



Lethal Seduction (Finding His Forever #1)

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Category: Action&Adventure

Description: Lights, Camera Danger

Patrick Flores works the sauna and massage tables at an exclusive country club for Hollywoods elite, pouring drinks and dodging eccentricities of the rich and famous. While he dreams of being on the big screen, his reality is navigating drunken tirades and entitled whims until a shocking crime spree shakes the very foundation of the glitzy world hes stuck serving.

Detective Michael Borne doesnt have time for distractions. A seasoned investigator, hes determined to bring the killer targeting Los Angeles wealthiest to justice. But his investigation takes a surprising turn when he meets Patrick, a sharp-tongued dreamer whose resilience draws him in like no one ever has.

When danger strikes too close to home, Patrick and Michael find themselves thrust together in a whirlwind of passion, peril, and secrets. As the lines between professional and personal blur, theyll discover that love can heal the most fractured hearts but only if they survive long enough to embrace it.

Total Pages (Source): 31

GORDY

The Los Angeles night sky is clear, with thousands of beautiful twinkling stars shining bright. I smile and breathe deep. The aroma of roses and Arabian jasmine tickles the back of my nose, but I stifle the impending sneeze.

Gordy , I think to myself, you don't have to do this. I sit on the gravel path behind the bushes lining the country club golf course. A fist-sized rock catches my eye. I pick it up and roll it around in my hand. It's wet and heavier than I expected. Wiping the mud from my hand, I hold the rock up for a better look. The ambient light from the partially illuminated grounds makes the tiny particles of the stone sparkle. Beautiful , I think.

I toss the rock down and cross my arms. I've come back to work at Who's Your Caddy Golf Club after hours to make a few extra bucks. Rumor has it that some of the older wealthy men use their money and influence to gain access to the club when they have an itch they need scratched. After my big break as Butler #1 in the latest Queen Victoria biopic fell through—unable to carry a British accent for my one line—I've become desperate to pay my rent. There is no way I'm going back to little know-nothing Maquoketa Iowa without at least one credit behind my name. Despite my tenacity, there wasn't another option but to beg my dad for funds, but then, as if by divine intervention, I received a note in my employee locker earlier this week, asking me to come tonight, and I jumped at the chance. From what I've gathered from the rumor mill, to be selected personally like this is a sure-fire way to get paid the big bucks. I can think of worse ways to earn a couple hundred dollars for an hour

of my time.

Shit, if he gives me the right motivation, I'll make him come however slow or fast he wants. I've been told my lips and hands have mad skills, not to mention my tight bootyhole. The tight ring of smooth muscle puckers, as if it knows I'm thinking about it, making me smile. I let out a breath, and I'm able to relax my shoulders a bit, despite the continued tension in the air.

How much longer am I supposed to wait? I'm hiding in the darkest shadows by the rose garden behind the pool, between the water trap on hole number nine and the tennis courts—just like the note instructed. Unfortunately, there hasn't been any sign of life except for the incessant chirp of crickets. I know, buddies. I'm looking for sex too, I think.

I glance at my watch and let out a sigh. My time is precious, or at least that's what I tell myself. My stomach grumbles because I haven't eaten all day, not knowing if I was supposed to top or bottom tonight. I'm seconds from leaving when I hear a man's voice in the distance. From the cackling laugh, I recognize it as Branson James, former NFL tight end and full-time flirt. He's recently been widowed, his wife passing unexpectedly in a car accident, but that hasn't stopped him from pursuing the younger men who work at the club. Gossip between staff and clients has always made him out to be a predatory horn-dog, but I've always found him quite pleasant—charming. Despite Branson being fifty-five to my youthful twenty-two, I wouldn't have come tonight had it not been him. The jock might be a player, in more than one sense of the word, but he also makes me feel safe... wanted. Which is a first for me, if I'm being honest with myself.

Branson's voice grows louder the deeper I go into the property, nearly at the water trap, but I still don't see him. The fountain in the center of the pond recirculates the water, helping to oxygenate it for the fish and prevent algae from growing, but it obscures the direction from which his voice is coming.

I peek through a thick clump of palms and spot the tall, athletically built man facing the water trap. Nearly, five-nine, I never considered myself small, but Branson is massive, six-four if he's even a foot tall. In the past, I'd given the man a massage at the club; his smooth brown skin would glisten with oil as I squeezed and pushed on his many, large muscles.

I swallow hard as the memory stirs my cock back to life, thickening inside my work shorts. Damn, I can almost feel his large muscular hands squeezing my shoulders, my ass. Fuck, I would honestly do him for free, but since he's paying...

The man of my dreams clears his throat and says something I can't quite make out. Branson is alone, so he must be talking to himself. I shrug. Whatever floats his boat, I think. I can be pretty vocal when the time comes too. Smiling again at the thought of the fun I'm going to have tonight, I shiver with anticipation. Here I come, Daddy.

I step through into the well-manicured patch of greenway that surrounds the water. "Branson, is that you?"

Branson turns and smiles. His beautiful dimples and sparkling eyes, send a tingle deep into my belly. We cross the grassy area that lies between us and stop short of an embrace. I'm completely unsure how these things usually progress, but my palms itch with the need to wrap myself up in his thick arms.

"You look really good tonight," Branson says, eyeing me. He seductively bites his lower lip and winks. "Are you ready to call me Daddy?"

I swallow hard. Am I ever. I'll call him whatever he wants if he promises to shove his cock down my throat. I look down at Branson's waist and see the bulge in his grey athletic shorts grow, quickly showing me the massively thick hunk of meat he's packing. The ridge of his cockhead begging me to unzip the fly and pull it out into the cool night air.

A sound behind us makes us look back to where I came from. “Is there someone else out here?” I ask. “I swear I heard you talking to someone earlier.”

Branson shakes his head, not taking his eyes off the hedges in the distance. “There was some guy out here, lurking around like a creep. I told him to get lost.”

“Who was it?”

Branson shrugs. “Don’t know, but I don’t hear anything else... he must have taken off when he realized I wasn’t here to see him.”

“Oh?” I take a step closer to the much taller and stronger man. I reach out and trace a finger along his erect cock, which jumps when I reach the head. “And who are you here for, Daddy?”

A sexy, deep, hungry moan comes from the older man as he wraps his arms around me, slowly lowering his head until our lips meet. My knees grow weak and my body trembles under his experienced touch. I pull away for a moment to catch my breath, ready and willing to dive right back in when I hear a rustle of tall grass behind us.

Suddenly, a loud thump, like a bat to a melon, Branson’s eyes widening in fear and pain, and he goes limp. I step back as his body slips through my arms and lands heavily upon the damp, grassy ground. Trying to find the words to say... to scream, I open my mouth, but, like a nightmare, nothing comes out. Standing before me is a man shrouded in black, moving toward me with a blunt object in hand. I turn to flee, to run for help, to escape this unfolding nightmare, but I’m too late.

I barely feel a thing, but a pressure to the back of my head sends me sprawling face-first on thick, lush, lawn of a well-manicured golf course where my world goes dark. Forever.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:17 am

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MICHAEL

I sit across from the date I connected with online last night. I swiped right on the newest app that promises to be the last app I'll ever need . I downloaded it, saved this guy's profile, and the almighty algorithm declared us a perfect match. Now here we are. In hell.

Had I read his profile a little more thoroughly before swiping, there's a good chance this date would never have happened. I need to be more careful next time. If I'm not going to put in the effort to find true love, there's a pretty good chance I should just leave well enough alone. This half-hearted approach is getting me nowhere except heartache and disappointment. Finding my forever isn't for the faint of heart, that's for sure.

Looking across the table, I internally gasp. Is he actually dipping his well-done steak in ketchup? Really? I'm a cop for goodness' sake, isn't ketchup on steak a crime? I should know this. No, really... I should. Glancing around to see if there's even one other table at this five-star restaurant with a bottle of ketchup, I cringe.

Nope . Not one table.

Dammit, this is not going well. I need a distraction, something interesting to happen, so I don't simply get up and walk away. My date takes another large piece of meat and plops it into his wide-open trap. Maybe he'll choke. Cringing at my own intrusive thoughts, I look away.

With a sigh, I take a sip of wine and clear my mind of all this negative energy. Maybe I should try starting a conversation with Brandon... or is it Blake? The younger guy hasn't asked me a single thing about myself since we arrived, except thinly veiled enquiries about money. He's more interested in my salary than me as a person. Doesn't seem to give a shit at all about anything else, not even my job, which usually at least gets me a second date from time to time.

"Tell me a little more about yourself... Blake?" God, I hope that's his name.

He stops mid-chew, a blankness settling across his beautiful features. "Like what?" He continues to slowly roll the half-masticated piece of dead cow around in his slack-jawed pie-hole.

Breathe, Michael. Breathe.

I suppose I got his name right, which is good. Why is dating so hard? "What do you do for a living?" I ask.

Blake smiles and coyly plays with the wine glass in front of him, swirling its contents around like he knows what he's doing. He makes a mockery of sniffing the contents before sipping a bit of it into his mouth.

Damn, should I have carded Blake before offering him something to drink? There isn't a single wrinkle on his flawless face. His eyes are bright and sparkle with life and vitality. He is truly gorgeous but vapid.

I sigh. Despite me being physically attracted to him and his perfect body, we probably don't have anything in common except how beautiful we both think he is.

"I'm only twenty-one, honey," Blake says. "There's plenty of time for me to figure out what I want in life." He takes another stab at the steak, mixes it with the mashed

potatoes, and plops it into his mouth.

“Fair enough,” I say. “Do you have any hobbies? Your online profile said you were an avid photographer.”

He snickers. “I wouldn’t say avid. I take nude selfies and post them on subscription sites for money.”

I sigh, louder than intended, but it can’t be helped. There isn’t anything wrong with someone trying to make a living, and I definitely don’t want to kink-shame him for his life choices, but I’ve been down this route before with dates recently. Ultimately, it never ends well. The last two men who did the online sex site thing demanded I show up online with them while wearing my uniform. No way in hell was I ever going to put my career at risk to get a little action.

“Your turn,” Blake says. “What do you do?”

Oh, here we go. A decent question. Although, I know I’d mentioned it in our brief interaction on the app, but now meeting him in person I can tell he never read my responses. “I’m a detective for the Los Angeles Police Department.”

“So, you chase after bad guys?”

“Among other things, yes. I always wanted to be a cop... ever since I was a little kid. There was something about making the bad guys accountable for their actions... you know? Keeping the good people of the world safe. Probably sounds pretty corny.”

Blake takes a sip of his rosé. “Cop... got it.” Did he just roll his eyes? Clearly he’s not impressed with my earning potential, but there’s more to it than that. Whatever. At this point, I don’t much care... this date has been more effort than it’s worth.

Silence settles over the table once again. I internally scream. Trying a new dating app has once again been a big mistake, but I've been reminded a million times by my best friend, Leah, that I need to put myself out there. What song does she always start singing to me? Oh, that's right, "If I Could Turn Back Time" by Cher. I definitely don't need a reminder that in the gay world, I'm getting older fast, I've reached daddy status in some circles. There aren't a lot of stops left along the way before I become completely invisible or irrelevant... or both.

My stomach clenches, and I put down the fork, the soft clink on the porcelain dinner plate breaking my self-deprecating thoughts.

I better keep him talking so I don't get up and leave his ass here. "Where are you from, Blake?" I don't care, but the silence is killing me.

He takes another sip of wine. "Kansas."

"What brought you here to Los Angeles? I bet that was quite the change from where you're from."

"I'm going to be the next Matt Damon," he says, dramatically looking off into the distance.

"Oh, very nice," I say sincerely. "I've never been much of an actor myself. I have a ton of respect for the industry though. Long days of shooting scenes and memorizing scripts. It can't be easy."

Blake shrugs and gulps down more wine. His last mouthful appears to swish around in his mouth like mouthwash before he swallows it. Where in the Dante's nine levels of hell have I found myself this evening?

"I'm sure it'll be fine. When I get my big break, I'll make this town my bitch. I'll set

my own schedule. Only work the days and times that suit me—trust me on that.” He stabs his fork into the chunk of steak on his plate with gusto.

Me. Me. Me. Does he ever think about anyone else? “Do you have an agent?”

“Honey, look at me. I don’t need an agent.”

Conceited and lazy. “Your confidence is inspiring,” I say. Every last drop of sarcasm lost on him. “I’ve never been one to be comfortable without planning out my path before I start down it. Maybe it’s a control thing, but there’s something to be said about knowing what’s coming next. You know what I mean?”

Blake plops another hunk of beef in his mouth and pulls out his phone, completely ignoring the question. Is he on social media right now? In the middle of our date?

Clearing my throat, I try and get his attention. “I’ve been a detective now for seven years, a cop even longer. I can’t believe how fast the time has gone, but it can make it difficult to date.” I take a sip of wine. “The hours I keep prevent me from making solid plans and have often gotten in the way of my relationships.”

Blake continues to scroll on his phone and then giggles. “Look at this meme.” He holds up his phone, showing a picture of a dog with a birthday hat on and something written below.

I don’t bother to read it. Instead, I try to imagine myself getting physical with this guy. Nothing. I actually feel nothing, not even a tingle or twitch. Either my age is affecting my libido, or I’m simply done with this date, and Blake. This self-absorbed jerk couldn’t care less about me. I’m a meal ticket, nothing more. I need to get the fuck out of here, and fast. The restroom sign in the corner is like my beacon of hope. If I excuse myself, I could hide in there until this guy gets bored and wanders away on his own. Maybe he’ll find another meme incredibly funny and go searching for

someone to share it with?

Not likely.

Without any other options, I'm about to get up and leave when my phone buzzes. I've never been so relieved to see my boss's name across my phone screen. This is my out, my chance to escape. If I could kiss my chief through the phone, I would— I'm desperate. "Excuse me for a second," I say and get up from the table to take the call away from the crowded dining area.

Once I'm near the entrance, I answer. "Borne here."

"Borne, we have an incident," my boss, Chief Derrick Mace, says. His voice is stern and no-nonsense on the best of days. This is not one of them.

"What happened?"

"Need you down at the Who's Your Caddy Golf Club, immediately. There's been a murder. One of the rich clientele, who happens to be somewhat of a local celebrity, was found tonight along with a staff member."

"I'll be right there, sir."

"There's more," he says. "I need you to be very discreet about this."

Discreet. The boss knows I'm gay, and this wouldn't be the first time I've been sent to a murder scene involving a celebrity caught in a compromising position. My guess is whoever this straight celebrity is, he was found in a not-so-straight situation—with his pants down.

"Let me guess, our local celebrity has family in high places? They don't want certain

details getting out to the press?”

Mace clears his throat. “It appears there may have been a sexual relationship between Branson James and a male staff member from the club. The family would like to keep Branson’s, how should I say it... proclivities, private.”

Not that it’s the 1970s or something, but the idea of someone being gay still instills fear and loathing in some people. Sad, but true. “Understood, sir.”

Mace hangs up the phone. The conversation is over, and I don’t have much time to get there and secure the scene. I look for our waiter and spot him at the cash register. Without a minute to waste, I hurry over to him.

“Hey, bud, I have to get going. My date over there,” I point to Blake, “hasn’t finished his meal, but I have to run.”

“Okay?”

“Work comes first sometimes.” I shrug. “I’d like to pay for our bill.”

“Sure thing.” The waiter searches through his apron pockets and pulls out the meal ticket.

“Thanks.” I hand him my credit card and wait for the transaction to go through. It’s over one hundred sixty dollars, but the relief I feel to get out of the nightmarish date and head to the crime scene is better than sex. Did that really just cross my mind? Either I’ve had some really shitty sex or not enough sex, either way, I hope never to think those words again. I hand the waiter a forty-dollar cash tip and say, “Can you let him know I won’t be back?”

The waiter looks back at Blake and then to me. He gives me a knowing smile and

nods. “Sure thing, man.”

“You’re the best.” I hand the waiter another ten dollars and hurry out the door.

While dining and ditching a date was never in the plan or in my normal wheelhouse, I can’t help but acknowledge the sense of relief I feel at my escape. I’ll definitely need to discuss this with Leah next time I see her for coffee. She’s not a therapist, but she has been through more in her lifetime than I could ever imagine dealing with and subsequently is a wealth of advice.

As I exit the restaurant, I’m assaulted by the sounds of the massive city where I work and live. The many lights, distant sirens, and horns remind me of the life and possibilities that still exist. One bad date can’t get me down. Running for my car, I unlock the door on the fly and get inside, slamming the door behind me.

Let’s find out what Mr. Branson had been up to.

PATRICK

It's a warm and sunny Saturday morning in Southern California, but I, Patrick Flores, am both in awe and appalled at the amount of sweat accumulating on Tina's brow and soaking the armpits of her t-shirt. Tina Brokaw is a cute girl with long brown hair, a decent body, and a fun personality that I've loved since the day we met. Back then, she was hitting on me at the local gay bar until I whispered in her ear that I was into dudes. The look on her face was priceless, but from that moment on, we've been the best of friends.

Truth be told, it made me sad when I found out she auditioned for the role of Katniss Everdeen in the teen dystopian *The Hunger Games* but lost out to J-Law. I'm an aspiring actor too, and after becoming friends, I found out we both auditioned on the same day, acting our asses off, desperate for a part in the movie. But at that time we hadn't yet met each other. Our star-crossed paths hadn't converged—or some crazy shit like that. I never took much stock in astrology or meditation, but Tina and I both went to see a past life regressionist last Christmas, and she filled our heads with some crazy stuff. Who would have thought I was once the scribe to the most famous Egyptian Pharaoh of all time, Ramses the Second?

Anyway, unlike me, once the movie released, Tina became obsessed with anything remotely similar to the movie—thus the reason we're out here at an archery range before seven in the damn morning. Despite my aversion to weapons and outdoor things, she'd convinced me with her big teary eyes, that it would be somehow good for me to practice with her. That at some point in the future these skills might come in

handy. I couldn't bear to see her reduce herself to begging... again, so I'd agreed to get a membership to this place with her.

Now, Tina slowly pulls back the bow, leveling the point at the target, and pauses. I wait... and wait. It seems as though she's never going to release the shaft. Her outstretched arm begins to tremble under the strain. This could get ugly. Should I take cover? Warn her to be careful?

"For fuck's sake, Tina," I say. "Shoot the damned thing."

She lets the string slide past her fingertips, releasing the arrow. It hurtles toward the target before slamming through the bullseye with a solid thud. The shaft penetrates the hay bale and momentarily quivers.

I jump up from my chair and pump my hips as if I'm topping the Invisible Man .
"Damn, you're good."

She flicks her hair to the side and smiles. "Don't hurt yourself, bestie. You haven't thrust those hips like that in a while." She puts her hands over her ears. "Don't you dare tell me about your prom night story again... I can't take it."

"Girl, don't you know it?" I haven't been in a real relationship in a while and as she points out, I always manage to compare every experience I have to what happened at my high school senior prom. The theme was Reach for the Stars, but all I could remember was the reach around I got in the handicapped stall in the boy's bathroom. Damn, he was so fucking hot. I never imagined I would be fucked that night by the star quarterback, Ricky Diaz. I close my eyes and for a split second, it's as if I'm teleported back in time. Breathing deep, I can still smell the urinal cakes and industrial-strength floor cleaner they use in the school bathrooms. The drip of the sink. The slippery floor tiles all around the urinals.

"Hey, aren't you gonna use that private stall?" Ricky asked in his deep baritone voice, gesturing to the one directly next to me. His breath was warm against my ear, making me shiver pleurably. My heart pounded like a drum as I watched him approach, admiring his broad chest and muscular arms adorned with deltoids that could rival any Greek god's. The stall door clicked shut behind him, leaving us alone in a cocoon of anonymity and taboo desire.

As he unzipped his white tuxedo pants, revealing a pair of black boxers underneath, my cheeks flushed hotter than the pent up load of cum I hadn't released since yesterday. Ricky's hard-on strained against the fabric, and I found myself mesmerized by its length and girth – it was like nothing I'd ever seen before or since. He stepped closer, our thighs brushing against each other, sending waves of excitement coursing through me. Without thinking too much about it, I reached out tentatively to touch him; he let out a low moan as my fingers grazed over his thick shaft, delighting in the velvety smooth skin beneath my trembling fingertips.

He guided my hand along his engorged member, showing me exactly how he liked it done as he wrapped one hand around mine and began to stroke both of us in tandem. The texture was different from what I'd imagined; sticky yet silky at the same time. His cock twitched under my touch as he leaned in close enough for our lips to brush against each other's neck. "You want this?" he whispered hoarsely into my ear before moving lower down towards my aching shaft. As if by divine intervention, my pants seemed to unbutton themselves and fell to the floor. Within seconds, I was sitting on the toilet and the guy's heavy balls were slapping me on the chin. After that, the Beverly Hills High School's best chance at a Football State Championship and I went for round two in the back of Ricky's truck.

A gust of hot Santa Anna wind blew me back to reality. The dingy men's bathroom replaced by a lush green archery range. Ricky's handsome face now my best friend, Tina's.

I shake away my nostalgia. One thing I was certain of, Ricky Diaz arguably had the biggest dick I'd ever seen. The unexpected encounter that fateful night wasn't how I'd planned to spend the best fifteen minutes of senior prom, but it sure was the most memorable.

It was truly magical.

"I'm one badass bitch." Tina twirls in place before throwing caution aside, sprinting for the target. Clearly unconcerned for her own safety as everyone else at the range is still firing off projectiles of death, she does a perfect cartwheel, double round off flip as she reaches the target to gather her arrow. Throwing her arms up into the air, she arches her back just enough to easily snatch the arrow from the target.

I watch as she rips the target sheet from the stand. Tina tosses her head back while raising her right hand in a three-finger salute of tribute-victory, or is it for solidarity? I really can't remember; I'm usually drunk by the time we get to that part of the movie.

"Get back here before you die," I call out to her. "I don't know how I'm going to explain to your mom that you got shot... again."

Tina jogs back, smiling from ear to ear. "It was just a flesh wound. Nothing Katniss couldn't handle." She flicks an errant hair out from the side of her mouth.

"Yes, but Katniss and The Hunger Games are fictional, and the only game we've successfully played is pin-the-cock on the stripper." I laugh to encourage her not to think too much into the disappointing past.

"No, that's the game you're good at. I'm classy." Tina strikes a pose, tossing her hair to the side and then checking her nails. For what, I don't know, but she seems to have taken to the pose lately.

“Oh, right. Day drinking and making out with my sister’s boyfriend was sure classy of you.” I roll my eyes and lovingly snap my fingers in her face.

“Again, that was you.”

“It was not...” I cock my head and hip to the side for a second. The way she pinches her mouth together triggers a memory. “Oh, yeah. That was me.” I coyly pick at my cuticle and bite my bottom lip. “I can’t believe Lisa ever thought her boyfriend was straight in the first place. I guess in some small way, I did her... and him, a huge favor. See... I’m a giver.”

“You two would have made a really cute couple,” she says. “He was ruggedly handsome, older, well-established.”

“Don’t start.”

She gives me a pouty face. “I just want you to find a nice guy who will treat you well.”

“And... support me so I don’t have to work my life away. I could use a life of luxury.” I smile but look away. Truth be told, I would settle for someone who truly loved me and treated me well. Unfortunately, the dating scene is all about the hookup, and that gets old—fast. The connection I felt with the guy who took my virginity had been fleeting but powerful, and I’ve never been able to replicate it with anyone else.

“Hey, stop that,” Tina says. “I recognize the look on your face.”

“What look?” I try desperately to appear innocent, but I know damn well what she’s talking about.

“The one where you’re thinking about Ricky. Stop it.”

I put my hands up in self-defense. “Hey, I can’t help it if I’m a hopeless romantic.”

“Sweetie,” she says, putting a sweaty hand on my shoulder. “It’s been years. Maybe a half a decade ago it was cute, but now it’s just revealing.”

“Revealing, what?”

“You’re damaged.” She puts a supportive hand on my shoulder and squeezes. “But I still love you.”

I shrug and cross my arms.

“Don’t get upset. If I’ve told you once, I’ve told you a thousand times.” She reaches over and squeezes my hand. “When you’re ready, I’ll go with you to your first counseling session. By then you’ll be comfortable with him or her. Trust me. I’ve been in therapy for years. Daddy says all starlets need a good counselor.”

I don’t have the heart to remind her she hasn’t actually starred in anything, unless you consider the commercial she did for that popular douche brand years ago. Mom, why do I have that not-so-fresh feeling? It’s the one speaking role she managed during the decades of auditions. I mean, she was great at pretending her crotch was musty, but it never seemed to translate into any real role.

“Are you going to go with me to the next audition? My agent says there’s a perfect part for me and you,” Tina says, giving her pouty face to guilt me into not giving up on my dreams of becoming an actor.

“I don’t know.” I look away.

“Why don’t you know? You’re a great actor.” She reaches up and puts her hands on my shoulders, squaring me up to look into my eyes. “Remember that time you tried out for that commercial, and they loved you?”

I smile. “They did... didn’t they?”

“No one ever gets their big break without getting shit on along the way. It’s part of the Hollywood experience.” She shakes me like an abusive mother and then says, “We both need to count our blessings as my grandmother would have said, bless her soul in heaven. Neither of us has had to suck a wrinkly old cock on the casting couch.”

She makes a few very strong points. “What movie is the audition for?” My interest is now mildly piqued.

“They won’t give out any specific information, which tells me it’s a big deal. Usually, the indie films are pretty open about casting, but remember how hush hush that last Richard Thompson film was?” She puts her hand on her hip. “Blockbuster... and top secret.”

“Okay, I’m in. We can discuss the specifics later, but let your agent know I’ll be going too. Do you think she’ll still represent me?”

“Bring her a pack of menthol cigarettes, and she’ll take you under her dusty, ash-filled wing.”

I hug her, suddenly excited about a part I have almost no chance of getting. “Thanks for always looking out for me.”

“Of course. Oh, my, look what we have walking this way.” Tina pushes me away and starts to play with her hair, contorting her body to make her boobs look bigger than

they are. I turn and see Jake Bloom approaching fast, too fast for me to collect my thoughts, let alone make myself look more appealing.

“Tina... Patrick,” Jake says, pausing after each name long enough to give us a fist bump. “What are you two doing here?”

Jake is the bartender at work and he catches the eye of every person who works there. No one is certain of his sexual orientation, but neither Tina nor I care as long as he keeps flirting with us.

“Tina and I come here to practice our archery skills. You never know when they’ll come in handy.”

Jake cocks his head to the side, his quizzical look making me want to crawl under a rock. “Planning on going hunting? It never occurred to me you’d be interested in something like that.”

I stammer a few unintelligible words.

“What my mute friend here is trying to say is, we come here to practice in case Hollywood decides to make another movie where archery is an integral plot point.” She smiles and nods my way.

“Ah, that’s right. I heard through the work grapevine, you tried to get the role of Katniss, didn’t you?” Jake smiles and takes a step closer to her. “You’re far too beautiful for that film.”

A sound between that of a horse whinny and a dolphin squeak emanates from the flushed Tina. She too grows speechless as her mouth opens and closes like a fish out of water.

I've got to do something to save my best friend from this humiliation. "I tried out for Peeta," I manage to say as I shift my weight under the ever-growing awkwardness. "But in all fairness, we've grown fond of the sport." I flex my left bicep in some kind of insane effort to appear manly.

"I get that," Jake says. "Sports are great. I especially love a soothing hot shower after a long, hard, day of play."

"Um," Tina says. "I love showers. You too, Patrick? You, me... we... showers."

I watch in horror as my friend dissolves into a pile of stuttering goo. Pull yourself together, woman .

"Tragic," I say and then nudge her. "Snap out of it. You're embarrassing us both."

She stops trying to form complete sentences and simply strikes a pose. I have to admit it's a great strategy as she looks fabulous in the morning light.

"Is she okay?" Jake asks.

I nod. "She'll be fine. Probably too much caffeine this morning," I lie. "Once she awakens from this fugue state, she'll be so embarrassed."

Her glare, so white hot, could burn my skin if I weren't wearing sunblock. I'll answer for this later, I feel it in my soul.

Jake wags his eyebrows at me and smiles. His carefree demeanor is infectious and intoxicating. The way his dark brown hair meets his smooth white skin sends my heart fluttering. I can't help but notice that despite the warm morning, Jake's nipples are hard under his thin blue shirt. I steal a glance down and swallow hard. His gray sweatpants perfectly accentuate the uncut beef he hides inside them, making my

mouth water.

“Okay, it was great seeing you both.” Jake readjusts his quiver and nods. “I’d better get to my lane before they give it away to someone else.”

“For sure,” I say with a forced, awkward laugh. “See you at work.”

“Bye,” Tina says.

“Tina,” I whisper. “What happened to you? Were you having a stroke?”

“I don’t know,” she says. “I made the mistake of looking down at his bulge. The way it moved from side to side when he walked toward us.” She bites her bottom lip and purrs. “There’s something bad... naughty about Jake that turns me on. I don’t care how this makes me sound, but I would ride him like a bull. Trust me, I’d hold on longer than eight seconds.”

We both turn and stand in silence, watching his thick muscular ass as he walks away. “He smells so good,” I say. “I want him... like, bad.”

“Don’t we all? You have to face it though, he’s straight and you’re never going to have him like that.”

“You don’t know he’s straight. Sexuality is a spectrum... he might like him some dick on the side.”

“True, but he was flirting with me.” Tina smiles, hopping in place. “He said I was prettier than Jennifer Lawrence.”

“I felt like he was flirting with me too.” I don’t have anything solid to go off, but it felt like it. Didn’t he hold my gaze longer than a straight man would have? “There’s

only one way to find out.”

“Yeah, and what’s that?”

“We both ask him out and see who he goes with.” I arch my eyebrows. “You down for a friendly wager?”

“Now you’re talking my language. What are the terms?”

“Whoever goes out with him first wins and the loser has to pay for their date.”

Tina shakes her head. “Not just a date. That’s too easy. It has to be whoever gets him into bed... and not to sleep.”

I want to protest as I haven’t had luck getting anyone to have sex with me in what seems like forever, but I also wouldn’t mind putting some real effort into this one. “Deal,” I say. “What do we use as proof of copulation?”

“I’ll take your word for it if you trust me too.”

We’re best friends and have never lied to one another, so it works for me. “Deal.”

We shake on our wager.

“Anyway,” Tina says, rolling her eyes. “You know I love you and want you to be happy, but guess what else I love?” Her smile says it all, but she doesn’t give me time to respond. She holds up the target so I can see the hole dead in the center of the red dot. “The Hunger Games franchise. The movies, books, clothing, and even the soundtrack speak to me on a subatomic level.”

“Fine, but you need to be more careful. I need you to promise me, you’re not going to

run down the lane like that anymore.” I cross my arms and do my best to glare at her for her own good. “Promise me.”

“Okay,” she says. “I promise, bestie.”

I take the target from her and hold it up like Rafiki presenting Simba to the animals gathered below during *The Lion King*. “You’re the best archer I know.” I twirl in place and dance a little jig holding the paper in front of me. When I look up, I see Tina’s gaze has shifted from me and into the distance. I follow her sightline. Her eyes are locked on Jake. He’s a few lanes away looking in our direction. I smile and obnoxiously wave as if I’m embarking on a cross Atlantic trip in the early nineteenth century. I don’t blame him, but Jake turns away as if he didn’t see me.

“Smooth,” Tina says. “Honey, you’re embarrassing yourself. I really want to win, but I wouldn’t be a good friend if I didn’t tell you to chill.”

“I know,” I say. “Oh my god, I hate myself when I get like this.”

“Nah.” She waves away my self-consciousness. “He probably didn’t even notice.”

I laugh. “Let’s get the fuck out of here and get a latte before our shift starts. There’s plenty of time to go to Coffee Cravings.”

“Perf.” Tina smiles with all the giddiness of a true coffee-obsessed fiend.

It’s one of the many things we have in common. I can almost feel the surge of life I know I’ll have after that first glorious sip. The caramel mocha sweetness will give me goosebumps, and the caffeine, the will to live through my shift. It’ll be great!

We gather up our equipment and head for the car. I need an extra shot of espresso in my iced coffee if I have the slightest hope of tolerating the assholes that frequent

what once was the country club of the Hollywood elite. It's where I get paid to hand out towels and toiletries in the guest locker room and at poolside. We also provide drinks and snacks to the middle-aged, out-of-touch, shitty rich people who repeatedly get handsy and ask for happy endings during their massage. Although, I suspect some of the other staff have it worse, especially those giving facials, waxing, and other spa treatments.

Needless to say, we rarely ever see any true Hollywood royalty, but the B-Rated and Forgotten-Abouts are there in force. Seas the Day Country Club and Med Spa has really fallen out of favor, to which I can't see any way to fix. Oh well. I'll ride this ship as it circles the drain. At least I'm still getting paid.

Happy fucking Monday.

MICHAEL

I 've arrived at Who's Your Caddy Golf Club before sunup. The club is one of two from the olden days of Hollywood. From what I've been told, this place and Seas the Day Country Club and Med Spa have been struggling to keep up appearances since larger chain clubs backed by corporations have been cropping up the last few years. This incident will do little to keep them afloat. Another Hollywood mainstay on the brink, it seems. It's sad, really.

As I step through the grand, arched entrance, the opulence of old-world glamour and luxury now feels eerie under the shadow of crime scene tape. The soft glow of crystal chandeliers hanging from an intricately coffered ceiling catches my eye, their light reflecting off polished marble floors that now echo with the footsteps of investigators and the murmurs of staff.

In the reception area, I notice the plush, emerald velvet chairs and the dark mahogany woodwork. Gilded mirrors adorn the walls, their ornate frames catching the light and adding a touch of opulence to the scene. Black-and-white photographs of Hollywood stars hang along the corridor, now serving as silent witnesses to the current investigation.

The air is still filled with a delicate blend of eucalyptus and lavender, a stark contrast to the tension that fills the room. The main lounge area, usually a sanctuary of comfort and style, now hosts a team of detectives, their voices low as they confer over the grand fireplace. Fresh flowers and vintage ornaments on the mantle seem out

of place amidst the chaos.

Every corner of Who's Your Caddy Country Club, once whispering tales of secret rendezvous, star-studded parties, and the timeless pursuit of leisure and luxury, now tells a different story. It's a place where the echoes of the past blend seamlessly with the grim reality of the present, offering me a unique challenge in uncovering the truth behind the crimes committed here under the cover of darkness.

"Who are you?" a seductive male voice sounds behind me.

I turn as a perky young red-haired twenty-something saunters over to me with his hand extended. Taking his hand I shake the limp, dead, fish. Gross. Nothing worse than a limp handshake.

"Hello," I say. "My name's Detective Michael Borne."

"Say no more," he says. "Put me in cuffs." He wiggles his hands and fingers between us.

Chuckling, I smile. "I don't think that will be necessary... unless you're a murderer, of course."

The gasp and clutching of pearls sounded as honest as any answer I've ever received during my time on the homicide division.

"My goodness," he says. "I was not expecting you to say such a thing."

"Sorry," I say, pulling out my pencil and small notepad. "What was your name?"

The handsome man before me seems to turn a shade of red, then white, and then green? Is he terrified of me now?

“Mr. Kaleb Robert Carmelo Hector Hudson, at your service.” His eyes twinkle as he clearly shifts from being scared to horny.

“Wow,” I say. “That’s quite a mouthful.”

“So I’ve been told.” He pouts his lips and tucks a non-existent strand of hair behind his ear. “What can I do to... sorry, for you?”

“I was hoping you could tell me something about the incident that happened here last night.”

His demeanor grows serious. “I don’t know anything. In fact, I didn’t even know the old guy that was found.”

“But you knew Gordy?”

He nods. “Super nice guy. I knew he was gay; we both would often chat about who we’d love to hook up with here at the club. Other than that, we didn’t hang out after work or anything like that.”

I took notes while he spoke and then handed him my card. “If you happen to remember anything else or hear anything that might be important... even if it just seems like idle gossip, let me know.”

He takes the card and shoves it into his front pocket. “Sure thing.”

We part ways and I do my best to make my way out to the grounds behind the large club space. There’s no one between me and the crime scene so I hurry to the site of the double murder. While the CSI team processes the scene, I walk around the bodies, snapping my own pictures and taking notes. Rumor has it that the two victims met up last night for a sexual rendezvous. The age gap between the two men unnerves some

of the staff I interview, but they're both consenting adults, so what does it matter? I wonder if the age gap would matter to the staff if it were a hetero couple.

I tap the end of my pencil against my chin. There has to be more to this crime scene and scenario. An older patron in his fifties and a young staff member sneak back here in the middle of the night to have sex. So what? Why would they be murdered for it? According to the police who arrived first on the scene, there's no sign of a robbery. Both victims have their wallets, cash, credit cards, and valuables undisturbed on their bodies. It'll take a while to get the toxicology report, but I would bet dollars to donuts they'll both come back clean—not a track mark on either man. Not even a pack of cigarettes was located amongst their personal items.

Hate crime? Jilted lover? There's still a lot to uncover, but from what I've already gathered, both victims were single, which leaves a hate crime. Something about that conclusion doesn't sit well with me either. This is California and two men having a quickie is anything but shocking in this day and age.

“Detective Borne?” A frantic man, appearing to be in his sixties, rushes over to me, hand extended in greeting. The man is short and stout, breathing hard and sweating from his march across the grounds. “What a terrible tragedy.”

I accept his handshake and say, “As you know, I'm Detective Michael Borne. And you are?”

“Oh, sorry,” the man says. “I'm the owner of the club. Stanley Crump's the name. I got a call an hour and a half ago, and I jumped in my car and rushed over here as soon as I could.”

“What can you tell me about the victims?”

Stanley shakes his head and shrugs. “Not much, I'm afraid. Branson James is a

former professional football player, widower, and very rich.”

“How about Gordy Herrera?”

Stanley fidgets in place like a scolded child waiting for his punishment. I cock my head to the side and watch him in silence for a moment. He digs his heel into the grass and kicks away the clods but doesn’t answer the question.

“Sir?” I ask. “Did you hear my question?”

He nods and sighs, his shoulders slumping even further than his already terrible posture. “Gordy was a good kid.” His voice catches in his throat.

“Did you know him personally?”

“Of course, he worked for me.” Stanley sounds harsh and dismissive.

“I understand, sir. I believe most employers have a basic idea of who works for them, but there are very few who have an actual personal connection to them... a connection that would bring up such an emotional response, such as yourself.”

He doesn’t reply at first but looks off into the distance, the hardness in his expression softening with each passing second. “Gordy was special to me.”

I let the statement sit for a moment and then ask, “In what way?”

Stanley shakes his head. “Not like the way you’re thinking.”

“I’m not thinking anything, sir. I’m simply trying to understand who the victim was.”

Another long pause, but then Stanley seems resolved to open the door. “He was my

son. No one around here knew it... lord knows the rumor mill this place has become.” Stanley clamps his hand down over his mouth and quivering chin, his eyes welling up with tears. He sniffs and wipes his nose on the back of his hand and shrugs. “Like I said, he’s a good kid.”

Needing to separate myself from the emotions running high, I press on for answers. “His relation to you was a secret? I don’t think I understand.”

“He found me on one of those family-ancestry websites. Just shy of a year ago, he contacted me. He wanted us to get to know each other... said he had proof we were family. Well... you can imagine how I reacted.”

I have an idea and find it best for the interviewee to tell me directly . “Keep going, sir. The more you tell me now, the more it could help lead to whoever did this to your son.”

“Turns out the affair I had two decades ago ended up producing a child... clearly it wasn’t something I was proud of, and I didn’t even know he existed until he showed up on my doorstep with the DNA results.”

“How did your wife react to the news?”

“I didn’t tell her. I’d already made peace with the affair, determined never to do it again, and pay for it when I meet my maker, whenever that should happen to be. I didn’t see a reason to ruin my marriage and hurt my wife since I was determined never to do it again.”

“Were you worried about the secret getting out since Gordy worked here? Why did you employ him to begin with?”

“He was already working here... I couldn’t just fire him. He was a good employee. I

even offered to make him a manager, but he was proud. Too proud to take handouts, he'd said. He repeatedly told me he didn't want anything from me, but to have a father figure in his life." Tears well up in Stanley's eyes again and he shakes his head. "We'd grown close over the past year... I'd even contemplated telling my wife about him because I couldn't imagine him not being part of our lives."

"Do you know of anyone who would want to hurt your son? Someone that might have become jealous of your relationship with him? You mentioned before this place was a rumor-mill, even something that seems implausible could help."

Stanley doesn't respond right away, but stares off into the distance, his eyes darting back and forth. I've seen this many times before, the victim's loved one desperate to help, but unable to focus on anything other than their pain and loss.

"I have no idea who could have done this. I'm so sorry, Detective. If there was anything at all I could do to help, I promise you I would."

"I believe you, sir," I say and put my hand on the older man's shoulder. "Here's my card. If you remember anything... or hear anything that might help, please don't hesitate to call me."

Stanley takes the card and studies it for a moment, then puts it into his front pocket. "Thank you, Detective."

I take a few notes as I walk away from the owner and stop midway to the main entrance. I put the pad back into my pocket and head straight for my car. I need coffee, and I need it now.

Coffee Cravings, the coffee shop I love to go to, isn't far from the golf club and they have the best iced mocha cold brew. With pedal to the metal, I make record time as I slow into the parking space. As I approach the entrance, a couple catches my eye. The

female is cute, physically fit, and appears even at this distance to be the male's friend rather than lover. Their dynamic is true and platonic. I refocus my attention on the male, decently dressed, thin, with boyish good looks and if I were to guess—gay. Butterflies fill my belly. Something about this guy tugs at me, and for the first time in a while, I want to actually get to know someone... him. It feels weird, since I haven't even spoken to the guy.

I hurry to catch the door as it starts closing behind them. They stand in line in front of me and I rack my brain to come up with a reason to speak to him. I'm about to give up when he drops his wallet.

Reaching down, I pick it up before he even turns around. When I tap him on the shoulder, he turns, and our eyes meet. His light brown eyes sparkle in the light. He's beautiful and not in the shallow sort of way as my previous date had been.

"Oh, thanks," he says and snatches the wallet from my hand. His female friend turns and checks me out; if her eyes were fingers, I'd have arrested her for unwanted groping.

"Got to be careful these days," I say. "People love to steal each other's identities." Shit, I sound like an overbearing father. Or maybe even a creepy serial killer.

Awkward glances from him tell me I need to change my approach or simply give up.

"My name's Michael," I say, extending my hand.

"It's so nice to meet you, Michael. I'm Tina and this is my friend Patrick."

Tina nudges him in the side and he shoots her a dirty look, his cheeks blushing red. He's clearly not interested.

“Great to meet you,” I say. Waiting for some kind of response from the guy, my stomach tightens. Gosh this guy is so cute, but he might not like me since I feel I look a bit older than him. Not to mention, I’m not absolutely ripped like a gym-bro. Inwardly, I sigh and I feel my shoulders slump, ever so slightly. It sure would have been nice to make a connection after such a shitty date the other night.

Cutting my losses, I look away, pretending to be interested in a stupid mug for sale on the shelf next to me in line.

They turn back around, and it’s clear from their body language, Tina either wants me for herself or for her best friend, but Patrick is not interested in the slightest. He probably wants a gym rat or something, and while I’m plenty strong, I’d say I have more of a muscular dad body—quite fit, but not a lot of definition in my abs. Tacos, pizza, and the occasional beer—never going to be completely ripped enjoying my life like that.

Anyway, I mind my own business in line and order my coffee. By the time I get a straw and napkins, I turn back around, and Tina and Patrick have left the shop. Oh well, wasn’t meant to be. I sit down at a little table in the corner of the place and take out my personal cell phone, open the dating app and begin swiping left and right. Dammit, the pickings are slim on here this morning. My mind tells me to uninstall the app, but my heart tells me there’s still a chance to find love. To find my forever.

PATRICK

Tina and I arrive to work a bit early and there is no way we are going to go inside until the last possible second. After all, we aren't sadists, and the club doesn't pay us extra if we get there before our shift starts.

Seas the Day Country Club sprawls impressively with its eighteen-hole golf course, a forty-thousand square foot clubhouse, multiple pools, tennis courts, and even horse stables. The circle drive, lined with palm trees and punctuated by a massive back-lit fountain, showcases what talented landscapers, architects, and designers can accomplish with enough money.

"You know, Patrick, the hunky guy at the coffee shop was giving you the eye," Tina says.

"What eye?" I ask. "There's no way he was gay."

"And why is that?"

"Simple," I say. "When he adjusted his suit jacket, he had a badge."

"So?"

"And he had a bit of a funky odor. Gays in suits don't do that. They make sure they smell delightful just in case they encounter one of their own."

“Funky odor? Like body odor?” she says. “That’s nasty.”

I shrug and wince. “I mean... he didn’t smell bad, but he did have an odor of someone who works for a living.”

“Stop that,” she says, slapping my arm playfully. “Everyone in this town works unless they’re a trust fund baby. Plus, did you see the dark circles under his beautiful blue eyes?” she asks.

“Well, sure.”

“That man had been up all night... probably working. I remember a time or two when we stayed up all night and stood in line at a casting call together. Your pits smelled like a dirty cat box.”

“Hey,” I say. “No need to be snarky.” She could be right about the guy, but after I dissed him like that, there’s no coming back from it. “Oh, well. Too late now. Los Angeles is a big city... there’s a snowball’s chance in hell I’ll ever see him again.”

She shrugs. “I suppose.”

We grow quiet, and as Tina and I stand out front sipping the last of our quad-shot skinny mocha lattes with coconut milk, I’m reminded of how much beauty surrounds me at work. Then, a horn blares behind us, instantly souring my caffeine-infused mood.

I turn as the smoky gray Bentley pulls up alongside us. The back window lowers, and a gnarled, claw-like hand with bright red acrylic nails emerges, resting on the door. Her four knobby fingers and the thumb are bejeweled with diamonds and emeralds, each worth more than I make in a year. The ostentatious display can only mean one thing.

The richest, most self-absorbed, narcissistic, and somehow cheapest old woman, has arrived.

“Sweetie,” Mrs. Nadine Thornbird says in a condescending tone. “I’ll be back in an hour for my usual mani-pedi, massage, and waxing.” She points somewhere below window level where I’m thankful I don’t have to see. Tina sighs before the older woman continues. “Have a cocktail or two waiting for me... would you dear?”

I start to ask exactly what kind of drinks she wants when Mrs. Thornbird tosses a crumpled dollar bill to the ground and raises the tinted window, effectively silencing me. Her driver pulls away with a squeal of tires.

I step over to retrieve the money, but Tina grabs my elbow.

“What are you doing?” she asks.

I shrug. “I can’t let her litter.”

“It’s okay to dive to the ground for a buck. God knows we’ve all done it. But we have an agreement.” Her look is stern, and I feel myself deflate a bit.

I nod.

“I think I’m going to need you to tell me about the agreement... I’m not convinced you remember.” Tina crosses her arms.

“Fine. No matter how desperate we are, we will never appear that way in front of the clientele.”

“Good. Now explain to me why.” The intensity of her glare sends a wave of anxiety through me.

“When ultra-rich sons-of-bitches see us in need, it satisfies their egos. When they watch us take the money they throw on the floor, it soothes whatever distorted sense of conscience they may have.” I look Tina in the eyes. “I know you’re right about this, but old habits are hard to break.” I turn to see the car as it pulls out of the circle drive and disappears into the distance.

“Okay, grab the dollar before one of the other desperate losers that work here thinks it’s theirs. We should get inside,” she says.

I unfurl the dollar bill before putting it in my pocket. We walk side-by-side toward the front door and throw our empty drinks into the trash outside the main entrance.

“Do we dare?” I ask.

Tina looks from side to side. No one is around as far as I can see and she says, “Hell yes. I’m not walking all the way around to the side entrance where, we, the lowly help is allowed to enter.”

All employees, no matter what shift or position, are required to go through either of the side entrances or any of the back doors. The management says it’s to allow employees to clock in and out immediately rather than walking through the premises off the clock. Everyone knows it’s far from altruistic on the part of management, but rules are rules. And when it comes to work, Tina and I don’t exactly abide by the rules unless someone is watching.

We step through the automatic doors together, and I hear the most annoying sound on the planet.

“Well look what the cat dragged through a big pile of shit.”

We both turn as Devon “Size Queen” Sanderson sashays toward us with a tray of

morning alcoholic beverages—Champagne and orange juice. My mouth waters. I could use one... or three to deal with Devon at this early hour. I'm not going to lie, Devon is actually a decent human being, but we had a falling out years ago when he was convinced I was trying to hook up with his boyfriend. No matter how many times I tried to explain that I wasn't interested in the self-proclaimed straight, happily married, fifty-three-year-old, father of three, Devon didn't believe me. Ever since, if side-eye, mean quips, and annoying behavior could kill, he'd be in prison, and I'd be six-feet under.

I roll my eyes. "Honey, if your shorts were any shorter, your shriveled-up bits would be showing."

"Aww." Devon feigns sadness. "Did it take you all night to think up that sad... pathetic comeback?" He puts his hand in my face. "Never mind, sweetheart, the bags under your eyes have told me all I need to know."

Tina steps in between us and rests a finger on the edge of the tray. A worried look somehow manages to cross his overly Botoxed and filler-injected face.

"Don't you dare, Tina," Devon says in a pitched voice, nearing what only dogs can hear.

"I don't appreciate how you spoke to my bestie. So, if you know what's good for you... you'll apologize."

Tina must have applied even more pressure with her finger as the crystal flutes begin to rattle on the silver tray. Devon tries to steady the load using his other hand, but it isn't helping stop the death rattle. The life in Devon's eyes ebbs as he turns to look at me for help. "I'm sorry."

I suppress a smirk and go to walk away, but as if compelled by some sassy, hateful

demon, Devon adds, “I’m sorry... your mom carried you to full term.”

“That’s it,” Tina says, pushing even harder on the tray before completely pulling her hand away.

Devon’s attempts to keep the tray level backfire as he didn’t expect her to take her finger off the edge. His over-correction sends the tray and all the crystal soaring upward in what feels like a slow-motion montage of helpless people fucking up simple tasks on infomercials.

Devon screams and tries to catch what he can to prevent it from all being destroyed, but it’s not to be. The shattering sound is epic, bits of crystal spraying in all directions.

“All you had to do was be nice... even if it was only for a few seconds,” Tina says. “But you couldn’t even do that.”

I loop my arm around Tina’s waist and give her a side hug. “Thanks, bestie.”

As we walk away from the carnage, I look back and feel a twinge of guilt and regret. Devon is a complete shithhead, shallow to a fault, and utterly annoying, but he is still family... of sorts. A bond in a way many don’t understand or care about, but even if he doesn’t feel the same way about me, I would stand up for him against the haters. That being said, if Devon thinks for a second he’s going to get away with talking shit to me when Tina is around, he has another think coming.

“Come on, we’d better clock in before we’re late,” Tina says as she pulls me along with her. But before we leave, I see Devon look up from the mess on the floor. The front doors open. Bright sunshine lights up the entire entryway.

“Hold on a second,” I say as I’m being tugged hard down the hallway. “Who is that?”

Tina stops and looks in the direction I'm staring. The way the bright light reflects off the mirror in the hallway, it's difficult to make out the man who entered. The doors close, and I realize it's Jake. He's dressed in his work uniform, but for some reason, it looks so much better on him than it ever does on me.

The white shorts hug his round ass. The black and white sweater vest begs to be torn off him with my teeth. He palms back his hair. Are there little forest creatures and birds singing in the background? Have Disney cartoons finally come to life? I swear I've found myself in the middle of an animated movie. Jake looks toward us and smiles. The air catches in my chest. Tina plays with her long brown hair, twirling it seductively, biting her bottom lip.

She's purposely being slutty to draw the attention away from me, but I seductively arch my back a bit to make my ass pop a little more than usual.

Jake removes his sunglasses and says something to Devon, who leaps from the floor like a jungle cat in heat—straightening his clothes and hair before stepping so close to him, their crotch bulges are about to touch.

I struggle to make out what he's saying, but it looks like whatever it is, Devon is hanging on every word and might mess his pants if he isn't careful. It's obvious to me that Devon wants to have Jake's babies, so we have even more competition than just the two of us.

"That guy could give me a good fucking if he played his cards right," Tina says.

"Shit, I don't know what card game you're talking about, but I'll just let him win." I want to run back over there and step between Jake and Devon. Jealousy is not my favorite color, and I need to avoid going down that path.

Tina tugs at my elbow. "I know you'd like to Eiffel Tower him with me, but we have

to clock in or get fired.”

I shrug, then let my shoulders sag. “Let’s go and get this day over with.”

“You okay?” Tina asks. “I would be willing to wait if you wanted to go and talk to him for a couple minutes.”

“You’re the best friend I could ever ask for. We’re in a competition, and you still try and help me out,” I sigh and turn, pushing my way through the double service doors to the back room where the staff are allowed to be themselves. Tina is right on my heels.

“Should we meet back here for lunch?” I ask.

“Sounds good to me.” Tina punches her employee number into the time clock. “Are you going to get Mrs. Thornbird’s drinks for her, or should I?”

“Here.” I hand her the dollar. “You do it, I’m not in the mood. Plus, she’s going to want you to give her a Brazilian.”

“Gross,” Tina says as she fills her pockets with vinyl gloves. “You know what happened last time I tried to get her on all fours with her ass in the air.”

“Oh man, don’t remind me.” I pretend to gag from the memory. “We don’t get paid enough for this shit.”

We share a good laugh and then hurry to finish getting ready for the day. If I can manage to avoid being humiliated by my boss, yelled at by an irate billionaire, or inappropriately touched by any of the massage clients... I’ll be able to call this a good day.

Fat fucking chance of that happening, though. I can't remember the last time I had a good day at work. Problem is I have nothing else, like a college degree, to fall back on. My rent-controlled apartment is two grand a month. It's not in a great neighborhood, I have to step over the unhoused, dodge the hookers and their Johns, but I call it home—for now. And if I include tips, this shitty-ass job pays enough for me to get by, which makes it too damn important to give up now.

Hurrying down the hallway toward my work post, my thoughts drift back to Jake. My belly flutters with butterflies. I have to push the man's image out of my mind so I can focus on my day... not to mention avoiding a boner I'll be unable to hide in these uniform shorts. I look down and try to readjust myself.

Dammit, too late.

MICHAEL

I step into the opulent lobby of Seas the Day Country Club, instantly hit by the blend of saltwater air and expensive cologne. The chandelier overhead twinkles with a kind of ostentation only a place like this could pull off. My shoes click on the marble floor, and I notice a short man dressed in a mostly-white uniform, although I can't imagine the length of his shorts is regulation. If he isn't careful, his berries will show. As the door closes behind me, the sun hits just right, glaring off tiny pieces of glass all over the tiled floor. The short-wearing employee is standing in the middle of it all with a look of despair.

That is until he turns and sees me.

"Good morning, welcome to Seas the Day! How may I make your day fabulous?" The man's voice drips with an accented desire, his dark brown eyes sparkling with mischief. His nametag reads: Devon.

"Detective Michael Borne," I say, flashing my badge locked on my hip. "I'm here to ask you a few questions about the incident down the road at Who's Your Caddy Country Club."

Devon's eyes widen, and he leans forward, his perfectly manicured fingers playing with the lapel of my suit jacket. "Oh my, a detective! And a handsome one at that. Other than answering your silly little questions, how can I possibly assist you?" His eyes roam from my head to toe sending an uncomfortable tingle up my spine. This

guy is eye-fucking me harder than I am used to.

I suppress a sigh when he licks his lips. "I'm investigating a murder that took place there. I was wondering if you've heard anything—any rumors, suspicious activity, anything unusual."

Devon's lips curve into a coy smile. "Rumors, you say? Honey, this place is a rumor mill. But murder? That's a new one."

"Anything you might've overheard could be helpful," I prompt, trying to steer the conversation back on track.

"Well," he drawls, tapping his chin thoughtfully. "Let me think. We do get some crossover between clubs—people gossiping in the sauna, whispers at the bar. But murder... hmmm." His eyes lock onto mine with a playful glint. "Are you sure you don't want to talk about something a bit more... exciting?"

"Unfortunately, this is pretty high on my list of excitement," I reply dryly. "Anything you can remember about odd conversations, strange behavior—anything."

Devon sighs dramatically, as if deeply disappointed. "Alright, alright. Let me think... Oh! There was that time Mr. Pembroke mentioned something about the Who's Your Caddy manager acting off somehow."

"Off, you say?"

He nods. "Yeah, like he was hiding a big secret or something."

Could be the secret of his lovechild working at the place, but I keep that to myself.

"But that was weeks ago," Devon continues. He taps his finger on his chin and then

eyes me again, dipping the tip of his index finger into his mouth.

I don't look away, but I give him the most unamused stare I can muster considering the circumstances.

He clears his throat and shrugs, a look of disappointment evident in his expression. "Anyway... and there was Mrs. Shepherds complaining about some new staff being too nosy. Getting into her business, type of thing. Nothing concrete, just idle chatter, darling."

I jot down the names despite feeling certain they'll both be dead ends. "Mr. Pembroke and Mrs. Shepherds. Got it. Anything else?"

Devon leans closer, his cologne invading my personal space. "You know, you have the most amazing eyes, Detective. Has anyone ever told you that?"

"Once or twice," I say, keeping my tone neutral. "Is there anything else you can think of that might help with the investigation?"

He pouts, clearly disappointed by my lack of response to his flirting. "I'm afraid not. We're a peaceful bunch here—mostly just scandalous affairs and the odd financial dispute. Murder is a bit out of our league."

"Alright. If you do hear anything, please give me a call." I hand him my card, which he takes with a little too much enthusiasm, his fingers brushing mine. He jumps in place for a split second as if he's about to piss himself, but then quickly shoves the card into his front pocket.

"Oh, I will, Detective," he purrs. "Don't be a stranger."

As I turn to leave, a movement catches my eye—a man in a dark suit lingering by the

entrance, his gaze fixed on us. His expression is blank, but there's something in his eyes that sends a chill down my spine. He's been listening.

I start to approach, but in the blink of an eye, he disappears into the crowded lobby. With a sense of urgency gnawing at my gut, I carve a path through the thrumming crowd. But the room is no longer the peaceful lobby it had been a few moments before as waves of geriatric ladies, swinging tennis rackets, flock into the space. They are a complete gaggle of cacophonous sound as their loud laughter and joyous conversation seems to suck the air from the room. Despite my gaze being set on a singular figure, the man who had been listening to my conversation a few minutes ago, I lose him amongst the sea of humanity.

There's no longer room to move and if I'm not careful, I fear I'll be trampled. Keeping my hands at my sides, I slowly push my way through the crowd toward the front exit. More than once, my ass is grabbed, and I hear a giggle and exclamation of joy, but I don't bother to turn and find out who the culprit is. Finally, I reach the door and squeeze my way through. I step into the sunlight, take a deep breath, and do my best to straighten my suit. Once I'm a few meters away from the exit, I stop and look back at the building. Something funny in my chest tingles as if I am being watched. It is hard to see if anyone is looking at me through the reflective front door, but I can't shake the feeling that Devon might know more than he's letting on. And that I'm not the only one interested in what he has to say.

PATRICK

After spending the entire day trying to avoid Devon like the plague, it is time for me to go home. The day went exactly how I expected it to go. It sucked. I didn't even get time to eat my lunch, even though the company automatically deducts the state-mandated thirty-minute meal period because I'm a full-time employee. But, whatever.

I'm now driving home, hoping to get a decent night's sleep before I have to wake up and do it all over again tomorrow. Traffic is surprisingly light and before long I'm almost home. Turning the corner into my apartment complex, I somehow manage to find an empty parking spot. There's an option to pay an extra three hundred dollars a month to guarantee a space, but I'm not convinced it would work. Even if I had the extra money on top of the two-thousand dollars for rent, my one-bedroom, one-bathroom apartment is surrounded by assholes.

Too often, I've witnessed people's parking spaces being taken, and the only recourse is to call the police. If the cops even bother to show up, they don't get there until the situation escalates into a brawl. It's like they want someone to get stabbed or shot before they can be bothered. I've come to the conclusion that it's all a bunch of bullshit, and it's easier to make do with whatever parking space I can find—even if it's raining and I'm carrying in my dry-cleaning.

"Hey, baby," Diamond catcalls from the parking lot as I clear the landing of the second floor.

I turn and smile in her direction. “Hey, Diamond. Hope your evening is going well.”

“Oh, you know it is... too many men, not enough cash.” Her usual customers always seem to want to barter or pay her with something other than money. Sadly, it always ends the same way—with her saying, “Cans of fucking green beans don’t pay no rent. I sucked your cock; now give me my money.” Sex work is hard work, and I always try to keep an eye out for her.

I know she lives on the streets and when I’m able to, I’ll make her extra food. She says my rice and beans are to die for even though Tina always complains that she’ll die if she has to eat them.

“Have a nice night, Diamond.” I reach up to open the door, noticing a piece of paper taped to it.

I snatch it free and read it, sighing. My landlord is getting impatient waiting for the rent. This is the third month in a row I’m going to be a couple of days late. Tips have been bad the past few months at the club. It’s hard to know when the money is going to be there when I have to rely on tips to make ends meet. “Dammit.” I glance back at Diamond and sigh. Sex work is hard work, but if I’m not going to get a real acting job soon, would porn still be an option? Maybe one of those pay-to-watch-me-clean-toilets-in-the-nude online subscriptions? Tina told me about a woman she knew from social media who gets paid some heinous amount of money to eat fast food on camera while men jerk off watching her.

To each their own, but couldn’t I get in on some of it?

I stick the key into the lock and turn, but the mechanism doesn’t disengage as it usually does. Reaching for the knob, I turn it. Much to my horror, the door is unlocked.

I could have sworn I locked it this morning. This neighborhood isn't even remotely safe; there's no way I would have forgotten to lock up. I vacillate between turning around and leaving or calling the police to check my apartment for unwanted guests. I start to pull out my phone when Diamond hollers, "You had a visitor today, baby."

"A visitor? Did you see who it was?"

She shakes her head. "I was too busy paying attention to my own business," she says, licking a candy sucker. "You know what I mean? Those dicks aren't going to suck themselves now, are they?"

She always tries to turn the conversation into talking about sex. Normally, I'm fine tossing around innuendos, but tonight it annoys me. For someone who is usually in my business, why couldn't she be more helpful this time?

"Did you see if they left? I don't want any surprises when I go inside."

"They sure did. I mean, I didn't see what they looked like on account of my head being... you know, busy. But what I did see when I came up for air was the man driving away in one of them nice cars... you know... the kind rich white dudes drive."

Well, fuck Diamond, this is Los Angeles. That description fits most of the cars and close to half the population.

"You sure it was a guy?"

"Oh yeah... I could smell him. He had on one of them colognes I like."

"What kind?"

She thinks about it for a second and then shrugs. “I don’t remember, but I think it was that new one by Tom Fjord.”

“Thank you, Diamond. If you see him again or remember anything else, please let me know.”

She winks. “You got it, baby.” Diamond turns and snaps her fingers at the man strolling down the sidewalk. “You looking for something fun, Boo-boo?”

Apparently, the man is indeed looking for some Diamond-fun as they walk together down the street before disappearing around a corner into an alley. I decide to risk my life and go inside the apartment without calling the cops. I push the door open and pause before stepping inside. Holding my breath, I listen for any signs of danger.

I flick on the light, and the inside of my apartment comes into view. Nothing is out of order: no overturned sofa, TV still securely mounted to the wall. No shadowy figures pop out of the darkness to kill me—I’m met with nothing but the usual loneliness I feel when coming home from a hard day’s work.

Shutting the door behind me, I quickly lock it. “Oh well,” I say to myself. “I was sort of hoping for some excitement, but that’ll be for another day.” It would have been interesting to call 911 and see what kind of hunky cops show up—Isn’t that how most of the ninety-second online porn clips start in the men-in-uniform genre? Or at least that’s what I’ve heard. The thought makes me chuckle to myself. Is porn even stigmatized these days?

I sit down on the sofa and yawn, stretching my arms up over my head. My back pops in two places, reminding me I’ll soon be twenty-five. Too old for Twink status, too young for cosmetic procedures.

Tina is picking me up early tomorrow to go shopping. She has a high school reunion

in a few weeks and has absolutely nothing decent to wear. No matter how many times I've warned her, time is running out before the event, but she always waits for the last possible moment. How can she be my best friend, my hag, my ride-or-die, yet has learned nothing of my ways?

Sighing and then setting two alarms on my phone, I mentally prepare for her overly dramatic dressing room behavior. The self-loathing and crying get to me more than anything else. I'm bound and determined, no matter what happens tomorrow, I will be positive and happy. I will make sure she gets the dress she needs to look her best and to show-up all her small-town, and even smaller-minded, high school friends.

There's no end to what I will do for my bestie.

8

MICHAEL

I get up early and decide to drive by the crime scene on my way to do a little shopping at the mall. There's this concert coming up, and I bought two tickets months ago, figuring I'd have found a date to go with me by then. So far, no such luck, but I'll be damned if I don't go.

I swing into the Who's Your Caddy parking lot and see a few people milling around outside. After parking, I get out of my car and walk up to a group of employees having a smoke break. They're all dressed in uniforms—blue and white shorts and shirts. To me, they look like they belong on a ship or in one of those crazy religious cults that pop up now and then in California.

"Excuse me," I say as I approach. "My name is Detective Borne. I'm investigating the murder that took place here yesterday. I'm hoping to interview a few people while I'm here."

"I remember you from yesterday, Detective," a slender young man with red hair says as he steps closer to me. He looks as if he'd go in for a kiss if he thought he could get away with it. For the record, I wouldn't be averse to it; he is downright cute as all get out.

"Ah, yes," I say. "Mr. Hudson... was it?"

"You remember me?" His blush matches his hair. "Should I be worried?" He holds

out his hands like I'm going to cuff him. "If you arrest me, just don't make them too tight, okay?"

I smile and look around for someone I haven't had a chance to speak with. That's when I notice a dark-haired young man walking toward the entrance to the club. He's far enough away where he'll make it to the doors before I can catch up, even if I were to run the whole way. Without seeing his face, it's impossible to make an identification, but something about him seems familiar. Was he the same man who was eavesdropping on my conversation with Devon yesterday at Seas the Day?

"Does anyone know who that is?" I ask, pointing to his quickly disappearing form.

Everyone turns and looks in the direction I'm pointing, but he's already made it inside the building. Blank stares return my question.

"Can everyone look around themselves and see who is missing? I wanted to chat with the gentleman who just left."

Again, the group looks around each other, but no one seems to recall anyone else having been there. Strange.

"Sorry, officer," Kaleb Hudson says. "If you need anything else, you know where to find me." He snickers and waves as he walks away.

Disappointed, I take a few minutes to walk around the grounds. The gardeners are hard at work, mowing lawns, trimming bushes, planting flowers along the walkways. It really is a beautiful establishment. Maybe I'll join here one day. Once I'm a bit older and learn to golf, anyway.

I look at my watch and back at the water trap where the bodies were found. If I don't leave for the mall soon, I won't make it on time to actually shop for something nice to

wear. “Just a couple minutes,” I say to myself as I hurry over to the water’s edge.

Squatting down, I look at my reflection in the water. The image ripples with movement, and the sound of trickling catches my attention. I run my hand along the muddy bank, and my fingers glide over something hard, plastic, and grated. Pulling a little sod up as I struggle to get a better look, I’m surprised to see there’s a drain.

That’s when a fountain in the middle of the pond shoots up water at least twenty feet in a spectacular display. Around the base of the fountain, there are lights that shine up the column. At night, it would have been a sight to see, but during the day, it lacks any real luster. Turning my attention back to the grate and drain, I peer into the debris trap.

Could there be evidence in there? I don’t recall seeing this yesterday. Could the crime scene team have also overlooked it?

I pull on a latex glove and yank the grate lid free. Plunging my hand into the murky water, I feel around for something other than twigs, stones, or grass clippings. My fingers brush against something, and I manage to pull the object out without much effort.

After wiping the mud off, I hold the gold chain up to the sky. There’s a small locket attached, and I have to pull off my glove to open it with the tip of my thumbnail. Inside, a picture of a young boy on one side and what appears to be the father on the other. If these two were not blood-related, based on their eyes alone, I would happily give up my career as a detective.

But who they are, I have no idea, nor is there any proof this necklace has anything to do with the crime that was committed here yesterday. One thing’s for sure; I’ll bag up the evidence and bring it to the station later tonight for the forensic team to do their magic.

I check my watch again. Damn, it's time to head out. I hurry to the car and slide behind the wheel. After peeling out of the parking lot, I rush straight to the mall. There's no telling if I can find something flattering to wear to the concert that doesn't make me look like a dad who's given up on himself.

I chuckle as I imagine all the things I could wear that would destroy any chance at finding a date. Stay away from all white tennis shoes, fanny packs, and super loose-fitting button-up shirts I'd have to tuck in, for starters. I'm technically in the second half of my thirties, but I don't feel like I've reached daddy status, not yet. Although, I've been told once my hair goes white, I'll be a silver fox. Again, I chuckle. I stop at the entrance to the mall, and my reflection stops me short; my beard is almost entirely white at the chin. Thankfully, the rest of it is dark, but when the hell did my chin go white?

Do I really not pay that much attention to myself? Damn. I've got to fix that. I'm a decent-looking guy; if I don't love myself, no one else will. I smile at my reflection and pull the door open.

"You look hot, man," I whisper to myself. "You're always getting hit on by younger dudes." How many people can say that? I feel myself stand a little taller and strut a little more when I walk. As I enter the first department store on my left, a really nice-looking gentleman bumps into me.

"Sorry," we both say at the same time.

I smile.

He gives me the come-fuck-me eyes. We continue past each other, but it's exactly what I need; to feel wanted.

PATRICK

"I told you not to try that last dress on," I say before sucking down the last of my Diet Coke. We've been at this since she picked me up first thing this morning.

Tina stares at me, eyes welling with tears and mouth agape.

"What?" I plop two fries into my mouth and savor the greasy saltiness—it isn't like I'm the one trying to fit into clothes made to fit the tiny little elves in Santa's workshop. Tina has a rocking body, but she won't try on clothes fit for an adult human being. There, I've said it—or thought it... to myself so only I can hear it.

"How can you eat at a time like this? I'm on the verge of a fucking meltdown here. I have exactly five weeks, three days—" she checks her watch, "—and eleven hours to find the perfect outfit to make all the losers I went to high school with jealous.

How she manages to do complicated math equations without so much as taking a breath during a meltdown is beyond me.

"I mean, it shouldn't be hard," she says. "Ninety-five percent of them haven't ventured outside the same small town in the middle of Arkansas farm country. Patrick, the school system refuses to teach history or geography but forces three years of animal husbandry, for fuck's sake."

Animal husbandry? I don't have the foggiest idea what that means, but if the awful

expression on her face is any indication, it wasn't a good thing. Not by a longshot.

Trying to lighten the mood, I say, "So, you're saying you don't want to wear burlap or overalls?"

"I could smash your pretty little face into this table and never speak to you again."

"Aww, you said I was pretty," I say while perfectly framing my face with my hands.

Tina smiles. It worked. The spell is broken. My best friend has returned to reality where she can be rational for a solid five fucking minutes.

"You were right. I shouldn't have tried that dress on... I mean who wears a low cut, black mini dress to a reunion in Hughes, Arkansas? And let's be honest, that designer label said it was a size four, and we both know it couldn't have been over a two or my name isn't Tina Devereaux Brokaw." She slams her fist on the table. "I should ask my father to get involved in this travesty of justice."

"Huh?"

"My father knows that high-priced attorney from the ACLU." She flips her hair to the side. "You know... the one who refuses to wear anything but tailored pantsuits."

Now isn't the time to remind her she's an athletic size six, not a two, and the dress is marked correctly. Tina is so cute, and I wish she saw in herself what I do, but Hollywood has done a number on her self-esteem and there isn't an attorney alive that could sue their way into making her feel better about herself.

She needs her best friend to make her feel better.

"No judgement, but girl, you know that dress was made by a bunch of tiny little

people in a far off land. They just slap a size on the clothing items and call it a day."

"You're probably right."

Of course I am. I watch documentaries on streaming, and I've learned a lot about the many injustices that take place in our world. I was shook. Absolutely shook, to learn that not everyone living in Florida ate iguanas. Insta was wrong about that.

"Please, allow me to change the subject for a second," I say.

"Sounds good to me. What do you want to talk about? Yourself, I'm assuming."

"Normally, assuming I'm that narcissistic would hurt my feelings, but in this particular case... you are correct. I've been thinking about that guy who handed my wallet back at the coffee shop. You remember... the cute one with a patch of white on his beard?"

"Yeah, that guy was hot. Do you think he'd be into me?" Tina smiles and twirls a lock of her hair.

"Of course. If he's straight. I'm not sure he is though... there was something about him that seemed like he might swing my way."

"But you said you didn't think he was gay."

I turn to look her in the eyes and with as much sass as I can muster say with a shrug, "As cute and well-groomed as he is, there's no way he's completely straight."

"I know you think everyone is gay, but that doesn't make it true." Tina must be feeling better because she starts devouring her chicken sandwich and fries like it's going to be her last meal. Bits of lettuce fall to the tray below. I wince when I watch

ketchup and mayonnaise begin to glob out from the bottom of the bun, drip off onto her hands, and coat the small diamond ring she wears on her pinky finger. If she doesn't slow down now, there's absolutely no way she'll fit into the dress of her dreams. Not to mention, I'd hate for her to choke on one of her acrylic nails.

I shake my head and hand her a napkin. "Tina, focus for a second. I know you didn't eat all day because you wanted to fit into an inhuman-sized dress, but slow down. You're going to choke."

She makes a spectacle of dropping the remaining sandwich and then slowly cleans her hand with the napkin. Finally, she leans forward, elbows on the table, fingers interlaced together in front of her and says, "Okay, what's so important?"

Shit, the moment has passed but it's impossible to change the subject at this point. "I haven't... you know."

"What? You haven't what?"

I wag my eyebrows up and down and click the side of my tongue trying to suggest my meaning rather than say it out loud.

"I don't speak seagull... or Klingon or whatever the hell you're trying to pull off here."

We both laugh and I feel my face grow hot with embarrassment. I have no doubt she knows exactly what I mean, but it isn't as much fun for her unless I say it.

"It's been a while since I... you know... got laid." My words are barely audible, even to myself.

Her eyes go wide. "Wait, what? You went out on all those Tinder dates a few months

ago." She looks around the mall's food court as if she's trying to find someone to explain this nonsense to her. "Are you telling me that you went out on all those dates and what? Gave each other head and a high five?"

"First of all, keep your voice down." I look at the young woman covering the ears of her kid at the table next to ours. I mouth the words "I'm sorry" before turning back to Tina. "I made up all the stories I told you about the dates. I embellished them... and I'm sorry."

"You lied?" Her expression breaks my heart. She's truly upset, and I don't blame her. We've never lied to each other before and I feel like scum.

"I know I made it seem like I was a player but..."

"Stop right there," Tina says. "Nobody ever thought you were a player. Trust me on that."

"Okay, fine, but I am really sorry."

"You never went out on the dates?"

I shake my head. "No, I did go. I would meet them at the bar or a restaurant and they would either not show up or were nearly unrecognizable. I swear so many of them were using pictures that were at least ten or more years old."

"Like a silver daddy?" Tina raises an eyebrow.

"No, like a sun-dried raisin," I say. "Had it been a silver daddy... like the guy at the coffee shop, I would have opened up like a blossoming rose."

Tina reaches across the table and grabs my hands. Her sticky fingers are so

comforting I want to cry. "Oh, bestie. I'm so sorry. I don't consider that lying. You were in one of those situations you didn't even want to admit to yourself."

"You're not mad?"

"Nope." She lets my hand go and picks up her sandwich. "Just don't withhold any information from me in the future and all is well."

"I love you, bestie. Thank you for being so understanding."

"Of course," she says with a smile before dragging her finger through the globs of mayo on the tray. She quickly makes love to her finger, sucking it down to the last knuckle and moaning. "Damn, I love condiments."

I look over at the table next to us and sigh in relief when I realize the mom has ushered her kid out of the area. I don't blame the woman; we can be super inappropriate in public when discussing sex, but it is kind of our thing.

"Let's get back to discussing the guy in the coffee shop," she says. "If he is gay... do you think he could be your type?"

I think about it for a few seconds and shrug. "Honestly, I don't know what my type is anymore. It's been far too long since I've sucked a dick, I can barely even remember what they taste like."

"Delicious," she says. "They taste absolutely delicious."

It's a relief to hear her say she isn't upset with me. I've been wanting to tell her about this, but I couldn't seem to ever get the words out. It's so embarrassing and humiliating that no one seems to want to date me—at least no one even remotely my age. Anyone who even glances my way is already collecting social security benefits.

Not that there's anything wrong with dating someone older and wiser than myself, but I really had hoped I could find someone who didn't remember when Lincoln was assassinated.

"Since you haven't gotten any real action other than the occasional unwanted groping at work, what are we going to do to rectify this situation?" Tina sucks down the last of her soda before pushing the tray out of her way.

"I think I'm going to try a new dating app or something, but I was hoping you'd help me manage it. Maybe I'm incapable of picking my own dates." I've known people like that in the past. No matter how well they tried to find the right person based on shallow criteria such as pictures and made-up likes and dislikes, they always chose poorly.

A squeal of excitement escapes before she can clamp a hand over her mouth. "I am so honored and excited. One hundred percent on board with this. What app should we try? O.M.G. I just heard about one that's specifically for people who work for the mortuary industry. Oh, shit I can't remember the name." She taps her finger a few times on her chin. "It was something like I Dig You or something along those lines."

"I Dig You? That's so ridiculous. Why would I want to date someone who digs graves? No, I'm thinking like a traditional dating app for normal people. I just need help with what to say in my profile, picture selection, and then help me weed through the matches I get. Are you in... or are you out?"

"In." Tina beams. "Just so we're clear. Are you trying to get laid or have a relationship? I mean, if you're just trying to get laid I have so many ideas for a profile picture."

I wave my hands to make her stop. "I want a real relationship for a change. I want to find love and be loved. I think I'm worth at least that much. Right?"

Like a true Hollywood starlet, Tina's eyes well up with tears. "I've wanted that for you since the day we met, my friend." She wipes her cheeks dry before she continues. "Now, let's go get me a fucking dress so I can go to this trashy reunion and make all these peasants wish they were me."

"Deal." I stand up and come around the table and hug her. "I'd do anything for you."

"Same." She gets up and throws our trays in the garbage can. "Let's go make one of these dresses my bitch. Shall we?"

We walk arm in arm to the escalators that will take us to the lower level. Tina loves one of the stores near the North exit and I'm going to do everything in my power to make her happy today. Even if I have to cut the dress into pieces and put it back together into something worth wearing, today is the day.

As we hit the bottom level and make our way to the store, I feel like someone is watching me. I turn to the left and right, scan our surroundings, but no one is obvious as the culprit. I shrug it off and keep moving along with Tina, but no matter what I do I can't shake the feeling.

"Is everything alright?" Tina asks.

I shrug. "I keep feeling like someone is following us."

Tina spins around to see for herself. After a moment, she shakes her head. "I don't see anyone."

"Maybe I'm just feeling off. After I got home last night my apartment was unlocked and I don't think I've ever done that before."

"Oh no. We live in Los Angeles. Leaving your door unlocked is like How to Become

the Next Serial Killer Victim 101.”

“Exactly.”

“I’ll be honest,” she says, “things have been a bit strange for me too, ever since the murder at Who’s Your Caddy Golf Club. I’ve felt on edge or something.”

“What murder?”

“I told you about it yesterday.”

I shake my head. “You absolutely did no such thing.”

She tosses her hair to the side and stops walking and turns to face me. “It was a few nights ago. Along the water’s edge. Two lovers met their demise at the hands of a serial killer. They didn’t see it coming. One by one, they fell... their worlds turning black as they took their last breaths.”

“You’re scaring me.”

“From what I heard, they haven’t caught the guy. For all we know, he could be lurking around Seas the Day, or any of the other clubs in the area—searching for his next set of victims.”

“Where did you find this out?”

“Jake,” she says. “He works there, part time. Said it was super sad. I guess the older gentleman was a client there and he was found lying next to an employee.”

“Damn. That is so sad.”

“Other than that, I don’t know anything. Jake said he would fill me in once he found out more, but all I really want him to do is fill me in... you know, down there.” She wags her eyebrows. “You feel me, Patrick?”

“Don’t be gross.” I cover my smile as I desperately try not to laugh at the ridiculous expression on her face. “If you manage to bed Jake before me... I’d honestly be happy for you.”

She clutches her heart. “I would be honored to fuck Jake before you.”

I roll my eyes. “I think you’re probably right though about me feeling uneasy. With all these crazy things happening lately, the universe is probably sending out warning signals all over the place.”

“Totally. I mean, for all we know, we could be working with the killer.”

That realization had never occurred to me, and it slams into my gut like a freight train. “You don’t really think it could be an employee at Seas the Day, do you?”

“I don’t know, but it might be a good idea not to talk about it with anyone. Wouldn’t want to make waves or cause the killer to think we’re on to them or something.”

I smile. “Oh, for sure. I mean, let’s be real... who would I even talk to? Other than you, I can’t stand anyone at work.”

“Just saying, in general, we should keep our mouths shut. Unless we get interviewed by some hot cop or something. To be honest, I’m a bit surprised we haven’t been dragged down to the police station, chained to a desk and interrogated.” Her last two words come out deeper and breathless. “Wouldn’t that be hot? I mean, seriously, Patrick. Picture it. Our arms restrained while a sexy daddy cop grills us for answers we don’t have.”

“First of all, I don’t think it’s supposed to be a pleasurable experience, Tina. Secondly, my guess is it’ll happen sooner or later. Especially if something goes down at our club.” My heart starts to race, similar to the panic attacks I endured as a kid. I close my eyes for a moment but shake away the memories of being held in the trunk of the car while my mom entertained boyfriends in the back seat at the drive-in movies. My tummy sours and threatens to return the greasy fries from the food court, topside.

“Anyway, are you ready? Let’s find me a nice black number that says I’m fuckable, but not by you small-town boys.” She smiles. “Don’t forget, it has to be a size two.”

I snap out of the disturbing memories of my childhood and nod. I guess I could keep these parts of my past a secret too... according to Tina’s logic. No sense in dredging up the past and having to talk about it every time we have a sleepover. Some things are better left balled up and shoved deep down inside where they’ll never see the light of day. Right?

“Size two, got it.” I’m actually on the hunt for a size six, but I’ll just hide the tag while she tries it on. If she doesn’t think I saw it, she won’t care what size it is.

As we enter the store, I steal a glance behind us. To my relief, there isn’t a soul staring back at us. I’m not ready to die... not yet. It’s been so long since I’ve lain with another man, felt his warmth pressed hard against me. It’s as if, somehow, I’ve regrown my virginity. I can’t die a re-virgin, I think to myself, and then hurry inside to find Tina the perfect outfit.

MICHAEL

It feels like I've been shopping for half the day, but after checking my watch I realize it's only been an hour. The longest hour of my entire life. To top it off, I haven't found a single damn thing to wear to the concert. Why is it so hard to find something that doesn't make me look like I'm wearing a flowy women's blouse? I swear these sizes were made for tiny little people from another planet, not a six-foot-five, thick-chested, behemoth like myself.

I reach for a shirt on the rack. It's a beautiful shade of blue and it would go well with my eyes. As I pull it free from the rack, another gentleman reaches for it.

"Oh," he says. "Excuse me, I didn't realize you had it already."

Our eyes meet and he gives me the look. The one that says, you're hot and I'd love to fuck you. Or at least that's how I interpret it. I feel like I get that look quite often, but I rarely act on it. Too many weirdos. Usually the super attractive guys are all closeted and married with children. I will have no part in any of that. To each their own, but I am no damn homewrecker.

"Here," I say with a smile. "It's all yours."

"Really?" he says, taking the shirt from me and putting it up against himself. "Do you think it looks good on me?"

I nod. "It actually seems like it'd fit you way better than me. I'm way too big for it." I stand a good six inches taller than he does, and while he's nicely built, his chest is far smaller than mine. "You know what, though?"

"What?" The eagerness in his eyes is a bit unnerving, but who am I to judge.

"To truly tell if that fits you well enough to spend your hard-earned money, I'm going to need to see you in it."

A devilish smile crosses his face, and he looks around to see if anyone else has heard what I said. "Meet me in the second changing room stall and I'll let you see whatever you'd like." He takes the shirt and makes a beeline for the dressing room a few feet away, before stopping and checking to make sure I'm still watching him.

Satisfied, he hurries into the second stall and closes the door. I don't hear the latch slide into place and know it's open for me to go inside too. I let my heart rate settle for a few seconds, but the anticipation is killing me. I don't plan on actually doing anything with him other than a quick show and tell; the dangerousness of exploring in public makes my knees tremble.

I enter the men's dressing room and go straight for stall number two, tentatively pushing on the door. I am right, it's unlocked.

"Come on in," he whispers.

Pushing the door open far enough to slip inside, I quickly close it behind me, locking it. My heart races. "I don't usually do this," I say, telling the truth.

He takes a step closer to me and skillfully slides his hand down inside the waistband of my jeans. His hand wraps around my cock which stiffens immediately. He smiles. "I don't usually do this either."

Something about the way he says it makes me question his honesty. But by the way he works my cock and plays with my balls, I no longer care. I start massaging his shoulders as he continues to play with me. We look into each other's eyes and for a moment, I think he's going to kiss me. Letting my head fall back, I close my eyes and enjoy the softness of his hands and the way he slides the foreskin over the head of my throbbing hard cock.

I have to undo these jeans , there's just not enough room . Opening my eyes, I reach for my belt when I notice something in the mirror. He's wearing a wedding ring. My body instantly stiffens, and not in a good way. I take hold of his arm and pull his hand out of my pants.

"You're married?" I ask, completely disappointed by the answer I already know.

"Separated," he says. "Come on, man. You feel so good. I want to make you come."

I straighten my shirt and jeans before crossing my arms. How dare he hit on me when he's not even available? What a creep. Shaking my head, I say, "I don't date married men."

He smirks. "Who said anything about dating?" His flippant attitude about the entire thing sours my stomach and makes me want to run out of there. Unfortunately, I can't even speak to him louder than a whisper for fear of getting caught with my pants down, literally.

Plus, the jerk is right. This isn't dating. How could I have been so careless? I should have asked him his status before venturing into something physical, but it happened so fast. Not to mention, I was way hornier and in need of another man's affection, more than I would like to admit. "Sorry, man. I'm out."

I turn and hurry out of the stall, careful not to be seen, and make my way back to the

clothing rack. As I exit, a woman pushes by me and stops at the entrance to the fitting rooms. “Dale, are you in there? Hurry up, we have to get some lunch.”

Separated, my ass. What a jerk. Granted, she could be his sister for all I know, but either way he is off limits, and I need to be more careful. It’s a good way to get my heart broken and also hurt others in the process. Not my style.

One last shirt to try. It’s a nice black buttoned-up long sleeve that’s tailored in at the waist. The rack is for big and tall men, but also says fitted. These terms don’t usually correlate in my experience. The clothes either fit around my chest, but make me look pregnant, or they fit my trim belly and not my chest. I go back to an empty changing room and lock the door behind me. Let’s give this one a try.

“Damn,” I say as I slip the shirt over my right shoulder and instantly feel it’s made for my body type. “This might actually fit.” After buttoning the shirt and rolling the sleeves up just so, I examine myself in the mirror.

For the first time in a long time, I feel like something fits me and I look so damned good. “I’d fuck me,” I whisper as I vainly turn from side to side, admiring myself for a change.

Feeling so much better about myself and the upcoming concert, I hurry and purchase the clothes. As I leave the store, my eyes catch a glimpse of the food court, and I can’t help myself. I haven’t eaten all day. I deserve a milkshake and a slice of pizza. Right? It’ll be my little treat and a job-well-done for finding something nice to wear.

But, before I can get there, someone else catches my eye. Walking toward me is the guy I met the other day at the coffee shop. The one who seemed less than interested but had a nice firm ass I wanted to explore. He’s also with the same girl. There are two distinct options. I could be a total loser and hide or I could march right up to him and look down into his eyes and ask him out on a date. What will it be, Michael?

Looking both ways for a quick exit, I step into a photobooth and pull the curtain closed. Option number one seems to have won out over acting like an adult male who isn't scared to ask for what he likes.

I feel so foolish in the way I react to seeing him. What's wrong with me? Maybe I don't want to face more rejection or don't want him to think I'm stalking him. I'm not right in the head.

I peek out of the booth and see they have passed. Without them being here, there's no reason I can't still get to the food court, eat my feelings, and get the heck out of the mall undetected. My tummy grumbles with hunger. As I exit the booth though, I notice something odd. I'm not the only one watching them. Who the hell is that guy across the center aisle of the mall?

That's strange.

Doing my best to look nonchalant and avoid undue attention, I make my way around the potted trees and flowerbeds that divide the upper floor into two sides. After ensuring I'm not being watched, I sit down on a bench directly behind the other man, but I can't make him out too well from this distance. If I were to get up and move two or three stores closer, I'd be in the perfect spot to see his face, but then I'd give myself away at the same time. Can't have that.

The man is definitely watching the two of them, and they are none the wiser. I stand up and move in his direction but stop short. The guy has his hand in his hooded sweatshirt pouch. Does he have a gun? I'm too far away to tell for sure, but he's definitely concealing something in there. He seems twitchy, and I can't risk allowing what I feel is about to happen. That's it, I can't wait any longer to make my move.

"Hold it right there," I say loud enough for him to hear me but not to call too much attention and make a scene. There's still a possibility I'm completely misreading this

situation. I'm risking my badge doing something like this, but, at the moment, I don't give a fuck. Something isn't right, I can taste it.

He turns slightly in my direction and bolts for the exit but slips and falls to the ground. A split second later, he's back up and running. I give chase, but he's fast. By the time I round the corner, he's already outside and who knows where.

Fuck.

I retrace my steps to see if he left anything behind when he fell. There's a little puddle of water around the potted plant he slipped on, having been freshly watered. I stoop down and look in the pot. Next to the base of the plant is a business card. I pick it up and turn it over in my hand. There isn't a person's name on it, but the company logo says, Seas the Day Country Club.

What are the chances this weirdo is involved in the killings at Who's Your Caddy? Coincidence? Very well could be, but my heart says otherwise.

I shove the card in my pocket and turn around and go back to see if the two being stalked are still there. I see them window shopping and laughing. There's a part of me that wants to turn on my heels and get the hell out of there before I do something stupid, but the little voice inside my head says, what do you have to lose?

They've made their way down the escalator, so I follow. After they've reached the main floor, they stop and are deep in conversation. Should I interrupt? Why not?

"Crazy seeing you two here," I say as I get off the escalator. The shocked look on their faces tells me I need to hurry up and try and be way less weird. I reach out my hand to greet them and smile.

"It's nice to see you both again." Now what do I say? I lift my bag and say, "Just

doing some shopping for the upcoming Lady Dame concert.”

Their eyes light up like I’ve just said something exciting. “You scored tickets? To Lady Dame?” Patrick asks.

I nod. “Yep. Got lucky. My credit card offered pre-sales about an hour before the general public.”

“That is incredible,” Tina says, bumping Patrick’s elbow with her own. “You were dying to go to her comeback tour.”

Patrick recoils from her elbow but nods. “You’re a lucky man.”

Shoot your shot, Michael . Just do it. “I have an extra ticket... you know, if you’d be interested in going with me?”

A squeal erupts from Tina and her eyes go wide. We both turn our attention to Patrick. What’s he going to say?

“No,” he says. “I couldn’t. I bet you have a significant other simply dying to go, and who am I to get in the way?”

I clear my throat and shake my head. “Honestly, I don’t.”

Tina looks from me to Patrick and back. “Michael,” she says, swatting at my arm. “I think what my friend here is trying to determine is... if you had a significant other, would they be a he or a she?”

“Oh,” I say. I hadn’t even thought about that. This entire scenario could be quite awkward for Patrick since I didn’t really give them a clue as to my orientation. I’ve been told by so many people they had no idea. That, I didn’t ‘act gay’. Whatever that

means. “Definitely, without a doubt... he .” I shift my attention to Patrick.

He smiles and there’s a twinkle in his eyes that hadn’t been there moments before. He’s even more attractive now than when I’d noticed at the coffee shop. The way the light seems to glint off his green eyes and light brown skin. His dark, black hair is too short for curls, but I can tell if he lets it grow out a little, he’d have some gorgeous wave to it.

“So, what do you say, Patrick?” I ask. “Would you do me the honor of accompanying me to Lady Dame’s It’s Never Too Late , comeback tour?”

“I would love to.” He blushes and looks away. Gosh, he’s cute.

“Fantastic,” I say. “Let’s exchange numbers so we can make arrangements. The concert is coming up in a few short days, you know.”

We exchange numbers and Patrick and Tina say their goodbyes and walk away. My belly tingles with excitement. It’s been far too long since I looked forward to a date with anyone I haven’t met on a dating app. This could be what I’ve been waiting for.

Then my cop brain kicks in, usurping my ability to think solely with my dick. Something nags at my inner thoughts, bringing me back to the man who was watching Patrick and Tina. Had I stopped a crazy person from hurting them? And if so, who was it and why the hell would he be after these two? They seem perfectly normal to me. No reason to think they’re involved in something shady or illegal that could put their lives in danger.

PATRICK

“Well that settles it,” I say with as much finality as I can muster into my voice. Sure, I’m disappointed that it’s been two days and I haven’t heard from Michael, but I can’t hold on hoping for something that isn’t going to happen. “I’m not going to the damn concert, Tina, and that’s final.”

"Oh, come on, Patrick. It's not like you have to suck the guy off on the first date. I can't believe you're having second thoughts!" Tina is as upset as I've seen her. "It's been what? Two days since he asked you out? How can you already have cold feet?"

"Bestie," I say. "You're going to need to simmer down so I don't end up with a migraine. You know I don't like telling you what to do, but I'm concerned you might pop a forehead vein or something." I shake my head and put on my pouty face. "And that's not a good look for anyone."

She sighs and flops back onto her chair. The break room at work has been empty for the past thirty minutes, which is odd, but also very much welcome. We've been able to carry on conversations unhindered by the watchful eyes and listening ears of our coworkers.

Gossip is gold here at the club.

Tina grabs my hand. "If you truly don't want to go out with that tall, handsome, well-built hunk of meat... then I support you. But if you're hanging onto some weird idea

that nothing can ever compare to that high school fling you had years ago... well, I cannot excuse that."

"You're not wrong," I say. "It's impossible not to think back to that night at prom." My memories come flooding back. The thing is, it wasn't just that night. Ricky and I shared many days and evenings together, exploring our bodies, learning new things to do with our tongues. I sigh.

Tina slaps me hard on the arm.

"Hey, what the hell did you do that for?"

"Snap out of it," she says. "You know I can always tell when the blood starts to pool in your shorts."

I shift, pulling the crotch of my tight uniform out enough to let my boys breathe. "You have no idea what you're talking about. Can we change the subject, please?"

"Not until I have confirmation you're going to go on this date. First of all, he seems like a really nice guy. Even if you don't have romantic sparks, what's the harm in being friends?"

"I don't need friends... I have you."

"Aww," she says and grabs my hand again. "I love you."

The feeling is mutual, but I only manage a smile and a nod. I feel bad because I know I'm manipulating her into letting me off the hook. I want nothing more than to go on this date, but I'm terrified. Plus, I don't want to appear desperate by texting him first. What if he doesn't like me and I never hear from him again? Or, what if I say something stupid and I never hear from him again? Or, what if I get so excited about

seeing Lady Dame that I throw up and then I never see him again?

I could have punched myself in the face at how pathetic I sounded inside my own head. Clearly, there is a theme to my insecurities — abandonment. Being ghosted by a lover is not something I ever want to feel again. It's even more painful than a regular breakup, in my humble opinion.

"Back to my list of reasons you need to go on this date," Tina begins. "You have been dying... and I mean catching the flesh-eating virus in the middle of the Amazon jungle, surrounded by nothing but endless miles of poisonous snakes, spiders, and rivers of piranha."

"I get it... dying."

"Exactly. You've been wanting to see Lady Dame for months ever since you heard about her It's Never Too Late Tour. I think it's a sign."

"You think everything's a sign. Remember that time Mr. Pendleton stuck his hand up my shorts and slipped a fifty-dollar bill inside my jock?"

"Yeah?" She looks confused as to where I'm going with this story.

"I wanted to file a complaint with management, but you convinced me that the fifty dollars was the sign we needed to go on that failed audition."

"Oh, that's right." She slaps the table and starts laughing. "We had to buy blue sweaters for the audition and they were twenty-five a piece. But if you'd complained, management would have made you give that money back to him."

"Exactly," I say. "But remember how bad the audition turned out? There was no way that fifty bucks was a sign."

"What's your point, Patrick? If you don't start looking on the bright side of things, you're never going to find anyone who wants to be with you. No one likes a downer."

She isn't wrong. I need to start living my life, but the idea of rejection and abandonment is a hard thing to get over. But Michael is hot, and Lady Dame is my idol, so fine — I'll go. Even if I have to text him first to make sure he hasn't found someone else to go with.

"You win," I say.

The door to the employee lounge swings open as I finish my sentence.

"You won what?" Jake asks as he walks in and lets the door close behind him.

Tina and I exchange looks. Her expression tells me she wants to jump across the table and tear his clothes off with her teeth.

She stands and twirls her hair. "We were talking about our upcoming audition."

"Oh," he says, palming back his hair. "Cool. What's the movie?"

"We can't tell anyone that," she says. "These producers are super tight-lipped about their upcoming blockbusters."

"Ah," he says. "You don't know yet. Makes sense."

Tina giggles.

"Tina's agent thinks we have a decent chance of getting a minor role in the movie, but she can't tell us what it is because it hasn't been made public yet."

"What happens if it's a porno?" Jake says, putting his hand up to his mouth to cover a naughty smile.

"Don't be gross, Jake," Tina says. "My agent only sent me on one of those, and she warned me ahead of time."

Jake's eyes go wide. "Wait, you're going to tell me you went on an audition for a porno?"

"If I can," I say. "I'd like to add that sex work is legitimate work."

"Right, but Tina's in a porno?"

"No," she says. "I didn't get the part."

"What part did you audition for? Bukkake bottom?" Jake laughs.

"For your information, I auditioned to be the dingy sidekick. The role I'd have had wasn't nude at all. I was supposed to escort my friend to a bar and then disappear into the night with a handsome stranger, leaving her alone to find love."

"Right, love." Jake crosses his arms. "What happened?"

"Nothing," she says. "I auditioned, but clearly, the producer saw I was overqualified to be some spacey-headed dumb sidekick. His exact words were, 'There's no way she's right for the part.'"

Jake looks at me for a second with an expression that asks if she's being serious. I nod and smile. I feel awful for her. She's tried so hard and for so long to get any acting part in any legitimate movie and has come up with nothing. The world hasn't yet seen the true potential of my best friend.

"Tina, you were way too good for that movie," I say. "Maybe it's a sign we were meant for bigger and better things."

"See," she says with a smile. "Signs are good."

Jake shrugs and goes over to the vending machines and retrieves a candy bar and soda. "I'll see you two later." He winks as he leaves, the door slowly closing behind him as he disappears into the hallway.

"He winked at me," Tina says, bouncing in place. "I bet if I were to approach him after work tonight, ask if he'd like to come over to my place and stream some movies while we chill, he'd say yes."

Despite wanting to go on the date with Michael, I also don't want to lose my bet with Tina. "Are you pushing me to go on this date so you can beat me at our bet? Jake winked at me, actually."

Tina bursts into laughter. "My delusional, misguided, ever-hopeful friend. Mr. Jake Bloom winked at me. Dude, he wants to lick chocolate from my boobs and bury his face in whipped cream and cherries. There's no way he wants to slob on your knob. He likes pussy. Plain and simple."

"If you say so," I say. "Personally, the way he looks at me makes me self-conscious. It's like he's undressing me with his eyes."

"Do you still want to do this bet or not?" Tina asks. "I can tell you're torn."

"I've had my eye on Jake for a while now. Only just met Michael and it's not like we are officially dating each other."

"True."

"How about we keep our bet until after I have my first date with Michael. I can gauge it better that way."

"Sounds like the scientific method if you ask me," she says with a smile. "Science is science and who are we to argue with that?"

"And math is math," I say before we both burst out laughing. "Neither of us is good at numbers, but we both know we love six to eight inches."

"You're such a whore and I love it." Tina slaps my arm. "We really need to go back to work. It's been over an hour."

We make our way back to our departments to finish out the day. Tina goes into the salon area of the country club to finish her day waxing old lady coochie and ass crack. I feel sorry for her in that role. Even though she gets to inflict some pain onto her tormentors, she says no matter how many times she reminds them to come back before the stubble turns into a bush, they never listen.

I, on the other hand, will be passing out towels at the pool, fetching drinks, and manning the stretch class. Despite the groping and lewd commentary I'll be subjected to, I rely so much on the tips to make ends meet. Even though, they've been a bit shitty lately, I've been known to pull in a few hundred on a good night. Especially when my ass is on-point. That money will come in handy when I go shopping for the perfect outfit to meet Michael for the concert. I'm imagining a new pair of jeans and a nice fitted black buttoned-down shirt.

The usual nervousness that accompanies the idea of going on a date settles into my belly like a swarm of butterflies. Excitement, damped slightly by self-doubt, is building the more I give life to the idea of having an actual boyfriend.

"Hey, Patrick," Jake says as he walks past me. "Can I talk to you tonight after our

shift?"

I turn to face him as he walks backward away from me waiting for my answer. "Sure, what's going on?"

"Nothing," he says. "I just need to talk to you about something."

"I'm off at ten, but I usually don't get out of here until ten-thirty or so."

"Perfect, same here," he says and smiles. His dimples light up the room and my confidence about going to the concert takes a hit. What if he asks me out?

"Have a good rest of your shift," I say and wave as he's about to round the corner, on his way to the bar area where he mixes drinks for the clients all evening.

He waves back and wags his eyebrows before disappearing from sight.

Goddammit, he's sexy. I bite my inner lip as I watch him leave. My inner hoe struggling with the good person I know I truly am. I wipe my chin and close my mouth. After all, no one likes a drooler.

12

MICHAEL

Back at police headquarters, I flip through photograph after photograph, each one a little grittier than the last. The crime scene from Who's Your Caddy has been fully processed by the crime scene unit, and these are some of the official photos they took.

There's something to be said about viewing crime scene pictures on the standard paper used for evidence and those that have been digitized into the computer. Paper is great, but when you can't zoom in, it makes it difficult. I can't believe how many times I've tried to use my fingers to enlarge them. Lucky for me, no one else saw me doing it or they'd probably question if I should still have my gun.

"Do you have these uploaded into our database yet?" I ask my partner, Joe Brighten. "I see a fleck of something in the grass, but I can't make it out."

"Getting old, partner," he says. "Should I be putting in for a replacement with the chief?"

"Don't start, Joe. You're only six months younger than I am and not nearly as handsome."

Joe laughs and slides an electronic pad over to me. "The photos are all uploaded to the system. I've already gone through them with a fine-tooth comb, and I'm telling you there isn't anything else to see."

Frustrated, I swipe through the images one by one until I come to the one I've been questioning. There it is at the upper right-hand corner of the image, a yellow dot of some kind. Zooming in, I still need to squint a bit to make it out clearly. Thankfully, the more I enlarge the image, the easier it is to make out.

The yellow blob comes into perfect view, revealing itself as the plastic tip of a sword. It's the kind used to stab through olives and fruit when making alcoholic drinks. Less common on a golf course and more readily available at the bar.

"See," I say. "Right there." Pointing to the ribbed hilt of the plastic sword, the rest of the piece extended past the frame. "Was there one of those little plastic swords used to hold fruit in the drinks logged into the evidence locker?"

"Let me check the inventory," Joe says, typing commands into the computer. A few minutes pass as he scrolls through pages of data before he turns back to me. "Yes, it's been labeled unknown yellow plastic piece."

"Have we checked with the bar at the club? To see if they carry that same line and color of plastic for their cocktails?"

Joe shakes his head. "I doubt it because of the way it's labeled. Whoever collected the data had no real idea what it was, and it's too early for them to have processed everything. You know how they start globally and work their way down to the incidental unknown or unidentified pieces."

"True," I say. "I have a strong feeling about this one."

"That's definitely something we can pursue on our end." Joe grabs his keys. "Want to go down there now? Rustle some feathers?"

I smile and nod. "Better than sitting around finger popping our assholes."

We both laugh and walk out the door. Once we make our way through the precinct, we exit into the parking structure where Joe's police-issued, unmarked car is waiting. We both hop in, and I sit back as Joe reverses out of the parking spot, puts the car in drive, and squeals the tires as he enters traffic.

The streets of Los Angeles are packed, as they usually are during the day. Bumper to bumper, we inch forward at a snail's pace. I reach for the radio to break the monotony, but Joe stops me.

"I have to ask you something and I don't want you to get all weird like you normally do," he says, turning to look me in the face.

Oh geez, here it comes. He wants to ask me a question about being gay. Or tell me he doesn't think I act gay or something equally as stupid. As much as I love my partner, he wasn't raised in Los Angeles and even admitted he hadn't known any people who were openly gay until we became partners at work. At the time, I didn't believe him, but since getting to know him better, he really is clueless. Clearly, he was raised under a rock, but I don't always feel like being the one to educate him.

"What can I do for you?" I ask with a sigh.

"See," he says. "You're already making it weird. I don't know why whenever I ask you about your personal life you get so awkward. We're partners. We're supposed to be close. As close as brothers."

I lay my head back against the rest and close my eyes for a moment. "You know what? You're absolutely right." I look at my watch. "At this rate, it should take us another twenty minutes or so to get to the club, so ask away. What would you like to know?"

"We've been partners now for like five years and I have not heard you once talk

about going on a date."

"That's not true," I say. "I've told you about a couple of my dates. Like that one a few years back from the dating app you suggested. Remember?"

He laughs. "A few years back? You count that as being open about your dating life? Are you telling me you haven't been dating anyone steadily in the five years we've been friends?"

"Not exactly," I say. "I've been out on dates. Sometimes, they even turn into second dates." I shrug. "Joe, you have it easy. You're straight and married. You're not in the dating scene like me. I hate the bar scene. I've tried pretty much every single app I've heard of, but nothing ever comes of it."

Joe doesn't say anything at first as he turns left to get on the freeway. "You're a good-looking guy with a hell of a great job. You're smart, talented. What more do people want?"

I shrug.

"Maybe it's not so much about the people you're attracting on these dating websites, and more about what you're looking for?"

"What do you mean?" I've honestly never heard my partner get deeper than a philosophical rant about the condiment ratio on Mister Bucky's Cheeseburgers.

"You're thirty-five years old. You've accomplished a lot already in your life and you're ready to settle down. Right?" He takes his eyes off the road long enough to stare me down, eyebrows raised into two perfectly peaked arches.

It's my turn to remain silent as I turn away from him and look out the window. The

traffic has lightened quite a bit, and I watch as cars pass us at speeds no one would be going if we were in a marked patrol vehicle.

"Michael," he says. "Once you're honest with yourself about what you're looking for in a relationship... you'll start attracting the right kind of people. I know it was that way with me."

I snicker. "You met your wife at the club... didn't you?"

"I didn't say you should join a church, man." He shakes his head. "What I'm trying to say is if you're looking for a partner, someone to settle down with, maybe adopt some children..."

"Hey," I say. "I never said anything about wanting kids."

He laughs. "I know. I know. But you get what I'm trying to tell you... right?"

"If you're telling me that I need to open myself up more, be more honest with myself, and stop dating losers, then yep. I hear you loud and clear."

Joe pulls the car into the club parking area and turns off the engine. "I shouldn't be surprised that you're still trying to make light of this, but I want you to know I hope one of these days to see you happy. To find what I know you've been looking for... which is your forever person."

Finding my forever. I do like the sound of that. Not going to lie to myself anymore, that's for sure. Life is too damn short and I'm tired of the dating scene. Looking over at Joe, I can tell this hasn't been the easiest conversation to bring up, but he looks relieved to have said something that's clearly been weighing on his mind. Maybe he's worried I'll end up a bitter old man who yells at his children, or breaks a hip chasing down neighbor kids for being on my lawn. Am I really that unhappy?

"Joe," I say as we get out of the car.

He turns to me. "Yeah?"

"Thank you."

"For what?"

"Talking to me about this. I know you are my partner, but I kind of feel like we're brothers now. Which is something I've not had in my life before—someone I could talk to unconditionally. Truly be myself around."

"I'm glad I could help." He shuts the car door. "Not going to lie though. After I tell my wife we've had this conversation, she's going to start searching for the perfect guy for you. If you get an invitation to dinner at our house... you've already been warned."

"Wait," I say. "Hold off on that. Let Susan know I am more than happy to have her play matchmaker, but I've got someone I'm taking to the Lady Dame concert this weekend."

"Oh?" He wags his eyebrows at me.

"Yeah, I met him at the coffee shop the other day."

"Nice," he says. "So, someone decent and not on one of those hookup apps? Not that I'm judging you."

I laugh. "Of course you're not."

"What's this guy's name? Do I need to run a background check on him?"

If I was Joe, I would have been the same way. No way would I have let my partner and friend out on the town without checking the guy... or gal, out first.

"Honestly, I don't know his last name."

"Huh?"

"Right? I'm trying things differently this time. Can't keep doing the same old thing and expecting a different result. That'd be crazy... or so I'm told."

Joe nods, and I can tell he's thinking about what I've said for a few moments. "I'm looking forward to a full report when you get back from the concert. Honestly, I'm really happy for you."

"Thanks, man." I shut my car door. "Shall we go inside and solve a murder?"

"Let's do this," he says and starts hoofing it toward the front entrance.

As we walk side by side up the drive to the Who's Your Caddy Country Club, I pat Joe on the belly. "I know I'm six months older than you, but we have to do something about this tire you're growing around your waist."

"Hey, don't fat shame me." Joe feigns being upset.

"No, buddy. I want you to be able to chase down suspects with me for years to come. There's no way I want to break in another partner if you go and have a heart attack on me."

"My wife cooks with lard, Michael. You've tasted her carnitas."

"Delicious," I say, my stomach reminding me I haven't eaten lunch yet. "Maybe we

should get something from the taco stand later?"

"The one outside Burger Barn?"

I see the way his eyes glaze over and know he's thinking about the way the owner of the taco truck shaved the meat right off the bone in front of us—thin slivers of deliciously seasoned meat filling a street-sized corn tortilla, almost no room for anything but salsa and maybe a sprinkle of cotija cheese.

"Don't tell my wife," he says. "We're supposed to go out to dinner with her parents tonight. If she finds out I filled up on Mexican food when we're going to an El Salvadorian restaurant tonight, she will cut me." He grabs my arm and stops me for a second. "I'm serious... she'll cut me, bro."

I laugh. "Your secret is safe with me." Throwing my hands up in mock fear of what his wife might do, I share a laugh with him, and we start back toward the entrance to the country club.

We finally make it from the guest parking to the front door. We stop and take a deep breath, slowly letting it out before we keep moving. It was something we both regularly did to calm our nerves and get into character, of sorts. We have to play the part of serious detectives, and while we are, nobody likes a hard-ass.

We walk into the club and are immediately approached by the concierge. "Is there something I can do for you, gentlemen?" the tiny woman wearing an all-white uniform and carrying a towel asks as she approaches us. Her name tag reads: Tonya Bishop and beneath her name, Manager.

"We'd like to speak with your bartender, if you don't mind," Joe says.

"Do you have memberships?"

I flash my badge, smile, and say, "Official police business, ma'am."

Her eyes widen, and she immediately gets on the radio she carries attached to her back pocket. "Is, J.B. here?" she says into the radio.

Static and then silence is the only answer to her question.

"Ugh," she says. "We've been a little short-staffed as of late, but I can show you where to go for the bar. I know he's here, but not always responsive."

Her face is red and blotchy, and it's obvious she's embarrassed by the lack of respect her staff shows her. The woman is short, but she sure can move fast. Her tiny legs turning over at a surprising speed. I look over at my partner to make sure he isn't having difficulty keeping up with her. I also want to tap his belly again and give him the look but decide against it. It wouldn't be right to do here, but when we get back to the car, I'll remind him to have no more than three street tacos and not his usual six.

"Here you are, gentlemen," Tonya says, sweeping her arm in the direction of the bar. "I can provide you with a free drink if you'd like?"

"Very kind of you, ma'am, but we're on duty." Joe crosses his arms and looks side to side. "Where's... J.B.?"

"I'll radio for him to meet you here. I assume he's on a break." She checks her watch. "Not that he's scheduled for one until later, but then again... short-staffed."

"Certainly," I say, watching her face turn a deep blotchy red. "We'll wait here."

Tonya hurries away with the radio pressed against her chin, and it's obvious she's quietly berating someone on the other end. We step up to the bar and have a look around while we wait.

"I don't see anything that looks like the little plastic sword from the picture," he says.
"Do all bars use them?"

"Not all of them," I say. "But plain toothpicks are boring, and the umbrellas are usually just tossed in as art these days."

"Hmm," he says, looking over the counter. "Look down there." Joe points to the open cabinet at the back of the bar. "There's supplies in there."

"What can I help you with, officers?" a voice comes from behind us.

We both turn as this good-looking dark-haired man with a decent body steps closer to us. He's dressed in the white and blue uniform with short shorts. The way his muscular thighs flex and release with each step makes me swallow hard. Something about this guy tells me he's got the dates lining up for him.

"J.B.?" Joe asks.

J.B. sticks out his hand, and we take turns greeting him with a firm handshake.
"That's me," he says. "Tonya said you wanted to talk to me?"

"Well, yeah," I say. "We had a few questions about your supplies here at the bar."

"Does this have to do with the murder that happened by the water trap?" he asks.

I nod.

"Sure does," Joe says. "We're still actively investigating."

"Oh," he says. "For some reason, I thought it was all over and done since you guys took down the yellow caution tape and hadn't been back in a couple of days."

I can see how someone would think as he does, but it can't be further from the truth. We'll be lucky if the investigation is completed within the next few months. Especially since we have so little to go on, this could be one of those cases that remain open but cold for quite some time. Years, in fact. Although, there's no way I'll let this guy know it.

"You're the bartender here, is that correct?" I ask.

"Yep," he nods. "There are a few of us, but I'm the one on duty today until early afternoon. Then I head to another job."

"Oh," I ask.

"Yeah, can't make rent unless I have a side-gig," he says with a smile. "It's Los Angeles, and I wasn't born to one of those rich families."

"Got it," Joe says with a knowing nod. Neither he or I were born with a silver spoon in our mouths. "I'm curious... the mixed drinks... do you put umbrellas in them?"

"Sometimes," he says. "Just depends on the drink."

"Okay," I say. "How do you make your Mia Tia? Do you put fresh fruit in them?"

J.B. cocks his head to the side. He's trying to figure out where our inquiries are leading, which isn't that unusual when questioning witnesses. "Yep. We put pineapple in them, but honestly, our clientele is very particular. They'll ask for all kinds of things to garnish their drinks. Berries, oranges, pineapple, peaches. You name it. This isn't a place where we get to say no when a reasonable request is made." He uses air quotes and a roll of his eyes to get his point across loud and clear.

"Sounds high maintenance," I say, trying to make him feel we're on his side of things.

J.B. laughs and nods. "Don't let my boss hear you say that. She gets pissy when we talk about the clients in a negative light."

I nod. "What do you use to keep the fruit from falling to the bottom of the glass? Do you use the umbrella? Or a toothpick?"

He nods and walks around to the back of the bar. He bends down and pulls out a box, opening it. "We usually use these things." He pulls out a plastic toothpick in the shape of a golf club. "Management tries to be cute and make the drink names match the theme of this place. It's all golf-related. For example, our Mai Tai is called Mai Tee Tai."

Joe and I glance at each other. It's a dead end, but also interesting that a toothpick with a sword was found at the crime scene which couldn't have been supplied here. After all, swords have nothing to do with golf. Which leads us to ask, where has it come from?

"That's all we have for you today," Joe says. "I'm sure you were questioned by the police already, is that correct?"

J.B. nods. "Yeah, they asked me a ton of questions that next morning. Pretty scary that something like that can happen here. I mean, this is supposed to be a classy place."

"Murderers don't always care how much money you have or how classy your establishment is," I say, handing him my business card. "If you hear anything at all pertaining to the murders, don't hesitate to call me... day or night."

He looks at the card and then puts it into his pocket. "I sure will."

Joe and I turn and walk out of the club. Something about the image depiction of a

yellow plastic drink toothpick is eating away at me, but I can't figure out why. My stomach growls, pulling me out of my train of thought.

"Time for tacos," I say, patting my stomach.

"Get in my belly," Joe says and picks up the pace to the car.

Once we sit inside, he starts the engine and speeds out of the parking lot. He doesn't even slow down at the first turn, but somehow manages not to take it on two wheels. Clearly, I'm not the only one who's hungry.

"Thanks again, Joe. Our conversation earlier about my dating life actually made me feel better knowing you're in my corner. And that I can come to you with anything."

"Anytime, buddy," he says as he pulls out into traffic. "Now, let's go get some grub."

PATRICK

My shift finally ended about fifteen minutes ago. It's been a really long day, and I can't wait to go home, even if it's to an empty apartment. I count my tip money as I walk out to the car, careful not to stray from the dull lights of the parking lot. While I work in a decent area of the city, it always freaks me out a bit to walk out to my car with a pocket full of cash. My mom's voice rings inside my head, crowing on about people jumping me for money and a free ride inside my asshole if they manage to kidnap me in the process. Her bedtime stories are terrifying, to say the least.

I've been so distracted by my own thoughts all day. Will I enjoy my time with Michael, or should I pursue Jake? It's a never-ending debate that seems to get worse as the night wears on. I tried most of the day to look for Jake, but couldn't find him. Maybe he was busy with one of the customers. Smiling, I think about the awesome drinks he makes with the Hawaiian rum our boss imports specifically for Mrs. Thornbird. It's all good though, I need to get home anyway. No more fantasizing about men.

Patting the roll of bills in my pocket I think, Damn, I made a lot of money tonight . From tips alone, I'll be able to afford groceries this week. It's such a great feeling, and I only had to endure one indecent proposal this shift. Pushing the money out of the way, I fish for my car keys out of my over-filled pocket.

"Where are you running off to?" Jake says as he rushes up behind me.

My heart races at the suddenness of his appearance. I flinch and turn in his direction, visions of my mother's fairy tales flashing through my mind. "You scared the shit out of me."

"Oh, sorry, man." If Jake's disarming and seductive smile had the dexterity of fingers, my pants would already be unbuttoned and lying on the ground around my ankles. How any man can bring me from the brink of a panic attack to wanting to suck his dick in a single heartbeat is beyond me.

Jake's wavy dark hair hangs in his face just enough to make me want to brush it out of the way before kissing his full lips. I swallow and blink away the budding fantasy. "Is everything okay?" I glance behind Jake. "No one's chasing you, right?"

We both laugh, but this is the first time Jake has shown this much interest in me, and I'm curious—why now? He's never chased me down in the parking lot before. Maybe my mom's nighttime terror stories are going to come true?

"I asked Tina for a ride home, but she doesn't get off for another thirty minutes or so."

"And she suggested I take you home?" I cock my head to the side. That's weird, considering Tina and I had a bet on who could land Jake in bed first.

Jake shifts his weight. "Not really. She asked me to wait for her to get off work, but it's been a long day and I just want to go home." He scratches the top of his head. "She was really pushy about it too. Kept doing that weird thing with her bottom lip." He feigns a disgusted shiver.

I laugh. That's Tina's way of flirting. She licks and bites her bottom lip while making googly eyes at her prey. Bitch is trying to win the bet at all costs. Needless to say, it rarely works and, more often than not, lands her in the Human Resources office

explaining herself.

“She’s like that,” I say. There won’t be another chance for me to be alone with Jake for the foreseeable future, so it’s my shit or get off the pot moment. Plus, the way Jake’s dimpled cheeks call to me, I couldn’t have told him no even if I’d wanted to. “Get in.”

“You’re the best. Thank you so much. My car is a piece of shit and wouldn’t start this morning.” He hands me a ten-dollar bill. “Here’s something for gas and your time.”

“Thanks,” I say, taking the money and putting it in my pocket. “Where do you live?”

“On Westland, just past the Mormon church.”

I blink a few times in silence as I try and envision where he lives. I put the key into the ignition and start her up. “I don’t have a flipping clue where that is.”

“I figured as much. You’re in luck. I’m only two miles down the road and I’m great at giving directions.”

“That’s not far at all.” I shift into drive and pull out of the parking space.

“I’d have walked, but after... you know, the murder at Who’s Your Caddy... well, it’s had me a bit spooked.”

“Same here,” I admit.

“Really?”

“Yeah, plus my apartment was broken into.”

“Dude,” Jake says. “Did the cops figure out who did it?”

“I didn’t really report it. My neighbor, of sorts, said some guy who smelled good broke in, but there wasn’t anything taken. Figured, either she was making it up or... I don’t know what I thought.”

Jake looks out the side window in silence for a few moments. “I’m really sorry, man. That’s scary.” He looks spooked, the color has drained from his face from what I can tell in the crappy lighting.

My heart melts a bit seeing Jake, usually self-confident and unflappable, look vulnerable and worried about something that concerns the regular people of the world. “I can’t believe it happened around here... murder. What are the odds?”

“Murder can happen anywhere, but you’re right... Who’s Your Caddy is just up the freeway an exit from here.” Jake turns to me and says, “Did you know the victims?”

“I don’t really know much about what happened, but any time there’s something scary happening near me I tend to freak out a bit. If you knew my mom, you’d understand.”

“From what I’ve been told, it was two guys. One was a client, older man, and a staff member. Rumor has it they were involved with each other.”

“Involved?” I ask. “Like they were hooking up?”

Jake nods. “Apparently, but you know how rumors go.”

“I guess I shouldn’t be too surprised. I’ve been hit on, groped, and had the nastiest shit said to me while working with these folks.”

“You’ve been groped?” Jake says, his face darkening. He shakes his head. “People really piss me off sometimes.”

Jake’s concern touches my soul. Usually when I tell people about it, they say, get in line and then go on to tell me something equally as awful that’s happened to them in the past.

I smile. “Thank you, Jake. I appreciate you saying that.” I pull the car out onto the main drag and work it up to speed.

“There’s something about these rich, old, white dudes using their money, power, and influence to get away with so much shit. If you and I were to inappropriately touch someone at work, we would be thrown out on our ear. They’d probably call the cops on us. We’d be sex offenders or something.”

“Very true,” I say. “The system is rigged to favor those with money for sure.”

“I guess so. Is it too much to ask for the world to be fair? Even if it’s just for some things?” Jake shakes his head. “Turn left up here.”

I often feel the same way. It's hard to wrap my head around it sometimes, but I try not to dwell on the negative too much. Turning the car as directed, I want to change the subject. I've got the hottest guy at the club in my car and we're discussing a murder and how unfair the world is. Talk about a cock block. "Anyway. I'm sure there's nothing we can do about it."

"Maybe... I guess." He sighs and looks out the window.

"It's sure dark on this street," I say. There isn't a streetlight to be seen. I squint to make out the street sign we passed but can't quite tell what it says.

"Make the next right and then an immediate left. I'll be the third house on the right."

I chauffeur us to his destination in silence. During the short drive, I keep glancing over at the gorgeous man in the front seat. Flashbacks to Ricky Diaz at senior prom make me start to sweat. I'm nervous and have no idea what else to talk about but have no trouble envisioning Jake's naked body pressed against mine. I glance over once again, but this time he's looking back at me with a gorgeous smile and twinkly eyes.

I pull into Jake's driveway and stop the car. "Here you are."

Jake turns and grins. My tummy flutters.

"You're the best. Would you like to come up for a drink or... something?" He arches his eyebrow in a naughty, suggestive way.

My pulse accelerates as Jake reaches over and grabs my hand.

"This might seem crazy, but I've always felt a connection with you."

"You have?" I blink rapidly trying to make sense of what's happening. "I didn't even know for sure you were gay."

Jake laughs. "I'm not into labels."

"Oh, sorry. I didn't mean to..."

Jake leans over and kisses me, soft and gentle on the lips. "Very nice. Your lips are so smooth."

I swallow hard. "Thanks... lip balm." I cringe inwardly. Don't be lame.

He kisses me again. Jake's hand rubs slowly up my thigh. I cup his head in my hand and squeeze the back of his neck. Our tongues touch, sending a tantalizing tingle through my eager body. I close my eyes and the car fills with the sound of heavy breathing and the soft moans of intensifying need and pleasure. I can't believe this is happening.

After a few minutes pass, I sit back in my seat, panting for air. I'm hard as a rock. Jake reaches over and wipes my chin dry with his thumb. "You had a little of my spit on you. Sorry about that."

I wipe my left cheek dry. "Wow."

"Yeah." Jake pulls at the crotch of his jeans, no doubt uncomfortably snug. I search Jake's eyes for a sign, anything to tell him what to do or say next. "I should probably get going." Jake thumbs out the side window. "I wouldn't want the neighbors thinking something fishy is going on in here."

"For sure." I play it cool, rolling my eyes. "Neighbors."

He gets out of the car and shuts the door. He smiles and rubs the back of his neck as our gaze locks. Then without another word, he waves and turns to walk away, adjusting the crotch of his pants as he does. I lower the window and say, "Jake. Wait."

He stops and turns. "Listen, Patrick. Please don't be upset." Running his fingers through his hair, he sighs. "I know I made the first move and now I'm backing away like a jerk, but we work together, and I don't think this..." He gestures between us. "You know what they say... never dip your pen in the company ink."

"For sure," I say. "I was going to ask you not to say anything to anyone. Seas the Day is a gossipy place, and I don't want it to be weird for us when we work the same

shifts," I lie. My heart hurts and the tears are building, making it hard to swallow. I need to get out of here before he sees me lose it.

"Absolutely." He waves goodbye and walks away without looking back again.

My throat grows tighter as I watch him walk around the back of his home and disappear from view. "Fuck my life," I say, putting the car into reverse. Backing out of the driveway, I whip the car around without squealing the tires. "You're never going to find the right guy." I turn the wheel and press on the gas. I can still feel Jake's lips pressed against mine. I wish there'd been more between us—not just a quick make-out session that went nowhere. I wipe a tear from my cheek and check the time. "Dammit."

It's getting late and I'm in no shape or mindset to drive home and be alone, but what other choice do I have? An internal debate begins to wage. Should I tell Tina what happened? She's my best friend, but it's embarrassing since Jake didn't want to pursue anything further and he also didn't seem to want anyone to know. "Phone, call Tina."

The phone doesn't even ring before she picks up. "Patrick... what's up?"

"I made out with Jake."

"You slut."

"I know."

"Well?"

"Well, what?"

"Did you have sex?" Tina's voice is so loud and high pitched the speaker on my

phone rattles. "Was his cock as big as I've always envisioned?"

"I said we made out."

"You're going to need to be more specific. Making out to someone like Devon could mean he was impregnated."

I laugh. "I'll tell you everything tomorrow, but you have to promise to keep this to yourself."

"Deal."

"Swear to it," I demand.

"I swear on the life of Katniss Everdeen in the critically acclaimed movie, The Hunger Games , but not Mocking Jay Part One . We both know that was trash."

"I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"Goodnight, bestie," Tina says.

I kiss into the phone. "Love you, bestie."

Once I disconnect the call I continue to drive toward home, merging onto the freeway. If I manage to get home before Diamond calls it quits for the evening, she'll be able to warn me if someone has broken into my place again.

I push on the gas. My nerves are shot. I shiver, thinking about how my apartment has been broken into and how there was a murder not far from work. I shake my head. "It's fine. There's nothing to worry about."

Brake lights ahead signal the continuation of the unrelenting traffic problems Los Angeles is known for—the sign I need. Exiting the freeway a few miles from my neighborhood, I pull over to the side of the road. My hands are shaking. Something is wrong, but I don't know what it is. An inner voice is telling me not to go home.

I pull out my phone and call Tina.

"You're scaring me," she says. "You never call me after we say goodnight. Are you dead in a ditch?"

I smile. "No, but if I was, you'd be the first person I call."

"What's going on? I'm almost home from work. Do you want me to meet you somewhere so we can talk about how big a slut you are?" The genuine concern in her voice gives way to the lighthearted naughty shit-talking tone she always gets when we're discussing sex.

I can't help but smile, already feeling better. "I was hoping I could come over and watch movies... maybe spend the night?"

Tina doesn't respond right away. I'm not worried she'll say no, but I know she's trying to figure out what's really going on with me. "Stop at the gas station on the corner and get some popcorn and wine coolers. It'll be like old times."

By old times, she means years ago when we first met. Neither of us had a steady job and drank two-buck-chuck on the weekends to forget our problems or at least pretend they didn't matter.

"This reminds me of the time you came back from that audition," I say. "What was the movie? You remember."

She laughs. “Oh, yeah that shitty-ass movie? I’m glad I didn’t get it. Would have typecast me for life.”

Wonder Woman , I remember. “For sure, bestie. You got lucky on that one.” Secretly loving the movie that broke my friend’s heart is tough, but it has to be done.

“Get your ass over here and don’t forget the peach wine-coolers.”

“I’ll be there shortly,” I say and then pause. “Bestie?”

“Yeah?”

“Thank you.”

“Of course, what are best friends for?”

“See you in fifteen.”

I pull back onto the street and turn on my favorite eighties radio station. The stylings of Cyndi Lauper further work to soothe my frayed nerves. That’s when I run the stop sign. “Shit... sorry.” I wave to the car I’ve cut off. Poor guy has screeched to a stop and honked. I deserve that.

“Hold it together, Patrick.” If the damn killer doesn’t get me, my poor driving skills and inability to concentrate on two things at once, will.

The following morning, I rub my eyes and curse the cheap alcoholic drinks Tina and I downed in earnest the night before. Stretching my arms overhead, I yawn, turn over, and flinch.

“Why are you staring at me?” My heart races at the creepy look in Tina’s eyes.

“Oh, don’t clutch your pearls, my friend. I’ve been sending you extra sensory perception nudges to wake up since six o’clock.”

I rub the sleep from the corner of my eyes. “And what time is it now?”

“Eight.”

“You’ve been staring at me for two hours?”

“What’s important is you’re awake now.” Her whispered voice takes on a conspiratorial tone. “Guess who’s been texting you for the past couple of hours?”

Flopping back over, I frantically look for my phone. It’s not where I left it the night before. I shoot a glance over my shoulder only to find Tina waving the phone in the air.

“Patrick... I did not read your texts even though you gave me your passcode.”

“I’ve never given you my passcode.”

“Gave might be an inaccurate word for it, but I have it and that’s what really matters because I didn’t look.”

Arching my eyebrow, I cock my head to the side. “Then how do you know who’s been texting me?”

“ESP?” she says, making her voice small and innocent.

Right. And I’m a well-adjusted twenty-five-year-old with a fantastic love life and an award-worthy acting career. Without a word, I lock eyes with her until she cracks.

“Okay, fine. After the fourth text, I got curious and turned the screen on and saw the missed messages and calls notifications.” She hands me the phone. “But I didn’t read them... I would never invade your privacy like that.”

“Jake texted me,” I say. “But there’s a couple missed calls from another number here I don’t recognize.”

“Michael Borne. Or should I say, Detective Borne? Mister hot body with a gun called you... multiple times, bestie. You know what that means?” She wags her eyebrows and shakes her shoulders like she’s trying to jiggle her boobs at me.

“Wait? What? He’s a detective?” I say. Damn, that’s hot. “And how do you know his number?”

She taps her chin with her finger a few times, feigning ignorance. “Okay fine. Full disclosure. I saw the number and called it from my phone. I wanted to protect you in case it was a telemarketer or something.”

“You spoke to him?”

“No, silly. When the receptionist answered, I hung up like any completely normal, rational, and well-adjusted person would have.”

“Well-adjusted?” I quirk a brow.

We share a hearty laugh at the description.

“I’m going to get up and take a shower so you can call Mister Policeman. I just have one question. Why would Jake be calling you? Especially after you left things like that last night?”

“I’m not entirely sure. Maybe he wants to make sure I haven’t told anyone about what happened between us? Or maybe he woke up and realized how he couldn’t possibly live without me?”

Tina laughs. “Now you’re being silly.” She gets up from the bed and looks herself in the mirror above the dresser, mussing with her hair. “If you don’t want to pursue things with Jake... would it be okay if I do?”

Whatever happened to bros before hoes? Or chicks before dicks? Not sure which one actually applies best in this situation.

“Is that what you really want?” I ask.

She nods. There’s a sadness in her eyes that tugs at my heart. She could do so much better than him, but there isn’t a chance in hell she’d believe me if I told her as much.

“Go for it,” I say. “He’d be lucky to have you.”

“Aww, really?” She twirls on her toes, stopping in time to face the mirror and blow herself a kiss. “Should we go get some breakfast?”

“That sounds wonderful, but let me find out what Michael wants first. If he needs me to do something for him, I’ll have to do it. He is the police after all.” I want to retract my choice of words, but they’re already being misconstrued by her.

As she steps into the bathroom and dramatically turns, holding onto the door, she smiles. “Oh, yeah. You’ll do something for him all right.”

I roll my eyes and chuckle. “Touché.”

Tina cackles and closes the door. The clunk of the water pipes as she turns on the

shower gives me the go-ahead to make the call. I click the missed call notification and connect it. The butterflies in my belly flutter with each passing ring.

“Los Angeles Police Department, how can I direct your call?”

“Detective Michael Borne, please.”

“Please hold.” Jazz music fills the line. I close my eyes and wonder what Michael wants from me.

“This is Detective Borne. Who’s calling?”

Fighting the surging need to hang up the phone, my voice squeaks.

“Hello? This is Borne... who’s calling?”

“Patrick,” I manage to say.

“From the coffee shop? Hi, Patrick.”

“Hi.”

“Sorry to have called you so early... and from my work number, force of habit sometimes.” He chuckles. “I wanted to confirm our date and see if you wanted to go out to dinner before or after the concert?”

“Sounds great,” I say. “I hadn’t thought that far ahead, but maybe we should eat afterwards?” This way I wouldn’t risk feeling bloated and weird during the concert of the year.

“Perfect,” he says.

“Michael?”

“Yeah, what’s up?”

“You didn’t mention you were a detective. I don’t know why it seems unusual for me, but it kind of does.” I don’t know what I’m trying to get at. Not like he should have led with his occupation, I certainly don’t.

There’s a pause on the other end. Had I said something wrong?

“Sorry, Patrick,” he says. “I hadn’t thought too much of it, but to be honest, I don’t usually tell my dates about my job until we actually go on the first date.”

Duh, makes total sense. “For sure,” I say. “Like I said, I don’t know why it seemed weird to me.”

“I hope it’s not going to be a big deal? Do you dislike the police?” His tone is playful, but it still gives me pause.

“Oh, no. I don’t dislike anyone, really. Pretend I didn’t say anything and we can discuss it during our date tomorrow evening.”

“Great,” he says. “What time should I pick you up?”

I’d planned to meet him wherever we decided so I could escape if needed, but something about him seems safe, old-fashioned, even. “If the concert is at seven, you’d probably want to pick me up by six. Traffic on the way to the venue from my place is a shit show.”

“Six it is.” He pauses for a moment, and I don’t interrupt the silence like I normally would have. “Patrick?”

“Yeah?”

“I am truly looking forward to spending time with you,” he says.

My heart melts at the sincerity in his voice. “I am as well.” Tina turns off the water and begins singing old one-hit wonders from the 80s—my cue to get off the phone.

“Well,” I say. “I should get going. I’ll text you my address and see you at six tomorrow.”

“Perfect,” he says and hangs up the phone.

The bathroom door flings open, and a cloud of steam billows out into the bedroom. Tina stands wrapped in a towel with another one tied up around her head like a fabric beehive. “Tell me everything. Does Michael want an accurate accounting for your whereabouts? Take down the exact details of your story? Frisk you for weapons of mass pleasure?”

I laugh to the point of tears. “Bestie, you are truly the best thing in my life. You know that?”

She dives onto the bed next to me, nearly losing the towel in the process. “I feel the same way about you.”

“I think we should go stuff our faces at Woofles and Wags at ten.”

“That place is exclusive. I heard they have a line out the door every day... even when it’s raining.”

“Ugh,” I say. “You’re right. If only we were famous Hollywood elite.”

“I heard they filmed an episode of The Real Househusbands of West Hollywood there. Ever since, it’s been the in-place to eat towering stacks of dog-bone-shaped waffles. Although, that’s a lot of carbs for someone like me trying to get into acting.”

“Now that you mention it, I do remember that episode. It was pretty dramatic, if I remember right,” I say. “Where should we go then?”

“Oh, I know,” Tina says with an earsplitting squeal. “Let’s go to Eggastic Breakfast King. The guy that owns it donates money to homeless animal shelters.”

“But didn’t he get in trouble for using canned cat food in some of his dishes?”

“Yes, but I have a list of what not to eat, plus there won’t be a line.”

How could I argue with that kind of logic?

We laugh before I jump out of bed and rush into the bathroom to take a shower. Before closing the door behind me, I turn and say, “I’m going to have to use the emergency change of clothes I leave here. I won’t have time to go home and freshen up.”

“Bottom drawer of the dresser.” She points to the huge dark antique dresser against the wall. “You’ve got a change of clothes and a fresh uniform in there for later.”

“Perfect.”

“Get ready. I’ll go make us some coffee so you can be fully caffeinated for breakfast.”

I close the bathroom door and smile at myself in the mirror above the sink. The giddiness I feel is only tempered by the idea that what I’m going to do once again

puts myself out there and potentially gets me hurt along the way.

I turn on the shower and strip naked. As I step into the flow of steaming hot water, I shiver and goosebumps spread across my arms and legs. Unable to stop myself from thinking about Michaels broad shoulders, trim waist, big strong hands, my cock jumps to life. Instinctively, I start stroking it, but then remember that I am a guest of my best friend and there's nothing classy about jacking off in a friend's shower.

Sighing, I lather up and wash my hair, still thinking about the man I'm going to meet for breakfast. Is this too good to be true? He checks so many of my boxes and yet I'm nervous.

Whatever, I think. I can hear Tina's voice in my head saying, Even Katniss was nervous the first real date she had with Peeta. And who was I to argue with that logic?

MICHAEL

I get to Patrick's apartment early and don't want to seem too eager, so I do the next worst thing possible—start fussing with my hair in the rearview mirror. It's like a fifty-car-pileup on the freeway. When I move one strand of hair to the left, it dislodges a curl I didn't even realize I had. I push, pull, flip, flop, beg, pray, and eventually give up.

Sighing, I go to return the mirror to its normal position when I see the panicked look in my eyes. Why am I so nervous? Something about this date feels different. Like, Patrick could be the one. What the heck am I thinking? I've been on dates that didn't even last two hours and I never saw them again. What makes me think this is going to be different?

I smile. Are those crow's feet? When did I get so old? Thirty-five is old? "Hi, Patrick." I practice in the mirror. "What's going on?" Duh, what a stupid question. We're going to a concert, that's what's going on. I shift the mirror back to its regular position and shake my head. Better not practice too much, I'm liable to sound like one of those automated intelligence programs, like when I ask the phone for help. That annoying, fake, pleasant voice, that says, "This is what I found." And no matter what I ask and what she finds, it's never what I was looking for.

The time on my dashboard clock nudges me into action. It's time, and I need to get to the door before I'm late. No sense in getting here early and then being late. I open the car door and get out. As I turn, close the door, and lock it with a touch of my finger

on the door handle, a woman approaches me from behind.

“Hey, sugar,” she says. “Can I interest you in some of this?” She jiggles her breasts and smiles. She’s missing most of the bottom row of teeth, but the tops are all there. It’s clear she’s a prostitute, and I can’t help but wonder if her teeth were knocked out by a John.

“No, thanks,” I say. There’s no point in flashing my badge, I don’t want to ruffle her feathers or start something I would have to pursue. I’m here for a date and that’s exactly what I intend on doing. “I’m here to see a friend.”

She looks disappointed, but then turns to look at the apartment I’m standing in front of and smiles again, putting her hands on her hips. “Oh, that explains it. You’re here to see sugar. You don’t go breaking his heart now. I don’t want to have to rough you up.” She puts up her hands in a playful fighting position.

“I wouldn’t dream of it, ma’am.”

“You can call me Diamond, boo. I have a feeling we’re going to see a lot of each other if you keep coming by to see your... friend.”

“Nice to meet you, Diamond.” I turn and hurry up the steps to the second floor where Patrick’s apartment is located.

I take a deep breath and let it out slowly before raising my hand and knocking on the door. A few seconds pass like uncomfortable minutes, my brain already trying to make excuses as to why he wouldn’t be home. Before I manage to convince myself to leave and drown my sorrows in a beer or three, the door swings open wide.

Patrick stands there looking like a dream come true. He’s in good shape, slender, but not waif. He isn’t as tall as I am, in fact, he looks a good six or seven inches shorter

than me—why I hadn't noticed this before I don't know. But what really impresses me is the smile on his face and the spark in his eyes. Everything I've learned about reading people as a police officer tells me he's excited to see me.

"Michael," he says. "It's great to see you."

"You look fantastic," I say. "I hope I'm not underdressed."

He looks me up and down with a twinkle of sexual hunger in his eyes. Shaking his head, he says, "Not at all. Would you like to come in while I finish getting ready?"

Patrick steps aside while I walk into the apartment. As I brush past him, I catch the scent of sandalwood and vanilla. Whatever it is that he's wearing, soap or cologne, does it for me. I follow him into the living room, unsure as to where I should sit.

"Can I get you something to drink?" he asks. "White wine... vodka and soda?"

"Nothing for me," I say. "I figured I'd drive us to the concert. But thank you."

Patrick smiles. "I know you're a cop and you have to obey all the laws and stuff, but I like the good boy in you."

What do I say to that? The way his gaze consumes my chest before slowly moving southward to my cock, I can tell he's imagining what I would look like without all these clothes on. To be fair, I already sized him up by the time I walked into the apartment. He's thin, but muscular. The way his shoulders bulge underneath the tight t-shirt he's wearing tells me he doesn't see himself the way the rest of the world does—all man.

I've seen this before in guys I dated. It seems that they want desperately to hold onto their youth at all costs, dressing younger than their age would seem appropriate.

Although, I can't say that Patrick is quite like those other guys. He wants to get into Hollywood, but he doesn't seem shallow enough or hung up on his look or brand.

Looking at my watch, I say, "We should probably leave soon if we're going to catch the opening act."

"Oh, crap," he says. "You're right. Sorry, I got distracted." He turns and rushes deeper into the apartment and closes the door behind him.

I choose the sofa to sit and wait on while he gets ready. The sofa looks comfortable, but as I lower myself onto the cushion it becomes all too obvious it isn't meant for someone my height or weight. Sinking deeper into the sofa like quicksand, the more I move the further I go. It isn't long before I realize I'm going to have to roll myself out and onto the floor to escape.

And I do just that.

Quickly, I stand and straighten out my clothes. What the heck is that couch made of anyway? Cotton candy? All looks and no substance? Lifting the cushion I immediately see the problem. The sofa is old and put together like an old 1970s sofa bed my grandmother had before she passed away. The springs that hold the frame together and keep the sofa bed from falling through the frame and resting on the floor are either broken or no longer attached.

I kneel down and begin fixing what I can. The springs are old, a few rusted. The bandage fixes I'm making won't last long, but they'll do until Patrick can get a new couch.

"Oh, crap," Patrick says as he rounds the corner from the hallway. "You sat on the sofa, didn't you? I was going to suggest the chair, but again... got distracted." The sheepish look on his face is so cute I could pinch his cheeks and plant a kiss right on

his lips.

Nodding, I smile. “Had to roll out onto the floor to escape her clutches. How old is this thing?”

He laughs. “Not entirely sure. It came with the apartment. All I know is anyone heavier than a small child sinks in and can’t get back out. My best friend Tina and I watch T.V. here sometimes, but we each take one of the recliners.”

“Seems reasonable,” I say and stand. “I’ve reattached the springs... or at least the ones that aren’t broken.”

“No way,” Patrick leans in to get a better view. “I tried a hundred times to stretch them far enough to reconnect, but they seemed unmovable.”

“What can I say,” I say showing my hands. “I guess these meat hooks are good for something.”

Patrick’s face turns red, and he appears flustered. “Should... we get going?” He turns away from me and begins rummaging through a backpack on the kitchen table. “My damn keys have to be in here.” He shakes the bag.

The sound of keys tinkling inside renews his efforts.

“Can I help?” I ask.

“Here they are,” Patrick exclaims and pulls the ring of keys from the bottom of the bag. “That’s weird, my badge and keycard are missing.”

“From work?” I guess as the apartment doesn’t look like it’s high-tech enough to require a keycard.

He nods with a huff. “Well, I’m sure they’re in the bag somewhere, but we don’t have time to look for them right now anyway. Shall we go?”

I follow Patrick to the door and then outside where I wait for him to lock up. We hurry to the car and get inside where I turn and look at him. “Patrick?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m really glad you decided to come with me to the concert. I didn’t think I could be more excited about seeing Lady Dame but having you along with me is going to make it even better.”

Patrick’s expression changes. The look in his eye softens and the way the redness blotches his cheeks is so endearing. He smiles at me, sincere and true. The butterflies in my belly come alive and threaten to make my hands tremble with excitement.

“I am so happy to come along with you, Michael. I haven’t had a date I’ve looked forward to this much in a very long time.”

“That makes the two of us,” I say as I pull out onto the street and into the L.A. traffic.

This is going to be the best concert ever.

15

PATRICK

Michael gives me my ticket and offers to stand in line for souvenirs while I get our seats. Who would say no to that offer? I rush down the stairs looking for our row, but I don't see it. As I turn back around, an usher comes up to me with a tiny flashlight and asks to see my tickets.

"Oh, sir," the usher says. "You can't get to your seats from this level." He points down to the next group of rows, just above the floor seats. "You're three rows back from the floor."

I turn to follow where exactly he's pointing, and my breath catches in my chest. Lady Dame's stage is shaped similar to a cock and balls, the base of the stage two large circles that extend out into the crowd. At the tip of the stage, it balloons out some, and a not-so-creative mind could envision an erect phallus—similar to her new album cover.

"The best way to get there is to go back up and circle around to section 180. The stairs will lead you all the way down front from there." The usher hands me back the tickets and moves along to help someone else find their seats.

Following his instructions, I make my way to the right section and down to the next level. Once I find our seats I sit down and take in the view. These seats are even better than the floor. There's no way Michael hasn't spent a few hundred dollars on each ticket. The way the cock-shaped stage extends toward us, we're right at eye

level with the stage, no more than fifteen feet from it. We're going to be able to see every last little stitch or glittering bead on her outfits when she comes walking our way.

I'm in heaven.

"Oh good, you found the seats," Michael says as he comes over carrying souvenirs. He hands me a beer and a t-shirt with Lady Dames' picture on it, glittery beads and rhinestones catch the overhead lights and flash.

"What do I owe you?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "Nothing. My treat. I'm just glad I didn't have to see the concert alone."

"How'd you manage to get such great seats?"

"My credit card let me purchase them in advance before the general public."

I scan the growing crowd. People are dressed in crazy outfits that could double for a comic book convention or Sci-Fi movie premier. There are people of all walks of life and every sexual orientation and age. It's awesome to see and experience.

"Pretty amazing how there's so much diversity in this auditorium right now," Michael says and then takes a swig of his own beer.

I nod. "I was just thinking the same thing." I feel so overcome by the whole spectacle I have to fight back tears. Leaning my head into his chest, I take in his warmth and positive energy.

He sighs and wraps his arm around my shoulders and we stay like that for a few

minutes while I compose myself. Once I'm sure any possible wetness from my unexpected tears has dried, I straighten up in the chair. I can tell he's looking at me, but I don't want to look back at him, not yet.

The energy flowing between us is powerful and intoxicating. Closing my eyes for a moment, I envision leaping to my feet, straddling his lap, and kissing him so passionately I'd take his breath away. My heart pounds and I swallow hard. Turning to return his gaze, our eyes lock, and he smiles. The dimples in his cheeks deepen the wider he grins.

"Are you having a good time?" he asks.

I nod. "The best."

Before we speak again, the lights dim and the crowd roars. The stage lights up with multicolored lights that flash and swirl outwardly into the audience.

"I thought there was going to be an opening act?" I yell to be heard over the crowd.

He shakes his head. "They cancelled. Lady Dame is going to play longer than planned to make up for it."

"She is my queen," I say.

Suddenly, the crowd erupts into borderline hysterics. I stand as everyone around me jumps to their feet. At the tip of the cock-shaped stage, no more than fifteen feet away, Lady Dame herself, blasts through a trap door and lands on her feet in front of us.

My vision tunnels, but I hold to consciousness with every last fiber of my being. I wouldn't miss this concert for anything in the world. The music blares to life and the

thousands of spectators begin dancing in place to her latest number one single, Popcorn and Candy.

Michael leans over and says into my ear, “I’m so glad you’re here.”

I throw my arms around him and squeeze before resuming my jumping to the beat of the song.

The concert lasts over two hours and I’ve been dancing so hard, I can barely make it up the stairs to exit the venue. Exhausted is an understatement.

“Let’s go get some midnight tacos somewhere,” Michael says. “I’m starving.”

Normally, I would have said no thank you because I’m so tired, but Michael is special. I feel it in my bones.

Not wanting to screw this up because I haven’t exercised in so long my legs are giving out, I give him a thumbs up. “I could eat.”

I hobble as fast as I can behind him until we get to the car. After getting inside, he asks, “Do you have a place you’d like to go?”

There isn’t any place I can think of, so I simply shrug. “You pick.”

He pulls out of the parking lot and avoids the traffic leaving the concert by turning left. I have no idea where he’s going, but he seems to, and that’s good enough for me. He puts on some soft music which soothes me to sleep even though I hadn’t planned on it.

I awake to him softly nudging me. “Patrick,” he says. “We’re here if you’re still up for it?”

“Of course,” I say. “Sorry about that. All the excitement of the evening got me drifting off to sleep.”

“No worries at all.” He jumps out of the car and hurries around to the passenger side and opens the door for me. He reaches for my hand and helps pull me up to stand.

That’s a first.

My belly flutters with nerves. We walk through the lot holding hands until we reach the entrance where he holds the door for me like a perfect gentleman.

“Thank you,” I say and go inside.

He follows close behind and tells the hostess it’s the two of us and asks if we can get a booth. We follow her through the mostly empty establishment and take a seat and begin looking through the menus.

“I’m not sure if you’ve been here before, but their guacamole is to die for,” Michael says.

“I think I’ll order the guac, chips, and salsa. Do they have queso?”

“Yes, it’s delicious.”

The waitress comes by and asks if we’re ready to order.

“Chips, guacamole, salsa, and queso dip, please,” I say.

“Should we share?” he asks.

“Absolutely.”

“I’ll share with him, but can you bring me a margarita.”

She scribbles it down on her pad. “Blended or on the rocks?”

“On the rocks, please,” he says. “What do you want, Patrick?”

“Mojito, please.”

“You got it,” she says and walks away.

A quiet settles over the table, but not in a bad way. Usually, when the conversation stops, I would look for the nearest exit and run away. Something about this feels different. Nice.

Our waitress brings the food and drinks, and we begin eating the chips in earnest. “I didn’t realize how hungry I was,” I say.

“Must have been all that dancing.” He plops a chip in his mouth and washes it down with a sip of his drink. “I like your moves.”

“You’re not so bad yourself.” I laugh. “For someone so tall, I didn’t expect you to have that much hip action.”

We both laugh now.

“I took ballet in high school. My mom thought it would be better for me than football, although my dad let me play my senior year.”

“Ballet, huh?” I wiggle my eyebrows. “Still have that tight booty?”

The twinkle in his eyes and the mischievous half smile he tries to cover with his

drink, tells me everything I want to know. He likes the way I flirt with him, and he wants to show me just how tight that booty is.

“How about you?” he asks. “Any sports?”

“With a hard body like this? I’ll give you three guesses and the first two don’t count.” I laugh. “Just kidding. Unless jumping to conclusions and running my mouth count as sports, I didn’t do much other than play cards at lunch.”

“To be honest, I envied the kids who didn’t play sports. Don’t get me wrong, I loved playing, but the early morning practices got to me sometimes. Not to mention, my parents’ expectations often outgrew my ability to meet them.”

“Lucky for me, my folks didn’t expect anything from me... and that’s exactly what they got.”

“Now, don’t say that about yourself. Look at you. You’re handsome and kind. You’re pursuing your dream of becoming an actor. Personally, I think it’s refreshing.”

“You do?” I can’t believe someone who is an accomplished police officer and now detective, thinks me pursuing my dreams as an actor is refreshing. “Honestly, I haven’t received any good parts. I’ve been offered a job in a low-budget porno, and I’ve done a few commercials. That’s about it.”

I can tell Michael doesn’t know whether to laugh or feel sorry for me. He probably really wants me to elaborate on the low-budget porn thing too, but I decide to make him ask if he wants further details.

“Not everything happens overnight,” he says, washing down the chips with the last of his drink. “I have a feeling you’re going to make your mark.”

How can he have such faith in me? Something tells me he's being sincere though, and the fact that he didn't give me the talk about having a backup plan in case the acting career doesn't pan out, makes him even more endearing to me. "And in case you were wondering, I didn't accept the porno gig. Too low budget and there was no way I was going to star in a film named Haunted Holes." I feign a shudder.

He laughs. "You don't say? That's one of my all-time favorites."

"Gross," I say and reach for a chip at the same time he does. Our hands brush against each other and send an electric chill down my spine.

So cliché and no way that could have really just happened, I think.

Since this isn't a science experiment, I'm not able to test to see if it would happen again, but I do suddenly have a desire to feel his hands caressing my body.

My left nipple tingles, causing me to shiver.

"Are you cold?" Michael asks.

I nod thinking that would be the end of it.

He slides out from around his side of the booth and sits next to me, wrapping his arm around my shoulders. I lean into him and breathe in his scent. Despite dancing the night away at the concert, somehow this man still smells good. I could push my face right into his armpit but force myself not to—that'd be weird, right?

"I should get you home," he says with a squeeze around my shoulders. "It's getting really late."

We pay the bill and leave. The car ride to my apartment is quiet, but again, not

uncomfortable in the slightest. We listen to soft melodies, and I bask in the energy between us. Truly, the best night of my life. Once we arrive at my apartment, I turn to him.

“Thank you so much for a lovely evening.”

“My pleasure,” he says. “I’d like to take you out again soon, if you think you’re open to that?”

The words couldn’t come out fast enough. “I’m looking forward to it.”

Do we kiss? Hug?

He reaches over and hugs me. His warmth is soothing. I could fall asleep in his arms, pressed up against his thick, muscular frame.

I get out of the car, close the door, and hurry to my apartment. Before going inside, I turn back around and wave goodbye.

He waves back and slowly pulls away from the curb. I watch him go and then head inside, closing the door behind me. Once in the apartment, I twirl around, clutching my Lady Dame t-shirt to my chest.

God, I hope he calls me tomorrow.

MICHAEL

It's way past my usual bedtime and my legs feel heavy as I get out of the car and walk to my front door. The evening has gone so much better than I could have hoped for. Patrick is such a cool guy, and he really seems to like me. We have fun together. Even the quiet times when we're just sitting in each other's company, the silence feels good—not awkward and terrifying like many of my other dates have been.

Tossing my jacket onto the sofa, I slug my way through the living room and into the primary bedroom where I desperately want to collapse onto the bed. The problem is I still have some errant glitter on me from the concert, not to mention my deodorant will fail by morning, and I don't want to wake up smelling like a farm animal.

Kicking off my shoes, I then toss my socks into the hamper and go into the bathroom. It isn't a huge ensuite, but considering I purchased the home on a public servant's salary by myself in Los Angeles, it's more than I could have expected. The walk-in shower has recently been remodeled with white marble and I absolutely love it.

The bright overhead lighting never lets me forget that I'm getting older by the day when I look at myself in the mirror above the sink. A few wrinkles have started showing at the corners of my eyes. Nothing too bad, but definitely something I've noticed in the last year. Making a mental note to seek an aesthetician's expert opinion when I get some time off to pamper myself, I wash my face in the sink. Well, more like splash some cold water to wake me up. It'd be a disaster if I fell asleep in the shower again.

I laugh to myself, remembering that night. I'd pulled a double shift during a stakeout. My partner and I drank coffee and ate doughnuts to the point of nausea, but we didn't want to risk leaving to get some real food. Our target had been too important; a known sex offender who'd refused to register with the city. Rumor had it he was also involved in some possible human trafficking, but we hadn't been able to confirm it at the time. Anyway, once I got home, there was nothing I needed more than a long hot shower. Nothing, except sleep.

I rub the side of my head as I recall the incident—waking up on the floor with the water still running. Only, the shower had gone from hot to cold at some point while I was asleep, and when I woke up, I was shivering on the tiled floor, bleeding from an egg-sized knot on my temple.

I flip on the shower, turning the knob to the perfect spot. Hot enough to soothe my aching muscles, but not too hot as to burn me—or at least not too burnt. My mind begins to drift to Patrick again. His cute smile, the glint in his eyes when he looks at me. Physically, we're pretty different, but I love that about him. He couldn't have been more than five-nine and a hundred-fifty pounds soaking wet. His light brown skin and black hair are stunningly perfect—not even a small blemish.

The steam billows out of the shower, and the glass walls are completely opaque with condensation. I begin unbuttoning my shirt and get a whiff of myself in the process. Yep, a shower before bed is definitely necessary.

I yawn. Not once, but twice. Long, loud, and with tears in my eyes.

Tossing the shirt on the floor, I unzip my pants. They're tighter than I usually like them, but I wanted to make a good impression. I slide them over my pronounced ass and down my thick muscular legs. For being in my thirties, I've retained much of my athleticism from when I was in ballet. I toss my jeans and boxers into the pile with the shirt and stretch my hands far above my head.

Once I step inside the shower, I sigh, enjoying the rivers of warmth as they caress my body. Each hot rivulet washes away the nerves and loosens my aching muscles.

I grab the body wash and apply a large amount to the washcloth, cleaning myself. Each time the rough fabric brushes against my hard nipples, I shiver. Very weird. Not usually so reactive to light touch. I look down at my semi-hard cock and realize just how horny I actually am. I begin playing with my nipples, rubbing them softly at first before lightly pinching them while the hot water runs over my chest. It feels so good. Goosebumps spread across my arms, legs, and chest, the more I rub my hands against myself. I close my eyes and imagine Patrick is in the shower with me.

I shiver with anticipation.

Slowly, I trace my finger down between my pecs, along the center of my stomach until I reach the base of my cock. I'm fully erect now, the entire shaft twitching up and down with my heartbeat. Again, soaping up the washcloth, making it slippery and wet, I wrap it around my shaft. Closing my eyes, I envision Patrick's lips slowly moving over my head, his tongue rubbing the sensitive underside of the head and shaft. I cup my own balls in my hand, letting them roll around in my fingers, before pulling on the loose skin of my sack.

I moan.

My knees begin to tremble more with each passing second. The desire I feel for him and for my own release is so much more intense than I can ever remember happening before.

My breath quickens as my stroking intensifies. To keep myself from slipping, I brace myself against the cold tile wall at my back, which sends a tingle up my spine. "Oh, fuck yeah." My legs continue to tremble, but I'm getting closer to climax. I pinch my sack again, but this time my balls are pulled up, ready to release their hot load.

“Just like that,” I say aloud, to no one but myself. “Fuck, yeah, buddy. Suck my cock... like that.”

I moan as my legs shake.

My thick cock throbs in my grip, fighting to erupt, but I hold back just enough to prevent this from being over. It feels too good and has been too long since I’ve felt this sexual and needful. I reach between my legs and press my finger against my asshole. I’m puckered tight, but I lube my finger with soap and push inside while I imagine Patrick standing behind me. “Fuck me, baby,” I breathe the words, sucking in air as I work my body hard in the hot water.

I reach my sensuous spot and press down while I continue to stroke my cock. A sensation almost impossible to describe runs down my legs and around my back into my belly. It’s pure pleasure. A nervousness, excitement, and unadulterated happiness rolled into one feeling that could bring this six-foot-five, muscular, ox of a man to his knees—begging for more.

Seconds race by as the surge of release that starts in the base of my sack runs up into my belly. Again, my balls are pulling up inside me, my body desperate to shoot my load. Quickening my strokes, my breath draws in and out, timing perfectly with my hand as I stroke my cock. Unable to remain standing, I slowly slide to the tile floor, but never once slowing my strokes. My need is now boiling over and no matter how hard I try to hold it back, I can’t. Locking my knees, holding my legs out straight, my back presses against the wall and my ass rests firmly on the floor, I begin using both hands to slide up and down on my shaft. Shifting myself out from under the direct water stream, I see precum seeping out and slickening my cock head. “Yes,” I call out. “Fuck, yes.” I explode with intensity. spurts of cum erupt, shooting upward and landing on my chest and belly. I rub the thick, creamy hot pleasure across my belly and back down onto my throbbing hard cock. Each stroke after I cum is hypersensitive and forces me into a laughing fit. A tingle forms at the top of my ass

and runs up my spine. I stop before it becomes too uncomfortable, but I want more—I want it to be real, with Patrick.

The hot water begins to run out, sending a shiver through my satiated body. My breathing has long since returned to normal, as has my heart rate. I stand and reach over, turning off the shower, and then sit on the ledge for a few moments, listening to the last of the water circle the drain.

I force myself to stand and stretch. My arms overhead cause my lower back to pop with a satisfying relief. Grabbing for the towel, I dry myself. Tears seem to come from nowhere.

What the hell is wrong with me?

I finish toweling off and take a deep breath, letting it out slowly. There is going to be time for me to get into a good relationship and be happy. No matter how many times my friends and family call, asking if I've found that special someone, and me telling them no—there is still time. Although, my mother is always reminding me that she is getting up there in years and would feel like a horrible parent if she died knowing her son had never been able to find true love.

I sigh and wipe my cheeks. The tears aren't from sadness, but they aren't from regrets either. The intensity of our date, and the lovely sex afterwards, party-of-one style, had just bubbled up. No reason to worry.

The phone rings and I rush to answer it.

“Hello?” I say as soon as I connect the call. “Mom, is that you?”

“Your father and I are having a lovely time in Hawaii. I wanted to call and see how your day went.” She's sweet, but I know what she really wants to know is how the

date went. I made the mistake of telling her when we spoke last.

“I was just about to get into bed... it’s been a long day here,” I say.

“Oh?” Her tone alone asks a thousand questions, none of which come before the first thing she has on her mind. “Are you going to bed alone?”

“Mom,” I say, “you ask too many questions. When I’m ready to share, I promise you’ll be the first person I tell.” I lie, but I know it will make her feel better about the fact I’m sharing no details.

“Hold on a second, Michael. Your father is trying to carry two plates of Kalua Pork back to the table, and you know how he limps.”

I stifle a laugh as I can picture exactly what is going on there. They are probably at a luau, and Mom has carried their drinks; two for her and one for him. He is in charge of the food, and God forbid he drop something—he would never hear the end of it.

“Don’t drop my pork,” she yells into the receiver. “Honey, I’m going to have to let you go, your father is embarrassing me.”

“Sure thing, Mom.”

“Maybe our next call you can tell me about your new boyfriend and what the wedding plans are going to be.”

Before I can respond, she adds, “Bye. Mom loves you.” She hangs up the phone.

I turn off all the lights and slip under the covers and close my eyes. The last thing I remember is hoping all my dreams will be about Patrick... or at least one of my celebrity crushes.

PATRICK

A couple of days after my date with Michael, I head to work like I normally do, bracing myself for the worst. Tina meets me at the front door with an iced latte. After the first sip, I'm so thankful I could have her babies right here and now.

"How did you have this made? It's crazy good," I ask, sucking down another few mouthfuls. I'd spent the last two days wondering what it would be like to have sex with Michael, but damn, this coffee could potentially rival all my expectations.

"The usual way, but damn it does taste extra delicious, doesn't it?"

We walk in silence together down the main hallway of the country club, enjoying our morning drinks. My apprehension about coming to work and facing all the terrible clients has washed away, and I feel a Zen normally reserved for after-glow.

Tina punches in at the time clock, then steps aside so I can do the same thing. There's no way either of us likes being inside this place without getting paid for it. After we officially start our day, we scurry away to find a nice chill place to sit and finish our drinks. The riff raff will be here within the hour, and unless we're both fully caffeinated, the clients are nearly impossible to bear.

We sit on one of the benches outside the employee break room. Tina gets straight to the point. "I want... no, let me rephrase that. I need to hear every last detail of your date with the detective. Do not leave out a single thing. I will be the one who deems it

important or not."

"Aggressive this morning, are we?"

"Don't start with me. I expected you to call me either the night of or the next and spill your guts to me, but you didn't. Not a peep."

I sigh. "Sorry about that. It went really well, and I was worried that if I said anything positive out loud, I would somehow jinx it."

"Honey, I totally get it, and normally I would agree with you, but the detective is so cute, and I really need to live vicariously through you. So, if you truly love me as your bestie... your partner in crime... your wingman... your reason for living, then you'll tell me every fucking detail."

Wow, that escalated quickly. It's either spill my guts and risk the wrath of the dating gods for speaking too soon or watch my bestie spiral into the proverbial toilet.

"Okay, fine," I say. "Where should I start?"

"Um, at any point is there nudity?"

I shake my head.

"Well, just start anywhere then, I suppose." She leans back against the wall as if the story isn't going to end the way she'd hoped.

I spend the next half an hour going through every little detail of the concert and the dinner afterwards. I tell her how he smelled amazing and even though we didn't kiss, it felt as if we both wanted to. Debating about how detailed I should be, I eventually even tell her how he bought me concert bling and didn't even expect a hand job in the

car ride home.

"It truly was a magical night."

Tina wipes away tears and buries her face in her hands. She's more emotional now than I've ever seen her, except the one time her casting agent accidentally put out a cigarette on her palm. Come to think of it, I hadn't asked how the scar treatments were going recently.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

She slowly raises her head and blinks away the remaining waterworks. "I'm sorry... so happy for you."

"Why are you crying?"

"You haven't mentioned Ricky from high school... not once." She reaches over and puts her hand on my knee. "Patrick, this guy's the one."

A sudden commitment panic rocks me like an earthquake. My heart begins to race, and my palms grow sweaty. I've got to chill out. Good god, we went on one date; he didn't propose.

"Are you okay?" she asks. "You look like you're going to throw up."

"I'm fine... suddenly got nervous. What if you're right? What if he's the one or the guy right before the one. You know how there's that one person that gets you all prepared to find the love of your life?"

"You're totally in love."

"Don't go there, please."

She side-eyes me and lets it drop. I had agreed to go out with him again, but now I'm freaking out. What if he expects too much from me? What if I can't be the person he wants, but I fall head over heels for him and end up getting hurt along the way?

"What are you two slags crying about?" Devon asks as he walks up to us. "Don't you have a wrinkly crotch to wax or something?"

"Devon," Tina says. "Why don't you run along and be the gold digger you were always meant to be."

He glares at us for an uncomfortably long period of time. I'm about to ask him if he's forgotten his medication to prevent catatonia, but then the spell is seemingly broken.

"I have gossip for you, but maybe you don't deserve to hear about it," he says.

What could he possibly have to tell us? "We don't want to hear about how many dicks you had inside you at any given time last night," I say.

"Very funny." He crosses his arms and actually looks hurt by my comment.

Ugh. "I'm sorry, Devon. That was a low blow."

"Not as low as last night, though, Devon? Am I right?" Tina never cared about his feelings and with good reason. He's always been mean to her. However, something doesn't feel right to me.

"What's going on, Devon?" I ask.

He doesn't immediately respond. His eyes roll back into his head. He's either being

possessed by some long-dead desperate housewife or he's deciding if he should tell us what he knows.

"I shouldn't tell you since neither of you deserves to know, but I'm sure you heard about the murders over at Who's Your Caddy?"

We both nod.

"Well, management here felt it would be a good idea for us to learn self-defense. Officially, the money for this is coming out of any potential raises we were supposed to get, but the class is also voluntary." He crosses his arms and looks away. "If you want to go, there's a sign-up sheet in the employee locker room."

I turn to Tina. "Should we check it out?"

"This cheap-ass place is going to withhold raises this year because of some stupid self-defense class? This whole thing pisses me off big time. Maybe I should bring my bow and arrow and teach people how to aim for the human heart?"

"Chill, Tina," Devon says. "No one wants to experience your obsession with The Hunger Games. As if it's not bad enough we had to endure years of you crying about not getting the main role, obsessively talking about how J-Law messed up one of the crucial lines in the movie that only you could have done well. There's got to be medication to help you with this."

"Go away, Devon," I say. "We'll see you later at the class."

Tina starts to argue, but I put my hand up to stifle the budding debate.

"We need to take the class," I say. "Let's go sign up before they take down the sign."

“Fine,” she says, standing up. “I guess if we aren’t going to get a raise this year, we can stick it to them. Make them pay for our classes.”

“Thanks, Devon,” I say to his back as he walks away. “We owe you one.”

He waves his middle finger at us without looking back. I really wish he and Tina could work out their hatred for each other so we could all start to get along at work. It’s always so stressful dealing with their jabs at each other.

We hurry into the locker room and put our names on the signup sheet.

“Look,” Tina points at the time listed for the class to start. “The club is shutting down early. The class is going to be in two hours.”

“There goes our tips for the day.” How can I afford my rent with one less day of tips? Fuck.

“We better go try and squeeze some cash out of our morning appointments if we can,” Tina suggests. “If we flirt enough, we might still be able to make enough for dinner tonight.”

“Good idea,” I say. “Meet me in the day spa once the club closes for the day. The signup sheet said that’s where the class is being held.”

“Do you think the instructor will be some hot, sexy, muscle-bound beefcake, begging for us to succumb to his manliness?” She starts fanning herself with her hand. “Damn, it’s hot in here.”

“Judging by how sweaty your face just got thinking about it, I hope not.”

We share a quick laugh and then go our separate ways. It’s just my luck we aren’t

getting a full day to earn tips. I never miss a day unless I'm on my deathbed. Even then, I've come to work with a fever and body aches so I can still make rent.

I turn the corner on my way to the indoor racquetball courts when I notice someone lurking at the end of the hallway. Stopping short of the door, I stare back, trying to get a better view. It isn't but a few seconds later, a crash from behind me breaks our standoff. I turn to see my boss pushing a full cart of linens. He's run into the laundry room door. By the way the cart is now bent in the front, it appears he was going at a pretty good clip, and the usually unlocked door wasn't open.

"Goddammit," he says.

I turn back, but whoever had been watching me is no longer there. Probably Devon. The guy is harmless but creepy at times. I shrug and step through the doors and into the courts. The squeak of balls and the pounding of feet fill the air as the old patrons relive their youth and try to prove to their opponents how virile they still are. I'd better position myself to take orders for drinks and provide clean towels if I want to garner any tips this morning.

"Hey kid," one guy in super-tight, yellow shorts calls out to me. "I need a drink. If you get me a rum and coke before taking other orders, there'll be something in it for you." He flashes me a one-dollar-bill.

Fuck my life. "Sure thing, sir." I hurry to retrieve his order for the pittance he offers.

The morning goes smoothly, and I make some decent money—enough to pay for dinner tonight and maybe even dinner tomorrow. I hope Tina has had the same luck as I enter the spa area.

Normally, this area is filled with treatment beds and equipment, but it has been moved to the side and replaced with thick, smelly, gym mats. This is going to be far

more legit training than I had expected. Honestly, I was thinking there would be an instructor who yelled a lot and spent the majority of the time either talking about himself or telling us scary stories to keep us engaged. But the way everything is positioned, there is going to be actual hand-to-hand combat.

“Isn’t this awesome,” Tina says as she runs up to me. “This reminds me of the time Katniss was training for the big day. They were all standing around sizing each other up, and you could tell she was going to kick all their asses.”

I nod.

“Look at Stephanie over there,” she motions in the woman’s direction with her head. “She’s terrified... I can smell it.”

“Really? All I can smell are those gym mats. They reek of old sweat and a yeast infection.”

“Eww, Patrick.” Tina slaps my arm. “Get your head in the game.”

I was about to remind her that this is not, in fact, The Hunger Games , but then the doors open behind us. We turn, and I witness something straight out of my dreams. Bright lights burst into the room from outside, and a shadowy figure steps inside. Even his silhouette seems to ripple with muscles.

“Who is this guy?” I ask. “A Greek God? Adonis?”

The doors slam shut behind him, and I blink away the darkness until my eyes adjust to the change in lighting.

“Is that?” Tina asks.

It is. I nod. Michael, in all his six-foot-five glory, walks straight up to me. I look up into his eyes and melt. I want to wrap my arms around him, feel his warmth. I can almost feel his powerful chest pressed against my cheek as if I'd thrown myself against him.

"Patrick," he says. "It's so wonderful to see you again."

My nipples are hard, and my brain stops working.

"Patrick," Tina says, elbowing me in the ribs.

Snapping out of the trance Michael's gray sweatpants have put me in, I recover my wits quickly. "Michael, I had no idea you taught self-defense classes. Are there no bounds to what you can do?"

He smiles, the dimples deepening in both cheeks. The way his blue eyes reflect the overhead lighting makes my belly tingle.

"Seas the Day asked me to come and teach you and your colleagues what to do in case they were ever attacked. My guess, they heard about the situation at Who's Your Caddy."

Situation. You mean double homicide? Truth be told, I'm glad he's here to teach us, but I don't want to share him with everyone. "We are in good hands." I look down and grab his right hand. Could I kiss it? Put a finger in my mouth like a lollipop? Shove the whole thing straight down my pants? Goosebumps spread across my arms and legs. I drop his hand and look at Tina. "We are going to have the best teacher."

"My body is your clay," she says. "Mold me into a great warrior princess."

Michael smiles and glances over at me. I shrug. What can I say? She's dramatic. The

consummate actress, always ready for her big part.

“You’re a quick learner,” he says. “I can tell.”

She giggles and jumps in place.

“I’d better get the class started,” Michael says. “If you would please excuse me.”

“Of course,” I say.

Michael walks to the center of the room. “Can I have your attention please? My name’s Michael Borne, and I’m here to show you how to protect yourself in the event you are attacked.” He indicates a large circle around the room. “Please everyone, have a seat.”

Tina and I hurry over to the side where he is facing and sit down. Looming in front of me is the gray sweatpants, dick print. My mouth waters and my heart pounds. I know he’s giving us instructions, but I can’t hear a single thing he’s saying.

I’ve become dickmatized.

MICHAEL

The self-defense class goes off without a hitch. I'm impressed at how seriously everyone takes it, especially Devon. He doesn't look like much, but he sure can cling on to an attacker if he needs to. I shake my head and laugh—he's like a spider monkey, every time I pull his hand free from one arm, he has reattached himself with the other.

The club graciously lets me use their facilities to clean up afterwards—there isn't a stitch of clothes that isn't soaked with sweat. I strip down, put my clean clothes in a locker, and head into the showers. Damn, these facilities are awesome. Multiple shower stalls, each equipped with a bench, detachable shower head, and all the shampoo and shower gel a guy could ask for.

After turning on the water, I hang my towel up on a hook inside the stall and pull the shower curtain closed. Well, as closed as it will go. Whoever ordered these didn't measure beforehand. There's a ten-inch gap on either side which doesn't offer much privacy.

Oh well, there doesn't seem to be anyone else in here anyway. I'm mid-lather when I hear the shower room door open. I squint and try to look through the suds to see who has come inside, but I'm not having any luck. Whoever it is begins to whistle, but not in a fun way. The creepy tone and cadence of the notes send an unexpected shiver up my spine.

As fast as I can, I hold my head under the water and rinse my hair so I can see. The creeper is moving closer, but then suddenly the whistling stops. The sound of the little metal fasteners holding the shower curtain in place clink, and I jump. Balling my hands into fists, I turn to face whoever has entered my personal space, but no one is there. The curtain has definitely been moved, but whoever moved it is gone.

Stepping out of the shower, I move slowly down the length of stalls, checking to see if I'm still alone. By the time I reach the end and turn to head toward the door, it swings open. Devon steps into the room and stops, looking at my naked, wet body. The twinkle in his eye makes me look back at my stall, wishing I'd brought my towel with me.

"Can I get you anything, coach?" Devon asks. He licks his lips and smiles. "I'd be happy to help you with whatever you need."

Without a word, I rush back to grab my towel, wrap it around my waist, and sigh with relief. "I'm good, Devon."

"Don't I know it?" He swishes his booty toward me like a supermodel on a runway. "You sure are good."

"If you don't mind, I need to finish my shower," I motion toward the door with my chin. "If you're not here to shower yourself... in your own stall, I'd appreciate some privacy." As the last few words come out of my mouth, Patrick walks in wearing nothing but a towel.

He stops, clearly shocked to see me standing there with Devon.

"Suit yourself," Devon says with an attitude. He twirls on his heel and marches toward the door. He stops as he reaches Patrick and says to him, "He wants his privacy. What does that even mean?" And then walks out.

Patrick starts to laugh. “Did he try to rub his ass against you like a cat in heat?”

I wipe my forehead dry and nod. “He’s something else, huh?”

“If you want your privacy, I can wait out there until you’re done,” Patrick says.

The way the towel hangs loose around his waist, the way his abs become visible with each breath, I’m glad the towel is secured around my waist. “Nah, I don’t mind you being in here.”

Patrick wags his eyebrows, but it seems more involuntary and less lecherous. He follows me to the back of the room where my stall is and goes into the one next to mine. We both pull our ill-fitting curtains closed and turn on the water. Soon the steam begins billowing up over the walls and filling the entire room. We haven’t spoken a word to each other since turning on the water, and I’m starting to feel the need to speak.

I’m done washing, but I’m not ready to turn off the water. The more I think about Patrick, naked, wet, touching himself in the shower next to me, the harder my dick grows. Reaching for the shower gel, I lube up my cock and stroke it a couple of times and nearly come. My stomach muscles tighten, and I straighten my legs, locking my knees. I hold my cock tight at the end until the surge of cum stops and I feel I can move without blowing my load.

“It was great to see you today, Patrick.” My voice sounds strange to me, my throat tight with sexual need.

“Thank you so much for showing us how to subdue our attackers,” Patrick says. “I wish I’d had a little more one-on-one time with you... if I’m being honest.”

My cock hardens once again, and my balls tingle with the beginning of the surge.

“Are you busy tonight? I’d be happy to give you some more time... show you a few other kinds of moves.”

Am I coming on too strong? Am I being creepy? God, I want to feel him in my arms, touch his chest and ass, stroke his cock, and feel loved. Despite the hot water washing over me, I get goosebumps.

Patrick turns off his water, and I hear him pull his curtain to the side. “I’m free tonight. I’d love to learn more from you.” The tone of his voice is higher than normal; is he nervous?

I’m about to turn off my water when Patrick, dripping wet and naked, steps in front of my curtain. Pulling it open, I welcome him inside, and he gladly steps in. He looks down at my semi-hard cock and reaches up to touch my chest. His hands feel like fire against my nipples as he slowly rubs them between his fingers. I fight the need that is growing inside me to pick him up and carry him to the benches, envisioning a passionate kiss between us followed by honest and passionate lovemaking.

I take his face into my hands, and our eyes meet. It’s like an unspoken message has passed between us; we both want the same thing. We both need to feel our hearts sync while lying next to each other in post-coital afterglow. Patrick leaps up, wrapping his legs around my waist while holding me around my chest. I catch him up in my arms and lean in for a kiss. Our lips meet, his soft and full, our tongues teasing, dancing, and sliding over each other.

My breath grows heavy as I hold him tight, slowly walking out to the bench where I lower him down.

“Wait,” Patrick says, looking over my shoulder at the door. “I don’t want our first time to be here... at work.”

I nod, kneeling so we can be face-to-face. I trace my finger along his jawline and smile. “I’ll do whatever you feel comfortable with. Your apartment or mine?”

“Meet me at my place, you know the address,” Patrick says before butterfly kissing me on the lips. God, his lips taste like fresh strawberries and mint. This guy is so perfect for me.

“I’ll be there in thirty minutes,” I say.

“Great.” He gets up and hurries out into the locker room. Somehow, I need to get my unceasing boner to stop bouncing with each heartbeat and go away long enough to get my clothes on and drive to his place.

I hurry over to the shower and splash some cold water on my face, chest, and cock. That’ll do the trick.

Pulling up in front of Patrick’s apartment, thirty-five minutes later, I don’t feel bad about being five minutes late. I’ve already had to break a bunch of laws to make it there when I did, including speeding and maybe running a few yellow lights. Not my finest moments as a human, but my heart won’t stop racing with excitement.

Somehow, he’s beaten me here, which is in and of itself impressive. I take the steps two at a time and knock on his door. He pulls it open almost immediately and yanks me inside by the front of my shirt. Immediately, without a word, we begin kissing, hard and fast, breathless within minutes.

Patrick pulls me down the hallway and into his bedroom. He flops back against the bed and pulls off his pants. Is this really happening? I start to unbutton my shirt, but my fingers are too slow. Growing frustrated, I rip the last two buttons clean off when I pull my shirt apart like Superman .

Patrick chuckles and lays back against the bed, his underwear and pants resting next to him on the mattress. His cock, not yet hard, is so beautiful. Circumcised, thick, and darker than mine. My mouth waters. I need to taste it.

I crawl onto the bed, over him. Leaning forward, I kiss him—starting at the mouth, but working my way down his neck, chest, belly, and the soft inner parts of his hips. He moans and thrusts himself up against me; I’m driving him wild. Wrapping my hand around his hard shaft, I kiss the tip of his cock, my lips moistened by precum as I pull away.

I lick my lips. “Delicious,” I say in breathy tones.

“I have condoms in the nightstand,” Patrick says, pointing to the drawer. “I need you inside me.”

Without a word, I get up and pull open the drawer and take out a condom. Using my teeth and one hand, I tear the metallic packet open and slide the rubber into place.

My cell phone rings, and I stop dead in my tracks. It’s my work phone, and I have to answer it. Patrick’s eyes search mine for answers. Why am I not fucking him? What could be so important that I couldn’t finish before answering my damn phone?

“I’m so sorry,” I say, pulling the phone from my pocket. “It’s the station, and I’ve already missed a dozen texts from my partner.”

Patrick sits up at the side of the bed. “Oh, man. Better get it then.”

“Hello?” I answer.

“You’d better get down to the station; there’s been a development,” my partner says. “They’ve made an arrest.”

“In the murder case?”

“Yup, and the boss is on his way. Be best if you got here before him. You know how he gets.”

“Absolutely,” I say and disconnect the call. I sit down next to Patrick. “I’m really sorry about this. I can’t imagine the night I’m giving up right now to go to work, but I don’t have a choice.”

“No worries,” Patrick says, rubbing his hand along my thigh until he reaches my cock. “This’ll be here next time.”

I smile. “It sure will.”

He gives me a peck on the cheek and stands, picking up my shirt and handing it to me. “Go save the world, Michael. Someone’s got to do it.”

I hug him. “Thank you for being so sweet. Can I call you soon?”

“You’d better,” Patrick says, but his eyes look sad to me. Almost like he doesn’t believe we’ll ever get this moment back.

Throwing my clothes on, I rush for the front door, turning back before I close it behind me. Patrick stands there in the hallway, naked from the waist down, the saddest expression etched across his face.

“I promise to call you soon,” I say and close the door.

This job has always treated me well, but at this very moment, I want to punch something.

PATRICK

The following day, I plan to meet Tina at the shooting range. We're both a little freaked out about the recent murders and my apartment break-in. As I walk toward the shooting range, I can hear the thump, thump, thump of arrows hitting their targets and people hollering in excitement.

The late morning air is warm but dry. Thankfully, I won't work up too much of a sweat, if I can help it. Where the hell is Tina? I stop and look around. She isn't at our usual lane, nor is she at the concession stand. Reaching for my phone, I check the messages. Nothing from her saying she changed plans. I send a text asking where she is, but I don't get the usual immediate response.

Hoping for the best, I go to our lane and begin setting up. Placing my bag on the chair next to me, I take out my target practice shoes, glove, wrist guard, and polarized sunglasses. Once everything is in place, I spray on some sunblock and check my phone. Still nothing from Tina.

My heart pitter-patters with nervous energy, or maybe it's the quad shot of espresso I downed in the car on the way to the archery shooting lanes. Either way, I'm feeling nervous as hell and start contemplating calling her—something we usually don't do before noon.

Continuing to scan my surroundings, something catches my attention in the tree-line behind the concession stand. Is that Tina? Squinting, I crane my neck trying to get a

better look. Someone in a bright pink shirt and white shorts is leaning against a tree. What are they doing?

I stand and march in their direction. The figure comes into perfect view, and I gasp, slapping my hand over my mouth and clutching my imaginary pearls. There she stands, leaning against a tree, Jake Bloom pressing up against her. Their faces are smashed into one mess of lips and slobber. Jake's hand is down the front of her shorts. I could turn away. I could pretend I haven't witnessed my friend winning our little bet—the one I'd pretty much given up on once I met Michael. But that isn't my, or Tina's, style.

“Tina Marie Conchita Brokaw, you slut!”

Jake's hand pulls out of her shorts so fast I'm concerned he's given her vagina a rub burn. He steps back from her, his expression one of shock and embarrassment.

Tina turns toward me and wipes her chin dry. The smirk on her face says it all; I win. I can't help but smile. The look we exchange is our own private message. I'm happy for her, and she's proud of herself. Definitely a win-win.

“Oh, my,” Tina says, buttoning her shorts and feigning embarrassment. “I'm so... sorry you had to see that, Patrick.”

“Um, hey Patrick,” Jake says as he steps out of the trees.

I can see I've interrupted more than a make-out session. His pants are tight in the crotch, the outline of his thick cock visible even through his jeans.

“Am I interrupting something?” I ask, my voice purposely dripping with sarcasm.

Jake shakes his head. “Not at all, man.” He turns back to Tina and then looks away

quickly. "I'd better get going." He rushes past me, and I watch him for a few seconds, his bubble butt looking so good in those jeans.

"Damn, Tina. I'm so sorry I fucked that up."

She saunters toward me with a smile on her face. "Don't be. He's one hell of a kisser, but I'm not sure I would have gone all the way with him."

"Really?"

"Yeah," she says. "Something about him seems off. Maybe it's because I haven't been laid in a really long time, but I didn't want it to be him."

"Fair," I say. "But for the record... you won the bet."

She pumps her fist. "Damn straight I did, bestie."

We hug, and I kiss her on the cheek.

"Grab my bag for me?" she asks, pointing toward the trees.

I catch sight of the red pack that holds her equipment and hurry over to get it for her. We then walk together arm-in-arm back toward the shooting lane where my bags hold our spot.

Time flies by as we each shoot our quiver full of arrows. Tina, hands down, outshoots me. At least two-thirds of her attempts are in or just outside the bullseye. Quite amazing, if you ask me.

We walk together down the lane once the whistle is blown, indicating it's safe to retrieve all the arrows. I yank each of mine free of the target, some of the hay bale

poking through the holes I've made in the paper target.

"Bestie," Tina says. "You're really getting better at this. I'm so proud of you."

I shove the last of my arrows into my quiver and say, "Thanks. All this practice has really paid off, but the one who should be proud of them self is you."

"Me?" she asks, pretending to be embarrassed by the compliment. "Why me?"

"You kick ass," I say. "Honestly, the next tournament, you should totally sign up for it. I'd come cheer you on... maybe Jake would too."

"Really?" This time her voice betrays her. She's truly shocked that I feel that way. Her surprise kind of makes me feel bad. Have I not been complimentary enough to my best friend in the whole wide world?

"Speaking of Jake," I say, taking her by the arm and leading her back to the safety of our seats. "Tell me all about what I walked into... what, where, when, and how did this exactly happen? Don't leave out a single detail or I'll scream."

Tina glances over her shoulder. I follow her gaze but don't see anyone within earshot. Apparently, she still doesn't feel secure speaking openly because she grabs my hand and whisks me away to the parking area.

"Get inside, and I'll tell you everything," she says as she unlocks her car doors with a click of the remote.

I do as commanded and wait while she starts the air conditioning and turns down the eighties music she always listens to on loop. Tina slowly turns in my direction and closes her eyes. I'm about to tap her on the shoulder, but something deep inside says to let this play out.

Her eyes flicker open. Ah, it's monologue time.

"There I was," she says, "waiting in line at the concession stand, minding my own business. And who should I see?" Her eyes grow wide, and she clasps her hands over her mouth as she pretends to fight back tears. She shakes her head and swallows. "Jake. That's right. Jake Bloom walked right up to me and smiled. Well, you can only imagine the rest."

I'm about to ask for more details when she puts up her hand to stop me.

"He slides his arm around my shoulders and kisses me on the cheek," she whispers. "On the cheek." With a shaky hand, she reaches for the side of her face. "As if the universe opened up to me and revealed her masterplan, Jake thumbs toward the trees. Well, I know what that means, he wants to make mad passionate love to me. He needs to express all of his pent-up lust and desires for me."

I'm breathless and quiet for a moment. Is it my turn to talk? Ask questions? Again, I go to speak, but when her eyes meet mine, I know she isn't done.

"And that's exactly what we do. Me, pressed up against a tree. Him, sliding his delicate, smooth hand down the front of my shorts," she says. "He fingers me like no one has fingered me before. Now, knuckle deep in my love, he knows what he's doing. Sweet baby Jesus, my legs are trembling, and I swear I hear my uterus cry out. Put a baby in me, Jake." She swipes away the bangs from her forehead and sighs. "It's truly magical."

Torn between puking my guts out at her overly descriptive tale and giving her a standing ovation for a world-class monologue, I simply slow clap. "Well done. You officially won our little bet, but even more so, you have yourself a cutie pie."

She plays it coy for a few seconds, but then bursts out laughing and cheering for

herself. "The weird part was I didn't have to really try. I've never had a guy just come up to me and point at a tree and get down with me."

"Do you feel alright about it?"

"Absolutely," she says. "But if I'm being honest. I don't think I really want to date him. His breath smelled funny, and the way he was digging around in there seemed like he was looking for his keys at the bottom of a purse."

"But you said it was magical."

"He took my breath away," she says. "But again, he could have used a mint."

I burst out laughing. "I swear to God our lives are like a sitcom."

"I know," she says. "Tell me about you, Mister. Didn't you get to see your hot detective, naked?"

Where to even begin with that? "There's a lot to unpack."

"Hey, I gave you the down and dirty. You owe me."

"I saw him in all his glory at work. He was taking a shower, and I saw him naked. It was huge. He was huge... and wet. Ugh, I could have gobbled him up right then and there."

"Why didn't you?"

"I tried, but then we decided to go back to my place and actually do the deed... proper-like."

"So, not in a public bathroom."

"Exactly," I say. "I think since he's a cop and all, he made me nervous and I came up with some ridiculous standards... which I'm totally fine with, but have never lived by. Not to mention, we still didn't get to have sex."

"Why the hell not?"

"He got an important call from work and had to go," I say with a sigh. "Tina?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm kind of scared to get hurt. Michael is a super awesome man, and I really dig him, but what if I let myself truly and madly fall in love, and he breaks up with me?"

"Patrick," Tina says. "Snap out of it. The better question is what is he going to do if you were to break up with him? Stop thinking that everyone is going to leave you. You're the catch here."

At first, I dismiss her words. She's just saying that because we're best friends. But then, I start to let them sink in. Maybe she's right? I am a catch. I need to stop being so scared of being abandoned. It's preventing me from letting myself enjoy a good thing when it comes along.

Still, there's something nagging at the back of my brain. An annoying voice that sounds a lot like my mom. Be careful. Protect your feelings. Men are awful, and they don't care about those they hurt. Granted, she'd been married and divorced eight times by my high school graduation, but her words still plague me no matter how much I try to ignore them.

I check the time on my watch. "We'd better get going."

"Oh shit," she says. "I didn't realize it was so late. I still want to stop and get another coffee before we go to work."

Pulling my bag from the floor, I begin rummaging through the first and then second zippered pockets. Where are my keys? My heart races. How could I have lost my keys? And then I remember my badge was still missing. Something wasn't adding up right here and my stomach tightens. "What the fuck?"

"Bestie? You okay?"

"No, my keys and work badge are missing." I pull open the large, zippered area and yank out everything and toss it on the floor. "Shit... they're gone."

We both stare at the bag in silence.

"Could you have left them in the car?" Tina asks.

I shake my head. "No, my car wouldn't lock and beep if I try and lock it without taking my keys out first." I start shoving all my belongings back into the pack. "I distinctly remember putting them in here."

"Is it possible they were stolen? Maybe when we both went down to collect our arrows at the end of the lane?"

"Maybe," I say. Then it dawns on me. "I left the bag unattended when I went to look for you by the concession stand. Someone must have gone through my stuff and stolen them."

"Why? Is your wallet gone? Your phone?"

I hold up my wallet. "Nope, I've got this right here, and my phone is in my pocket." I

pat my leg just to be sure.

"I don't see what good keys are without knowing where they belong." She looks out the car window and points. "Your car is right over there. You'd think whoever took the keys would have stolen the car too."

Nodding, my head is spinning. None of this makes any sense. "Although, with my work badge, they have my name and where I work." I shiver. "This whole thing creeps me out."

"Not to mention your apartment was broken into just the other day."

"Fuck," I whisper. "I hadn't even thought of that."

"Better call your boyfriend and let him know. Maybe he can come stay with you? Keep you safe?"

"First of all, he's not my boyfriend... at least not yet. But I think it's wise to at least let him know." I cross my arms and sit back into the chair. "You don't happen to have copies of my keys on you... do you?"

"I sure do, bestie." She opens her purse and pulls out a full set of keys. "Front door, mailbox, and car."

Relief washes over me. Even though I'll have to change my locks and be scared every time I set foot in my apartment until I do, at least I can use my vehicle and get to and from work. "Thank you. You're a lifesaver."

We air-kiss before I get out of her car. "I'll see you at work."

"Be careful and don't forget to call Michael. He'll know what to do." She starts the

car, waves goodbye, and pulls away.

Another happy fucking Monday to me.

20

MICHAEL

It's just another crappy Monday at the station. The suspect who'd been arrested the night before turned out to be a piece of shit liar who turned himself in so he could be arrested. Word on the streets these days has suggested to some being arrested got them three free meals and a roof over their heads.

Had to cut him loose a few hours after I arrived that night, having missed out on a date with Patrick. I shrug. Truth be told, I was more upset about missing the date than not catching the murderer. What that says about me right now, I don't know. But, I can't stop thinking about him.

Trying to focus on the job at hand, I'm sitting at my desk with Joe, going over the details of the murders for what feels like the hundredth time. We're both frustrated at the lack of progress. Maybe if we start from the beginning again, we'll catch something we missed before.

"This is really getting to me," Joe says, finishing off his stale coffee.

"Are you talking about the coffee or the case?" I ask.

He smirks and tosses the cup into the trash. "Both."

"There has to be something we're overlooking."

"Of course there's something we're missing," Joe replies, running his hand through his hair. "We just haven't figured it out yet. I need a break. I'm going for a walk."

"Good idea," I say. "Could you grab me one of those sandwiches from the corner store while you're out?"

"Dude, do you have a death wish?" Joe laughs. "No way. I'm getting us burgers from Lou's. Chili fries or regular?"

"Chili fries, definitely," I reply.

Joe's eyes light up. We've both been too absorbed in this case to eat properly, and greasy food sounds perfect right now. "I'll be back soon."

"Thanks, man."

As Joe leaves, I turn back to the whiteboard covered in pictures of the victims and possible suspects. We've eliminated everyone except for one problem - we can't find any solid leads. What are we missing?

Leaning on my desk, I can't help but think about Patrick. Just the thought of him eases my stress. But then I remember our near miss the other day. We were so close to finally being together, but work had to interrupt.

My phone rings, snapping me out of my thoughts. It's Patrick.

"Hey," I answer. "I was just thinking about you."

There's a pause on the other end, making me wonder if I said something wrong.

"Patrick?"

"I'm sorry," he finally speaks. "I shouldn't be bothering you. You're probably busy with work."

"Are you okay? What's going on?"

Another pause.

"Patrick, where are you? Do you need me to come over?"

"I'm at home," he says. "But Tina asked me to call you."

"Okay, what's going on? You sound worried."

He hesitates. "Someone stole my keys – to my car, apartment, and work."

"When did this happen?"

"Today," he replies. "We were at the shooting range, and when we got back to the cars, I realized they were gone."

Damn. "Do you know if the range has security cameras?"

"I'm not sure," Patrick admits.

"I'll check it out," I say, grabbing my jacket. Just then, Joe returns with our food.

"Thanks, Michael," Patrick says. "I really appreciate it. Sorry to bother you."

"It's no bother," I assure him. "I'll be there soon."

"Can you come over after work?" he asks. "I could really use your company."

"Of course," I reply. "I'll check the cameras and then head over."

"Thank you," Patrick says, sounding relieved. "I'll see you later."

"What was that about?" Joe asks, digging into his chili fries.

"That guy I went out with the other night," I explain. "His keys got stolen, and he's freaked out."

"Looks like you're his knight in shining armor," Joe jokes.

I chuckle. "Something like that. I'm going to check the security cameras at the shooting range. Wanna come?"

"Nah," Joe declines. "I'll stay here and stare at this whiteboard a little longer. Plus, the Missus is making lasagna tonight."

"Save me some leftovers," I request with a grin.

"You got it," Joe replies, handing me a bag of food. "Go save the day."

I head out, but the more I think about it, the less funny the situation seems. Missing keys could be nothing, but with the case I'm working on, it could be connected. Not to mention, that day at the mall where I know I saw someone following Patrick and Tina. It was a dead end at that time as the mall security cameras were offline, but it still adds up to being interesting... suspect.

As I drive to the shooting range, I can't shake the feeling of unease. When I arrive, I ask about security cameras, but it turns out they're all fake. No footage to review. Again? What were the chances?

Back in my car, I ponder the situation. There's no way I'm not spending the night at Patrick's place. And I'm not there for anything other than to help him feel safe.

When I get to his building, his neighbor, Diamond, approaches me.

"Hey, mister," she greets me. "Looking for a good time?"

I smile but politely decline. "I'm here to see Patrick. Is he home?"

She nods. "Sure is. He got back a while ago."

"Do you keep an eye on him?" I ask.

"That boy needs someone looking out for him," she says. "I feel responsible."

"I'm glad you do," I reply. "He needs friends."

"We all do," she agrees. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to make some money."

I hand her some cash and my business card. "Consider it a donation to the Patrick Protection Fund. If you see anything suspicious, let me know."

She accepts the money and promises to keep an eye out. As she walks away, I hurry up the steps to his place and knock on the door. I hear him approach, no doubt double-checking through the peephole to make sure it's me before unlocking the door.

He opens it. "I'm so glad you're here. Come inside."

I step through the door, and he locks it behind me.

"Here," he says, handing me a glass of red wine. "Come tell me about your day. I

want to hear all about it."

I take the wine and smile. It feels so right. Even though I'm here to help ease his concerns, he welcomes me in as a trusted companion, and I love it.

We sit on the sofa side-by-side and clink glasses.

PATRICK

We're sitting on the sofa, watching television and drinking wine for the past couple of hours. I try to steal glances at him. He smells so good, and the way the buttons strain and the fabric gaps between his pecs makes my cock jump.

I haven't even been paying attention to what's been streaming on TV for the last half-hour, and truth be told, I don't give a damn. All I want to do is rip Michael's buttons off with my teeth, one by one. I take another sip of my wine and close my eyes. Instantly, my mind fills with images of his hairy, muscular chest. He's a true daddy in every sense of the word, and I have no idea how I got so lucky.

He's older than me, but still looks and acts young. We have so much in common, and I really don't want to keep looking. I sigh, careful to do so under my breath. Michael is perfect for me. So, when is the other shoe going to drop? When is he going to inform me that he likes to eat puppies? Or that he enjoys having sex when death metal plays in the background. Patrick, I think... stop being so judgmental. But I can't help it... I don't like those things, and they'd be deal-breakers. When are the deal-breakers going to reveal themselves?

"Penny for your thoughts?" Michael asks.

Not on your life, buddy. "Huh?" I need to buy myself some time to think.

"You haven't said anything for a while. Are you okay? I'm having a really nice time

with you."

"Me too," I say. "There's nothing wrong."

"But?" His voice betrays his own worries. His eyes are so blue, drawing me in, begging me to kiss him.

"Full disclosure?"

"Definitely." He shifts his weight so he can turn and face me.

"I keep waiting for the other shoe to drop."

"What do you mean?"

How do I explain that I have the worst luck in the world? As an adult, I've never even been in love. I shrug. "I keep waiting for a romantic comedy turn of events to happen. Like you're going to reveal you're actually married... or you were only looking to make a new friend."

"Oh my god." He puts a hand to his chest, grasping imaginary pearls.

"Come on," I say. "Just tell me you have two weeks to live. Or you're moving to Pakistan or something."

He grabs my hands and pulls me closer to him, leaning in and slowly kissing me on the lips. He tastes like Rosé, and his tongue slips into my mouth with a flurry of sensation.

"I don't have any secrets... there's nothing I'm keeping from you. Promise," he says as he pulls away, but then kisses me once more with soft, sensuous lips. My belly tingles

with desire. My hands tremble with the need to rub his chest and shoulders, and then tear his clothes from him.

I clear my throat, tight with emotion and sexual desire. "I believe you."

He smiles.

I smile, reaching for his chin and then pulling him closer once again. This time, I kiss him. Standing, I slowly straddle him.. The naughty smile I'd hoped to see spreads across his face. The twinkle in his eyes tells me all I need to know, he's as ready as I am, and it's go time.

Michael's erection pushes against my bottom as I grind my hips into him. He moans, our lips never coming apart from one another. Within seconds, we've found our rhythm, both our bodies rubbing against each other with optimal feeling. Michael wraps his arms around me and hugs me tight.

He kisses my neck, soft and sweet. He whispers, "Patrick, you make me feel real... wanted, for real."

His words cause me to flinch, and I pull away. You make me feel real. These were the exact words Ricky in high school had said whenever we were together and alone. It wasn't until we were away from everyone else that he opened up to me and became the person he'd been born to be.

"What's wrong?" Michael asks, concern etched across his face. "Are you okay? Did I hurt you?"

I pull away, backing off his lap and stand. What can I say? How can I still be affected by this? What the hell is wrong with me? I shake my head and cross my arms. Fighting the urge to run away, I grab both our empty wine glasses and head for the

kitchen.

"I'll get us a refill." I hurry away, instantly wanting to kick myself in the butt. Here I go again, ruining a good thing. I open the refrigerator and pull out a fresh bottle, white wine this time.

Looking back into the living room, I can see Michael still sitting there watching television, although I'm sure he isn't actually paying attention. He's most likely trying to figure out what the hell my problem is. I pour wine into the glasses, then slowly walk back and hand him one.

"Thank you," he says, taking the wine. He immediately takes two gulps. Yep, he's freaked out, and why wouldn't he be? I'm acting like a freak.

I lower myself down next to him on the sofa and sigh. "I owe you an apology."

He shakes his head. "You don't ever have to apologize. If you're not ready... you're not ready. I can be patient."

"It's not that," I say. "Or at least it's not just about that."

"What is it then?" he asks. "I don't want you to feel pressured into anything."

"I don't," I say.

"Then, what is it?" He shifts uncomfortably in his seat. "If I said something or did something wrong, please tell me. Patrick, I really like you."

Michael's tone is so heartbreaking. I made him blame himself. This is exactly why I've struggled to be intimate with someone I care about. Wait... I care about him. I must really care about Michael.

This is a really good thing. Suddenly, my spirits feel lifted. My feelings are really starting to come to the surface, and I want to keep it going. "It's not you... it's me."

"You're ending this already?" His eyes go wide.

"No," I say. "No... nothing like that." I start laughing.

"Why are you laughing?"

I try to explain, but I can't stop myself. This whole thing has been so ridiculous. "I'm sorry. It's not so much funny as it is stupid."

He rests back against the sofa. "Care to share?" His expression has softened and he clearly feels better than he did just a few moments ago.

Regaining control of myself, I take another sip of wine. "First, do you have enough wine?"

He looks at his glass and nods.

"Okay," I say with a smile. "You're going to need it after this story."

Michael smirks. "This I've got to hear."

"We're going to have to jump into a way-back machine," I say. "Picture it, Senior Prom... 2018."

"First of all, ouch," Michael says with a laugh. "Now, I feel really old."

I swat his arm. "Don't. You're gorgeous. Anyway, the Varsity Football Quarterback, Ricky and I had a special moment in the boys' room. One thing led to another, and

before I knew it, I was draining him dry in the back of his pickup truck.”

“Hot.”

“Yes,” I agree. “But I caught feelings for him. He was a real nice guy... when no one else was around. We had more in common than our joy of gay sex. He was actually a really interesting guy, and I fell so hard for him.”

“What happened to him? Did he die?”

I shake my head. “No, nothing like that. I kind of feel like it was actually worse. We would have sex, laugh, talk, and figure out how we were going to conquer the world together... but that was only while we were alone. At school or in public, I was lucky when he ignored me... sometimes he’d even laugh and point at me with his football buddies. Each and every time it was a knife in my chest.”

Michael reaches for my hand and holds on. It's nice. Seems like he isn't going anywhere. I swallow down my rising emotions.

“Eventually,” I continue, “I couldn't take it any longer. It got to the point where I didn't want to go to school, couldn't bear to see him with his friends or in public. I stopped going out with friends for fear of encountering him at parties or places the kids from school wanted to hang out.”

“Did I say something that triggered you?”

I nod. “He would say to me, ‘when I'm with you I feel real’. When you said that, it was like a gut punch. I know you didn't mean it... and it's stupid because it's been years since this all happened, but my feelings were really destroyed that year.”

“I'm so sorry you went through something like that. I can't even imagine.” He shakes

his head. “There’s probably nothing I could really say to make you feel better at this moment, but please know... I’m not Ricky. I would never walk away that easily from someone like you. You’re honestly fantastic... smart, cute, funny... kind.”

Letting out a held breath, I fall back into the sofa. “Tell me more.”

Michael laughs. I laugh. I feel so much better... telling him the truth. Even my bestie, Tina didn’t know the entire story.

“Patrick,” he says, putting the wine glass down on the coffee table. “I am falling for you.”

I nod and swallow down the lump in my throat. “I truly believe you, and what that tells me is I am also falling for you.”

“We don’t have to solve anything tonight. There’s no sense in rushing into anything. In fact, time is on our side. Especially since I’m not planning on moving to Pakistan... unless you’ve got something crazy up your sleeve you haven’t mentioned yet?”

I smile. “Maybe... but nothing that can’t wait until next time. Like you said, time is on our side.”

Michael gets up and offers his hand to me. I take it, and he pulls me up into an embrace. I melt into his chest, my arms wrapped around the lower part of his chest. I can hear his heartbeat as he holds me. Nothing has felt so right for so long.

“I’d like to stay the night, Patrick,” he says.

We rock back and forth a slowly, neither of us letting go of the other. There’s nothing I’d like more than to have this burly man sleeping next to me in my bed. All night.

But, I also can't expect him to come running to my side like I'm some damsel in distress. Sure, it was great in the movies, but wouldn't that make me some kind of little bitch?

I pull away and we gaze into each other's eyes. My heart begins to beat faster and I can't help but tremble with desire. "I want you to stay, but I think I have to prove to myself I'll be fine here alone."

"No," he says. "There's nothing to prove. I want you to be safe... to help you stay safe."

Grabbing his hand, I kiss his fingertips and then go up on my tiptoes to kiss him softly on the lips. "I love hearing you say that. Just knowing how much you care about me is comfort enough. But no," I say. "I need to stay by myself tonight."

"Are you absolutely sure?" His eyes search mine for any indication of my faltering resolve.

"I'm sure," I say with a smile. "And look, I'll use one of my kitchen chairs to wedge under the front door... just in case."

"Well, in that case, I should go," he says. "I think you got this all under control, and there's a lot to do in the morning for work. The investigation keeps growing." Michaels tone was soft and unconvincing, but he would abide by my wishes.

Such a good man.

"I'm guessing you can't tell me anything about it, but you know I'm dying to know everything."

He kisses the top of my head. "Hopefully soon I'll be able to tell you all the gritty

details. Any chance you're available to have dinner on Thursday?"

I pull away and grab my phone. "Let me check my schedule." I pull up the calendar and smile. "Wide open that day."

"Perfect," he says. "I was thinking of cooking for you? Would you enjoy that?"

"As long as I don't have to cook, I'd love it." I shove the phone into my pocket and start toward the front door.

"Not much of a cook, huh?"

"My favorite recipe is, making reservations."

We share a quick laugh as he walks through the door. He turns back, our eyes locked.

"Thank you," I say.

"For what?"

"Being real."

He nods and walks away. I close the door and lean against it. Could he really be this perfect for me?

MICHAEL

When did Thursday sneak up on me? I scramble around the kitchen, regretting my offer to cook for Patrick. Whenever I get stressed about making a meal for someone special, it always ends up burnt. Should I just order pizza?

Shaking my head, I decide against it. Pizza wouldn't exactly impress him. Time to face reality. I swing open the refrigerator door and gasp.

"What the hell happened to all my food?" Oh, right. I was supposed to go grocery shopping yesterday, but then Joe, my partner, got a lead on the case we've been working on.

That case is slowly driving me insane. We've barely made any significant progress. Every lead we've chased so far has led to dead ends. It's beyond frustrating. Joe even mentioned the words "cold case" the other day, alluding to the fact that we might get reassigned with we don't start making progress. But I'm not ready to give up just yet. Yesterday's lead still holds promise, at least for now. Another victim found in the area. Not at a country club, but not far enough away from Who's Your Caddy to completely rule it out.

In fact, the DNA of the possible perp found on the latest victim, came back as male. Not surprising, but it's a solid lead for once. The District Attorney managed to get warrants for DNA samples from all the employees at both country clubs. It shouldn't take too long to test everyone and narrow down our suspect pool.

Closing the refrigerator door, I turn to the pantry. There are at least four boxes of pasta and some sauce. Lasagna it is. Glancing at the time and quickly calculating, I grab the pasta and sauce from the shelf. After making sure there's ground beef in the freezer, I take that out too and get to work.

Before I know it, the house is filled with the heavenly aroma of cooking lasagna, bringing back memories of cooking with my mom when I was younger. We used to attempt recipes from her grandmother, doing our best to follow them. My ancestors would probably disapprove of using jarred sauce, but my mom always said adding a few seasonings and fresh basil made it homemade.

My mom's the best.

Suddenly, I'm adding the final layer of mozzarella cheese to the top of the lasagna. The oven is preheated and, after checking the time again, I realize there's just enough time to cook it before Patrick arrives.

My stomach flutters at the thought of him. His smile, the way he talks with his hands, how excited he gets over the little things—it all makes me fall even harder for him. I was so nervous last night about him coming over, I had trouble sleeping. Usually, I'd resort to my tried-and-true method of quickly relieving stress, but I wanted to save myself for tonight.

The phone rings, and I answer it straight away.

"Hey, Michael, it's Dan." He's my neighbor next door. We're not exactly friends, but we're decent enough neighbors.

"What's up?" I ask.

"Your sprinklers have sprung a leak, man. My wife said your entire backyard is

flooding.”

“Oh, shit!” I run to the back window and see two of the sprinkler heads spraying water six feet in the air. “Thanks, Dan. Gotta go.”

Without hesitation, I rush outside and search for the irrigation kill-switch. Where did the real estate agent say it was? I haven’t lived in the home long, and I haven’t had any trouble with the irrigation system until today. Ah, the east side of the house. That’s right, next to the switchbox.

I quickly locate the irrigation control, switch off the water, and hurry back to the tiny flood waiting for me in the yard. As I reach it, I slip and fall flat on my backside.

“Nice one,” Dan yells over the fence. “Let me know if you need anything.”

I wave him off. “Thank you. I think I’ll handle it myself.”

Despite my annoyance, I can’t help but laugh. My entire backside is drenched, soaked in muddy water and now stained by the grass. I stand and examine the broken sprinkler heads up close. How did this happen? If I’d run them over while mowing the lawn, I would have noticed days ago.

Picking up the broken sprinkler head, I notice jagged edge marks on the plastic. Someone intentionally damaged them. This wasn’t an accident. A sense of being watched sends shivers down my spine. Rubbing my finger along the edges, I start forming scenarios in my mind. Did Joe and I disturb the killer? Is he aware we’re getting closer? Or is this just a way to mess with me?

Shaking my head, I try to clear my mind but make a mental note to tell Joe about it tomorrow. For now, I need to clean up this mess and make sure the sprinklers aren’t further damaged below the surface. A water leak could be costly if left unchecked,

not to mention the damage it could do to the landscaping.

After grabbing a shovel from the garage, I'm soon elbow-deep in mud. Fortunately, it seems like everything is fine, and the repairs should be relatively inexpensive.

Sitting in the wet grass, I start fiddling with the broken sprinkler heads, trying to determine the size and type so I can buy replacements.

"There you are," Patrick says as he rounds the side yard into the back. "I've been ringing the doorbell, but no one answered."

I jump up from the ground, dropping what I was working on. "Damn, so sorry." Looking down at myself, I realize I must look like a mess.

"What are you doing out here?" he asks.

"Ugh, the sprinkler system sprung a leak." I try to wipe my hands clean on my clothes, but there aren't enough dry spots. "I'd give you a hug, but..."

"No worries." He chuckles. "Not going to lie, you look good... all dirty and hardworking."

I chuckle in return. "You're too kind."

"I brought wine," he says, holding up a bottle of Merlot.

"That's going to go great with the lasagna," I start to say. "The lasagna. No." Running past Patrick, I take the three steps to the back door in one leap. As I pull the door open, the smell of overdone pasta fills the air. "Not again."

Yanking the oven door open, the kitchen fills with smoke and the alarm blares its

judgmental signal. I toss the pan onto the stove, turn off the oven, and close the door. Using a dish towel from the counter, I wave it in front of the smoke detector until it finally stops.

Patrick steps over and peers down at the crispy pasta dish. “If you want my opinion, we can just scrape the top off and eat the rest? I can’t remember not having burnt food growing up. My mom hated to cook and said we either eat the burned pieces or go buy our own food.” He shrugs and pokes at the top layer. “Oh, this is still good. See that?”

Is he being nice, or is he serious? It’s been so long since I’ve been out with a decent person, it’s hard to tell what he really means. “I’m sorry about dinner. We can order pizza if you want?”

“No,” he says. “Seriously, it’s totally edible.” He steps closer to me, seductively touching my chest, running his fingers down the middle of my belly. I bite my bottom lip and arch my eyebrow. My jeans grow tight in the crotch as Patrick’s fingers linger on me. An unconscious rumble emanates from deep inside my chest. I want to pick him up and carry him into my bedroom. “If I didn’t know better, I’d think you weren’t really all that hungry for lasagna.”

Patrick unbuttons one of my shirt buttons, then another. “I love this,” he says, touching my chest hair. “Go get cleaned up. If you show me where the dishes are, I’ll serve us up food and drink.”

I begin unbuttoning my shirt the rest of the way, pulling it off my shoulders as I step away from him. Dropping the shirt to the floor, I pause, looking back at Patrick and smile. After I round the corner, I stop and take off my jeans, tossing them down the hallway where Patrick will see them land. A few more feet and I leave my socks and underwear at the entrance to my room, like I’m leaving breadcrumbs for him to follow if he wants. Hoping he gets the hint and I didn’t make a mess for no reason, I

hurry into the bathroom.

The shower heats up, and I shiver as my body quickly cools without the damp clothes. Perfect, hot like I like it. Stepping into the shower, I quickly begin scrubbing myself clean. I hope Patrick catches my drift and wants to join me, but if he doesn't, I better hurry up and rejoin him in the kitchen.

Suddenly, the shower door opens and Patrick steps inside, completely naked. "Fancy meeting you in here," he says, putting both hands on my chest. I smile and lean down, kissing him on the lips. "I was hoping you'd want to join me."

He looks me up and down, his gaze stopping twice on my ever-hardening cock. "I wouldn't miss this for the world."

Patrick wraps his hand around my dick and begins working the shaft, cradling my heavy balls in his hand. I let my head fall backwards with a moan. I begin playing with my nipples, squeezing them between my fingers, with just a hint of pain. His hot breath on the head of my cock sends a shiver up my spine, and my body is instantly covered in goosebumps. When he takes my head into his mouth, I reach down and place both my hands on the back of his head, edging my cock deeper to the back of his throat.

His hand picks up speed as he licks the underbelly of my head. "Do you like that, Papi?" he asks. I nod and suck air between my teeth. His tongue works the tip and hole so perfectly, I'm already edging. I have to pull back, forcing him to let go. I'm not ready to come, not yet.

"Stand up," I whisper. He stands, and we kiss, slowly at first, but then with such earnest need that my lips burn against Patrick's stubble. Our tongues slide past each other, playing and teasing with each little turn and touch.

Patrick pulls away first, gasping for breath. The need in his eyes turns me on even more. The way he looks at me, as if I'm the only man he's ever seen, ever needed, drives me wild. I kneel, allowing the hot water to flow over us, but this time, it's my turn to service him.

Patrick's cock is hard, pulsing with pleasure. I take him into my hand and slowly work his shaft until I see pearly drops of pre-cum drip from its tip. Without wasting another beat, I take his cock into my mouth until his head hits the back of my throat and my nose presses against his lower belly. He moans as my tongue slides over his shaft, back and forth, teasing the soft sensitive tip of his head.

I work his cock, sucking, licking, and stroking. Reaching up, I cup his ass in my hand as his legs tremble. He's getting close to climaxing. I can feel the way his cock pulses in my mouth, thickening even further as he's completely engorged, ready to come.

"I'm... getting... close," he pants. "I..."

Pulling him from my mouth, I stroke his cock and look up into his eyes as he watches me. His legs tremble, his knees twitch as if they're ready to buckle. He leans his head back against the shower wall and moans.

Ribbons of hot cum squirt across my face as I continue to stroke him throughout the climax. A second blast lands in my hair, and he begins to laugh. "Oh, fuck," he moans. "Fuck. Oh my god, Papi." He opens his eyes and wipes my face clean as I continue to kneel before him.

He holds out his hand, and I take it to stand. We stand in the hot water as it washes over us, wrapped in each other's arms. Without words, we hold each other tight. I feel my desire to be with him deepen. After an unknown amount of time, the water begins to cool, and I feel him shiver. He kisses my neck but doesn't pull away. It's clear he doesn't want this moment to end any more than I do.

I reach back and turn off the cool water and kiss the top of his head. "I'm not sure what to say," I say honestly.

He shakes his head and squeezes me tight one last time before reaching for a towel. "There's nothing to say."

Were those tears in his eyes? I want to ask if he's okay, but I don't know what to say. He reaches for my hand and kisses it. "You're an amazing man."

My heart melts. "I feel the same about you."

He nods and steps out of the shower. I grab my towel and join him as we towel off and begin getting dressed. He finishes first and says, "How about some burnt lasagna?" He smiles, and I laugh.

"And wine."

"Oh, there's always time for wine."

He walks out of the room and heads into the kitchen. He's probably going to plate the food and pour the wine while I finish getting ready. I look at myself in the mirror. I'm smiling, and no matter how I try to wipe it off my face, it won't stay gone. I feel like I'm in college again, experiencing sex for the first time.

I might actually be falling in love.

PATRICK

It's been two days since I've seen Michael and over a week since we had our sexy shower. I'm getting twitchy for more. We've planned a romantic dinner at a fancy restaurant. Honestly, I was hoping for something more affordable since I'm on a budget, but when I suggested McDonald's, he offered to pay.

Never one to turn down a free meal, I also don't want to seem like a mooch. I would agree to pay anything if I had to, but I don't want to blow my entire food budget on one meal and eat ramen noodles at home for the next week. Thankfully, Michael is a gentleman and offered to pay. I have to plan exactly how I'm going to make it up to him. Judging from our last shower encounter, I have an idea of what he likes.

My stomach rumbles because I haven't eaten all day. Not only am I too nervous to eat, but the shirt I plan on wearing is one sandwich away from not fitting. If I'm going to bust out of this shirt, I'd better be in the middle of a good time. Flashes of Michael's sexy, wet, muscular body fill my mind. That man is an Adonis, but he doesn't even seem to know it—making him even hotter in my eyes.

Standing in front of the bathroom mirror, I finish putting a bit of gel in my hair. Not too much, but enough that I won't have to worry about it the rest of the day. Clearing the counter of products, I shut the vanity drawer and take a long hard look at myself in the mirror. It's not about making sure my hair is perfect, my skin is moisturized, or my shirt is pressed properly. I look into my own eyes, into my soul, concentrating on my feelings and wants.

Staring back at me is a man who has never felt true love before, never experienced more than a couple of dates with the same person before running away or being turned off by the other man's opinions, quirks, or mommy issues. There's a sadness in my eyes I hadn't noticed before. It's not sagging skin or wrinkles; I'm far too young for that. It's a feeling inside me wanting to emerge.

Is that hope?

It's not that I need a man to feel happy or content, but there's definitely something about finding your own person. Someone who loves you and whom you love back. A man who thinks about you when you're not around, looks forward to seeing you when he has to work late. So, while Michael isn't the reason for my happiness, like in some kind of movie-land fairytale, he's someone who gives me hope. Hope that I can have what I want in a partner.

The alarm buzzes on my phone. It's time to meet Michael at the Fortune Garden. I've never eaten there, mostly due to the price and the fact that there's always a waitlist to get inside since they opened three months ago. I don't know how he managed it, but Michael says he knows a guy and we have a table for two. I grab my keys and rush out of the apartment. I lock the door behind me and pause for a moment.

I still don't feel safe at the apartment since my keys were stolen, but there haven't been any more incidents of break-ins or murders. Granted, the police haven't solved anything, but maybe whoever was guilty of the crimes has moved on somewhere else. Either way, I'm ready for a nice Chinese dinner and no one is going to stop me from seeing Michael tonight.

Shit, I have twenty minutes to get there and on a good day the GPS says eighteen. Fingers crossed, I hop into the car and speed away from the curb. After breaking at least a few laws along the way, I make it to the restaurant just in the nick of time to meet my law enforcement boyfriend. The irony of this is not lost on me as I hurry to

the front door.

Once inside, my vision quickly adjusts to the low light in the waiting area.

“Do you have a reservation?” a beautiful young hostess asks.

I’m about to answer when Michael steps over to me and wraps an arm around my back, pulling me into him. “He’s with me.”

As I look up at him, he leans down and kisses me on the lips. Sparks fly just as they have every time our lips meet. He pulls away and addresses the hostess once again, while I continue to gawk at him like a love-struck fool. I can’t see myself, but I swear I’m having an out-of-body experience.

“We have a table for two,” Michael says. “The name is Borne and the reservations were made by Mr. Fong.”

She nods and smiles. “It would be my pleasure to seat you. Please follow me.” The hostess takes us to our seats, motioning for us to sit. “Your waiter is Ethan, and he will be here momentarily.”

“Thank you,” we both say as she turns and walks away.

“How did you get us reservations for this place?” I ask. “This has been the most exclusive restaurant since it opened in West Hollywood months ago.”

“Mr. Fong told me that I will always have a standing reservation under his name.”

“How’d you manage that?”

“I caught the man who murdered his wife,” Michael says, leaning closer so he can

whisper the rest. “His wife was killed by the Yakuza. They’re basically the Japanese version of the mafia.”

“And you solved her murder?” I put my hand over my mouth for a second. “That’s incredible... and dangerous. I can only imagine.”

He nods. “The main thing is Mr. Fong and his children are safe now. I wish we would have known she had a hit out on her life earlier so we could have tried to prevent it from happening in the first place.”

“Oh, man.” I sit back in my chair. “I almost wish we had this reservation for another reason. That’s intense.”

“I know,” he says. “I’ve learned as a detective that all our lives are fragile. It takes one person to upend what we have and change our existence forever. Honestly, it’s taken me a while to learn to let things go... allow bad things to happen that are out of my control. No one can stop everything bad from happening. My goals are now to help as many as I can, feel content with the good I can do, and keep those close to me safe.” His eyes linger on me a little longer with that last statement.

He’s referring to me when he speaks of keeping those close to him safe. My belly flutters with butterflies again. Usually, I avoid things that make me nervous, but this is different. The attraction I feel for him is on a level I’ve never felt before and it’s intoxicating.

“Good evening,” the waiter says as he walks up to the table, menus in hand. He opens and hands us each one before beginning his spiel. “My name is Ethan, and I’ll be your waiter this evening. Have either of you been here before?”

I shake my head no, but Michael just smiles and says, “We’d love to hear about the specials.”

“You’re in for a treat tonight, I can assure you,” he says, without opening a menu to reference. “Our special tonight is Kobe beef. It is served shabu-shabu, with a side of sticky rice, imported vegetables, and traditional ramen. I can give you a few minutes to look over the menus if you need?”

I glance across the table to Michael who isn’t even holding his menu. “Did you already know what you’re going to have?”

“Usually, I stick with the special and tonight’s sounds delicious.”

Ethan turns to me with expectant eyes. Clearly, it’s I who will either hold up the show or go with the flow. “I guess we will both be having tonight’s special.”

“Fantastic,” Ethan says. “You won’t be disappointed, I can assure you.” He points at the menu in my hands. “If you turn to the back, there is a list of wines, spirits, and traditional fare.”

“I’ll let Michael order that for us,” I say.

He smiles and addresses the waiter. “We will have your sake, warm, and two waters, please.”

“Perfect choice,” Ethan says with a slight bow of the head. He turns on his heel and hurries away from the table.

“Shabu-shabu?” I ask.

“It’s how the Kobe beef is prepared. Thinly sliced and flash-boiled in water. It tastes like butter. I promise.”

Someone comes by and drops off water at the table. I take the glass and sip the

filtered water. “Nicer water than I get at the apartment, that’s for sure. I think they use the same reverse osmosis system we do at the club.”

“I can’t believe Los Angeles thinks the water we drink out of the tap is healthy. There’s got to be a higher than allowed level of chlorine at the very least.”

I take a moment to look around the restaurant. People of all ages, races, and backgrounds are enjoying their food while soft Japanese music and the faint sounds of nature play. The one thing everyone seems to have in common, other than me, is money. There’s no way a working schlep like myself would set foot in here if they had to actually pay for their meal. Sudden panic sets in. I didn’t even check the menu for the price of my meal—not that a place like this has dollar amounts listed. Shit, I know he said he was going to pay, but this is too much to ask. I feel a little uncomfortable.

“Is everything alright?” Michael asks. “You look worried.” He turns and looks over his shoulder for a moment. “Is someone here making you feel uncomfortable?”

Should I just lie? Or be honest and explain that I will probably never be able to afford to take him out for a meal like this? I hear Tina’s voice in the back of my head telling me to be honest. If you really like this guy, don’t start figuring out ways to lie to him already. Save that for when you’re married and you spend too much online and have to hide the packages as they’re delivered in the mail.

“I hate that you are going to pay for dinner and I will never be able to pay you back by doing the same... at least not in a place like this.” There it is. I’m being honest and vulnerable. Probably, for the first time this early on in a relationship.

“Don’t worry about it,” he says. “I wouldn’t have suggested it if I wasn’t comfortable paying. Not to mention, there’s something sexy about getting to pamper you like this.”

I try to cover my smile with my napkin, but there's no way he can't see my blush even in the low lighting.

"Hope that's okay with you?" he adds.

Reaching across the table, I take his hand in mine. We look into each other's eyes, and I swear I see him blush a little bit too.

"What do we have here?" A skinny, flushed-faced Twink in tight jeans and a half-shirt says as he walks up to our table.

I pull my hand away from Michael's and turn to the intruder. I'm about to ask him if he's lost or needs directions to the nearest STD clinic, but the twit speaks first.

"Michael," he says. "I can't believe you haven't returned my phone calls."

He knows Michael?

The intruder continues, "There's still time to make me an honest man, big guy. The last time I saw you, you were practically begging for it." He turns and glances at me before he addresses Michael again. "Don't tell me you're cheating on me with that."

Michael's dating him? What the fuck?

I stand and toss my napkin on the table.

"No," Michael says, holding up his hand toward me trying to get me to stop. "It's not what you think. I've..."

"Save it," I say. "I should have known this was too good to be true. People like you and me... it never works out." I grab the water glass on the table, toss it in the

intruder's face, and walk away.

As I leave, I hear Michael say, "Blake. We are not together. What the hell are..."

I pick up the pace and leave before I can hear any more. What's the point? Clearly, they had a thing and Michael is trying to keep it a secret. Weirder scenarios have happened, why am I so shocked by this one?

As I walk down the sidewalk, I book a ride-share to pick me up at the next stoplight. By the time I arrive, it's there waiting for me. After opening the door, I look back toward the restaurant, half expecting Michael to be running down the street to stop me from leaving.

Nothing but streetlights and car headlights zooming past. I get into the vehicle and shut the door. Another chapter in my life now closed as well. Fuck my life. I really thought this was going to be something.

24

MICHAEL

My home feels more like a prison than it does my sanctuary. Pacing back and forth in the kitchen stopped being therapeutic thirty minutes ago, and I've upgraded to walking into the living room. This is ridiculous. Why hasn't Patrick texted me back? Not even to say, "Fuck off, Michael." Nothing bothers me more than the cold shoulder. Nothing.

Talk about bad timing. Blake showing up at the same restaurant we decided to go to on the same night. How could that loser have even afforded to get inside? No doubt, hooking up with someone twice his age and ten times his annual salary. After our one date ended with me going to the crime scene, we never even spoke again. There was no point, and we both knew it. Or at least I thought he understood that too.

I could strangle him for pretending to be in a relationship with me. I guess he wants revenge for not hearing back from me, but we have absolutely nothing in common. Crossing my arms, I plop down on the sofa like a child having a temper tantrum. It's not a good look, and I know it. Thank goodness I'm alone, or I'd be embarrassed about it later.

It's been more than twenty-four hours without a peep from Patrick. I need to do something, so I grab my keys and rush out the door. Tempted to put the removable police light on my car and bust through traffic, I stop myself and take control of my emotions. No sense in working myself up too much until we've had a chance to sit down and talk about this.

After all, it's a silly misunderstanding. Right? It takes longer than I want to reach the Seas the Day Country Club, but as I walk to the entrance, I scan the lot for Patrick's car. It isn't there.

I step through the doors and am immediately accosted by Devon. He's wearing the same tight, white, Daisy Duke shorts and company t-shirt. His eyes light up like fireworks on Independence Day. I know I'm in for a show.

"Well, well, well," Devon says as he saunters over to me. He puts his hand on my chest and sucks air through his teeth. "What do I owe this pleasure? Did you want my phone number? Oh, I know." He puts his hands out in front of him, wrists touching each other. "Come to handcuff me? Lock me up and throw away the key, handsome?"

"Cool it," I say. "I'm not here for you."

Devon wrinkles his nose. "What do you want then?"

"Have you seen Patrick today? Is he here?"

"That old slag?" Devon's face pinches together like he's smelled a garbage pail of rotting fish. "He was a no-show, actually. I wouldn't be surprised if he gets his ass fired for it too."

"Doesn't sound like Patrick to risk so much to have a day off. Has he done this before?"

He shakes his head. "No, but there's a first time for everything."

"Is Tina here?"

Cocking his head to the side, Devon narrows his eyes. “What’s with the third degree? Are they involved in something?”

“Please, Devon,” I say. “Have you seen Tina?”

“Fine, she came in for her shift, but when Patrick didn’t show up, she freaked out. Said something about him not being at his house when she checked on him this morning. Told our boss she was sick—something about her monthly cycle. Once she said that, the boss wanted to hear nothing else. Sent her home.”

“Do you have her phone number?”

“I can’t just give you her phone number.”

“I’m the police, and this is important. I need to get in touch with her immediately.”

We have a stare-off. I can see the wheels turning in Devon’s head. He doesn’t have any kind of loyalty to Tina, but he’s probably calculating how far he can push me or what he can get out of me before he hands it over.

He looks away. “Fine,” he pulls out his phone and shows me her number.

I enter it into my phone and say, “Thank you, Devon.” I put my hand on his shoulder. His posture sags ever so slightly under my touch. “I appreciate you.”

Devon’s face flushes red. He seems to regain his composure and says, “Sure, whatever.”

I rush out the door and place a call to Tina. It rings and rings without an answer. Fuck.

Calling the police station, I'm patched through to my buddy in tech, Matt. "What's up?" he asks.

"I need some help."

"Like official help, or like a favor?"

Technically, there could be concerns for privacy by asking Matt to find Tina Brokaw's address by reverse searching her cell phone number, but I don't care. Not when I need to know that Patrick is okay.

"I need a favor." I hold my breath while I wait for Matt to respond.

"Michael," he says. "Remember that time you drove me home after I called you in the middle of the night because I was too drunk to drive myself home? My wife and I were having troubles at the time, and I was really lost."

I nod and let out my breath. "I do."

"I said then, and I meant it, that I would always be here for you. Lay it on me, man."

"Not sure if I told you about me dating a guy named Patrick?"

"You mentioned him a week or so ago... everything going okay with him?"

"We had a misunderstanding. I'll fill you in on all that sometime over a beer, but the important thing is my inner senses are telling me something is wrong. I've been working on a case that has spread to his place of work."

"Do you need me to hack into a computer system or something?"

“No,” I say. “Nothing like that. I have Patrick’s best friend’s name and phone number, but I have not been able to reach her. I am hoping she’s heard from him because he’s not returning my phone calls or messages.”

“Is he avoiding you? I mean... you’re not stalking him or something, are you?” There’s a hint of humor in his voice, but his nervous laugh falls flat as soon as it comes out of his mouth. “What exactly do you need, Michael?”

“You know how I have gut feelings. I haven’t been wrong in a while, and I’m convinced he’s in some trouble. You haven’t met Patrick. He’s not the type to ignore someone’s calls... not over a stupid misunderstanding like we had.”

“Shoot me the information, and I will work on it right away,” he says. “I should have it back for you in a matter of minutes.”

“Great,” I say. Disconnecting the call, I quickly send him Tina’s full name and phone number and then wait. Wait, and then wait some more.

My stomach is in knots, and I have so much pent-up anxious energy I could run a marathon. As I’m contemplating calling Matt to see what’s taking so long, my phone beeps with an incoming text message. It’s Tina’s address. “Thank, God.” I jump in the car and set the navigation. According to the GPS, it won’t take more than ten minutes to get there from here with the current traffic. “Hot, damn.” My luck is turning around.

Ten minutes pass, and I screech to a halt in front of her house. I rush to the front door and look for the doorbell. There isn’t one. I raise my hand to bang on the door when it suddenly opens. Tina screams something unintelligible as she slumps to the floor.

“Are you alright?” I hold out my hand and help her stand.

“You scared the ever-loving shit out of me,” she says. If her eyes could shoot, I’d be dead right now. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m looking for Patrick. Have you seen him?”

“He doesn’t want to talk to you. You really hurt him.”

I put my hands up, palms out in front of me. “You have to believe me. What happened at the restaurant wasn’t what it looked like.”

“And what did it look like, Michael? Because I can tell you what it looked like to him... and me.”

I feel awful about everything that happened that night, but it wasn’t my fault. I didn’t know that a random date I had weeks ago would show up and pretend to be in a relationship with me. But, somehow, I bet Tina wouldn’t give a crap about that. Not when her best friend is hurting like he is.

“I can see how it must have seemed,” I agree with her. “Trust me, if I’d been in his position, I would have walked out too.”

“Good, then you know how much hurt he is feeling right now and why he wouldn’t want to talk to you.”

Nodding, I want to walk away, tail tucked between my legs, but I can’t. The feeling I’ve been having... the one where Patrick is in danger won’t leave me. My gut is almost never wrong when it comes to things like this.

“If you don’t mind, I have somewhere to be,” Tina says, closing the door and locking it behind her. She steps around me. “Once I leave, you’re not planning to break into my house looking for him, are you?”

The idea has crossed my mind, but no. “Of course not.”

“Then might I suggest you leave?” Her tone has a warning to it. She doesn’t give a shit I’m a cop... not when it comes to her best friend. Her loyalties are clear.

“Promise I won’t bother you again, but I have to talk to you for a minute.”

“Make it fast.”

“I’m worried about him. I don’t know him as well as you do, but from our interactions, I don’t for a second believe he’s the type to completely ignore someone’s texts and phone calls. Especially after the connection we had with each other.”

“Patrick isn’t so desperate for attention that he needed to call you back.” She pauses and pinches her brows together. It’s clear to me she doesn’t believe what she’s saying. Sure, he isn’t desperate, but he isn’t the type to completely ignore someone.

“Have you heard from him today?” I ask. “When was the last time you spoke?”

She thinks about it for a second and then says, “Yesterday.” Tina pulls out her phone and taps the screen. “I have not heard back from him either. He hasn’t returned my texts or calls either.”

“Is that normal for him?”

She shakes her head. “No, but you really hurt him. Give him a few days, and I’m sure he will reach back out.”

“You truly believe that? There aren’t any red flags or warning signs to you that he might be in trouble?” I ask.

Tina shrugs. “Fine.” She shrugs and lets out a long sigh. “I don’t have any idea where he is and I’m fucking worried. If he’s totally fine and knows I’m even talking to you after what you did, he’ll never speak to me again.” She steps past me but then turns back. “I promise if he calls me, I’ll call you. But you have to promise to do the same. I’m really worried.

“Fair,” I say. Sending her a text so she has my number, I wait until I hear her phone beep. “There’s my number. Please call me.”

“Will do,” she says. “Why did you have to hurt him, though? He’s such a good person, a truly good guy. Someone you’d be fucking lucky to have.”

I look her in the eyes. “I know you might not believe this, but it was all a misunderstanding. The guy who showed up at the restaurant was a date I had one time... before I ever even met Patrick. He wasn’t my type, and I was a dick and ditched him at the restaurant.” I shrug. “He got his revenge. That’s for sure.”

I know the look on her face. She searches my face for a sign of me lying. Tina isn’t happy about it, but she believes me.

“I’ll call you as soon as I hear back from him,” she says.

“Thank you.”

Watching her get into her car, I get behind the wheel of mine. Tina is a good friend, and I know she wants what’s best for Patrick. So do I. Against my own instincts, I turn on my car and drive back to my place. It won’t be easy, but I have to wait.

Dammit, Patrick. Please be alright.

PATRICK

Tina urges me not to do anything rash or stupid. I promise her I won't. But here I am, sitting in Jake Bloom's living room, waiting for him to come back with a beer. His place is sparse but clean—definitely not what I envisioned when I came over last night. I don't know why I'm even here, I let out a held breath and run my fingers through my hair. Is this some kind of rebellious shit? Like I'm going to hurt Michael by being here? I shake my head.

My first stop was to see Tina. She hugged me and let me cry it all out on her shoulder. We spent the next hour talking shit about Michael, and it felt good—at first. My heart wasn't truly in the shit-talking session because I still very much want him. For God's sake, I really have feelings for that man. Even when they're rather confusing feelings right now. Whenever I close my eyes, I see his face, smiling at me. I can still feel his lips on mine as we showered together and made love.

Why did he have to lie to me? I start wracking my brain for details. Had he said he wasn't dating other people? Was he even still dating that little asshole who ruined our romantic dinner? Ugh. There are too many possible truths to keep track of, and that's why I'm at Jake's place.

Spending the rest of last night with him was fun, but we didn't do anything sexual. Although I'm pretty sure he wanted to at least do some hand and mouth stuff, I wasn't ready for that. Not after he turned me down last time. Not to mention, my feelings for Michael. Truth be told, deep down, I hope there might be a reconciliation with

Michael, but that doesn't seem likely since he hasn't even reached out to me.

Pulling out my phone, I check for a message. Damn, the phone is dead. How long has it been like that? Looking around the living room, I search for a charger that might fit my phone but don't find one. Oh, well. I'll be leaving here soon enough.

Jake walks back in from the kitchen with a cold beer in each hand. "Here you go," he says with a smile. "We've gone through almost my full twelve-pack between last night and today."

"Sorry about that," I say. "I'll definitely restock you when I get paid."

He shrugs. "No worries."

We clink bottles and take a few swigs in silence. My senses are heightened, and the energy in the room feels different. Jake's mood seems to have changed, although I don't have any way to prove it. There's something about the way he sips his beer. What the hell is wrong with me? He's not acting any differently. Clearly, I'm still just paranoid from what happened at the restaurant last night. Not everyone is out to screw you over, I remind myself.

"Do you have to work today?" I ask.

Jake shakes his head. "I've got the whole day off." He turns to me and wags his eyebrows suggestively. "How about you?"

My stomach tightens. Jake really wants to mess around, and I don't. I'll have to play it cool and figure out a way to get out of here without hurting his feelings. After all, he's been so kind to stay up all night with me while I bitched and moaned about my date with Michael.

“I’ve got to work,” I say. “I should have been on my way already, but the only one who really pays attention to the timeclock is Devon. He’s a freak about everyone else’s schedule.”

“God, he’s such a jerk. The other day he walked up to me and asked if I knew the difference between a Fuzzy Navel and Sex on the Beach. Supposedly, a client complained about the drink I made, and he threw a fit with me because he said I was dipping into his tips with my incompetence.”

“Dude,” I say. “Uncalled for. Did you tell him to back off?”

He smirks. “I leaned across the bar and told him in no uncertain terms that I would slit his throat and tear out his tongue if he spoke to me like that again.”

The look in Jake’s eyes is a tiny bit unsettling. Could it be the dehydration from two days of alcohol and no water? Or is he really as crazy as he just made himself sound? Trying desperately not to react, especially with my facial expressions, I blink a few times and laugh. It’s not my best attempt at a fake laugh, but under the circumstances, I feel it’s passable.

“I bet he didn’t sass talk you again after that.”

He shakes his head and gulps down some beer. “You bet your sweet ass he didn’t.”

My sweet ass? Here we go again. The look on Jake’s face gives me pause. Is it lust? Anger? Super hard to tell. I could have sworn there was a twinkle in his eyes, but they also seem really hard and a bit off-putting. I quickly down the rest of my beer and set the empty bottle on the coffee table.

“Can I use your bathroom?”

“Sure, be my guest.” He points down the hallway. “It’s on the right.”

Maybe if I dilly dally a little bit in there, he will lose interest, and I can go home and get ready for work. Getting up from the couch is a little harder than I thought. Again, I must be dehydrated or something because my head is spinning. Somehow, I make it to the bathroom and shut the door behind me. I look in the mirror and gasp. My eyes are super bloodshot, and my pupils are huge.

What the hell?

I turn on the cold water and splash some on my face. Next, I drink at least four full hands worth of water from the tap, which is definitely not something I usually do, especially at someone else’s home. Germs... especially in the bathroom.

The cold water tingles as I splash it again on my cheeks. My face feels like it's on fire, and the water is like hundreds of tiny needles poking me over and over again. I’ve never felt like this before. Am I sick? Do I have a fever?

I pull open his medicine cabinet to see if he has any Tylenol. There are multiple prescription bottles, but nothing I recognize. Next, I open the vanity drawer and begin moving things around, hoping to find something to relieve my symptoms.

That’s when I notice it. How the hell did he get this? I pull on the lanyard and take a closer look. Sure enough, it’s my work badge, keys, and identification. My stomach tightens once again, and I turn back to the mirror. If Jake stole my stuff, then could he be... the killer? Oh shit, my mind starts swirling with all the possibilities. I’m instantly wracking my brain to make sense of it all.

My heart races as I lean in closer to the mirror. My vision begins to narrow, and I feel like I might pass out. Then it dawns on me. I’m not sick; Jake has poisoned me... he must have roofied me. What am I going to do? I reach for my phone again but

remember the battery is dead.

Right then, the bathroom door crashes open. Jake stands in the doorway. I sense pure evil as he steps closer to me, eyes locked onto mine. There isn't anywhere for me to run or hide.

"You shouldn't go through people's things," he says.

I turn and reach for the windowsill above the toilet. If only I can get to it before he attacks, but my feet feel like they're stuck in cement.

"Not so fast," Jake says behind me.

A thump to the back of my head is the last thing I feel as my vision tunnels and my world goes black.

The back of my head is throbbing, but the rest of my body feels like it's floating in suspended animation. My eyes are closed, and something tells me to keep them that way.

What just happened? Where am I? Why does my head hurt so fucking bad? I feel like I've been drugged.

Drugged! That's right. Jake gave me a beer, and I drank it. He roofied my beer. I pretend to still be unconscious and open my eyes, but just a slit. I'm still in his bathroom, but I'm lying on the tiled floor. There's no sign of him, but surely, he is close by. What the hell do I do? My body slowly begins to feel like my own again; my arms and legs tingle as they come back to life. My internal fight-or-flight is kicking in hard. Sweat forms on my upper lip, and goosebumps spread across my body. I'm ready for a fight, but deep down just want to run away.

The bathroom door creaks as Jake enters the small room and stands over me. I've closed my eyes but can feel his presence. One foot on either side of my chest, he stares down at me. Is he trying to figure out the best way to kill me? I hear the shower curtain tear off the metal rings holding it to the bar.

I've seen enough true crime to know this isn't good. Only time killers use plastic is to dismember and dispose of the body. I need to act and act fast. Within a few seconds, Jake takes the curtain and grabs ahold of my legs, dragging me out of the bathroom.

Where the hell is he taking me?

He pulls me down the hallway toward the living room. He must want more room to do the dirty work. I frantically search my surroundings from my current vantage point and find his bow and quiver full of arrows. There's one arrow lying on the floor next to the other items, and it looks like we are going right past it.

As he drags me past the weapon, I grab for it, my hand gripping it tight. He notices my sudden movement and drops my legs, lunging for me. Without hesitation, I stab at him. Over and over, I plunge the arrow tip toward him, but each damn time he manages to move out of the way.

He stands and backs up a step. I sit, holding the arrow in front of me like a shield from his onslaught. As I make it to my feet, my head swirls, causing me to stumble one step back. It's all Jake needs to move on me. He grabs me in an instant, pulling me around, his arm pressed against my neck. Gripping the shaft as tight as I can, I jab the arrow into his thigh. Never have I ever stabbed something, but I can tell I've done a little damage. He releases the pressure around my neck and screams in pain. Attempting to pull the arrow back out to do it again proves impossible. My hands are slick with blood and sweat, and I can't secure my grip. Instead, I elbow back and knock him in the jaw. He stumbles backward, holding his face in his hands.

I rush at him like we learned in the self-defense class at work, but as I reach for him, he sidesteps and sends me sprawling across the floor. Looking back, I watch in horror as he turns to face me, sucking air through his teeth. The savageness in his eyes scares me more than the arrow he pulls from his own body and now holds up like a dagger.

“Jake,” I say. “Please don’t kill me.”

He takes a step toward me.

“I won’t tell anyone. I promise. I swear I’ll just go to work and pretend none of this ever happened.”

Another step closer.

I’m running out of space and time. I scramble to my feet and rush toward the front door. This time, I only manage a few steps when he trips me. Now, flat down on my stomach, he puts his knee to my back and ties my hands behind me with what feels like duct tape.

Jake sits me up against the wall and tapes my legs together as well.

“Don’t think for a second I hadn’t overheard you and Tina talking about your little bet. Who was going to get me to have sex with them first. Had you just tried a little harder the other night, we could have had something special... you and me,” he says. “But then... you went and found yourself a cop instead. Was I not good enough for you?”

I open my mouth to speak, but he slaps a piece of tape across it.

“Don’t say a word,” he says. “It’s too late for talking.”

26

MICHAEL

I pace the office, back and forth so many times that my partner Joe finally asks me to sit down because I'm making him anxious. How can I sit at a time like this? My entire world is imploding. My boyfriend isn't returning my calls, thinks that I've been lying to him, and no one has seen him for quite a while. It isn't like him to just up and disappear.

My mind flashes back to all the strange things he's told me have been going on lately. His apartment being broken into, losing his work badge and keys, and even his neighbor Diamond saying there's been a man lurking about a while back.

Is Patrick in danger?

If he's in danger, it's all my fault. If we'd never been interrupted by one of my past dates at dinner, he'd never have gone AWOL. If we'd continued on the way things were progressing, Patrick would be at my house in bed waiting for me to return from work.

Dammit, I'm freaking out right now. Patrick, where are you?

"Dude," Joe says. "I know that look in your eyes."

"What look?"

“The one where you’re internalizing everything that goes wrong in the world. Twisting it up into an unfixable knot and then blaming yourself for it.” Joe rests a comforting hand on my shoulder. “Want to talk about it?”

Joe is right. He almost always knows me better than I know myself. I shake my head. “Thank you, but no.”

“It might help?”

The phone on his desk rings. The light that blinks with each ring indicates the call is coming from outside the precinct, and I reach for it to answer. I’m a fraction of a second too late as Joe snatches up the receiver.

“Hello?” he says. “Homicide.”

I watch as Joe’s eyes dart back and forth while he listens to the person on the other end. I can’t make out what they’re saying, but reading his body language, it isn’t good news. After a few acknowledgments from Joe as he jots down notes on a pad, he hangs up the phone and turns to me.

“There’s been another murder.”

My heart skips a beat. The deep creases of his furrowed brow push my stomach down, and a pit of anxiety forms.

I sit up straight in my chair. “Related to our case, I’m guessing by the look on your face.”

He nods.

“Should I be worried?” I ask. “It’s not... Patrick, is it?”

Joe quickly waves his hands, dismissing my fears. “No,” he says. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to freak you out, but there are some interesting developments.”

“What are we working with?”

“Older man at Seas the Day Country Club, found floating face down in the water trap at hole six of the golf course.”

“Seas the Day is where Patrick works. Do we know who was killed?”

“Body was identified as a,” he double-checks what’s written on the notepad, “Tom Ballard.”

“The Tom Ballard? As in the actor from all those old spaghetti westerns?”

Joe nods. “The one and the same.”

“Damn, he must be what? Eighty years old? Maybe older?”

“There’s more.”

Oh geez, it must be a whole lot more by the look of disgust on his face. “Joe? What’s up? I haven’t seen that look on your face in a really long time.”

“There were puncture wounds across his chest, back, belly, and groin. The forensic team is still running tests back at the lab to determine what kind of weapon could have made them, but the old man suffered. None of the wounds were fatal, and they were all made while he was still alive.”

“Shit,” I say. “Is there more?”

He nods. “There was foreign DNA found in the victim’s wounds. Semen, to be specific. They’re going to run the results and cross-reference from the database, but it could take a few days.”

“Are we still at square one, then?” I ask. “Until we get the results of the DNA tests, we have nothing really to go on? This is all pissing me off, Joe.”

“Same,” he says. “We need to go down to the crime scene and start interviewing people.”

The phone rings again, and this time I’m quicker.

“Homicide,” I say.

“This is Officer Dante. I was just speaking with Joe, and after we hung up, there was a development.”

I motion for Joe to come back over to the desk. I place the call on speaker since there isn’t anyone else in the office.

“Dante, you’re on speaker. Both Joe and I are on the call now.”

“Great,” he says. “We have found fingerprints and were able to upload them straight away. Took a few minutes to run them through the database, but we got a hit. Ninety-nine point six percent chance they belong to a Richard Dickerson.”

I look at Joe, hoping the name will ring a bell to him, but he simply shrugs.

“Dante, does the name mean anything to you? I don’t remember seeing that name anywhere in our investigation.”

There's a long pause on the other end. I can hear him typing into the computer and shuffling through some paperwork. "Here it is," Dante says. "Dickerson's alias is Jake Bloom."

Jake Bloom. Now that's a name I'm familiar with.

"Do you have an address?" I stand and grab my jacket.

"Right here."

"Let's roll."

We're out the door in a flash. Speeding through the streets of Los Angeles is dangerous, but I can't shake the thought that time is of the essence here.

I push the accelerator to the floor with a burst of speed.

It doesn't take long before we reach Jake Bloom's street. I roll to a stop in front of the house, not wanting to let our presence be known yet. Joe and I look at each other and nod. It's go time. Without a spoken word between us, I know he's thinking all the same horrible things I am. We have to get inside that house.

Scanning the block, I spot Patrick's car, and my stomach does flip-flops. All signs are pointing to bad news, and I can't bear the idea of something happening to him. I fight down the rising emotions and struggle to control my breathing. I need to be on my A-game to keep me, Joe, and Patrick safe against this madman.

As we approach the house, I point around back, and Joe heads right there with nothing more than a nod. I take the steps to the front door with as much finesse as I can in case Jake has a dog—don't want to give away I'm here just yet.

Once on the porch, I duck low and peek through the windows, trying to get an idea of who is home and where they are. Unfortunately, the blinds are down on all the windows except one. I peer through the one, trying to keep low and to the corner so I won't be as obvious. The room is a mess, the sofa overturned, lamps on the floor, and even the television is face down on the ground.

Definitely a struggle.

I reach for my gun and hold it out in front of me with both hands, prepared to enter the home. Knowing I'll have very little time to react to the unknown once I'm inside, my heart begins to race with the adrenaline dumping into my bloodstream.

Standing tall, I lean my back against the side of the house, my right shoulder along the front doorframe. The law requires I announce my entry into the home, and I'm prepared to do so when I hear Joe yell out, "Los Angeles Police, put your hands up!"

A crash of splintered wood and broken glass signals he's made entry. I kick in the front door. A gunshot rings out, and I hit the floor, unsure of where it came from. The sound of a body hitting the ground makes me flinch. Is that Joe? I can't call out and give away my position in case Jake has the upper hand. I'm behind the sofa in the living room when I stand and rush to the wall to protect my back. The corner is within arm's length, and I creep closer, gun in both hands.

I have to make my move.

Stepping around the corner, in the direction the gunshot came from, I hold my gun in front of me, prepared to shoot. Joe's body lies spread out on the floor, blood oozing from his shoulder. Just as I take a step forward, something heavy comes down on both my arms and rips the gun from my hands.

My service weapon skitters across the floor into the kitchen. I make my move to rush

for it when Jake seemingly comes out of nowhere, colliding with my side, sending me sprawling across the floor.

He jumps on top of me, his forearm across my neck and his gun pointed directly at my face. “Don’t move, motherfucker,” he says. “Or you’re dead.”

I nod and do my best to take in my surroundings. Joe lies still in a pool of blood to my right, my gun to my left, but where is Patrick? A moan sounds in front of me, and I crane my neck to see.

Patrick. He’s still alive. He’s tied up and gagged against the far wall in the living room.

“Don’t even think about it,” Jake says.

I nod.

“I never wanted any of this to happen,” Jake continues. “But you all just couldn’t leave well enough alone. Who gives a shit if these old, rich, assholes die? They’re abusive and cruel. They don’t even look at poor people like me as human. Fuck that.” The venomous words spray out like an attacking snake. Jake is sick, mentally ill, and doesn’t care who gets hurt along the way.

“But what about the young guy you killed? Why did he have to die?” My voice comes out raspy and tears fill my eyes.

Jake sneers at me, his gaze absolutely wicked. “He’s part of the problem. Plus, I couldn’t have any witnesses. No loose ends.” He moves closer to me. “You understand?”

What the hell am I going to do now?

My best bet is to comply until he tries to move me. I relax and take deep calming breaths. Playing along is never my forte, but I don't have any other options.

Jake looks around the room and sighs. He must realize he needs to get up and off me at some point. Unless he plans on killing me right away, he needs to tie me up somewhere. He keeps the gun trained on my face but gets off my chest. He stands without so much as looking away from me for a fraction of a second.

"Get up," he says. "Don't do anything stupid."

I sit up, then push myself into a standing position. I tower over him, and I feel great pleasure at the unease our size difference causes in his expression. He points the gun at my chest and says, "Go into the living room and sit on the floor. Keep your hands behind your back where I can see them."

Doing as I'm told, I take a few steps forward and steal a glance behind me. That's when he looks back at Joe. I turn, reach for his outstretched arm, and angle the gun away just in time to avoid the bullet.

The shot rings in my ears, but I'm used to the sound. With my other hand, I clock him right across the jaw and send him sliding across the floor. He comes to rest on his back a few feet away. He's out cold. My first instinct is to run to Joe and check for his vitals.

As soon as I get to him, his eyes flutter open. I take his other hand and push it onto his gunshot wound. "Put pressure on this." He winces but does as he's told.

I hurry over to Patrick and begin untying his hands. As soon as he's freed, he yanks off his gag. "Thank you," he sighs.

A floorboard creaks behind me, and my entire body stiffens. Patrick's eyes go wide,

and he scrambles to his feet. Something heavy hits me in the back, and I fall onto the floor. Looking up, Patrick stands over me facing Jake, bow in hand, arrow pulled back ready to fire.

Fear takes hold of me. I push myself up and turn back, barely in time to see Jake standing over me with a baseball bat. Without time to move, I hear Patrick cry out and release the arrow. A thump to the back of my head sends my world into darkness, but the sound of the arrow impacting Jake's chest is the last thing I hear.

I regain consciousness to the sound of sirens and the faint murmur of voices. My head throbs, and every movement sends a jolt of pain through my body. Blinking against the bright lights, I see Patrick kneeling beside me, his face etched with concern.

"Michael," he says, relief flooding his voice. "You're awake."

"Patrick," I croak, my throat dry. "Are you okay?"

He nods, tears welling in his eyes. "Thanks to you and Joe. Jake is... he's dead."

I turn my head slightly, seeing Jake's lifeless body sprawled on the floor, an arrow protruding from his chest. Joe is being tended to by paramedics, his wound bandaged but still serious.

"Joe?" I ask, struggling to sit up.

"He's going to be okay," Patrick reassures me, placing a gentle hand on my shoulder to keep me from moving too much. "The paramedics said he'll recover."

Relief washes over me, mingled with the lingering fear and adrenaline from the confrontation. "We need to get you to a hospital," Patrick says, helping me to my feet as gently as possible. "You took a pretty hard hit."

“I’m okay,” I insist, though my body protests every step. “Let’s get Joe to the hospital first.”

Patrick nods, supporting me as we make our way out of the house. The flashing lights of police cars and ambulances illuminate the night, a stark contrast to the violence and chaos we’ve just endured. Within a few moments, paramedics rush into the house and get Joe on a stretcher and wheels him out to the waiting ambulance.

As we reach the emergency vehicle together, Joe manages a weak smile. “Told you we’d get through this,” he murmurs, his voice strained.

I squeeze his hand, grateful beyond words for his resilience and partnership. “Yeah, we did,” I reply, my voice thick with emotion.

The paramedics load us into the ambulances, and as the doors close, I glance at Patrick, who’s holding my hand tightly. We’re safe, for now. But the journey ahead is uncertain, filled with healing and the aftermath of everything that’s happened.

And as the ambulance speeds toward the hospital, I silently vow to protect those I love, no matter what it takes.

PATRICK

" S top," I say. "No more, Tina."

The incessant beeping sounds of the hospital machines next to my bed are driving me absolutely bat-shit crazy. Pulse, oxygen, breathing rate, EKG. What else do they measure, how many times I pass gas? Get a boner?

My mind drifts to Michael. He was lucky to make it out alive. The hellscape known as Jake's house will not soon be forgotten.

"You have to rehydrate, and you haven't even touched your water." She holds up a bathrobe-pink plastic container full of shaved ice and a spoon. "At least suck on some of this."

"Ugh. Fine." I hold out my hand and take the small pitcher and spoon. I begin shoveling ice shavings into my mouth like a fat kid eating birthday cake.

"Slow down," she says. "You'll choke on it, and I can't be responsible for saving your life."

I set the ice down on the food tray in front of me and rest my head back onto the elevated head of the bed. The splitting headache is nothing unexpected after being struck multiple times by that psychopath.

"Are you okay, bestie?"

I let my head loll over to the side and I smile. If my attempt looks anything like it feels, it's pathetic. "Thank you for being here."

"A flock of Mocking Jays couldn't keep me away from you when you need me," she says, referencing crazy creatures from her favorite movie franchise. It's good to know some things won't change, even if I nearly died. "I have to tell you something."

"What's that?"

"I'm really sorry about Jake." She buries her face in her hands. When she looks back up her makeup has begun to smear, casting dark shadows under each eye. "If it hadn't been for our little bet, you'd never have gotten as close to him as you did and none of this would have happened."

Grabbing her hand, I squeeze. "There isn't one thing about this situation that you're to blame for. It was my own stupid-ass self, trying to get a boy's attention to make me feel better about myself when I was upset. It's a long-standing toxic trait of mine."

She nods. "You're probably right. I've known you a long time and you've got a couple toxic traits we need to work on."

We both laugh. She stands and leans over my bed, giving me a hug.

"Patrick?" she asks, straightening up to full height.

"Yeah?"

"What's going to happen between you and Michael?" She backs away from the bed a

few steps and crosses her arms. "He's a really good guy."

He is such a good man, but I've probably fucked it up permanently with my outburst at the restaurant. "Do you really think there's still a chance for us to be together? Even after I yelled at him? Immediately didn't trust him when that other guy came up to us?"

"All I know is he came looking for you when you didn't respond, and then he saved your life and got hurt in the process. A stupid misunderstanding between the two of you shouldn't be that big a deal in the larger picture." She shrugs. "But what do I know? I'd still break up with someone if they didn't like the Hunger Games movies."

I laugh and check the time on the wall clock across the room from my bed. "Not to change the subject, but if you're working today, you'd better get a move on. You'll be late."

"I can call in sick if you'd prefer I stay a while longer?" Her puppy-dog eyes would have pulled on my heartstrings had her expression been genuine.

"Can't use me as an excuse not to put in your time at work. If I can survive a serial killer, you can manage an evening shift at the club." I smile and wave as she heads for the door.

"I'll come visit you tomorrow," she says.

"Hopefully I'll be discharged in the morning. This lump on the back of my head is going down nicely."

She blows me a kiss and says, "Call you tonight on my way home from work?"

"Can't wait," I say with a smile.

Tina leaves the room, but the door doesn't even have time to close before it opens wide again. Now who is coming to see me?

"Hey," Michael says as he wheels his way inside my room. He sits in a wheelchair, dressed in a hospital gown, attached to an I.V. pole, and struggles to maneuver past the bed.

"Michael?"

He nods, tears filling his eyes as he rolls up alongside me. Reaching for my hands, he holds onto me, kissing my bandage-wrapped knuckles. "I'm so sorry," he says. "Please believe me. You're the only one I've been seeing and that other guy you saw at the restaurant was just a mistake I went on one date with before we ever met."

The kindness and sincerity in his voice draw me in instantly. "Honestly, I realized that the moment I stepped foot into Jake's place. It had nothing to do with the fact he was a psychopath killer... I didn't even know it at that point. All I knew was me getting angry at what I perceived as you being dishonest with me was a mistake. My own fears and insecurities had gotten in the way."

"Are you up for telling me what happened? How badly are you injured?" His eyes look at the brightly lit instruments beeping next to my bed. "Your poor hands." He tenderly touches the bandages again.

"I'm okay, Michael. You got to his house in time to keep the really bad things from happening to me."

"God... what had he planned for you?"

I shake my head. "I think I'll leave that for another day." How I wish the beeping would stop. Rubbing my temples, I close my eyes.

"Is the noise bothering you?" He wheels to the other side of my bed and presses a green button. "I'm surprised they even had the audible on, usually they silence them unless they think you're critical."

"Thank you," I say. My headache immediately begins to subside. Taking a few ice chips into my mouth, I suck on them until they melt into water and swallow. The cold liquid feels so good on my scratchy throat.

He looks into my eyes and smiles. The butterflies in my belly take flight and all I can imagine are the intimate moments we will still be able to share. Not just the sex, but the long walks holding hands, late night movies side-by-side on the sofa, soft kisses before falling asleep, and even the little annoying things I know he will do, like squeezing the toothpaste from the middle.

"Would you like to talk at all about what happened?" he asks. "The last thing I remember is seeing you holding a bow and arrow. What happened?"

"Oh, that?" I say, looking down at my hands. There is so much I want to tell him, unburden my heart and mind, but should I? How would he feel knowing what happened to me? Then again, he is the detective on the case. Surely, he will be in the know sooner or later. "Where should I start?"

"Wherever you feel most comfortable."

"After our dinner, I was so upset. I went to Jake's house to hang out." Don't lie. This is your chance to be completely honest. "Sorry, that's not entirely true."

"Go on," he says. "It's okay." The kindness in his eyes reassures me more than I was expecting.

"I went there to hook up with him." I swallow hard. "You can ask Tina about this, but

for good or bad, when I get upset I tend to run into the arms of a man. The comfort they provide me in that moment is like a drug, but then it passes quickly. Honestly, it's embarrassing, and I hope I never act like that again."

"We all have our own terrible coping mechanisms... it's probably why we are still single."

I nod. "Anyway, I spent the night talking with him. I knew he wanted more from me, but it wasn't something I was willing to do. See... I still have feelings for you and I soon realized I shouldn't have even set foot in that house to begin with. By the time I realized that and wanted to leave, it was too late." I take a deep breath, willing myself to keep going while I had the strength and courage. "I wanted to leave... not because he was a killer... I didn't know that about him yet. Recognizing the pattern, I always fall back on, I wanted to self-correct and get the hell out of there. Jake, on the other hand, had other ideas."

"Is this when he hit you over the head?" Michael asks, pointing to the lump at the back of my head.

I nod. "Fucker really got me good. Waking up hours later on the floor, I was already tied up and gagged. Every few hours, he would give me some food or water and then tie me right back up."

"Did he leave you alone in the house at all? Or was he there the whole time?"

"No," I say. "He never left me alone for long. Jake spent a great deal of time pacing the room, talking to himself. It was like he was carrying on a full conversation with another personality or something. The things he had planned for me were..." My voice breaks and tears well up in my eyes.

"It's okay," Michael says, leaning forward and wrapping me up in his strong arms.

His body heat soothes my fears and terrifying memories. "He's gone now." He rests back in his chair and waits for me to continue.

I nod. "There were hours upon hours of time for me to plan what I would do if I ever untied myself. Once you freed my hands, I lunged for Jake's quiver of arrows and compound bow. He'd often go to the target shooting range when Tina and I were there, and I knew he had the weapon in the house somewhere. Lucky for me, it was in the coat closet next to where I was tied up."

"Then what happened?" His eyes grow wide. "He struck me in the head at this point and I blacked out."

"At first I thought he killed you. He hit you with a goddamned baseball bat... twice."

He nods. "First time right between the shoulder blades. He must have missed his target and tried again."

"Seemed that way," I say. "It gave me just enough time to load up an arrow and pull back." My voice catches in my throat once again. I swallow hard and fight back the tears that fill my eyes. "He was about to swing the bat for the third time... I knew it would kill you if he hadn't already. There wasn't time to tell him to stop, so I shot him."

Michael looks away and sighs. "I'm sorry."

Our eyes meet. "For what?"

"I'd never wish upon anyone... especially someone as kind and good-hearted as you to have to take another person's life."

Tears flow down my cheeks and I wipe them away.

"Thank you," he says, once again taking my hand in his and kissing me.

I let the moment breathe for a while without saying a word. We both sit in silence, holding hands. What must he think of me? I save his life and I'm the one still crying. Am I weak?

He locks his chair and stands. Thank goodness, he isn't so badly injured he actually needs it. A sigh of relief escapes my chest. Michael leans over me and takes me into his arms, holding on tight. I melt into him and cry. His comforting form feels like protection and safety. As long as we are together, trusting each other, and in love, I will have nothing else to fear.

"Where does this leave us?" Michael asks, still holding me tightly against him. I can hear his heart beating fast and he is holding his breath, waiting for me to answer.

I let go of him and he sits back in his wheelchair where we are at the same height, looking into each other's eyes. "Can you ever find it in your heart to forgive me?"

"Forgive you?" he says, sounding shocked. "You didn't do anything wrong."

I shake my head. "That's where you're wrong, Michael. The second that guy showed up at the restaurant, I immediately distrusted you... ready to throw what we had away, to protect my feelings. How immature is that? It's the stupidest thing I could have done, and yet, here we are."

Michael remains silent for a few moments as he is probably mulling my words around in his head and heart. He finally shrugs and smiles. "I forgive you."

My heart races a mile a minute and I go to swivel my legs out to the side of the bed, but my vision begins to swim. That lump on the back of my head is clearly still an issue. Lying back against the bed, I start to laugh.

"What's so funny?"

I can't speak, I just laugh. Insanity must have taken over, tears rolling down my cheeks, I can't catch my breath. My split with reality has infected Michael as he too starts to laugh. Through blurry, tear-filled eyes, I watch the man of my dreams release built-up stress and anxiety through a burst of laughter. It is a beautiful thing to witness.

Finally, the hilarity subsides and we both grow quiet. Our breathing begins to normalize, and I manage to sit up, letting my legs dangle over the side of the bed.

"Be careful," he says, reaching out to catch me if I fall.

I wave him away. "I'm fine now... promise."

He smiles at me, our eyes once again meeting.

"Michael?"

"Yes?"

"I would love for us to continue to see one another and I will make you a promise."

He smiles from ear to ear, his cheeks blushing the sexiest shade of pink I've ever seen. I could gobble him up and kiss him from head to toe. "I promise you I will no longer run away. If and when we come across a bump in our road together, I'll talk to you about it and we will get over it together."

Michael grabs my hands in his. "I promise the same."

We lean toward each other and our lips meet. His soft, tender kiss gives me such

intense pleasure, my body is instantly covered in goosebumps. Without disengaging our lips and tongues, which explore one another as if for the first time, he wraps his arms around me. Once again, I melt into his embrace.

28

MICHAEL

After getting home from the hospital the next day, I feel weak and emotional. I've never come that close to being killed in the line of duty, and with no one at home to talk to about it, I call my mom.

"Honey," she says as she answers the phone. "Is everything alright?"

"What makes you think something's wrong?"

"Mother's intuition. Now, spill it."

I clear my throat a few times before I start, trying to keep the emotion out of my voice. My mom is already on high alert, and I don't want to panic her. The last thing I want is for her to jump on a plane and arrive at my doorstep in the middle of the night.

"It's been a couple of bad days at work. Nothing to get too worked up about," I say.
"Just felt like talking."

"Well, you've come to the right place. There's so much to tell you. Your cousin, Deborah, is getting married, and I have absolutely nothing to wear. And that's not the worst part. She's marrying a guy she met online. Can you believe that? Online? Who does that? Desperate people? She's gorgeous and kind. Why can't she meet a nice young man at church like the rest of us?"

I don't have the heart to remind her that most everyone in the world meets someone either at work or online these days. Personally, I've had to use the online and dating apps because the chance of meeting a nice, young, gay man who isn't under arrest would be a long shot—although I did somehow manage to find Patrick. And as far as church goes, Deborah is an atheist, and I haven't been to church since I came out of the closet. Not that I couldn't find one that accepted me, but it's too much effort at this point in my life.

My mom drones on about the upcoming wedding, dropping hints about how much she would love to see me walk down the aisle before she dies. How did she just transition the conversation from my cousin getting married to me making her grandchildren? I have no idea. But there's something to be said about my mom; she's a master at taking my mind off my own problems.

There's an unexpected break in the conversation. The last thing I remember her saying is that my father is getting too fat for his suit, and they'll need to go shopping before Deborah's wedding.

"Honey," she says. "Is there something bothering you?"

I don't answer right away, but I sigh.

"I can hear it in your breathing, Michael. Tell me what's going on. Did you get shot at? I swear to everything holy in this universe if you get shot, I'm coming down there and making you quit your job. You know how I worry. There're too many bad people out there. Honey?"

"Don't be silly, Mom. Nothing like that."

"You promise on your great grandfather Boone's grave?"

"I swear I was not shot at. There'd be no way I could keep something like that from you. I promise."

"Okay," she says, her tone betraying her skepticism. "What's the problem then?"

"There's a guy I've sort of been seeing." What in the hell am I doing? The only thing that could get my mom on the plane faster than if I got shot is if I started dating someone.

"What?" Her screech is just below a dog-whistle.

Here it comes. A million questions. Demands for details I don't even know yet, and I did it all to avoid telling her I was in the hospital. What was I thinking?

"Bill? Come in here," she calls out to my father. No doubt he's in the living room reading the newspaper like he always does at this time of day. "Our son has some good news for a change. Get in here."

"Mom," I say, frantic not to hash out what I still am not sure about. There's something truly special about Patrick, but again, I still don't know him that well. Could I be imagining how deeply he feels for me?

"What? Your father is going to want to hear this firsthand, so I don't have to repeat it line for line to him later. I'll certainly be parched after telling your cousin Deborah, who will need to put another place setting down for your special someone."

Oh, shit. It's already happening. She's imagining us married. Probably in a large home with a white picket fence, two-point-five kids, and a dog. I need to get off the call before it's too late.

"I have to go; my boss is calling," I say.

"Tell him you're in the middle of an important family discussion. He can call back later. Bill," she hollers again to my dad. "Get in here."

"Sorry, it doesn't work like that. There's got to be something really important going on, or he wouldn't dare call this late."

Silence meets me on the other end of the call. My mom is mulling over the cost of plane tickets and if it's worth it to get them before she's heard the entire story first.

"Fine," she says. "I expect a call as soon as you're free."

"For sure, Mom. Would I leave you hanging?"

"Momma loves you," she says. "I'm so happy I could cry. There are so many things I need to plan. Please tell me the wedding won't be destination. It has to be here."

"Got to go," I say. "Love you."

I disconnect the call before I hear her response, as she has not stopped talking about flower arrangements. My mom has been wanting me to get married since I turned eighteen years old, regularly referencing the fact that she wants to be a young, healthy grandmother. Not one of those little old ladies, sitting on a rocking chair, knitting cat fur into a shawl.

My phone rings, startling me out of my day-nightmare.

"Hello, Joe," I say, answering the call. I can count the number of times we speak on the phone about something other than work. It doesn't mean we aren't close, but since we spend more time together than he does with his wife, we have plenty of time to chat in person about other things. "Everything okay?"

"I was about to ask you the same thing, buddy. My wife wants to bring you over

some baked ziti and wine. When would be good?" he asks. "And if you don't want it, you'd still better say yes because she's adamant since you saved my life."

Laughing into the phone, I feel my spirits rise. "She's such a good woman. You're so lucky to have her as your partner."

"I really am, and she will remind me of that whenever possible." We both laugh again. "Honestly, super glad you're okay, man. I couldn't imagine doing this job without you."

"Man," I say. "You're going to make me cry. Stop it. I'm fine. Plus, you're the one who was shot. You're the hero here."

"Great," he says. "When should I bring the ziti?"

I laugh and bring my emotions back under control. "Not really that hungry today. Maybe tomorrow? I won't be back to work for at least a week. You know how the higher-ups want to look into everything before they let us come back."

"I heard you're going to be put into department-mandated counseling since you were assaulted on the job."

"I think we will both be seeing the same therapist. Maybe we can go together?" I joke and then sigh. "Better than desk duty."

"Couples therapy," Joe says. "As for desk duty, that'll depend on if they think you're crazy or not."

"You'd better put a good word in for me then," I say. "Please tell Madalyn I said thank you for the ziti and wine. I'm looking forward to seeing you both tomorrow."

"Sounds good," he says. "Get some sleep." Joe hangs up the call.

Sitting on the sofa in the living room, I turn on the television and begin scrolling through the seemingly endless channels. The only problem is, nothing catches my attention. My mind keeps drifting to the attack and Patrick. How close I came to losing him before we even had the chance to get started.

My cellphone rings.

It's Patrick.

"Patrick?" I say. "Are you okay? Are you still at the hospital?"

"I'm home. Got home this morning. I've been sleeping all day but feeling great."

"Oh, that's so good to hear."

"I've been thinking about you." There is a long pause, but I know he wants to say more. "After you came to see me at the hospital, I haven't been able to get you out of my head."

Is that a good thing or a bad thing?

"Same here." Taking a chance, I add, "I'm so glad you called me. Not to sound pushy, but I have a few days off work and would love to see you... if you're okay with that."

"It's like you read my mind." There is a short pause before he continues. "My place? Tonight?"

Now we're talking. My heart skips to life, and my brain races with the possibilities. It's a nighttime meet-up at his house. Is tonight the night? To be safe, I'll have to

prepare as if it will be.

"I'd love to," I say. "What time works for you?"

"Eight?"

That gives me enough time to clean up and get ready for whatever is about to happen.

"I'll see you then."

Disconnecting the call, I hurry into the bathroom and start the shower. Stripping off my clothes, I look at myself in the mirror. I've seen better days, that's for sure, but considering I've been in the hospital after being assaulted, I don't look too shabby.

Sure, there are a few bruises on my face, chest, and back, but overall, I'm pretty sure I will clean up nicely. I hop into the shower and begin scrubbing the hospital smell off me, along with the excess glue and tape from all the machines I was hooked up to when I first got there. The hot water flowing over my body feels so good.

I close my eyes and think about tonight and the possibility Patrick and I will go all the way. My legs shake a little, and my knees feel weak. I rub soap over my chest and stomach and down onto my fully erect cock. Oh, damn, that feels good. I stroke the shaft a few times and moan, forcing myself to stop before I take it too far.

Turning off the water, I towel dry and get dressed. My watch indicates I have thirty minutes to get there, which is just enough time to drive the speed limit. Hurrying out to my car, I hop in and start the engine.

Taking a second to double-check my appearance in the mirror, I smile. I put the car into gear and peel away from the curb. I can't wait to see him. My belly flutters with nerves to even think about him, let alone see... or touch.

PATRICK

I answer the door with a smile and hug. It's great to see Michael now that we can finally be together without danger getting in the way. I breathe in his scent as he steps through the door, and nearly wet my pants. My knees tremble, making me feel a bit unsteady.

I try to laugh it off, but I know myself too well. Tonight is the night, and I couldn't be more excited and ready for it. I've invited him over to see how it goes, to ensure we still have chemistry, but I never anticipated struggling to keep myself from saying I love you.

"It's so great to see you, Michael."

He smiles and gives me a kiss on the cheek. "The best part is we are both healthy and out of the hospital. Now we can continue with our lives and put Jake Bloom behind us."

"Definitely," I say. "Do you want anything to drink? Wine? Beer? Vodka straight up?"

He laughs and shakes his head. The way his gaze connects to my soul at this very moment, I know we both want the same thing. Without a word, I begin slowly walking deeper into my apartment, only stopping once to look over my shoulder at him. Offering him a slight nod and come-fuck-me eyes, I turn and go into my

bedroom, leaving the door open.

The room is dark, but I can still see him. Michael steps closer to me, and I breathe in his scent—all man. My legs begin to tremble, and my knees feel weak. I honestly never knew that could happen to me.

He pulls off his t-shirt with one smooth motion, and the outline of his muscular shoulders, trim waist, and deep chest comes into view. Instantly, my mouth waters as I imagine twirling my tongue around each of his nipples and tracing his treasure trail down to the good stuff.

He takes another step. This time I hold my breath. I want him so badly to take me into his arms and hold me, kiss me, and lead me to the bed. My hands begin to tremble with anticipation. I have to clench my fists to keep myself under control. The butterflies in my tummy flutter to life, harder and faster than I've ever felt before. How can it be that I'm this attracted to someone? Not even with Ricky, back in high school, have I felt such a strong pull to be with a man. To kiss. To touch. To fuck.

Fighting the need to close the gap between us, I force myself to step back, prolonging the tension that grows between us. The heat now palpable. My back comes to rest against the wall, and there's nowhere else to go. As he continues to come closer, I can see the need in his eyes. In fact, we need each other. I go to speak, but my words catch in my throat. Instead, my breath quickens along with my heart. He's almost upon me, and I ache for it, his touch.

I tear off my shirt, my nipples so hard and sensitive, I dare not touch them. There'd be no way to stop myself from coming, and I'm not ready. Not yet. Gooseflesh spreads across my chest and arms, and I feel my balls tingle. My cock grows hard, pushing against my jeans. He reaches for my face, tracing a finger along my jawline. His lips part as if by touching me he's edging toward his own climax. I part my own lips as my jaw relaxes, and moan—softly at first, but if the tightness in the crotch of

my jeans is any indication, I'll be calling out in a matter of seconds.

The heat from his bare chest reaches me even before our skin touches. Leaning my head forward, I rest against his muscular pecs. I can't keep my hands to myself. Not for another second. I slowly run my finger down the center of his abs until I reach his belt, where I unhook it, and then his button fly—I grow harder with each button as it comes free and opens his fly that much more. He moans. It sounds involuntary. Before reaching inside his pants, I trace the outline of his large, uncut cock. When my fingertip reaches the head, he begins undoing my pants. As if by chance, our jeans hit the floor together, and I look up into his eyes. There's a kindness there I've never seen with someone I'm about to have sex with. Maybe this is going to be more than a simple fuck. Maybe this is going to be what I've been wanting all along, but never knew I could have—or deserve.

I wrap my hand around the thickness of his shaft, his girth so impressive, my fingertips barely touch. He's fully erect now, but his skin is so soft. Slowly at first, I begin sliding his foreskin over the head and back down. His pre-cum not only slickens the head but lubes the palm of my hand as well. He flops his head back and moans. “Just like that,” he says in a deep, breathy voice.

I'm so hard, my cock jumps with the beat of my heart. Reaching up, I wrap my arms around his shoulders and pull him in toward me. As he inches closer, his hard cock presses against my belly and mine pushes between his legs and against his balls. My hips involuntarily pump against him, seeking a hole to push inside.

Without a word, he backs away and takes me by the hand, leading me to the bed where I quickly lie down on my back. “Are you sure?” he asks.

I nod. “Never more sure in my life.”

He reaches into the drawer of the nightstand and pulls out a condom. I watch as he

slides it into place, over the head, and down the entirety of his shaft. He lubes his hand, pressing it to my ass, making sure that my hole is ready for him. He leans over me and smiles. Lowering his face to mine, he kisses me tenderly on the lips. I want more, and he does not disappoint. Slowly at first, he slides his tongue between my lips, where I meet him move for move. Heat flushes my cheeks as we share one breath, tasting each other for what feels like the first time. And he tastes delicious.

He pulls away. We're both breathless, my lungs burn for more air, but my body burns and aches for his intimate touch. As if he reads my mind, he adjusts his weight and slowly pushes the head of his cock against my ass. I want him inside me so badly, I have to consciously relax my hole to allow for his thick cock.

I nod, indicating I'm ready. He slowly inches himself inside. I throw my head back against the bed in pleasure and pain. The initial entry is always a little precarious until my body can adjust to what he's working with. It doesn't take long before he's easily moving inside me, pumping his hips against the backs of my legs and ass. I clench my ass down around his shaft, giving myself more friction when I need it.

My g-spot sends bursts of electricity through me, down my legs, and into my belly. Each and every time he slides past it, it brings me closer to my carnal eruption. I want to cry, not from pain or regret, but from the intense pleasure. He feels so good inside me, so right. I begin working my own cock in time with him. It isn't long before I feel the beginning of the end, the explosion of cum every man grows to know and love. I force myself to stop, removing my hand completely from my cock. I look down between my legs, which are being held up in the air by him. His intense gaze excites me. He's feeling the same fervent rush of sexual heat I am, and my cock bounces against my belly—begging to be stroked again.

Not yet. I want this moment to last longer.

“This feels so good,” he says.

I bite my bottom lip and pull his hips in closer so he can go deeper. “Yes, just like that,” I say. “Come inside me, Michael.”

A naughty twinkle in his eyes tells me he’s been hoping I’d say that. Once again, I begin working my shaft. Despite not stroking my cock, it’s never gone soft. I’ve been edging since he first unbuttoned my pants and led me to the bed. The need to come, to shoot my load all over my chest and against him, comes quickly.

“I’m going to come,” I moan and grab a fistful of bedding as his pounding intensifies.

“Yes,” he says. “I’m there too.” Our eyes lock for a moment before he throws his head back. I can feel his cock momentarily thicken even more as my asshole clamps down on the base of his shaft. He’s pushed in as far as he can go, and I feel my own surge of cum. He bucks, moans, and shoots his load inside of me.

It’s my turn.

Barely a moment passes when the tingle sends an electric surge up into my belly. Pearly drops of pre-cum slicken the tip of my throbbing head as I feel the heat in my belly growing hotter. Within seconds, and without my conscious control, cum races up my shaft and explodes. Hot ribbons of cum splatter my chest, face, and belly. Not just once, but two separate eruptions take me to a place I’ve never experienced before. An ecstasy so intense I have to fight back tears. I fall back onto the bed, fully satiated.

We’re both out of breath, and as he pulls out of me, he lies on his back next to me on the bed. We both relax there without a word, our breathing slowing, and the sweat cooling over my entire body. I shiver and then roll over, kissing him on the cheek. He smiles and wraps me up in his arms, spooning me, and for the first time, I fall asleep in the arms of a lover.

When I wake up, the room is filled with the soft glow of dawn. Michael is still beside me, his arm draped over my waist. I take a moment to just breathe him in, to feel the warmth of his body against mine. It feels surreal, waking up next to him, knowing we are safe and can finally be together without any threats looming over us.

I gently slip out of bed, careful not to wake him. I pull on a pair of boxers and head to the kitchen. As I start making coffee, the events of the previous night play through my mind, making me smile. I can't remember the last time I felt this happy, this content.

Just as the coffee finishes brewing, I hear Michael stirring in the bedroom. A few moments later, he walks into the kitchen, wearing only his boxers, and gives me a sleepy smile. "Good morning," he says, his voice husky from sleep.

"Morning," I reply, handing him a cup of coffee. "How did you sleep?"

"Better than I have in a long time," he says, taking a sip. "You?"

"Same here," I admit. "It was... amazing."

He steps closer and wraps his free arm around my waist, pulling me in for a kiss. It's soft and tender, and it makes my heart race all over again. "What do you want to do today?" he asks, resting his forehead against mine.

"Honestly, I don't care, as long as I'm with you," I say. "But maybe we could just stay in, relax, and enjoy each other's company."

He grins. "That sounds perfect to me."

We spend the day together, lounging around the apartment, talking, laughing, and just enjoying being in each other's presence. It's simple, but it feels like everything I could

ever want. As the day turns into night, we find ourselves back in bed, wrapped up in each other.

Lying there, I realize how far we've come, how much we've been through to get to this point. And for the first time, I allow myself to truly believe that we deserve this happiness, that we deserve to be together.

"I love you," I whisper, the words slipping out before I can stop them.

He looks at me, his eyes soft and full of emotion. "I love you too, Patrick," he replies, pulling me closer. I feel safe in his arms, and I don't ever want this moment to end.

MICHAEL

I stand there with iced coffees in my hands, watching Tina and Patrick laugh at each other's jokes. They're here to shoot a quiver full of arrows and hone their skills as expert archers, and I'm here to enjoy their company.

They haven't noticed me yet, and for that, I'm grateful. I enjoy watching them interact, more as family than friends. It's truly comforting to see that there's someone else in Patrick's life who isn't going anywhere and will always have his back. Sure, I plan on never leaving him, but my career in law enforcement has shown me over the years that you can never be completely certain about the future.

"Tina," Patrick says, "I can't believe you signed me up to audition for the role without asking me."

"You said you were interested. Remember?"

He shakes his head. "That was before I was attacked and nearly killed. Don't you have any sympathy for me? I could have died, Tina. D.E.A.D. Gone forever, but not forgotten."

"Don't go quoting your overly dramatic future headstone, my friend. I will never let anything happen to you. And when have I ever steered you in the wrong direction? I'm going to be there auditioning for a part as well. My agent even agreed to take you on for this one."

“How’d you manage that? I didn’t even bribe her with a pack of clove cigarettes.”

Tina smiles and touches his shoulder. “I might have mentioned to her that you were in a near-fatal accident and Make a Wish was sponsoring you. Stop,” she says, holding up her hand to curtail Patrick’s response. “She needed the good press and was willing to take you under her wing.”

“I know, but what happens when she finds out you lied to her?”

Tina waves away the question. “She’s not going to remember. The last time I brought you up, she asked if you were still doing porn.”

“Porn?”

“I know, right? As if you would ever be cool enough for porn?” Tina laughs.

I can’t help but start laughing. Trying to hold three very cold drinks at the same time is getting difficult, but once I start chuckling, I start to lose it.

“Michael?” Patrick asks. “When did you get here? Oh, shit, you’re about to drop the drinks.”

He and Tina run over to stabilize their precious elixirs, each taking one and leaving me with my own.

“I’m glad you’re here, Michael,” Tina says. “You can help us settle this matter once and for all.”

Not sure I would be the best person to weigh in on this discussion since I have no idea about the movie-making industry or acting, I back up a step. “Maybe the two of you should settle it yourselves?”

Patrick takes a long drink of his coffee. “No, it’s okay. I would love to hear your opinion.”

“Great,” Tina says. “That settles it. Michael, do you think that Patrick should stop being such a baby, man up, and audition for the part in an upcoming blockbuster movie? By doing so, he will have the potential to fulfill his dream of being a serious actor?”

Patrick's turn for rebuttal comes. “First of all, the movie is extremely hush-hush, which sometimes means it’ll be a huge movie, but not guaranteed. Secondly, with all the craziness that went on over the last week or so, I haven’t had time to prepare, and the audition is in just a few days. And third, I have a big old scratch on my face and a few yellowing bruises that will look horrendous on camera.” He points to his face and grimaces.

I look from her to him. Both look back at me with urgency in their eyes. If I’m honest, someone might be upset with me, but it’s the right thing to do. Stepping over to Patrick, I trace my finger along the scabbed-over cut on his face. “You’re gorgeous no matter what. Honestly, a few scratches make you look tough.” I tilt his chin up and lean down to give him a kiss. Our lips part as my tongue slips into his mouth. He tastes so good. “Babe,” I say after pulling away. “You are talented, smart, and so damn hot, any movie that didn’t want you is stupid. Follow your dreams and go kick some ass.”

Tina squeals, and Patrick smiles as he gazes up into my eyes.

“I believe in you,” I say.

Patrick nearly drops his drink as he hurries to wrap his arms around me. We hug as Tina hops up and down next to us with her hands clasped.

“Me next,” she says. “I need some of this love too.”

“Bring it in,” I say, opening my arm to her as well.

She slides into my embrace, and we stand there and hug for a few moments. Once we all separate, Patrick nods and says, “I want to audition, but I’m a little nervous.”

“I’ll tell you what,” I say. “I’ll help you study or practice or whatever you call it and go with you and sit in the waiting room. Would that help?”

“Absolutely,” he says. “You’d waste a couple of days to help me with this?”

“It’s not a waste of time as long as I’m spending it with you.”

He smiles. I smile. Tina squeaks.

“There is nothing I would enjoy more than watching the two of you be cute together, but we have to finish shooting. There are a few people waiting for our lane once we are done.” Tina thumbs toward what looks like a family of four, waiting patiently for us to stop wasting their time.

“I’m going to wait for you two over by the concession stand. Come get me when you’re done here.”

Patrick and Tina grab their bows and arrows and start firing off projectiles. They’ll be done soon. By the way they quickly shoot without spending much time actually aiming, I can tell their heart isn’t in it anymore today. Once I get to the concession stand, I order a bag of pretzels and watch them from afar.

There’s something different about Patrick after the attack. I can tell from the way he stands, walks, and interacts with those around him, he’s more confident. Somehow,

the intense circumstances he's lived through have strengthened him, made him more certain. It's obvious to me and absolutely intoxicating. While I'm happy for his newfound self, I know from experience that there may come a time where he struggles. He may become anxious or depressed as his mind continues to process what happened to him. There have been more than one police officer I've known who ended up needing counseling after an attack left them with PTSD.

It wouldn't be something to bring up to him at this time, but I make a mental note to always be there for him. I'll help him through whatever life throws his way from now on. I think back to when I was a kid and spoke with my father about how he knew Mom was the one for him. He answered that when he closed his eyes at night, images of them living their lives together flashed in his mind. His gut told him that she would always be his person.

A tingle in my belly when I imagine Patrick and my life together and what it might look like in a year, five years, or even longer down the road, tells me he's my person and I'm his. I wave at them as they now make their way across the park toward the concession stand. They get closer, and I hold out the bag of pretzels. "Snacks?"

PATRICK

My life couldn't have turned out any better than it has. After Tina and I auditioned for the part, we both got picked for important roles in the film. I play Max Donovan, and she's Clarissa Cane in the latest Alexander Dorn film, "Devil's Reach."

We finished shooting a week ago, but the film isn't slated to come out for another eight months as they still need to work on some of the CGI effects. It's going to be such a life changer for me. I've already been offered other roles to consider, and I couldn't be happier. However, after throwing every last bit of myself into this movie, I need a break, and there isn't anywhere I'd rather be than side-by-side with my newlywed husband, Michael, headed to first adventure on our honeymoon destination in Los Angeles.

Yep, home-sweet-home.

We walk hand in hand up the stone steps of the Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History, the air warm but the breeze cooling enough to keep us comfortable. It's a grand building, with its towering columns and natural stone facade exuding a timeless elegance that always leaves me feeling small, but in the best way. Michael squeezes my hand, and I glance at him, his smile reassuring, grounding.

"We could've gone anywhere for our honeymoon," he says, his voice soft, teasing.

"And yet we're here," I reply, grinning back at him. "But it's not like this place

doesn't have its charm.”

Our honeymoon plans have been put on hold, obligations pulling us back to the city. Instead of disappearing to some far-flung, tropical paradise, we've decided to spend the next few days checking out local spots we've never had the chance to visit. The museum has been on our list for a while, and today feels like the perfect escape from the hectic schedule that keeps trying to pull us back into reality.

The moment we step inside, we're greeted by the cool air and the vast, open lobby. The grandeur of it all makes me pause. I've been in countless buildings more luxurious than this, thanks to my career, but this place—there's something ancient about it. It feels like stepping into a different world.

We wander through the exhibits, taking in everything from dinosaur fossils to precious gems, each display more fascinating than the last. Michael stops in front of a giant mammoth skeleton, his eyes wide, a boyish grin lighting up his face. It's moments like these that remind me why I fell in love with him. Even after everything we've been through—the case that nearly broke us both—he can still find joy in the simplest things.

“Hey there,” a voice interrupts us, and we turn to see a man approaching. He's wearing a security guard's uniform, but it's the easy smile on his face and the way he carries himself that catches my attention.

“Enjoying the exhibits?” he asks, his tone light but genuinely interested.

“Yeah, it's incredible,” Michael replies, nodding towards the skeleton behind us. “This place is full of surprises.”

The man's name tag reads Max Salgado , and there's something about him—something that feels... familiar, like a kinship. Maybe it's the way he looks at us, the way his eyes flicker just a little too long at the sight of our hands intertwined. I

can tell Michael notices it too.

“I’m Max,” he introduces himself, shaking both of our hands. “I work here while I finish my degree. Hoping to become a curator someday.”

“That’s impressive,” I say, genuinely meaning it. There’s passion in his voice, a quiet determination that I respect.

Max nods towards the exhibit we’re standing in front of. “This one’s one of my favorites. We’ve got pieces here that are hundreds of millions of years old. Kind of makes you think about how small our lives really are in the grand scheme of things.”

His words hang in the air for a moment, and I glance at Michael, who gives me a knowing smile. It’s true. We’ve been through so much in the past year, things that felt monumental, life-changing. But here, in this space, with relics of a world far older than our own... it all seems so insignificant.

“Well, good luck with your degree, Max,” Michael says as we begin to move away. “You’ll make a great curator one day.”

Max’s smile falters, just for a second, but he recovers quickly. “Thanks. I’m sure I’ll see you around. Enjoy the museum.”

As we walk away, I can’t shake the feeling that there’s something more to him, something buried beneath the surface. Trauma, maybe. God knows we’ve both been through our share of it.

“You feel that too?” I ask Michael, my voice low, as we make our way through another exhibit. “Something’s... off with him.”

Michael glances back over his shoulder, but Max has already disappeared into the crowd. He squeezes my hand again, pulling me close. “Everything’s fine, Patrick.

Whatever craziness we dealt with last year, it's over. We're safe now."

I nod, trying to convince myself that he's right, but the nagging feeling lingers. There's more to Max Salgado than meets the eye.

And something tells me we're not done with the craziness just yet.

But, for now, this is the happiest I can ever remember being. The start of a new life with the man of my dreams. I couldn't ask for a better ending to the old and beginning of the new chapter in my life. I'm truly going to be happy forever after.

I found my forever!

THE END