she ran her fingertips over it. Tiny blue roses decorated the bulb and her full name was engraved on it.

"This is for me?" she whispered.

Sara hugged her. "You're as much a part of this family as the rest of us honey. Do you like it?"

"It's beautiful." Her tone kept that awed, hushed tone. "I love it."

"Put it on the tree!" Mateo tugged her hand and she gripped her cane tightly when she stood. "Right here." Mateo pointed to the spot beside Mason's.

She glanced at him and he couldn't have loved her more if his life depended on it.

Mateo had taken to her more than he had anyone else in the family.

Well, aside from Conner, but that was a whole other story.

That little boy's love was precious and hard to come by.

Jo had won him over without even trying.

She put her ornament on the tree and Mateo tugged on her hand. He crooked his finger at her and she bent down. The kid planted a kiss on her cheek and ran back to his mother.

Everyone stared, shocked.

But they knew better than to make a big deal of it. They started putting more ornaments on the tree.

"Was that your surprise?" she asked when she sat back down next to him.

"No, baby, I have something else planned. As soon as the ornaments are up, we'll go find your surprise."

By the time they left, it was well past dark, but he'd planned for this. His brothers helped him come up earlier and set everything up for them. Mason just hoped she liked her surprise.

They were driving on the land the Kincaid's owned.

Nik had bought up every single piece of unoccupied land around the neighborhood he could.

They were thinking of trying to buy the other residents out, but so far they hadn't

gone that route.

He wouldn't put it past his brothers to do just that, though.

"Mason?" she asked curiously when he stopped the truck in the middle of nowhere.

"Do you trust me?"

"Of course."

"Then just go with it, baby."

He jumped out of the truck and got the picnic basket Sara gave him right before they left. It held their dinner. He came around and opened Jo's door, giving her his back.

"Hop on, Josephine."

It took her two attempts to climb on, but once he had her secured, he shut the door and started the ten minute walk to the clearing. He only hoped she loved it.

Jo leaned her head against his, inhaling his scent. She loved the way he smelled. Like honey and sandalwood. She needed to find out what kind of aftershave he used so she could buy it and spritz her room when she was lonely.

As they trudged deeper into the woods, the more she relaxed. Her entire body was boneless when they rounded a corner and the entire area ahead was ablaze with multicolored Christmas lights. Every single tree was decorated, encasing the two chairs and firepit in its own little private circle.

"Mason," she whispered.

He didn't say anything, just let her slide off his back and set about building a fire in the firepit. Once that was done, he made her sit down. She'd been too busy looking at

her very own festival of lights.

She'd told him she was looking forward to going to the one her hometown always put on.

This didn't have all the different shapes of course, but it was just as beautiful and way more special.

It must have taken him hours to get this set up.

She heard a generator running in the background and that answered her question of how all the lights were working.

It was the sweetest thing anyone had ever done for her. The time and care he'd put into planning this astounded her. She blinked back tears when he squatted in front of her and rubbed her hands to get them warm.

"Do you like it, baby?"

It was too much and she burst into tears.

"Hey now, what's wrong?" His expression morphed into alarm and she cried harder. How had she resisted it this long.

"Josephine, tell me what's wrong."

She shook her head. "It's beautiful, Mase, just beautiful."

"Then why are you crying, sweetheart?"

"Because I love you!" She threw herself at him and hugged him so tight, she had to have cut his air off. "I love you so fucking much, Mason."

He laughed. “That’s good because I love you too, Jojo. I love you so fucking much.”

She heard the sheer joy in his voice. She’d seen his face every single time he told her he loved her and she didn’t say it back, but he never pushed, he never got mad, and he always put her first. She should have told him weeks ago how much she loved him, but she was afraid.

Afraid she’d get lost again and end up back where she started, with a man who forgot about her.

But that wasn’t Mason. It would never be Mason.

She should have told him she loved him sooner.

“Hush.” He bent his head and dropped a swift kiss to her lips. “Don’t worry about what was, Josephine, only what is. You and me, baby. That’s all you got to worry about. Now, do you want your presents?”

“Presents?” She laughed at his squirrely expression. “The Christmas ornament and then all this is present enough Mason. I don’t need anything else.”

“I know, but I want you to have presents. You deserve presents every single day.”

He reached into the backpack laying beside the other chair and withdrew a box wrapped in shiny blue paper with a big silver bow on it. “Merry Christmas, Josephine.”

She took the box and opened it, revealing a diamond and blue sapphire bracelet. Her breath caught at how it sparkled in the firelight.

“Do you like it?” he asked shyly.

“I love it, Mason.” Her hand shook when she tried to get it out.

“Let me.” He brushed her hand away and took the delicate bracelet out of the box and snapped it closed around her wrist.

“It’s beautiful.”

“Not nearly as beautiful as you.” He kissed her again and she started to cry.

“Hey, now, no more tears. You’re giving me a complex.”

She laughed. “I love you so much.”

He winked. “Of course you do. There’s no resisting all this.” He waved at himself as he always did. “It was written in the stars, baby. You and me, we were always inevitable.”

He was still the cockiest man she knew too.

“Let’s eat. I’m starved. It’s Mama’s baked ham and Babby’s baklava. You couldn’t ask for more.

She watched him dish out food and pour them both a tall glass of sparking grape juice. He sat down in the Adirondack chair beside hers and kicked his feet out towards the fire.

“Mason?”

“Yeah?”

“Are you happy?”

“More than I’ve ever been in my entire life, Josephine. I couldn’t ask for better than I have right now. Well, if my Papa would get better, that’d be awesome too.”

She took his hand and squeezed it. She refused to tell him everything was going to be fine because with cancer, you just never knew. But what she could do was be there for him through it all. And she planned on doing it too. He was always there for her and in this she could be his rock.

“Now eat before your food gets colder than it already is.”

She smiled and dug in, surrounded by thousands of twinkling lights and a love so deep, she didn’t think anything would ever compare to it.

She was good and truly happy.

And she’d stay that way. Mason would make sure of it.

Thank God for Mason Xavier Kincaid.

**\*\* Make sure to read the rest of Jo and Mason’s story in Mason (Kincaid Security & Investigations #3)**