



Monster Mistake (Sanity Falls #3)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: She loved the accidental marriage trope in rom coms. In real life? Not so much...

All Justine Willet wanted was a night of fun to help her forget about her cheating scumbag of an ex-boyfriend.

In retrospect, attending the Monster Match probably wasn't a good idea. Neither was the impromptu road trip to Vegas.

But while there, drinks were consumed. Accidents happened. MONSTER mistakes were made.

Which is how she ended up with the mother of all hangovers...and married to her giant orc co-worker.

Khill was grumpy. Antisocial. Unfairly hot. And once upon a time, he friend zoned her in a big way.

So, why is he suddenly so reluctant to annul their drunken marriage?

Justine has no idea. But she's starting to wonder if walking away from Khill would be an even bigger mistake than their accidental wedding...

Monster Mistake, book 3 in the Sanity Falls series, is a light, low angst, lightly spicy monster romance novella that can be read as a standalone. It's full of witty, snarky banter, has no 3rd act breakup, and features a grumpy heroine and the even grumpier orc hero of her dreams.

Total Pages (Source): 21

CHAPTER 1

“ L ook, you can’t tell this one you’ll rip his colon out through his ear if he refuses to surrender the dog to us, OK?”

Now there was a sentence Justine Willet never thought she’d utter. But here she was.

The giant, hulking orc next to her rolled his head around on his thick neck, then cracked his knuckles. “I don’t see why I can’t speed the process.”

She sighed as she punched the buzzer on the ramshackle house’s front door. “Khill, it’s illegal to threaten people into giving up their pets.”

He shrugged. “It’s illegal to abuse animals, too. That doesn’t seem to stop any of these assholes.”

Justine pinched the bridge of her nose. They had this conversation every time they approached a dog owner about surrender in cases of neglect and abuse. He always wanted to threaten first and ask questions later. Or never. And frankly, she didn’t blame him for feeling that way. He wasn’t wrong. She admired his passion.

Actually, she admired a lot of things about Khill.

The broad shoulders? The long, thick, wavy black hair? The intense, black-as-sin eyes? The muscles rippling under his snug black T-shirt? The scalpel-sharp cheekbones and kissable pout? The fact that he was tall enough to make her—a strong, curvy woman who stood, in her bare feet, at 5’10”—feel like the daintiest of

dainty flowers? She admired the hell out of it all.

She wasn't even normally attracted to orcs. The tusks, pointy ears, and green skin didn't normally do it for her. But on Khill, it all just worked for some reason. She wanted to trace her fingertips over the pointy tips of his ears and her tongue over the tusks that poked out a little over his pillow-y bottom lip. And that lush skin that reminded her of fresh spring grass... sigh . What she wouldn't give to have that skin against hers.

And beyond his supernatural sexiness, Khill was just a great guy. Not that too many people ever got to see it. His resting serial killer face offered him a pretty big personal bubble of space, after all.

She knew him better than most people ever would, though, and he had a kind, gentle soul when it came to animals and anyone in need. Sure, he was grumpy. Hell, so was she. But he was the kind of man she could totally fall for.

It was just her unfortunate luck that her feelings were one-sided, and she'd been friend zoned in a big way. Hard.

But that was another story entirely, and none of it mattered today.

What did matter on this particularly sunny spring day was that while she admired Khill's passion for animal welfare, his methods of helping her "convince" neglectful and abusive owners to surrender their pets were often less than...optimal.

Effective, though. And exactly how she'd choose to handle things if jail time wasn't on the table.

Whatever she was going to say to Khill next was swallowed by the sound of the homeowner yanking the door open and practically snarling at her, "What the fuck do

you want?”

Khill let out a growl that reminded Justine of an angry Rottweiler getting a rectal exam. She laid a hand on his arm to remind him not to threaten this guy. With words or noises. And holy crap, that was one hard, bulging bicep.

Which, again, was entirely not the point.

Justine cleared her throat. “Mr. Sanders, I’m a veterinarian here on behalf of the Monsters for Mutts dog rescue. One of your neighbors called because they were concerned about your dog.”

His beady eyes shifted over to Khill before landing on her again. “It was that nosy bitch across the street, wasn’t it?”

It was indeed. And the nosy bitch in question was not a joy to talk to. But she wasn’t wrong, either. Justine had already gotten a glimpse of the scrawny dog in the guy’s yard, and the poor thing was obviously being neglected. “It doesn’t matter who made the call, sir,” she pointed out. “I saw your dog, and even from the street, I can tell he has a serious case of mange and is severely underweight. If you’re having difficulty caring for the dog because of any...hardship...”

She’d practically choked on the word hardship . Sanders was clearly having no trouble feeding himself, or say, buying beer. His barely concealed gut and the dozens of empty bottles littering the porch told her that much. Meanwhile, that poor dog was starving and battling a raging skin condition that was very uncomfortable.

She was starting to rethink her order to Khill. This guy deserved to be threatened.

“...we can help,” she finished through gritted teeth.

Sanders leaned a shoulder against his doorframe and shot her a mulish look. “You can tell that hag I don’t answer to her. Or to you, for that matter, bitch.”

Justine didn’t even have time to process being called a bitch by a stranger before Khill had snagged Sanders by the throat, lifted him several inches off the ground, and slammed him back against a porch post. He leaned in close as the guy’s eyes bugged out and hissed, “Don’t. Call. Her. That.”

Oh, boy. This wasn’t going to end well. She grabbed Khill’s arm and tugged with every bit of strength she had, putting her full weight into it, but he didn’t budge. “It’s fine,” she said. “Really. I’m not offended. Just let him go.”

She understood why other people might be hurt or offended by being called a bitch, but Justine was used to it. Anyone as blunt as she tended to be needed to have a thick skin. Hell, bitch wasn’t even the worst thing she’d been called that day . It certainly wasn’t worth murdering anyone over.

Sanders kicked his feet and clawed at the hand on his throat. His struggles weren’t any more effective than Justine’s. “Please,” she tried again. “Please, Khill.”

The please must’ve done it. A shudder ran through him, but ultimately, he opened his hand, letting Sanders fall to the ground like a used bath towel. He coughed and sputtered as Khill frowned down at him dispassionately. “I’m calling the cops,” Sanders choked out.

Ugh . That’s what she’d been afraid of. Khill had already been a person of interest last month when the owners of a dog fighting ring had been found beaten to within an inch of their lives and stuffed into the trunks of their own cars. When the police rescued them, they couldn’t provide a description of their assailant, other than to say he was huge. Like, supernaturally huge. Khill had been questioned immediately. Without proof, they couldn’t hold him for long, though, and they didn’t push it. After

all, who really cared that a bunch of scumbags got a little of what was coming to them? But everyone knew it had been Khill.

So, even if assault charges didn't land him in jail this time, he'd definitely lose his job at the rescue. Monsters for Mutts employed more than 30 monsters that were unemployable anywhere else and helped thousands of dogs a year find forever homes. With so much at stake, Lucy and Victor, the owners, couldn't afford the kind of bad press that came with keeping a convicted felon on staff.

Which meant it was time for her to get creative.

"You could," she said with a shrug. "But remember, the shelter has rich benefactors with great attorneys. He'll at least make bail. And when he does, he knows where you live."

Khill bared his teeth at him in a vicious mockery of a smile. Good Lord, Justine thought. He looked absolutely feral. It did have the intended effect, though...if the puddle of urine forming under Sanders was any indication.

Gross.

She cleared her throat. "Or you could give us the dog, let us leave, and you'll never see either of us again."

Sanders shot Khill one more terrified glance before hissing, "Take it and go." Then he crab crawled back into his hovel and kicked the door shut in their faces.

Khill had the nerve to look proud of himself. "You want to grab the dog, or should I?"

Justine blinked up at him. "Are you kidding me?"

He sighed as he made his way off the porch towards the dog. “I’ll grab him.”

She trailed behind him, speechless. Beating up some scum bags with no witnesses around in the middle of the night was one thing. But assaulting a guy in broad daylight, right in front of her, after she mentioned the name of the rescue? It was reckless and stupid and...OK, fine. It was kind of hot that he’d done it on her behalf.

But as a result, she’d just committed a crime to protect him (blackmail was illegal, right?), which made his actions decidedly less hot.

What a fucking mess. Lucy and Viktor were more than bosses, they were friends. But did friendship extend to cases where their business was dragged through the mud—criminal mud, even—because of something she and Khill had done?

She let out an involuntary squeak when Khill stopped, and she ran into his back. It was like slamming face first into a wall.

Peeking around the giant expanse of shoulder he carried around so easily (the show off), Justine got her first up-close look at the poor little dog they’d just threatened (blackmailed...whatever) Mr. Sanders into surrendering. And just like that, she didn’t feel bad at all for threatening/blackmailing that asshole.

First of all, he wasn’t even an adult dog yet. If Justine hadn’t missed her guess, he was only about three months old. He looked to weigh about twenty-ish pounds, but probably should weigh closer to thirty, maybe even forty. She couldn’t say for sure what breed he was. He had the coloring of a beagle, and the wiry coat of a terrier. His left ear was ragged on the end, like he’d gotten it caught on something and tore it free. It had healed a little wonky, letting Justine know it had never been treated properly. He was looking up at them like they might stomp him at any moment, and he was resigned to whatever fate they decided to deal him.

“I should’ve let you strangle that motherfucker,” she said through gritted teeth.

Khill glanced down at her and cracked his knuckles. “It’s not too late.”

“Let me put together some bail money first.”

Kneeling down, she extended her hand to the puppy. “Hi,” she said in her most soothing voice. “You don’t know it yet, but you just hit the doggy lotto. I have a nice, warm kennel and a big bowl of food with your name on it.”

He cringed away from her hand, cowering closer to the house. She sighed. So, he was going to play hard to get. She could deal with that. He wouldn’t be the first.

Her thoughts drifted inappropriately—so, so inappropriately—to Khill, who’d also been determinedly playing hard to get for all the years she’d known him.

But that wasn’t the point. Point was, normally, she could wait all day to earn a little dog’s trust. They didn’t have that kind of time, though. She figured if they were still there once Mr. Sanders changed his pants and stopped shaking in his boots, he’d call the cops.

She opened her mouth to tell Khill to grab a lead and small carrier from the truck, but snapped it shut when he knelt and extended his giant, dinner-plate sized hand to the dog.

“Come on,” he said in his low, gravelly, oddly calming voice. “Time to go. Gonna need you to be brave, little man.”

Justine held her breath as the little dog looked up at him with solemn eyes. He looked like he was running a risk assessment, trying to decide if his odds were better with this monster, or the one inside the house. She wished she could explain to him that

this monster wasn't a bad guy at all. He only looked like a scary monster.

A crazy-hot scary monster.

The dog inched forward, eyes shifting between Khill and Justine. When no one made a grab for him, he moved a little closer. Then a little closer yet, doing a commando crawl. And when he was within Khill's reach, he flopped over on his back and exposed his belly.

She let out the breath she'd been holding when Khill chuckled and rubbed his knuckles over the dog's furry belly. "Good boy," he said.

What I wouldn't give to have him call me a good girl .

Good grief. Why were her thoughts so porn-y today? She needed to get laid. Like, ASAP.

Khill scooped his new best friend up, cradling him against his chest like a football before he grabbed her hand and yanked her to her feet. Per usual, he underestimated his strength, and she smacked into him, nearly squishing the dog between them.

"Sorry," he mumbled.

"It's fine," she said, brushing some dust off the knees of her jeans. She didn't tell him she was horny enough to have enjoyed smashing into his chest. That was just pathetic.

Khill opted to hold the dog rather than secure him in a crate while she drove them back to the rescue. He didn't offer any explanation, but Justine knew he didn't want to give up his precious burden, who was now snuggling into Khill's arms like they were the comfiest place he'd ever known.

Great. Now she was jealous of a puppy.

“I’ll give him an exam when we get to the rescue, but I’m going to wait on vaccinations until he’s put on a few pounds and his skin clears up,” she said. “I can get him started on an antiparasitic, antibiotic, and anti-inflammatories in the meantime. That’ll make him feel a lot better. Then I’ll get one of the kennel staff to give him a medicated bath and get him set up for the night. He’ll need to be isolated from the other dogs for quite a while, though.”

Which meant he’d be staying in a clinic kennel instead of one of the luxury dog suites at the rescue.

The vast grounds of the historic Spellman Mansion where her bosses lived held more outbuildings than she could count. One of them was her vet clinic. Others held supplies and grooming tubs. There was also a caretaker’s cottage where Khill lived.

Then there were the tiny houses. So, so many tiny houses.

Instead of cages, the Monsters for Mutts rescue set each of their pampered guests up in their own private tiny houses, complete with gated front yards, chairs and couches, and, of course, central heat and air.

There was also a giant fenced area, many acres wide and long, behind her clinic where all the dogs could frolic, socialize, and receive training if necessary.

In other words, it was doggy Shangri-La. Justine couldn’t wait until this little guy could join the ranks of the other potential adoptees.

“I’ll bathe him and get him settled,” Khill said gruffly.

She held in her instinctive “aw.” She loved it when the big, tough orc decided to take

care of a tiny little puppy. And it happened all the time. He was a soft touch, for sure. Which she imagined was something only she knew, based on his appearance. “You’re not going to the Monster Match tonight?”

That was the other thing the Spellman Manor was known for. Speed dating events for monsters looking to hook up with marriage-minded human women, otherwise known as a Monster Matches, were held once a year at the manor. Lucy and Viktor had met at one, as had her friend Roxie and her husband, Riordan.

Justine had never attended as a participant. It just felt a little too...social for her. The idea of flirting and trying to pretend she wouldn’t rather be at home with a glass of wine, binging episodes of Cobra Kai while wearing her comfy pants was too daunting. Besides, pretending to be pleasant for hours was exhausting. She could maybe pull it off for one speed date. But several? Pffftt . No way.

He snorted. “Hell no. What about you?”

She ignored how much it pleased her that he wasn’t looking for a wife. But his question did make her side-eye him. “You know I’ve been seeing Jake. Why would I go to a Monster Match?”

Khill always looked like he’d just stepped in a fresh pile of dog vomit every time she mentioned Jake’s name. She’d never asked why. After all, it wasn’t like Khill was much of a people person. Er, monster. Whatever.

“You’re still with that guy?”

He might as well have asked, “Still got herpes?” That was the tone he used when he asked about Jake.

If she didn’t know better, she’d think he was jealous. But even if he was, what did he

expect her to do? Move into a convent and become a nun after he rejected her? She was a mildly antisocial introvert who didn't enjoy the company of many people, but she did enjoy sex, which meant that abstinence wasn't in the cards for her, and she'd already waited long enough for Khill to change his mind about dating her. She refused to apologize for moving on with her life.

Besides, Jake was a decent enough guy. He was good looking, clean, had a steady job as a paralegal at the biggest law firm in town, and never seemed to mind when she'd had enough people-ing for a day and required a little space. Surely all that was a decent foundation to build a relationship on, right?

"Yes," she answered patiently. "I'm still seeing Jake. He's had that flu that's been going around. I'll head to his place after this little man's exam and bring him some soup or something."

Khill made a sound somewhere between a snort of disgust and a growl. Again, she ignored it. Instead, she asked him, "What are you going to name your new friend there?"

He glanced down at the dog in his lap and ran a fingertip over the edge of his chewed-up ear. "I'm thinking... Van Gogh."

She let out a shocked laugh. "That's perfect."

"Yeah. It is."

Only when she glanced over at him, he was looking at her instead of the dog. Surely, that was a coincidence.

He glanced away before she could overthink the situation, which was probably for the best. Right?

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CHAPTER 2

It took three shampoos, but Van Gogh no longer smelled like week-old roadkill.

Khill grabbed a towel and wrapped it around the dog before he could shake and splatter wet dog smell all over the front of his T-shirt. “There you go, little man,” he said, giving him a thorough rub down before scooping him up into arms.

Van Gogh blinked up at him like he was Superman or some shit. It was ridiculous. And kind of nice, if he was being honest. He wasn’t used to looks of admiration instead of fear and curiosity.

Even in Sanity Falls, the monster capital of the world, he was an oddity. You couldn’t swing a dead cat on main street and not hit a half dozen vampires, shifters, or demons. Hell, there were even a handful of gargoyles in town. But as far as he knew, he was one of the only orcs.

Probably because the orc dimension was practically paradise, and no orcs wanted to leave it. But that didn’t apply to Khill. He’d been forced out. Which might explain why he was so damn grumpy all the time.

Van Gogh yipped at him, obviously not enjoying the dark turn Khill’s thoughts had taken. Which was just one of the reasons he preferred working with animals instead of humans or other monsters. Animals were creatures of intuition. As a result, they had a capacity for empathy that Khill found lacking in most other beings.

Except for Justine, of course.

He'd never seen anyone who could win over a sick, injured, or scared animal's trust faster than Justine. Or anyone who was quicker to become annoyed with humans. But he loved that about her. Preferring the company of animals over that of humans was just one of the things he had in common with Justine.

But still, she was way too good for him. She was smart and accomplished and so damn beautiful it hurt to look directly at her most of the time.

So. Damn. Beautiful.

Khill had been in this dimension for long enough to have seen plenty of models and actresses, and he had yet to see one of them who could hold a candle to Justine. Curves for days, strong enough to deadlift a seventy-pound Labrador off the ground and gentle enough to not hurt it while doing so, delicate features, kissable, plush lips, big eyes that were so blue they looked lavender when the light hit them right, shoulder-length, curly brown hair so wild it refused to remain confined no matter what kind of clip she used... phew . She was stunning.

The day she'd boldly told him she wanted to date him— him !—was the best and worst day he'd had in this dimension. Dating someone like her would be a dream come true. But at that time, he still sucked at trying to live among humans. Starting a relationship with one seemed impossible. Justine deserved a man who knew how to be...well, a man instead of a monster. So, he'd turned her down. Told her he didn't think of her in that way and wanted to remain platonic friends.

And he'd been kicking the shit out of himself for being so damn dumb ever since.

Finding a way to tell her how he felt now just felt selfish. Especially when she was with that absolute fucknugget Jake.

He sighed. None of that mattered anymore. He'd had his chance, and he let it slip

away. It was his loss.

His HUGE fucking loss.

Khill glanced down at Van Gogh. “Guess it’s just you and me, huh?”

The little dog blinked up at him for a second before leaning up to aggressively lick Khill’s chin.

He chuckled. “Thanks for the support, little man. I appreciate it.”

CHAPTER 3

Whoever said men were poor communicators had never met Jake.

Sure, he hadn't told her with words that he was seeing someone else. But that didn't mean he wasn't communicating clearly right at this moment.

Standing in his bedroom doorway with a bag of takeout from his favorite restaurant as he plowed his tiny little penis into a busty blonde from behind was the clearest communication she'd ever had from him.

If she stayed quiet, she could slowly back out of the room and preserve some of her dignity. She could break up with him over text and be spared a very awkward confrontation. That would definitely be best.

Too bad quiet wasn't really her style.

"I see you're feeling better," she said loudly enough to be heard over Jake's panting grunts and the blonde's squeals (fake squeals, most likely) of delight.

When his stunned face turned toward her, she heaved the bag of takeout at his head. And she'd pitched for her high school softball team, so the bag hit its mark with a satisfying thunk. It was just a happy accident that the plastic container inside the bag popped open on impact, splattering chicken noodle soup down his naked chest.

The blonde, still pinned under Jake (and a pint of chicken noodle soup) turned her head to look at Justine, mouth open in quiet horror.

Justine didn't pay any attention to her. Her beef wasn't with the blonde. The blonde hadn't agreed to not see other women while they were dating. That had been Jake.

She shook her head at him. "Last week you were talking about wanting to move in together."

Thank God she'd shut that nonsense down. Imagine how she'd feel if she'd found him fucking someone else on her bed?

He didn't even have the decency to pull his dick out of the blonde before saying, "Justine, baby, you know I love you. This is just sex."

The blonde made a disgruntled noise that Justine took to mean he'd been feeding her similar bullshit. "It takes a lot of nerve to say you love me when you're balls deep in another woman."

Albeit not very deep. Did she mention he had a tiny penis? Because he did.

He did pull out then. She was glad to see he was wearing a condom. He was a lying, cheating, scumbag, but at least he wasn't a reckless lying, cheating, scumbag.

Behind him, the blonde crawled out of bed, grabbed her clothes, and started getting dressed. "I'm really sorry," she said. "I had no idea he was...involved."

Justine snorted. "He's not. Not anymore, anyway. But don't worry about it. He's obviously a great liar. I don't blame you."

Jake made a move toward her, but she held up a hand to ward him off.

"I mean it, baby," he said. "You know you're it for me. Sometimes it's just so hard to connect with you. I get scared you don't love me as much as I love you. I've always

been worried that you're too good for me."

Shame like she had never felt in her life flowed over Justine. She'd had sex with this man. Not very regularly or in a satisfying way, but still. This limp-dicked man child had been inside her and it had taken her by surprise that he was cheating on her. Hell, he'd probably been cheating on her all along, and she'd had no idea. He was standing here, dick still wet from another woman—another woman he'd also lied to and played—giving her cheap lines out of the cheater's playbook, and she hadn't left yet.

And the worst part? She'd always known Jake wasn't The One. He wasn't even her type. He was just...there. It was sheer laziness that had kept them together, and that was just gross.

Well, she couldn't make up for her lost time and self-respect, but she could fix that .

Grabbing a reusable grocery bag from the hall closet, she started gathering everything she'd left there, which, thankfully, wasn't much. Box of tampons, bottle of shampoo and lotion, hair dryer, toothbrush, a couple pair of underwear and a few T-shirts...yep. That was about it.

Kind of sad when she thought about it. The entirety of their relationship fit in the confines of a small grocery sack. What the hell had she been thinking dating this loser?

But none of that was important anymore. So, clutching her grocery sack to her chest, she turned to address her ex-boyfriend, hopefully for the last time. "Jake, that might be the only thing you were absolutely 100% right about. I'm definitely too good for you."

And with that, she spun on her heel to leave. The blonde beat her to the door, biting her thumbnail nervously. "Um...he drove me here. If you're going downtown, can I

catch a ride with you?”

Only in her life—or a rom com starring Katherine Heigel or some shit—would her ex-boyfriend’s ex -sex partner, the one she caught him cheating with, ask for a ride home. “Sure,” she said on a humorless chuckle. “Why the fuck not?”

The grateful blonde, whose name was Gloria, Justine would later learn, hustled past her as Jake sputtered in naked, limp-dicked protest behind them. Leaving at that moment without saying another word would’ve been considered taking the high road. It would’ve been very demure. Very mindful.

Too bad she only had a passing acquaintance with the demure and mindful high road .

With one last withering glance in his direction, Justine said, “By the way, the clit is nowhere near where you seem to think it is.”

And on that note, she slammed the door behind her.

The drive with Gloria took several unexpected turns. First of all, Gloria was a neighbor. She lived in the building across the street from Justine’s half duplex. They’d probably passed each other on the way to work or the corner coffee shop a thousand times and never noticed. (Especially since Justine made it a point to avoid eye contact with neighbors. Eye contact led to small talk, and small talk was abhorrent.)

Second of all, Gloria was beautiful, funny, and had a wickedly dark sense of humor. The fact that Jake had been able to pull a woman like her made Justine feel a little bit better about having fallen for his nice-guy bullshit.

It was probably because Gloria was such a delightful woman that Justine ended up suggesting they check out the Monster Match. But the fact that she was currently

wearing her sluttiest little black dress with three tequila shots in her bloodstream? That was Gloria's fault.

It was kind of surreal. She was on this property nearly every day and somehow it still surprised her how stunning the main house was.

The place was a gothic wet dream. With its ornate style, stone facade, soaring arches, and rich jewel-toned finishings, it looked like the kind of place where Dracula would seduce his next bride.

Not entirely a far-fetched theory, seeing as there were currently at least ten vampires who may or may not be Dracula sitting here, speed dating human women with matrimony on the brain.

They weren't talking to her, though. No, she was stuck with a werewolf who would not shut up about his new sports car. Honestly, it was making Justine question every decision she'd made all night. Again.

She glanced over at Gloria, who shot her a very enthusiastic thumb up from the table next to hers. Apparently, her date with the basilisk was going better than Justine's. Looked like she was on her own.

The wolf— what the hell was his name? Derek? Damon? It was something with a "d", right? —ran a hand through his longish blond hair (which, even Justine was willing to admit was glorious) and said, "So, I told the salesman there was no way I would ever own a 4-cylinder, even if it was turbo charged, and I needed him to find me a?—"

Justine shot to her feet, only wobbling slightly on the four-inch heels Gloria had arm-twisted her into wearing and snatched her phone off the table. "I'm so sorry, but I have to take this call. It's my mom. Probably an emergency."

Derek or Damon or whatever raised a brow at her. “But your phone didn’t ring.”

D’oh! That’s what she got for making up excuses while half-lit on tequila. “Um...I meant she texted. I, uh, have the sound off, but I saw the message. Anyhoo, Derek?—”

He frowned. “It’s David.”

Mentally, she face-palmed. But at least she’d been partially right. His name had, in fact, been something with a “d”. “I’m sorry, David,” she said with as much sincerity as she could muster, considering he hadn’t asked her a single question about herself and had spent the entirety of their speed date spouting lame car facts. “But I’ve had one hell of a night, and the truth is...I just need to leave. Coming here was a mistake.”

He might’ve said something or objected to her leaving, but Justine had no way of hearing it. She was already more than halfway to the door.

It wasn’t until she’d stumbled out onto the mansion’s front lawn that she realized she’d left her jacket—the one that contained her valet parking ticket—inside on the back of her chair. So now, after everything she’d been through that night, she’d have to sheepishly go back in, face David, the car-obsessed werewolf, and get her valet ticket for the truck she wouldn’t be able to drive because she was drunk.

The scream of pure frustration she let out felt like it had been ripped from her very soul. It went on until every breath of air in her lungs was gone and her cells were screaming for oxygen. And when she couldn’t scream anymore, when she was fighting off tears out of sheer spite because no one deserved her fucking tears, she felt...

Well, she felt better, honestly.

“Who do I need to kill?”

Justine swallowed a startled shriek as Khill stepped in front of her. She’d momentarily forgotten he lived on the property. She blamed the tequila. “You scared me.”

He crossed his arms over his chest and frowned at her. “You screamed and you’re almost crying. Who do I need to kill?”

That was really sweet. Psychotic, maybe. But sweet, nonetheless. It was nice to have someone on her side who was ready to commit a felony on her behalf. “I caught Jake with another woman tonight. And when I say ‘with’, I mean inside of.”

He gave her a stiff nod and said, “OK.”

And with that, he spun on his heel, ostensibly to go kill Jake. She had to grab his forearm and dig her heels into the dirt to stop him. Jake was an ass, but he wasn’t worth jail time. “It’s fine. I’m fine. Truly.”

His stony gaze moved over her face for a moment. “You don’t look fine.”

She sighed. “I’m mad at myself more than anything. He was a weasel-dicked little chucklefuck, and on some level, I always knew that. I shouldn’t have been surprised he was a cheater. Truth is, there were red flags all over the place, and I overlooked them.”

“Why?”

“I was lonely, I guess? Or maybe it was temporary insanity. I don’t know. But it’s not important now.”

A muscle in his jaw jumped, but at least he seemed to give up on his plans to kill Jake. That's when his gaze shifted off her face and trailed down slowly—oh, so slowly—over her dress.

It occurred to her in that moment that Khill had never seen her outside of scrubs or casual wear. The leap from those outfits to her current one was shockingly huge.

On a woman of average height, the dress would probably hit about knee level. But on Justine? Mid-thigh. The deep V-neck wouldn't have been scandalous on a small-breasted woman. On Justine, it was toeing the line of decency. And the lace-over-silk fabric was ridiculously sexy.

Maybe it was the tequila talking, but she would swear in a court of law under oath that she could actually feel the weight of his gaze as it traced her curves.

Everywhere. It. Touched.

After what felt like a breathless eternity, he asked in that low, gravelly voice of his, "Why are you here , in that dress?"

The truth spilled out before she could stop it. Fucking tequila. "I came to get laid."

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CHAPTER 4

Khill was...confused.

The shift from murderous rage to being so turned on he couldn't think straight because all the blood had rushed so quickly to his dick was discombobulating.

Justine was always gorgeous. That had never been in dispute. Whether she was wearing scrubs and a white vet's coat or her yoga pants, no one would ever deny she was a beautiful woman. But now...

Fucking hell .

And she'd just told him she was here to get laid.

She'd been genuinely surprised to see him, though, so she hadn't come here to fuck him. Pity, that. Which begged the question...who, exactly, was she here to fuck?

That's when a long-haired douchebag—Khill sniffed the air and determined said douchebag was a wolf shifter—jogged across the lawn to them, Justine's jacket in his grubby paw.

The fucker looked like the kind of guy that could be found in any television show or B movie—blond, white, generically handsome. Like a Temu version of a younger Brad Pitt with a friendly, open smile.

Khill hated him on sight.

Surely this wasn't the kind of guy Justine had come here to fuck...right?

The grin the blond motherfucker offered Justine as he handed her the jacket made Khill want to rip the bastard's lungs out through his nose. The urge did not dissipate when Justine thanked him.

The wolf shoved a hand through his obnoxiously shiny hair. "Glad I was able to catch you before you left." He shifted his gaze briefly to Khill before turning back to Justine. "I was enjoying our conversation. Want to go for a drive and see where the road takes us?"

That did it. This wolf was going to die. Khill cracked his knuckles, but Justine's delicate snort and restraining hand on his forearm stopped him. "I appreciate you returning my jacket, Devon," she said.

He frowned. "It's David."

"Fuck," she muttered. "I can't believe I keep doing that. I'm sorry, David . Again. But like I said, coming here was a mistake."

The stupid asshole ignored Khill's warning growl and took a step closer. Idiot. There was no reality in which a wolf shifter—even an alpha one like this fuck knuckle—would win in a fight with an orc. Khill could rip his arms off and beat him to death with them before the wolf was even able to shift into his animal form. Hell, shifters were stronger than humans, but not by that much. The guy's confidence (and level of delusion) was high.

"I think everything happens for a reason, Justine," David said. "You coming here, meeting me , definitely wasn't a mistake."

Khill might've been able to take the high road. But then David committed the

ultimate sin.

He reached for Justine.

Khill planted his hands in the center of David's chest and shoved. He only put half his strength into it, but it was still enough that the startled wolf flew backward at least twenty feet. He would've gone farther, too...if his spine hadn't collided with one of the ancient oak trees that dotted the property, that is. "She said no, motherfucker," he snarled as the wolf dragged himself to his feet, attempting to smooth his suit jacket. "Can't you take a fucking hint?"

"This isn't any of your business, orc," David snarled right back. "I'll go when Justine tells me to go, and not a minute sooner."

Justine groaned. "Look, before either of you decides to whip out your dick and pee on me to mark your territory, let me be perfectly clear. David, the answer is no. Thank you for returning my jacket, but please leave me alone now."

Khill crossed his arms over his chest, thoroughly pleased with himself, until Justine turned a stern frown on him. "And don't look so smug," she whisper-hissed. "Acting like a Neanderthal is not sexy."

Did that mean she thought he was sexy when he wasn't acting like a Neanderthal?

It was that thought—and the fact that Justine body blocked him—that ultimately kept him from going after David when the fucker stabbed an accusatory finger at Justine and said, "You're going to regret that decision. Just wait. You'll see."

When he was gone, Justine started marching to the valet station to get her truck, muttering under her breath the whole way. Khill shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans and followed her. She could call him a Neanderthal all she wanted, but there

was no way he was going to let her drive anywhere. He could smell the tequila on her breath.

Fortunately, she didn't argue with him when the valet handed her the keys, and Khill immediately plucked them out of her hand and asked, "Where to?"

She sighed and rested her butt against her truck before she dropped her head into her hands. "I don't know, OK? I have no idea where to go now. If I go home, I'm just going to keep feeling sorry for myself. If I go to another bar, I'm going to drink more tequila, then I'll definitely go home with someone I shouldn't."

Khill frowned at the thought of Justine picking up some random dude at a bar.

"I just wanted to have fun tonight," she continued. "Boost my ego a little. Let my hair down and...I don't know....let loose? Where the hell should I go to do that?"

Later (much, much later), Khill would be willing to admit that the idea he had to help her let loose and have fun was ill-advised at best. But for now...

He gave her a half smile. "I know just the place."

CHAPTER 5

Justine wasn't a big drinker. Never had been.

She'd had an unfortunate Boone's Farm incident at her friend Sheila's high school graduation party when she'd been trying so hard to impress Chad Fuller (who was hot back then, but was now doing time for tax evasion) by playing cup stack with him and the rest of the football team. She'd ended up puking in Sheila's dryer (long story). Consequently, the smell of strawberry wine still made her gag.

She woke up the next morning feeling like the school marching band had paraded across her forehead. Or, more accurately, she felt like a piece of gum on the trombone player's shoe as the band paraded through a sewer.

After this morning, she realized she'd judged Boone's Farm too harshly.

She was in hell. She was officially Satan's whore. Or his come rag or something equally gross.

First of all, no one should ever have to, under any circumstances, wake up with no idea where they were, how they'd gotten there, or why their mouth tasted like sunbaked shit bricks. And Justine was currently experiencing all three.

With a groan that sounded like a reanimated mummy crawling out of a tomb after a thousand years, Justine flipped onto her back and pried one eye open to take stock of her surroundings, just like Criminal Minds had taught her. (Because at this point, the idea that she might've been kidnapped and drugged by a serial killer was viable.)

Well, she wasn't in a basement. That was something, at least.

She was clearly in a high-end hotel room. It was well-lit (much to her headache's consternation), and elegantly but simply appointed. And the sheets under her butt felt like they were the thousand-thread-count kind she'd never buy for herself, even though she'd love to have them.

It took Herculean effort for Justine to roll to the edge of the bed and lower her feet to the ground. It took an even bigger effort to sit up straight. Her muscles felt like overcooked Ramen, her stomach was about to violently protest movement of any kind, and her head was pounding like a bass drum at a rock concert.

"Need to go to the bathroom again?"

If her reflexes hadn't been bathed in alcohol, she probably would've been startled to realize she wasn't in the room alone. As it stood, she barely mustered the strength to flick her gaze toward the door.

There, in all his freshly showered, bright-eyed, muscle-y glory was Khill, looking hot as ever in yesterday's black T-shirt and jeans, with a coffee in his giant hand. She was torn between relief and embarrassment.

First of all, given how she felt, she must look like Death had taken a few whacks at her, and here he was, looking like a walking wet dream. That was embarrassing. But she was a little relieved that when this hangover finally killed her, at least she wouldn't be alone. And also, she knew that coffee was for her because Khill hated coffee.

"I do," she croaked. "I'm not sure I can get there, though. I think I'm dying."

He snorted and set the coffee cup on the nightstand. "I'm sure it feels that way."

Again, under normal circumstances, she might've been startled when he scooped her up off the bed like she was weightless and carried her to the bathroom. But since she was dying, all she could do was rest her head on his chest and pray the good Lord would just smite her already.

It really was a miracle that when he set her back on her feet next to the toilet and politely gave her some privacy, she didn't crumble to the ground like a discarded paper napkin. Even more of a miracle that she managed to pee without toppling off the toilet and falling into the shower. Angels should've been singing when she found the strength to wipe, flush, and stagger over to the sink to wash her hands. She was pretty proud of herself, if she was being honest.

Until she looked into the mirror above the sink.

The shriek she let out, followed by the sound of Khill kicking the door in and glancing around wildly for whatever threat made her scream, probably echoed through the entire hotel.

"What's wrong?" Khill asked, still searching the tiny bathroom for intruders. "What the hell happened?"

Justine was too busy staring at her reflection, mouth agape, red-rimmed eyes slow blinking at the horror.

She usually slept in a bonnet, because if she didn't, her curls ended up looking like she'd been electrocuted. Today was no different.

Every article of clothing she owned would fit in the bags under her eyes and her skin was two shades lighter than milk. Seriously, she looked like she was method-acting her way through an episode of *The Walking Dead*.

It took a while, but she was finally able to ask, “What. The. Fuck. Happened. Last. Night?”

He frowned at her in the mirror. “You don’t remember?”

“I remember...tequila. And the Monster Match. There was a werewolf named...Dusty or something.”

Khill’s frown got even frownier. “David.”

“Yeah. Then you were there, and we were driving to...”

Images pinged around in her poor, battered brain. Bright lights. Slot machines. Show girls.

“Are we in...Vegas?”

He ran a hand through his hair, looking relieved. “Yeah. You remember.”

“Kind of.” She swallowed, even though her mouth was drier than the Serengeti. “We played slots.”

He nodded. “And drank more tequila.”

“There was...karaoke, wasn’t there?”

This time, he chuckled. “Yep. Pretty sure they removed I Will Survive from the playlist as soon as you got off the stage.”

Justine cringed. Why, oh why, did she have to remember that ? “We drank there too, didn’t we?”

“Definitely.”

She was damn lucky she hadn't blacked out. And that she spent the night drinking and gambling with someone honorable who wouldn't try to...

Giving herself a quick, panicky pat down, she was relieved to realize her dress, underwear, and shapewear were still intact. She had not been naked at any point during the evening. No way could she have gotten all that shit back on while she was drunk. Hell, she'd barely been able to peel everything down far enough to pee.

Khill raised a brow at the obvious relief on her face. “If we'd had sex,” he said, his already deep voice going deeper on the word sex, “you'd remember.”

Of that, she had no doubt. She was more afraid that she'd propositioned him in a drunken stupor and thrown her panties at him or something. She knew he was too much of a gentleman to take advantage of a woman who couldn't consent.

And there was, of course, the fact that she'd already thrown herself at him and he'd turned her down.

But all in all, it would appear that even though she felt like there was more alcohol in her blood than plasma and there was a raging mosh pit in her skull, she had escaped her adventures in Vegas relatively unscathed.

Well, except for her hair. That looked like a pair of squirrels had tried to nest on her head. After fucking for a few hours. In a tornado.

Lifting a hand to try to finger comb her wild curls into submission, something caught her eye. Something glittery. Something expensive looking. Something that weighed heavily on her finger.

Her left ring finger.

Justine's grandfather had been a jeweler. She used to spend a few days a week with him after school when she was a middle schooler, and because he wasn't one to let anyone freeloader, she'd learned a lot to help him out in his shop. She knew all about cut, clarity, color, and carat sizes. So, she could say with absolute certainty that the ring she was wearing cost more than her car.

First of all, it was an emerald-cut, 1.25 carat pavé diamond. The band was platinum and covered with micro-pavé diamonds. It was nothing short of stunning.

Honestly, the only thing she didn't know about this ring was why it was on her finger.

Her saucer-wide eyes lifted from the ring back up to catch Khill's gaze—his somewhat guilty looking gaze—in the mirror.

“Oh,” he said, rubbing the back of his neck sheepishly. “Yeah. I know you were worried about how much the ring cost. But like I said, there's no reason to. The guy who handles my money is a genius, so I have plenty of it. Or, if you want something less flashy, we can do that, too.”

She swallowed hard. Tried to, at least. It was difficult when her throat was so dry. “Um...I'm more concerned with why I have the ring at the moment.”

He frowned. “Don't you remember anything about...the ceremony?”

Ceremony . The room spun. Sweat broke out on her brow. She remembered...laughing. Lots of laughter. There was also a little white chapel and...a dude dressed up in a 1970s Elvis costume. Khill grinning down at her as he promised to love and cherish her until...

Holy shit kabobs.

“We got married,” she whispered in horror.

In answer, he held up his own left hand, drawing her gaze to the plain platinum band on his ring finger.

Justine spun on her heel and barely made it to the toilet before spewing twelve hours’ worth of tequila (and most of her dignity) into the bowl.

Khill let out a sigh so deep it sounded like it came from the depths of his soul as he leaned down and gathered her hair for her. “Perfect,” he muttered.

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CHAPTER 6

In retrospect, Khill would admit that taking an already tipsy Justine to Vegas and letting her ingest more alcohol hadn't been one of his brighter ideas.

She'd just looked so defeated that he couldn't stand it. She was too good to feel like that. All he'd wanted was to cheer her up. Make her understand she was fun and smart and gorgeous and way too good for a dickwad like old what's-his-face.

The wedding had not been part of that plan.

But, in the moment, with her looking at him like he was her savior, it'd just happened. And it felt right, somehow. The moment when she agreed to love, honor, and cherish him until death parted them had been the best moment of his life.

The worst moment was this morning when she couldn't remember most of it and was puking up everything she'd ingested since birth.

Not exactly the way he'd hoped to begin their first day together as a married couple.

And now, as he sat across from her at the 50s-style diner with a greasy spread of breakfast foods between them, he knew he should've put a stop to the wedding, no matter how right it'd felt at the time. "It's not really that big of a deal," he told her.

With one hand on her coffee cup and the other on her forehead, she glanced at him over the tops of the sunglasses he'd picked up for her in the hotel's gift shop. "How is married not a big deal?"

He shrugged. “I mean, I’m not a lawyer, but I assume we can get an annulment if you want one.”

Khill did his best to ignore the gnawing feeling in his gut the thought of annulling their marriage caused. That had to be a holdover from his upbringing. There was no such thing as annulment in orc marriages. If an orc wanted out of marriage, they had to murder their spouse—which was legal in cases of abuse or fraud.

Justine frowned. “I don’t know much about it, either. But if TV and movies can be believed, the fact that the marriage wasn’t, um, consummated means we can probably get an annulment.”

He didn’t mention that he would’ve consummated the fuck out of their marriage if she’d been sober. But while he apparently had no problem marrying her while she was drunk, he most definitely would never take advantage of her physically without sober consent.

The fact that she’d tried really hard to convince him that drunk consent was sufficient was another fact he’d take to his grave. She was already embarrassed enough without that knowledge. No need to make things worse for her. “I’m sorry.”

She took a sip of her coffee. “Oh, don’t worry. I don’t blame you for any of this. You were drunk, too. I know none of this was your fault.”

Well, that wasn’t necessarily true. But again, he saw no need to point that out. They were, in fact, married. The why of it wasn’t important at this moment.

That was his story, and he was sticking to it.

“So, I guess the right move now is to get a lawyer when we go home,” he suggested.

Justine poked at the hashbrowns on her plate, grimaced, and set her fork down. “My cousin is a lawyer. I’ll call her.”

There was that gnawing in his gut again. He’d already eaten his body weight in pancakes, bacon, and eggs. It couldn’t be hunger. Justine clearly regretted their hasty marriage. Getting the annulment was the right thing to do.

And still he couldn’t shake the feeling that it wasn’t right. Which was why he had to ask, “You’re sure, right? That you want the annulment?”

She glanced at him over the tops of her sunglasses with wide eyes. Those eyes never failed to gut-punch him. Did she have any idea how beautiful she was? “Why? Don’t you want the annulment?”

Shit. He’d been too distracted by her pretty eyes to think of how he’d answer the same question. He rubbed a hand over the back of his neck. “I want...what you want.” Then he shrugged and added, “But it’s not often I find someone who matches my level of grumpy. I could certainly do worse for a wife.”

What a stupid fucking thing to say! Why don’t you just tell her you love her and want to be her husband? Why did you have to make it fucking weird ?

But the shy smile she rewarded him with made him stop mentally castigating himself. “I could certainly do worse for a husband, too. But even though I was never one of those girls who dreamed of her wedding day, a drunken Vegas ceremony I can barely remember isn’t ideal.”

His takeaway from that was she wasn’t necessarily saying she didn’t want to be married to him , just that the way they got married was less than optimal. Which was fair. Totally fair. He’d prefer his bride to remember the ceremony, too, if he was being honest. “Well, that settles it. We’ll talk to the lawyer, yeah?”

“Yeah.”

Good. Great even. It was all settled.

So why did it still feel like something was slowly eating away at his gut?

CHAPTER 7

It took two days to get an appointment with her cousin. During that time, Justine could only hope Lila had stopped cackling evilly at her expense.

The rotten bitch found the whole situation hilarious—even more so than the time when Justine was seven and Lila tossed her into a clothes hamper, sat on the lid, and made her sing the SpongeBob theme song until she nearly lost her voice. Their mothers had blown the whole incident off because apparently, that's the kind of crap they'd done to each other growing up.

Which was why Justine had never minded being an only child. If her cousin treated her like that, what the hell would a sister do to her?

But while Lila had been hell on wheels as a kid, she grew into a fiercely loyal teenager who Justine adored. When Sammy Walford put gum in her hair and she had to get an unfortunate pixie cut she did not have the cheekbones to pull off, Lila had stolen Sammy's clothes in the locker room during gym class. Good old Sammy had been forced to walk to his car wearing nothing but a clear plastic shower curtain around his waist. Lila had made sure the girls' lacrosse team was there to witness his walk of shame.

And there was a lot of shame because Sammy either had a micro-penis, or he was a grower, not a show-er. That fucker couldn't get a date for the entirety of his senior year.

These days, Lila put her big, evil brain to good use in divorce court. If you were a

woman about to get screwed over in settlement talks, Lila swooped in like an avenging angel in an Alexander McQueen suit to save the day. She was revered—and feared—for the courtroom goddess she was all over the state.

It almost felt like a waste of her skill to talk about an annulment. But Lila had offered her services for free, so Justine could hardly say no.

Sitting on the buttery-soft leather loveseat in Lila's lush corner office, in front of a mahogany desk that probably cost more than her first year of veterinary school, Justine glanced over at her husband, who sat next to her while they waited for Lila to show up. She wanted to make a joke to lighten the mood.

But what could she say when she had no idea why the mood needed to be lightened? Khill looked like he was waiting for a colonoscopy. That was going to be performed sans anesthesia. On a speeding city bus full of tourists snapping pictures. Through a construction zone.

“Are you OK?” she asked, wondering if one of the burritos he'd scarfed at lunch had turned on him. “You seem...tense.”

As if to prove her point, a muscle in his jaw jumped. “I'm fine.”

“You don't sound fine. You sound like?”

Whatever she'd been planning to say was drowned out by the sound of Lila breezing into the office, leaving a trail of Tom Ford Rose Prick Eau De Parfum in her wake.

With a bone-deep sigh narrating her movements, she dumped her briefcase on her desk, tossed her thick auburn hair over her shoulder, and dropped into her office chair. It wasn't until her eyes fell on Justine, then shifted to Khill, that she finally broke her silence.

By laughing. Loudly. Until she snorted.

Justine wished she could see the humor in this scenario, too. She could use a good laugh as much as the next girl. But since the laughter was at her expense, she held her tongue and just slow blinked at her cousin until the unsympathetic bitch's belly laughs died down to an occasional guffaw.

Lila wiped at her tear-filled eyes with the back of one well-manicured hand. "Oh, this just makes my day. I swear to Jesus, I thought you were kidding. But you really did it, didn't you? You drunk married a hot orc in Vegas. I didn't think you had it in you, cuz." She slow clapped a few times. "Well done."

Khill crossed his arms over his chest and glanced over at Justine, one brow raised. "You told her I was hot?"

Fuck. Me. Sideways .

Justine pinched the bridge of her nose in consternation and ignored the question. Mostly because, yes, she had told her big-mouthed cousin that Khill was hot. Absurdly hot. Supernaturally hot. So hot her panties were never totally dry in his presence. But she wasn't dumb enough to tell him that. "Can we cut to the part of this meeting where you tell us what we have to do to get an annulment?"

Lila blew a raspberry at her. "Oh, boo. I should've known you'd suck all the fun out of this situation." She stabbed an index finger at her. "But at Christmas dinner, when everyone is telling me how I need to settle down and have kids, I'm telling them at least I didn't drunkenly marry a hot orc in Vegas."

"Fine," she said with an eye roll. Like she hadn't expected that . Besides, she kind of deserved it. She had done an insanely impulsive thing.

Lila leaned forward in her seat and clasped her hands in front of her as she turned her shrewd gaze on Khill. “So, handsome, I have many, many questions for you. But I’ll just start with the obvious so that Justine doesn’t have an aneurysm while we sit here.”

He narrowed his eyes on her. “Shoot.”

“Do you want this annulment?”

Justine expected him to give his enthusiastic consent. They’d discussed this and agreed, after all. Anyone who’d drunk married someone in Vegas would want an annulment...right?

So, imagine her surprise when he did not give his enthusiastic consent. Instead, he shifted his eyes to Justine and muttered, “I want...what Justine wants.”

Justine’s jaw dropped. This was the second time he’d insinuated that maybe he didn’t want this annulment. She’d been sure he was making a little joke when he said he could do worse than her. But she couldn’t ask for clarification now. Not in front of Lila, and not when she wasn’t even sure how she felt about his reluctance to annul their giant drunken mistake.

Lila, however, had no such compunction. “That’s not a yes, pal. Before I waste my time on paperwork, I’m going to need consent from both of you. So, I’ll ask again. Do you want this annulment, Khill?”

And still he didn’t answer. Justine sputtered, “Of course he does.” She turned fully in her seat to face him. “Right?”

A muscle in his jaw jumped. “If that’s what you want, then yes.”

Lila's eyes bounced between them like she was watching a tennis match. "Jussie? You want the annulment, right?"

Some part of her somewhere deep inside wanted to scream no. Khill was an amazing guy. He was hot, kind, great with dogs, hardworking, smart, and every other thing she could ever want in a husband. But the way they got married was just...wrong. If she ever got lucky enough to actually marry Khill, she wanted to do it right. Or sober, at the very least. "Yes, I want the annulment."

The longest silence in the history of long silences followed. Not a sound could be heard—not a heartbeat, not a breath, nothing. Until Lila cleared her throat and muttered, "Close enough, I guess. OK, so here's what's going to happen. I'm going to file a petition and a summons with the court for an annulment on the grounds that both of you were unable to consent to the marriage. Namely, because you were drunk off your asses, but I'll phrase it as 'mental incapacity'."

Justine frowned at her. "You're enjoying this a little bit too much."

Lila nodded. "Fair. Then, we'll get a court date. When we show up, the judge signs off and grants the annulment. Bada bing, bada boom, you're all done with each other."

Why the idea of being bada-bing-bada-boom done with Khill felt like her heart was being curb stomped, she had no idea. "Great," she said with absolutely zero enthusiasm.

Khill merely grunted.

Justine was suddenly not liking her odds of coming out of this marriage/annulment without someone getting hurt.

Especially not her.

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CHAPTER 8

Everything went reasonably back to normal after their meeting with Justine's fancy lawyer cousin.

They continued to work together at the rescue and the clinic. Other than Justine occasionally looking at him like he was a particularly challenging puzzle she was trying to figure out, their relationship was...friendly.

Khill hated it.

He missed the more intimate connection they'd had in Vegas. Not that he was going to tell her that. Not after he'd agreed to the stupid annulment.

Why he couldn't seem to tell her that he wanted to stay married, he had no idea. He kept opening his mouth to say it and...nothing came out. The words just withered in his throat and died. It was annoying. Infuriating, really. He blamed his upbringing to some degree. Orcs were not a species known for communicating their feelings. Or for having feelings, for that matter.

Still, he was living among humans and needed to start acting like it. Especially if he wanted to have a relationship with one.

And, oh, how he wanted a relationship with Justine.

So, like usual, he'd practically attached himself to her side all week. If she needed to treat an aggressive dog brought in for treatment by the local dog catcher, he was there

to protect her. When she got a call to evaluate a potential neglect situation, he was there to protect her. When she wanted tacos from that truck that liked to park in the sketchy part of town, he was there to...well, he went with her because he wanted tacos, too. But he also wanted to protect her.

His constant vigilance was how he learned that her ex-boyfriend—the dumb fuck who'd cheated on her—was harassing her, trying to win her back.

She'd performed ten surgeries that day at the free spay and neuter clinic. She was so damn tired that Khill practically had to hand feed her dinner and carry her to the car when she was ready to go home. And when they arrived at her place...there it was.

A giant bouquet of red roses from her idiot ex, sitting there on her doorstep.

Khill snorted at the way her little button nose wrinkled in disgust when she saw them. Justine wasn't a fan of cut flowers. She'd always said they were a waste of money, because what kind of expression of love was a cut flower that was on borrowed time and would be a dried out, withered husk of its former self in three days' time? Anyone who supposedly loved her should know that .

She let out an exhausted sigh as he walked her to her door and she scooped the flowers up. "This is the fourth bouquet so far," she said. "I feel like such an asshole for throwing them away. Think I should take them to the nursing home or something? Give them to someone who doesn't have any family to visit?"

He shrugged. "Maybe. I'll take them for you if you want."

The sad little smile she gave him as she handed over the flowers did unspeakable things to his heart.

God, he was pathetic.

“Thanks,” she said. “I appreciate that. This whole thing is getting really old. He’s not even taking the time to write a personal message. Just writes ‘meant to be’ on the card.”

There was something about that message that gave Khill a bad feeling, like a spider had just crawled down his spine. He had no idea why. Maybe he was annoyed that someone other than him was in love with Justine? Or maybe he was annoyed with himself for not being able to express his feelings as easily as this flower-sending jerkoff was. “I’ll drop ‘em at the nursing home,” he grumbled.

Another sigh. She rubbed her temples. “He keeps calling, too. I blocked his number, but he must’ve gotten a new one just to call me on. When I answer, all I hear is some stupid old song about fate. It’s crazy! Why does he keep trying? I mean, he cheated on me . I would think having me out of his life would make it easier for him to bang other women. Why try to get me back?”

He knew the answer to that question better than anyone on the planet. But his inability to voice it was what had gotten him into this fiasco.

So, he did the only thing he could. He stepped in closer. And closer. Until she was forced to crane her neck up to meet his gaze. Her eyes widened as he slid his hand into her hair and cupped her neck. Slowly—oh so slowly—he leaned down, close enough to take her mouth with his if he chose to, and...

Pressed a kiss to her forehead.

He tried not to read too much into the way her breathing quickened. “I can’t imagine anything more painful than watching you walk away,” he whispered against her skin. “Other than maybe letting you go without a fight. That’s why he keeps trying.”

And with that, he let her go and walked away, taking whatever scraps of his dignity

(and self-control) he still had with him.

Justine was still sitting at the foot of her bed, dumbfounded, a full half hour after Khill left her.

He'd been weird about the annulment, continued to act weird with her all week, gave her the sexiest kiss of her life (what did it say about her love life that the sexiest kiss she'd ever had was a forehead kiss?), said it must be painful to walk away from her, then proceeded to walk away from her like it was nothing?

What. The. Actual. Fuck?

Was he trying to say—in his unique, annoying, non-communicative way—that he wanted her? Years after he'd rejected her ? Had he wanted her all along? The whole time she'd been with Jake? When he drunk-married her in Vegas? And more importantly...if she asked him about any of this now, would he even admit it?

It was so hard to tell what Khill was thinking or feeling. He was so damn stoic. Always had been. She assumed it was because of his upbringing. From the little bits and pieces she'd gleaned from stories he'd told her in the past, orcs weren't what anyone could call emotionally available. And she'd had to drag each of those stories out of him like she was pulling teeth.

So, how the hell was she supposed to get the most tight-lipped orc in the state—maybe even on the planet—to discuss his feelings with her?

She was making a mental list of possible solutions (that may or may not involve waterboarding) when her cousin called.

"I'm a legal goddess," Lila said in lieu of a greeting.

“I know. You remind me every Thanksgiving and twice on Christmas. What’s up?”

“The court’s docket is jammed up for months, but because I’m a legal goddess , I got you a court date next Tuesday.”

Justine took that news like a punch to the gut. “So soon?”

“I believe the response you’re groping for is, ‘Wow, Lila, thank you so much for being so freakin’ awesome at your job! How can I ever repay you?’ And the answer, since you seem slow today, is to let me borrow your red leather jacket next Friday. I have a date.”

Justine rubbed her aching temples. “I mean...thank you. And, of course, you can borrow the jacket.” It didn’t fit right across her shoulders, anyway. It had been a gift from Jake, who obviously had no idea what size she wore. “So, by next Wednesday, I’ll be a single woman again?”

“Yes.” Long pause. “Unless you’ve changed your mind? You do still want the annulment. Right, Jussy?”

She swallowed hard. “Yeah. Why wouldn’t I?”

Lila snorted. “Because your husband is fuck hot? I’d trap his ass into marriage in a heartbeat if I thought he’d go for it. And believe me when I say, hon, if I was you , he’d go for it.”

“You think he might not want the annulment?”

“Are you blind? He obviously has a thing for you.”

“He plays it close to the vest,” she admitted. “If he has feelings for me, he hasn’t said

a word.”

“Well, he is a man. Monster or human, I haven’t met a single one of them who expressed a damn feeling unless he was forced into it. But go with your gut. If you want me to cancel the court date, I will.”

It’d be so easy to say yes. To just stay married until she was able to drag Khill’s feelings out of him. But manipulating him into expressing himself just didn’t feel right. Then again, neither did alcohol-fueled wedding vows.

“Let’s keep the date,” she said with as much confidence (if not enthusiasm) as she could muster. “I’ll let Khill know.”

Lila sighed. “OK. Seems like a waste of great potential orgasms, if you’re asking me.”

This time, it was Justine who snorted. “Don’t I know it.”

“Want to know what I do when I think someone is holding back information?” Lila asked.

Justine blinked. Did people hold back information from Lila? How was that possible? All it took was one raised brow in her direction and Justine usually spilled her guts. “No. What?”

“Cross examination. Go at them hard, like you’re Olivia Benson and they’re a disgusting perp on Law and Order . The more they evade, the harder you go at them. Eventually, you’ll get the answers you want.”

Hmmm . Cross examination. Pushing her husband into the corner until he gave up the truth. It was just crazy enough to work.

“Or,” Lila said after a pause, “they’ll cry. Sometimes that happens, too.”

Now that was a chilling thought.

But Justine supposed she’d just have to take that risk, especially when there were so many great potential orgasms on the line.

CHAPTER 9

Sitting outside the courtroom, waiting for the annulment hearing, Khill was sweating like he was facing sentencing for murder. And the worst part?

He'd rather be sentenced for murder.

Why the hell couldn't he just tell her he didn't want a damn annulment? That he'd married her because he loved her and wanted to be with her forever?

Why couldn't he tell her how he felt about anything ?

He was still stewing about all that when Justine marched—actually marched— across the courthouse hall like she was leading troops into battle, stopped in front of him, close enough to touch, and crossed her arms over her chest. “Why do you look like you're headed to the gallows?”

Because I feel like I'm headed to the gallows . “Do I?”

Her foot started tapping. Khill sat up straighter. Justine's baseline was a little grumpy and annoyed. But she wasn't quick to anger. When her temper blew, however, it blew in a big way. And it always started with foot tapping.

“You know you do,” she hissed. “You've looked like this every time we've discussed the annulment since Vegas. Why, Khill? You do want the annulment, don't you?”

He swallowed declarations of love and any other pitiful groveling that might trip off

his tongue. “I want...what you want.”

She stabbed a finger at him. “No. That’s not going to work this time. Do you want the annulment?”

“What difference does it make? This is your decision.”

Justine looked like she was going to lunge at him and strangle him with her bare hands. It was so fucking hot. “Why is it only my decision? We were both there in Vegas, drunk off our asses.”

“No, we weren’t,” he grumbled quietly.

She snorted. “Oh, so now you’re going to deny you were even there? Very fucking mature.”

OK, now he was getting angry. Did she really think he was doing this for shits and grins? That it was all some kind of immature practical joke? “We were both there,” he said through gritted teeth.

“Then why did you just say we weren’t?” She poked his shoulder. Hard. “Huh?”

“Don’t,” he warned.

Another poke. “Tell me, damn it.” Another poke. “What the hell did you mean?”

“Justine, I swear, I’m going to?—”

“You’re going to what ?” Poke. “Just tell me what the hell you meant. Why is everything my decision when we both got ourselves into this mess?” Poke. “When we were both drunk that day?” Poke. “When...”

With a roar that seemed to tear its way out of his very soul, he shot to his feet, towering over her until she had to crane her neck up to meet his gaze. “I. Wasn’t. Drunk!”

With his chest heaving and rage pouring off him in waves, it took him a few seconds to comprehend what he’d just blurted out.

Well...fuck.

But there was no stopping the flow of emotions and words now, so he also added, “Orcs can’t get drunk. I married you because I fucking wanted to marry you. I’ve been in love with you for years, Justine. Fucking years . So, no, I don’t want a damn annulment and never will. The only reason we’re here now is because you were drunk and no matter how much I want to, I can’t hold you to those vows.” He took a deep breath, having spit all that out without one. “Is that what you wanted to know, wife ?”

Justine rocked back on her heels, mouth dropping open. But if he’d expected her to back down, he would’ve been sadly mistaken. Because true to form, she stepped back up until her chest brushed his. “Yeah, that’s what I wanted. I would’ve preferred that we dated a little, maybe had sex a few times, before marriage. But I’m not sorry we did it. Not anymore. So, guess what? I don’t want the annulment, either!”

His heart rate picked up with what was probably joy, but damn it, he couldn’t turn off his temper that fast. So, all he said was a snarled, “Fine.”

She bared her teeth at him. “Fine.”

That was all he could stand. He snagged her by the back of the neck, yanked her into his arms, and swallowed whatever comments she wanted to spew at him next by slamming his mouth down over hers.

Over the years, Khill had imagined kissing Justine more times than he could count. His fantasies were vast, diverse, and pervasive. He was fairly certain he hadn't gone a single day in their entire acquaintance without imagining taking her mouth with his own at least once.

But none of the fantasies he'd had—and oh , he'd had some good ones—compared to the reality of her.

She tasted like peppermint, need, and every hot desire he'd ever had. Her lips were somehow petal soft, yet firm and demanding all at the same time, and Khill knew he'd never tire of feeling them against his own.

Someone moaned. It might've been her, but it was probably him. That didn't matter, though.

What mattered now was that for the first time in his life, Khill felt like he belonged somewhere. To someone. In this moment, with this woman, he was exactly where he was supposed to be. If whatever gods were in charge of this dimension decided to smite him right now, at least he'd die happy.

No, wait. Fuck that. No one—not even a god—was going to pry him away from the woman he loved now that he finally had her in his arms.

Or so he thought, at least. Until a violently loud throat clearing right next to them forced them apart.

Not by much, though. Khill pulled back just far enough to rest his forehead against hers. Letting her go altogether was not an option.

“I'm going to go out on a limb here and say you don't still want an annulment?” Lila asked with a snarky smile.

“You got that fucking right,” he answered.

“Damn straight,” Justine whispered breathlessly.

Lila chuckled. “Good for you, girl. I’ll go in and let the judge know what’s up. Meanwhile, might I suggest you take your little, uh, reunion here to a more private location? Because we’re dangerously close to me having to defend you against an indecent exposure charge here.”

CHAPTER 10

The ten-minute drive from the courthouse to Khill's cottage took six minutes. Many traffic laws (and maybe even the laws of physics) were broken along the way.

And not a word was uttered. The anticipation in the air between them was so heavy, Justine was tempted to start tearing her clothes off in the car so that by the time they got to a bed (or wall or couch or really any non-mobile, solid surface), she'd be good to go.

Not that she wasn't already good to go. Khill had gotten her wetter with one kiss than she'd ever gotten during actual sex with anyone.

Which was kind of sad and cool at the same time. Her husband got her wet with nothing but a kiss. Yay! And her other partners (all two of them...but still) barely convinced her that taking off anything other than her pants for sex was even worth it. Boo!

One look at Khill's face (and the obvious hard-on pressing against his jeans) told her his thoughts were traveling in a direction similar to hers. His jaw was so tight it looked like it might snap under the pressure of his clenched teeth, and while his eyes were technically on the road ahead of them, she could tell his full attention was actually on her. Every time she shifted in her seat, every time she took a deep breath, his focus sharpened.

When they finally got to his place, Khill threw the car in park and shifted in his seat to face her. "I need to know now?—"

“No.”

His brow furrowed. “No?”

“No. We’re not talking now. We can talk after.”

He ran a hand over his jaw, eyeing her up and down, like a hunter siting down prey.

“After what?”

“After you fuck me until I can’t walk.”

She figured he might kiss her again at that moment.

She figured wrong.

As it turned out, orcs were really fast. She’d never had much of an opportunity to see just how fast Khill was. But in the time it took the word fuck to fall off her tongue, he’d gotten out of the car, moved around to the passenger side, ripped her door open, yanked her out of the car, and tossed her over his shoulder.

Her heart pounded as he sprinted from the car into his cottage.

Normally, whenever she stopped by Khill’s place, she took the time to admire it. To Justine, it had always reminded her of a Hobbit hole—if Hobbits were 7’ tall and appreciated vaulted ceilings, of course. But with its English-ivy-covered stone walls, round windows, and solid oak beams, floors, and finishings, the cottage was a nature lover’s fantasy.

She’d appreciate all that later, though. At this moment, she was really only interested in Khill’s California King mattress.

Too bad they didn't make it there.

Khill set her on her feet in the living room and crowded her up against the wall. There—right there in this cottage that looked like a Tolkien novel come to life—they made out like horny teenagers, feeding each other hot, open-mouthed kisses, groping and grappling until they were both panting, bodies begging for release.

He pulled back just enough to rest his forehead against hers. “Yes?”

Her husband was a man of few words. The one he'd just uttered sounded like it'd torn its way out of his throat like broken glass. A lesser man (or monster) might've just taken what he wanted right there against the wall. But not Khill. Nope. Her husband was still a consent king. “Yes,” she whispered, grabbing hold of his bottom lip between her teeth and giving it a good, sharp tug. “A thousand times, yes.”

Then his mouth was on hers once again in what could only be called a claiming. It was rough, demanding, wild, and so, so welcome.

To put the punctuation on her consent, Justine reached between them and rubbed her palm over his cock. He spit out a tangle of urgent-sounding words in a language that was not English (Orcish, maybe?), then slid his hands down to cup her ass and pull her hard against him. She shifted and opened her mouth against his throat, flicking her tongue against his skin.

Good lord, he tasted incredible .

Justine was so turned on she could barely breathe. Or maybe anticipation had replaced all the air in the room. Whatever the case may be, if foreplay with Khill was this intense, how was she supposed to survive when she finally got this man inside her?

He must've seen the questions in her eyes because he flashed her a wolfish grin that all but screamed you can take it and you will take it, all of it, for as long as I say you will . Then he spun her around, pressing her chest against the cool wall.

She managed to get her palms up on the wall for support, but he didn't let her move more than that as he ruthlessly stripped her out of her clothes. All her clothes. They were all now in a puddle at her feet.

Now, Justine wasn't normally self-conscious. Her body wasn't perfect, but it was strong and healthy, and she was proud of it. But she could feel the weight of Khill's stare trailing over her curves, and while it was definitely sexy, it also made her feel a little, well, shy .

But that thought and every other thought she'd had for months fled when Khill pressed up against her back, sliding his hot hands down her thighs, then nudging them apart.

"You're gorgeous," he whispered in her ear before capturing her earlobe between his teeth, giving it a quick nip. "I've never seen anything so perfect in my life."

She sucked in a sharp gasp when he pressed the heel of his hand against her swollen clit. "Hmmm . You feel perfect, too," he murmured. "Hot and wet. Mine ."

Yep. She couldn't agree more. She was his . Voicing that was beyond her at the moment, though. So, all she could do was press back against him as he slowly—way, way too slowly—slid a finger into her, pinning her against him. Justine pressed against the wall to remain upright when her knees threatened to buckle.

Eventually, as he continued torturing her at a glacial pace, she managed to choke out, "Please. Now. Hurry."

“No,” he said in a growly rumble. “We’re going to consummate the fuck out of our marriage tonight, and we are not going to hurry.”

She groaned. He was trying to kill her. There was no other explanation for it. Then he slid a second thick finger into her and she bit down on her lower lip to stop the needy, embarrassing wail that was just dying to spill off her tongue.

The low chuckle he let out told her he was enjoying her sensual misery a little too much. Bastard.

As his fingers kept tormenting her, Justine reached back threaded her fingers into all that thick, glorious hair of his, and turned her face up to his to for another deep, drugging kiss. His tongue stroked against hers as he shifted his free hand from her hip to her breast. She gasped into his mouth as he brushed his thumb over her nipple. “More,” she whispered into his mouth, hoping he’d at least grant that request.

That’s when he pulled his fingers away.

“Motherfucker!” she wailed.

Another chuckle. He spun her around to face him and pressed her hands to the wall over her head. “Leave those there,” he ordered.

She’d never wanted to lower her hands more in her life. Being told what to do triggered every rebellious instinct she had. But the fear of him moving away and refusing to touch her again had her following orders.

“That’s my good girl,” he murmured right before he dropped to his knees at her feet and completely blew her mind.

Holy. Hell.

Yep. This was it. This was how she was going to die.

And she couldn't think of a better way to go.

CHAPTER 11

Kill knew there was a very good chance he wasn't going to last two minutes once he got inside Justine. So, while what he said about not rushing was true, he was also taking things slowly to ensure she at least got to come a few times before he did.

Gazing up at her now, though, he realized waiting and taking it slow wasn't going to be an option for much longer.

Fucking hell, her body was gorgeous. All soft skin, long, lean muscles, and rounded curves. If he was an artist, he could show his appreciation of her body by painting or sculpting her. But he had zero artistic ability, so he'd have to worship her a little...differently.

Leaning in, breathing deep the mingled scents of her desire and the cherry blossom and almond lotion she used, he knew exactly how to prove to her just how desirable she was.

She whimpered as he brushed his thumb over her clit. Gaspd when his tongue followed the same path. Trembled when he slid two fingers inside her, stroking her g-spot.

He manfully suppressed a whimper of his own when she threw a leg over his shoulder, digging her heel into his back. That's when he realized how wrong he'd been.

Two minutes was an incredibly unrealistic estimate of how long he was going to last.

At this rate, he was going to come on the snowy white skin of her stomach like a horny, inexperienced teenager before he ever got inside her.

But he was a husband now, and he owed his wife more than a quick, caveman-like rutting. So, he grabbed her ass with his free hand to hold her steady while he really got to work.

Her entire body quaked as he worked her over with his tongue and fingers, and her hands restlessly clawed the wall above her head. Animalistic, guttural sounds—sounds that resonated to the depths of his soul—fell from her lips, urging him on.

She was so close. He could feel it in the tightening of her muscles and hear it in her trembling, raw voice. But his wife was stubborn. She was holding onto control for some reason.

“Let go,” he murmured. “Come for me, wife. Now.”

And much to his surprise—and tremendous pleasure—she did.

Her every shuddering gasp, every inner contraction and convulsion, was a gift—a gift he intended to draw out of her again and again until she was too tired and spent and satiated to move.

The rumbling growl of satisfaction he let out was the perfect accompaniment to her broken cries and moans. It was more pleasing to his ears than any symphony he’d ever heard.

When the last of her shudders subsided, she dropped her leg from his shoulder and looked like she was going to slide bonelessly to the floor.

Oh, dear wife, we're not anywhere near done yet .

Khill stood up, upended her over his shoulder, and marched her to the bed. She gasped, then giggled when he dumped her on the mattress unceremoniously. Had he ever heard her giggle before? He didn't think so.

But he intended to hear it every day for the rest of his life. He'd make fucking sure of it.

Plus, the way she bounced when she hit the bed was nothing short of magical.

In that moment, looking down at Justine's dreamy, sated grin, Khill felt more like a hero and less like a monster than he'd ever felt. Making his wife come had given him that feeling.

Then she sat up on her knees, scooted to the edge of the bed, and reached for his zipper. He immediately got lightheaded, probably because all the blood in his body had shifted to his cock. He held his breath as her deft fingers undid his jeans and shoved them down to his knees.

Her eyes widened. "You go commando, huh? Good to know."

He grunted as he kicked his way free of his pants. "Underwear is a waste of time."

"God bless efficiency," she murmured.

She licked her lips as she stared at his cock. Surely, she didn't intend to...not with her little human mouth...

As if she could hear his thoughts, she said, "I'm not exactly sure how to manage all this , but I'll be damned if I'm not going to give it a good go."

He opened his mouth to tell her that wasn't necessary, but words escaped him when she tugged him toward her and wrapped her lush lips around him.

Fuuuccckkk .

A ragged hiss tore its way out of his throat as he stared down at her. Her eyes tipped up to his as she sucked him into the back of her throat and cupped his balls in her delicate hand.

“Holy hell, baby,” he choked out. “You’re killing me.”

He could tell she was enjoying the power she had over him. Her pleased hum as her cheeks hollowed out told him that much. He wished he didn't have to stop her. But he was not going to come in her mouth. Not this time, at least.

So, he gave her hair a gentle tug, forcing her to let go. Her lips were swollen and wet as she blinked up at him. “Did I do something wrong?” she asked.

“Fuck no. But if you keep that up, I’m going to lose control.”

She bit her lower lip. “Sounds good to me.”

You first, wife .

“Tell me again that you’re sure,” he said in a voice so rough he barely recognized it as his own. “Tell me the answer is still yes.”

“I’m sure,” she said without hesitation. “And I’m on birth control.”

Which meant they'd be fucking with nothing between them, because monsters couldn't carry or spread human diseases.

He didn't dare think too much about that. Not when he was already hanging onto control by the barest whisper of a thread. Which is why he didn't respond to her statement. Just flipped her onto her back and scooted her up to the headboard.

"You might want to hang onto that," he suggested. "This might get rough."

"About damn time," his wife muttered, grabbing the headboard with both hands.

Khill crawled up her body slowly, like the apex predator he was, stopping along the way only to give her breasts the attention they were begging for.

He held his weight off her the whole time. He outweighed her by at least a hundred pounds. It said a lot about his character that even in the throes of passion—like, the literal throes—he still cared more about her comfort level than his own. And the way he looked at her...phew. No one had ever gazed at her in such an open, honest way before. She'd never felt this desired. This needed.

This loved.

It made her so emotional she almost forgot about that giant beast of a cock he was going to stuff inside her. Almost. Because seriously, she knew vaginas could stretch, but that much? On some level, she was a little bit afraid this was going to rearrange her organs.

Not afraid enough to tell him to stop, of course. But concerned, nonetheless.

Thankfully, Khill seemed to sense her apprehension and took his time sliding into her, inch by glorious inch. So, so many inches. It wasn't long before she realized her fears about punctured lungs and kidneys were unfounded. Probably because of the amount of effort he'd put into their, um, prep work. But when he finally bottomed out and they were nose-to-nose, she felt fuller than she'd ever felt in her life.

It was like they were made for each other.

“Oh, God, yes,” she panted.

His muscles tightened. “Fucking hell, you feel so good. So tight.”

Then he started to move.

He moved slowly at first, in and out, in and out, giving her time to adjust to his size. She knew he was holding back. She could see it in the rigid set of his jaw, feel it in the tightly coiled muscles of his core and arms. He was probably afraid of hurting her.

“Don’t hold back,” she said. “I want to feel all of you.” To make her point, she arched up against him, silently begging for more.

And he gave it to her.

With a throaty growl that raised goosebumps all over her skin, he grabbed her leg, hooked it over his hip, and really started to move.

He gave her what she’d been dying for practically since they first met. She held onto the headboard for dear life as he pounded into her over and over again, hitting a spot— oh, yes, there !—that made every muscle in her body clench. “Don’t stop!” she cried. “I’m so close.”

Khill had never let her down before, and he didn’t seem willing to change that anytime soon, because he showed no signs of slowing down. If anything, he just went harder and faster.

Then he let out a guttural rasp that seemed to reach down between their straining

bodies and take hold of her clit. Hard.

That was all it took to break her. Justine came so hard her body bowed, her vision blurred, and she felt light-headed. It was nothing short of a life-altering orgasm. She felt like it had pulled her apart on a molecular level and put her back together again, different, but somehow better. It was the kind of orgasm that all the other orgasms she'd ever had hoped to be when they grew up. And the best part?

Something told her Khill was able and willing to deliver that kind of orgasm whenever she wanted it, no matter how many times she wanted it.

Yay !!

She figured Khill would let go and have a life-altering orgasm of his own at that point. But she figured wrong. Because Khill did not stop.

He did, however, pull out long enough to flip her onto her hands and knees before slamming into her again. His big hands shifted up to her breasts, pinching her nipples. Hard.

“Again,” he demanded.

She shook her head, because there was no way in hell she could come again, so...

He slid his hand down over her stomach, down, down, down, until his thumb unerringly found her clit again. And yep, that did it. She came again, screaming his name so loud anyone within earshot would assume she was naming her murderer.

Only then did Khill bury his face in her hair and come with a possessive growl so sexy it probably would've made her come again if she hadn't been so utterly, perfectly sated.

Justine collapsed onto the mattress. Khill rolled off her, but didn't move away. They stayed that way, side by side, breathing hard, sweat cooling on their skin for what could've been minutes or hours. Time had no meaning in her post-orgasmic glow.

She eventually found the strength to lift her head off the mattress and shove a hank of sweaty hair out of her eyes. She glanced over at Khill, who was lazily trailing his fingers up and down her back. "Well...that annulment is certainly off the table. We just consummated the fuck out of our marriage."

Khill pushed up on his elbows, then leaned over and dropped a kiss on the back of her shoulder. "I like to be thorough."

She snorted. "That's an understatement. I feel like you got the short end of the stick here, though."

His brow furrowed. "How so?"

"Unbalanced orgasm ratio," she said. "I had three and you only had one. I owe you a few. I'll have to take care of that tomorrow or something." You know, when I can feel my legs again .

His eyes darkened and he grinned an evil grin that was positively brimming with sensual promise right before he grabbed her and lifted her so she straddled him. "Why put off until tomorrow what you can do today?"

She sputtered. Surely, he didn't think she could...not again...not yet...

But then he lifted his hips and she felt he was already hard again—already!—and she changed her mind.

She had always hated procrastination.

CHAPTER 12

Hours later, sweaty and spent and sprawled across Khill's chest with her face buried between his pecs, one of his giant hands palming her ass possessively, Justine finally caught her breath. "I'm so mad at you," she muttered.

"What did I do?" he grumbled without any heat.

"We could've been doing that for years, but no, you let me think you weren't interested."

He sighed. "It's complicated, OK? Orcs aren't...emotional. Believe it or not, I was considered overly emotional in our home world, which is why I was exiled to begin with."

With way more effort than it should've taken, she lifted her head to meet his gaze. "Can you tell me about your world?"

He looked so uncomfortable she thought he might refuse to say anything. But he eventually asked, "What do you want to know?"

Anything. Everything. She didn't say that, though. Not when they were just getting to the point where they could actually talk about important things. Scaring him off with too much communication too fast would be a huge setback. "As much as you're willing to tell me."

Another sigh. "The orc home world is called Gorlaug. It's as close to paradise as you

can imagine. Sunny, warm, just enough rain to support the natural environment, no storms, nothing destructive at all...it's like the best parts of Earth with none of the downsides."

"It sounds beautiful," she murmured.

"It is. That's why so few orcs end up here. I mean, don't get me wrong. I like Earth, for the most part. But it's no Gorlaug."

She listened as he told her about the social structure (largely a matriarchy) where every citizen was equal and worked for the good of the many. There was next-to-no crime, very little violence. Not even any weapons. It sounded so much like Utopia that Justine was starting to consider petitioning the government to hand the reins over to Gorlaug's leadership, because clearly, they had their shit together in a way that the United States never had.

"There's a trade-off, though," Khill admitted quietly. "Along with all that perfection comes a complete lack of...passion, I guess would be the best word. Emotions lead to chaos, and there's no chaos allowed in Gorlaug. Which means marriages are more like a business arrangement than anything humans are used to."

Justine frowned. "No one marries for love?"

He gave her a crooked smile that made her sad just contemplating it. "Nothing is more chaotic than love. Expressing emotion in Gorlaug is punishable by exile."

Well, that was a bummer. She supposed if she had to choose between Utopia and never being allowed to express an emotion, she'd probably leave, too. But then the second part of his statement penetrated her brain. "Wait, were you exiled for expressing an emotion? What emotion?"

“Not exactly a specific emotion. It was more about what I wasn’t feeling, which was a duty to marry the woman my parents chose for me,” he admitted ruefully.

“Why not?”

“It didn’t feel right. I just felt like getting married in Gorlaug would be a mistake.” He eased a piece of her hair behind her ear, letting his fingertips linger on her cheekbone as he added, “I didn’t know why until I met you.”

Oh, God...her heart ! “Any regrets?”

“Absolutely none,” he said without hesitation. “Well, other than not telling you how I felt sooner. I tried a few times. I just couldn’t make the words come out.”

She didn’t hold that against him anymore. Especially not now that she knew more about his upbringing. No one had ever taught him how to have emotions, let alone express them. But she didn’t tell him that. Instead, she eased her legs apart so that she was straddling him. “I suppose I’m willing to let you make up for lost time.”

He hissed when she ground down on him, rubbing her clit over his cock. “Yeah? And how do you propose I do that?”

“Orgasms,” she said, catching his bottom lip between her teeth and giving it a good, hard tug. “I’m thinking ten or so should be a good start.”

She squealed, then moaned when he reversed their positions, dumped her on her back under him, and slid neatly into her. “I can do that,” he growled.

Oh, she had no doubt. “Prove it,” she growled back.

It took him all night, but he more than proved it. Which is how Justine learned what a

complete overachiever her husband was.

Yay !

CHAPTER 13

Justine started to sneak quietly out of bed the next morning because she didn't want to wake Khill, but she quickly realized sneaking was unnecessary. He was dead to the world.

Her husband—and, yes, even thinking that word gave her a thrill—was sprawled across his bed (their bed, now, she supposed), face down, blanket hanging precariously onto his left butt cheek but baring everything else, breathing the kind of deep breath only a man who'd spent the night thoroughly satisfying his wife could breathe.

And, oh, how satisfied she was this morning.

A little sore and dehydrated, too. But that was beside the point.

The point was that while she'd love to kiss him goodbye and let him know she was going to check in on the clinic and make sure all the animals in the kennels were happy, she just didn't have the heart to wake him.

Plus, he'd need his strength later because she had every intention of riding him like a Palomino when she got home.

She knew they needed to have more conversations, too. They had so many logistics to figure out. She could assume they were going to live in his cottage because her place sucked in comparison, but it wasn't a sure thing. Should she take his last name? Hell, did he even have a last name? That was something they'd never discussed. What

about kids? Did he want kids? She wasn't even sure if she wanted kids.

These were all things they needed to talk about. Being in love was great, but it wasn't always enough to keep a couple together. Her parents were proof of that.

But all these things could wait. They especially weren't worth waking him up for. Poor guy needed his rest after a hard (and she did mean hard) night's work.

The only thing that truly mattered now was that she knew what they had together was worth saving. And one of the biggest things she had in common with Khill? Tenacity. Now that they had each other, neither one of them would be letting go without a big fight.

Thoughts of how their last fight had ended made her consider crawling back into bed with him.

But alas, the clinic awaited. And Van Gogh was due for his antibiotic. She'd just sneak over there, take care of the animals, and might even be able to get back into bed before Khill woke up. It was a solid plan.

Too bad her plans always seemed to have a way of falling to fuck .

Because she'd no sooner finished at the clinic and set foot outside before an unyielding hand clamped a sweet-smelling rag over her mouth and nose and she found herself yanked back against an even more unyielding body.

"I tried to tell you it was fate," her much larger attacker hissed in her ear. "You wouldn't listen. But you will now ."

Justine realized a couple of things simultaneously at that point. First of all, the sweet-smelling rag was most likely coated with chloroform, which was why she was getting

so, so tired all of a sudden. Secondly, if she survived this, she was definitely going to have to think up an alibi for Khill, because he was going to destroy this asshole when he found her.

Finally—and this one really chapped her ass—she owed her ex an apology. She'd assumed he'd been the freak who'd been sending her flowers and weird music snippets about fate. But she'd been wrong.

Because while she didn't recognize this guy's voice, she knew beyond a shadow of a doubt it wasn't Jake.

Just. Fucking. Great .

Which was her last thought before she slipped into the darkness.

CHAPTER 14

W aking up alone sucked ass .

Which was a weird feeling for Khill, because he'd been waking up alone for thirty-eight years and had never really thought much about it. But now that he'd gone to sleep with Justine at his side (OK, more like on top of him), waking up without her was like a blast of arctic air blowing across his heart.

For the amount of time it took him to get out of bed, brush his teeth, and pull on pants and yesterday's T-shirt, Khill told himself that Justine leaving without waking him up to say goodbye didn't mean anything. Hell, married people went out all the time without telling their partner where they were going...right?

Well, there was one way to find out for sure.

Khill grabbed his phone and dialed his married friend, Riordan. He supposed "friend" might be a strong word. More like a semi-friendly acquaintance who also managed his investments. But that wasn't the point.

Riordan was a giant, red-skinned, horned demon from a dimension worse than any Khill had ever seen. He came to this dimension looking for a mate and found one in Roxie—a woman who was only slightly less terrifying than her husband. Of course, their path to happiness wasn't smooth. It involved kidnapping, arson, and the murder of Khill's cousin (long story...and the cousin was a total asshole who deserved what he got. He was not missed). But Khill had helped Riordan track Roxie down when she was in danger (because demons apparently had shit tracking skills), and they'd

been friends-adjacent ever since.

He didn't even wait for Riordan to offer a greeting before he blurted, "Does Roxie ever leave the house without saying goodbye?"

There was a loaded pause on Riordan's end of the line before he said, "I realize we're both monsters and not from this dimension, but I believe the customary greeting here is hello."

Oh, for fuck's sake. "I don't have time for customary greetings, you dick. I need to know if human women regularly leave the house without telling their monster husbands goodbye."

Another pause. "I am, of course, dying to know where this conversation is going, so I'll humor you. No, Khill, my wife doesn't usually leave without saying goodbye. Unless I'm asleep, or something."

Ah ha! He had been asleep. See, there was a perfectly good?—

"In which case she leaves me a note," Riordan went on.

Khill glanced around frantically. Fuck! There was no note. "Why the fuck did she leave without saying anything?"

He hadn't really been expecting an answer from Riordan for that one. He'd mostly just been thinking out loud. But Riordan must not have realized that, because he said, "And somehow I have the feeling this isn't really about me and Roxie. Want to give me a clue about what's going on? I haven't talked to you in a while."

Khill blurted out the entire story without taking so much as a breath. Vegas, the drinking, the wedding, the aborted annulment...he spilled it all. He only spared

Riordan details of the previous night. Those belonged to him and Justine alone.

When he was done, Riordan whistled. “Wow. That’s...a lot. But I didn’t hear anything in that story that makes me think something’s wrong. Maybe she just thought you needed your sleep.”

Yeah. That did make sense. Justine was thoughtful like that.

But that didn’t explain the bad feeling he had in his gut. The gnawing ache screaming at him that something was wrong . “Maybe,” he murmured.

“Did you try calling her ?” Riordan asked gently.

The ache intensified. “I can’t explain this, but...she’s not going to answer. I just know it,” he admitted.

Riordan sucked in a sharp breath. “If I’ve learned anything from my relationship with Roxie, it’s that your gut is never wrong. If you think something is going on, then something is going on.”

Khill stifled his fight-or-flight instincts when Riordan appeared out of the fucking ether in front of him.

Oh, yeah. Did he mention that Riordan could teleport?

“What the fuck, man?” he asked.

Riordan shrugged. “You helped me find my wife when she was missing. So, let’s go find your wife.”

Now that was the best idea he’d heard since waking up alone.

CHAPTER 15

Waking up from chloroform was not as easy as Hollywood would have you believe. Justine was, sadly, figuring that out the hard way.

In fact, now that she was thinking about it, it wasn't all that different than waking up in Vegas with the worst hangover of her life. The toxic-waste taste in her mouth, the pounding headache, the slight numbness in her extremities...yeah, that was all similar.

The difference was that when she had her hangover, Khill was there to take care of her. Now, she was slumped over in a wooden chair with her ankles zip-tied to the chair legs and her wrists tied behind her.

This was so not good.

But she'd seen more than her fair share of police procedurals on TV and watched a shit ton of true crime documentaries, and she felt like if anyone should be able to handle this situation, it was her.

(Of course, she was halfway convinced that because she could operate on animals and had watched eleventy-billion episodes of Grey's Anatomy she could perform a lap coli on a human, too. So, sometimes her confidence overrode her reality.)

Taking a deep breath, Justine took stock of her situation.

Low, exposed ceiling beams, bare concrete floor, unfinished sheetrock walls,

dampness in the air, no natural light...all hallmarks of a basement. Not good news. Tied to a chair in a murder basement sounded like the start of a horror flick. Or a bad Netflix documentary about a serial killer—a documentary she would not be the titular character in. She'd just be, like, victim number five or something. That'd really piss her off.

She had to swallow a squeal when a giant dude suddenly appeared within her line of sight. And from there, her fear bled away, allowing annoyance to take its place.

Fucking hell. She knew this guy.

She narrowed her eyes on him. She hadn't recognized his voice, but she knew that stupid face. "You're...Desmond, right? What the hell is going on?"

That handsome face twisted into an expression so angry Justine braced herself for a blow. But to his credit, the werewolf reined in his emotions quickly. "It's David," he corrected through obviously gritted teeth. "And you'd remember that if the orc hadn't interrupted our date."

He said orc in the same tone she used when describing how heart worm killed dogs, wearing the same expression her vet tech wore when expressing a grumpy Doberman's anal glands. But pointing that out didn't seem wise.

She swallowed hard. "David, I wasn't in the right frame of mind the night we met. I'd just had a bad breakup. I never should've been at the Monster Match."

He knelt in front of her, and the wild look in his eyes made her heart rate kick up. "You were exactly where you should've been, Justine. It was fate."

Now, admittedly, Justine wasn't great at romance. She loved it in fiction, but in reality? Not as much. She generally believed in what she could see, feel, and

quantify. So, while she wasn't close-minded to the concept of fate , she couldn't say she fully endorsed it. Not to the extent that it'd put her in a murder basement with a werewolf, at least.

Except...if she hadn't been storming out of that Monster Match, half-cocked, looking for someone to fuck her misery away, she wouldn't have ended up in Vegas, which meant she wouldn't have ended up drunk-marrying Khill. Would he ever have confessed his feelings for her if she hadn't drunkenly agreed to marry him?

Huh. Maybe she believed in fate, after all. "I guess it's possible," she admitted quietly, more to herself than to the wolf.

David's eyes lit up, which, for some reason, made her even more nervous than his feral expression did. "Yes," he said. "If you hadn't shown up that night, it might've taken me years to find you. Decades, even. My fated mate."

Record scratch in her brain. "Wait...what?"

He grabbed hold of her knees, and she couldn't hide her flinch/recoil combo. Scarily enough, that did nothing to dim the light in his eyes. "I knew it the moment I saw you, Justine. You're mine ."

What kind of deluded idiot thought his fated mate was a woman who'd just spent the entire night getting absolutely railed by her orc husband? "But...I'm already married."

"No!" He shoved a hand through his hair furiously. "It doesn't matter. Marriage is nothing compared to the mating bond. You'll see that in time."

That's when the restraints finally made sense to her. This maniac planned to keep her here, held hostage, until she agreed to be his mate . Yikes.

She was at a loss here. Nothing in all her years of consuming media about criminals and crazy people had prepared her for this .

What were the odds that her orc in shining armor would show up and save her from a forced mating situation?

CHAPTER 16

Tracking humans was easy. Especially for an orc. So Khill shouldn't have any trouble following Justine's scent, even if she was miles away.

And he couldn't find a fucking trace of her anywhere .

Which meant that someone had masked her scent. A human wouldn't know how to do that. There was only one possible explanation for this.

A monster had taken his wife.

They'd checked her apartment, the entire grounds of the Spellman Mansion, her favorite coffee shop, and a few other local spots she frequented. The cameras in her clinic showed she'd left there at least an hour earlier. But outside the clinic, there was no trace of her.

He shoved his hands through his hair in frustration as Riordan teleported them back to Khill's place. "Where the hell could she be? Why would anyone take her?"

Riordan rubbed the back of his neck. "Does she have any enemies?"

See, this was where he wanted to say that everyone adored his wife as much as he did. But... "Well...yeah. We take dogs from people all the time. Lots of people hate us both. Van Gogh's old owner especially hated her."

And his wife wasn't especially pleasant to pet owners she deemed stupid at the clinic,

either. Like the lady who'd tried to put her cat on a vegan diet. Justine had ripped that woman a new asshole and told her that if it was up to her, she'd never be allowed to even pet a cat again, let alone own one.

“Did any of them hate her enough to hurt her?”

He blew out a harsh breath. “I mean, probably. But I don't see any of them going to the effort. These are mostly assholes who can't be bothered to take care of their pets, let alone kidnap a woman.”

Riordan thought about that for a moment before saying, “On the horrible TV shows Roxie makes me watch, in cases like this, it's often an ex. Would her ex do anything to her?”

Fuck! Why hadn't he thought of that? This whole experience was teaching Khill that he was total shit in a crisis, and he hated it. “The guy's obsessed with her. He was cheating, so she dumped him, but he was sending her flowers and music, trying to get her back.”

Riordan cracked his knuckles. “Let's go pay this jackass a visit. I don't know where he lives, so think about that, and I'll teleport us there.”

Man, Riordan was on fire with the great ideas today. Khill laid a hand on his friend's shoulder and braced himself for yet another teleportation (which was a super weird, super tingly—and not in a good way—feeling). “Go.”

That's all it took. One thought, and half a blurry, discombobulating second later, and boom . There they were, right at the little fucker's doorstep.

Khill lifted his foot to kick the door in, but Riordan stopped him. “Maybe we try knocking first?”

“If it was Roxie, would you try knocking first?”

Riordan stood back and lifted his hands in supplication. “Good point,” he muttered. “Carry on.”

The door exploded into a thousand shards with one kick. They just really didn’t make doors like they used to.

Jake was sprawled on his couch, wearing nothing but a sad bathrobe (suspiciously untied), in the middle of the day, watching what looked to be—Khill did a double take—porn.

Porn of a dude in a kangaroo suit, with his dick out, spanking someone in a panda suit.

Jesus Christ.

Riordan let out a low whistle. “That’s...weird. And sad. And embarrassing. Not necessarily in that order.”

Jake leapt off the couch, threw his hands in the air like a perp on Blue Bloods , eyes going comically wide when they landed on the two hulking monsters that’d just appeared out of nowhere in his living room. “Who the fuck are you?” he screeched. “Why are you in my house?”

Khill was still having trouble finding the right words. Hell, any words if he was being honest with himself. So, he stopped trying. He stalked forward, grabbed Jake by the throat, lifted him a foot off the ground, and slammed him back against the wall. “Where the fuck is Justine?” he snarled.

Jake made an annoying gurgling noise.

“Uh, I don’t think he can talk with your hand that tight around his throat. Might want to let up a little,” Riordan pointed out.

Begrudgingly, Khill loosened his grip. But only by a little. He repeated his question.

The worthless little fucker’s eyes were the size of dinner plates. “I-I don’t k-k-now. She’s n-n-not here.”

Khill gave him another shove back against the wall. Not too hard. Just enough to crack the drywall a bit. He was displaying amazing control, in his opinion. “I can see that, you pathetic motherfucker. What did you do to her?”

He clawed at Khill’s hand and twisted in his grip, but couldn’t break free. It was a little surprising that he even tried. He was hopelessly outclassed in size, strength, sheer desperation, and rage. “It was only o-o-one time! I only cheated once!”

Riordan made a disgusted noise. “She’s so far out of your league it’s not even funny. You shouldn’t have even been looking at other women. What the fuck were you thinking, you glue sniffer?”

His wild gaze flew to Riordan. “I wasn’t, ok? I screwed up!”

Jake flinched when a frustrated growl tore its way out of Khill’s throat. “I don’t give a fuck about that. Where is she now ?”

“How would I know? I haven’t seen her since she threw soup on me and told me I didn’t know where her clit was!”

Riordan snickered. “Nice.”

Khill let out another growl, this one fueled by rage rather than frustration. “Do. Not.

Talk. About. My. Wife's. Clit," he ground out, punctuating each word by slamming Jake back against the wall.

Then he had to shift back a little to avoid splatter from the urine that was now leaking down Jake's leg. Why did that keep happening? Why was some pathetic weakling always trying to piss on him while he was asking them questions?

"Wife?" the pisser whispered, horrified. "She married you ?"

"You're goddamned right she did! So, all the flowers and stupid songs about fate you sent her didn't mean shit ."

That's when the expression in his eyes shifted from terror to confusion. "Flowers? Songs? I-I don't know w-what you're talking about."

"Liar!" Khill snarled.

Riordan cleared his throat. "I don't think so, man," he interrupted. "I used to reap souls, remember? The damned always try to lie there way out of hell. I can smell it a mile away. And this guy might be a sniveling little loser, but he's not lying. Not about the flowers and songs, anyway."

Khill looked Jake squarely in the eye again. "You didn't try to get her back with flowers and songs?"

He shook his head furiously. Well, tried to, anyway. But Khill's grip was still too tight to allow for much movement, so it was more like he just kind of negatively vibrated there for a second or two.

"Did you even apologize to her?" Riordan asked.

More negative vibrating.

“What a useless little turd,” he muttered.

“You really don’t know where she is now?” Khill asked again.

“No, sir,” the useless little turd wheezed out.

Khill released his grip. Jake dropped to the floor like a sack of wet shit, landing in a puddle of his own piss. He turned to Riordan, who said, “Not gonna lie. I was hoping it was him. I’ve been itching to throw someone into one of the feral hog dimensions.”

Khill had been hoping for the same thing, honestly. He wasn’t opposed to tossing this cheating loser into another dimension, but something told him Justine wouldn’t like that. He groaned and raked his hands through his hair again. “Who the hell would’ve taken her?”

Riordan rubbed his furrowed brow. “You know, you said someone sent her songs about fate?”

“Yeah, why?”

“Well, I thought I caught a whiff of a werewolf on the grounds at the mansion. No one’s more into fate than those guys. Did she know any werewolves?”

Khill frowned. “I smelled that, too, but didn’t think much of it because after a Monster Match, it always smells like...” He trailed off, memories crashing through his brain like a bullet train. “Holy shit. There was a fucking werewolf who followed her out of the Monster Match the night we went to Vegas!”

Riordan grimaced. “It’s fucking hard to track a werewolf. Do you know anything

about the guy?”

That’s when Khill did something he hadn’t done since he woke up to an empty bed that morning.

He smiled.

Only it wasn’t a happy smile. It was a feral, unhinged smile that made Jake whimper from his spot on the floor. “We don’t have to track him. I know exactly who will have all the details about that motherfucker.”

He laid a hand on Riordan’s shoulder and thought about their next destination, readying himself for yet another teleportation. As they were disappearing into the veil, Khill heard Jake mutter, “I gotta get out of this fucking town.”

Khill snorted. “Good plan, asshole. You should get right on that.”

CHAPTER 17

Justine's friends, Roxie and Lucy, were avid romance readers. They'd introduced her to everything from light romantic comedies to dark paranormal romance. She'd enjoyed all of them. They were a great escape from reality after a long, hard day at work.

Plus, the world was a dumpster fire. Anyone who didn't enjoy a little romantic escapism needed their head checked as far as Justine was concerned.

I digress...

But never, ever, did she imagine she'd be living the plot of a paranormal romance novel.

Although, since her true love was not the delusional werewolf who had zip-tied her to a chair, it was feeling more like she'd taken up residence in a horror novel.

What she needed was to calm down. Think this through rationally. Act more like Penelope Garcia on Criminal Minds and less like a sassy novel heroine who was destined to fall for her captor.

At least the dumbass wasn't lurking over her anymore. Telling him she was hungry had sent him scurrying off like a rat with a stupid grin on his face. Obviously, the thought of feeding his fated mate pleased him.

Pfffttt . Fated mate. Her . What a load of horse crap.

As soon as this was over, she was going home and purging her E-reader of every wolf, bear, and dragon shifter romance she'd ever downloaded.

Well...maybe she shouldn't be too hasty about the dragon ones. She'd especially liked those. But the wolf and bear books were history !

She gave her zip ties another useless tug. Breaking them was out of the question. Even if she broke her wrist, the ties were still too tight to maneuver out of. Plus, she'd always been skeptical of that particular escape tactic when she'd seen it in movies and on TV. Unless you enjoyed pain, how could you possibly break your own bones?

Besides, something told her to just wait this out. To stay as safe (and unmolested) as possible, and wait for Khill. She was sure he would've realized she was gone by now and started looking for her. And with his tracking skills, he'd be able to find her in no time. Especially now that he knew she...

Oh. Wait. A. Fucking. Minute .

Justine's blood ran cold as a horrible thought occurred to her. She'd meant to tell Khill she loved him, but she hadn't. She'd been too distracted by all the kissing and nudity to talk about much of anything, let alone how much she loved him and probably had for years .

She'd been in love with him since the first time he grumpily forced her to go home and take a break after she did twelve-hours straight of surgeries. And when he'd grumpily binge-watched The Great British Baking Show with her when she was stuck in bed with the flu. And when he never once told her she was hard to connect with, or that she should smile more. No, not Khill. It tickled him that her grumpiness rivaled his. He protected her and cared for her without asking for anything in return. He loved her because of her personality quirks, not in spite of them.

He was kind, caring, and giving—more so than any human or monster she'd ever known. Whenever something annoyed her, he was the first person she wanted to bitch to about it. He was the first one on her mind when she woke up, and the last one on her mind when she went to bed.

She loved the shit out of him.

And she'd crawled out of bed and left him there without a word.

Holy hell, he probably thought she regretted their night together!

She renewed her struggles with the zip ties with a vengeance. As if being kidnapped by a delusional werewolf wasn't bad enough, now the orc who probably was her actual fated mate was out there somewhere thinking she didn't love him.

This was a disaster .

Maybe if she tipped her chair over, it'd break when it hit the ground, allowing her to pull her wrists and ankles free. She might also smack her head on the floor and give herself a traumatic brain injury. That'd suck.

But damn it, that was a chance she was just going to have to take.

Justine took a deep, cleansing breath, closed her eyes, and threw all her weight to the side. As the chair started to tip, she steeled herself, waiting for impact.

It didn't happen.

When she cracked an eye open to see what had gone wrong, she found herself nose-to-nose with a very angry werewolf.

Gulp.

“You were lying,” he hissed through gritted teeth as he righted her chair. “You weren’t hungry. You just wanted to be alone so you could try to escape!”

He heaved a takeout bag of what smelled like Thai food against the wall.

She flinched, pressing herself as far back into her chair as she could. She knew the smart thing to do would be to play along and try to pacify the raving lunatic. It’s what Penelope Garcia would do. But Justine was tired, she actually was hungry, and she had much better things to do than sit here with this idiot. So, she hissed right back at him, “Of course I was lying, you stupid asshole! You kidnapped me and tied me to a fucking chair!”

He shoved his hands through his hair, frustration drawing his features tight. “Why don’t you get it? This is fate! You can’t fight it! Why are you still trying?”

“Because I don’t love you! I can’t even remember your damn name! Why would fate give you a mate that doesn’t even remember your name? Not to mention that I’m in love with someone else!”

“No,” he said, furiously shaking his head. “You’re not.”

“I sure as shit am!”

“I can prove it to you.”

Well, if those weren’t the most terrifying words she’d ever heard in her life, she didn’t know what was. And that theory was proven when the crazy jerk lunged forward, grabbed hold of her hair, cranked her head to the side, and sank his teeth into her neck.

Justine wasn't sure if the primal scream that split the air was actually coming out of her mouth, or if it was just happening in her head. She tried to fight, did her best to rock her chair away from him, but his grip on her was unbreakable.

"I'm going to fucking kill you," she grated out through clenched teeth. "And if I can't, my husband will!"

Her voice rose so high on the word husband that he finally pulled his mouth off her neck, dropping to his knees at her feet. While she fought to control her thundering pulse, he stared up at her, wide-eyed as her blood dripped down his chin.

"Holy shit," he whispered. "You don't feel it, do you?"

She scowled at him. "Were you dropped on your head as a child? Of course I feel it; you fucking bit me! I'm bleeding here!"

He shook his head slowly. "No. Not the bite. The mating bond. You don't feel it, do you?"

"No! I told you already, I'm married. I love my husband!"

And that's when Khill appeared out of thin air directly behind the werewolf and everything got a little...chaotic.

CHAPTER 18

Kill palmed the werewolf's skull and tossed him to Riordan.

He'd deal with him later.

Right now, he had bigger things to focus on. "Did you just say you love me?"

She gaped at him for a second or two before closing her eyes and taking a deep breath. "Is that really the first thing you want to do at this moment? Ask me to repeat myself? Rather than, say, getting me out of this fucking chair?!"

Oh. Yeah. That probably would be a better way to go.

He reached down and snapped the plastic ties that bound her to the chair, then scooped her up into his arms. He didn't set her on her feet, though.

"So," he asked now that they were eye-to-eye, "did you just say you love me?"

"Of course I love you, you big idiot," she grumbled. "I think I've been in love with you for years. I just didn't recognize the feelings for what they were until now."

"I can relate to that."

He couldn't stand it anymore. He captured her lips with his and kissed the crap out of her.

When they broke the kiss, she tucked her cold nose into the spot where his shoulder and neck met and asked, “How’d you find me?”

“Your stupid ex helped us figure out it was a werewolf that took you. Then we pulled the records from the Monster Match to find the guy. He was dumb enough to take you to his real address, the one he put on his entry form, after kidnapping you.”

She snorted. “That was dumb. He—wait.” She lifted her head off his shoulder. “You said ‘us’ and ‘we’. Who’s ‘us’ and ‘we’?”

He turned her so she could see who was behind him. Riordan gave her an awkward wave with his free hand. His other hand was busy holding up the squirming werewolf. And next to him, was Viktor, beast of Spellman Manor himself.

While Khill was a bit of an oddity in Sanity Falls, Viktor Adamovic was THE oddity—a literal one-of-a-kind.

Sometime in the 1700s, a mad scientist took it upon herself to sew together parts from the men she’d murdered and reanimate the result. That result was Viktor.

Khill wasn’t a good judge of what was considered handsome , but he’d heard plenty of women in town (even Justine, much to his annoyance) say that Viktor was good looking. Not classically, of course. With the scar down the middle of his face, bolts in his neck, and mismatched eyes (one was brown, the other pale blue), there was nothing “classical” about him. But even Khill would admit all the pieces and parts had been pulled together in a way that was...aesthetically pleasing, he supposed.

Viktor offered her a half smile. “I’m glad you’re safe, Justine,” he said. Khill hated how sophisticated the guy’s Croatian accent sounded. Orcs didn’t have accents. He could sound threatening, angry, or feral. But sophisticated, unfortunately, was beyond him.

“Hi, guys,” she said. “What are you two doing here?”

“I teleported them,” Riordan said at the same time Viktor said, “Lucy would kill me if I hadn’t helped rescue you.”

“Wow,” Justine said, rubbing her temples. “I feel like I just walked into the punchline of a weird joke. All that’s missing is a bartender.”

Riordan and Viktor looked confused, but Khill knew what she meant. An orc, a werewolf, a demon, and a reanimated dead-guy walk into a bar...

“Are you alright?” Khill asked her belatedly. It should’ve been his first question, he realized. But once he heard her say she loved him, his brain kind of shut down.

“Yeah. The asshole bit me, though,” she groused.

Khill growled. “I’ll fucking feed him his own heart.”

“I can chuck him into a feral hog dimension,” Riordan suggested eagerly.

Viktor, ever the adult in the room, sighed and said, “Perhaps we could at least consider calling the authorities?”

“I like my idea better,” Khill grumbled.

Meanwhile, the werewolf in question didn’t seem to have any concern for how precariously he was clinging to life at the moment. He was too busy staring at Justine with wide, confused eyes. “I don’t understand,” he murmured. “Why didn’t you feel it?”

“What’s he blathering on about?” Riordan asked.

“The fated mates thing,” Justine answered. “He was sure I was his fated mate and he doesn’t understand why I didn’t feel a bond or anything when he bit me.”

“Clearly it’s because you’re not his fated anything,” Khill said.

“I know, right?” Justine said, incredulous.

“It should’ve worked,” the werewolf whispered. “I felt it as soon as I saw her. Why didn’t she feel it?”

Riordan snorted. “Human women don’t operate like monsters, idiot. Not even fate can make them do something they don’t want to do. And clearly, she did not want to do you.”

David went limp in Riordan’s grip, raising sad eyes to Justine. “I-I’m sorry.” He swallowed hard. “I made a huge mistake.” His gaze shifted over to Khill for a moment. “A really huge mistake.”

Khill glared at him. “I don’t care. You kidnapped my wife and bit her. You deserve to die.”

His head fell forward. “You’re right.”

Viktor cleared his throat. “Am I the only one who thinks death might be an overreaction here?”

“Yes,” Riordan and Khill said in stereo.

Justine rolled her eyes. “No. Death is an overreaction. I’m fine! OK, I have a little headache, but that might be because I haven’t eaten?—”

“You didn’t feed her?!” Khill roared, baring his teeth at the werewolf, who flinched and closed his eyes, clearly waiting for a death blow.

Justine grabbed Khill’s chin, forcing him to look down at her instead of at her kidnapper. “He tried, OK? I’m just saying that other than the bite, I’m fine. It’s definitely not worth murdering anyone over.”

“But...but...” Khill sputtered. “He terrified you! For that alone, he should die.”

She shrugged. “Honestly, once I realized who it was, I was more annoyed than terrified. Then I was just pissed about the bite. And the Thai food he threw at the wall and wasted.”

Riordan sighed, dropping David on the concrete. “I guess killing him doesn’t seem especially fair if all he did was annoy her while she was already hangry anyway.”

Justine nodded. “I am a little hangry.”

Khill let out a sigh of the damned and set her on her feet. “Fine. Let’s wrap this shit up and get you fed.”

Viktor grabbed the werewolf by the collar. “Excellent. Riordan, if you wouldn’t mind dropping us at the police station, I’d appreciate it. This one will confess to what he’s done. I’ll let them know Justine will be by tomorrow morning to give her statement.”

Riordan nodded. “Sure.” He turned to Khill and Justine. “Do you mind waiting here for a second? I can come back for you and take you wherever you want to go eat right after I drop them off.”

Khill opened his mouth to object, but Justine answered, “Yes, that’s fine. And thank you both so much for coming to my rescue. That means a lot to me.”

Riordan gave her a nod and Viktor offered her a warm smile and said, “You’re family. Of course we came for you.”

Tears sprang to her eyes. “Well, shit. That’s really sweet.”

Khill made a shoo-ing motion. “Yes, you’re both sweet. Now get out of here so I can feed my wife faster.”

After the werewolf muttered yet another stupid apology and Khill’s quasi-friends/quasi-family disappeared, Justine locked her arms around his neck and said, “I like the sound of that.”

“I’m not surprised. If you haven’t eaten anything since breakfast, you must be starving. I’m honestly surprised you didn’t let me kill that motherfucker.”

She rolled her eyes. “I’m not talking about food. I mean you calling me your wife .”

Warmth the likes of which he’d never felt before bubbled up inside him. Was this... happiness ? Like, true happiness?

As he stared down at his hangry-but-gorgeous, smiling-but-generally-grumpy wife, he knew what he was feeling was without a doubt true love and pure happiness. “I love calling you my wife, too,” he murmured.

“You realize we’re going to have to repeat that ceremony, right?” she asked with a crooked grin. “Nothing fancy, but definitely with less Elvis and tequila?”

“Baby, I’ll marry you in whatever kind of ceremony you want, as many times as you want. You can invite the whole town if that makes you happy.”

She grimaced. “That’s way too much people-ing. Maybe a nice, brief-but-official

visit to city hall?”

He chuckled. “Sounds perfect.”

“This whole thing is so surreal,” she said. “We’re talking about our happily ever after ending in a kidnapper’s basement. A werewolf kidnapper’s basement.”

Khill shrugged. “In Sanity Falls? I’m sure there are weirder stories out there.”

“I’m just wondering how we ended up here, you know?”

He eased a curl behind her ear. “Just lucky, I guess.”

She grinned up at him. “Normal does sound pretty boring.”

“You got that fucking right, baby.”

EPILOGUE

Here's what happened next...

Justine's new friend Gloria did, in fact, marry the basilisk she met at the Monster Match. He took her home with him after the event and she never left. She liked to joke that they fell in love at first hiss. They went on to have five kids and start the town's first monster day care center, Monster Tots, which was wildly successful.

David served a very light prison sentence for kidnapping and annoying Justine. When he was released, he moved to Wyoming where he met his actual fated mate, a large-animal vet who, weirdly enough, looked an awful lot like Justine.

Lila, much to her family's chagrin, decided (after yet another disastrous date) that she was perfectly happy staying single and fabulous. Every holiday, she ignores her family's persistent demands that she settle down. Justine always defends her.

Jake...ah, poor Jake. Turned out Jake was embezzling from his law firm. His illegal activities were discovered thanks to a forensic audit performed by an anonymous do-gooder (*cough*Riordan*cough*) who turned the results over to the authorities. Jake received the maximum sentence for his crime. Fortunately for him, the maximum sentence was only three years. (After all, who really gives a crap about embezzlement?)

Van Gogh never made it to an adoption event. He went straight from his isolation kennel at the vet clinic to Khill's couch. To this day, he still looks at Khill like he's Superman. Justine can relate.

Khill ended up taking Justine's last name because, as Justine suspected, orcs do not have them. And since he was raised in a matriarchy, he had zero alpha male hangups about such things. He grinned for a solid three days after legally changing his name and loves it when anyone calls him Mr. Willet.

Meanwhile, the newly minted Willets did indeed decide to live in Khill's cottage because it was way better than Justine's place, and also because Justine was a huge Tolkien fan.

They ultimately decided they did not want to have kids of their own. Focusing on the rescue and clinic and each other suited their needs just fine. Neither of them ever regretted that decision for a minute.

Other than that, the Willets are pretty boring by Sanity Falls standards. They're happy just being alone together. Most humans still annoy them, but they'll always have each other to complain to about it. And at the end of the day, what better foundation for marriage is there than that?

So, all in all, everyone (except Jake) lived happily—and weirdly—ever after.

THE END

But keep flipping pages for a sample of *Monster Match* , Lucy and Viktor's story, and *Caped and Dangerous* , a superhero rom com.

(And if you loved how grumpy Justine was, you'll REALLY love Greer.)

Happy reading!

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 3:36 am

The Chupacabra and the Chimera thought she was un-marriable.

Lucy West let that fact sink in for a moment.

The real irony here was that she didn't even want to get married. She was only here because she'd had a weak moment personally, and she'd always wanted to see the old Spellman mansion close-up. A Monster Match speed dating event seemed like a great idea at the time. And there was free food and drinks. It was a win-win.

So, the fact that a blood drinker and a lion/goat/snake person didn't want to marry her shouldn't bother her. It kinda did, though.

Maybe it was because she'd just dumped Jonathan and her emotions were still a little raw. While she was calling him a cheating bastard and grabbing everything she could carry to walk out on him, he was telling her she wouldn't ever find another man who was willing to tolerate her.

Jonathan hadn't ever been right about much. But the idea that he might've been right about that , of all things, really chapped her ass.

It hurt her pride, too, damn it. Breaking up with her live-in boyfriend (when his name was the only one on the lease) in the same week she was laid off from her job didn't help her foster a sunny can-do attitude about, well, anything . She was homeless, jobless, thirty bucks away from sleeping in her car, and now she couldn't even convince monsters who were desperately seeking human brides that she was a viable option.

If that wasn't the cherry on this shit sundae of a week, she didn't know what was.

Finding the flyer for the Monster Match had felt serendipitous at the time. The wind-swept thing had smacked her in the face when she was walking out on Jonathan.

Since the male monster population in the United States outnumbered the female monster population ten to one, many marriage-minded monsters set out specifically looking for human brides. That's why matchmaker Truvy Trudeau's monster speed dating events here in Sanity Falls were always such a huge success.

It hadn't escaped Lucy's attention that a rich, monster sugar daddy would solve many—if not all—of her current problems. Sure, her inner feminist prickled a little at the notion. Not enough that she didn't attend the event, obviously, because here she was in her one fancy dress (a classy, knee-length, black, vintage Chanel she'd picked up at a consignment shop for her uncle Morty's funeral five years ago), entirely unsensible (and uncomfortable) stilettos, and her last pair of clean underwear.

Still, the idea that a rich man could solve all her problems bothered her enough that her conversations with the prospective monster husbands were awkward at best, deeply embarrassing at worst.

Hopefully, the Orc she'd had her last speed date with would forget the story she told him about the time she'd gone to middle school wearing the same jeans two days in a row, and the previous day's underwear fell out of her pant leg on the bus in front of Jimmy Jorgenson, the love of her young life.

She sighed. Her relationship with Jimmy hadn't survived. Of course, it hadn't been any great loss since the relationship had existed only in her head.

That wasn't the point, though. The point was that when she was nervous, she was prone to bouts of verbal diarrhea nothing short of death could stop.

Her nerves had nothing to do with being anti-monster, either. She totally wasn't. She was pretty open-minded. Tails and tentacles and horns didn't bother her. But marriage...that was way scarier than any monster she'd ever seen. Except for maybe that vampire with the combover in the orange leisure suit she'd passed on the way to the bathroom. She shuddered.

So, that's why she was currently hiding in a dark alcove, listening to all the humans and monsters mingling, laughing, drinking, and enjoying themselves. It would've been fun if she hadn't overheard them talking about her .

Lucy frowned. Maybe she'd just rescue a bunch of dogs, cats, and feral goats and give up on dating—humans and monsters—forever. Her Aunt Fanny had done just that, and she always seemed happy. The rest of the family felt sorry for her, but honestly, she was Lucy's hero.

Well, at least the Spellman mansion isn't a letdown , she thought. It was every bit as majestic as it looked from the outside.

The mansion was a Victorian gothic revival home on steroids. It was huge, dramatic, and unspeakably elegant. She was almost afraid to touch anything for fear of messing the place up with her grubby, unworthy paws.

Lucy had only seen three rooms so far—one being the most beautiful, ornately-decorated powder room in existence, the other being a parlor designed for receiving guests, and the third a ballroom where the speed dating event was held. But from her perspective, it was a decadent collection of satin drama drapes, dark, rich wood panels and floors, antique tapestries, wrought-iron chandeliers, thick crown molding, vaulted ceilings, and jewel-toned, patterned wallpaper.

In other words, it was Lucy's dream home. Teenaged Goth Lucy would've killed to live here. And if someone didn't stop her, she couldn't promise she wouldn't soon be

sliding down the giant curved railing on the grand staircase that spiraled from the corner of the ballroom up to the mansion's second and third floors. How could anyone who lived with that staircase not slide down it every morning?

“Are you hiding from someone—or some thing—in particular?”

Lucy startled at the deep voice behind her in the alcove she'd thought empty.

The owner of said voice was leaning negligently against the wall, most of him cast in shadows. All she could see were a pair of long, trouser-clad legs, one crossed over the other at the ankles. Human-looking legs, she thought. Which meant he was probably one of the waiters or bartenders.

She raised a brow at him. Well, in his direction, at least. “I could ask you the same.”

He chuckled. It was an intensely pleasing sound that vibrated along her nerve endings, making her wonder if she'd had too much champagne and too few shrimp puffs. “I would say I'm hiding from...a bit of both,” he admitted.

He had a really great voice. Cool accent, too. Croatian, if she hadn't missed her guess. And she was fairly sure she hadn't because she'd always loved the Croatian actor who took over when George Clooney left ER, and this guy sounded exactly like that actor.

Note to self: find out where I can stream ER again. Time for a rewatch, methinks.

She wondered idly if she could convince this guy to narrate audiobooks for her. Hearing some of her favorite romance novels read in that voice would be orgasmic.

But then she remembered it was her turn to talk, and hey, if he could be honest, she supposed she could do the same. “I'm eavesdropping,” she admitted.

“Really?” he asked, sounding interested instead of disappointed by her bad manners, which made her like him even more. “Heard anything interesting?”

Her shoulders slumped a little. “Well, apparently I have a great rack and a decent face, but my personality is shit.”

A sound emanated from his chest that could only be described as a growl. It should’ve scared her.

It didn’t.

“Who said that about you?”

He sounded outraged on her behalf and it was nice. She couldn’t remember a time when someone championed her. “It’s OK. I’m a lot to take. I get that.”

He grumbled again. Clearly it wasn’t OK with him . And that was most likely why she felt comfortable telling this man—this stranger—her secret.

“I’m glad they don’t like me,” she said quietly.

She felt lighter the moment the words were out of her mouth. Unburdened.

There was a long pause on his end that made her heart beat a bit faster, but she heard no judgment in his voice when he eventually asked, “Why would you be glad that someone doesn’t like you?”

“I don’t really want to marry any of them. I just got out of a relationship with a guy who I barely even tolerated most days. I think I was only with him because it was easier than being alone, you know?”

“I do know,” he murmured.

Here came the dark part that didn’t paint her in a very flattering light. “I saw the flyer for this event and thought, for just a split second, that marrying a monster would be an easy solution to all my problems. But it turns out I can’t do it. I can’t use someone like that. For that split second, though...I thought I could. I just wanted things to be—I don’t know—easier.” She blinked back the stupid tears that were bubbling up behind her eyelids. “Look, I’m strong and smart and resourceful, so I’ll figure all this out. But it was nice to imagine, if only for a little while, that someone else could just swoop in like a knight on a white horse and rescue me from my problems.”

And she felt like such a weak-ass feminist for even thinking all that crap, let alone saying it to a stranger. For shit’s sake, what was wrong with her tonight? Why was she spilling her guts to a stranger in a dark alcove?

He remained quiet for so long she thought maybe she’d scared him off for good before he said, “I admire that.”

She snorted. “What? My lack of options and grayish morals?”

“Your unwillingness to use someone to get what you want and need.”

Lucy frowned thoughtfully. “That’s, like, the lowest bar for humanity ever.”

There was that dead-sexy chuckle again. “Indeed. And yet I spoke with so many people tonight—human and monster—who have no problem using someone to get what they want.”

She thought about all the women she’d talked to tonight who seemed willing to do or say anything to get the rich husbands they wanted. And all the monsters who were willing to be used in that way for their own reasons. It was kind of awful now that she

really thought about it.

“What would you do if you had a nice place to live and plenty of money?” he asked.

“You mean like if I hit the lottery?”

“Sure.”

Oh, she liked this game. Lucy used to dream of what she’d do if money wasn’t an issue. “It’ll sound weird.”

“Try me,” he said dryly.

Well, at this point, she imagined she’d already let him see the worst in her. Why hold back now? “I know most people say they’d like to travel the world. And maybe I would one day. But if I had money, I’d stay home. I’d make my home as comfortable as possible without being too extravagant. I’m not saying I’d hoard my wealth, because I’d definitely set up some big charity donations. But all I’d really want is to get a dog and build a big-ass library—you know, the kind where the shelves go floor-to-ceiling and you have rolling ladders to reach everything? Hell, I might even write my own book one day. I’d just...live a quiet life, not answering to anyone. I’d be an eccentric weirdo hermit, I guess.”

She thought her last statement would at least get her a chuckle, but it didn’t. “You’d do all that alone?” he asked.

Lucy bit her lip. “Ideally, I’d have someone who just wanted to be alone with me. If that makes sense. Two people who just love to be alone together sounds like the perfect relationship to me.”

“It does indeed.”

That's when he stepped out of the shadows, and...whoa, she was not in any way ready for the sight that greeted her.

First of all, he was huge. She was five-seven (five ten in her impractical party heels), and he towered over her like she was a toddler. If she had to guess, she'd say he was nearly seven feet tall.

His body was lean, but the way his clothes pulled taut through the shoulders led her to believe he was muscular under that expensive-looking suit of his. It took a minute for her gaze to make it all the way from his polished dress shoes up to his face, but when she did, she had to swallow a sharp gasp.

She'd assumed her new friend was a waiter or a bartender here at the manor.

Oh, how wrong she'd been.

She'd been talking to the owner of the manor all along—a man as infamous in town as he was reclusive. There wasn't a resident in Sanity Falls who didn't gossip about the monster of Spellman Manor.

The man who'd allegedly been created from dead bodies a mad scientist had stitched together and reanimated...roughly three hundred years ago.

He looked good for a three-hundred-year-old dead guy.

His creator had obviously taken great care to find... specimens with features that were aesthetically pleasing and symmetrical. But there were obviously at least three, um, donors, who'd contributed to his form.

The thick, jagged scar that surrounded his neck (and the two small metal bolts a few inches below his ears) told her his head and body hadn't always been attached.

Probably not to each other, at least. And the straight scar that ran down the middle of his face separated two very different halves. The left side of his face looked like it had been carved from stone. It was flawlessly beautiful, like a runway model. The other side was what Lucy would call ruggedly handsome. More like young Harrison Ford and less like some pretty boy you'd see in a perfume commercial. They were two very different faces, but when put together with what had obviously been such care...well, it worked.

The fact that the left eye was a rich, chocolate brown and the right was pale blue made his gaze oddly piercing, but Lucy decided that worked, too. As did his shampoo-commercial-shiny, just-a-little-too-long, just-a-little-messy black hair

With the gossip mongering going on about the monster of Spellman Manor, why had no one mentioned how hot he was? That would've been first on Lucy's list if she'd been so inclined to spread gossip about the man.

He bowed at the waist slightly and offered her a dinner-plate-sized hand. "I'm Viktor Adamovic."

Duh, she thought. With that face, there really wasn't a shadow of a doubt who he was. But then her manners caught up to her brain and she took his hand. "I'm Lucy West."

He lifted her hand to his mouth and brushed a kiss across her knuckles. She felt the warmth of his lips all over her body.

All. Over. Her. Body.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Lucy," he rumbled quietly.

Sweet baby Jesus did her name sound good coming from his lips. "Y-you, too."

She thought he'd let her go, but his grip on her hand tightened just a fraction before he said, "I have something I'd like to show you."

Now, Lucy had watched more than her fair share of serial killer documentaries and true crime specials. If anyone else in the world had said that to her, she would've laughed in their face. No way was she going to allow herself to be separated from the herd like a limping baby gazelle at the watering hole by the big, scary lion.

So, color her surprised when she opened her mouth and "OK" tripped easily off her lips.

Well...fuck.

Like it so far?

CHAPTER 1

Being a superhero is not all it's cracked up to be.

Evil doesn't take a break because you have a date, or the flu, or just really want to stay home and binge-watch *Supernatural* on Netflix while wearing slouchy socks and sweatpants.

Nope. Superheroes don't get vacation days. You're pretty much on call 24-7, with crappy state-employee health benefits and damn near useless dental coverage.

And for what? The feel-good knowledge that you're doing something good for your fellow man? The adoration of the public? Pfffttt . Sometimes the "adoring public" sues you because when you flew in to save them from a carjacking, you accidentally shattered their windshield with the bad guy's head.

A thank-you would be customary in such situations, but it doesn't happen as often as one would think.

And you know what else? Capes chafe the back of your neck like a bitch . They always feel like an irritating tag in the back of a \$2 T-shirt.

These were all things Greer Glenanne, aka G-Force (a stupid nickname she did not choose for herself, mind you), wished someone had told her before she'd taken the gig as the official superhero for Gem City.

But that was twenty-ish years ago. Back when she was shiny and new and so

idealistic it hurt . There'd been so many things she'd wanted to do, so many people she'd wanted to help. She'd been so sure she would save the world one day.

Now she got sued by the people she saved. (Yeah...that was a true story, sadly.) Her bum knee ached so badly every time it rained she was forced to limp on the job. Sometimes she woke up and her back hurt for no reason at all. Or she threw it out entirely because she sneezed wrong.

As it turned out, being able to fly and bench press a Buick didn't protect you from all the typical middle-aged maladies that impacted normal folks.

Then there was the fact that she was in early onset menopause. That was a fun one. Hot flashes and heightened emotions. Just what every woman with superpowers should have.

So, if being a superhero sucked, being a middle-aged superhero sucked the biggest bag of dicks the world had ever known.

“Hey! Yo, G!”

Greer startled at the voice that popped into her ear, nearly causing her to spill the mug of hot chocolate she'd just pulled out of her microwave.

Yeah. That was another thing that sucked about being a superhero. The Bluetooth-enabled cochlear implant that allowed her team to reach her, anytime, anywhere.

Day. Or. Night.

The sheer number of times she'd taken calls while on the toilet was appalling.

“What?” she snapped, wishing more than anything that she could just drink her damn hot chocolate and go to bed. But Rio only said “ Yo” in that tone when she wasn't

going to like what he had to say.

Rio Flores was her tech support, her project manager, her personal assistant, and her best friend all rolled into one six-foot-tall, ridiculously attractive gay man who had better style than all the Queer Eye guys combined. He was her Overwatch—the Felicity Smoak to her Green Arrow.

And he was about to ruin her night. She could just feel it, from the tips of her messy bun to the soles of her fuzzy pink bunny slippers.

“I got a call from Hottie McStudly, my friend.”

Greer groaned and squeezed her eyes shut. “Ugh. Not again. Please, don’t tell me.”

“OK. But he says he has something of yours. Again.”

She pinched the bridge of her nose. “See, I told you not to tell me.”

“Sorry,” Rio said, not sounding sorry at all. “But we don’t know for sure it’s her this time.”

Oh, of course it was her. It was always her. “Don’t patronize me.”

Bryn Terrell—no official superhero nickname yet—was and had always been a pain in the ass, ever since the state made her Greer’s trainee.

It wasn’t that Bryn was bad at the job. Quite the opposite, really. She was just overzealous. She tended to treat jaywalkers with the same “I am Justice” attitude she threw at bank robbers and muggers. She saw every petty thief and minor league crook in the state as evil. Greer had been at the superhero gig long enough to recognize all the shades of gray between good and evil.

There were so many shades of gray.

And Bryn's righteous quest for justice was topped off with a mountain of blonde curls, perky, 20-year-old boobs, and a sweet, lilting voice. All of that made Bryn almost more than Greer could take on a good day.

And today was not a good day.

Bryn had, for some reason, made it her life's mission to take down Killian Morgan, who Rio lovingly (or lustingly) referred to as Hottie McStudly.

About once a month for the past two years or so, Bryn got caught breaking into Killian's billion-dollar, corporate high rise, looking for "evidence of wrongdoings", as she put it.

Greer wasn't entirely sure what Killian had done to make his millions, and she wasn't certain what his employees did in that lavishly appointed high rise of his. What she did know was that he was way too smart to have any "evidence of wrongdoings" laying out where Bryn could stumble upon it.

And it wasn't like Killian didn't know that Bryn had X-ray vision. If there was anything in the building that could incriminate him, she would've seen it. Then she would've gleefully reported it all to Greer in that annoyingly pretty voice of hers, and Greer would've gotten a migraine.

Greer was willing to admit that, on some level, it irked her that Bryn might be at least a little right about Killian. The odds that he was completely innocent were most likely not favorable. After all, were any hot billionaires under fifty not crooked as hell? Greer didn't see how they couldn't be.

But as far as Greer knew, whatever Killian was doing wasn't actively hurting anyone. If anything, he was probably guilty of a bunch of white-collar crimes and money-

making schemes that Greer didn't give a crap about. And Bryn wasn't going to find evidence of any of that in his building, or she would've already.

So, here she was, again, in the position of going to the Morgan Enterprises building, and being forced to sweet talk Killian Morgan into not pressing charges against her trainee.

Which left Greer in yet another uncomfortable position. Because as much as she tried to ignore it, Killian Morgan was wildly attractive. And she did mean wildly . Like, throw-him-down-and-mount-him-like-a-rutting-beast wildly . She couldn't afford to develop a crush on him or indulge in any flirting. She did not need a sexual harassment suit on her record.

Greer fanned her face. Great. Now she was having a hot flash. Just the thought of sexually harassing Killian gave her hot flashes. Fan-fucking-tastic.

“Kiss him ‘hi’ for me, G,” Rio said.

Greer let out an unladylike snort. “Yeah, sure. I’ll get right on that,” she said, still fanning her face.

“Honey, if I was you, I would’ve got on that years ago. Now, go collect the B-Team.”

“You know she hates it when you call her that.”

“I could call her Plan B, if you’d prefer? Betamax?”

Even in her foul mood, Greer got a chuckle out of that. “You know I love you, right?”

“ Pfffttt . Of course you do. Who else would pick up your hormones from the drugstore and iron your capes?

Like it so far?

You can pick up a copy DIRECT from Isabel [HERE](#) .

Everywhere else, you can get a copy [HERE](#) .